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Kangaroos Among the Beauty: Painting and Queer Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

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September 2021

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For my grandparents,

Dana Badley,

Mary Badley, and

Jeanne McIntosh Mackey,

and to

Rhys Skjonsby Wallace

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Researching queer history can be decidedly melancholic. My first cousin once removed, Bill Zantiny, died from AIDS in 1989. I wish I could have met him. But then again, I am prone to what E. M. Forster calls the longing to "see, beyond my own happiness

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Abstract

Kangaroos Among the Beauty: Painting and Queer Sexuality

in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

by

Dana N. Badley III

Since the roughly simultaneous emergence of queer theory and historicist literary criticism in the early 1990s, scholars have confronted the problem of studying queer culture and identity prior to the so-called "invention of the homosexual," typically dated to the 1870s–90s. My dissertation offers an interdisciplinary approach to this question by focusing on the literary device of ekphrasis: verbal description of works of art. I argue that, prior to the advent of a discourse of homosexuality in the twentieth century, queer identity materialized in ekphrastic scenes from American literature. By asserting that the aesthetic and the erotic were profoundly entangled during the nineteenth century, I claim literary works as essential to the history of sexuality. I examine numerous writers who refract queer intimacies through scenes of painting—surprisingly, with more enthusiasm than shame or trepidation. In close readings of encounters between white spectators and paintings, I show that writers tend to stage queer relations in terms of racialized desire. Ekphrastic scenes thus consolidate whiteness and heterosexuality by frequently aligning racial and ethnic alterity with queer sexuality.

At a time when critics and audiences were understandably anxious about the fledgling status of American art, the writers I discuss ventured far beyond the nation in search of more capacious forms of gender and sexuality: both to actual places such as Europe (in the case of Washington Irving and Henry James), as well as to fantastic

dreamscapes (as in the fiction of Theodore Winthrop and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps). As my analysis reveals, these four writers regarded painting as a realm distinct from the contemporary United States. I demonstrate that American authors could explore, but ultimately disavow, queer attachments by writing about art in Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819–20), *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), and *Tales of a Traveller* (1824); in Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* (1861); in Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1877); and in James' *The Tragic Muse* (1890). "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" situates these literary works in terms of art history and aesthetic philosophy that influenced how writers and audiences evoked the embodied pleasures of appreciating beauty. Thus understood, ekphrasis offered writers the chance to describe, rather than interrogate, burgeoning sexual categories. "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" proposes that heterosexuality became white, in part, via literary scenes of painting in which non-normative desires flourished through the frame of art.

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The painter of life has indeed work cut out for him when a considerable part of life offers itself in the guise of that sapience. The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character, has often in fact a broad and rich comicality, many of the signs and values of the appreciable.

—Henry James,
Preface to *What Maisie Knew* (1908)

When I was in the third grade
I thought that I was gay
'Cause I could draw

—Macklemore and Ryan Lewis,
"Same Love" (2012)

Introduction

Kangaroos Among the Beauty

How can we find our way through what separates words from what is both without a name and more than a name: a painting? . . . We must retrace the speaking thread, put back into words that from which words have withdrawn.

—Julia Kristeva,
"Giotto's Joy"[1]

The primal scene of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) occurs fairly early on in a chapter titled "The Counterpane." Upon waking up in the Spouter-Inn, the man who asks to be called "Ishmael" finds himself in bed with the handsomely tattooed Queequeg, a harpooneer from the South Seas whose arm, Ishmael recounts, was "thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner." "You had almost thought I had been his wife," he remarks.[2] In the preceding chapter, Ishmael observes the harpooneer's body for the first time with rapt fascination. "Good heavens!," Ishmael thinks, "what a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares" (33). Scrutinizing Queequeg's foreign body with equal parts curiosity, bafflement, and desire, Ishmael beholds the harpooneer as if he were a work of art. After seeing Queequeg's tattooed "black squares on his cheeks," Ishmael speculates that

> They were stains of some sort or other. At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me. I remembered a story of a white man—a

[1] Julia Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy," in *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 210.

[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 36. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

> whaleman too—who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. (34)

Regarding Queequeg's body as a text to be interpreted, Ishmael moves from observation to contemplation to philosophical assertion in strikingly formulaic ways. To contemporary readers of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's progression might recall the philosophical tradition of associationism, a key component of aesthetic writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Originating in the Scottish Enlightenment and incorporated into the philosophies of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, associationism provided an empirical basis for perception by anchoring visual perception in terms of bodily sensations. Associationist philosophers and critics framed spectatorship in terms of the ideas, memories, and concepts that a work of art provoked in the observer.[3] American literature often drew upon associationism and aesthetic philosophy by dramatizing visual perception as a matter of embodied response. As suggested by Ishmael's encounter with Queequeg's tattooed body, fictional spectators and artists turn to prior accounts or examples ("I remembered a story of a white man") that could demystify otherwise new or unusual sights.

As I will argue, writers increasingly turned to aesthetic experience to stage erotic desire throughout the nineteenth century. After waking up next to Queequeg in the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael registers the sensation of Queequeg's arm thrown over him by likening their morning activity to marital domesticity: "You had almost thought I had been his wife" (36).

[3] Helpful introductions to associationism include Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 94–134; Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98–134.

Then, he shifts his focus away from the sensory weight of Queequeg's arm toward noticing the elaborate, intricate patterns on not only the bedspread but Queequeg as well:

> The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade—owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in sun and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times—this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt. Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together; and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me. (36–37)

Here, Ishmael returns to the associationist framework to understand Queequeg's face. Shifting from description ("The counterpane was of patchwork . . . ") to speculation ("owing I suppose . . . ") to assessment ("I could hardly tell it from the quilt . . . ") and finally to declaration ("Queequeg was hugging me"), Ishmael embodies the sensitive, feeling spectator idealized by American aesthetics during the nineteenth century. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* can read as a romance of spectatorship in which men behold a variety of foreign objects and others—a coastline, a doubloon, a leviathan—that continually thwart their capacity to interpret. Yet in "The Counterpane," the "strange" "sensations" (37) occur, not in the limitless expanse of the ocean, but arguably the most intimate of settings associated with domestic sentimentalism: the marriage bed that the Spouter-Inn's landlord, Peter Coffin, shared with his wife, Sal. Ishmael and Queequeg inherit and reconfigure such arrangements when Ishmael awakens as the "wife" of a harpooneer. In this space of

"blended . . . hues," bodies converge beneath aestheticized surfaces that cordon off unscripted intimacies apart from the quotidian everyday.

Queequeg's "bridegroom clasp" (38) lies at the center of the axes that inflect "Kangaroos Among the Beauty": ordinary and aesthetic experience; heterosexuality and non-normative (or same-sex, or queer) desire; national and foreign identities. For quite some time now, critics have turned to Melville's fiction as evidence of same-sex activity before the so-called "invention of the homosexual" typically dated to the late nineteenth century.[4] Yet what I find most refreshing—and bizarre—in "The Counterpane" is, not so much a subversive queer identity, but rather the complete absence of it. Ishmael and Queequeg's embrace depicts same-sex eroticism prior to the emergence of words such as "homosexuality." Although Ishmael makes recourse to marriage or domesticity ("You had almost thought I had been his wife"), he appears wholly unbothered by his mock-conjugal relation with a stranger. That Ishmael pays as much attention to Queequeg's "bridegroom clasp" as he does to the counterpane's design speaks to what Christopher Looby has called the scene's "indistinguishability of erotic and aesthetic experience."[5] If Ishmael "could hardly tell [Queequeg's arm] from the quilt" (37), this overlap reveals that aesthetics provided, as I will argue, a variety of writers and spectators a language with which to convey the embodied intricacies of visual perception. Before the emergence of sexual orientation, aesthetics influenced how observers related to their bodies as well as those of others. Melville superimposes Ishmael's sight of Queequeg onto his noticing the quilt, effectively conflating the tattooed arm, the counterpane, and Queequeg's sleeping body

[4] For a representative sample, see James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's* Pierre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Michael D. Snediker, "Melville and Queerness without Character," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 155–168.

beneath. As Looby claims, this superimposition "is meant to blur the boundary . . . between the emerging category of the sexual and the receding but still dominant category of the sensual."[6] On top of and beneath the counterpane, the touch of bodies conveys an overdetermined charge that exhausts more familiar conceptions of sexuality and desire. The counterpane mediates how Ishmael relates to his bedfellow, his surroundings, and finally himself. At first unable to differentiate between their "blended . . . hues together," he remarks that "it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell Queequeg was hugging me" (37). Ishmael's ability to say "me" relies upon the "weight and pressure" that Queequeg's impressively decorated arm exerts.

As "The Counterpane" suggests, the aesthetic and the erotic were profoundly entwined in nineteenth-century American literature. "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" analyzes how writers, critics, and fictional characters negotiate their relation to sexuality via ekphrastic accounts of works of art. Prior to the "invention of the homosexual," experiments in sexual desire and gender expression flourished in literary scenes of painting where primarily white spectators grapple with queer and racialized desire. At a time when domestic sentimentalism upheld whiteness, marriage, and the nuclear family as American ideals, writers including Washington Irving, Theodore Winthrop, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Henry James displaced errant forms of gender and sexuality onto paintings. Such displacements, I argue, fetishize and disavow racial difference. As whiteness gradually became associated with what the decolonial theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff calls a "right to

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[5] Christopher Looby, "Strange Sensations: Sex and Aesthetics in 'The Counterpane," in *Melville and Aesthetics*, ed. Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65–84: 71.

[6] Looby, "Strange Sensations," 75.

look"[7], spectatorship offered a permissible means to explore desire without fear of recrimination. Ekphrasis and description were erotic activities that offered audiences a means to acknowledge, yet distance themselves from, burgeoning sexual identities. Spectators could pursue, however temporarily, these sexual practices and desires before they assumed more coherent forms.

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"Kangaroos Among the Beauty" contributes to ongoing conversations in literary history regarding what Michel Foucault refers to as the "invention of the homosexual"[8] that occurred during the late nineteenth century. As historians have established, modern conceptions of sexuality developed through legal, medical, and scientific discourses during the 1870s–90s.[9] To a large extent, cultural narratives of sexuality promulgated the notion of a sexual binary typically split between hetero- and homosexuality.[10] Literary historians have

[7] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[8] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 43. Historians of sexuality have identified a myriad of events that corroborate Foucault's dating to the 1870s-90s as the beginning of a distinct homosexual identity premised in legal, medical, and scientific discourses. For instance, the coinage of the word "homosexual"—first in Germany in 1868, then in English in 1892 (when it entered the Oxford English Dictionary), and then French in 1907—has carried significant weight for literary critics and historians interested in the emergence of sexual terminology. On the coinage of the term "homosexual," see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 52.

[9] The notion of homosexuality was shaped, in part, by the rise of medical-scientific disciplines in the late nineteenth century, including psychoanalysis, psychology, and sexology. Clinical and case studies attempted to schematize sexual development in terms of normative gender-based attraction, pathologizing deviations from these norms as disruptions in infantile development or a response to sexual trauma. These fields influenced press coverage of two sensational court cases involving same-sex activity: Alice Mitchell's murder of her former lover Freda Ward in 1892 in Memphis, Tennessee, and Oscar Wilde's trials for sodomy and gross indecency in 1895 in London. On the rise of sexology, see Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

ventured earlier than the late nineteenth century in search of queerness prior to homosexuality, finding experiments in gender and sexual expression in the literary archive.[11] In one of the more ironic twists in the history of sexuality, queers, for once, arrived early to this party. Before more familiar forms of same-sex, non-normative, and queer identity took shape, early attempts to stray from emergent heterosexual cultures proliferate across American literature. For instance, episodes of cross-dressing and disguised gender identity abound in fictional and nonfictional narratives, a trend that inflects Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* (1861), the antebellum romance that is the focus of Chapter 2.[12] Along similar lines, the romantic friendship tradition commonly associated with the cult of sensibility endured well into the nineteenth century.[13] Referring to an emotionally significant relation between two people of the same sex, romantic friendship charges popular homosocial literary works of the period, such as James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales (1823–41) and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).[14] In one of the

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[10] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*; Benjamin Kahan, "Conjectures on the Sexual World-System," *GLQ* 23, no. 3 (2017): 327–57; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[11] Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Natasha Hurley, *Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[12] On cross-dressing and intersex identity in pre-1900 American history, see Rachel Hope Cleves, Introduction to "Beyond the Binaries in Early America," *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 459–68; Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Many texts incorporate cross-dressing into their plots, including Lucy Brewer/Nathaniel Hill Wright's *The Female Marine* (1815), Julia Ward Howe's unfinished manuscript "Laurence" (ca. 1840s) published as *The Hermaphrodite*, Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme*, and Loreta Janeta Velázquez' *The Woman in Battle* (1876).

[13] Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 53–76; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[14] Christopher Castiglia, "Same-Sex Friendships and the Rise of Modern Sexualities," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: Cambridge

most influential (if controversial) accounts of American writing, Leslie Fiedler argues that romantic friendship lies at the heart of nineteenth-century literature, in which "the typical male protagonist . . . has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization,' which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility."[15] But as Fiedler's formative argument suggests, homosocial intimacy and romantic friendship could complement, and arguably even sustain, heterosexual culture. "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" attends to attachments and longings that attempt new forms of relation while nevertheless preserving more recognizable intimacies.

To be clear, few, if any, of the writers (or, for that matter, characters) I analyze would identify as homosexual or queer, especially if we understand such categories in terms of a coherent identity or shared history. During the nineteenth century, sexual activity was largely understood as a range of practices, most of which did not align with or signify a broader identity. Discrete, non-normative encounters could and did coexist alongside the familiar orientations eventually designated as homo- or heterosexual. I maintain that it was precisely this temporal understanding of sexual activity that fueled ekphrastic writing, as ekphrasis allowed a writer or spectator to linger in the impressions one glimpsed in a work of art. By transitioning from visual to verbal representation, writers could render a static work of art as a temporally, and emotionally, dynamic experience that unfolds in lengthy passages, such as "The Counterpane," that expand a momentary glance into a more

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University Press, 2014), 300–03; Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); George E. Haggerty, *Queer Friendship: Male Intimacy in the English Literary Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Michael Lynch, "'Here Is Adhesiveness': From Friendship to Homosexuality," *Victorian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1985): 67–96; Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

embodied response that spans touch, sound, smell, and taste. Like sex, art lent itself to thinking about time and duration in ways that could be confined to a fleeting instant. Thus understood, ekphrasis offers insight into how bodies apprehend and approach one another before more recognizable sexual categories took shape.

These ephemeral experiments in gender and sexuality occurred within a racialized context in which spectatorship aligned whiteness with heterosexuality. This was not coincidental. As scholars working in queer-of-color critique, such as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman and Siobhan B. Somerville, have argued, sexual categories reinforced normative ideals of racial and ethnic identity during the late nineteenth century, especially in terms of cultural traditions that reified the nuclear family and domestic spheres as idyllic sites of national belonging.[16] For decades now, literary critics have demonstrated how domestic sentimentalism stabilized racial and sexual categories.[17] Domestic sentimentalism valorized the traits associated with the household—piety, frugality, and the familiar gendered stereotypes—as desirable traits. To a large extent, the writers analyzed in "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" were committed to a rigorous critique of the sentimental tradition: Washington Irving's persona, Geoffrey Crayon, spurns marriage (much like Irving himself), and fictional artists either call off engagements, as in Henry James' *The Tragic Muse* (1890),

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[15] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997), 26.

[16] Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and Black Figuration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

[17] The scholarship on sentimentalism is vast. See Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–70*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Arguably, domestic sentimentalism upheld what Foucault refers to as the "one basic concern" of rendering sexuality into a discourse: "to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in

or enter into unhappy marriages, as in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1877). In such works, artists and spectators endure heterosexuality by adopting Orientalist and romantic styles that project non-normative desires into foreign territory. Although art historians have begun excavating the role visual culture played in emergent queer and homosexual communities, much of this work necessarily prioritizes graphic, rather than verbal, representation.[18]

To explore the relations among spectatorship, race, and sexuality, I turn to the legacy of aesthetic philosophy. As aesthetic philosophy took shape throughout the eighteenth century, critics justified the act of appreciating art as both an intellectual and pleasurable exercise.[19] Writers suggested that spectatorship could provide dignified leisure (especially when audiences beheld a beautiful work of art) as well as intellectual and moral instruction (especially when observing scenes of sympathy). Nowhere is this duality more apparent than in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), in which he develops the notion of "disinterested" spectatorship.[20] According to Kant, disinterested spectators approach the

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short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative" (*History of Sexuality*, 36–37).

[18] Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69–104; Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

[19] On the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, see M. H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 38, no. 6 (1985): 8–33; Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 131–69; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 496–527; Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (II)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13, no. 1 (1952): 17–46; Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 75–151; Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 107–08. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically.

aesthetic realm as a domain apart from daily life in which they can gaze upon, but remain autonomous from, a work of art. Although capable of being moved by the beautiful or the sublime, the disinterested viewer judges "an object . . . through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest" (96). Thus understood, aesthetic philosophy advanced a form of impartial observation that could feel, but ultimately transcend, sentiment. Nicholas Mirzoeff defines this aesthetic domain as "the right to look," or a form of racialized surveillance that he argues originated in the North American plantation complex (ca. 1660–1860) and extends to the military industrial complex today.[21] As defined by Mirzoeff, the right to look rests upon "the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable."[22] Mirzoeff's history of visuality reverberates with disinterestedness, in that white spectators possess the capacity to both look away from what they see and also to organize and categorize the observed.

This disinterested "right to look" shaped the emergence of racial, gender, and sexual identities during the nineteenth century by conflating spectatorship with power. As Jonathan Crary and Peter de Bolla have persuasively argued, aesthetic philosophy provided a model of epistemology in which spectators gleaned knowledge and power based upon empirical observation.[23] Hence as environmental and externalist theories of race were gradually replaced by interior and psychological understandings of identity, visual culture stabilized

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[21] In this regard, Mirzoeff anticipates Simone Browne's scholarship on surveillance, which examines "blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted." Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

[22] Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, 1. For Mirzoeff, the figure of the plantation overseer metonymically embodies the right to look, since the overseer enforces power by disciplining the bodies observed (48–76).

[23] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). For the American context of this history, see Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

shifting conceptions of race for white spectators who expected to conflate phenotypical and racial identity. Aesthetic philosophy hence defined the human in terms of the subjects who look and, in turn, the objects who are looked at.

Recent scholarship in art history has revealed how visual culture defined race and ethnicity as categories that could be readily observed, especially by white spectators. During the eighteenth century, paintings and illustrations perpetuated colonial fantasies by depicting the plantation as a picturesque landscape and the people enslaved on it as an environmental backdrop.[24] Influenced by the disciplines of physiognomy and phrenology, visual media encouraged viewers to scrutinize bodies for signs of inner character.[25] With the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, commercial photographs and reproductions confronted spectators with a tangible, specific referent rather than an abstract type or stock figure.[26] Visual media were inextricable from burgeoning racial categories, not only in

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[24] On visual culture and race during the eighteenth century, see Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Barbara E. Lacey, "Visual Images of Blacks in Early American Imprints," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1996): 137–80; Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Marcus Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[25] On physiognomy and phrenology, see Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); Christopher J. Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[26] On photography and race during the nineteenth century, see *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, ed. Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis (New York: Aperture, 2020); Matthew Fox-Amato, *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mark Reinhardt, "Vision's Unseen: On Sovereignty, Race, and the Optical Unconscious," in *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinksi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 174–222; Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): 38–61; Harvey Young, "Still Standing: Daguerreotypes, Photography, and the

terms of the representational politics associated with portraying sentimental or sympathetic figures, but also in terms of reinforcing a disinterested "right to look" that could police bodies of color. Visual media purported to depict people as they were in terms of a portrait's "likeness" of its subject that could offer clues to how a person looked and acted.[27] As critics have aptly shown, the rise of commercial photography inspired writers to incorporate portraiture and portraitists into a range of antebellum writing, including Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Melville's *Pierre* (1852), and Frederick Douglass' "Lecture on Pictures" (1861).[28] Throughout the nineteenth century, photographic portraiture emerged as a choice venue in which to convey character in terms that remained, ostensibly, unmediated by artistic license.

But what if painting offered respite from extant identities instead? "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" argues that aesthetics exerted such a considerable influence upon American literature because it straddled the divide between mimesis and fantasy. Although many paintings certainly replicated a landscape or a sitter, arguably just as many did not. The paintings that appear in "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" run the gamut from mimesis to fantasy, with some purporting to be identical copies of the real thing and others consciously departing from realism altogether. The paradox of aesthetic feeling—that a spectator could feel authentic emotions on behalf of fictional people—speaks to a broader conversation regarding cultural experience that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. The writers I

Black Body," in *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 26–75.

[27] As I argue in Chapter 4, this tendency to regard photography as objective galvanized the rise of scientific photography, which justified postbellum taxonomies of race, gender, and sexuality.

[28] Sarah Blackwood, *The Portrait's Subject: Inventing Inner Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

discuss were profoundly interested in the distinction between "real" and "aesthetic" life, and they dramatized such distinctions in fiction as well as critical and nonfictional writing. Together, they developed the notion that I designate "queer personhood," or a type of spectatorship that pursues forms of desire rendered permissible by aesthetic conventions. By experiencing fictional sentiments and attributing them to painted figures, audiences could temporarily identify with non-normative sexual and gendered positions while still retaining their status as spectators who could later disidentify with those very sentiments after looking away from the work of art or leaving the gallery. According to the logic of queer personhood, one could acknowledge same-sex beauty because such an acknowledgment constituted an act of critical appraisal rather than a private declaration of arousal. In this light, aesthetic criticism equipped writers and audiences with a vocabulary for discussing desire in ways that genteel audiences might otherwise lack.

This dissertation derives its title from an obscure remark in one of Emily Dickinson's letters that stages queer personhood. Becoming acquainted with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she wrote, in July 1862, that "My Business is Circumference – An ignorance, not of Customs, but if caught with the Dawn – or the Sunset see me – Myself the only Kangaroo among the Beauty, Sir, if you please, it afflicts me."[29] The juxtaposition between Dickinson's status as "the only Kangaroo" and "the Beauty" she surveys animates the geographical and affiliative logics of this project. A species indigenous to Australia and thus decidedly exotic to Dickinson's New England sensibility, the kangaroo embodies an unorthodox, if not exactly graceful, spectator seemingly out of sync with the elegance one expects from beauty. As a metaphor that localizes spectatorship and visual perception in terms of a body decidedly different from Dickinson's, the kangaroo suggests the vicissitudes

[29] Emily Dickinson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 176.

and transformations associated with the act of looking. But whereas Dickinson identifies herself as "the only Kangaroo among the Beauty," the dissertation excavates several more in literature from the early national era until the *fin de siècle*. From Geoffrey Crayon to Cecil Dreeme, from Avis Dobell to Nick Dormer, Gabriel Nash, and Miriam Rooth, this project proposes other "kangaroos" whose pursuit of beauty leads away from the domestic interior toward other locations: to Europe, to the South Pacific, to Ancient Egypt, and finally to experiments in intimacies yet to come.

These artists and spectators explore queer personhood by detailing aesthetic experience via ekphrasis, a style known for its ability to transition between the so-called "sister arts" of poetry, painting, and music. Descended from the *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting, so is poetry") tradition of classical poetry, ekphrasis was the preferred poetic practice of aesthetic philosophy during the eighteenth century.[30] In ekphrastic poems, neoclassical poets frequently portrayed fictionalized alter-egos deliberating the merits of a painting or sculpture. Such poems simultaneously acknowledged poets' extensive knowledge of poetic conventions and dramatized a spectator's intimate reaction to art typically recounted via first-person lyric perspective. Ekphrasis lent itself to intimate, often dramatic, accounts of looking that paradoxically offered a glimpse into unguarded private thought even as these lyric accounts were intended for publication and circulation. This paradox, I argue, was foundational to ekphrastic writing. By focalizing aesthetic experience within a single consciousness, ekphrasis offered a double-portrait of both a work of art as well as the spectator who beholds it. As Peter Brooks and Ruth Bernard Yeazell have persuasively argued, ekphrasis and visual culture influenced the rise of the realist novel,

[30] See Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967). Helpful introductions to ekphrasis include Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2008); James A. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

especially for writers and critics who likened realist description to painterly technique.[31] Suspending the plot in order to provide a tableau or portrait in words, painterly scenes abound in American literature—from the letter "A" in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to the gold doubloon in Melville's *Moby-Dick*; from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow" (1879) to Huckleberry Finn's satirical description of Emmeline Grangerford's crayon drawings of grieving young women, American writers imagine visual perception as a matter of contrasting, overlapping, and typically overdetermined perspectives.

The ekphrastic fictions of Washington Irving, Theodore Winthrop, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Henry James constitute a capacious archive of queer longings, one that refracts desire and relations through the prism of aesthetics. This interplay between literature and painting offers a means of theorizing culture's role in shaping the history of sexuality. As Natasha Hurley writes, "Queer worlds existed before queer subjects as such."[32] Such world-making occurred, in part, within the domain of cultural self-fashioning. As dramatized in these works, artists and audiences attach to artifacts that offer the promise of expression and recognition. To varying degrees of success, Irving, Winthrop, Phelps, and James attempted to forge a distinctly American cultural tradition in fiction as well as criticism. Extensively read and professionally prolific, they depict characters who refashion themselves by appreciating, consuming, and making art. These texts dramatize what James calls, in his memoir *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), the relation between the "house of life" and the

[31] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

[32] Hurley, *Circulating Queerness*, 224.

"palace of art."[33] By transfiguring "life" into "art," these writers seek to integrate the one into the other. As recent scholarship in queer theory has shown, this integration has proven foundational to queer life. From what Michael Moon refers to as "queer hypermimeticism," to what Gayatri Gopinath deems the "queer curation" of global diasporic communities, to the sharing of books among New England women that Natasha Hurley and J. Samaine Lockwood have excavated, culture has helped formulate queer gender and sexuality for quite some time.[34] As David Halperin writes, queer subjectivity often "expresses itself through a peculiar, dissident way of relating to cultural objects." "As a cultural practice," queer identity "involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, of decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning."[35] "Kangaroos Among the Beauty" explores the antecedents of this dynamic from the vantage point of literary criticism. In response to painting's fluctuating status during the nineteenth century, these works claim the medium as a form of highbrow leisure, a repository for countercultural and bohemian desires, a mode of self-expression, and a means for escaping a prohibitively philistine national audience.

Although explicit depictions of sexual activity are few and far between in the literature I analyze, fictional accounts of aesthetic experience express a sublimated longing through the conventions of writerly style. Throughout the nineteenth century, critics and

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[33] Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 280.

[34] Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 9; Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 4–5; Hurley, *Circulating Desire*, 109–48; J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[35] David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12 (italics removed).

audiences became heavily invested in the notion of style, especially when it came to recognizing a writer's voice or an artist's palette. Hence if "literary criticism and the history of sexuality meet . . . in the domain of style"[36], as Jordan Alexander Stein writes, style is inextricable from thinking about embodiment. Given that ekphrasis is a practice that seeks to conjure the intricacies of associationist perception, the writers I explore anchor prose as an outgrowth of the impressions and sentiments that accompany a work of art. To express what it feels like to behold beauty or the sublime, writers and fictional characters seek the words that can do justice to the immensity, and occasional disorientation, of sentiment. As Kevin Ohi has written about Henry James, queerness rarely confines itself to the "representation of marginal sexualities—however startlingly explicit those may be." Instead, queerness resides in James' "elusive and multivalent effects of syntax, figure, voice, and tone, in its systematic challenging of the presumption that desire can be, or ought to be, represented. Conversely, the full significance of James's formal and stylistic innovations is best grasped by considering their sexual resonance."[37] Although the histories of sexuality and literature are well underway, much less has been written about the history of style. Style often stands in for a too-much-ness, an extravagance, that has long characterized queer expression. To possess a style often entails being associated with a distinguishing idiom that reveals, allegedly, an internal characteristic. Hence for Richard Poirier, "The great works of American literature are alive with the effort to stabilize certain feelings and attitudes that have, as it were, no place in the world, no place at all except where a writer's style can give

[36] Jordan Alexander Stein, "*The Blithedale Romance*'s Queer Style," *ESQ* 55 (2009): 211–36: 214.

[37] Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2–3.

them one."[38] What Poirier identifies as "scenes . . . that by standards of ordinary life are foolish, preposterous, or sexually irregular" (10) maps the contours of queer sexuality that occur at the margins of American identity.

"Kangaroos Among the Beauty" asks what it means to cultivate a style. I understand style to be, like gender and sexuality, an ongoing process rather than a fixed product. As writers, artists, and spectators attempt new modes of expression through a variety of cultural artifacts and works of art, they rehearse alternate forms of identification that remain tentative rather than fixed. Style is a work in progress. Each of the chapters concerns the process of mimicry and adaptation by which artists and audiences work toward a more refined or sophisticated style, a process that necessarily entails risk and the possibility of failure. Significantly, many of the fictional paintings in this study remain incomplete or only partially finished. The fledgling status of this art evokes the nascent status of queer sexuality and culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that these paintings are truncated by a bevy of extenuating circumstances, their fragmentary status nevertheless inspires spectators to respond by writing about their reaction to art. In this regard, the relation between painting and literature was a symbiotic endeavor in which artists, spectators, and writers co-created new ways of imagining what it meant to look and feel in the presence of a work of art. These unfinished paintings provoke audiences to imagine richer, more fulfilling worlds in which queer attachments may one day thrive.

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[38] Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), xxi.

The first of this dissertation's "kangaroos" is Washington Irving's alter-ego, Geoffrey Crayon. Chapter 1, "Crayon, Looking: Washington Irving and the Queer Sublime," focuses upon Irving's extended career writing as Geoffrey Crayon. As an instrument that could be used to write as well as sketch, Crayon's namesake suggests the cross-fertilizing influence visual and literary culture exerted upon one another during the early republic. A self-professed connoisseur, Crayon epitomizes the rise of taste and refinement cultures fueled by the transatlantic exchange of aesthetic writing and luxury goods. But unlike his historical peers who professed taste to assert social distinction, Crayon seeks a markedly different relation to the arts. By sublimating bodily and erotic energies into the appreciation of art, Crayon models a form of spectatorship that jars against the artisanal or folk-craft tradition associated with the colonial era. A lifelong bachelor (much like Irving himself), Crayon reserves his most profound emotions for the arts, gradually refashioning himself as a man of feeling across his three "sketch-books": *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819–20), *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), and *Tales of a Traveller* (1824). I trace the evolution of Crayon's performance as a man of feeling based upon his shifting attitudes toward the aesthetic categories that predominated in eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy: the picturesque, the sublime, and the beautiful. In *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall,* Crayon visits Bracebridge Hall as a guest, where he observes a variety of scenes that unfold according to picturesque conventions: courtship, marriage, and hunting. I argue that such conventions map the contours of an emergent heterosexual culture premised on wealth and leisure—a domain from which Crayon, as a bachelor, is perennially excluded. Instead, he gravitates toward the sublime thrills associated with France and Italy in *Tales of a Traveller*, where he recounts stories of murderous and melancholic painters. I focus on a sequence of tales from *Tales of a Traveller* in which Irving appropriates the aesthetic category of the sublime to

imagine the overwhelming, disorienting sensations of men beholding one another as beautiful works of art. A careful reading of this sequence reveals that Irving coopts a romantic model of aesthetics to convey spectators who can appreciate, if not exactly apprehend, illegible same-sex encounters. By staging aesthetics as a decidedly European affair—in either picturesque England or romantic Italy—Irving locates non-normative sexualities in terms of environments that American spectators can travel to but ultimately leave.

Chapter 2, "Night-Blooming Flowers: Dreaming Interiority in the Antebellum Romance," demonstrates that the figure of the romantic artist played a formative role in antebellum romance's treatment of sexuality as depicted in Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme.* Unlike Irving and Crayon, who pursue an aesthetic education abroad, Winthrop dramatizes the downtown Manhattan art world as a sordid, increasingly bohemian, domain. I juxtapose *Cecil Dreeme* with the *Crayon* (1855–61) and the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* (1856–61), contemporary periodicals that promoted a model of spectatorship premised on respectability, whiteness, and domestic gentility. Rejecting the patriotic and spiritual qualities associated with antebellum spectatorship, Winthrop considers painting as a repository for suppressed longings and secrets. Building upon recent scholarship in queer historicism, I focus on the text's anachronistic fantasy of the Italian Renaissance that painters and aficionados reenact at the fictional Chrysalis College. As critics and historians in the 1850s promoted the fifteenth century as the apex of cultural productivity and inspiration, Winthrop's fictional boarders at Chrysalis College cling to this fetishized epoch in order to reinvent themselves. I argue that this anachronistic affiliation constitutes an act of racialized self-fashioning. Just as Irving's homophobic parables unfold in a romanticized fantasy of Italy as a site of ethnic difference, Winthrop's text posits painting incompatible

with the United States by exaggerating the otherworldliness of Chrysalis College—a domain in which, like its namesake suggests, transformation abounds. The chief metamorphosis of the text is that of Cecil Dreeme, a woman cross-dressing in disguise as a male painter and whose portraits hold the key to her secret identity. At a time when the Hudson River School and antebellum journals encouraged spectators to scrutinize art for signs of inner sincerity, *Cecil Dreeme* embraces the artifice of aesthetics.

Chapter 3, "The Woman and the Sphinx: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' Enigmatic Orientalism," considers the fate of the romantic artist during the postbellum era. I explore the rise of photography and commercial illustration by focusing on Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' novel *The Story of Avis*, which chronicles the tragic plight of Avis Dobell. After deferring a promising artistic career to marry a young professor, Avis siphons her frustrations with the domestic sphere into her private studio, where she works on a painting of the Sphinx over the course of several years. Equally restrained by marriage and motherhood, Avis regards the Sphinx as an emblem of androgyny and silence that counteracts conventional attitudes regarding the transparency of wives and mothers, especially after the Civil War. Although her untimely sexual identity predates more legible categories, Avis embraces an Orientalist style as a means to displace her anti-domestic tendencies onto foreign locales where they can remain, like the notorious silence of the Sphinx, illegible. This displacement, I argue, reflects the shifting cultural hierarchies of the postbellum era. In contrast to a widespread belief in the verisimilitude of photography and commercial illustration, Avis cherishes painting precisely because it is not beholden to realism. The Sphinx, then, recasts the novel's feminist critique of the increasingly heterosexual domestic sphere in terms of an Orientalist fantasy that can bear and preserve non-normative attachments. *The Story of Avis* exports queer desire to peripheral locations including Egypt and the South Pacific, a

maneuver that effectively safeguards queerness from the philistine domestic sphere by confining it to oblique, cryptic art.

Chapter 4, "Rove, Drift, Float: Henry James and the Art Appetite," grapples with the lingering fantasy of the romantic artist that endured into the *fin de siècle*, a period that witnessed the virtually simultaneous emergence of Aestheticism and homosexuality. Henry James' novel, *The Tragic Muse*, concerns three artists who possess and feed "the art appetite": Gabriel Nash, an Irish aesthete modeled upon Oscar Wilde; Miriam Rooth, a Jewish actress based upon the popular tragedienne Rachel Félix; and Nick Dormer, a young politician harboring a secret desire to paint. Set in Victorian London, the novel renders the art appetite a trait at odds with Protestant British identity. Gabriel and Miriam's respective ethnic positions are both the source of their mass appeal, as performers, as well as their estrangement from the aristocratic upper-class upon which they rely for income. I analyze Nick's portraits of Miriam and Gabriel as exercises of self-fashioning that attempt more experimental forms of representation associated with painting rather than photography. Although Miriam and Gabriel acquiesce to having their photographs taken for the sake of celebrity culture, they each commission Nick to paint an oil portrait that, like Avis' painting of the Sphinx, is not intended to circulate. In this manner, the novel reflects the broader *l'art pour l'art* ("art for art's sake") philosophy that epitomized the Aestheticism movement by staging works of art that recoil from social or political reform. I consider Nick's inability to finish his painting of Gabriel as an ambivalent gesture that cannot decide the fate regarding homosexuality and queer relations at the eve of the twentieth century. The novel's mysterious ending speculates that Gabriel "has gone to India," where the aesthete seems to abandon Victorian England for an Orientalist tableau. Nick's incomplete portrait, then, embodies the unfinished work of aesthetics that imagines a horizon that might never arrive.

Together, these four chapters work toward a prehistory of queer identity that originates in ekphrastic writing published during the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, writers frequently drew upon shifting conceptions of identity and embodiment that sought to stabilize gender, race, and sexuality during a period when cultural and political upheavals threatened to unfix these categories. In tandem with these fluctuations, the notion of spectatorship, as well as the figure of "the spectator," provided a means to inhabit or disidentify from such categories via the frame of art. Anticipating the formative role cinema and popular culture played for queer audiences in the twentieth century, painting curated more expansive identities via fantasy and creativity rather than imitation and reflection.[39] In lieu of a more crystallized discourse related to homosexual and queer identity, visual culture—its iconography, its technologies, its textual genres, its communities, its spaces—fostered short-lived experiments in relational intimacy. Borne from the frustrations and failures of domestic sentimentalism, such experiments gesture toward nascent, inchoate utopias.

[39] On cinema and queer identity during the early to mid-twentieth century, see Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Chapter One

Crayon, Looking: Washington Irving and the Queer Sublime

The truth is, we generally make love in a style and with sentiments very unfit for ordinary life: they are half theatrical and half romantic. By this means we raise our imaginations to what is not to be expected in human life.

—Joseph Addison and Richard Steele,
Spectator no. 479[1]

Throughout the colonial and early national eras, citizens and writers situated refinement as a hallmark of social distinction and erudition based upon purchasing power in the aftermath of the consumer revolution in the late eighteenth century.[2] As Simon Gikandi and Kyla Schuller have persuasively argued, taste and sentiment helped establish normative forms of gender and race.[3] Yet despite this body of work in consumption and luxury goods, comparatively little ink has been spilled regarding the relation between queerness and taste. (One can practically hear a stifled voice in archives shouting, "We're here, we're queer, we import cashmere!") Taste was believed to mark a citizen's capacity for refinement,

[1] *The Spectator; With Notes and a General Index* (Philadelphia: J. J. Woodward, 1832), vol. 1, 231.

[2] Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Barbara Dayer Gallati, "Taste, Art, and Cultural Power in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy*, ed. Gallati (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2011), 11–122; Christina J. Hodge, *Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Catherine E. Kelly, *Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Jennifer Van Horn, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[3] Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

decorum, and restraint, yet one might always overdo it.[4] Satirical representations of overly refined men in early American literature suggest that one could plausibly become too ostentatious in ways that anticipate the homosexual dandy or flamboyant aesthete from the *fin de siècle*. As I will argue, taste rested upon an uneasy relation to gender that relied upon misogynist stereotypes in order to align vapid or superficial consumption with indecorous women and macaroni men. If not kept in check, the effeminate refinement implicit in taste could unman the gentleman or man of feeling.

By reconciling the "invention of the homosexual" with what the art historian Jonathan Crary refers to as the "rise of the observer," I demonstrate that aesthetic writing offers a capacious archive of queerness in which taste and visual perception organize, and thus alternatively disrupt, a spectator's relation to desire. Prior to the advent of a recognizable queer discourse, one finds in ekphrastic or descriptive writing the nascent forms of something like queer desire, especially when it comes to spectators beholding works of beauty. As Crary makes clear, the "rise of the observer" that occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century fueled a vibrant discussion of what it meant to observe a work of art. Crary designates this history in terms of what he calls "subjective vision," or the "undemarcated terrain [in] which the distinction between internal sensation and external signs is irrevocably blurred."[5] This world of "internal sensation" is foundational to the emergent queer literary tradition, I would argue, because with ekphrastic

[4] On gender and taste, G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 154–214; Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 29–87; *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700–1830*, ed. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

[5] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 16; 24. For the American context of this history, see Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Peter John Brownlee, *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

writing one finds a variety of spectators acknowledging, if not exactly understanding the wide array of sensations and impressions that would eventually resemble something like sexual desire or taste (what we might call "sexual orientation" today). Those well-versed in aesthetic philosophy will recognize in Crary's history of the rise of the observer the lingering effects of associationism, a tradition that arose from the Scottish Enlightenment and attempted to provide an empirical basis for visual perception.[6] Associationist philosophers and critics framed spectatorship in terms of the ideas, memories, and concepts that a work of art provoked in the observer. At stake in associationism, I would argue, was the relation between a spectator and the work of art. Could a work of art inspire or expose a spectator's desires?

The twinned rises of the observer and the homosexual inflect Washington Irving's writing as "Geoffrey Crayon" between 1819–24. Irving depicts the vicissitudes of aesthetic experience through Crayon's travels throughout the British countryside—in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–20) and *Bracebridge Hall; or The Humourists, A Medley* (1822)—and then in Continental Europe in *Tales of a Traveller by Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1824). That these three books coincided with Irving's professional success speaks to the overlap between professional painters and authors working during the early national era. Shunted by both a fledgling market economy and audiences who denigrated painting as craft labor, aspiring American artists frequently sought training while working abroad rather than fashion an itinerant career in search of commissions or patronage.[7] British institutions, such

[6] Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 94–134; Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98–134.

[7] Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 123–68; Susan Rather, *The American School: Artists and Status in the Late Colonial and Early National Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 18–21. On itineracy and eighteenth-century American artists, see T. H. Breen, "The Meaning of 'Likeness': American Portrait Painting in an Eighteenth-Century Consumer Society," *Word & Image* 6, no. 4 (1990): 339–40; Harris, *The Artist in*

as the Royal Academy of Art, conferred prestige and dignity far exceeding what the fledgling North American art scene could provide.[8] Following this tradition, Crayon and Irving pursued professional success in London, the capitol of transatlantic literature and painting.[9] Although Irving devoted his travels to courting authors such as Sir Walter Scott and publishers such as John Murray, Crayon's tour of the English countryside leads him to the fictional Bracebridge Hall, an aristocratic manor embodying the cult of sensibility even as it was fading out of fashion by the 1810s.[10]

Crayon's numerous sketches—one hundred and seventeen in all—depict numerous scenes of consumption. As digressive as they are formulaic, Crayon's sketches read as episodes of associationist spectatorship. I argue that these (necessarily formulaic) sketches are crucial for the prehistory of literary queerness because they dramatize what queerness looked and felt like before it could be identified as such. For Irving and his fictional surrogate Crayon, aesthetics is a profoundly erotic experience in which taste seems incompatible with what is called "heterosexuality" today. Indeed, Irving's epigraph for *The Sketch Book* aligns spectatorship with singledom: "I have no wife nor children, good or bad,

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American Society, 69–73; David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 156–68.

[8] Each of the five major colonial American painters spent formative time abroad in London: Charles Willson Peale trained from 1767–69; Benjamin West permanently relocated to England in 1763 until his death in 1820 and served as the president of the Royal Academy between 1792–1805; John Trumbull studied in Europe in the 1780s; John Singleton Copley resettled in London in 1774 until his death in 1815; and Gilbert Stuart worked in London from 1776–87 before moving to Dublin until 1793. See Paul Staiti, *Of Arms and Artists: The American Revolution Through Painters' Eyes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[9] Joseph Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 25–39. Sir Walter Scott famously vouched for Irving's talent to the London publisher John Murray. For the history of *The Sketch Book*'s publication, see Andrew Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 149–50; *Washington Irving and the House of Murray: Geoffrey Crayon Charms the British, 1817–1856*, ed. Ben Harris McClary (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969); Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature*, 99–101.

[10] Irving's Bracebridge Hall was modeled upon Aston Hall and named after one of its residents, Abraham Bracebridge.

to provide for. A mere spectator of other men's fortunes and adventures, and how they play their parts."[11] Derived from Richard Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), the epigraph implies that Crayon abstains from the courtship rituals and marriages of Bracebridge Hall so that he may congregate among connoisseurs and aficionados in the homosocial realm of the British aristocracy. Irving's own singledom has been compellingly claimed as a prototypically queer position.[12] More relevant to my interests, however, is Crayon's psychically intense form of spectatorship that sublimates erotic longing into associationist description. His most profound experiences are reserved for painting, even if—or perhaps because—he does not understand what he feels. Although Crayon's fellow aesthetes can easily converse in the discourses including the picturesque or the sublime, Crayon gravitates toward mystifying and exhilarating works that suggest the limits of extant aesthetic categories as well as the very boundaries of intelligible experience. Aesthetic experience pushes Crayon to bodily and cognitive extremes through sensations that divert—indeed, even pervert—psychic energies to queer, wholly unexpected, ends.

In this chapter, I focus on two aesthetic categories that inflect Crayon's sketches: the picturesque and the sublime. I propose that Irving and Crayon refract sexual desire and erotic activity through aesthetic categories that, in these sketch books, assume a geographic tint. *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall* narrate Crayon's grand tour of the picturesque

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[11] Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, in *History Tales, and Sketches*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 735. All further references to *The Sketch Book* are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

[12] Jenifer S. Banks, "Washington Irving, the Nineteenth-Century Bachelor," in *Critical Essays on Washington* Irving, ed. Ralph M. Aderman (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), 253–65; Bryce Traister, "The Wandering Bachelor: Irving, Masculinity, and Authorship," *American Literature* 74, no. 1 (2002): 111–37; Michael Warner, "Irving's Posterity," *ELH* 67, no. 3 (2000): 773–99. As Burstein argues, the author "generally subsumed libidinous desire in his commitment to literature." *Original Knickerbocker*, 335. Warner reaches a similar point, concluding that "Literary reproduction is, for Irving, the ultimate form of surrogacy: a mode of cultural reproduction in which bachelors are, at last, fully at home" ("Irving's Posterity," 792). On singledom as a queer category, see Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

British countryside (based upon Irving's own travels between 1815–24). *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall* reify the emblems of the British aristocracy—marriage, family, children, and the promise of posterity—that would eventually cohere as what is commonly referred to as "heteronormativity."[13] But upon leaving England for the tumultuous, romanticized terrain of Germany and Italy in *Tales of a Traveller*, Crayon finds himself among bohemian artists and their sublime, melancholic paintings. I designate this as the realm of the queer sublime, where emotions associated with the sublime—terror, thrill, astonishment, fear, and the pleasure of annihilation—map the identical contours of artists' response to other men.[14] Those familiar with the antisocial thesis of queer theory will sense the uncanny resonance between Irving's writing and contemporary psychoanalytic understandings of queer desire. The queer sublime anticipates, for instance, Lauren Berlant's and Lee Edelman's definition of sex as a relation to "something in excess of pleasure or happiness or the self-evidence of value."[15] The queer sublime names a desire predicated upon the disruption of the psychic boundaries between self and other, something that is most easily glimpsed in what Edmund Burke designates as the "obscure"[16] terrain of

[13] Following Michael Warner's lead, I define heteronormativity as a sociopolitical order that privileges the heterosexual couple and establishes biological reproduction as a universalizing norm. Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* ed. Michael Warner (for the Social Text Collective) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxi–xxv.

[14] Although Davin Grindstaff also refers to the "queer sublime," his usage of the term refers to audiences' responses to homosexual acts depicted in *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005) that "transcend the terror that would ordinarily accompany such encounters" (225). In a related vein, Max Fincher detects the "queer sublime" in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) in how "Caleb reads and reacts to Falkland's body" (117). My usage of "queer sublime" departs by stressing the category's origins in associationism and degree of psychic intensity. See Grindstaff, "The Fist and the Corpse: Taming the Queer Sublime in *Brokeback Mountain*," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 223–44; Fincher, *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age: The Penetrating Eye* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 110–30.

[15] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 12.

[16] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2015), 109. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

inscrutable, overwhelming emotions. Arguably the first American aesthete (albeit a fictional one), Crayon couches these aesthetic styles in terms of the emotions and desires they inspire.

Irving's performance as Geoffrey Crayon reveals that aesthetic philosophy helped writers imagine spectatorship as a realm adjacent to what Joseph Addison and Richard Steele designate in this chapter's epigraph as "ordinary life," a domain in which "we raise our imaginations to what is not to be expected in human life."[17] I argue that this distinction between "ordinary life" and aesthetic experience was crucial for early iterations of queer sexuality, in that aesthetic experience offers spectators the chance to pursue that which "ordinary life" does not provide, especially forms of beauty and elegance that can be attributed to the technical dexterity of an artist rather than a spectator's private proclivities or preferences. Thus when Crayon beholds what is called "manly beauty"[18], he couches his appreciation in terms of associationist thought rather than sexual desire. Queerness reads as epiphenomenal to aesthetics—in other words, a fondness for "manly beauty" can be claimed as evidence of sophisticated taste rather than non-normative attraction. This chapter accompanies Crayon as he encounters a variety of sexual desires and categories. After examining the homosocial picturesque of *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall*, I will focus on the queer sublime as portrayed in a sequence of interrelated tales from *Tales of a Traveller*: "The Adventure of the Mysterious Picture," "The Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger," and "The Story of the Young Italian." As Crayon hears the story of Ottavio—a

[17] *The Spectator*, 231. The emergence of aesthetics as a distinct sphere in the eighteenth century is narrated in M. H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 38, no. 6 (1985): 8–33; Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 496–527; Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (II)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13, no. 1 (1952): 17–46; Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 75–151.

painter attracted to a romantic rival that he will eventually murder and then paint compulsively—he confronts more disruptive forms of aesthetic experience that offer more lurid, sublime thrills. According to the literary critics Edward Cahill and Edward Larkin, aesthetics promises "insight into the shape and consistency of private interiority and public collectivity that defy empirical assessment; the nonrational premises out of which rational thought and action emerge; and the idealist projections that are, for the artist, the only true measures of the real."[19] The queer sublime foregrounds the erotic potential of such "nonrational premises" and "idealist projections." This messiness speaks to the inchoate desires that animate Crayon's sketch books that, when taken together, demonstrate that aesthetics contributed to the development of queer sexuality in American literature by providing a means to bear and render inscrutable attachments through the frame of art.

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Part One: Feeling Like a Man of Feeling

Crayon seeks from aesthetic experience the chance to reinvent himself through temporary forms of queer personhood glimpsed through art. No stranger to the art of fictional personae, Irving's multiple alter-egos are as varied as they are numerous.[20] Yet Irving's

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[18] Washington Irving, *Bracebridge Hall, Tales of a Traveller, and The Alhambra*, ed. Andrew B. Myers (New York: The Library of America, 1991), 435. All further references to *Bracebridge Hall, Tales of a Traveller*, and *The Alhambra* are to this edition and are included parenthetically.

[19] Edward Cahill and Edward Larkin, "Aesthetics, Feeling, and Form in Early American Literary Studies," *Early American Literature* 51, no. 2 (2016): 244.

[20] An incomplete list includes the theater critic, Jonathan Oldstyle, who penned reviews for the *Morning Chronicle* (1802–03); the actor, Dick Buckram, who also wrote for the *Morning Chronicle*; Anthony Evergreen, Gent., featured in *Salmagundi* (1807); Christopher Cockloft, also appearing in *Salmagundi*; and the historian, Diedrich Knickerbocker, of *A History of New York* (1809). Irving adopted the name Geoffrey Crayon in 1819, likely as an acknowledgment of his friendship with the English painter Charles Robert Leslie.

affinity with Crayon dramatizes what Irving referred to as his "fatal propensity to Belles lettres."[21] Writing as Crayon far longer than his earlier short-lived personae, Irving refashions his fluency in *belles lettres* into Crayon's contemplative responses to any number of different scenes of consumption. Crayon's preferred literary genre, the sketch, reveals the productive tension between ordinary and aesthetic experience. Time and again, Crayon reacts to a painting, a tale, or a character sketch as if he were moved and changed by it, becoming more refined, more sensitive, more genteel on the basis of his consumption. Just as an artist's sketch is a preliminary drawing that rehearses a more daunting or high-stakes work, Crayon's sketches chart emotions that lack the shape of more pronounced sentiment.[22] As a genre prized for both its ephemerality and its formulaic nature, the sketch offers Crayon the chance to experiment with a variety of personae, including the gentleman, the man of feeling, the connoisseur, and the litterateur. Just as his namesake reflects an instrument that could be used for writing or drawing, Crayon relishes visual culture for its improvisational nature that affords him the chance to linger in the spontaneity of his meandering or digressive impressions.[23]

Crayon's sketches problematize the distinction between reality and representation by conflating what he sees with what he writes. Early on, Crayon introduces himself as

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Stanley T. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), vol. I, 169–70. On Crayon as Irving's persona, see Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, *Adrift in the Old World: The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 59–64.

[21] Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, vol. II, 256. Irving based his writing for *Salmagundi* upon Addison and Steele's *Tatler* and *Spectator* magazines; see Burstein, *Original Knickerbocker*, 21–22; Carla L. Peterson, "Mapping Taste: Urban Modernities from the *Tatler* and *Spectator* to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*," *American Literary History* 32, no. 4 (2020): 697–99.

[22] I am thankful to Zara Anishanslin for this point. On sketches as the preeminent textual genre of aesthetic experience in the eighteenth century, see Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 77–126.

[23] In this regard, the crayon anticipates the pencil, which, as Blake Bronson-Bartlett reveals, "mobilized writers and accelerated their hands—in the moment and on the move—and thus promised a means of getting close to,

someone who has "wandered through different countries and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. I cannot say that I have studied them with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print shop to another; caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape" (*SB*, 745). Such "shifting scenes of life" are ordinary activity transfigured into commodified tableaux. Here, Crayon brings together spectatorship, consumption, and refinement. Apprehending "the shifting scenes of life" as if he were a window shopper, Crayon remains decidedly uncommitted about just who he wants to be. Anticipating the flâneur that would become popularized by the nineteenth century's end, Crayon flocks to "delineations of beauty," "distortions of caricature," or "the loveliness of landscape" based upon his tastes. But in preferring the "print shop" to the real thing, he pursues reproductions (i.e., landscape prints) rather than reality (i.e., nature) itself. This preference sustains his identity as both a spectator and a tourist, as both activities recapitulate experience through stylized representation. His travels are so significant, then, because they provide a stage on which he can play the role of spectator. "Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association," he explains. "There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age" (*SB*, 744). Here Crayon refashions the familiar juxtaposition of American infancy and European maturity into an allegory for aesthetic experience: "I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread as it were in the footsteps of antiquity—to loiter about the ruined castle—to meditate on the falling tower—to escape in short, from the

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if not capturing, ephemeral experience." Bronson-Bartlett, "Writing with Pencils in the Antebellum United States: Language, Instrument, Gesture," *American Literature* 92, no. 2 (2020): 202.

commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past" (*SB*, 744). His preference for "storied and poetical association" as opposed to "the commonplace realities of the present" transforms tourism into fantasy by couching his travels in terms of "the language of polite and cultivated life" (*SB*, 1043).

Crayon's tendency to conflate reality with representation captures the ambiguity of the spectator as a figure caught between respectable labor and the creative imagination. Throughout *Bracebridge Hall* and *Tales of a Traveller*, Crayon differentiates between spectatorship and creativity in sketches that portray a variety of artists such as Ottavio, a painter, and Buckthorne, a writer. As Bryan Jay Wolf argues, Irving tends to view artists with suspicion, especially those who forsake civic duty for the increasingly solipsistic pleasures of the romantic imagination.[24] But if we couch Irving's romantic artist in terms of the feminized history of consumption, the male artist starts to resemble feminized, quixotic consumers (not unlike Crayon himself). When Buckthorne recalls his childhood, his schoolboy daydreaming becomes a parable for keeping fancy in check. "I used to sit on my desk in the school," he writes. "Instead of studying the book which lay open before me, my eye was gazing through the windows on the green fields and blue hills. How I envied the happy groups on the tops of stage-coaches, chatting, and joking, and laughing." Recalling Crayon's habit of "gazing" onto others, Buckthorne retreats into a reverie in which "I fancied to myself what adventures they must experience, and what odd scenes of life they must witness. All this was, doubtless, the poetical temperament working within me, and tempting me forth into a world of its own creation, which I mistook for the world of real life" (*TT*, 507). Like Crayon's account of "humble lovers of the picturesque" (*SB*, 745) who peer into print-shop windows, Buckthorne's memory conflates reality with representation.

[24] Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 107–73.

Both spectators look upon scenes of happiness as if they were "the world of real life." But whereas Buckthorne identifies this as "the poetical temperament," Crayon must ensure that he does not mistake these tableaux for the real thing. For the man of feeling, these reveries and visions are fodder for genteel leisure, unlike the working artist, such as Buckthorne or Ottavio, who turns "the poetical temperament" into a profession. Along with quixotic daydreamers like Ichabod Crane or Rip Van Winkle, Buckthorne and Crayon forsake "the world of real life" by staging "odd scenes of life" that abandon verisimilitude for romanticized distortion. By refracting experience through stylized conventions, Crayon inhabits "the picturesque situation of [a] village" or "the simplicity of rural life" (*SB*, 1042) as a fictionalized character who populates his own scene recounted in sketches.

But unlike his British counterparts who consumed the picturesque during its heyday in the 1790s—the so-called "decade of the picturesque"—Crayon's fondness for "polite and cultivated life" is passé. The picturesque style had fallen out of fashion by the time *The Sketch Book* was published in 1819. As the art historian Ann Bermingham has demonstrated, the popularity of the rustic landscape tradition coincided with the enclosure of the English countryside (roughly 1750–1815). The genre, she argues, helped assuage class-based anxieties regarding the displaced rural poor and the industrial proletariat by staging pastoral scenes that feature harmonious relations among stratifying social classes.[25] The picturesque was borne by a variety of print and belletristic genres—including landscape prints, travel writings, and guidebooks—that standardized a distinct vocabulary that

[25] Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 73–83. As Nancy Armstrong argues, the Restriction Bill of 1797, shifting England from a gold to a paper standard of currency, fueled nostalgic portrayals of the landed gentry. Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 45–56.

amateurs could easily adopt and imitate in private writing and conversation.[26] (Irving was one of the first writers to popularize the picturesque for American audiences, as the tradition was typically associated with British literature.[27]) When Crayon opines that "an old English family should inhabit an old English manor house" (*SB*, 1034), he reproduces the idyllic pastoral by reenacting it at historical remove. His nostalgia for what he calls the "joviality of long departed years" (*SB*, 961) asserts his status as a fellow man of feeling, a cultural ideal epitomized by Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) who embodies a distinctly masculine form of genteel wealth, decorum, and sensibility.[28] In claiming that "the man of refinement finds nothing revolting in an intercourse with the lower orders in rural life," Crayon aligns himself with a figure who "lays aside his distance and reserve, and is glad to wave the distinctions of rank, and to enter into the honest heartfelt enjoyments of common life" (*SB*, 799).[29] During such moments, Crayon renders himself as a man of feeling on the basis of his ability to observe tableaux of class privilege through disinterested spectatorship and sympathy.

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[26] Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition*, 135–66; Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 108–28; John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Martin Price, "The Picturesque Moment," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 259–92; Cynthia Wall, *Grammars of Approach: Landscape, Narrative, and the Linguistic Picturesque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[27] Matthew Redmond, "Trouble in Paradise: The Picturesque Fictions of Irving and His Successors," *ESQ* 62, no. 1 (2016): 2–4; Michael Hurst, "Reinventing Patriarchy: Washington Irving and the Autoerotics of the American Imaginary," *Early American Literature* 47, no. 3 (2012): 649–78; Rubin-Dorsky, *Adrift in the Old World*, 80–93.

[28] On the rise of the man of feeling, see Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 340–44; George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 98–115.

[29] In Nancy Armstrong's trenchant turn of phrase, "the picturesque aesthetic had been uniquely geared to the task of turning poverty into art." Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 95.

This anachronistic relation to the bygone picturesque constitutes, I would argue, an act of queer fashioning. Crayon's staging of stylized personhood anticipates a wide variety of cultural self-fashioning that has become central to contemporary queer theory. From what Michael Moon refers to as "queer hypermimeticism," to what Gayatri Gopinath deems the "queer curation" of global diasporic communities, to the sharing of books among New England women that Natasha Hurley and J. Samaine Lockwood have excavated, culture has helped formulate queer gender and sexuality for quite some time.[30] As David Halperin writes, queer subjectivity often "expresses itself through a peculiar, dissident way of relating to cultural objects." "As a cultural practice," queer identity "involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, of decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning."[31] Crayon's sketch books may lack the subversive bent that Halperin identifies, but they nevertheless anticipate the "decoding and recoding of the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture." Crayon performs the picturesque with considerable panache, even if he is prone to overwrought tears, overeager declarations, and overzealous mimicry of British texts associated with the cult of sensibility, including Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* and Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journal Through France and Italy* (1768), in order to play the man of feeling.

For an American writer and fictional character to emulate the British aristocracy in the 1810s would be unorthodox to say the least. On the one hand, Irving's fondness for

[30] Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 9; Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 4–5; Hurley, *Circulating Desire*, 109–48; J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

British culture and history resonates with the broader American Anglophilia that characterized many of the cultural elite in the early republic, who professed sophistication by consuming imported luxury goods.[32] Yet on the other hand, the War of 1812 intensified anti-British sentiment, especially after British troops set fire to numerous federal buildings and residences in Washington, D.C. in 1814. As the historian Nicole Eustace argues, American patriotism often appropriated the imagery of romance, marriage, and children to establish procreation as intrinsic to national wellbeing.[33] The family was regarded as evidence of civic virtue, where morality and duty were central to the domestic sphere.[34] But as a perennial bachelor excluded from the courtship and marriages that unfold at Bracebridge Hall, Crayon reserves his psychic and erotic energies for belles lettres instead. Preferring the company of authors, artists, and historical figures to women or children, Crayon opts for textual, rather than sexual, reproduction. As he remarks in "The Art of Book Making," Crayon refashions authors in a process by which "many of their works . . . undergo a kind of metempsychosis and spring up under new forms. What was formerly a ponderous history, revives in the shape of a romance—an old legend changes into a modern play, and a sober philosophical treatise, furnishes the body for a whole series of bouncing

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[31] David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12 (italics removed).

[32] Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[33] Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1–35.

[34] Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 136–53.

and sparkling essays" (*SB*, 811).[35] Crayon's idiosyncratic relation to cultural artifacts evokes Halperin's description of queer cultural expression as interested in "decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture." This passage elucidates how Crayon jettisons "ordinary life" for what critics have deemed his "archaic," "anachronistic," and "amateur antiquarian" impulses that place him at cross purposes with contemporary American manhood.[36] Like Irving, who modeled his Sunnyside estate upon British, Spanish, and New York's Dutch colonial architecture, Crayon abstains from contemporary American identity by retreating into the past where he can refashion himself as a cosmopolitan man of feeling.[37]

This stylized experience is predicated upon feminized and queer desire. He aspires to become, and to possess, the man of feeling. The man of feeling lies at the center of the homosocial picturesque of Bracebridge Hall as evidenced by the profoundly eligible bachelor, Simon Bracebridge. Crayon vies with other women, servants, and admirers for Simon's time and attention. When it comes to the English gentleman, "I do not know a finer race of men." Crayon declares:

> Instead of the softness and effeminacy which characterize the men of rank in most countries, they exhibit a union of elegance and strength, a robustness of frame and freshness of complexion, which I am inclined to attribute to their living so much in

[35] As Grantland S. Rice argues, this passage reflects recent developments in copyright law in light of the 1790 Federal Copyright Act, which obscured the notion of ownership over intellectual property. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 70–72.

[36] Warner, "Irving's Posterity," 775; 776; Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 138. Dinshaw's provocative reading of *The Sketch Book* persuasively situates Irving's historicism in terms of the so-called "temporal turn" of queer theory; see Dinshaw, 129–52.

[37] After Irving acquired the cottage in 1835, he drew upon British, Spanish, and New York's Dutch colonial architecture when renovating the property. Sunnyside's American picturesque aesthetic was featured in A. J. Downing's *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1841).

> the open air, and pursuing so eagerly the invigorating recreations of the country. These hardy exercises produce also a healthful tone of mind and spirits, a manliness and simplicity of manners, which even the follies and dissipations of the town cannot easily pervert, and can never entirely destroy. (*SB*, 798)

Crayon's sketch renders the man of feeling in comparable terms as he would describe a rustic landscape. Known for his "elegance" and "simplicity of manners," the gentleman is a curated entity refined by his surroundings that impart an air of effortless refinement, a far cry from Crayon's consciously labored writing that seeks to assert his fluency in the terminology of belles lettres. The man of feeling functions as a fetish for white manhood, especially because Crayon remains adjacent to this category. Simon Bracebridge is everything that Crayon is not: landed, wealthy, and successful in courtship and romance. Crayon's subordinated position with respect to the man of feeling constitutes, I would argue, a nascent queer status. Crayon seems unable, or at least unwilling, to discipline his emotions with the decorum expected of a man of feeling. Rather, his preferred mode of cultural consumption and aesthetic experience more closely resembles the quixotic tendencies he associates with women. Irving reveals, then, that the observer and the man of feeling attach to cultural artifacts in markedly different ways that pivot upon feminized or passive forms of consumption.

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Part Two: Taste Among the Picturesque (or, Male Quixotism)

As Crayon discovers at Bracebridge Hall, gendered conventions organize aesthetic consumption in terms of the degree to which one sublimates desire into stylized depictions

of intimacy. "I have seldom met with an old bachelor," Crayon remarks, "that had not, at some time or another, his nonsensical moment, when he would become tender and sentimental, talk about the concerns of the heart, and have some confession of a delicate nature to make." By cordoning off "concerns of the heart" as "nonsensical," his gendered schema bifurcates reason and emotion by suggesting that men access, and ultimately compartmentalize, emotions through the arts. This model structures how men interact with one another at Bracebridge Hall, such as when Simon Bracebridge confides to Crayon that he has preserved a lock of his unrequited love's hair, "which he wore in a true lover's knot, in a large gold brooch" (*BH*, 200). The beloved's transfiguration from person into brooch encapsulates the broader metamorphosis that Crayon seeks in aesthetic experience by which souvenirs structure relations through forms that endure. That is to say, he searches for the rituals that can illustrate attachments even if such illustration idealizes, rather than consummates, desire. Unrequited longing hence comprises a key component of the man of feeling's disposition. As Crayon remarks about romance, "With a bachelor, though it may slumber, it never dies. It is always liable to break out again in transient flashes, and never so much as on a spring morning in the country; or on a winter evening, when seated in his solitary chamber, stirring up the fire and talking of matrimony" (*BH*, 200). Crayon's ideal spectator is thus a single one, ideally a man, who reroutes emotions and desires through the chaste appreciation of beautiful objects rather than people.

Unlike the man of feeling who is moved, but not overcome, by sensibility, Crayon practices a distinctly different form of sensibility through his enthusiasm for books and art. His love of reading recalls Don Quixote, the wanderer from Miguel de Cervantes' anti-

romance of the same name, who had become the icon of naïve consumption by the 1810s.[38] Referring to the stereotypical "boarding-school girl" who "devour[ed] the pages of a sentimental novel, or Don Quixote a chivalrous romance" (*BH*, 78), Crayon equates Quixote with his counterpart, the female reader, who also conflates reality and representation. Crayon differentiates between his and women's quixotic habits lest he become an undiscriminating reader who might become "stark mad . . . from reading books of chivalry" (*SB*, 1049). Crayon's sketch books anxiously distinguish between his and women's forms of consumption in order to align himself with the man of feeling. As Julie Ellison writes, "Sensibility becomes fashionable when men practice it—although they are not the only ones who practice it and although their practices have variable meanings."[39] Crayon adopts the cult of sensibility so that he may identify with an idealized manhood predicated upon disidentifying with womanhood. "Man is the creature of interest and ambition," he claims. "But a woman's whole life is a history of the affections. The heart is her world." As "the companion of her own thoughts and feelings," "woman's is comparatively a fixed, a secluded, and a meditative life" (*SB*, 802–03). But as a bachelor and a spectator proficient in belles lettres, Crayon's position contradicts his own schema. His associationist sketches read as "a history of the affections" and emphasize his "fixed," "secluded," and "meditative" tendency to retreat inward toward style. As "the companion of [his] own thoughts and feelings," Crayon inhabits a quixotic position at odds with men of feeling for whom emotions comprise part of a broader gentility rather than its defining, and misogynist, characteristic.

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[38] Amelia Dale, *The Printed Reader: Gender, Quixotism, and Textual Bodies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2019). This phenomenon is satirized in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801).

[39] Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.

Enter the work of taste. Irving differentiates between masculine and feminine forms of aesthetic consumption by appealing to taste as the prerequisite for whiteness, manhood, and aristocracy. Crayon affirms these values when declaring that the gentleman "should not be a mere man of pleasure" but rather "a man at all points; simple, frank, courteous, intelligent, accomplished, and informed; upright, intrepid, and disinterested" (*BH*, 110). Crayon's final term, "disinterested," is telling. Signaling a spectator's capacity to remain stoic in the face of sentiment, disinterestedness was deliberated with considerable vigor in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which established critical judgment as the hallmark of aesthetic pleasure.[40] Crayon's sketch books reproduce Kant's commitment to disinterestedness by depicting men of feeling who curb aesthetic emotions seemingly at will in contradistinction to feminized, quixotic audiences' sentimental or overwrought reaction. To respond to a work of art without becoming beholden to it signals the disinterested, critical judgment that Crayon desires and upholds. As Terry Eagleton has made clear, aesthetic philosophy exerted a powerful influence upon the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it functioned as "a bourgeois concept in the most literal historical sense, hatched and nurtured in the Enlightenment." A surprisingly versatile concept, disinterested spectatorship encompassed what Eagleton calls "a varied span of preoccupations: freedom and legality, spontaneity and necessity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality, along with several others."[41] Such preoccupations suffuse Edmund Burke's definition of taste, which he argues "is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human

[40] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90–96.

[41] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 9; 3.

passions, manners and actions" (*PE*, 23). Taste, in other words, keeps emotions and the imagination in check by couching aesthetic value in terms of reasoning and judgment.

As scholars have demonstrated, taste helped forge and reassert categories of race, gender, and class during the early national period.[42] Consider, for instance, Thomas Jefferson's racist dismissal of Phillis Wheatley Peters and Ignatius Sancho in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Referring to people of African descent, Jefferson writes that "in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous," and that "their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection." As Jefferson's commentary reveals, taste was believed to restrain the excesses of "sensation" by reinforcing disinterested "reflection" as a matter of dignified leisure. Jefferson admires Sancho's "strong religious zeal" despite the fact that, according to Jefferson, his "imagination is wild and extravagant, [and] escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste."[43] This form of spectatorship suffuses Bracebridge Hall, not to mention Monticello, where spectators behold spectacles with a disinterested eye that can look away. Crayon's sketch books narrate the racial and sexual politics of this form of spectatorship, especially when Crayon claims taste in contradistinction to quixotic or feminized spectators. Taste is co-constitutive of the man of feeling because it confers what William Hazlitt refers to as "the highest degree of sensibility, or the impression made on the most cultivated and sensible minds."[44] For Crayon, the tension between sensibility and impressibility marks the limits of whiteness and genteel manhood. Taste signals whiteness, in other words, by projecting sensation and emotion onto

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[42] Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 145–87; Kelly, *Republic of Taste*; Van Horn, *The Power of Objects*.

[43] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 139–40.

[44] William Hazlitt, *The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. Tom Paulin and David Chandler (New York: Penguin, 2000), 206.

bodies deemed unable to control or restrain emotional responses to what Hazlitt describes as "the impression" made upon a spectator.

For Irving and Crayon, taste signals a critical faculty that, according to Sir Joshua Reynolds, "no man ever possessed without long cultivation, and great labour and attention."[45] After the consumer revolution inundated markets with mass-produced goods, Reynolds' call for "great labour and attention" encouraged male connoisseurs to distinguish their refined proclivities in opposition to their female counterparts. More recently, Kyla Schuller has developed this notion of "impressibility," which she defines as the "ability to respond to sensory stimulations on the basis of emotional reflection, rather than instinctive reflex."[46] Impressibility emerges from this genealogy of taste, I would argue, by negotiating the relation between "emotional reflection" and critical appraisal. According to Jefferson, writers of color were impressible to a fault just as, according to Crayon, female consumers were overly quixotic. (As Schuller makes clear, "impressibility was deemed to be heightened among the feminine: ladies, children, artists, and homosexuals, among others."[47]) Crayon attempts to curb his "instinctive reflex" with "emotional reflection" throughout his sketches. Despite the fact that he is prone to overwrought or melodramatic responses, his sketches nevertheless assert his status as an aspirational man of feeling by concluding with an appraisal or assessment of the scene at hand. By sympathizing with "the sorrows of the poor, . . . the sorrows of the aged, . . . [and] the sorrows of a widow, aged, solitary, destitute, mourning over an only son the last solace of her years" (*SB*, 837), he brings himself into

[45] Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmond Malone, and Thomas Gray, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight* (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1797), vol I, xii.

[46] Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 4.

[47] Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 16.

contact with what he is not—"poor," "aged," or "a widow"—in order to perform genteel white manhood through disinterested spectatorship.

Crayon's carefully curated performance differentiates between two forms of visual culture that predominated British aesthetics: beholding paintings and reading literature. As a figure who oscillates between the two forms, Crayon valorizes painting while disparaging feminized literary consumption. Thus when Lady Lillycraft arrives at Bracebridge Hall, her entrance threatens to undermine Crayon's status as a self-appointed arbiter of taste. Notably, Crayon reserves his derision for her habits of consumption: "One of those tender, romance-read dames of the old school," her "mind is filled with flames and darts, and who breathe nothing but constancy and wedlock." Much like Crayon himself, Lady Lillycraft is known for her love of books. She "is generally surrounded by little documents of her prevalent taste; novels of a tender nature; richly bound little books of poetry, that are filled with sonnets and love tales, and perfumed with rose-leaves" (*BH*, 54). Whereas Crayon justifies his refashioning of literature as an act of pseudo-procreation, Lady Lillycraft's reading threatens to entice Simon with the real thing. Crayon bemoans the fact that Simon "is very attentive and officious, and somewhat sentimental, with Lady Lillycraft; copies out little namby-pamby ditties and love-songs for her, and draws quivers, and doves, and darts, and Cupids to be worked on the corners of her pocket handkerchiefs." Yet when Simon "gets among young company, such as Frank Bracebridge, the Oxonian, and the general, he is apt to put on the mad wag, and to talk in a very bachelor-like strain about the sex" (*BH*, 51–52). The ease with which Simon transitions between these gendered styles unnerves Crayon precisely because it exposes just how tenuous these divisions are. Unlike Crayon, Simon freely partakes in sentimental culture without losing fluency in "a very bachelor-like strain."

The problem with Lady Lillycraft, it seems, is that she prefers the reality over the representation—she would rather consummate than sublimate desire. She threatens to upend Crayon's preferred configuration of homosocial singledom. As critics have observed, Irving's fiction is replete with similar homosocial arrangements that siphon courtship and romance into same-sex romantic friendship between men.[48] But in Irving's riff upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's homosocial erotic triangle, Crayon competes with Lady Lillycraft for Simon's affections (rather than two men jockeying for a woman's). Yet despite this inversion, Crayon's disdain for Lady Lillycraft nevertheless affirms Sedgwick's claim that "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved."[49] Crayon disparages Lady Lillycraft's "little namby-pamby ditties and love-songs" (*BH*, 51) because they attempt to catalyze, rather than defer, erotic activity. Given that Crayon prefers to displace emotions through totems such as a brooch or a painting, he disparages women who seek more fulfilling emotional experience. "It is a pity," he declares,

> that plays and novels should always end at the wedding, and should not give us another act, and another volume, to let us know how the hero and heroine conducted themselves when married. Their main object seems to be merely to instruct young ladies how to get husbands, but not how to keep them. . . . It is appalling to see how soon the flame of romantic love burns out, or rather is quenched in matrimony; and

[48] David Greven, "Troubling Our Heads about Ichabod: 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,' Classic American Literature, and the Sexual Politics of Homosocial Brotherhood," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 93. On homosociality and Irving's Knickerbocker coterie, see David Dowling, *The Business of Literary Circles in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 43–47.

[49] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 21. On homosociality in eighteenth-century England, see Declan Kavanagh, *Effeminate Years: Literature, Politics, and Aesthetics in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2017); Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London: GMP, 1992). Many of the spaces associated with the cult of

> how deplorably the passionate, poetic lover declines into the phlegmatic, prosaic husband. I am inclined to attribute this very much to the defect just mentioned in the plays and novels, which form so important a branch of study of our young ladies; and which teach them how to be heroines, but leave them totally at a loss when they come to be wives. (*BH*, 55)

Crayon's "flame of romantic love" burns brightest in his idealized homosocial domain where suitors play the role of the "passionate, poetic lover" if only amongst themselves. In this regard, Crayon and Lady Lillycraft both desire "the passionate, poetic lover" embodied by Simon Bracebridge. They share common ground as consumers of literature and painting that valorize the man of feeling in idealized abstraction. According to Crayon's misogynist critique, "the passionate, poetic lover" is incompatible with marriage because women do not know "how to keep them." Women, in other words, are obstacles to be overcome.[50] The homosocial realm, by contrast, offers the chance for men to remain something other than "the phlegmatic, prosaic husband." Yet despite Crayon's willingness to forsake marriage and family, he discovers that not all men share his enthusiasm for sacrifice. After departing Bracebridge Hall in the closing sketch significantly titled "The Wedding," Crayon begins his next sketch book, *Tales of a Traveller*, from Mainz, Germany, where he finds himself in a more tumultuous, mystifying domain. Crayon remarks that "My brain is filled . . . with all kinds of odds and ends. In travelling, these heterogenous matters have become shaken up in my mind, as the articles are apt to be in an ill packed travelling trunk; so that when I attempt to draw forth a fact, I cannot determine whether I have read, heard, or dreamt it" (*TT*, 385).

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sensibility—coffeehouses, taverns, and social clubs—actively encouraged homosocial behavior. See Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 90–93; Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, 59, 112–13.

[50] In a foundational analysis of *The Sketch Book*, Judith Fetterly argues that "the basic fantasy 'Rip Van Winkle' embodies is that of being able to sleep long enough to avoid at once the American Revolution and the

Crayon seems to have ventured even further into the realm of aesthetic experience. Unable to differentiate between reality and representation, Crayon recognizes that his preferred mode of spectatorship is incompatible with the picturesque.

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Part Three: The Queer Sublime

> So enchanting a scene was sufficient to inspire the poet – not do I wonder that this climate should [be] particularly productive of poetry & romance. . . . There is a poetic charm (if I may so express myself –) that diffuses itself over our ideas in considering this part of the globe. We regard every thing with an enthusiastic eye – thro a romantic medium that gives an illusive tinge to every object. Tis like beholding a delightful landscape from an eminence, on a beautiful evening. A delicious mistiness is spread over the scene that softens the harshness of particular objects – prevents our examining their forms too distinctly . . . . a glow is thrown over the whole, that by blending & softening and enriching – gives the landscape a mellowness – a sweetness a loveliness of color not absolutely its own, but derived in a great measure from the illusive veil with which it is oerspread [sic]. I do not know whether I express myself intelligibly. Those are sensations difficult to be explained – they are too exquisitely delicious to bear a cool discription [sic].
>
> —Washington Irving,
> December 25, 1804[51]

As I have been arguing, the category of the man of feeling rests upon the ability to sublimate desire into stylized form. Irving's alter-ego Geoffrey Crayon largely accomplishes this in *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall*, but he encounters more sordid forms of spectatorship upon entering Germany at the beginning of *Tales of a Traveller*. In this final of the three sketch books, Irving becomes decidedly interested in the trope of the romantic artist, an increasingly subcultural figure whose creative genius and unorthodox sexuality

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wife" (6). Fetterly, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1–11.

[51] Washington Irving, *Journals and Notebooks: Volume I, 1803–06*, ed. Nathalia Wright (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 144–45.

departed from the notion of the artisanal or craftsman tradition of painters.[52] This figure emerges in the painter Ottavio, whose tale of consummated desire appears in the sequence of interrelated tales, "The Adventure of the Mysterious Picture," "The Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger," and "The Story of the Young Italian."[53]

In order to narrate Ottavio's homoerotic, rather than homosocial, desire for another man, Irving refashions the aesthetic philosophy of the sublime.[54] As a Byronic artist, the mercurial painter Ottavio stands as a foil to Crayon's groomed appearance as a man of feeling. Whereas spectators like Crayon congregate among the homosocial aristocracy to appreciate paintings, artists like Ottavio fall prey to queer desire in ways that resemble the sublime. Thus understood, the queer sublime marks the limits of what one can observe from afar. Taste ceases to matter in tales such as Ottavio's, especially when audiences are baffled by Ottavio's portrait of Filippo. As beholders scrutinize the painting for signs of hidden meaning, they confront the realm of the queer sublime that gestures toward new forms of spectatorship that indulge, rather than suppress, desire. A far cry from the genteel picturesque of Bracebridge Hall, the romantic extravagance of Ottavio's tale relishes the overwhelming emotions that exceed spectators' capacity to interpret or narrate what they feel. Although Crayon prides himself upon his fluency in aesthetic discourse, Ottavio encounters the limits of his perceptual capacities during encounters with other men. Given

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[52] On the rise of the romantic artist as queer or melancholic figure, see Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 149–90.

[53] Like many other sketches, Irving derived Ottavio's tale from a variety of European intertexts. Stanley T. Williams traces these stories' origins to Schiller's play *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*, 1781), Charles Maturin's novel *Fatal Revenge; or The Family of Montorio* (1807), and possibly an anecdote Irving heard from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's father. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, vol. II, 288–89.

[54] On the discourse of the sublime, see Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

the erotic undertones of his relation to art, Crayon's sketch books brush up against the perceptual limits of spectatorship and vision.

Notably, Ottavio's tale of passion is one of the few sketches that Crayon does not narrate. Rather, the story is recounted by a figure known only as "the nervous gentleman" (*TT*, 389). More "nervous" than "gentleman," the figure embodies the nervous system and its gendered association with excitability and excess.[55] By jettisoning the loquacious Crayon for the nervous gentleman, Irving dramatizes the overwhelming effects of the sublime upon the mind. That is to say, the nervous gentleman is ill-equipped to narrate his tale, since Ottavio's story practically seeps across three stories as each sketch concludes with another unresolved mystery or ambiguity. Each sketch depicts a different man coming into closer contact with Filippo: first, the nervous gentleman beholds Ottavio's portrait of Filippo in "The Adventure of the Mysterious Picture"; then the nervous gentleman's host, the Baronet, recounts how he met Ottavio in "The Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger"; and then Ottavio's manuscript itself, "The Story of the Young Italian," provides the mysterious portrait's origins. If Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky refers to this sequence as "a readerly coitus interruptus" that "denies . . . the pleasure of the anticipated climax"[56], what does it mean that this pseudo-sexual literary act involves "manly beauty" (*TT*, 435)? Working through what happens when men behold men, rather than women, as works of art, Ottavio's story affirms that "Manly beauty has its effect even upon men" (*TT*, 435). By staging same-sex intimacy using gothic conventions, Irving charts the "homosexual panic" that Eve Kosofsky

[55] Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 1–36; Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel,* 104–09.

[56] Rubin-Dorsky, *Adrift in the Old World*, 183–84.

Sedgwick argues was foundational to gothic literature with its interest in close, occasionally violent and sadistic, relations between men.[57]

Unlike the man of feeling, Ottavio refuses to discipline or regulate his tempestuous passions, likening them to sublime, gothic forces that control his every move. With his "eye . . . full of expression and fire, but wild and unsteady" (*TT*, 433), Ottavio is prone to what he calls an "extreme sensibility." As a child, he was "easily transported into paroxysms of pleasure or rage" (*TT*, 439). After his mother's death, he is sent to a convent near Vesuvius where the "convulsive throes" of the volcanic lava "shook the solid foundations of nature" beneath. Unlike the harmonious picturesque of Bracebridge Hall that can be observed from a distance, Ottavio's creativity thrives upon his proximity to nature. Irving attributes Ottavio's emotional state to his surroundings, especially at the monastery where Ottavio's excited interest in the volcano and lava approximates the painter's dormant unconscious.[58] At the monastery, Ottavio learns how to paint from monks who "talked of . . . streams of molten lava raging through [the earth's] veins; of caverns of sulphurous flames roaring in the centre, the abodes of demons and the damned; of fiery gulfs ready to yawn beneath our feet" (*TT*, 441). By conflating gothic imagery with creativity, the monks teach the young boy how to channel his "riot of vague but delicious emotions" (*TT*, 442) into art. Although Ottavio and Crayon both turn to the arts in order to experience such embodied sentiment, Ottavio descends further into subterranean, unconscious depths.

At stake in Ottavio's portrayal are the racial and sexual politics that align whiteness with disembodied spectatorship and ethnic identity with impressible, increasingly queer,

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[57] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 83–117.

[58] On nature and the gothic sublime in nineteenth-century American painting, see Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–29; Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 34–44; Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision*, 195–97.

artistry. By narrating the tale of what he calls "that crack brained Italian," the nervous gentleman establishes normative forms of spectatorship by ascribing volatile emotions onto what he calls the "tempest of mighty passion in a pigmy frame" (*TT*, 439). Time and again, Ottavio is rendered powerless by painting. In contradistinction to Crayon's quasi-disinterested gaze, Ottavio enjoys being dominated by art and others. After returning from his travels to discover that his intended fiancée Bianca has married his childhood friend Filippo, Ottavio cannot restrain his rage. "My blood boiled like liquid fire in my veins," he writes with language recalling the volcanic imagery from his boyhood at the monastery: "Every passion seemed to have resolved itself into the fury that like a lava boiled within my heart" (*TT*, 461). Yet Ottavio's emotions are reserved for Filippo rather than Bianca. With his "brain . . . in delirium," Ottavio "snatched forth a stiletto, put by the sword which trembled in his hand, and buried my poniard in his bosom. He fell with the blow, but my rage was unsated. I sprang upon him with the blood thirsty feeling of a tiger; redoubled my blows; mangled him in my frenzy, grasped him by the throat, until with reiterated wounds and strangling convulsions he expired in my grasp" (*TT*, 462). Unlike the comparatively chaste configuration of Crayon/Simon/Lady Lillycraft, the entanglement of Ottavio/Bianca/Filippo ends in consummation. With frenzied "blows," strangled "convulsions," and an intimate "grasp," Ottavio's animalistic state aligns the painter with the banditti and scoundrels who populate other sketches in *Tales of a Traveller*. Ottavio's "delirium" remains mysterious because it reverberates with numerous overdetermined meanings that the painter cannot, or does not care to, interpret. Although the "stiletto" Ottavio murders Filippo with recalls "stylo" (for stylograph, a fountain pen) and "stylus"[59], the etymological association underscores the very illegibility of his emotions. Like the

[59] Rubin-Dorsky, *Adrift in the Old World*, 192.

nervous gentleman, Ottavio seems ill-equipped to offer an account of his impressions. If Crayon describes his aesthetic response with eloquence and avidity, Ottavio occupies the psychosexual territory of the queer sublime where desire, aggression, and fear collide.

Ottavio takes pleasure in being haunted by the beauty of Filippo's inscrutable, ubiquitous face. After Filippo dies in his arms, the painter "remained glaring on the countenance, horrible in death, that seemed to stare back with its protruded eyes upon me" (*TT*, 462). Ottavio is transfixed by Filippo's face that is eventually imprinted upon his mind and internalized as the painter cannot stop thinking about it. Such incorporation recalls Edmund Burke's account of the sublime, especially when it comes to the "modification of power" (*PE*, 53) between spectator and sublime landscape. Whereas the man of feeling reasserts class privilege through disinterested spectatorship and the ability to look away, Ottavio is beholden to Filippo's "protruded eyes" that follow him even in death. Within the context of contemporary queer theory, Leo Bersani has described the queer sexual act in analogous terms that resonate with Burke's description of the sublime, where, according to Bersani, "pleasure occurs whenever a certain threshold of intensity is reached, when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those connected with psychic organization."[60] Filippo's haunting of Ottavio suggests this "threshold of intensity," as the painter encounters the limits of his "psychic organization" at which he is rendered passive, submissive, and feminized. In aesthetic experience, Ottavio gravitates toward what Burke calls an annihilation: "Whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him" (*PE*, 56). Similarly, Ottavio is rendered powerless by Filippo's face: "Wherever I went," Ottavio

[60] Leo Bersani, "*Is the Rectum a Grave?" and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

writes, “the countenance of him I had slain appeared to follow me. Whenever I turned my head I beheld it behind me, hideous with the contortions of the dying moment” (*TT*, 463). Whereas Crayon’s sketches chart and organize the pleasure of his aesthetic experience, Ottavio’s manuscript devolves into scattered, frenetic descriptions of his cathexis upon Filippo. Alternating among fear, guilt, melancholy, and longing, Ottavio’s description elevates Filippo to a status higher than Bianca’s, in that the slain inspires more vehement reactions than his former betrothed. Usurping Bianca as the artist’s muse, Filippo overpowers Ottavio with an intensity seldom seen in Crayon’s sketch books.

This yearning for annihilation inflects two of Ottavio’s portraits: one of his fiancée, Bianca, and another of Filippo. In both instances, Ottavio is overwhelmed by what he attempts to represent. While painting Bianca, her beauty sends him into a “kind of dream, I might almost say delirium” (*TT*, 448), that eventually spirals into “a kind of idolatry” (*TT*, 450). His fetishistic painting “elevated her into something almost more than mortal. She seemed too exquisite for earthly use; too delicate and exalted for human attainment.” On canvas, Bianca exists as an abstraction rather than a person, described as “the *beau ideal* that haunts [artists’] minds with shapes of indescribable perfection” (*TT*, 447). Recalling Simon’s brooch of his beloved’s hair, Ottavio’s portrait of Bianca preserves her “indescribable perfection” in unconsummated, chaste form. But whereas Bianca’s beauty remains “too exquisite” and “too delicate” for contact, Filippo is all too near, haunting Ottavio’s memory like a “permanent malady of the mind” (*TT*, 463). Ottavio resembles Burke’s spectator encountering the sublime whose “mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (*PE*, 47). In Burkean terms, Filippo is “a delightful horror” (*PE*, 109) that Ottavio cannot escape: “I have travelled from place to place, plunged into amusements—tried dissipation

and distraction of every kind—all—all in vain" (*TT*, 463). Filippo's sublimity derives from what Burke would call his "obscurity" (*PE*, 109), as Ottavio remains uncertain about the source of his fascination and reverie. Beset by terror, Ottavio flees "without knowing wither—almost without knowing why":

> My only idea was to get farther and farther from the horrors I had left behind; as if I could throw space between myself and my conscience. I fled to the Apennines, and wandered for days and days among their savage heights. How I existed I cannot tell—what rocks and precipices I braved, and how I braved them, I know not. I kept on and on—trying to outtravel the curse that clung to me. . . . Rocks, trees, and torrents all resounded with my crime. (*TT*, 462)

Ottavio's asides—"almost without knowing why," "How I existed I cannot tell," "I know not"— reveal the uncertainty and confusion that animate the queer sublime. Upon scaling the geographical and emotional heights of the Apennines, Ottavio is frequently astonished by his behavior. Astonishment, "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (*PE*, 47), excludes him from the realm of genteel impressibility associated with the man of feeling. Unlike Crayon and Simon Bracebridge who behold nature at a distance, Ottavio finds the Apennines to be the clearest expression of his obscure, vehement state.

Like men of feeling who siphon desires into art, Ottavio attempts to purge himself of Filippo's presence through painting. With Filippo's face "burned within my brain" (*TT*, 463), Ottavio is caught in the realm of introjection that effectively erodes psychic boundaries. Whether this is Burke's "annihilation" of the self through the sublime or Bersani's "shattering of . . . psychic structures" through sex, the interstice between the two men has clearly collapsed. Ottavio seeks to cleanse himself by displacing Filippo onto a canvas. "I painted an exact resemblance of this phantom face," Ottavio writes: "I placed it

before me in hopes that by constantly contemplating the copy I might diminish the effect of the original. But I only doubled instead of diminishing the misery" (*TT*, 463). Only, his attempt at a "copy" backfires. The awkwardness of the grammar—"I only doubled instead of diminishing the misery"—mimics the portrait's disorienting sensations that lure other spectators into rapt fascination with the painting. The sequence depicts the nervous gentleman and the Baronet gazing upon Ottavio's portrait. When the nervous gentleman sees in the portrait's face "an expression that was startling," he struggles to interpret the work. "I sat in my chair gazing at it," he remarks, "and the more I gazed the more it disquieted me. I had never before been affected in the same way by any painting. The emotions it caused were strange and indefinite. They were something like what I have head ascribed to the eyes of the basilisk; or like that mysterious influence in reptiles termed fascination." These "strange and indefinite" emotions induce a physical response: "I passed my hand over my eyes several times, as if seeking instinctively to brush away the illusion—in vain—they instantly reverted to the picture, and its chilling, creeping influence over my flesh and blood was redoubled" (*TT*, 426). Ottavio's portrait is so startling, I would contend, because it does not inspire the customary emotions expected from portraiture. At a time when portraiture was prized for its ability to conjure a sitter's likeness, Ottavio's portrait is something other than a mimetic copy.[61] In their struggle to provide an ekphrastic account of what they see and feel in the presence of Ottavio's portrait of Filippo, the baronet and nervous gentleman encounter sensations and longings that exceed extant aesthetic categories. Ottavio's rendering of Filippo attempts to offer its painter some semblance of

[61] Carrie Rebora Barratt, "Faces of a New Nation: American Portraits of the 18th and Early 19th Centuries," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 61, no. 1 (2003); Breen, "The Meaning of 'Likeness'"; Wayne Craven, *Colonial American Portraiture: The Economic, Religious, Social, Culture, Philosophical, Scientific, and Aesthetic Foundations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986); de Bolla, *Education of the Eye*, 28–34; Van Horn, *The Power of Objects*, 99–155.

catharsis or closure but only accomplishes the opposite: it amplifies and exacerbates Ottavio's longing for the dead.

Irving's homophobic tale depicts queer desire as a destructive force that spreads like a contagion, emanating from Ottavio onto his portrait and finally onto its spectator. Two of the portrait's viewers, the Baronet and the nervous gentleman, absorb Ottavio's passions as if they were their own. As the Baronet remarks upon first meeting Ottavio in Venice, "I felt his melancholy to be infectious" (*TT*, 436). When the nervous gentleman beholds the painting, he feels "as if an electric shock darted through me" and "some horror of the mind, some inscrutable antipathy awakened by this picture . . . harrowed up my feelings" (*TT*, 426). Unlike the elegance of Bracebridge Hall, the queer sublime is characterized by what sticks. Ottavio's fixation on Filippo—first in life, then in death—reveals the disruptive emotions that accompany same-sex desire before more legible or coherent accounts of queerness. Irving pathologizes queer desire by rendering Ottavio into a criminalized murderer who concludes his autobiographical manuscript with a confession that he intends to surrender himself to the law: "You who have pitied my sufferings; who have poured the balm of sympathy into my wounds, do not shrink from my memory with abhorrence now that you know my story. Recollect, when you read of my crime I shall have atoned for it with my blood!" (*TT*, 464). In keeping with the alienation that Frances Ferguson argues is foundational to the sublime, Ottavio's manuscript offers a portrait of solitude that anticipates the so-called antisocial thesis of queer theory.[62] As a figure who annihilates himself in the

[62] Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For helpful glosses of the antisocial thesis, see Robert L. Caserio, Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PLMA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819–28; Benjamin Kahan, "Queer Sociality After the Antisocial Thesis," *American Literary History* 30, no. 4 (2018): 811–19.

shadow of insurmountable desire, Ottavio disavows futurity by willingly, even masochistically, surrendering to the state.

Ottavio's fervor and passion mark the limits of what the spectator can interpret. Irving abandoned the persona of Geoffrey Crayon after publishing *Tales of a Traveller*, using his own name and identity as a way to organize *The Alhambra* (1832), a text that in many ways belongs to the sketch book tradition discussed earlier. Like Crayon, Irving describes his experiences as a tourist-observer in *The Alhambra*, where he encounters the "half Spanish half Oriental" (*TA*, 723) tradition in Spain. Although the collection omits any reference to Crayon entirely, its politics of racial and gendered spectatorship align Irving with his persona. Irving discovers the Moorish and Muslim influence of the Alhambra by gazing upon picturesque ruins or beholding scenes of "dear old romantic Spain" (*TA*, 731) reminiscent of Crayon's nostalgia for the British aristocracy. Crayon's sketch books move from the coherent and organized schema of the picturesque toward the lurid romanticism of the queer sublime. Reflecting the geographic travel of Crayon and Irving from England to Germany and Italy to Spain, the sketch books make their way towards deepening levels of uncertainty and allure, where one discovers that "painting . . . had a very odd effect upon the feelings" (*TT*, 464) and anticipates the formation of queer identity via cultural forms.

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Conclusion: "More or Less Irrational"

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson,
"Self-Reliance" (1841)[63]

[63] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures,* ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 259.

As Crayon's sketch books reveal, spectatorship was inextricable from burgeoning gender and sexual categories of the early nineteenth century. Juxtaposing the British picturesque countryside with the sublime landscapes of Italy, Crayon aligns aesthetic categories and experience with particular regions. His sketches belong to what the literary critic Jonah Siegel refers to as "the art-romance," a literary genre that "evokes the conventional frustrations of the romance form broadly understood in order to represent an overdetermined anxiety about intimacy with culture that is particularly pressing in the artistic self-imagination of the period. If romance has at its heart the inability to arrive at a prized but ever-deferred goal, Italy is an overdetermined destination for the artist, a passionately desired space combining the prospect of erotic pleasure with the hope for intimacy with the most profound sources of culture."[64] For Siegel, the art-romance consolidated "a new set of relationships, practical and imaginary, between an ascendent North and a politically weak but culturally rich South."[65] As aristocrats and tourists flocked to Italy, Greece, and France as sites of cultural heritage, their writings depict a fantastic terrain that afforded new experiences channeled through the arts. Beholding works from Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance, tourists encountered a territory that occupied a vexing relation to reality and the world back home. Once in the "culturally rich South," British and American writers could inhabit, much like Crayon, the realm of romance.

Although Irving abandoned the persona of Geoffrey Crayon after *Tales of a Traveller* and published his next sketch book, *The Alhambra* (1832), under his own name, the art-romance endured well into the nineteenth century. Antebellum romances, including

[64] Jonah Siegel, *Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel, and the Art-Romance Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.

[65] Siegel, *Haunted Museum*, 5.

the painter Washington Allston's *Monaldi: A Tale* (1841) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), depict Florence and Rome, rather than the United States, as the privileged site for art and artists.[66] In this regard, Allston and Hawthorne position Italy as an alternative to America's provincial or infantile artistic status. Frustrated with the dearth of professional opportunities, artists and writers turned to Europe, and especially Italy, as the site for prestige and inspiration. Following in Irving's footsteps, Allston and Hawthorne limn the region in terms of romantic plots featuring disguised identities, murder plots, and extramarital affairs as if such contrivances were inextricable from creativity and the imagination. The conjunctions among Italy, art, and sensual (if not sexual) freedom persisted throughout the nineteenth century, inspiring works, such as Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875), William Dean Howells' *Indian Summer* (1886), and Edith Wharton's "The Fulness of Life" (1893). Upon arriving in Rome, James' sculptor Roderick Hudson realizes that the city "made him feel and understand more things than he could express; he was sure that life must have there for all one's senses an incomparable fineness; that more interesting things must happen to one there than anywhere else."[67]

Like Roderick, Crayon attributes "interesting things" to atmospheric and environmental influence in ways that anticipate what the John Ruskin would identify as the pathetic fallacy. As defined in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856), the pathetic fallacy is "caused by an excited state of the feelings" and makes "us, for the time, more or less irrational." In this state, a spectator misattributes and projects emotions onto

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[66] Nathalia Wright, *American Novelists in Italy: The Discoverers: Allston to James* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 35. Barbara Novak provocatively likens the relation between Italy and the American artist to one of sexual freedom: "The American artist could marry the wilderness, which was, in many ways, more familiar to him. But Italy was his mistress and the affair could maintain its potency as long as the elusive mystery was maintained." Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 215.

[67] Henry James, *Roderick Hudson*, ed. Geoffrey Moore and Patricia Crick (New York: Penguin, 1986), 108.

surroundings with what Ruskin calls "a falseness in our impressions of external things."[68] This "falseness" amounts to a slippage between spectator and environment, where observers practically absorb their surroundings so that a sublime landscape or elegant painting seems to seep into a spectator's contemplative thought. Thus for the history of sexuality, Italy stages something like an environmental theory of queerness, one in which spectators inhabit, however temporarily, "more or less irrational" or "excited" emotions prompted by an atmosphere or work of art. Crayon's sketch books suggest how spectators worked through "more or less irrational" feelings by describing works of art through ekphrasis, which often involves projecting inner sensations onto environmental influence, such as Ottavio's tumult coalescing around the lava flowing beneath the Vesuvian monastery. Although spectators acknowledge "more or less irrational" sentiment as originating in works of art or the landscape, they nevertheless refuse to claim them by attributing them to external influence rather than internal desire. These ekphrastic emotions constitute what Addison and Steele refer to as the "sentiments very unfit for ordinary life," or the "half theatrical and half romantic" feelings that proliferate the aesthetic terrain bracketed from ordinary experience. In this manner, visual culture offered authors and spectators a chance to explore, yet ultimately distance themselves from, burgeoning queer desires that could be attributed to the environment or a work of art rather than the spectator. Such displacements extended well into the antebellum period, when critics debated the relation between art and spectator across a wide range of writing. In tandem with the flourishing of art journals and serial literature devoted to the fine arts, painting influenced the rise of the American romance. As Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* (1861) reveals, the fantasy of a world elsewhere borne

[68] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3 (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1856), 160.

by art exerted considerable influence upon midcentury literature and its shifting conceptions of psychological interiority and identification.

Chapter Two

Night-Blooming Flowers: Dreaming Interiority in the Antebellum Romance

We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own.
—Susan Sontag,
"Notes on 'Camp'"[1]

To be in any form, what is that?
—Walt Whitman,
Leaves of Grass (1855 ed.)[2]

The year he died, Washington Irving attended the premiere exhibition of Frederic Edwin Church's *The Heart of the Andes* (1859; figure 1).[3] Church's monumental 13'x14' painting was an immensely popular attraction for midcentury audiences, and its exhibition attracted over 12,000 paying visitors. First unveiled on April 27, 1859 at Lyrique Hall, *The Heart of the Andes* soon moved to the Tenth Street Studio Building, where its extravagant display invited audiences to spend hours gazing upon it. Lit by gas light and flanked by black crepe curtains, not to mention tropical vegetation apocryphally attributed to South America, the painting and its exhibition liberally drew upon the panorama tradition.[4] After the exhibition at the Tenth Street Studio Building closed, the painting embarked upon a national tour from 1859–61, where audiences could purchase a variety of memorabilia, including the young

[1] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 285.

[2] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY: 1855), 32.

[3] Maggie M. Cao, *The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 77; Andrew Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 327.

[4] Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 71.

writer Theodore Winthrop's souvenir pamphlet, "A Companion to *The Heart of the Andes*" (1859).[5] Winthrop's pamphlet introduced readers to South American geography and wildlife using the popular conventions associated with aesthetic criticism. Although landscape and genre painting helped visualize a distinct American identity, Winthrop values Church's painting for its lush romanticism and foreign terrain far removed from what he calls the "solemn pine woods and jocund plains and valleys" and "bridal-cottage picturesque" of domestic scenes one might expect from the Hudson River Valley school.[6] For Winthrop, *The Heart of the Andes* is remarkable precisely because "The subject is new, the scenes are strange, the facts are amazing" (6).

Figure 1: Frederic Edwin Church, *The Heart of the Andes* (1859)

Bequest of Margaret E. Dows, 1909

Metropolitan Museum of Art

[5] Elbridge Colby, *Theodore Winthrop* (New York: Twayne, 1965), 24; 90; 54.

[6] Theodore Winthrop, "A Companion to *The Heart of the Andes*" (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1859), 6–7. Further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text. On landscape painting and American identity, see Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Novak, *Nature and Culture.*

Winthrop's forty-three-page pamphlet offers an ekphrastic account of *The Heart of the Andes* that establishes the painting as an expansive work of Dark Romanticism that encompasses beauty, the picturesque, and the sublime. Winthrop is especially struck by the painting's dynamic movement: "Life here may be a sweet idyl [sic]; and the great mountains at hand will never let its idyllic quiet degenerate into pastoral insipidity" (22). According to Winthrop, the painting creates something new out of juxtaposing "great mountains" and "idyllic quiet." Hence when it comes to Church's use of chiaroscuro, "We know not where it is not sun, nor where the melting shadow fades. And all, whether sunlit slope, or profound retreating abyss, or sharp sierra, is seen through leagues of æther, a pellucid but visible medium. Forms become undefined, but never vague in this gray luminousness. The enchantment of beautiful reality in all this central mountain is heightened by the faint pencils of light striking across the void" (24). Calling upon the associationist framework discussed in Chapter 1, Winthrop emulates the painting's elevated sentiment as he moves from impression to contemplation, eventually claiming that "Beauty could become a part of our minds" (13). As a friend of Church's (figure 2), Winthrop speculates that *The Heart of the Andes* will contribute to American art because it will deepen and enrich audiences' visual perception. Because "men are better and nobler when they are uplifted by such sublime visions" (43), this democratic aesthetic education will inaugurate, according to Winthrop, a new era in which artists' virtuosity will beget spectators' maturity and nuance of thought. But in contrast to Geoffrey Crayon's grand tour across England, Germany, and Italy, Winthrop's souvenir pamphlet envisions a distinctly American aesthetic tradition still in its formative stages. "We must outgrow childish fancies," Winthrop remarks: "We must banish to the garret our pre-Praxitelite clay-josses, and dismiss our pre-Giottesque ligneous daubs to the flames" (5–6). Addressing an audience perhaps yet to come, Winthrop

encourages spectators to refine their powers of observation and imagination by poring over Church's painting.

Figure 2: Frederic Edwin Church and Theodore Winthrop, ca. 1860
Miscellaneous photographs collection, circa 1845-1980
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Winthrop's friendship with Church and frequent visits to his atelier at the Tenth Street Studio Building inflect his posthumously published novel, *Cecil Dreeme* (1861).[7] (An enlisted Union officer in the Civil War, Winthrop died in battle on June 10, 1861.) *Cecil Dreeme* draws upon Winthrop's experience living in the New York University Building alongside artists, intellectuals, and writers in the late 1850s. Three blocks away from the New York University Building, the Tenth Street Studio Building (figure 3)—built in 1857 by Richard Morris Hunt, the model for the novel's architect, Stillfleet—rented rooms and studios to a variety of artists, including Church and John La Farge.[8] A space described in terms of its "small, ill-lighted dormitories, approached by filthy stairs, and situated in buildings appropriated to different and uncongenial purposes"[9], the Tenth Street Studio Building anticipates Chrysalis College, its fictional counterpart in *Cecil Dreeme*. Readers familiar with antebellum art history will recognize Winthrop's deep knowledge of New York City, which had become, by the 1850s, the capitol of American art. Located at the "corner of Mannering Place and Ailanthus Square"[10], Chrysalis College is set at Washington Square Park, just blocks away from Broadway Street, the epicenter of the midcentury art world.[11] *Cecil Dreeme* dramatizes this world in terms of Cecil's vocation as

[7] Eventually going through nineteen editions between 1861–66, *Cecil Dreeme* was popular enough to warrant a mention in Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor" in 1862: "Many are the Cecil Dreemes of literature who superscribe their offered manuscripts with very masculine names in very feminine handwriting." Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," *Atlantic* 9, no. 54 (April 1862): 26.

[8] Annette Blaugrund, The Tenth Street Studio Building: Artist-Entrepreneurs from the Hudson River School to the American Impressionists (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Emily Kies Folpe, It Happened on Washington Square (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Mary Sayre Haverstock, "The Tenth Street Studio," Art in America 54 (1966): 48–57; Garnett McCoy, "Visits, Parties, and Cats in the Hall: The Tenth Street Studio Building and Its Intimates in the Nineteenth Century," Archives of American Art 6, no. 1 (1966): 1–8.

[9] "Sketchings," *Crayon* 5, no. 1 (1858): 24.

[10] Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, ed. Christopher Looby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 23. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

well as his and Robert's friendship flourishing during their visits to urban art markets. Within striking distance of Chrysalis College are the offices of preeminent art journals the *Crayon* (1855–61, at 287 Broadway) and the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* (1856–61, at 548 Broadway). Elsewhere on Broadway were the Institute of Fine Arts (625 Broadway), the National Academy of Design (663 Broadway), and the Dusseldorf Gallery (497 Broadway).[12] In *Cecil Dreeme,* Winthrop satirizes this world as caught between those who work in the arts and crowds composed of "fat dowagers . . . pretty girls . . . anxious papas, indifferent brothers, bored husbands, eager lovers, ineligible young men taking out mamma, while her daughter hung on the arm of the eligible" (155). One of the earliest novels to devote sustained attention to the fledgling status of American painting, *Cecil Dreeme* portrays no shortage of artists who create and spectators who behold.[13]

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[11] Although Ailanthus Square is fictional, Winthrop's botanical expertise confirms its identity as Washington Square. *Ailanthus altissima* ("tree of heaven") became associated with Washington Square after the tree was introduced to New York in 1820. In *Washington Square* (1880), Henry James refers to "the strange odour of the ailanthus-trees which at that time formed the principal umbrage of the Square." *Washington Square* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 16.

[12] Carrie Rebora Barratt, "Mapping the Venues: New York City Art Exhibitions," in *Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825–1861* ed. Catherine Hoover Voorsanger and John K. Howat (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 47–81; Kenneth John Myers, "The Public Display of Art in New York City, 1664–1914," in *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826–1925*, ed. David B. Dearinger (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 31–52.

[13] On artists in midcentury American literature, see Rupert Christiansen, "Imagining the Artist: Painters and Sculptors in Nineteenth-Century Literature," in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Alexander Sturgis (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 30–41; Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 218–51.

Figure 3: Tenth Street Studio Building, 51 West 10th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, New York, New York

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

A recurring concern of antebellum aesthetics was the relation between deception and sincerity, as critics encouraged readers and spectators to scrutinize a work of art, like they would other people, for signs of authenticity and truth. Just as philosophers and curators emphasized visual perception as a means of civic education during the colonial and early national eras, antebellum writers fostered the belief that a landscape, portrait, or person could appear legible given the right conditions and circumstances.[14] In response to this privileging of sincerity, early forms of mass entertainment offered audiences a variety of activities in which to scrutinize fakery and illusion, including *trompe l'oeil* paintings, dioramas, and circus exhibitions.[15] At stake in these amusements was the value of honest appearance, as audiences and critics debated the merit of enjoying illusions and deceptions as a source of leisure while retaining the ability to distinguish between truth and falsity. Yet at the same time, the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 and subsequent rise of commercial photography in the 1840s–50s provided viewers a chance to see the world as it was, in that critics championed the technology as an objective medium that would not, and could not, distort. What Robert Taft identifies as "the era of the daguerreotype"[16] was fueled by the rise of mass entertainment localized in New York and fueled by a vibrant print culture committed to advertising, celebrating, and theorizing the arts.[17] Unsurprisingly, the

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[14] On this history, see Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); Christopher J. Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[15] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[16] Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 46–62.

[17] Famous photograph galleries included Mathew Brady's Gallery (205 Broadway); Plumbe National Daguerrian Gallery (251 Broadway); Gurney's Daguerrean Gallery (349 Broadway); and Lawrence's Daguerrian Gallery (881 Broadway).

rise of mass visual culture inspired a variety of writers to incorporate artistry and works of art into midcentury literature. Photography and portraiture proved especially compelling to writers interested in psychological interiority, as works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and Herman Melville's *Pierre* (1852) plumbed the debts of what can be gleaned by observation.[18] Relying upon phrenology's and physiognomy's confidence to discern moral character via physical appearance, portraiture suggested a sitter's hidden depths shrouded in mystery yet paradoxically accessible through moments of startling clarity.[19]

Cecil Dreeme, by contrast, envisions a radically different form of aesthetics premised upon dreamy artifice and imagination. As reflected in the homophone of the novel's title, the "dream" of Cecil "Dreeme" occurs in the mysterious artist's painting. Cecil is one of several boarders staying at Chrysalis College, a decrepit and Gothic estate modeled upon New York University. After traveling abroad in Europe, the young Robert Byng returns to New York only to discover that his beloved childhood friend, Clara Denman, has drowned. He rents a room in Chrysalis College, where he befriends the architect Henry Stillfleet (based upon Richard Morris Hunt) and reclusive Cecil Dreeme. Robert becomes fascinated by Cecil, spending much of his time in the artist's studio gazing upon various unfinished works. One work in particular, *Lear and His Daughters*, strikes Robert, who recognizes the face of Cordelia but cannot identify the model. Lurking amidst these shadows is Densdeth, the remarkably handsome, and remarkably dangerous, figure who exerts considerable

[18] Sarah Blackwood, *The Portrait's Subject: Inventing Inner Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

influence at Chrysalis. Cecil and Robert's friendship soon matures into "a love passing the love of women" (163). After Cecil becomes a "friend closer than a brother" (197) to Robert, the painter confides that he is actually Clara Denman cross-dressing in disguise, after she staged her death to escape being married off to Densdeth.[20] Robert realizes that it was Clara's face hidden within the *Lear* painting all along, and the two depart from Chrysalis College. That Cecil's preferred medium is painting, rather than photography, speaks to the novel's attempt to imagine more capacious forms of aesthetic experience. As two of the novel's "night-blooming flowers" (122), Cecil and Robert engage in nocturnal activities that become increasingly homosocial the more they congregate among art. In this manner, Winthrop conflates same-sex desire with aesthetics, from Robert's "lulled and dreamy state" (153) at an opera to Cecil's backstory that is "strange as a dream" (204). By likening aesthetic experience to a site of unpredictable associations and impressions, Winthrop understands painting as "a dream" with "no vulgar, harsh, or cruel realities" (34). Artifice and illusion are thus intrinsic to, rather than at odds with, the psychic work of the imagination.

In this chapter, I focus on the historical fantasy that Robert, Cecil, and Stillfleet pursue together, where they refashion themselves, rather anachronistically, as both heirs to and reenactors of the Italian Renaissance. As a response to the infantile status of American art, the male lodgers turn toward the fifteenth century as the pinnacle of creativity and expression. Like Geoffrey Crayon, Robert, Cecil, and Stillfleet refashion themselves using cultural artifacts and works of art. The three men embrace a decidedly artificial form of

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[19] On phrenology and physiognomy, see Blackwood, *The Portrait's Subject*, 21–27; Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[20] As Christopher Looby notes in his introduction to *Cecil Dreeme*, the problem of identifying "Clara" or "Cecil" perplexes critics to this day (xv). Because this chapter foregrounds Robert and Cecil's intimacy before

queer personhood where they seek recourse from fictional characters—in the case of Cecil's painting, *Lear and His Daughters*—and historical counterparts—in the case of Stillfleet's amateur "museum" comprised of antiquated props. In this regard, Robert, Cecil, and Stillfleet coopt works of art into makeshift portraits. Winthrop's romance is an early iteration of queer world-making that occurs through appropriation and adaptation, demonstrating how, in Natasha Hurley's words, "the literary road to queer truth-telling is a matter of stylistic detours, private printings, mythological mediations, eschewals, pronoun play, and aesthetic way stations."[21] Even if *Lear and His Daughters* lacks the verisimilitude one expects from portraiture, the painting still possesses a kernel of accuracy, albeit refracted through the "stylistic detours" or "aesthetic way stations" Hurley describes. If "We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own," according to Susan Sontag in this chapter's first epigraph, the displacement of a fantasy brings into sharper focus the desires and identifications that propel art.

Winthrop stages same-sex intimacy as a dreamy terrain that allows for improvisational and experimental forms of personhood without requiring a spectator to scrutinize their attachments. Like Chrysalis College's namesake, the novel imagines gender and sexual identities still in development as suggested by what Peter Coviello calls "early"[22] iterations of homosexuality before its time. For these "night-blooming flowers," nascent or inchoate forms of queer attachments arise as if from within a dream. I situate *Cecil Dreeme* alongside three art journals based in New York—the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal,* the *Crayon*, and the *New Path* (1863–65)—that promulgated the notion that amateur audiences should

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he is revealed as Clara, I refer to the painter as "Cecil" and employ male pronouns. Even after Clara reveals herself, Robert doggedly refuses to use female pronouns: "Dreeme—for so I must call him" (199).

[21] Natasha Hurley, *Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xiii.

decipher works of art through symbolic or iconographic interpretation.[23] Together, these journals offered a model of visual perception based upon narrative or literary analysis that trained readers to search for references or allusions contributing to a work's larger moral instruction or spiritual lesson. Rejecting this tendency toward transparency and sincerity, *Cecil Dreeme* insists upon the autonomy of a work of art that exists alongside of, rather than firmly within, the everyday.

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Part One: "The Greatest Number of the Greatest Ideas"

Cecil Dreeme dramatizes the midcentury notion that visual perception was both a mark of refined taste and a source of intellectual activity. Although taste was often associated with the cultural elite in the early republic, antebellum print journals attempted to democratize taste by framing refinement not solely as the mark of social distinction but rather the demonstration of perceptual acuity.[24] Journals such as the *Crayon* and the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* encouraged readers to hone observational habits through reading serialized art

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[22] Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 19–20.

[23] Although editorial offices for *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* and *Crayon* were located on Broadway, the *New Path* was based out of painter Thomas Charles Farrer's Waverly Place Studio at the New York University Building at Washington Square Park. Janice Simon, "*The New Path*, 1863–65: 'He Serves All, Who Dares Be True,'" in *The American Pre-Raphaelites: Radical Realists*, ed. Linda S. Ferber and Nancy K. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019): 113–30.

[24] On taste in the nineteenth century, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Catherine E. Kelly, *Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Rachel N. Klein, *Art Wars: The Politics of Taste in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). On the relation between cultural nationalism and antebellum aesthetics, see Martha Banta, *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 1–41.

criticism and attending gallery exhibitions and lyceum lectures. Targeting amateurs as well as connoisseurs, these journals prioritized criticism free of technical jargon or specialized debates in the still-developing field of art history.[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Ruskin, two of the most referenced and serialized writers in these journals, advanced the notion that spectatorship, when honed and perfected, led to spiritual or metaphysical truth through direct observation of natural or religious laws. Editors including William James Stillman (of the *Crayon*) and Thomas Charles Farrer (of the *New Path*) encouraged readers to regard sight as a path to knowledge as defined by Emerson's "The American Scholar" (1837), in which "The ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."[26] For midcentury audiences, Transcendentalism and the early volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843–60) conceived of visual perception as a mode of intellectual and religious thought. Ruskin's definition of great art in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) epitomizes this attitude: "The art is greatest, which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas."[27] Ruskin's writings justified journal editors' taste-making labor as a near-evangelical endeavor that codified observation as a source of edification. Some of the more enthusiastic spectators of *Cecil Dreeme* recapitulate this notion, such as when Stillfleet

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[25] The proliferation of art journals in the 1850s–60s reflects the larger trend of periodical literature that shifted from general interest topics to more specialized groups. See Heather A. Haveman, *Magazines and the Making of America: Modernization, Community, and Print Culture, 1741–1860* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 42–52; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 435–38; Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850–1865* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 193–94.

[26] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays and Lectures,* ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 56. On Emerson's influence on *The New Path*, see Simon, "*The New Path*, 1863–65," 118–20.

[27] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1843), 14. On Ruskin's influence in the *Crayon*, see Karen L. Georgi, *Critical Shift: Rereading Jarves, Cook, Stillman, and the Narratives of Nineteenth-Century American Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 76–91; Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 101–23.

gazes upon the paintings that adorn Robert's walls at Chrysalis College: "Very fine paintings! . . . I have a taste for such things. Not a connoisseur! Only an amateur, with a smattering of knowledge! Art refines the character wonderfully. I wish I had been introduced to it younger" (178).

Antebellum aesthetics framed visual perception in strikingly narrative and literary terms, as critics recounted their experiences with art in ekphrastic writing and encouraged audiences to do the same. Especially for journals that refrained from or refused to reproduce artworks, ekphrasis and description purported to conjure images in the mind's eye. As the editorial masthead of the *New Path* marks clear, this capacity to see and narrate clearly was a matter of moral significance: "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things that shall be forever."[28] Glossing over the formal or technical specifics of art appreciation, writers encouraged readers to scrutinize art for references to concepts, historical events, or figures. According to the popular critic Henry T. Tuckerman, "Art is a language" because "language is but the medium of ideas, the expression of sentiment—it may be purely imitative, or pregnant with individual meaning—it may breathe confusion or clearness, emotion or formality, the commonplace or the poetic. The first requisite for its use is to *have something to say,* and the next, to say it well."[29] Hence for midcentury critics, literature and visual art could be evaluated in terms of their ability to evoke a story.[30] Aesthetic response relied upon recognizing and interpreting iconography, usually with the help of printed material that provided context for such references. As the illustration from the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* (figure 4) below suggests, viewers often read text and looked

[28] Clarence Cook, the editor of the *New Path*, derived the masthead from Revelation 1:19 in the King James Version of the Bible: "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter."

[29] Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 27.

at art in tandem, as based upon the man standing in a top hat in the middle of the illustration holds a small book up as he gazes upon the sculpture of a nude woman. And he is not alone: a man in the bottom-left corner of the image strolls the gallery with an oversized sketch book clutched under his arm.

INTERIOR VIEW OF THE NEW GALLERY.

Figure 4: Nathaniel Orr & Company, "Interior View of the New Gallery."

Cosmopolitan Art Journal (November 1856), pg. 32

Although Stillfleet's enthusiastic reaction to Robert's paintings evokes these midcentury aesthetic attitudes, *Cecil Dreeme* foregrounds the emotional and imaginative thrill of art over than the religious or spiritual. Unlike the size and grandeur of the New Gallery depicted above, Stillfleet's room resembles an "informal museum" characterized by

[30] Nina Baym, Novels, *Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 152–72.

"bastard mediævalism" (22) and "whimsical disorder" (31). Once there, Robert loses himself in reverie. Poring over the "Raphaels, Corregios, and stuff" (24) scattered about, he imagines:

> Greece and Rome, Dark Ages, Crusades, Middle Ages, Moorish Conquest, '88 in England, Renaissance, '89 in France, every old era and the last new era,—all were so thoroughly represented here, by model of temple, cast of statue, vase, picture, tapestry, suit of armor, Moslem scymitar, bundle of pikes, rusty cross-bow or arquebuse, model of guillotine,—by some object that showed what the age had most admired, most used, or most desired,—that there, restored before me, rose and spread the age itself, and called its heroes and its caitiffs forward in review. . . . If I had preferred to live in the Past, I had only to shut myself up at home, and forget that eager Present about me,—that stirring life of America, urged on by the spirit of the Past, and unburdened by its matter. Romance, too! Romance had come to me, whether I would or no. Without any permission of mine, asked or granted, I was become an actor, with my special part to play, perforce, among mysteries. (121–22)

Robert's imaginative response to Stillfleet's "informal museum" shirks edification for the sake of pleasure. Preferring to "forget that eager Present" and "live in the Past," Robert fashions a makeshift identity using artifacts. He values these antiquities, not for their historical knowledge or verisimilitude, but for their contribution to his performance as "an actor . . . among mysteries." Refashioning these objects into props, Robert aspires to "absorb history with unconscious eyes" (121) that search for that which Robert might not know he is looking. He curates an aesthetic identity on the basis of his imaginative response to works that allow him to remain "among mysteries." Unlike the moralizing attitudes associated with antebellum criticism, Robert and Stillfleet anticipate Susan Stewart's

envisioning of the collection as "a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context."[31] "Like other forms of art," Stewart writes, the function of the collection "is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life."[32] In the case of Chrysalis College, this "new context" paradoxically involves a return to the antiquated and the outdated.

Robert's penchant for fantasy extends throughout the novel, as he often perceives other people as if they were works of art. When he reads Cecil's name upon a doorplate, he cannot help speculating about the mysterious, reclusive artist:

CECIL DREEME,

PAINTER.

"Its shyness interested me at once," he remarks: "'Mr. Cecil Dreeme,' I said to myself, 'is some confident genius, willing to have his name remain in diminutive letters on a visiting-card until the world writes it in big capitals in Valhalla. Here he lurks and works, 'like some poet hidden in the realm of thought.'" Basing these impressions upon gossip and the plate's "neatly printed" handwriting, Robert concocts a fantasy of the artist that veers toward the homophonic play of "Dreeme" and "dream": "My neighbor . . . has a most musical, most artistic name. Dreeme,—yes; the sound, if not the spelling, fits perfectly. A painter's life, if common theories be true, should be all a dream. Visions of Paradises and Peris should always be with him. No vulgar, harsh, or cruel realities should shatter his placid repose."[33]

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[31] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 151.

[32] Stewart, *On Longing*, 152.

[33] Robert's ekphrastic tendency extends to the opera: "Always this music seemed to sound and sing, with every not of voice or instrument,—'Brethren, what have we to do with that idle fiction of an earnest life? While we live, let us live in sloth. Let us deaden ourselves with soft intoxications and narcotic stupors, out of reach of care. Why question? Why wrestle? Why agonize? Here are roses, not too fresh, so as to shame the cheeks of

Robert's speculation recalls his reaction to Stillfleet's museum, as objects and people stimulate his imagination in equal measure based upon their mystery or inscrutability. If "the melodious vagueness of the name gently attracted me" (34), its vagueness offers a wide expanse in which to dream. Robert indulges his imagination by paying attention to his surroundings even if he begins to fantasize about more speculative terrain. Embodying the rise of the observer much like his predecessor Geoffrey Crayon, Robert spends a good deal of *Cecil Dreeme* looking—at paintings, faces, and signs—and attempting to make sense of what he sees. He prides himself upon his analytic capacities that complement Cecil's creativity: "Chemistry—Art. Formulas—Inspirations. Analysis—Combination. I work with matter; he with spirit. I unmake; he makes. I split atoms, unravel gases; he grafts lovely image upon lovely image, and weaves a thousand gossamers of beauty into one transcendent fabric" (34).

Cecil's doorplate inspires Robert to fantasize about what type of artist Cecil must be. He asks,

> Is he perhaps a painter of the frowzy class, with a velvet coat, mop of hair and mile of beard, pendulous pipe and a figurante on the bowl, and with a Düsseldorf, not to say Bohemian, demeanor. Is he a man whose art is a trade, who paints a picture as he would daub the side of a house? Or is he the true Artist, a refined and spiritualized being, Raphael in look, Fra Angelico in life, a man in force, but with the feminine insight,—one whose labor is love, one whose every work is a poem and a prayer? Which? Shall I knock and discover? An artist generally opens his doors hospitably to an amateur. (35)

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revelry. Here is the dull, heavy sweetness of tropic perfume. Here is wine, dark purple, prostrating, Lethean. Here are women, wooing to languid joys. Here is sweet death in life. So let us drowse and slumber, while the silly world goes wearily along'" (152).

Robert's tripartite schema suggests the tensions that animated midcentury conceptions of artistic labor. The first artistic type captures the "Bohemian" dramatized in Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* [*Scenes of Bohemian Life*] (1851), which renders Parisian artists as subcultural radicals at odds with bourgeois audiences and critics.[34] In describing this class as having "a Düsseldorf, not to say Bohemian, demeanor," Robert likely refers to the Dusseldorf Gallery, which opened in New York in 1849 and was heavily promoted in the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* and the *Crayon*. On the other side of this "Bohemian" extreme lies the artisanal craftsman "who paints a picture as he would daub the side of a house." If the first category embodies the contemporary French art world, the second category reflects the history of early American painters who worked as itinerant laborers and regarded their trade as a practical career rather than an identity.[35] Robert hopes that Cecil falls somewhere in the middle of these extremes as "the true Artist, a refined and spiritualized being," who reconciles these attitudes and "whose every work is a poem and a prayer." Robert's confidence in his model speaks to the broader investment in visual culture that sought signs of inner character through outer appearance. Indeed, the majority of his social interactions are premised upon physical appearance. From Churm's "Saxon coloring of hair and complexion" (44), Densdeth's "Oriental hues" (44), or Huffmire's "coarse face" (193), he is prone to conflating corporeality with character. Notably, Robert stores such impressions in what he refers to as "the book of portraits in my brain" (89). When it comes to first impressions, Robert remarks that "It is error to waste the first look and the first few

[34] The term "Bohemian" derives from the French term for "gypsy" and was first used to refer to artists in Félix Pyat, *Le nouveau tableau de Paris au XIXme siècle* (Paris: Madame Charles-Béchet, 1834). On the term's appropriation in the United States, see Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858–1920* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[35] T. H. Breen, "The Meaning of 'Likeness': American Portrait Painting in an Eighteenth-Century Consumer Society," *Word & Image* 6, no. 4 (1990): 339–40; Harris, *The Artist in American Society*, 69–73; David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 156–68.

moments, if one wishes to comprehend a face,—to see into it. No after observations are so sharp and so unprejudiced" (81).

Yet the irony of Robert's belief in transparency is that it is often proven false. When he sees Cecil for the first time, Robert conducts "a thorough analysis of his countenance" as the mysterious artist lies comatose in a chair:

> Cecil Dreeme's face was refined and sensitive, the face of a born artist. Separately, the features were all good, well cut and strong. Their union did not produce beauty. It was a face not harmonized by its construction, but by expression,—by the impression it gave of a vigorous mind, controlling varied and perhaps discordant elements of character into unison. There was force, energy, passion, and no lack of sweetness. Short, thick, black hair grew rather low over a square forehead. The eyebrows were heavy and square. The hollow cheeks were all burned away by the poor fellow's hermit life. He wore no beard, so that he was as far away from the frowzy Düsseldorfer of my fancy as from the pretty, poetic young Raphael. This was a man of another order, not easy to classify. His countenance seemed to interpret his strange circumstances. (82)

Robert's "thorough analysis" conflates aesthetic appreciation with phrenology even as the face does not adhere to aesthetic categories or even Robert's ideas as to what an artist is. Because it "did not produce beauty" and remains "far away from the frowzy Düsseldorfer of my fancy," Cecil's face attracts Robert. In Ruskin's terms, Cecil's face certainly elicits "the greatest number of the greatest ideas"[36] even if the variety of competing ideas means that Robert struggles to provide a definitive account of the painter's identity. Cecil, "a man of

[36] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, 14.

another order, not easy to classify," thwarts Robert's belief in phrenological and visual perception.

At this interpretive impasse, Robert retreats inward by making associative leaps in memory and contemplation. Dramatizing the philosophical tradition of associationism, his inner monologue moves from impression to conscious thought. "I perceived the question flit across my mind," he reflects: "Had I not had a glimpse of that inspired face before?" Robert ventriloquizes his thoughts: "'Why not?' my thought replied. 'I may have seen him copying in the Louvre, sketching in the Oberland, dejected in the Coliseum, elated in St. Peter's, taking his coffee and violets in the Café Doné, whisking by at the Pitti Palace ball. . . He may have flashed across my sight, and imprinted an image on my brain to which his presence applies the stereoscopic counterpart" (88). Half-memory, half-fantasy, this "stereoscopic counterpart" lies "imprinted" upon Robert's imagination and is triggered by the sight of Cecil's uncanny face. Yet in turning to his memory to make sense of the present, Robert is entwined with the aesthetic interpretation. To solve the mystery of the painter's identity entails solving the mystery of their shared relation. Here, same-sex intimacy is inextricable from aesthetic experience, as Robert concocts a backstory that renders their relation legible and coherent.

Part of Cecil's thrill is that his is an inscrutable presence that flummoxes and mystifies his friend. For Robert, "This image, if it existed, was too faint to hold its own with the reality. It vanished, or only remained a slight blur in my mind" (88). Perhaps seeing the painter with the "unconscious eyes" (121) he mentions in Stillfleet's room, Robert beholds Cecil as if he were a living portrait, albeit a mysterious one. Robert's fantasy vision of the painter would not be out of place in the shifting paradigms of antebellum portraiture that gradually recast allegorical and class-based portraiture in terms of psychological complexity

and ambiguity.[37] In works such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862; figure 5), painted subjects confront their viewers with facial expressions alternating among pleasure, desire, shock, comfort, surprise, and ease. Such overdetermined expressions thwart the belief in phrenological or physiognomic transparency by suggesting secrets of the mind and body that resist prying eyes and withhold their information. In much the same way, Cecil's paintings conceal his secrets behind masks and personae. Even if they are "full of color, full of expression" (163), his paintings refract content through coded and oblique references, such as *Lear and His Daughters*.

[37] Michael Fried claims Whistler as part of the "generation of 1863" who, along with Édouard Manet, Henri Fantin-Latour, and Alphonse Legros, are known for the "courting of unintelligibility, subversion of potentially absorptive motifs, denial of individual psychology, [and] refusal of closure on the plane of technique" (406). Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996), 185–261.

Figure 5: James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862)

Harris Whittemore Collection, National Gallery of Art

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Part Two: Cecil's Dream

Cor. Speak to me sir, who am I?

—Engraving on mezzotint of
Benjamin West's
King Lear and Cordelia (1793)

Although *Cecil Dreeme* dramatizes the world of antebellum aesthetics, it imagines more capacious forms of aesthetic experience that involve speculative thought and queer intimacy. These converge in Cecil's painting, *Lear and His Daughters*, a work that lies at the heart of the novel. From Robert's first glimpse of the work to its association with Clara's secret identity, *Lear and His Daughters* looks markedly different when compared to the paintings that predominated in antebellum galleries and art journals. Unlike genre or landscape paintings, *Lear and His Daughters* projects Clara's inner turmoil through the conventions of melodrama and theater. Described by Cecil as "a spasm" that "came to me . . . as a purpose and a power come in the paroxysms of a fever," the painting serves as a repository for trauma and melancholy. In this regard, it is an intensely private work of art that, unlike *The Heart of the Andes*, is not intended for circulation. "I have spent all my large force in it" (128), Cecil tells Robert. It is precisely the magnitude and depth of its emotional content that ensnares viewers. When Robert encounters the painting for the first time, he senses its expressive force immediately:

> The background retired, the figures projected. They stirred almost, almost spoke. It seemed that I ought to know them, but that, if I did not catch the likeness at the first look, I could never see it. "That large and imposing figure, the King!—wipe out the hate from his face, and I have surely seen the face. The Regan is in shadow; but the Goneril,—what features do I half remember that scorn might so despoil of beauty?

Ah! that is the power of a great artist. His creations become facts. This is not imagination, it is history. At last here is my vague conception of Lear realized." (83)

Just as he struggles to remember why he recognizes Cecil, Robert gazes upon Cecil's painting in search of clues that can reveal the painter's inner character. Its figures, who "stirred almost, almost spoke," appear poised on the brink of legibility in ways that suggest Robert's tacit understanding of the work. When he recognizes the face of Cordelia as "Cecil Dreeme himself," Robert finds himself on a similar brink of inscrutability. The painting appears to offer the only unguarded glimpse into Cecil's mind: "A very noble figure, even as I see it faintly. Tenderness, pity, undying love for the harsh father, for the false sisters, all these Dreeme's Cordelia—Dreeme's self idealized—expresses fully" (83–84).

This interplay between what Cecil paints and what Robert catalyzes the novel's plot as well as the two's budding intimacy. *Lear and His Daughters* facilitates their friendship through a variety of projections, displacements, and identifications. To Robert, the painting promises access to Cecil's hidden interiority in ways that are not available through conversation. To Clara, the painting promises to articulate her inner turmoil in ways that will protect her secret from others. Although Robert initially approaches the painting by deciphering its iconography, his analysis leads to relational intimacy rather than spiritual truth. Wandering around Cecil's studio, Robert imagines a speculative account of its painter: "Strangely enough,—and here I recognized either a wound in Dreeme's life or a want in his character,—there was not one scene of love—that is, the love Cupid manages—in the collection. Not one scene where lovers, happy or hapless, figured. No pretty picture of consent and fondness. Not one of passion and fervor" (132). From this "wound," he extrapolates that either "Dreeme's nature was still in the crude, green state, unripened by passion, or he had suffered so bitterly from some trajectory in love that he could not

reawaken the memory. Either he was ignorant of love's sweet torture, or he had felt the agony, without the healing touch" (133). As their friendship deepens, Robert tells Cecil that "Your picture is a revelation": "You, of course, have not had an unjust father, like your Lear, not a disloyal sister, like your Goneril; nor have you felt a withering curse, as your Cordelia does. But tyranny and treachery must have touched you. They have initiated you into their modes of action and expression. Do not find inquisitiveness implied in my criticism. I pity you too much for the ability and impulse to paint thus, to be curious how it came." Significantly, Cecil changes the subject in order to dodge the latent question: "And now, pray let us be technical. That white drapery,—how does it fall? Are the lines stiff? Is there too much starch in the linen, or too little?" Byng: "Technicality another time" (105).

Given that this concern regarding knowledge and silence plagues Cordelia in *King Lear*, Clara's identification with the character imagines alternate modes of communication. The painting's intertextual reference proves so salient, I would argue, because it names a character who refuses to disclose or reveal her inner self even as her father commands her to do so. Upon being asked to pledge her love, Cordelia tells Lear that

> I cannot heave
> My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
> According to my bond, no more nor less.[38]

Believing that the "bond" between daughter and parent is legible enough to warrant her refusal to "heave [her] heart into [her] mouth," Cordelia prefers the realm of the implicit in which her "love's / More ponderous than my tongue" (I.i.77–78). At stake in her refusal is

[38] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1297–1354 (I.i.91–93).

what it means to define or articulate an attachment.[39] Her mute expressivity would be at home in nineteenth-century theater, especially in the melodramatic tradition wherein actors revealed character using a variety of embodied cues. Returning to New York "fresh from the French theatres" (68), Robert would be familiar with what Peter Brooks describes in *The Melodramatic Imagination* as "the desire to express" private sentiment in terms of bodily appearance. As Brooks writes, melodramatic theater is a domain in which "Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship."[40] Melodrama hence signals "the need for a new language" by "mark[ing] a kind of fault or gap in the code, that marks its inadequacies to convey a full freight of emotional meaning. In the silence of this gap, the language of presence and immediacy, the primal language, is born anew" (67). Brooks' insight that the nineteenth-century novel inherited this "text of muteness" brings into sharper focus how *Cecil Dreeme* stages the implicit through language that conveys "the fullness, the pregnancy, of the blank that is significant: meaning-full though unspeakable" (73). Thus a figure like Cordelia, associated with gestural communication and a reluctance to express, imagines how the "unspeakable" can be conveyed through the moving, acting body. As portrayed in works such as Benjamin West's 1793 painting (figure 6), Cordelia expresses inner sentiment through nonverbal bodily cues. As a fictional work descended

[39] Hence for Stanley Cavell, "Cordelia is alarming precisely because [Lear] *knows* she is offering the real thing, something a more opulent third of his kingdom cannot, must not, repay; putting a claim upon him he cannot face. She threatens to expose both his plan for returning false love with no love, and expose the necessity for that plan—his terror of being loved, of needing love." Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 290.

[40] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 4.

from this lineage, Cecil's *Lear and His Daughters* couches attachment in terms of nonverbal, and largely silent, embodiment.

Figure 6: Benjamin West, *King Lear and Cordelia* (1793)

Folger Shakespeare Library

Lear and His Daughters is a peculiar painting, to say the least. On the one hand, it is a fairly straightforward adaptation of a familiar scene from one of Shakespeare's tragedies routinely performed on the midcentury stage.[41] On the other hand, Clara coopts this famous

[41] The stage history of *King Lear* lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Although Shakespeare's plays were a mainstay of antebellum American theater, the histories were more frequently performed (*Richard III* in particular), while the tragedies and comedies remained popular in England. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11–82; Stanley Wells, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 69–70; Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), 45.

opening scene in order to serve as a repository for inner turmoil. By prompting same-sex desire and homosocial friendship, the painting envisions a form of intimacy that exceeds the language and narrative that antebellum critics encouraged audiences to seek from the fine arts. Clara's identification with Cordelia is foundational to *Cecil Dreeme*, I would argue, because it stages a different form of aesthetic experience that conjures, rather than reflects, a world. If Robert regards the painted Cordelia as "Dreeme's self idealized" (84), what is that ideal? What does Cordelia's mute expressivity convey? After disclosing her identity, Clara tells Robert that "Painting my Lear kept me alive, with a morbid life. It was my own tragedy, Robert. I am the Cordelia" (203).[42] Her therapeutic, even cathartic, account of the painting's origins suggests how the painting displaced her inner turmoil and "kept [her] alive." By becoming "the Cordelia," Clara expresses her own version of "my Lear."

As an act of self-fashioning, Clara/Cecil's identification with Cordelia anticipates contemporary queer theory's interest in world-making via cultural artifacts. In the painting's mute expressivity, one might recognize the stirrings of Wayne Koestenbaum's claim that "Imitation is a form of mourning-through-identification: you imitate what you wish you could explain."[43] Although Koestenbaum's work pertains to the opera diva's appeal for queer male audiences in the twentieth century, his insight into cross-gender cultural identification reveals that representations of feminized sentiment promise to convey or concretize inner selfhood for a variety of audiences regardless of gender or sexual identity.[44] Feminized sentiment has a history, one that intensified in domestic

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[42] Winthrop added "I am the Cordelia" while revising the manuscript. Theodore Winthrop Papers, New York Public Library, Box 4 (*Cecil Dreeme* holograph manuscript).

[43] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 108.

[44] On the feminization of emotion, see David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 242–81; Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*; Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).

sentimentalism and a so-called "separate spheres" ideology that differentiated bodies based upon their presumed capacity to feel.[45] Feminized characters who feel, such as Clara, promise to reconcile what queer theorist David Halperin refers to as "the inevitable gap between what is *felt* and what in any specific context is capable of being *expressed*."[46] In this regard, they make good on the promise of what Peter Brooks refers to as the "desire to express" (4) associated with melodrama by conveying "meaning-full though unspeakable" (73) emotions in highly visual terms such as painting.

Because it crystallizes Clara's inscrutable emotions, *Lear and His Daughters* constitutes the implicit and nonverbal basis of Robert and Cecil's friendship. Gazing upon Cecil's face, Robert senses that he is in the presence of a tortured mind:

> A man of genius, ardent, poor, and nursing a wound. The wound may be merely a scratch, he may merely have had the poet's quarrel with vulgar life; but, great or small, the hurt has consigned him to this unwholesome solitude, and here he has lavished his mind and body on his art. No, Cecil Dreeme, you are dying because you have ignorantly lived too intensely. But the world does not willingly let such faces die. I myself feel the need of you. Even with your eyes closed, the light gone, your countenance tells me of the presence of a character and an experience riper and deeper than my own. What have you been taught by suffering, what you have

[45] On gender and sentimental culture, see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–70*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). The term "separate spheres" derives from Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74.

[46] Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 268 (italics in original).

divined by genius, that you wear maturity so patiently upon your sad young face? (81)

To pull Cecil from these melancholic depths, Robert must confront the "wound" within. This therapeutic working-through impels their friendship. Robert's declaration that "I myself feel the need of you" acknowledges that Cecil offers "a character and an experience riper and deeper than my own." And yet, that "riper and deeper" experience is tinged with melancholy and tragedy. As Cecil confides to Robert, "I have been struggling with dark waters. . . . Struggling like a raw swimmer" (91). Painting seems to be one of the only means by which Cecil remains afloat. Having "wreaked my anguish, my pity, my shame . . . on that canvas" (128), Cecil stayed alive by "putting my agony into my picture" (203).

In this light, painting displaces melancholy through abstraction or identification. Cecil projects this secret history onto the iconography of Cordelia, a character who expresses what the literary critic Siân Silyn Roberts calls one's inner "gothic subject" associated with unconscious and surprising forms of thought that might otherwise contradict the premise of rational or logical thinking.[47] As an expression of queer personhood, Cordelia externalizes Cecil's gothic subject, suggesting the kinship between melancholy and creativity that had become, by the 1850s, an established trope associated with the romantic artist.[48] Recalling the mercurial painter, Ottavio, who displaces his conflicted same-sex

[47] Siân Silyn Roberts, *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790–1861* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 16. Roberts defines gothic subjects as "different narrative personas whose mutability and adaptability make them ideally suited to a fluctuating Atlantic world. At a time when both British and American intellectuals were preoccupied with the psychology of the political individual . . . works of psychological fiction offered a testing ground for competing and often contradictory forms of human consciousness and collectivity" (7). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, the gothic novel was a formative genre for the history of homosexuality and homophobia; see *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 83–96.

[48] On the cultural association between artistry and melancholy during the romantic era, see Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 49–101. Jamison's survey of biographies and case studies suggests that artists report a disproportionately higher frequency of mood disorders and suicide attempts when compared to focus groups.

attachments onto a portrait in Washington Irving's *Tales of a Traveller*, Clara regards aesthetics as a site in which to work through unresolved sentiment. As Robert suspects, "Genius is quickened, if not created, by throes of anguish in the soul" (202). Painting provides a frame to such "throes of anguish" without narrating or moralizing the sentiment therein. As suggested by the "spasm" (128) of painting and the neurasthenic collapse in which Robert discovers him, Cecil embodies the Byronic tendencies associated with the romantic artist. Nineteenth-century medical science pathologized this category, as suggested by the American physician Benjamin Rush's writing on creativity and mania: "Talents for eloquence, poetry, music and painting, and uncommon ingenuity in several of the mechanical arts, are often evolved in this state of madness."[49] Hence when Robert calls Cecil "a delicate being" (126), he identifies "susceptible nerves of an artist" (105–06) in strikingly gendered ways by aligning male artistry with feminized sentiment. Robert praises Cecil as "a man in force, but with the feminine insight" (35), but this tension speaks to the very qualities he admires that synthesize female and male traits into an idealized, androgynous whole.

Embodying feminized sentiment and melancholic masculinity in equal measure, Clara-as-Cecil-as-Cordelia reveals how the novel's staging of queer intimacy rests upon the gendered discourse of genius. Cecil's identification with Cordelia suggests how Clara, as a woman cross-dressing in disguise, offers Robert the fantasy of someone who can reconcile the emotional depths of a feminized feeling body with the intellectual force of a male genius. Despite the fact that most male characters are quick to confirm other men's geniuses in the novel, the women do not fare so well. The sculptor Sion acknowledges "that fine something called Genius" (169) in Cecil, and even Densdeth is described as "a bad genius"

[49] Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Kimber & Richardson, 1812), 153.

(15), but Clara does not claim the title of artist or genius for herself. Likening her trade to "painting for my bread," she tells Robert that "I had not been, in any ripe sense, an artist. No amateur can be. I was a diligent observer, a conscientious student, a laborious plodder" (201). Yet from Robert's perspective, Clara/Cecil epitomizes the artistic genius who instructs him how to appreciate art. Robert's love for his "friend and Mentor" (143) suggests that the two men share a commitment to cultivating taste and refinement, a commitment that lies at the heart of their attachment to Chrysalis College, where they devote their time to fostering an increasingly bohemian, subcultural community.

Notably, Robert's relation with Clara's sister, Emma, lacks the intensity or depth of his love for Cecil. His ambivalence toward Emma rests upon her lack of emotional reserves: "Emma Denman stood just on the hither brink of genius," he admits. "It seemed that, if some magnificent emotion, some heart-opening joy or grief, could befall her, she would suddenly be promoted to become herself, and that self a genius" (139). According to Robert, she "needed but one step to stand on the heights among the inspired. She seemed to feel this also, and to be always pleading tacitly with me to give her the slight aid she needed. She could not pass into the realms of the divine liberty of genius, for some gossamer wall, invisible to all but her, and against her strong as adamant" (140). If this dynamic seems familiar, it's because Robert reverses the roles that he and Cecil play. Whereas Cecil performs as "Mentor" to Robert's novice, Robert is unenthusiastic, to say the least, to switch roles for Emma. Robert's gendered assessment of genius and the creative imagination claims aesthetics as a primarily male realm characterized by homosocial fraternity even as Clara's secret identity threatens to upend this fantasy of male bonding via the arts.

In this regard, *Cecil Dreeme* departs from the gendered stereotypes of sentiment and genius that predominated antebellum America. The novel's cross-dressing episodes and cross-gender identifications imagine more capacious ways of feeling, especially when these moments refract desires through the frame of art. Like Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) and Julia Ward Howe's "Laurence" manuscript (ca. 1846–47), *Cecil Dreeme* depicts artistry and creativity as traits that involve some degree of cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, or "inversion."[50] Robert is so enamored of Cecil, I would argue, because the painter possesses manly genius and womanly sentiment in equal measure. He tells his friend, "The feminine element is largely developed in you as a poetic artist. It precisely supplies the want which a sisterless and motherless man, like myself, has always felt" (144). Time and again, Winthrop dramatizes aesthetics as a site in which cross-gender identification can thrive: Robert's likening of himself to Eve (40) and Cassandra (126) when it comes to Densdeth, for instance, or Cecil's "womanly guise" (91) as Cordelia, acknowledge the artifice of gendered stereotypes.[51] If Clara's disguise as Cecil began when she "dressed myself in a suit of clothes I had worn as the lover in a little domestic drama we played at home in happier days," her extended performance is a triumph of what Churm, one of the lodgers at Chrysalis, calls "womanishness" (202). The suffix "ishness" performs considerable work: just as Cecil accentuates parts of his inner life through the identification with Cordelia, Robert fashions himself into a theatrical character using works of art.

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[50] Howe's manuscript was published as *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. Gary Williams (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). On gender deviance as an early expression of homosexuality in the nineteenth century, see George Chauncey Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi* 58/59 (1982–83): 114–46 ; Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 13–14; Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76–79.

[51] On Clara's cross-dressing as evidence of the "constructedness" of gender, see Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 85–86.

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Part Three: "Palazzo Sforza Fancies"

I would not paint – a picture –
I'd rather be the One
It's bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –

Emily Dickinson,
[#348][52]

Robert and Cecil rehearse queer desire in their various aesthetic experiences localized in places such as Chrysalis College, where they fashion themselves as anachronistic personae who depart from contemporary forms of identity. Their fictional and temporary personae provide "bright impossibility," to invoke Emily Dickinson's phrasing in this section's epigraph, which is indeed "delicious" to "dwell" upon. Chrysalis College doubles as a staging ground for these rehearsals of queer relations, in that its architecture and interior design render the site distinct from—and even at odds with—midcentury America. Yet the historicity of Chrysalis College bears further consideration as epitomized by its disparate, competing styles. Despite its "Large Gothicish doors" (22), which bear the influence of Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851–53), its "sham convent, sham castle, modern-antique affair" (20) evokes an idiosyncratic style comprised of multiple periods that allows its lodgers to shirk the antebellum world. Modeled upon New York University (figure 7), Chrysalis College seems to be a romantic terrain comprising "Otrantoish" (25) rooms and "Dantesque, Bryonic, Victor Hugoish" (24) design. Stillfleet's assurance to Robert that "It's not a jail, as you might suppose from its grimmish aspect" (20) reveals just how out of place

[52] *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 157.

the college is in uptown Manhattan, a notion that contemporary critics of the novel sensed. As Julian Hawthorne remarks, "The whole atmosphere of [*Cecil Dreeme*] is unreal, fantastic, obscure. An attempt is made to endow our poor, raw New York with something of the stormy and ominous mystery of the immemorial cities of Europe."[53] As "half college, half lodging-house," Chrysalis plays a variety of roles for its lodgers as well as its "young Chrysalids" (31)—its students—yet perhaps its most valuable asset is what Stillfleet refers to as its offer of anonymity and "completer privacy than anywhere in Christendom" (25).

Figure 7: University of the City of New York, Washington Square (1850)

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs: Print Collection

New York Public Library

[53] Julian Hawthorne, *Confessions and Criticism* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1887), 181.

Robert regards Chrysalis as an especially powerful location that allows him to nurture his historical imagination. "If I had preferred to live in the Past," he remarks, "I had only to shut myself up at home, and forget that eager Present about me" (122). As he wanders around the college's "phantasmagoria," he recedes further back in time: "Outside was the nineteenth century; here is the fifteenth. . . . Here I am in the Palazzo Sforza of an old Italian city, in the great chamber where there was love and hate, passion and despair, revelry and poison" (23). In keeping with the environmental logics of Geoffrey Crayon's sojourn in Italy, Robert absorbs the atmosphere of Chrysalis College. Recalling Ruskin's notion of the pathetic fallacy in which a spectator attributes human emotions to his environment, Robert frequently projects his sentiment onto Chrysalis. As he remarks, "A Palazzo Sforza style of place inspires Palazzo Sforza fancies" (25). Eventually, he comes to prefer "Palazzo Sforza fancies" to New York realities, renouncing the nineteenth century for the fifteenth so that he can live amidst a staged fantasy of the Renaissance construed with "old books, old plates, and old *objets*" (26), in which Cecil plays the "poetic young Raphael" (82) and Robert a young apprentice. As nineteenth-century art historians mythologized the Renaissance through works such as Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* [*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*] (1860) and Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), the fifteenth century represented a notion of artistic genius characterized by emotional sensitivity and intellectual acuity.[54] In keeping with the rise of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England, the boarders at Chrysalis turn to the past for evidence of what Burckhardt refers to as a "new race of poet-scholars."[55] Rejecting contemporary British artists trained at the Royal Academy, the Pre-

[54] Will Fisher, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Historiographical Writing about the 'Renaissance,'" *GLQ* 14, no. 1 (2007): 41–67; Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 232–66.

Raphaelite coterie sought and modeled themselves upon historical counterparts rather than contemporary fellow citizens, eventually resisting citizenship and political belonging for historical and aesthetic affiliation instead. (That biographers and historians labeled certain Renaissance artists homosexual fueled such personal attachments to the past.[56]) Whereas Robert, Stillfleet, and Cecil seem out of place in antebellum New York, they are wholly at home in the college's anachronistic décor.

Within this dream-like terrain, Robert finds himself in the realm of what the contemporary psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas refers to as the "aesthetic moment." For Bollas, the aesthetic moment is an "intense affective experience" characterized by "deep subjective rapport"[57] between a spectator and a work of art. The aesthetic moment resembles and feels like a dream. In what Bollas calls a "caesura in time," the spectator "feels held in symmetry and solitude by the spirit of the object" that grants "a rendezvous of mute recognition that defies representation" (30–31). Such moments entail what Bollas refers to as

> a non-representational recollection conveyed through a sense of the uncanny. Such moments feel familiar, sacred, reverential, but are fundamentally outside cognitive coherence. They are registered through an experience in being, rather than mind, because they express that part of us where the experience of rapport with the other was the essence of life before words existed. . . . The aesthetic experience is an

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[55] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Penguin, 1990), 105.

[56] John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893); Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood," in *The Uncanny*, trans. David Mclintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 43–120.

[57] Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 17, 28.

> existential recollection of the time when communicating took place primarily through this illusion of deep rapport of subject and object. (32)

Staging this deep rapport, *Lear and His Daughters* functions as something of an intersubjective bridge between Cecil and Robert. Yet Winthrop makes clear that not only is Robert's experience as a spectator emotionally significant; it prompts his friendship with, and attraction to, its painter.

Modeling how people relate to and through the arts, Cecil's painting fuels Robert's transformation into someone other than himself. As Robert tells Cecil, "the immortal Me expands under your artistic touch" (124). His considerably Whitmanian turn of phrase, "the immortal Me," reveals the discrepancy between Robert's identity as a spectator and his sense of a transformed self glimpsed in terms of style. Time and again, Robert pursues the dreaminess of aesthetic experience, whether it is his "lulled and dreamy state" (153) at the opera; the "dreaminess . . . in Germany" (17) before he sails back to New York; or the "dreamy influence" (31) of Stillfleet's room. Cecil's love of "night-blooming flowers" arises from the association linking nighttime and dreamy mental states. As he tells Robert, "I have accumulated sunshine enough, I hope, for growth, and perhaps for a pallid kind of bloom, in my past sunny days. My rank growth went on vigorously enough in the daylight. I am conscious of a finer development in the dark" (122). As the two wander about New York at night, Robert confesses that he shares Cecil's love of nocturnal life. In an apostrophe addressed to the night, Robert lapses romantic: "Night! when the sun, the eye of God, leaves men to their own devices; when the moon is so faint, and the stars so far away in the infinite, that their inspection and record are forgotten; when Light, the lawgiver and orderer of human life, withdraws, and mankind are free to break or obey the commands daylight has taught them" (142). Offering reprieve from decorum, these nocturnal states

allow Cecil and Robert to yield to what they see and feel. Cruising "the gas-lit city" in order to "study the side it showed at night" (143), Robert and Cecil search for other experiences that recreate nocturnal sensations or emotions. When Robert enters Chrysalis College, he is struck by its "dreamy influence" in which "I had no definite life before me. I was passive, and awaiting events." In such a space, Robert "did not pause to analyze" (31) his surroundings but wholly yields to them in keeping with Christopher Bollas' description of the aesthetic moment as "fundamentally outside cognitive coherence" (32). In this respect, his sensations in Stillfleet's mock museum move away from antebellum and associationist habits of visual perception by cultivating unconscious, vehement reactions he is seemingly powerless to control.

Just as *Lear and His Daughters* explores new forms of queer personhood via a spectator's temporary cross-gender identification, the "dreamy influence" of Chrysalis enables Robert to transform himself into a fictional character on the basis of anachronistic affiliation. Upon returning to New York at the beginning of the novel, he remains unsure as to what he calls his "character":

> Character,—as to my character, it is not yet compacted enough for inspection. My soul grows slow as a century-plant. You can hardly look for blossoms at the end of the first twenty-five years. . . . It seems to me that my allotted method of forming myself is by passing out of myself into others. I am dramatic. I adopt the natures of my companions, and act as if I were they. When I have become, in my proper person, a long list of *dramatis personæ*, I shall be ready to live my life, be it tragedy, comedy, or romance. (51)

With the genre of his life still undetermined, Robert finds in aesthetic experience the ability to transform himself. What he calls his "dramatic fashion of identifying myself with others"

(71) will determine whether his life will become "tragedy, comedy, or romance." But "with no *role* yet assigned" (32), he finds "the new actor" in Cecil, even if he remains unsure about what the painter's position: "Is he in the plot? Is he underplot, counterplot, or episode?" (74). This ambiguity resonates in Winthrop's two models of same-sex relation: whereas Robert and Cecil's romantic friendship is noble and restorative, Densdeth's predatory desire for other men imagines a more gothic, pernicious model of seduction.[58] Just as antebellum audiences might have seen two different versions of *King Lear*—either Shakespeare's original tragedy or Nahum Tate's adaptation, both of which were performed throughout the nineteenth century[59]—Robert's friendship with Cecil is tinged with the thrill of unpredictability. Malleable and undetermined, their relationship offers Robert the freedom to experiment with a range of intimate forms.

At Chrysalis, Robert pursues queer sociability as a historically valued relation. While abroad in Italy, he is warned of the dangers of "a country where there is no past, no yesterday, and if not yesterday, no to-day worth having" (119). In "life without shade, life all bald, garish steady sunshine," Robert might succumb to "corporeal, mundane facts" (120) and lose the spirit of romance.[60] Juxtaposing American cultural infancy with European

[58] Travis M. Foster, "The Queer Young American Comes of Age," *Common-Place* 17, no. 2 (2017), http://common-place.org/book/the-queer-young-american-comes-of-age/; Looby, Introduction, xviii; Michael Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women: Sodomy and Male Sentimental Citizenship in the Antebellum City," *Arizona Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2002): 28–29.

[59] Tate's *Lear* dominated the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century stages. The first known performance of Tate's *Lear* in British North America occurred in 1754. King George III famously disliked the play and banned all performances. After he died in 1820, the Lord Chamberlain lifted the ban, and Shakespeare's *Lear* was reintroduced to the British stage in 1838. As Lawrence Levine observes, most nineteenth-century American audiences would likely have been more familiar with Tate's *Lear* even if Shakespeare's was occasionally performed. See C. J. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage*, vol. 2, 33; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 42–45.

[60] This is a recurring motif of nineteenth-century American literature. In *The Marble Faun* (1860), Hawthorne warns that "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance without a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight." Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: or, The Romance of Monte Beni*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (New York: Penguin, 1990), 3.

history, this warning conflates historical tradition with psychological interiority in which the comparative infancy of antebellum aesthetics perpetuates a national naïveté or innocence, one that Winthrop himself seeks to counteract in his souvenir pamphlet on Church's *The Heart of the Andes*. By curating an *ersatz* "romantic place" (30), Stillfleet constructs what Christopher Castiglia refers to as the "marvelous interiors"[61] of American romance or what Richard Poirier calls "a world elsewhere"[62] borne by language. According to Castiglia, "marvelous interiors," such as Chrysalis, "persist as important sites of inventive aspirations that take us beyond what *must* and toward what *might* be, a record of what citizens can do—and, indeed, are doing—to maintain inventive sociability despite their location in an institutionalized public and the interior states it mandates" (257). Chrysalis facilitates what Castiglia refers to as "romantic sociability," which he defines as being "built on contingency, ephemerality, fantasy, and opaque and irredeemable innerness, [and] runs counter to and distorts institutionalized sociality and its supplemental interior states, readable and reformable, that have become synonymous with public civility in the United States" (259). In this regard, Winthrop brands queer intimacy, not as something new or utopian, but as a historical precedent that already occurred during the Renaissance and Classical Greece. At Chrysalis, queer intimacy and romantic sociability simply reiterate a historical tradition.

Although *Cecil Dreeme* replicates the more recognizable forms of homosocial intimacy one expects from nineteenth-century American literature—relations that go by

[61] Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 256–93.

[62] Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).

names like "romantic friendship"[63]—Winthrop insists upon a historical precedent that stretches back to Classical Greece. As Christopher Looby and Axel Nissen assert, Winthrop's vision of romantic friendship is perfectly compatible with homoerotic and same-sex desire.[64] As Robert tells Cecil, their friendship stems from a longer tradition: "We form a capital exclusive pair, close as any of the historic ones,—Orestes and Pylades, for example" (144), or "Damon and Pythias" (204). Byng's allusions are revealing, as they invoke Classical pairs frequently associated with homoeroticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Consider, for instance, Benjamin West's painting *Pylades and Orestes Brought as Victims before Iphigenia* (figure 8), which depicts Pylades and Orestes in strikingly tragic terms that recall Cecil's Cordelia in *Lear and His Daughters.* With downcast eyes, the pair seem out of place in the painting's tableau, as their comparatively bright skin and classically muscular bodies evince a beauty that jars against the rest of the scene. In this discrepancy between their embodiment and the canvas' palette, Pylades and Orestes appear incongruous with their counterparts, just as Robert and Cecil seem on the cusp of shame. Hence when Byng steps outside of Chrysalis, he is ashamed of what he calls "a wretched place, stiffly laid out, shabbily kept, planted with mean, twigless trees, and in the middle the basin of an extinct fountain filled with foul snow, through which the dead cats and dogs were beginning to sprout at the solicitation of the winter's sunshine" (36).

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[63] Christopher Castiglia, "Same-Sex Friendships and the Rise of Modern Sexualities," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 300–03; Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); George E. Haggerty, *Queer Friendship: Male Intimacy in the English Literary Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women"; Nissen, *Manly Love*; Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[64] Looby, Introduction, xviii–xxi; Nissen, *Manly Love*, 57–88.

Figure 8: Benjamin West, *Pylades and Orestes Brought as Victims before Iphigenia* (1766)

Courtesy of Tate Britain. Photo © Tate.

For Winthrop, Classical Greece and the Italian Renaissance represent the ideal of cultural progress. Yet he remained uneasy, even suspicious, regarding the relation between artists and society writ large. We see this tension as early as 1846, when the eighteen-year-old deliberated the arts in an undergraduate essay written at Yale University on the prompt, "Which more deserves the honor and respect of men, the man of eminence in literature, or the great inventor?" He begins by considering the artistic temperament: "If as a distinguished literary lady said lately, in relation to the character of the people of Athens, great mental cultivation is very usually united with great moral deformity, how very

dangerous to the welfare of their fellow men, must distinguished letters men sometimes be." If "great mental cultivation" and "great moral deformity" accompany one another, Winthrop takes comfort that the writer's "power is confined necessarily to a few, for however great he may be it is the few educated only who read and know his works." Eventually, he concludes that "the influence of the literary man is small and frequently of an injurious character." However, he extends the analogy from Classical Greece to antebellum America: "We see this forcibly in the present day; the doubts, and speculations with hidden things, of modern philosophers, and the spirit of infidelity which pervades their writings must have a very bad effect upon the minds of their readers. And most of the productions of the present day, some of them unworthy to be dignified with the name of literature, are either positively injurious, or if not bad, frivolous and unimproving."[65] Thus understood, "great mental cultivation" threatens to exert pernicious influence over audiences, since cultural artifacts "must have a very bad effect upon the minds of their readers." *Cecil Dreeme* reiterates these concerns by dramatizing the "injurious" or "frivolous and unimproving" effects of those with "great mental cultivation," such as Cecil or Densdeth, who might serve as "positively injurious" or "frivolous and unimproving" influences upon Robert.

These dream-like affiliations and anachronistic reenactments resonate with what has been termed the "temporal turn" of contemporary queer theory. Critics and theorists have sought to understand how queer subjects engage the history of sexuality in search of predecessors or antecedents before the so-called "invention of the homosexual" or emergence of the homo-/hetero- binary in the late nineteenth century.[66] Cecil and Robert

[65] Theodore Winthrop Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1, Folder 16.

[66] Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 177–95. See also Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University

understand all too well what Elizabeth Freeman means by claiming that "The experience of not fitting in often feels both like having the wrong body and like living in a different time zone."[67] Inhabiting a world that predates the first known usage of the term "homosexual" in writing—typically dated to 1868—Cecil and Robert are poised on the cusp of this paradigm shift.[68] At Chrysalis, they turn to prior traditions, events, and figures in search of queer identification beyond the contemporary present moment. Despite the many names queer theorists provide for this type of affiliation— "affective historiography"[69], for instance, or "intimate historicism"[70]—it is characterized by what Freeman calls a "stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development)" (8). For Cecil and Robert, this "stubborn lingering of pastness" is an aesthetic experience in which they curate a past to fashion themselves as if they descend what Burckhardt calls the "new race of poet-scholars" (105) associated with the Italian Renaissance.

By dwelling in this anachronistic world, Robert remains ambivalent when it comes to more conventional forms of gender and sexuality. After the twenty-six-year-old disembarks at the beginning of the novel, Stillfleet teases him about his lack of accomplishments: "Why

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Press, 2012); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American 19th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[67] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 172.

[68] Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 52.

[69] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 8.

[70] Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 8–15.

then haven't you been five years at the bar, or ten years at the desk? Why are you not in command of a clipper ship, or in Congress, or driving an omnibus, or clearing a farm? Where is your door-plate? Where is your wife? What school does your eldest son go to? Where is your mark on the nineteenth century?" (17). But these bourgeois icons of respectability hold little appeal to the young bachelor who seems uncommitted to leaving his "mark on the nineteenth century." Rather, the fifteenth century leaves its mark on him, as he forsakes the domestic sphere by "tenanting the museum of some old virtuoso Tuscan marquis, the last habitable chamber of his palazzo" (30). Robert's relation to history departs from more professional or objective historical methods by privileging the amateurish, the private, and the emotional as valid sites of personal experience. If in the nineteenth century the discipline of history sought to differentiate between academic or rigorous methods, on the one hand, and a more amateur or feminized style, on the other, Robert's penchant for historical romance claims him as a member of the latter camp.[71] Robert's intimate, affective relation to history attempts what queer theorist Jack Halberstam refers to as "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing."[72] In *Cecil Dreeme*, returning to the past constitutes an aesthetic exercise in which one forsakes the present to curate a viable past.

Provocatively, Winthrop situates Robert's inclination toward the past as inextricable from his same-sex desires, eventually likening this inclination to magnetism. Whether it is "the magnetism of human touch" (84) at Cecil's studio, "the magnetic current of a lively conversation" (167) among Robert and the artists Pensal and Sion, or "Densdeth's

[71] On gender and historicism, see Freeman, *Beside You in Time*, 88–90; Mike Goode, *Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History, 1790–1890* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

magnetism" (39), *Cecil Dreeme* imagines the attraction among men as something that is unavoidable and seemingly indecipherable. Especially when it comes to Cecil or Densdeth, their influence upon other men exerts considerable force. As Robert soon realizes, he is powerless to resist Cecil's stare: "I became conscious, by I know not what magnetism, that he had opened his eyes, and was earnestly looking at me." Yet Robert comes to enjoy this mutual recognition: "I let him examine me, as I felt that he was doing, with hollow, melancholy eyes" (86). In similar terms, Robert experiences this recognition standing before art in Stillfleet's room: "All the pictures, statues, reliefs, and casts in [his] room stared at me strangely. . . . The portrait of Stillfleet's mother, a large, dignified woman, gazed kindly and pityingly upon me, with a mother's look, as I lighted the gas" (163). Such stares and gazes offer Robert the semblance of recognition where he is acknowledged by others. Even when it comes to Densdeth, Robert yields to this influence as if it were a surreal dream: "I did not state to my own mind, then, why he captivated me,—why he sometimes terrified me,—why I had a hateful love for his society. In fact, the power of deeply analyzing character comes with a maturity that I had not attained" (109). In what Robert declares being "attractive by repulsion" (106), these same-sex inclinations propel men away and toward one another with a momentum that rarely accompanies women, as Robert quickly learns when it comes to Emma Denman. He remains ambivalent at best: "I loved, or thought I loved, or wished that I loved" (138) her. "Did I, or not, love Emma Denman? Why could I not determine this question?" (139), he asks. For someone whose "heart was free from any love of woman" (141), Robert finds within anachronistic or

[72] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2. This concept of heteronormative time has been variously named "repro-time" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 4–6), "chronobiopolitics" (Luciano, *Arranging Grief*, 9–12), and "reproductive futurism" (Edelman, *No Future*, 2–3).

aesthetic experience a form of interiority that does not demand that he answer such questions.

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Conclusion: Marriage and Mayonnaise

Having celebrated the magnetic pull of same-sex desire, Robert is pained to discover that Cecil is a woman in disguise. Such knowledge registers as a trauma, forcing him to admit that "Cecil Dreeme and I could never be Damon and Pythias again." Gradually, he realizes his profound disappointment: "Ignorantly I had loved my friend as one loves a woman only. This was love,—unforced, self-created, undoubting, complete. And now that the friend proved a woman, a great gulf opened between us" (204). The remarkable syntactic precision of "This was love" asserts, by dint of contrast, the vastness of the "great gulf" now separating the two. Even if the novel ends by suggesting the couple's endurance in the more recognizable heterosexual coupling of Clara and Robert, their modified attachment lacks the magnetism of its prior form. In one of the more colorful similes of nineteenth-century literature, Robert likens heterosexuality to a culinary recipe: "Antagonistic natures do not necessarily make man and woman hostile, even when they are imprisoned for life in matrimony; domestic life stirs and stirs, slow and steady, and at last the two mix, like the oil and mustard in a mayonnaise" (43). Robert registers the rise of heterosexuality as an "imprisoned" sentence of marriage and domesticity as labored as the making of mayonnaise.[73]

[73] On the emergence of heterosexuality in *Cecil Dreeme*, see Looby, Introduction, xii; Nissen, *Manly Love*, 88.

An unlikely simile to say the least, marriage-as-mayonnaise nevertheless envisions a transformation that Robert, Cecil, and Stillfleet seek from aesthetic experience. Such an understanding of transformative aesthetics originates, I would argue, in antebellum criticism, specifically in the *Crayon*'s invocation of Emerson and Transcendentalism as the philosophical bases of visual perception. As Emerson writes in "Beauty," an essay published in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), "Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were just ready to flow into other forms. Any fixedness, heaping, or concentration on one feature,—a long nose, a sharp chin, a hump-back,—is the reverse of the flowing, and therefore deformed."[74] As Jonathan Levin has persuasively argued, Emerson's theory of beauty and poetics is premised upon what he calls "flowing," as the malleability of beauty inspires, in turn, a spectator's flight of imagination and pleasure.[75] As a corollary to the notion that aesthetic experience occurred alongside ordinary life, spectators in *Cecil Dreeme* mimic and imitate the fluctuations associated with cultural artifacts in their own lives, where they are transformed on the basis of their proximity to the magnetic pull of beauty.

Such force inflects Winthrop's writing in *Cecil Dreeme* as well as his souvenir pamphlet for Church's *The Heart of the Andes*. Other spectators were enamored of Church's sublime vision as well. In March 1861, Mark Twain wrote a letter describing his range of impressions upon seeing the painting in St. Louis:

> I have seen it several times, but it is always a new picture—*totally* new—you seem to see nothing the second time which you saw the first. We took the opera glass, and examined its beauties minutely, for the naked eye cannot discern the little wayside flowers, and soft shadows and patches of sunshine, and half-hidden bunches of grass

[74] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 1105.

[75] Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

> and jets of water which form some of its most enchanting features. . . . When you first see the tame, ordinary-looking picture, your first impulse is to turn your back upon it, and say Humbug—but your third visit will find your brain *gasping* and straining with futile efforts to take all the wonder in—and appreciate it with its fullness—and understand how such a miracle could have been conceived and executed by human brain and human hands. You will never get tired of looking at the picture, but your reflections—your efforts to grasp an intelligible Something—you hardly know what—will grow so painful that you will have to go away from the thing, in order to obtain relief. You may find relief, but you cannot banish the picture—it remains with you still. It is in my mind now—and the smallest feature could not be removed without my detecting it.[76]

Twain's evocative sketch captures the vicissitudes of aesthetic experience that run throughout Winthrop's novel. If, for Twain, Church's painting "is in my mind now" and "remains with you still," the kinship between painting and spectator speaks to the intimacies of art that burrow inside a viewer's thoughts. Exerting a magnetic force, paintings such as *The Heart of the Andes* proved so popular for midcentury audiences in part because of their foreign and exotic locations. To behold a romanticized depiction of the Andes from New York or St. Louis meant to enter and imagine the world through paint—to travel, if only virtually, to places far removed from the United States. Church's painting suggests the increasingly hemispheric tendencies of nineteenth-century painting. Although American art arguably came of age with landscape paintings based upon the Hudson River Valley or the Western frontier, postbellum artists gravitated toward increasingly exotic terrain. Just as Chrysalis College attempted a new form of sociability premised on anachronistic history and

[76] Letter to Orion Clemens, March 18, 1861, Mark Twain Papers, UC Berkeley, http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL00022.xml;style=letter;brand=mtp.

cross-gender identification, paintings at the edge of empire displaced burgeoning forms of gender and sexuality at odds with the increasingly heterosexual middle-class culture onto territory beyond the nation. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1877) dramatizes the plight of an artist who enshrouds her untimely sexual identity by turning to an Orientalist style that preserves errant, experimental forms of pleasure.

Chapter Three

The Woman and the Sphinx: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' Enigmatic Orientalism

What a pity that all pretty dreams have to be analyzed!

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,
The Gates Ajar (1868)[1]

The Gilded Age marked a formative moment in the history of American aesthetics, as newly opened art museums helped justify the study and appreciation of the fine arts as foundational to a democratic society.[2] Especially after the Civil War, critics and cultural arbiters promoted the arts as a source of social reform and national unification with the hope that beauty might offer solace, as well as civic instruction, for the masses in the aftermath of wartime trauma and death.[3] As the critic James Jackson Jarves writes in *The Art-Idea* (1865), "We cannot make the world more beautiful without making it better, morally and socially." In keeping with the utilitarian zeal associated with Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, Jarves claims the "art-idea" as "the Beautifier, an angel-messenger of glad tidings to every receptive mind."[4] Postbellum aesthetics was hence characterized by the

[1] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Three Spiritualist Novels*, ed. Nina Baym (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 60.

[2] Of particular importance are the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (founded in 1870), the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (founded in 1870), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (founded in 1876), and the Art Institute of Chicago (founded in 1879).

[3] See Martha Banta, *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 140–81.

institutionalization of the fine arts in spaces such as the museums and public galleries as well as the professionalization of artists, critics, and managers. Departing from the subcultural and romantic representations of painting associated with the fiction of Washington Irving and Theodore Winthrop, postbellum artists possessed a symbiotic relationship to the United States, in which the artist contributed to national wellbeing and, in turn, profited from a commercial marketplace.[5] As suggested by the Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition of 1876, American art and audiences had grown past their nascent origins and could now claim both a legitimacy and a sophistication on par with Europe's. As depicted in *Frank Leslie's Historical Register* (figure 9), the 1876 International Exhibition popularized American art in venues, including the Woman's Pavilion, that upheld the gendered divisions of aesthetic consumption in the nineteenth century. Before the eyes of a respectable bourgeois audience, the female nude sculpture in Figure 9 preserves her modesty by covering her eyes and breasts. The illustration in *Frank Leslie's Historical Register* demonstrates how spectatorship tended to reinforce the increasingly heterosexual cultures of gender and sexuality by staging questions of desire, exposure, and concealment. Given the inclusion of women and children in the Woman's Pavilion, the marble sculpture's modesty works against the art-historical tradition of the female nude by insinuating a self-conscious recognition of her status as being on display. Both the sculpture and its illustrated representation in the *Historical Register* refract sexual desire through Classical conventions of female beauty and idealized form.

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[4] James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-Idea: Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1865), 316.

[5] On visual printing technologies in the late nineteenth century, see Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Figure 9: "The Art Department in the Woman's Pavilion."

Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876

(New York: Frank Leslie, 1877), pg. 208

Part of the power of postbellum visual culture lay in its ability to stabilize shifting conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality at a mass scale. Lewis Mumford's provocative phrase for this period, the "brown decades" (1865–95), reveals the racial anxieties regarding national identity that inflected events such as the 1876 International Exposition. Published in 1931, Mumford's *The Brown Decades* historicizes the nineteenth century in terms of cultural production that flourished, he argues, during "the few warm weeks that elapsed between 1830 and 1860," when "the literary works of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, [and] Hawthorne" issued forth "new modes of thought" associated with

"delectable" and "abundant" "flowers."[6] Yet as Mumford writes, "The Civil War shook down the blossoms and blasted the promise of spring. The colours of American civilization abruptly changed. By the time the war was over, browns had spread everywhere: mediocre drabs, dingy chocolate browns, sooty browns that merged into black. Autumn had come" (5). After 1865, according to Mumford, "the country *looked* different—darker, sadder, somberer. The Brown Decades had begun. Dead men were everywhere. They were present in memory: their portraits stoically gathered dust in empty parlours; they even retained possession of their bodies and walked about the streets" (6). Within this account looms a pervasive anxiety regarding a national idenity overtaken and contaminated by "mediocre drabs," "dingy chocolate browns," and "sooty browns that merged into black." Such imagery resonates with the racialized history of visual culture that scholars have argued helped formulate and reinforce forms of identity that could theoretically be scrutinized via observable traits. The hiearchies associated with Jim Crow segregation rested upon, for instance, anti-Black iconography derived from antebellum minstrelsy that anchored racist stereotypes in bodily performance and exaggerated caricature.[7] As photography and sculpture commemrated the frequently conflicting histories of the Civil War, the versimilitude associated with these media purported to represent people and subjects as they were in an attempt to counteract this history of illustrated, painted, and melodramatic racial identity.[8] In keeping with this history of racialized visual culture, illustrated magazines and

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[6] Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865–1895* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 4–5. F. O. Matthiessen develops Mumford's metaphor into what he calls the "American Renaissance" of antebellum literature in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

[7] Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[8] Kirk Savage, Standing Soldiers, *Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race,*

newspapers circulated (literally) stereotypical depictions of manhood and womanhood that audiences could recreate and imitate.[9] As scholarhip in queer-of-color critique has made clear, these sexual and gender categories emerged from the very visual culture that attempted to demarcate racial difference.[10]

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps draws upon these histories in *The Story of Avis* (1877), a novel that concerns an aspiring painter, Avis Dobell, caught between professional ambition and domestic femininity. Set in the fictional New England college town of Harmouth (a portmanteau of "Harvard" and "Dartmouth"), the novel reads as a stymied *künstlerroman*, or artist's novel of education, in which Avis defers her promising career in order to nurse her neurasthenic husband, Philip Ostrander, a professor at Harmouth University, and raise their two children. Set during the "brown decades" of postbellum America, *The Story of Avis* acknowledges the gendered boundaries that determined who could work as a professional artist.[11] After commemorating the Civil War's devastating impact upon those she called "the helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted women"[12] in her best-selling novel *The Gates Ajar*, Phelps recasts the Civil War, in *The Story of Avis*, as an unlikely opportunity for

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and Class in Visual Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 113–35; Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[9] Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895–1915* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

[10] Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and Black Figuration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

[11] Nancy Bentley finds an analogue between Avis' and Phelps' respective "distance from established aesthetic institutions" in their painting and writing. Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas*, 123–24.

[12] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896), 98.

women to enter the workforce and work outside the home.[13] The novel portrays the years following the Civil War as a crisis in American domesticity prompted by women's work beyond the household.[14] As part of a generation of women writers who interrogated the domestic sphere formerly idolized during the so-called "Feminine Fifties," Phelps critiques marriage and motherhood, not only in terms of their stifling of women's possibilities for fulfillment, but also for fetishizing what the historian Barbara Welter refers to as the "cult of true womanhood."[15] Along with Louisa May Alcott's *Work* (1873), Phelps' *Doctor Zay* (1882), and Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* (1884), *The Story of Avis* insists that a woman's right to work outside the domestic sphere is crucial personal and national well-being. As a novel that has the dubious honor of being "the first important American novel about a failed marriage"[16], *The Story of Avis* registers shifting conceptions of middle-class sexuality during a postwar period characterized by the rise of divorce rates, a higher average marrying age, and lower average childbearing rate.[17] Although Avis and Philip reconcile

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[13] Reprinted fifty-five times in twenty years, *The Gates Ajar* renders the Civil War as a distinctly feminized trauma, one in which, as Phelps observes, "Our country was dark with sorrowing women" (*Chapters from a Life*, 96). The daughter of the prominent Calvinist theologian Austin Phelps (who taught at the Andover Theological Seminary), Phelps critiqued the limits of masculine religious authority: "Creeds and commentaries and sermons were made by men," she opines in her memoir. "What tenderest of men knows how to comfort his own daughter when her heart is broken? What can the doctrines do for the desolated by death?" (*Chapters from a Life*, 98). Phelps lost a fiancée in battle at Antietam.

[14] On the Civil War's impact upon women, see Elizabeth Leonard, *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994); Anne C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 145–92; Jane Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[15] Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–70*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," American Quarterly 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74.

[16] Alfred Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 38. Phelps' contemporaries, Henry James and William Dean Howells, depict unhappy marriages in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *A Modern Instance* (1882) respectively. For Phelps' influence on these novels, see Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism*, 46.

[17] In the United States, the divorce rate rose by 2,000 percent between 1867–1929. Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2. Phelps defended a woman's right to divorce, declaring that "Divorce, at best, is pure surgery; nothing more

during Philip's convalescence and remain married until his death, their largely unhappy union evokes the cultural narrative that artistry is incompatible with wifehood and motherhood—that, in other words, a woman's likelihood of artistic success lay in direct proportion to her singleness.[18] As Van Wyck Brooks asks regarding *The Story of Avis*, "Should woman artists marry? Should Avis have married? The question reverberated in many a feminine breast in Boston."[19]

I argue that Avis channels her conflicted, unresolved feelings regarding marriage and domesticity into her monumental painting of the Sphinx, an Orientalist work that displaces queer desires and identifications onto foreign and exotic locations. Avis seeks, from the androgynous mythological creature, a form of racial and sexual difference that lies beyond the American household. Her imperial aesthetic doubles as a repository for an inchoate and untimely sexual identity. Avis' most profound relations are with women rather than men: her marriage with Philip pales in comparison with her friendship with the aptly named Coy, and her artistic practice centers upon women's lives and experiences through figures such as a marble Venus or her painted portrait of Philip's mother. *The Story of Avis* envisions queer female sexuality prior to more recognizable identities including the "New Woman"[20] and

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nor less." *Selected Tales, Essays, and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Duquette and Cheryl Tevlin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 209.

[18] Fictional women artists frequently choose to remain single in order to work in Fanny Fern's *Rose Clark* (1856), E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Vivia, or The Secret of Power* (1857), Harriet Prescott Spofford's "The Amber Gods" (1860), and Augusta Jane Evans' *Macaria* (1864). French and British novels featuring women artists include Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807), Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *L'Atelier d'un peintre* (1833), Sydney Owenson's *The Princess* (1835), Angélique Arnaud's *Clémence* (1841), Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anna Mary Howitt's *Sisters in the Art* (1852), and George Sand's *Elle et lui* (1858).

[19] Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer, 1865–1915* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1940), 155.

[20] The term "New Woman" was coined in 1894 in the *North American Review* and featured prominently in fiction and film that presented the stock character an emblem of feminist political action (typically organized around the fight for suffrage) and changing social values (including access to birth control). Banta, *Imaging*

relations such as the "Boston Marriage."[21] Not quite a New Woman and nearly a lesbian, Avis searches for a recognizable category of womanhood other than wife or mother.[22] She finds such recognition when, in her studio, "the woman and the sphinx looked at one another."[23] This chapter inquires as to how "the woman" and "the sphinx" constitute one another at an historical moment when female painters, including Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, typically valorized the domestic sphere as an idyllic haven in ways that recall antebellum domestic sentimentalism.[24] In contrast to this movement, Avis retreats to a fantastic Ancient Egypt to dwell with the silent Sphinx, where she explores what she calls her "unshared, inscrutable moods" (126). *The Story of Avis* hence chronicles a markedly different relation to aesthetics other than the utilitarian justification of art that inflected the postbellum era. Avis' painting does not attempt to contribute to national debates regarding the arts, nor does it circulate among public galleries and museums. Rather, it is solely intended for private use.

Yet I do not want to suggest that the Sphinx is a stable sign that can be unambiguously read. Indeed, it is precisely the Sphinx's overdetermined nature that

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American Women, 45–139; Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*; Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 245–96.

[21] The "Boston Marriage" was popularized by Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1886). See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 190–203; Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 168–189; Valerie Rohy, *Impossible Women: Lesbian Figures and American Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 13–41.

[22] Hence for Christine Stansell, Phelps offers "devastating analysis of the nature of heterosexuality and its implications for the liberation of women." Stansell, "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: A Study in Female Rebellion," *Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1–2 (1972): 239.

[23] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Avis*, ed. Carol Farley Kessler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 119. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

[24] For a helpful history of the rise of female painters in American art, see Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

appealed to both Avis and Phelps, who initially considered naming *The Story of Avis* "The Story of the Sphinx"[25] and returned to the creature in the poem "The Sphinx" (1885) and the short story "The Married Daughter," her contribution to the multi-author novel *The Whole Family* (1908), in which a woman registers at "The Sphinx, that nice ladies' hotel where mere man is never admitted."[26] As the literary critic Bram Dijkstra has shown, the Sphinx inspired a variety of nineteenth-century writers and artists who depicted the figure as alternatively monstrous, feminine, and androgynous.[27] Phelps' invocation of the Sphinx situates her within a genealogy of poets and writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oscar Wilde, who regarded the creature as perhaps the paradigmatic example of racial and sexual difference. As we see in two contemporary paintings by the New England artist Elihu Vedder, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863; figure 10) and *The Sphinx of the Seashore* (1879; figure 11), the Sphinx often refracted gender and sexuality through Orientalist iconography. Recalling the Dark Romanticism of Frederic Edwin Church's *The Heart of the Andes* (1859) analyzed in Chapter 2, Vedder's paintings portray feminine identity as a mysterious, nearly inscrutable, foreign terrain. For Avis, who awaits a more recognizable form of womanhood, the Sphinx embodies what that femininity might become through its interplay of silence and riddles.

[25] Carol Farley Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 89.

[26] *The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1908), 192.

[27] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle* Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 325–32.

Figure 10: Elihu Vedder, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863)

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 11: Elihu Vedder, *The Sphinx of the Seashore* (1879)

The Story of Avis imagines more capacious forms of female desire in terms of Orientalist style. As a preliminary form of what Melani McAlister refers to as "Commodity Orientalism"[28], *The Story of Avis* establishes that racial and ethnic difference were foundational to the emergence of a distinctly white heterosexuality, since non-normative sexualities were displaced onto foreign bodies rendered figuratively and geographically peripheral to American empire. Building upon the work of Amy Kaplan and Laura Wexler, who have analyzed how imperial logics were integral to domestic sentimentalism, I wish to bring into sharper focus the homoerotic and queer dimensions of Orientalism.[29] This chapter explores two competing notions of gendered and eroticized Orientalism in *The Story of Avis*: first, the notion of a transparent womanhood that can be easily deciphered via the

[28] Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 22.

figure of the female nude associated with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra; and second, Avis' and Phelps' fantasy of the Sphinx, an mythological figure that conceals selfhood associated with an obscured, androgynous bodily appearance. Avis embodies a relation to domesticity and material culture that paradoxically reifies the heterosexual domestic sphere by decorating it with exotic trinkets and foreign art associated with female beauty. *The Story of Avis* proposes a vision of sexuality that rejects the notion "that queerness is registered through affirmative and externalized modes, a mandate that relies too readily on phallocentric and patriarchal assumptions validating denoted presence over all other modes of expression."[30] Rather, the overdetermined silence of the Sphinx locates sexual and racial desire, not in tangible appearances, but rather in shrouded mystery and reticence. As a figure who stupefies by asking mystifying riddles, the Sphinx gestures toward a model of gender and sexuality that only coheres in tentative guesses and experiments.

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Part One: Cleopatra

By invoking Cleopatra and the Sphinx in *The Story of Avis*, Phelps joins the Orientalist literary tradition that interrogates the question of legibility and translation using cultural figures who either invite or resist interpretation.[31] After the Rosetta Stone was discovered in

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[29] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U. S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U. S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[30] Travis Foster and Timothy M. Griffiths, "Introduction: American Women's Writing and the Genealogies of Queer Thought," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 37, no. 1 (2020): 11.

[31] John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley:

1799 and transliterated in Paris in 1822, European and American authors drew upon hieroglyphics as a metaphor for depicting signification writ large. In such literature, hieroglyphics often appear in conjunction with the belief that inner meaning lies couched within language even if that representation requires translation. As icons of intelligibility (or lack thereof), Cleopatra and the Sphinx express Avis' strained relation to domestic ideology, which seems to be a language she cannot speak or understand.[32] Phelps' novel participates in the process that Edward W. Said outlines in *Orientalism* (1979) in which European literature renders the Arab-Islamic world as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."[33] By presenting the so-called "Middle East" as a discourse, nineteenth-century literature and painting sought to "make the Orient visible, clear, 'there'" (22).

Recent scholarship in postcolonial studies and queer theory has established that what Said calls the "almost uniform association between the Orient and sex" gradually aligned whiteness with heterosexuality.[34] Because "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe," Orientalism depicted what he brands "a different

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University of California Press, 1991); Lynn Parramore, *Reading the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[32] On the Civil War's impact upon cultural production in the postbellum United States in *The Story of Avis*, see Naomi Z. Sofer, *Making the "America of Art": Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 184–95.

[33] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 1. See also Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on 19th-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 33–59; Malini Johar Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

[34] Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Natasha Hurley, *Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 41–77; Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden" (190).[35] It was precisely this association with a "more libertine and less guilt-ridden" sexuality that inspired a variety of writers to render the Arab-Islamic world as a pleasurable domain in which desires and sexual practices otherwise taboo in Europe and North America could flourish. By feminizing and fetishizing Arab-Islamic men, what Joseph Allen Boone calls "the homoerotics of orientalism"[36] preserves homosexuality in historically or geographically foreign territory. The rise of heterosexuality thus relied upon hemispheric and colonial encounters that aligned heterosexuality with whiteness and non-normative sexuality with bodies of color. As Melani McAlister writes, "commodity Orientalism" allowed Americans in particular to acquire and enjoy "the exotic pleasures of the Orient" at home, regardless of an artifact's status as either a historical antique from abroad or a commodity designed and produced elsewhere. For McAlister, consumer culture established "the East [as] something missing in the world of the American work ethic; it is what one longs for; it is the iconography of sexual desire and the possibility of purchasing the feelings that go with that desire—reverie, release, sensual pleasure—through the goods associated with it."[37]

Although *The Story of Avis* lacks the explicit homoeroticism associated with nineteenth-century literature or painting, it draws upon Orientalist iconography to render non-normative desire as incompatible with American domesticity. Upon her three-year apprenticeship in Florence and Paris in the 1850s, Avis would have been immersed in Orientalist art. Her time abroad coincides with other women artists who left the United States to seek formal training in more hospitable climates in ways that recall, for instance,

[35] Provocatively, Said elaborates: "Why the Orient seems still to suggest [these qualities] is something on which one could speculate: it is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite its frequently noted appearance" (188).

[36] Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Geoffrey Crayon's aesthetic education in England and Italy. Like Mary Cassatt (who moved to Paris in 1866 at twenty-two years old) or Harriet Hosmer (who moved to Rome in 1852, also at twenty-two years old), Avis would not be out of place amongst what Henry James dismisses as Hosmer's "white, marmorean flock"[38] of female artists working in Rome. As biographers and art historians have documented, art colonies in Rome and Paris offered young women professional and personal validation through the chance to join bohemian communities of unmarried or androgynous artists.[39] For the nineteen-year-old Avis, living and working abroad meant that she "simply spent two years unlearning, that she might begin to learn" (37). Among this vibrant expatriate community, Avis "plunged into a life which extremely few women in America, twenty years ago, found it either possible or desirable to lead. Those who know any thing of art-circles in Italy at that time will recall the impression made upon them by her superb perseverance in mastering the difficulties of her position long before her gift had been distinguished from a grace" (35–36). Avis finds freedom in a life and career abroad, in which she "now began in soul and sense to live" (36).[40]

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[37] McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 22.

[38] Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1904), vol. 1, 257.

[39] Kate Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); Charmaine A. Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3–44; Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 141–65; Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 171–204. One American equivalent is the so-called "Red-Rose Girls" (Jessie Willcox Smith, Elizabeth Shipper Green, Violet Oakley, and Henrietta Cozens) who pursued careers as illustrators while living together in Villanova, Pennsylvania from 1901–06. See Alice A. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls: An Uncommon Story of Art and Love* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000).

[40] In Paris, Avis apprentices at Thomas Couture's studio. Couture tutored Louisa May Alcott's younger sister Abigail May Alcott in the early 1870s. In her unfinished manuscript fragment "Diana and Persis" (1879), Alcott returns to *The Story of Avis.* She wrote to her sister that she hoped Abigail would "prove 'Avis' in the wrong" by being able to reconcile professional artistry and motherhood. Deborah Barker, *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature: Portraits of the Woman Artist* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 94–95.

Avis' apprenticeship in Italy places *The Story of Avis* in conversation with one of the most prominent novels concerned with American artists in the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860). In the novel, Hawthorne explores the gendered dynamics of spectatorship in a scene involving the sculptor Kenyon's work-in-progress, a statue of Cleopatra. By conjuring *The Marble Faun,* Phelps asks what it means to represent a woman in art, especially when that woman is as racially and sexually ambiguous as William Wetmore Story's sculpture *Cleopatra* (1858; figure 12), the source of inspiration behind Kenyon's fictitious piece.[41] In the novel, Kenyon proudly shows his *Cleopatra* to Miriam, an oil painter. After he "drew away the cloth," he reveals the sculpture, which is "all Cleopatra—fierce, voluptuous, passionate, tender, wicked, terrible, and full of poisonous and rapturous enchantment."[42] The cloth covering Cleopatra's nude body captures the tension between surface and interiority that animated the American romance. Kenyon takes great pride in being able to control when and how viewers behold his marble queen reclining in what he calls "the repose of despair." Immensely proud of the piece, he tells Miriam that it possesses "a great, smouldering furnace, deep down in the woman's heart . . . . She might spring upon you like a tigress, and stop the very breath that you were now drawing, midway in your throat" (126). Kenyon's ekphrastic description of his sculpture renders Cleopatra in suggestive terms. By describing both her psychological interiority "deep down in the woman's heart" and her frenzied motion of "spring[ing] upon

[41] Like Hawthorne and Phelps, Story was ensconced in New England artistic culture: after studying literature and classics at Harvard, he participated in Emerson's and Fuller's social circles before relocating to Rome. Story's art studio was a popular tourist attraction for visitors, including Hawthorne, who visited the sculptor and used both the encounter and Story's sculpture in *The Marble Faun*.

[42] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: or, The Romance of Monte Beni*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (New York: Penguin, 1990), 127. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically. Hawthorne identifies Story's sculpture as the inspiration for Kenyon's piece in the preface (4). On Story's *Cleopatra* in *The Marble Faun*, see Deanne Fernie, *Hawthorne, Sculpture, and the Question of American Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 252–53.

you like a tigress," he animates the frozen marble with an eroticized intensity rarely glimpsed in ekphrastic and critical writing.

Figure 12: William Wetmore Story, *Cleopatra* (1858)

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Kenyon's and Story's Cleopatras conflate nudity with transparency, in that they portray the Egyptian queen as an erotic object to be consumed. "What a woman is this!," Miriam exclaims to Kenyon upon seeing his sculpture. She asks, "Were you not afraid to touch her, as she grew more and more towards hot life, beneath your hand?" (127). Miriam's question could easily apply to other paintings of Cleopatra that depict her in various states of undress. From the exposed breast in Story's *Cleopatra* to fully bared breasts in Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Cléopâtre et César* (1866; figure 13) and the draped nudity of Jean-André Rixens' *The Death of Cleopatra* (1874; figure 14), Cleopatra is rarely wholly nude. Instead, she appears caught in the act of undressing or exposing herself—a gesture that lends itself to dramatic and imaginative accounts that extend far beyond the single moment commemorated by sculpture. These sculptures situate Cleopatra as part of a larger narrative that viewers and audiences can complete on their own. Only partially nude, these works imagine an eroticized gaze otherwise compatible with the relatively chaste tastes associated with midcentury American art. Story and Hawthorne siphon Cleopatra's association with erotic desire and female sexuality through the cultural cachet associated with sculpture by portraying the queen as a beautiful, if tragic, figure. Given her exposed breast and downward glance, Story's *Cleopatra* is close to death, which ultimately provides a moralistic tint to her pursuit of power and ambition. In this regard, the work embodies what Russ Castronovo characterizes as the nineteenth-century American fixation with "necro citizenship," or fetishized scenes of suffering and death that articulate political belonging (or lack thereof).[43] Story's *Cleopatra* thus considers the fate and place of a woman who freely pursues sexuality and power by confining her to a catastrophic, self-imposed fate. In this manner, the sculpture upholds Edgar Allan Poe's infamous remark that

[43] Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century* United States (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

"The death [of] a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."[44] Simultaneously eroticizing and punishing Cleopatra, these works embody the cultural tensions regarding female sexuality.

Figure 13: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Cléopâtre et César* (1866)

Goupil and Co. reproduction (1909)

[44] Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 19. See also Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Figure 14: Jean-André Rixens, *The Death of Cleopatra* (1874)

Goupil and Co. reproduction (1909)

At stake in these representations of Cleopatra is a gendered history of ekphrastic writing in which male spectators and writers narrate women's lives using a ventriloquized perspective. Just as a variety of men gaze upon Cleopatra within Gérôme's and Rixens's paintings, male characters frequently behold Cleopatra as a spectacle to be consumed. As Henry James writes in his biography of *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903), the sculptor worked during an "age in which an image had, before anything else, to tell a story."[45] For James, *The Marble Faun* is a triumph because it offers "a fine prose transcript of Story's Cleopatra" (85). James found Story to be a "frankly and forcibly romantic" artist

[45] James, *William Wetmore Story*, vol. 2, 76.

because the sculptor "told his tale with admirable emphasis and straightness, with a strong sense both of character and of drama, so that he created a kind of interest for the statue which had been, without competition, up to that time, reserved for the picture" (77). Story not only sculpted the Egyptian queen but also dramatized her dying thoughts in "Cleopatra" (1868), a dramatic monologue that imagines the queen's dying thoughts:

> I dreamed I was with my Antony,
>
> And in his arms I lay;
>
> Ah, me! the vision has vanished—
>
> The music has died away.[46]

Story's Cleopatra is laid bare for all to see. Despite the fact that she "dreamed I was with my Antony," her "vision has vanished." Her creativity is no match for death: Story appears to have the upper hand when it comes to representing the Egyptian queen.

Cleopatra's iconography reveals how ekphrastic writing attempted to stabilize inner character in terms of outer appearance. These competing narrative accounts render Cleopatra into an overdetermined icon that signifies a variety of contradictory or opposing interpretations when it comes to gender, sexuality, and race. As an Orientalist icon of indeterminate race, Cleopatra conjures the emergence of a distinctly white womanhood premised on everything that the dying queen is not: chaste, modest, and decorous.[47] That Cleopatra appears so frequently in nineteenth-century literature—including *The Marble*

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[46] William Wetmore Story, "Cleopatra," in *Graffiti D'Italia* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1868), 147.

[47] Cleopatra's racial identity was based upon a historical narrative that claimed her as either a white sovereign (due to her Ptolemaic father) or a Black tragic figure whose sexual allure spelled her doom. See Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 181–86; Nelson, *The Color of Stone*, 159–62; Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 177–86.

Faun and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853)[48]—suggests the cultural work she performed in defining female desire and sexuality.[49] "Apotheosized in an indestructible material" through marble, Kenyon's sculpted *Cleopatra* "would be one of the images that men keep forever, finding a heat in them which does not cool down, throughout the centuries" (127). Such fantasies fetishize Cleopatra's tragic downfall as something like a sexual act, aligning spectatorship with a distinctly heterosexual and male desire to see and know her innermost thoughts. In this regard, these Cleopatras anticipate the rise of literary realism that attempted to render characters' psychic life, especially women's, using the language of visual culture: James' "portrait" of a lady is one of many that suggests unconscious or latent thoughts hidden beneath the surface.[50]

Phelps recasts this ekphrastic tradition in *The Story of Avis* when the young painter imagines Cleopatra as something other than a tragic victim on the brink of death. Before her extraordinary reverie, Avis drinks from a bottle of *Eau de Fleurs d'Oranger*, a French brandy whose every "drop was an amber bead, sluggish and sweet" (79). It transports to her to an altered, hallucinogenic state where "the darkness had become alive":

> That which she saw appeared at the remote wall of the room, a panorama extending from floor to ceiling, stirring slowly, like Gobelin tapestry which unseen hands rolled and unrolled. She roused herself, sitting with her hands clasped about her

[48] In *Villette,* Lucy Snowe gazes upon a painting of the "huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen" (276) at an art gallery. While beholding "the queen of the collection," she notices the physical size of the queen, who she describes as "extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh" (275). Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Mark Lilly (New York: Penguin, 1979).

[49] On nineteenth-century representations of Cleopatra, see Buick, *Child of the Fire*, 181–207; Mary Hamer, *Signs of Cleopatra: History, Politics, Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 208–17; Nelson, *The Color of Stone,* 143–178; Trafton, *Egypt Land*, 165–221.

[50] On portraits of women in late nineteenth-century American literature, see Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 287–338; Sarah Blackwood, *The Portrait's Subject: Inventing Inner Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 124–29; David M. Lubin, *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Smith, *American Archives*, 206–221.

> knees, giving, as was her habit, a more iron attention to these fictions of her own nature than to any thing which those of others had made fact in the world. Neither Raphael nor Titian could have taught her what she learned in one such self-articulate hour as this. (80)

Comprised of "fictions of her own nature," this panorama grants Avis the cultural authority of Renaissance painters just as Phelps renders a "Gobelin tapestry" in prose. As literary historians have suggested, many American women writers in the 1870s turned to ekphrasis in order to assert fluency in esteemed cultural traditions that could vouch for artistic legitimacy and dexterity.[51] In her memoir, Phelps recounts her experience of reading Matthew Arnold, Anna Jameson, and John Ruskin—critics who shared the notion that art should narrate a story.[52] Avis' dream vision, however, renders a mystical vision of women that unfolds in imagistic scenes rather than narrative plot:

> Cleopatra was there, and Godiva, Aphrodite and St. Elizabeth, Ariadne and Esther, Helen and Jeanne d'Arc, and the Magdalene, Sappho, and Cornelia, a motley company. These moved on solemnly, and gave way to a silent army of the unknown. They swept before her in file, in procession, in groups. They blushed at altars; they knelt in convents; they leered in the streets; they sang to their babes; they stooped and stitched in black attics; they trembled beneath summer moons; they starved in cellars; they fell by the blow of a man's hand; they sold their souls for bread; they dashed their lives out in swift streams; they wrung their hands in prayer. (82–83)

The women's motion is based on a rhythm that accretes "in procession" as they move in unison ("They blushed . . . they knelt . . . they leered . . . they sang . . . "). This dream

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[51] Barker, *Aesthetics and Gender*, 11; Sofer, *Making the "America of Art*."

[52] *Chapters from a Life*, 51–52; *Story of Avis*, 95.

passage invokes what Dorri Beam refers to as the "voluptuously turned language" of nineteenth-century American women's writing. According to Beam, such language is characterized by "the textured layering of sensual detail and image, and a syntax of endless accrual." This ornamental description offers "twinned aesthetic delight and (equally pleasing) aggression toward any aesthetic experience figured as transcendence of the feminine or materials."[53] Calling attention to itself through ornate language, the passage insists upon both the materiality of the prose as well as the creative labor that went into it. Given the feminized nature of ornamental writing, Avis' vision privileges description over exposition as a deliberately gendered form of aesthetic delight.

Avis' highly wrought fantasy resists the urge to narrate or ventriloquize these women's thoughts by embracing artifice. In a provocative analysis of this scene, the literary critic Scott Trafton refers to Avis' "opium-induced Orientalist hallucination" as a lurid fantasy that renders "women's history as white history and white history as linear history." (To be clear, Avis consumes an orange liqueur rather than opium.) It does so, according to Trafton, because Avis' "historical identity, as a woman as well as a feminist, is dependent on her ability to enlist the signs of race."[54] Although my interpretation of the scene is largely commensurate with Trafton's insight as to the interplay between "white history" and Avis' identification with white womanhood, situating the dream vision as part of the broader Orientalist tradition reveals that Phelps renders Cleopatra as one of many (white) feminist icons but, in that very rendering, withholds Cleopatra as something other than a stereotype. Cleopatra remains deliberately enigmatic because she is visually wrought, passing from Avis' vision where she "vanished in an expanse of imperfectly-defined color like a cloud,

[53] Dorri Beam, Style, *Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

[54] Trafton, *Egypt Land*, 204.

which for some moments she found without form and void to her" (83). In this "imperfectly-defined color" that remains "without form," this imprecision and ambiguity retains something of the mystery of these figures that saturates the colonial stereotype. As Phelps problematizes the rendering of inner life through visual appearance, she refuses to define or specify inner life. Just as Phelps' vision of Cleopatra is essentially pure surface, Avis' painting of the Sphinx is a hieroglyphic signifies, rather than reveals, its semantic content.

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Part Two: "The Passion of Carmine"

You have written the novel of the century [*Middlemarch*]—but that is one matter; you have almost analyzed a woman—and that is quite another.

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,
Letter to George Eliot,
February 26, 1873[55]

Phelps' admiration for Eliot's "novel of the century," *Middlemarch* (1871–72), rests upon Eliot's psychological realism that probes the depths of enigmatic, even unconscious, thought. A far cry from the transparency associated with Cleopatra in *The Marble Faun*, Eliot's and Phelps' depiction of mental life likens psychological depth to uncharted territory. While revising *The Story of Avis*, Phelps read *Daniel Deronda* (1876) with great enthusiasm, confiding to Eliot that she found Deronda to be "the counterpart of Dorothea," describing him as "great . . . sad; lonely as the Sphinx."[56] Phelps' simile, comparing Daniel's loneliness to that of the Sphinx's, situates Dorothea's "great mental need" in

[55] George V. Griffith, "An Epistolary Friendship: The Letters of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to George Eliot," *Legacy* 18, no. 1 (2001): 95.

Middlemarch—"her desire to make her life greatly effective"—at the margins of British Empire.[57] Eliot's portrayal of frustrated action in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* instructed Phelps how to conceive of the rerouting of psychic energies in response to patriarchal and misogynist limitations. Eliot's heroines must sublimate their professional and personal aspirations in such a way that keeps them "lonely as the Sphinx"—a reticent counterpart to the sexualized sculptures of Cleopatra in *The Marble Faun* and American sculpture earlier discussed. For Eliot or Phelps to "almost [analyze] a woman," then, entails developing representational strategies for considering a woman's desire for happiness other than in marriage or motherhood.

In *The Story of Avis*, Phelps represents psychological interiority in terms of visual perception, especially in the silent glance between two women that occurs in the novel's opening scene. It begins during a meeting of Harmouth University's poetry club, a gathering comprising faculty wives and daughters, including Avis and her friend, the aptly named Coy. "What *was* it about her?" (3), Coy asks herself as she sees Avis sitting alone. Given that Avis is flanked by curtains on both sides, the young painter appears as if inside a painting. Coy observes that

> Avis Dobell, sitting in the shadowed corner of the president's parlor that night, had happened to place herself against some very heavy drapery, which clasped two warm arms of intense color across the chill of a bay-window. The color was that called variously and lawlessly by upholsterers cranberry, garnet, or ponso; known to artists as carmine. The material held a satin thread, which lent to the curtains the lustre of jewels in a dark setting, or of water under a flaming sky. In the gaslight and firelight

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[56] Griffith, "An Epistolary Friendship": 97.

[57] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (New York: Penguin, 1994), 28. As Phelps writes in the poem "George Eliot—Her Jury" (1881), Dorothea is "Womanhood's woman." Phelps, *Selected Tales*, 232.

> of the room, the insensate piece of cloth took on a strange and vivid life, and seemed to throb as if it held some inarticulate passion, like that of a subject soul. (6)

Coy's vision of her friend abounds in ambiguity. Just as the color of the curtains goes by four different names ("cranberry," "garnet," "ponso," or "carmine"), their "strange and vivid life" plunges Coy into a world of sensation even if that sensation lacks the contours of more recognizable experience. This tableau of "inarticulate passion" is so disorienting because it conflates what Coy sees with what she feels. Here, ekphrasis problematizes the distinction between Avis' appearance and Coy's gaze so that, although Coy can name the "inarticulate passion" glimpsed in her vision, she cannot define its specific attributes. Imagining that the "insensate piece of cloth . . . seemed to throb as if it held some inarticulate passion," the "as if" attempts to define the sensation, however imperfectly, using simile and comparison. Coy's vision of Avis marks an eruption of passion cordoned off from bourgeois domesticity. The "carmine" curtains effectively domesticate emotion by conflating it with the curtains rather than the women.

Coy's "throb[bing]" vision develops an environmental theory of sexuality in which desire and beauty are inextricable from the atmosphere of the domestic parlor. In keeping with the spatial logics that cordon off aesthetics from the quotidian everyday as discussed in Chapter 2, *The Story of Avis* portrays characters attributing aesthetic emotions to their physical surroundings as if these impressions and sentiments originate from a foreign or unusual environment. In this regard, the novel evokes the pathetic fallacy associated with midcentury aesthetic criticism in order to imagine where, and how, non-normative desires arise. As defined in the third volume of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1856), the pathetic fallacy refers to a spectator's misattribution of emotions to inanimate objects. "Caused by an excited state of the feelings," the pathetic fallacy is characterized by what Ruskin deems

a "more or less irrational" state beset by "a falseness in our impressions of external things."[58] This excited state blurs the distinction between subject and environment, as sentiment seeps across the boundaries separating bodies and their surroundings. The pathetic fallacy inflects Avis' transformation within the domestic sphere and her husband Philip Ostrander's scientific expedition studying birds in the Tuamotu Archipelago in the South Pacific. Avis and Philip both absorb and mimic the traits of their respective surroundings in such a way that Coy's perception of Avis frames Avis as a fetishized commodity. Coy, Avis, and Philip respond to their surroundings as if their surroundings prompted them to feel and experience newfound sensations otherwise unavailable to them in any other location. Just as Geoffrey Crayon beholds same-sex desire in Italy or Robert and Stillfleet encounter queer erotics in their makeshift Italian Renaissance, Coy displaces erotic attraction onto the curtains surrounding Avis, which "took on a strange and vivid life, and seemed to throb as if [they] held some inarticulate passion" (6). Such "inarticulate passion" lingers in the atmosphere rather than emanating between the women. Coy absorbs the environment's "throb[bing]" and internalizes it as if it were her own. Her appreciation of Avis' beauty thus reflects her surroundings rather than announces her private desires. Like Avis, Coy is a rare female spectator who acknowledges same-sex beauty.[59] Yet by refashioning a household parlor into a site of same-sex beauty, the opening scene considers how domestic sentimentalism endures into the postbellum era. As arguably the epicenter of the middle-class household, the parlor and its furnished or decorated spaces reveals, as

[58] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3 (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1856), 160. On the pathetic fallacy, see 157–72.

[59] This scene recalls the environmental logics of sexuality discussed in Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). As LaFleur argues, natural history was instrumental in stabilizing gender and sexuality in eighteenth-century North America by couching sexual behavior and activity as outgrowths of, or at least imbricated by, an organism's environment. Just as Philip travels to the South Seas to study birds and Coy beholds Avis as if she were an exotic specimen (a "rara avis," or rare bird), the foreign often expresses desire in *The Story of Avis*.

Jasmine Nichole Cobb writes, "how the centrality of Whiteness, gender norms, and middle-class status heavily relied upon the palpability of Otherness, rendered through physical objects and pictures."[60] Here, Avis becomes a work of art that influences spectators' thoughts and impressions.

That the curtains go by four names reveals how color functions as a conduit of sexual longing, as the "inarticulate passion" they confer resembles formless sensation rather than a discrete desire. Avis' beauty emerges from the "passion of carmine" (7) associated with the curtains rather than with Coy. Like the pathetic fallacy that occurs in the slippage between subject and object, Coy refracts her proximity to Avis through the multiply colored curtains. Such description affirms Julia Kristeva's claim that "It is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as a conscious subject, accepts."[61] "Color is not zero meaning," Kristeva writes, "it is excess meaning."[62] This abundance of visual sensation suggests the necessarily restrictive limits of language that lacks the terminology for a female gaze that can behold and desire. The "excess meaning" of Avis' beauty resides in the tension between her status as a conventional object of admiration—much like the marble sculpture from the 1876 International Exhibition, for instance—and Coy's status as a desiring spectator. The "passion of carmine" mediates this relation between gazing subject and seen object by doubling as the site of aesthetic categories rather than sexual tastes. Hence although Coy continues to look upon Avis, her ekphrastic account gleans knowledge that might otherwise go unnoticed were she not to linger in the vision:

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[60] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 18.

[61] Julia Kristeva, *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 221.

> Against this background of the passion of carmine, Avis, sitting silently the evening through, had a solitary look. There was a certain aloofness in her very beauty, if one chose to call by the name of beauty the kindling of her face: it was somehow unlike that of other handsome women. It cannot be said that she was quite without consciousness of it; no woman could have been: it might be rather that she made no effort to appear unconscious of it. She had nothing of that wide-eyed, infantile look of distraction, which, in a grown woman, indicates the very quintessence of egoism. (7)

In Avis' "solitary look," Coy recognizes the countenance of a woman "unlike . . . other handsome women." Because Avis' striking beauty departs from that of the faculty wives and daughters, Coy can only describe it through suggestion ("a certain aloofness…," "it might be…") and negation ("someone unlike…," "It cannot be said…," "She had nothing…"). Like Phelps' syntax composed of appositives and dependent clauses, Coy's incremental observation of Avis accretes through scattered glimpses and shifting impressions. Just as the sentences wander from referent to referent, Coy approaches her subject via a meandering, circuitous route.

Throughout the novel, color offers Coy and Avis the chance to dwell in inscrutable or opaque attractions without having to specify or declare their attachments. Regarding the carmine of the curtains, we read that Avis "had a fierce kinship in her for that color, of which she seldom spoke." "She did not expect it to be understood," nor did she "care that it should be" because "she imperfectly understood it herself: she only knew that it made her happy to be near it. Tonight, for instance, though she had felt this Poetry Club rather a bore, a positive wave of pleasure flowed to her from the sight and contact of that curtain, which

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[62] Kristeva, *Desire and Language*, 221.

she felt in every sense of soul and body" (7). Unlike Spenser's poetry these women have gathered to discuss, such nonverbal moments allow Avis to retreat into sensation and pleasure. Avis expresses herself in the visual, rather than verbal, arts: first through her profound intimacy with colors and then through her artistic training in Europe and New England. Much like Coy's gravitation toward Avis at the poetry club gathering, Avis "imperfectly understood" her "fierce kinship" with carmine and feels no need to decipher it. "Avis was affected by color," we read, "as the more sensitive musical temperament is by sound. Color divorced from form, crude and clear, was to her what the musical notation is to the composer, who, without striking a note, reads the score by the hour as other men read printed text" (5). Phelps differentiates visual and verbal representation in terms of gender by juxtaposing the feminized world of color with the masculine domain of "printed text," claiming sensation, rather than speech, as the realm of beauty.

Color mediates how female spectators behold one another by providing a language with which to discuss otherwise enigmatic impressions. As she gazes upon Avis at the poetry club, Coy thinks to herself that "Avis had that one particular coloring about her (Coy decided to call it coloring), which is, in a woman, powerful above all beauty, wit, or genius, that subtile something which we name *charm*" (5). If for Coy "Avis is not like other women. She never was" (14), that difference becomes all the more striking because of Coy's profound attraction to such a departure from conventional womanhood. At least initially, the friendship between Coy and Avis propels them toward one another with a force that men and children lack. Coy likens this force to magnetism: "Avis was a magnet," she thinks to herself.[63] Much like Avis' "fierce kinship" with carmine, Coy's magnetic attraction to Avis conveys a relation more vehement than romantic friendship and more

[63] On the "magnetic" attraction between men in Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme*, see Chapter 2.

fulfilling than heterosexual courtship. Coy idolizes Avis, even if her "metallic theory had . . . rather run away with her. But of so much she was sure: when Avis was a baby, mother-earth yielded pure perfect magnet up into her composition. Shrewd Nature, never to be cheated out of her control over her children, held back her gold, her gems, her silver, and her fine, dumb pearl, and wrought into Avis just the one thing more precious than they all" (4). *The Story of Avis* couches same-sex desire as a matter of environmental influence rather than sexual orientation. Hence when Coy gazes upon Avis at the poetry club meeting, she notices that her friend "had a fresh but fine and restless color" (7) in ways that otherwise go unnoticed by Philip and others in Harmouth. Their friendship threatens to encroach upon, if not usurp, their respective marriages and families as the predominant emotional force in their lives.

Understanding sexual desire as an aesthetic phenomenon, Avis likens her apathy toward men to colorblindness, in that she prefers the idealized female body of Venus to the male physique. After Philip proposes to her in her studio, she confides to him that "I could never understand it. . . . When I was a girl, and the other girls talked about the handsome college-boys, I was greatly puzzled. I did not know but I was color-blind about it, or that my eyes were made with different lenses. I am afraid I am just not like other women." After disclosing this, she "dipp[ed] her brush with deep absorption in the madder-rose," effectively retreating to the chromatic emotions associated with the carmine curtains. "I rarely meet with beauty in men," she tells Philip, even as she acknowledges that "I have known several beautiful women" (54). Avis' self-diagnosed colorblindness acknowledges her estrangement from conventional womanhood, especially as she prefers to look upon, and create, beautiful women. Avis' analogy positions her desire as a deviation from normative visual perception rather than a distinct sexual identity. Such an analogy problematizes her

artistic practice as something between a sexual orientation and a professional interest in female form. Avis' interest in women's beauty—be it sketching Una from *The Faerie Queene* or painting Philip's mother, Waitstill—threatens to undermine her capacity to be a wife and mother, especially when it comes to her adoration of one of her most prized possessions, a "fine bit of marble,—the Melian Venus" (15), which she lovingly displays, first in her bedroom and then in her studio.[64] Paradoxically, her desire for women's bodies and figurative colorblindness toward men is both the cause for her anxiety regarding marriage and the source of her creativity. Suspecting that "God gave her the power to make a picture before he gave her the power to love a man" (69), Avis remains obstinate when it comes to men and marriage. As someone who "regarded the contour of a man's face precisely as a physician regards a hectic flush or a bilious eye-ball" (54), she avers that "I don't think I could love a great man, if I tried" (70).

Like color, friendship offers Avis the chance to explore a range of intimacies without specifying or committing to its form. Not only do marriage and domesticity stifle her artistic practice; they impinge upon her friendship with Coy. Despite remaining lukewarm about male beauty, Avis is wholly enthusiastic about Coy's. Together, they "were girls still to each other by that pretty trick of speech and fancy common in the comradeship of all women before marriage" (16). Descended from the romantic friendship tradition popularized during the eighteenth century, Avis and Coy's relationship demonstrates how friendship between women served as a supplement to marriage.[65] Feminist and queer scholars have found, in romantic friendship, the origins of modern lesbian identity even if

[64] Curiously, when the Venus sculpture breaks, it is described as "the Parian Venus" (152), which is composed of Parian porcelain. I am grateful to Christopher Looby for this point.

[65] Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, 63–143; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 112–31; Caroll

such friendships might lack physical or sexual activity.[66] Much of this companionship occurred through private writing exchanged between women, especially in letters such as those Avis shares with Coy that contain wordplay, jokes, and references.

Avis' search for style thus occurs both through her aesthetic education abroad as well as her letters with Coy. As historians have argued, middle-class women maintain personal ties through privately circulating genres such as epistolary writing and friendship albums.[67] Hence when Philip proposes marriage for a second time, Avis writes to Coy immediately:

> DEAR COY,—I have said, that, sometime or other, I will marry Mr. Ostrander. But, Coy, if you talk to me about this as most women do about such things, I'll break the engagement.
>
> Yours,
>
> Avis

Deferring to Coy's opinion, Avis regards friendship as the utmost influence in her life. Not only does Coy remind her friend of her domestic inexperience, she proposes a suggestive alternative instead:

> DEAR AVIS,—You'll streak his cake with saleratus. His biscuit will taste of yeast. His wristbands will be wrinkled. But you know, if I were a man, Avis, I'd live on johnny-cake and paper cuffs to get you. You'd better be married Christmas, when we are.
>
> Yours,
>
> Coy (116)

Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," in *Disorderly Conduct*, 53–76; Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[66] See, for instance, Adrienne Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum" that encompasses non-sexual intimacy between women. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60; 648–52.

[67] Cobb, *Picture Freedom*, 66–110; Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 15–16; Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World," 42–45.

An ambivalent endorsement of marriage to say the least, Coy's letter acquiesces to the necessity of the institution even as it fantasizes about an alternative that would allow the two women to remain in each another's company. Coy's offer of simultaneous weddings keeps the two in conjoined, synchronized harmony. Although their friendship is not necessarily at odds with these respective proposals, their exchange acknowledges an inchoate, burgeoning queer intimacy that runs parallel to heterosexuality and marriage. Coy enables Avis to endure domestic sentimentalism. As the narrator remarks, "We hear much of the jealousy and scorn of women among themselves. It is not often that we are reminded of the quickly-flashing capacity for passionate attraction and generous devotion which renders the relation of woman to woman one of the most subtle in the world, and one exposed most to the chance of what we call romantic episodes" (164).[68] More "subtle" than her relations with Philip, Avis' friendship with Coy, and even Susan Jessup, facilitate intimacy she otherwise lacks.

Phelps bases prototypical queer attachments in terms of color, in which chromatic sensation, such as the "passion of carmine," offers a variety of feelings that exceed recognizable form. Just as romantic friendship ranges from platonic to sexual intimacy, color provokes a spectator's contemplative reaction that need not travel familiar routes. Avis' most fulfilling relations occur outside of marriage and motherhood. She reserves her emotional and psychic energies for women, such as Coy, and works of art such as the Melian Venus and her painting of the Sphinx. Hence when literary critics such as Alfred Habegger deride *The Story of Avis* for focusing too narrowly on women, they expose an unnecessarily impoverished understanding of feminist critique that privileges

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[68] This aside follows Susan Jessup's revelation to Avis that she was once engaged to Philip. That the narrator's commentary concerns Susan, rather than Coy, imagines a romantic friendship permissible only because both

heterosexuality. "The basic defect in *Avis*," Habegger writes, "is that it was too feminine. That is to say, it was written for women, in defense of women's interests and in support of women's myths and values, and was therefore a highly partisan book that set out to attack one side, the men, in aid of the other side, the women. It was not an exploration of the bitter antagonism between men and women; it was itself bitterly antagonistic."[69] But what is a liability for Habegger is an opportunity for Phelps. In her memoir, Phelps claims the novel as "a woman's book, hoping for small hospitality at the hands of men," characterizing the work as belonging to "an author [who] would care for it in proportion as she cared for her own sex."[70] More interested in the attachments that sustain women rather than the men who restrict them, *The Story of Avis* is indeed what Habegger terms "an off-centered analysis of feminine misery."[71] Yet this asymmetry is foundational to its imagining of queer aesthetics, since Phelps moves beyond a critique of marriage or domesticity by considering what inspires women like Avis to endure. As an artist, Avis seeks to render sensations such as "the passion of carmine" through her work, a desire which culminates in her painting of the Sphinx. By dwelling with the notoriously silent mythic creature who does not require that she identify her desires, Avis retreats into a fantasy of Ancient Egypt in which skepticism and mystery can thrive.

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women are married at the time. Unlike Coy, who befriends Avis before either of them are married, Susan Jessup poses no threat to Avis' identity as a wife.

[69] Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism,* 46.

[70] Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 157; 272.

[71] He elaborates: "Narcissistic self-pity has an insidious appeal to women (as it would to men) when they are mythologized as intoxicating girls or good angels and yet subjected to distinct social disadvantages as compared to men. In Phelps, this combination of de jure superiority and de facto handicap led to an off-centered analysis of feminine misery." *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism*, 50.

Part Three: "The Woman and the Sphinx"

O glad girls' faces, hushed and fair! how shall I sing for ye?
For the grave picture of a sphinx is all that I can see.

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,
"The Sphinx" (1885)[72]

Just as Avis cultivates her artistic style in her writing to and friendships with women, she retreats into aesthetics in order to escape marriage and domesticity. Orientalism saturates the Ostrander household through Avis' paintings and interior design. During the 1870s, many American households displayed lavish collections of Orientalist art that asserted national identity on the basis of purchasing power and decoration. What Edward W. Said calls "domestications of the exotic"[73] staged cosmopolitan and hemispheric American identity using curated objects.[74] Similarly, Avis decorates her house as a theatrical backdrop against which she can perform:

> It was one of the small surprises of life to her to find herself stroking the curtains, and patting the pillows, like other women whom she had seen in other new houses; to see that her hand lingered upon her own door-knobs even, with a caress. The thrill of possession, the passion of home, had awaked itself in a sleeping side of her nature.

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[72] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The Sphinx," in *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1885), 97–98. Phelps wrote this poem to commemorate the graduating class at Abbott Academy, a female boarding school.

[73] *Orientalism*, 60.

[74] Thomas W. Kim, "Being Modern: The Circulation of Oriental Objects," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 379–406; Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*. For literary depictions, see, among others, Robert Acton's collection in Henry James' *The Europeans* (1878): "He possessed the most delightful *chinoiseries* – trophies of his sojourn in the Celestial Empire: pagodas of ebony and cabinets of ivory; sculptured monsters, grinning and leering on chimney-pieces, in front of beautifully figured hand-screens . . . . These things were scattered all over the house. . . . It had a mixture of the homely and the liberal, and though it was almost like a museum, the large, little-used rooms were as fresh and clean as a well-kept diary." *The Europeans*, ed. Andrew Taylor (New York: Penguin, 2008), 79. See the lavish collection of photographs featured in *Artistic Houses, Being a Series of Interior Views of a Number of the Most Beautiful and Celebrated Homes in the United States, with a Description of the Art Treasures Contained Therein* (New York: D. Appleton, 1883–84).

> In her own room there was a very fine East India hammock, woven of a lithe pearl-white cord, much favored for this purpose by people of ease in tropical countries. Avis put it there, because, against the color of the walls and drapery, it had a peculiarly delicate and negligent effect, grateful to her in the confined house. Above it, against a deeply-stained panel, stood her own Melian Venus.
>
> She flung herself into the hammock, and yielded to its light motion idly. As idly she thought of her future, of her work, of the sphinx in the cold, closed studio. Not to-morrow, perhaps, but some day, she should convert her delight into deeds.
>
> It seemed to her a necessity simple as the rhythm of a poem, or the syntax of a sentence, that the world should be somehow made nobler or purer by her happiness. By and by she should know how to spell it out. (132–33)

Flanked by *objets d'art* including "her own Melian Venus," Avis fashions herself as a work of art in lieu of "convert[ing] her delight into deeds." This is a moment of profound interiority based upon queer personhood. Literally suspended within the American household by a hammock, she surrenders to its repetitive "light motion" and fondly recalls "the sphinx in the cold, closed studio." She and the Sphinx share a kinship based upon their estrangement from domesticity, given that they both seem anachronistically housed in nineteenth-century New England. Just as the lodgers in Chrysalis College retreat into an anachronistic past in Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme*, Avis withdraws from the nineteenth century into what T. J. Jackson Lears refers to as an "antimodernist" terrain characterized by Medieval and Orientalist design.[75] Even if her studio is architecturally displaced from the

[75] T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

first floor to the attic[76] to make room for her husband's study, she sublimates her creativity into temporary identifications and attachments that sustain amidst a life of tedium and monotony. Even if the hammock's "light motion" suggests the repetitiveness of domestic life, she finally succumbs to its movement.

In ways that recall her friendships with Coy and Susan Jessup, Avis' ongoing relation with the painted Sphinx offers a means of recognition she otherwise lacks. Whereas Coy happily becomes a wife and mother (much to Avis' dismay), the androgynous Sphinx does not betray such principles.[77] As a creature associated with riddles and the search for knowledge, the Sphinx allows Avis to express the contradictions and uncertainties that inflect her conflicting attitudes towards her husband and children. After she accepts Philip's marriage proposal, Avis

> went up and uncovered her sketch. The critical, cool sunlight fell upon it. The woman and the sphinx looked at one another. Avis glanced at the ring that fettered her finger. Her whole figure straightened and heightened: she lifted her head, and out of her deepening eye there sprang that magnificent light which so allured and commanded Philip Ostrander.
>
> "What have I done?" she cried. "Oh! what have I done?"
>
> With an impulse which only a woman will quite respect, standing alone there in the silent witness of the little room, she tore off her betrothal ring.
>
> Then with one of her rare sobs, sudden and sharp as an articulate cry, she flung her arms about the insensate canvas, and laid her cheek, as if it had been the

[76] In *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps recalls that when writing *The Gates Ajar*, "Often I stole up into the attic, or into some unfrequented closet, to escape the noise of the house while at work. I remember, too, writing sometimes in the barn, on the haymow. The book extended over a wide domestic topography" (103).

[77] As she tells Avis, "I ought never to have been born in Harmouth. If I'd been just a downright society girl now, I could have been a dunce, and nobody ever have known the difference" (17).

> touch of one woman upon another, against the cold cheek of the sphinx; and solemnly, as if she sought to atone to a goddess for some broken fealty, she whispered,—
>
> "I will be true." (119–20)

In lieu of understanding or knowledge, Avis seeks from the Sphinx a sense of recognition. Having "laid her cheek, as if it had been the touch of one woman upon another, against the cold cheek of the sphinx," Avis approaches her painting as if it were another woman who she has betrayed by accepting Philip's hand in marriage. The Sphinx exerts a hold upon Avis that holds her accountable to her artistic ideals in ways that Philip and Coy do not. Vowing that "I will be true" to her profession, Avis is beholden to her craft. Philip senses as much by asking her, "What would you do if you had to choose now between us,—the sphinx and me?" Avis replies, "A man cannot understand, perhaps . . . or he would never ask a woman such a bitter question" (127). As both a creation of and counterpart to Avis, the Sphinx provides its creator with a sense of power that transcends notions of womanhood altogether. In rapt silence before her canvas, "She had set herself, with more patience than power, resolutely to work; but she found the lips of her visions muttering in a foreign tongue. She sat entire days before an untouched canvas. She stared entire nights upon untapestried darkness" (76–77). In the silence of her studio, Avis "stood like the child of the desert, with her ear at the lips of the sphinx" (54) listening for the speech that might never come.

As something of a mix between a friend and an aestheticized alter-ego, the Sphinx grants Avis the cultural and professional authority she otherwise is denied from the commercial art market. While at work in her studio, Avis derives power from honing her craft:

It was mid-morning with the sphinx. . . .

"Staring straight on with calm eternal eyes."[78] The sand had drifted to her solemn breast. The lion's feet of her no eye can see, the eagle's wings of her are bound by the hands of unrelenting years; only her mighty face remains to answer what the ages have demanded, and shall forever ask of her.

Upon this face Avis had spent something of her best strength. The crude Nubian features she had rechiselled, the mutilated outline she had restored; the soul of it she had created.

She did not need the authority of Herodotus to tell her that the face of the sphinx, in ages gone, was full of beauty. The artist would have said, "Who dared to doubt it?"

Yet she was glad to have wise men convinced that this giant ideal was once young and beautiful, like any other woman. If there were a touch of purely feminine feeling in this, it was of a sort too lofty to excite the kind of smile which we bestow upon most of the consciousness of sex which expresses itself in women. (143)

The shared look between Avis and the Sphinx recalls the opening scene between Coy and Avis, in that the painter seems beholden to what the Sphinx sees in her. Rejecting "the authority of Herodotus" by admitting herself that "the face of the sphinx . . . was full of beauty," Avis distances herself from male intellectual authority on the basis of her own appraisal of beauty. But in contradistinction to Cleopatra's transparency as discussed in Part One, the Sphinx remains partially obscured in mystery. Because "no eye can see" its "lion's feet," the Sphinx embodies a vision of interiority premised upon concealment. Unlike Story's and Kenyon's sculptures that narrate Cleopatra's tragic demise, Avis' painting of the

[78] Phelps adapted this phrase from Edmund Yates, *Broken to Harness: A Story of English Domestic Life* (London: Richard Bentley, 1864), 67.

Sphinx does not attempt to moralize its subject matter. Instead, it cultivates an air of elegance and beauty.

This shift from narrative to mood enshrouds Avis' untimely queer identity in her opaque, enigmatic paintings. If *The Story of Avis* begins with Coy asking about her friend, "What *was* it about her?" (3), Avis struggles to answer the question herself. "I am alive," she ponders. "What did God mean by that?" She resolves that "No one could understand: no one should understand" (32). She siphons such skepticism into her work and studio, where "she sat alone with unshared, inscrutable moods" (126). Because the painting of the Sphinx remains unfinished for the majority of the novel, its nascent status offers a variety of ways to rehearse identity without having to commit. Avis listens for the Sphinx to speak to her in hopes that "the parted lips of the mysterious creature seemed to speak a perfect word. Yet in its deep eyes flitted an expectant look that did not satisfy her; meanings were in them which she had not mastered; questionings troubled them, to which her imagination had found no controlling reply." Try as she might to complete the painting, Avis cannot because "I am not satisfied yet" (143). She concludes that "I cannot be understood till I have understood myself" (144). Contrasted with the legible emotions associated with sentimental literature, Avis' "inscrutable moods" lack the contours of what Linda M. Grasso identifies as the palpable anger of antebellum women's writing that indexes political injustice and feminist critique.[79] Avis' oblique, inchoate emotions defy such classification. The Sphinx's reticence to speak preserves a commitment to uncertainty and ambiguity: as suggested by its notorious riddle that perplexes Oedipus, the Sphinx baffles its audiences.

[79] Linda M. Grasso, *The Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women's Literature in America, 1820–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). On the tensions between the private and public sphere in women's writing, see Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*.

Like the Sphinx, Avis astounds those who expect her to inhabit the roles of mother and wife. Because "motherhood gave her so much more anxiety than pleasure" (170), Avis rejects the sentimental tradition that valorizes the domestic sphere as a site of women's evangelical authority. As the narrator speculates, "Perhaps . . . she was lacking in what is called the maternal passion as distinct from the maternal devotion. She was perfectly conscious of being obliged to learn to love her baby like anybody else." Her "vague ideas of the main characteristics of infancy" were drawn "chiefly from novels and romances, in which parentage is presented as a blindly deifying privilege." She "had not escaped the influence of these golden, if a little hazy [,] pictures." Avis must differentiate between aestheticized representations of happiness and her own ideals, even if she remains in the dark as to how to convey them to others:

> While she knew, or supposed that she felt, many things not expected of her, and failed to feel others which it was proper to feel under the conditions of maternity, yet she cherished in her own way her own ideals. But of these she did not talk, even to her husband. These it was only for her child and herself to understand. Over these, as over her wedded fancy, Nature drew a veil like those casement screens, which to the beholder are dense and opaque, but to the eye behind them glitter with a fair transparency through which all the world is seen divinely new. (151)

The tension between what Avis expects to feel and what she actually feels plays itself out as she develops her painterly style. Shielded by "a veil like those casement screens, which to the beholder are dense and opaque," Avis' desires remain shielded from prying eyes yet "glitter with a fair transparency" to her and her alone. Here Phelps draws upon an iconographic tradition that thematized women's interiority through the near-transparent covering of the veil. In antebellum American fiction and midcentury French painting, the

veil thematizes the tension between public and private personhood by obscuring the face from behind a diaphanous surface.[80] Both concealing and revealing women's faces, the veil offers Avis the semblance of privacy behind which she can pursue her own desires while remaining a housewife and mother.

Because marriage pits motherhood against artistry, Avis pursues alternate forms of queer personhood through painting. "It is quite right for other women to become wives, and not for me," Avis confides to Philip. "If that is what a woman is made for, I am not like that: I am different" (107). This difference, however, becomes a liability for her marriage, as Avis is expected to assume a variety of roles that take her away from her craft. "Marriage is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work!" (71). Yet as Philip's exhaustion gives way to neurasthenia, Avis becomes responsible for his recovery.[81] Because she "cannot resign [her] profession as an artist" (110), she is caught within what Phelps calls "the civil war of the dual nature which can be given to women only"[82] who must choose between domesticity and a profession. This "civil war" is so detrimental because it is near-impossible to express. "How can you know what my dreams are?," Avis asks Philip. "Did I ever tell them to you? You are using a language that you do not

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[80] Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 48–68; Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[81] Phelps partially based Philip's decline upon her father's invalidism and early (arguably forced) retirement from Andover Theological Seminary. Philip ultimately resigns from his post at Harmouth University, citing "an increasing delicacy of the lungs, in consequence of which his physicians had forbidden all brain labor, and required a change of climate" (198). These symptoms correspond to neurasthenia as outlined by the neurologist George M. Beard in *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1881). Defined by Beard as "nervelessness—a lack of nerve force" (3), neurasthenia was a gendered condition that, disproportionately afflicting men, was characterized by nervous strain caused by work. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84–88; Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[82] *Chapters from a Life*, 12. Phelps refers to her mother, Elizabeth Wooster Stuart Phelps, an accomplished author who published *Sunny Side* (1851) and *A Peep at "Number Five": or, A Chapter in the Life of a City Pastor* (1852) before dying from complications from childbirth in 1852. Phelps based Avis' mother upon her

understand. My ideals of art are those with which marriage is perfectly incompatible. Success for a woman means absolute surrender, in whatever direction. Whether she paints a picture, or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy" (69). Philip regards Avis as an icon of womanhood rather than a woman who yearns to work. He tells her, "You perplex me like the Sphinx; you awe me like the Venus; you allure me like the Lorelai! I have dreamed of such women. I never saw one. I love you!" (66). Rendered as an object of beauty, Avis is prized for her ornamental status rather than her intellectual or professional ambition. She clings to her painterly style—"a language that [Philip does] not understand"—to protect her inscrutable moods under the auspices of an Orientalist style.

Phelps aligns Avis' illegible desires with geographies and cultures at odds with the American household. We see this when Philip recounts a formative trip to the Paumotu Archipelago[83] as a young man. "Exhausted with the team's work," Philip is advised by his doctor to recuperate by embarking on an expedition in the South Pacific. His expedition asserts imperial manhood through discovery and conquest, especially when it comes to his encounters with animals. After discovering a white bird "dropped like an angel from the sky," he is "overswept" by "a tide of feeling half terror, half joy" (136):

> The name and nature of that bird were unknown to science; and the young man knew it. It seemed to him as if Nature laughed in his face. She held out this one sequestered, shining thought of hers, this white fancy that she had hidden from the world, and nodded, crying, "Catch it if you can! Classify my unwon mood in your bald human lore. Marry my choicest tenderness to your dull future if you will. See,

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own, as Avis' mother cut short her acting career and who "under proper conditions . . . might have become famous" (25) had she not married Hegel Dobell.

[83] As Carol Farley Kessler notes, this likely is an alternate spelling for the Tuamotu Archipelago near Tahiti (*The Story of Avis*, 260n3).

> I have waited for you. I have kept my treasure back from the eye and hand of other men. Yours it shall be, yours only, yours, yours!" (137)

With his "faint finger on the trigger," he thinks to himself that "to capture that bird was fame." Experiencing "one of the most muscular emotions that his life had known," he is caught between a desire to capture the bird and a willingness to free it.

Philip's adventure recapitulates the intersections among colonial travel, manhood, and sexuality. As the story continues in the novel, it becomes clear that he is recounting the tale to male undergraduates in his laboratory at Harmouth University. In this ritual of homosocial bonding, the men await the conclusion to the story, which Philip performs as if it were a routine:

> "Gentlemen," he said, "the bird stood still. It turned its head and looked at me: its eyes shone with a singularly soft, pleased light. I lowered the gun. How could I fire? I crept towards it. It was a beautiful creature. It did not move: I thought it was gratified at the sight of me. It acted as if it had never seen a man before: I do not suppose it ever had. I crawled along; I stretched out my hand: and yet it did not fly. I touched it—I stroked it. With this hand I stroked that magnificent, unknown creature. It did not shrink. I took out my knife, opened it, laid it down. The bird looked at me confidingly. I put the blade to its throat; but it would not stir. It trusted me. Gentlemen, I came away—I could not kill the bird." (137)

Philip's staccato delivery of this chance encounter stands in striking contrast to Phelps' otherwise ornate prose. Clear and direct, Philip's authority rests upon the force with which he recounts his story to the "gentlemen," a term twice repeated in the passage. Like Avis' relation to the Sphinx, Philip's relation to the bird defines American gender and sexuality in

geographic and colonial terms.[84] In this manner, *The Story of Avis* considers how unformed identities could coexist with the increasingly heterosexual middle class. Just as Avis' romantic friendships with Coy and Susan do not compromise her marriage, her painting of the Sphinx enables her to remain, albeit begrudgingly, married and a mother. Thus despite critics' tendency to regard the text as "the first important American novel about a failed marriage"[85], Phelps portrays a woman for whom "It seemed . . . the great triumph of her life that she could love her husband just as God had made him" (234). The novel's tentative, somewhat tepid, exploration of same-sex desire acquiesces to the necessity of marriage, an institution that can withstand the threat of romantic friendship and burgeoning queer identifications.

Philip's encounter with the white bird establishes the novel's recurring trope of conquering the exotic, especially when it comes to his soon-to-be wife, Avis.[86] In contradistinction to Philip's rhetorical eloquence, the novel aligns women with birds by suggesting that both withhold inner thought. "We are apt to think of a bird," the narrator speculates, "as rather an open-hearted, impetuous creature, telling all she knows." But "in fact, perhaps no creature is more capable of concealment. Naturalists load us with stories of her little stratagems. We have but to look intently in her eye to be made conscious that she has her mental reservations about many matters." To listen to what birds convey requires a patience beyond the ordinary:

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[84] On literary representations of queer sexualities in the South Pacific, see Hurley, *Circulating Queerness*, 41–77; Lee Wallace, *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

[85] Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*, 38.

[86] Other examples of this trope include one of Avis' early sketches as a girl—"a picture of a bird . . . with trees" (26) for her mother whose "cooing tones of her clear but uninsistent voice" suggest "something bird-like about her" (23). After marrying Philip, "Avis in the town was like a bird that has flown through a window by mistake" (129).

> The robin at your door on a June morning seems to be expressing himself with lavish confidence; but, to a patient listener, his song has something of the exuberant frankness which is the most impenetrable disguise in the world. The sparrow on her nest under your terrace broods meekly; but the centuries have not wrung from one such pretty prisoner a breath of longing for the freedom of the summer-day. Do her delicate, cramped muscles ache for flight? her fleet, unused wings tremble against the long roots of the overhanging grass? She turns her soft eye upon you with a fine, far sarcasm. You may find out if you can. (23)

Like the Sphinx, the robin and sparrow suggest the limits of intelligibility. *The Story of Avis* asks what happens when one refuses to translate for the sake of others, and how "the most impenetrable disguise in the world" conceals inner life. If the Sphinx's riddle or bird's song perplex listeners, Phelps speculates that the Sphinx might not care to be understood at all.

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Conclusion: "When"

> Women understand—only women altogether—what a dreary will-o-the-wisp is this old, common, I had almost said commonplace, experience, "When the fall sewing is done," "When the baby can walk," "When house-cleaning is over," "When the company has gone," "When we have got through with the whooping-cough," "When I am a little stronger," then I will write the poem, or learn the language, or study the great charity, or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become. Merciful is the fate that hides from any soul the prophecy of its still-born aspirations.
>
> — *The Story of Avis* (149)

The "still-born aspirations" mentioned in the epigraph characterize contemporary reviews of *The Story of Avis*. As a critic writing for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* declares, the "disappointing book" is "morbid through and through, and in saying that we mean that the

author represents unhealthy and abnormal moods of mind and emotions as being natural and typical." As "a psychological study of the exceptional," the novel fails because Avis "remains, in spite of all, a mystery, vague and unreal."[87] A more hopeful reviewer, writing for the *Woman's Journal*, maintains that the novel "is not intended to show the incompatibility of art with true marriage. Had Avis married her ideal, she would have painted far greater pictures than would have been possible to her before."[88] Phelps' critique of marriage and of women's labor largely failed to resonate with readers expecting a more optimistic portrait of the artist as a young woman. Ill-equipped to recognize a "vague and unreal" artist such as Avis, readers were unaccustomed to seeing a painter struggle against the strictures of domestic sentimentalism.

In this light, Avis' decision to sell her painting of the Sphinx to a lithography firm speaks to her uneasy relation to mass culture. To offset Philip's rising debts, she sells the painting to Goupil and Co., a Parisian publishing firm with offices in New York associated with elite reproductions.[89] As her tutor warns her, this decision might compromise her integrity: "Don't let Goupil photograph it. You can't afford to photograph a fledgling. You have a future. 'The Easel' says it is a work of pure imagination. 'The Blender' says it shows signs of haste" (205). Given this "demand for the picture" (215), she sells the rights to the image. Avis' commercial success rests upon an uneasy relation to photographic reproduction, which was, at the time of the novel's publication, a denigrated artform that was perceived as derivative mimicry rather than an original form of expression.[90] Her

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[87] "New Books," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 13, 1877, 3.

[88] "Gail Hamilton's Criticism," *Woman's Journal,* March 30, 1878, 99.

[89] Marie-Stéphanie Delamaire, "American Prints in Paris, or The House of Goupil in New York, 1848–1857," in *With a French Accent: American Lithography to 1860*, ed. Georgia B. Barnhill (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2012), 65–82.

[90] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History from Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 164–230.

ambivalence regarding selling the painting speaks to the shifting cultural hierarchies of the postbellum era, as painting competed against photography for highbrow status. Yet despite Avis' willingness to sell her art, she discovers that when it comes to her paintings, "Nobody wants them—now. They tell me that my style is gone. Goupil says I work as if I had a rheumatic hand—as if my fingers were stiff. It is true my hand has been a little clumsy since—Van" (244). Having lost her "style" to mothering and running a household, Avis' tragedy fulfills her father's prophecy. As a young girl, she tells him that "I want to be educated as an artist, and paint pictures all my life" (33). He suggests that she become a copyist instead, a profession whose literary examples include Hilda[91] in *The Marble Faun* and Noémie Nioche in Henry James' *The American* (1877). Avis rejects his offer on no uncertain terms: "I do not want to make pretty little copies . . . *I who love my art would never wish it lower to suit my stature*" (34).[92] As Avis realizes, artists rely upon "pretty little copies" for financial security and professional recognition.

The Story of Avis joins a number of literary texts, including Henry James' *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and Louisa May Alcott's "Diana and Persis" (1879), that envision a remarkably bleak future for American art. Like "the dumb mouth" (247) of the Sphinx, Avis' ambitions are stifled and suppressed. As Martha Banta argues, American literature remained skeptical regarding the viability of professional artistry in the late nineteenth century, especially when contrasted with European markets and patronage.[93] Alongside James' and Alcott's fictional artists, Avis recognizes that her vocational ambition is irreconcilable with American culture—an irreconcilability that, as Phelps emphatically

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[91] On Avis as a rewriting of Hilda, see Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer*, 155–56; Barker, *Aesthetics and Gender*, 27–38; Sofer, *Making the "America of Art,"* 132.
[92] Phelps adopts Avis' response from *Aurora Leigh*: "Who love my art, would never wish it lower / To suit my stature" (Book II, lines 492–94). Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (New York: James Miller, 1866), 53.

states, is a feminist issue. In the epigraph, Phelps appeals to the notion that women must wait until "the fall sewing is done" or "we have got through with the whooping-cough" in order to "act, dare, dream, become." Avis must sublimate her "still-born aspirations" (149) into art that satisfies these ambitions for the time being. Just as her painting of the Sphinx remains unfinished for the majority of the novel, her incomplete canvas speaks to a burgeoning sexual category that adheres to the logic of deferred waiting that the narrator calls the "old, common . . . experience" of saying, "'When the fall sewing is done,' 'When the baby can walk,' 'When house-cleaning is over,' 'When the company has gone,' 'When we have got through with the whooping-cough,' 'When I am a little stronger,' then I will write the poem, or learn the language, or study the great charity, or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become." Midcentury American literature features no shortage of incomplete works of art.[94] As Phelps reveals, the partial canvas accommodates untimely identities and defers them until the offset "when" speculated in this conclusion's epigraph.

In contrast to this pessimistic strand of thought that maintains "Merciful is the fate that hides from any soul the prophecy of its still-born aspirations," painting preserves a space in which to explore unrehearsed, experimental attachments. Despite the melodramatic tragedy of *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James returned to the dilemma of the artist in his later fiction. But whereas Avis' tragedy arises, in part, from her desire to paint at a time when the postbellum marketplace could rarely sustain private artists, James' fiction reflects his experiences in the vibrant *fin de siècle* art markets of Paris and London. In particular, *The Tragic Muse* (1890) explores what happens when a promising artist, Nick Dormer, is free to pursue his ambition and is left to his own devices, even if that aesthetic education comes at

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[93] Banta, *One True Theory*, 177–208.
[94] Fernie, *Hawthorne, Sculpture, and the Question of American Art*, 100–09; Sofer, *Making the "America of Art,"* 184–95.

the cost of marriage. Whereas Avis marries and raises a family at the expense of her career, Nick draws kinship and solace from the fount of an increasingly bohemian and homosexual British Aestheticism.

Chapter Four

Rove, Drift, Float: Henry James and the Art Appetite

I rove, drift, float . . . my feelings direct me – if such a life as mine may be said to have a direction.

—Henry James,
The Tragic Muse (1890)[1]

Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance.

—John Ruskin,
The Stones of Venice
(1851–53)[2]

Five years after *The Story of Avis* was published, Henry James met Oscar Wilde at a hotel in Washington, D.C. one night in January 1882. By all accounts, the meeting was not a success: James complained about "Hosscar' Wilde"[3] in a letter to Marian Hooper Adams, and Wilde seemed content to let James remain, at best, a professional acquaintance—one who eventually became a competitor for the critical and commercial acclaim of the Victorian London stage. The two met as Wilde was embarking upon a year-long lecture tour across the United States, where the self-anointed apostle of Aestheticism capitalized

[1] Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin, 1995), 30. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

[2] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, ed. J. G. Links (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1960), 38.

[3] *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams, 1865–1883*, ed. Ward Thoron (New York: Little, Brown, 1936), 342. On this meeting, see Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 273; Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 178–79; Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 26–29.

upon his celebrity at sold-out speaking engagements.[4] Lecturing on topics including "The English Renaissance" and "The Decorative Arts," Wilde deliberately avoided what audiences expected from a critic advocating for the fine arts during the Gilded Age. The 1882 tour epitomized a broader shift from utilitarian aesthetic philosophy—first associated with John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold—toward the Aestheticism Movement characterized by a decadent, sensual, and borderline hedonistic pursuit of beauty.[5] A role that Wilde perfected on stage and in interviews, the cosmopolitan aesthete departed from more conventional forms of manhood associated with decorum and restraint. For North American audiences—the majority of which had likely never seen or heard an aesthete before—Wilde's insouciance seemed at odds with the exigencies facing the late nineteenth century. By refusing to apply the fine arts as an antidote to contemporary issues, "Hosscar' Wilde" alienated audiences expecting a more conscious engagement with pressing topics of the period.

Well before Wilde was a prosecuted "sodomite" and James a lauded author, their meeting in 1882 reveals the intersections among aesthetics, literature, and sexuality in the late nineteenth century. Historians of sexuality frequently regard Wilde's trials in 1895 as a seismic shift in the "invention" of homosexuality, as press coverage of the trials and his prison sentence rendered sodomy the paradigmatic example of sexual "perversion" subject

[4] On Wilde's tour, see Victoria Dailey, "The Wilde Woman and the Sunflower Apostle: Oscar Wilde in the United States," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* February 8, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-wilde-woman-and-the-sunflower-apostle-oscar-wilde-in-the-united-states/; Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), 31; Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 150–211.

[5] Many postbellum writers and critics promoted literature as a crucial means for commentary and social activism; Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Kenneth W. Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 48–70.

to the purview of the state.[6] As both a sodomite and the public face of Aestheticism, Wilde nurtured an identity that oscillated between his status as a bohemian provocateur and a respectable writer. As surely as he did to James in 1882, Wilde suggests the conjunction between aesthetic and sexual pleasures, thus claiming the fine arts as a source of private beauty rather than what Lawrence W. Levine has termed the "sacralization of culture"[7] associated with political reform or social critique. Instead, Wilde pursued the *l'art pour l'art* philosophy first outlined in his mentor Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) and later dramatized in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).[8] As "an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress"[9], the Aestheticism Movement spurned both the commercial art marketplace and its emphasis upon the spiritual or political efficacy of art. As Wilde avers in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "All art is quite useless."[10] Such uselessness became a rallying cry for aesthetes, artists, critics, and audiences who claimed the fine arts

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[6] Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 126–209; Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69–72; Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 193–217; Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, 453–78; Elaine Showalter, S*exual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 169–187. In this regard, Wilde's trials recall the press coverage of Alice Mitchell's murder of her former lover Freda Ward in Memphis, Tennessee in 1892. See Lisa Duggan*, Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

[7] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 86–168. For Victorian attitudes towards the social value of art, see Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), 269–98; Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

[8] The phrase "art for art's sake" is believed to originate in Théophile Gautier's preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835); see Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 192n23.

[9] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 3. See also Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[10] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), xxiv. This polemical attitude influenced novels, such as J. K. Huysmans' *À Rebours* [*Against Nature,* or

as an increasingly subcultural space characterized by, at least in the popular imagination, sexual deviance and bohemian traits.

James draws upon both his chance encounter with Oscar Wilde and his extensive knowledge of Aestheticism in *The Tragic Muse* (1890), a novel that dramatizes the aesthetic and sexual metamorphoses of the *fin de siècle*. Published prior to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "homosexual panic"[11] associated with his short story "The Beast in the Jungle" (1902), *The Tragic Muse* presents a more tentative account of queer desire encapsulated in what James refers to as "the art-appetite" (9) that each of the novel's three artists share. "The idea of the book," he reminisces in his Preface to the New York Edition of the novel published in 1908, was "a picture of some of the personal consequences of the art-appetite raised to intensity, swollen to voracity" (9). Set in London during the late nineteenth century, *The Tragic Muse* returns to the transatlantic aesthetics that inflect Washington Irving's writings as Geoffrey Crayon, only *The Tragic Muse* situates its ethnic politics in terms of European migration. Like James and Wilde, two of the novel's three artists are outsiders to Victorian England: Gabriel Nash, an extravagant aesthete who most critics agree is modeled upon Oscar Wilde[12]; and Miriam Rooth, a Jewish actress inspired by

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Against the Grain] (1884) and Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre* (1886), that render the artist as a bohemian outcast who belongs in cosmopolitan cities such as Paris and London.

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 182–212.

[12] Oscar Cargill, "Mr. James's Aesthetic Mr. Nash," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12, no. 3 (1957): 177–87; Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 310; Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 167–201; John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 93–94; Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 75; Viola Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 46. Other sources of inspiration include the sculptor Lord Ronald Gower, Violet Paget (who wrote under the pseudonym Vernon Lee), and Count Robert de Montesquiou; see Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59–61. Herbert Pratt, a college friend of William James' who trained as a medical doctor at Harvard, also provided inspiration; see *Tragic Muse*, 495–96n5; *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 221.

Elisabeth "Rachel" Félix, one of the most famous actresses of the nineteenth century.[13] Together, the Irish aesthete and "more than half a Jewess" (49) constitute a distinctly ethnic class of artists who must cater to stereotypically philistine audiences. *The Tragic Muse* explores the rise of a British Protestant whiteness associated with cultural consumption based upon Arnold's and Ruskin's conception of aesthetic value rather than Aestheticism's. In contrast to these religious and ethnic outsiders, the novel's chief artist, Nick Dormer, must choose between his family's aristocratic milieu—characterized by a lucrative engagement to the eligible Julia Dallow as well as a promising career in British Parliament—and his desire to paint for a living.[14] Nick's vocational dilemma speaks to the ethnic politics of the "art-appetite," as he regards painting as incompatible with his British identity. As he tells Gabriel, "I think from a general conviction that the 'æsthetic' – a horrible insidious foreign disease – is eating the healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!)" (361). That he regards "the art-appetite" as "a horrible insidious foreign disease" reveals the tensions between British audiences and cosmopolitan performers. Gabriel, Miriam, and Nick configure themselves as a considerably perverse family, as when Gabriel claims Miriam and Nick as "my children" (261) and Nick calls off his engagement to Julia Dallow so that he can devote his life to painting among his chosen kin. In a novel that is conspicuously childless, the "art-appetite" stands in for a desire that draws upon, yet far exceeds, sexual hunger.

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[13] Rachel M. Brownstein, *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comédie-Française* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 218–62. Rachel's career and personal life inspired numerous characters, including Vashti in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and Mirah in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Jonathan Freedman argues that Mary Anderson was also a model for Miriam (*Professions of Taste*, 188).

[14] Colm Tóibín speculates that Nick was inspired by John Singer Sargent; Tóibín, "Henry James: Shadow and Substance," in Tóibín, Marc Simpson, and Declan Kiely, *Henry James and American Painting* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 1–48: 40; Tóibín, "Secrets and Sensuality: The Private Lives of John Singer Sargent and Henry James," in *Boston's Apollo: Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent*, ed. Nathaniel Silver (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020): 117–32: 119.

The Tragic Muse depicts the reshuffling of cultural hierarchies associated with the late nineteenth century by rendering painting, rather than photography or theater, as a prized medium by which to convey personhood. This chapter explores a transitional moment in art and literary history when cultural arbiters established painting as a highbrow, and increasingly elite, medium associated with patronage and the semi-public display. Although Miriam possesses a fair number of theatrical photographs and *cartes de visite* that she distributes as a form of advertisement, she, like Gabriel, commissions Nick to paint a portrait. By promoting themselves as celebrities as well as artists, Gabriel and Miriam render themselves commodities to be consumed in the rapidly expanding commercial art market. Yet by opting for painted, rather than photographed, portraits, Miriam and Gabriel fashion themselves as something other than reproducible. In this regard, they represent themselves in a highly mediated style that rejects the realism and verisimilitude otherwise associated with photography. This decision, I argue, constitutes a means to conceal and withhold psychological interiority, even from their author. In his Preface, James laments that "I never 'go behind' Miriam; only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little, and the author, while they so waste wonderment, goes behind *them*" (9).[15] James' inability to "go behind" Miriam suggests how she, Nick, and Gabriel advertise themselves by branding a public persona that, much like Wilde on his 1882 lecture tour, capitalized upon their outsider status.

The "art-appetite" suggests how artificial style enabled artists and ethnic outsiders to commodify themselves for the purposes of professional success during the fin de siècle. As somebody "who seemed . . . to know his part and recognize his cues" (29), Gabriel is all too

[15] Critics have gravitated toward James' provocative phrase, "go behind," as evidence of what Peter Brooks calls a psychic abyss "fully analogical to unconscious mind" and what Kaja Silverman proposes as a masochistic, chiefly homosexual, alternative to masculinity. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic*

content to play the roles of aesthete and artist. (In this regard, he and Nick depart from the artisanal conception of painting associated with the early nineteenth century discussed in Chapter 1.) Yet despite the certainty with which he and Miriam express themselves, Nick lacks such confidence. Like *The Story of Avis, The Tragic Muse* dramatizes aesthetic education in strikingly tragic terms, in which professional ambition begets personal frustration and critical indifference. But whereas Avis retreats into a romanticized Orientalist fantasy to cultivate her style, Nick turns to his muses, Miriam and Gabriel, for inspiration. In *The Tragic Muse,* painting stages an intersubjective meeting ground between artist and sitter where style emerges on the basis of proximity. Nick's portraits attempt more capacious forms of personhood that offer solace from the commercial marketplace of Victorian London. Whereas Miriam eventually becomes a famous actress lionized by critics and audiences alike, Gabriel refuses to assimilate for the sake of success and flees London for an undecided future. By claiming the art appetite as a trait wholly distinct from contemporary tastes and commercial success, *The Tragic Muse* treats aesthetics as a realm of unfinished, speculative futures in which style begets transformation and metamorphosis.

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Part One: Putting Venus for "Art"

'What is it – what is it? *Have* you been bad?' Mr. Carteret panted.
'No, no; I'm not bad. But I'm different.'
'Different – ?'
'Different from my father. Different from Mrs. Dallow. Different from you.'

—*The Tragic Muse* (334)

Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 178; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 174–79.

Set at the Palais de l'Industrie, the opening scene of *The Tragic Muse* reveals how spectatorship indexed white Anglo-American identity in the late nineteenth century. Built for the Paris World Fair in 1855, the Palais de l'Industrie signals both the commercialized and the utilitarian dimension of the fine arts at midcentury, as the exhibition hall's architecture signified the social significance and the national value of art. As a contemporary photograph (figure 15) reveals, public museums were built at a scale far larger and grander than the private and domestic galleries that predominated American art. The Palais' monumental scale regards spectatorship as a decidedly public activity, as audiences were often highly aware of being observed while strolling or visiting museums. Thus when we meet the aristocratic Dormer family wandering the Palais' exhibition hall, James introduces them as if they were strangers. The family appears as "good people [who] might appeared to have come, individually, to the Palais de l'Industrie much less to see the works of art than to think over their domestic affairs" (19). The Dormers are incredibly uninterested in the fine arts. Nick's mother, Lady Agnes, "hated talking about art" (23), and his sister Bridget would rather concentrate on her aspirations to become an actress. James' satirical sketch of the British aristocracy exposes the cultural work of museums by suggesting how philistine decorum and absent-minded strolling confer cultural authority in strikingly national terms. For Lady Agnes, Victorian British identity is incommensurable with the fine arts: she dismisses Bridget's sculpture modelling as "horrid messy work" (23) and chastises Nick for becoming enchanted by sculptures that stage "some primitive effort of courtship or capture" (19). She chides him, "You think too much of beautiful objects!" (21). In her view, "Art's pardonable only so long as it's bad," she belives, "so long as it's done at odd hours, for a little distraction, like a game of tennis or of whist" (25).

Figure 15: Édouard Baldus, *Palais de l'Industrie* (ca. 1850s–60s)

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

This opening tableau exposes the generational conflicts between Victorian and Aesthetic attitudes. Lady Agnes embodies what the literary critic Nancy Bentley refers to as "the museum idea" of realist literature, or the "transportable belief that the world is most legible whenever the right kind of observer confronts and understands selected objects—within the walls of the museum or without."[16] As the preferred site of aesthetic education for the paying public, the museum reflected the notion that the arts can, and should, improve

[16] Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870*–1920 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 23. See also Dehn Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On James and the cultural authority of museums, see Jonah Siegel, *Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel, and the Art-Romance Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 113–70.

society. Yet as this opening scene depicts, audiences were more frequently bored than refined. Lady Agnes clings to an increasingly outdated utilitarian ethos that cordons off the arts a respectable hobby "done at odd hours" (25) for the sake of amusement rather than professional livelihood. In this regard, she epitomizes the culture of disinterestedness and detachment that, as Amanda Anderson has written, characterized Victorian literature. By cultivating "an ideal of critical distance" from strangers and others, detachment helped writers navigate shifting conceptions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Because one could observe ethnic, racial, and sexual difference from afar, figures such as "the dandy, the Jew, and the fallen woman . . . focused anxieties about ironic distance, rootlessness, and heightened exile."[17] In keeping with the rise of museums that introduced audiences to exotic and historical artifacts, detached spectators, such as Lady Agnes, cultivated an impartial gaze that could behold or alternatively look away. In this manner, the detachment associated with literature and museum culture descends from the disinterestedness associated with Enlightenment aesthetics that conferred power on the basis of a racialized "right to look"[18] associated with white spectatorship.

In contrast to their mother's detached and philistine attitudes, Bridget and Nick crave a more intimate form of aesthetic experience. "This place is an immense stimulus to me; it refreshes me, excites me," Nick thinks to himself while wandering the Palais. "It's full of ideas, full of refinements; it gives one such an impression of artistic experience. They try everything, they feel everything" (23). Much like James' formative apprenticeship reviewing Parisian salons in 1875–76, Nick's immersion in French art deepens his critical

[17] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

[18] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

sensibilities.[19] He loses himself in a reverie of "dreaminess" where "the wandering blankness . . . sat at moments in his eyes, as if he had no attention at all, not the least in the world, at his command" (19). A far cry from Lady Agnes' disinterested stroll, Nick's reverie leads him away from detachment and toward intimate contact with works of art as well as himself. In this regard, he gravitates away from a culture premised upon "sweetness and light"[20] by embracing the pleasures of art. Like Geoffrey Crayon, Cecil Dreeme, and Avis Dobell, Nick seeks a newfound relation to himself and to others as expressed through scenes of consumption. The opening scene of the novel evokes the Palais de l'Industrie, not to mention the utilitarian ethos it encapsulates, as an outdated style of critical judgement that Nick, Bridget, Gabriel, and Miriam all resist.

Nick's departure from his mother's philistinism culminates in the sense that he lives a double, secret life. In a society where "Everything has its place" (299), Nick "was conscious of a double nature." "There were two men in him," we read, "quite separate, whose leading features had little in common and each of whom insisted on having an independent turn at life" (169). Nick tells his mother that "I'm two men; it's the strangest thing that ever was. . . . I'm two quite distinct human beings, who have scarcely a point in common." Thus when it comes to his career as a politician, he fears that "One man wins the seat but it's the other fellow who sits in it" (160).[21] For Nick, "the other fellow," the artist, is incompatible with politics and marriage. As art historians and literary critics have argued, the trope of the double helped dramatize the conflict between private and public identities in

[19] Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 28–32; Edel, *Henry James*, 181–203.

[20] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2006), 34.

[21] Nick's remark resonates with Hannah Arendt's account of the origins of the *persona* as the political representation of a Roman citizen's voice: "Without his *persona*, there would be an individual without rights and duties, perhaps a 'natural man'—that is, a human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word,

Victorian literature, especially in terms of incongruous selves at odds with British society.[22] Popularized by works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the figure of the double offered James a way to experiment with a hidden self. Recalling the vocational dilemma in *The Story of Avis*, Nick's conflict entails that he choose between Parliament and painting. Significantly, the novel recasts aesthetic ambition as a matter of sexual indeterminacy: to remain in Parliament is tantamount to marrying Julia Dallow. As Gabriel warns him about his impending marriage, "The beautiful lady will swallow your profession if you'll swallow hers. She'll put up with the palette if you'll put up with the country-house. It will be a very unusual one in which you won't find a good north room where you can paint." Were Nick to choose Julia, according to Gabriel, "Every one, beginning with your wife, will forget there's anything queer about you, and everything will be for the best in the best of worlds" (472). As a repository for all that is "queer about [him]," painting signals Nick's ambivalence regarding politics as well as marriage. To "give up his sweetheart for the sake of a paint-pot" (299) marks his refusal to decide between these split desires. In this regard, Nick stands on the cusp of what Elaine Showalter terms the "sexual anarchy"[23] of the fin de siècle. But although James' fiction is replete with burgeoning forms of non-normative and queer identity, Nick gestures toward a remarkably inchoate form of sexual identity.[24] In

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indicating someone outside the range of the law and the body politic of the citizens, as for instance a slave—but certainly a politically irrelevant being." Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 103.

[22] Anthea Callen, *Looking at Men: Anatomy, Masculinity, and the Modern Male Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 110–39; Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 209–44.

[23] Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*.

[24] On James' portrayals of non-normative sexual identities and practices, see Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 168–189; Wendy Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity*; Leland S. Person, *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Rowe, *The Other Henry James*; Katherine V. Snyder,

contrast to his avowed passion for painting, his ambivalence regarding marriage outlines the contours of an identity yet to emerge.

Understanding his split selves as a matter of biological difference, Nick seeks alternate forms of kinship with those who share the art appetite. He confides to Gabriel, "I don't know *what* I am": "I'm a freak of nature and a sport of the mocking gods. Why should they go out of their way to worry me? Why should they do everything so inconsequent, so improbable, so preposterous? It's the vulgarest practical joke. There has never been anything of the sort among us; we're all Philistines to the core, with about as much æsthetic sense as that hat. It's excellent soil – I don't complain of it – but not a soul to grow that flower." Nick couches his existential dilemma in terms of heredity, as if his desire to paint were a genetic trait. He asks: "From where the devil then has the seed been dropped? I look back from generation to generation; I scour our annals without finding the least little sketching grandmother, any sign of a building or versifying or collecting or even tulip-raising ancestor. They were all blind as bats, and none the less happy for that. I'm a wanton variation, an unaccountable monster" (122).[25] Nick's search for a hereditary basis couches his vocational crisis as a pseudo-Darwinian variation that lures him away from his family wishes. The notion that aesthetic education constitutes a form of illegitimate pleasure is a recurring motif in James' fiction.[26] Just as Nick repudiates his family's tradition of serving in Parliament, Henry and William James' respective desires to write and

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Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel, 1850–1925 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104–40; Hugh Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[25] James couches *The Tragic Muse* in similar terms, likening the novel to "a poor fatherless and motherless, a sort of unregistered and unacknowledged birth" (1).

[26] James further explores this crisis in "Owen Wingrave" (1892), in which Owen Wingrave renounces his English family's military tradition, and "Mora Montravers" (1909), in which Mora Montravers flees her guardians to elope with her painting tutor, Walter Puddick, whose name homophonically recalls Walter Pater.

paint jarred against their father's ambition for his family.[27] As James recounts in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), he was raised in a family that regarded "the 'career of art'" as "deprecated and denounced, on the lips of anxiety or authority, as a departure from the career of business, of industry and respectability, the so-called regular life."[28] Nick, too, shares an uneasy relation to "the so-called regular life" as defined by a career in politics and marriage. Nick's aversion to these customary markers of respectability and "regular life" speaks to his unease with the intensifying heterosexual culture that predominated the nineteenth century. Suspicious of what James calls "the career of business, of industry and respectability," Nick seeks alternate forms of productivity that do not contribute to the advancement of Victorian society. In keeping with the Aestheticism Movement's emphasis upon the non-usefulness of art, Nick's painting turns inward, rather than outward, so that he can express his unformed sense of self.

Just as Nick feels caught between the "two men in him" (169), *The Tragic Muse* oscillates between two plots: that of the marriage plot (which would consummate his engagement to Julia Dallow and a career in Parliament) and the *Künstlerroman*, or artist's novel (which would conclude with his friendship with Gabriel Nash and a career in the arts).[29] Although James' fictional artists frequently abandon romance and marriage in order

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[27] Despite socializing among numerous writers of the period, including William Makepeace Thackeray and Theodore Winthrop, the family discouraged both Henry and William from pursuing a career in the arts. (On James' childhood encounter with Winthrop, see *A Small Boy and Others*, 167). After reading the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Autobiography* (1853), Henry and William took an active interest in painting, especially when they lived in Newport from 1858–59 and frequented John LaFarge's studio. (Edel, *Henry James*, 45–47; *A Small Boy and Others*, 243–44). Eventually, Henry enrolled at Harvard Law School in 1862 and William at Harvard Medical School in 1864. On William James' relation to painting, see Howard M. Feinstein, *Becoming William James* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 103–16; Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, 52–58. Henry James channeled much of William James' vocational crisis into the character of Rowland Mallett in *Roderick Hudson*; Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, 99–100.

[28] Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* and *The Middle Years*, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 43.

[29] Reviewing the novel in *Harper's New Monthly*, William Dean Howells claims that *The Tragic Muse* "marks the farthest departure from the old ideal of the novel. No one is obviously led to the altar; no one is relaxed to

to create art, Nick's sexual ambiguity is perhaps the queerest, since he decides to sacrifice Julia so that he can work and continue socializing with Gabriel. As James recalls in his Preface, the germ of the novel originated in this sacrifice, where "The young man should 'chuck' admired politics, and of course some other admired object with them." Yet in "chucking" politics and Julia (the "other admired object") for a "supposedly minor craft" (3), Nick forsakes heterosexual convention as well. Whereas the marriage plot seems to confer public recognition and political power, the Künstlerroman allows Nick to pursue the arts away from the public eye. As he tells Julia, "It *is* uplifting to be a great man before the people – to be loved by them, to be followed by them. An artist isn't – never, never. Why *should* he be?" (282). Julia cries out, "You're an artist: you are, you are!" (280). Her considerably melodramatic accusation registers painting as a deviant, even tragic, calling that cannot be avoided. In this variation upon the seduction plot, the feminized Nick must choose between two seducers: Gabriel, described as "Nick's queer comrade" (49), and Julia, whom Nick describes as "safe" (197). In a notebook entry for *The Tragic Muse*, James imagines that Julia "tries to seduce him—she is full of bribery. . . . She appears soft, seductive—but in it all there lurks her *condition*—her terms."[30]

Yet despite his insistence upon wanting to paint, Nick lacks any discernible talent or style. As he tells Julia, "I've no talent" (182). As much as he vows to "live in paint and tinsel" (383), Nick remains an enigmatic presence throughout the novel, especially when compared to Gabriel's and Miriam's staunch commitment to the arts. As James remarks in his Preface, "It strikes me, alas, that [Nick] is not quite so interesting as he was fondly intended to be. . . . For, to put the matter in an image, all we then – in his triumph – see of

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the secular arm and burnt at the stake. Vice is disposed of with a gay shrug; virtue is rewarded by innuendo. All this leaves us pleasantly thinking of all that has happened before, and asking, Was Gabriel Nash vice? Was Mrs. Dallow virtue? Or was neither either?" Howells, "Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly* (September 1890): 639–41.

the charm-compeller is the back he turns to us as he bends over his work" (13). (Compared to James' inability to "go behind" Miriam, Nick is already behind us, "ben[t] over his work.") Nick does not fare much better when it comes to contemporary critics: Viola Winner maintains that "A crucial flaw [of the novel] is the characterization of Nick."[31] Similarly, David McWhirter claims that out of James' "self-doubting, passive, feminized male protagonists, perhaps none is more annoying than Nick Dormer."[32] I would suggest that Nick's ambiguity or annoyance stem from his sexual indeterminacy. In a novel known for its "sexlessness"[33], Nick's chaste admiration for women, fondness for men, and appreciation of painting suggest an inchoate sexual identity that eludes the hetero-/homosexual binary. As McWhirter claims, Nick embodies "however tentatively, the contours of a different kind of manhood."[34] This tentativeness reverberates throughout the novel, as no one is sure what to make of either Nick or his craft. When Julia visits Nick at his studio to discover Miriam posing for him, she mistakes the session for an extramarital tryst. But although her suspicion is unfounded—they are not, in fact, having an affair—the gist of her impression remains correct: Nick diverts his erotic energies through painting. She tells him that, when it comes to his studio, "You love it, you revel in it; that's what you want – the only thing you want!" (278).

Only, Nick is not so sure just what "the only thing" he wants is. In his studio, he refracts desires through cultural artifacts and the words of others. As he confides to Gabriel, this habit began in college, when the two men first met. At university, Gabriel served as

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[30] *Complete Notebooks*, 46.

[31] Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts*, 124.

[32] David McWhirter, "Restaging the Hurt: Henry James and the Artist as Masochist," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, no. 4 (1991): 464.

[33] Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 257–58.

Nick's "new Mentor or oracle" (72). "At Oxford," Nick recalls, "you were very bad company for me – my evil genius: you opened my eyes, you communicated the poison. Since then, little by little, it has been working within me; vaguely, covertly, insensibly at first, but during the last year or two with violence, pertinacity, cruelty. I've resorted to every antidote in life; but it's no use – I'm stricken. *C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée* – putting Venus for 'art'" (122). Nick couches his relation to Gabriel and Aestheticism in terms of an encoded reference to Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), "*C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attaché*." Significantly, Nick likens Gabriel's "poison" to Phèdre's secret desire for her stepson Hippolytus:

> *Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée:*
>
> *C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée.*[35]
>
> [It is no longer an ardor hidden in my veins:
>
> It is Venus entirely latched onto her prey.] (My translation)

By equating Gabriel's tutelage with incestuous longing, Nick positions himself as Phèdre, the tragic heroine who eventually commits suicide on account of her forbidden desire. With significant gothic and sexual overtones, Nick oscillates between being Gabriel's victim, whose eyes have been "opened," and Gabriel's transgressive desirer. Remarking that he is "putting Venus for 'art,'" Nick construes homosocial bonding as a matter of melodramatic seduction premised upon feminized sentiment. As the goddess of love, sex, and fertility, Venus serves as a mythological referent for understanding desire.

That Nick regards painting and sexuality as interchangeable suggests how aesthetics was foundational to James' exploration of queer intimacy. As depicted in *Roderick Hudson*

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[34] McWhirter, "Restaging the Hurt," 486.

(1875), "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" (1884), "The Aspern Papers" (1888), *The Tragic Muse*, and "Collaboration" (1892), male artists and audiences experience emotionally and erotically fulfilling relations through works of art rather than with other people. The visual arts serve as a mediating influence that helps men triangulate desire by attributing it to the creation or consumption of art, especially in homosocial environments conspicuously devoid of women. These fictions stage what Leland Person refers to as "homo-aesthetic desire"[36]: they suggest how artists siphon off "the art-appetite" from the British aristocracy, confining it to spaces associated with the arts or hidden within a double, secretive self. Nick's attraction to Gabriel and Aestheticism must necessarily flow "*dans mes veines cachée*" (hidden in my veins) given the incompatibility between his private artistic tendencies and his public-facing role as a member of Parliament.

Nick's aesthetic education amounts to something like a sexual initiation by which he learns to express himself by cultivating a distinct style based upon that of others'. During sessions with Miriam and Gabriel, Nick adopts their style in such a way that blurs the lines separating artist from sitter. In this regard, he inherits Gabriel's stance that a portrait is the "revelation of two realities." For Gabriel, a portrait conveys both "the man whom it was the artist's conscious effort to reveal and the man – the interpreter – expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give" (268). By circumventing language, Nick's paintings depict both sitter and painter in the act of doing rather than explaining—of being "caught in the act" rather than describing it. Hence for David M. Lubin, James' literary portraiture offers a chance for "declaring the otherwise indeclarable, a method of externalizing and temporarily reconciling that highly unstable, even volatile, sexual

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[35] Jean Racine, *Phèdre* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 52.

difference that was felt within but not understood."[37] But while Nick and Gabriel embrace painting because it expresses the "otherwise indeclarable," the actress Miriam has a wholly different relation to art. She conveys the intricacies of personhood through theater and dialogue, rather than painting, as her chosen media.

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Part Two: "A Thing Alive"

> But what, after all, is one's "own life"? Why should we draw these distinctions between real life and stage life? It is when we feel most that we live most; and we cannot believe that Rachel, married to a real man, bearing real children, and adding up real butcher's bills, would have lived more truly than Rachel imagining the passions of women who never existed.
>
> —Virginia Woolf,
> "Rachel" (1911)[38]

As I have been arguing, Nick's undeveloped artistic style is inextricable from his sexual indeterminacy and ambivalence toward marriage. One of his most famous sitters, Miriam Rooth, does not share his predicament, as she possesses a surfeit of style. Said to be "as good as Rachel Félix" (49), Miriam conjures Rachel's privileged status as the leading tragedienne of the Comedie Française, where Rachel was arguably as famous for her Neoclassical roles as she was for her sexually adventurous and scandalous personal life. In this manner, Rachel, like Oscar Wilde, was a celebrity borne by promotional material and visual culture that popularized her physical appearance and personality for audiences who

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[36] Person, *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity*, 124–48.

[37] David M. Lubin, *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 20.

[38] Virginia Woolf, "Rachel," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1: 1904–1912, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1986), 351–54: 352.

might recognize her name and notoriety even if they had never seen her perform.[39] Declaring Miriam "James's most successful and emancipated feminine character," John Carlos Rowe argues that she "manages and is never managed *by* the media, especially the popular press."[40] As several critics have identified, *The Tragic Muse* is one of James' most theatrical novels, not solely in terms of its setting and plot, but also its presentation of character based upon dialogue and stage directions.[41] By juxtaposing an aesthete and an actress as two sides of the same figurative coin, James demonstrates that celebrity and artistry are mutually constitutive. Gabriel and Miriam commodify themselves for a paying public, which entails commissioning Nick to paint their respective portraits. The success of Miriam's portrait, as well as her career, attests to her confident sense of style, where she asserts herself in performances that critics declare a "'revelation,' 'incarnation,' 'acclamation,' 'demonstration,' 'ovation' – to name only a few, and all accompanied by the word 'extraordinary'" (486).

For Miriam to display and profit from her theatrical style suggests the entwined rise of celebrity and fan cultures, as she captivates audiences who consume her performances and her popularity. Style thus emerges as a key site in which ethnic outsiders, not to mention women and homosexual artists, negotiate the commercial art market by presenting themselves as spectacles to be consumed. "Beauty was the principle of everything she did," we read: "an exquisite harmony of line and motion and attitude and tone." Miriam's acting sends even the philistine ambassador Peter Sherringham to the sublime heights of aesthetic

[39] Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 246–58; Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 9–18. Rachel toured New York and Boston in 1855, but the James family was in Europe at the time. See James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 64n130.

[40] Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, 76.

[41] Victoria Coulson, *Henry James, Women and Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60–95; Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 235–69.

experience. As he watches her on stage, he is transformed: "To see this force in operation, to sit within its radius and feel it shift and resolve and change and never fail, was a corrective to the depression, the humiliation, the bewilderment of life. It transported him from the vulgar hour and the ugly fact; drew him to something that had no warrant but its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the remote, the antique" (319). By embodying "the pure, the remote, the antique," Miriam's performance is inextricably linked to her ethnic status as a "Jewess" whose "remote" and "antique" history becomes something to be consumed. As men gaze upon her on stage, they are "transported" into realms associated with her Jewish identity. Significantly, Peter describes the "force" that acts through Miriam—"the pure, the remote, [and] the antique"—as "sweetness." Recalling Matthew Arnold's distinctive idiom of "sweetness and light" that characterized Victorian aesthetics, Peter's assessment perpetuates what Arnold articulates, elsewhere in *Culture and Anarchy*, as the distinction between "Hebraic" and "Hellenic" art. Whereas Hellenic art attempts "to see things as they really are," Hebraic art stresses "conduct and obedience." "The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*," Arnold goes on to write, and "that of Hebraism [is] *strictness of conscience*."[42] Viewed in this light, Miriam's devotion to her craft affirms her status as a Jewish outsider whose obedience to cultural artifacts is a matter of genetic disposition rather than imaginative faculty. As critics have demonstrated, Miriam's émigré identity reveals how celebrity culture nurtured outsider status on the basis of its novelty and rarity.[43] Peter's emotional reaction to Miriam's acting thus affirms his markedly British identity, as she becomes, in effect, a public commodity

[42] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 97.

[43] Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123–57; Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, 76–87. That being said, critics argue that James insinuates, rather than explicitly declares, her Jewish identity. See Rowe, *The Other Henry James*, 77; Gustavus Stadler,

based upon her Jewish ancestry. As "a performer who could even produce an impression of not performing" (265), Miriam recognizes that she is always on display.

Miriam's mastery of English and French drama amounts to an act of cultural assimilation, since her performances as Juliet or Constance display her ability to emulate Shakespearean language, albeit as an outsider. Just as Geoffrey Crayon plays the role of man of feeling by appropriating British literature, Miriam models herself upon the dialogue of Racine and Shakespeare. Her relation to drama blurs the line between originality and imitation. Especially when it comes to "the development of Miriam's genius" (149), she cultivates her talent by emulating others' in ways that recall the "conduct and obedience" that Matthew Arnold argues inflects Hebraic art. After asking her acting coach, Madame Carré, "How shall I find my voice?" (95), Miriam is told she must study Racine and Shakespeare as well as the poetry of Longfellow and Tennyson (92–93), Shelley (146), and Whittier (99).[44] Unlike Gabriel's distinctive voice, Miriam's voice is all but her own. Evoking the longstanding denigration of theater as a source of popular entertainment rather than dignified art, *The Tragic Muse* situates Miriam's "art-appetite" as a matter of mimicry and adaptation rather than originality. Effacing herself on stage, she "forgot herself in some act of sincere attention" (126). This disappearing act effectively renders Miriam invisible at the very moment she is on display.

Like Nick, Miriam experiments with different forms of character through craft. "Miriam's performance was a thing alive, with a power to change, to grow, to develop, to beget new forms of the same life" (315). In a novel that is conspicuously childless, artists generate "new forms" through aesthetic, rather than sexual, reproduction. Miriam's "art-

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Troubling Minds: The Cultural Politics of Genius in the United States, 1840–1890 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 202n28.

appetite" hence estranges her from Victorian ideals of womanhood. *The Tragic Muse* reflects the gendered history of British and American theater that deliberated how, and when, women should appear before a crowd.[45] One of Miriam's "new forms" of life is her ability to reinvent herself as something other than a wife or mother. As with Nick, Miriam must choose between her career and marriage. Her mother remarks, "The question of marriage has ceased to exist for you" (422). Despite eventually marrying her British stage manager Basil Dashwood, Miriam anticipates the figure of the New Woman who devotes herself to her craft rather than to marriage and domesticity. Miriam's professional ambition places her at odds with other women in *The Tragic Muse,* especially when it comes to what the ambassador Peter Sherringham calls her "demonic gift" (203), her acting talent. That he regards her professional skill as a "demonic" power not only speaks to the Victorian understandings of angelic or demonic femininity that Nina Auerbach argues is central to women's identity as depicted by nineteenth-century British literature[46]; it also signals a particularly misogynist strand of anti-Semitism that regards the figure of the "Jewess" as incompatible with British femininity.

Miriam's stagecraft thus imagines a different form of theater than what Peter Brooks outlines in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, where he persuasively situates James' fiction in terms of eighteenth-century French theater. In French melodrama, according to Brooks, "characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings,

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[44] Rachel's training followed a similar path. In her copy of Racine's *Works* (1851), she inscribed: "Oh my sweet Racine, it is in your masterpieces that I recognize the heart of a woman! I shape my own to your noble poetry" (Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 108).

[45] This motif runs throughout *The Bostonians* (1886), which depicts feminist lecturers in New England as similarly theatrical presenters. On female genius in *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse,* see Stadler, *Troubling Minds*, 131–68.

[46] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship."[47] Melodrama thereby constitutes "a victory over repression," because "the characters have no interior depth, [and] there is no psychological conflict" because "melodrama exteriorizes conflict and psychic structure."[48] Yet Miriam seems to lack any "psychic structure" to project outward. Rather, she is most herself, and most unguarded, when she expresses herself using the words of somebody else. Because of this, critics have found Miriam to be among James' more puzzling characters. Miriam tends to underwhelm audiences expecting the psychological complexity of James' more fully developed female characters.[49] As Martha Banta asks, "Has Miriam a 'character' of her own?"[50] Along similar lines, Victoria Coulson claims that Miriam "has no psychological interiority" because she "lives entirely in the present." For Coulson, there is "no tension between Miriam's public persona . . . and her putative private self, no *frisson* of potential self-revelation; she is a perversely unerotic fantasy, blank, untraceable, content-free."[51] For Jonathan Freedman, "Miriam is so deeply caught up in her theatrical self-fashioning that by the end of the novel, she has virtually no self left at all."[52] But what if that is precisely James' point? What if Miriam's success, as both a Jewish woman and an actress, is her self-fashioning as a "blank, untraceable, content-free" "fantasy" that can be consumed within the artistic marketplace? Recalling the "wandering blankness" (19) that Nick encounters while

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[47] Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 4.

[48] Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 35.

[49] Barbara Hochman, "Disappearing Authors and Resentful Readers in Late-Nineteenth Century American Fiction: The Case of Henry James," *ELH* 63, no. 1 (1996): 182–83.

[50] Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 666.

[51] Coulson, *Henry James, Women and Realism*, 72–73.

[52] Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, 186.

strolling the Palais de l'Industrie, Miriam's "blank" character suggests a self withheld from public view. Miriam arguably acts both on stage, where she performs as Racine's and Shakespeare's heroines, as well as off, where she plays the roles of ingénue (for Peter Sherringham, one of her suitors), apprentice (for Madame Carré, her acting coach), and artist (for Nick and Gabriel). Such metamorphoses offer Miriam a chance to reinvent herself as something other than an ethnic outsider in Victorian London.

One of Miriam's most significant metamorphoses is the portrait she commissions Nick to paint. In a novel where characters frequently liken others to works of art, Miriam's portrait aspires to become both a representation of a sitter (i.e., Miriam) and also a chronicle of a performance (i.e., her posing in a costume).[53] But although Nick and Gabriel turn to portraiture as a means to establish selfhood, Miriam problematizes portraiture's claim to fidelity. As a woman continually represented and observed by men, she stands as one of what Victoria Coulson has termed James' "portrait heroines," or "feminine bodies [that are] understood as fields of representation"[54] liable to be coopted. She must negotiate a visual culture that routinely scrutinizes bodies for signs of inner character that might stabilize gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. As Sarah Blackwood has recently shown, James turned to portraiture as a means to envision "a larger cultural reimagination of human subjectivity, psychology, and inner life that was taking place at the turn of the century, as the physiological psychologies of the nineteenth century gave way to a return of the metaphysical in the form of psychoanalysis."[55] Returning to a genre associated with social

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[53] At the Palais de l'Industrie, Gabriel Nash remarks, "Miss Dormer's herself an English picture" (32). Later, Bridget "thought [Peter Sherringham] recalled a Titian" (44).

[54] Coulson, *Henry James, Women and Realism*, 48. For "portrait heroines," see 47–59. On visual culture and gender in the late nineteenth century, see Banta, *Imaging American Women;* Callen, *Looking at Men*.

[55] Sarah Blackwood, *The Portrait's Subject: Inventing Inner Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 112.

distinction and class status, Miriam commissions a portrait as a means to assert cultural capital in ways that resemble Lady Agnes' dismissive remarks at the Palais de l'Industrie.

That Miriam commissions a painter, rather than a photographer, to represent her suggests an even further level of mediation that resists contemporary attitudes regarding photographic verisimilitude. As art historians have demonstrated, a variety of artists, audiences, and critics valorized the daguerreotype and the photograph as media that were mirror-like reflections of their subjects and sitters.[56] Because photography was regarded as an accurate copy of what lay on the other side of the camera lens, medical and scientific communities often adopted photography as a means to organize human behavior based upon observable traits.[57] In keeping with the traditions of physiognomy and phrenology, photography encouraged audiences to scrutinize bodies and faces for signs of internal character. Yet for a novel concerned with the nature of "fidelity"[58] applied across photography and painting, *The Tragic Muse* claims painting as a realm characterized by more experimental, tentative forms of queer personhood. Despite the fact that Rachel and Oscar Wilde relied upon commercial photography, Miriam and Gabriel deliberately commission a painter to capture their likeness. At stake in this aesthetic preference is an economy of scale and circulation. "It's so amusing to have them," Miriam remarks about her trove of photographs, "by the hundred, all for nothing, to give away" (264).[59] Although

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[56] Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

[57] For instance, criminal photography sought to categorize bodies based upon racist and xenophobic stereotypes that disproportionately assigned criminal activity to racial, sexual, and (dis)abled subjects. Jonathan Finn, *Capturing the Criminal Image: From Mug Shot to Surveillance Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1–30; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3–64; Martha Merrill Umphrey, "The Sun Has Been Too Quick for Them: Criminal Portraiture and the Police in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society* 16 (1997): 139–63.

[58] Adam Sonstegard, "Painting, Photography, and Fidelity in *The Tragic Muse*," *Henry James Review* 24, no. 1 (2003): 27–44.

she admits to the necessity of publicity photographs, Miriam fetishizes oil painting due to its cultural cachet. Whereas Miriam can freely "give away" copies of herself as photographed, her singular painted portrait does not circulate.

Rather, her portrait remains a private artifact that withholds Miriam's inner life. She approaches her sitting sessions as if they were a performance no different than acting on stage. This variation upon portraiture surfaces while she is in Paris and attends a performance at the Théâtre Français. After venturing into the green room backstage, she cries out, "Think of Rachel – look at her grand portrait there!" (225). A devoted attendee of the Comédie Française, James refers to Jean-Léon Gérôme's portrait of Rachel, *La Tragédie* (1859; figure 16).[60] In Gérôme's portrait, Rachel is everywhere and nowhere: draped in rich red robes and posing as "La Tragédie"—the Muse of Tragedy, Melpoméne—she plays both herself and the tragic muse. Leaning against a column carved with the names "Aeschylus," "Sophocles," and "Euripides" (in Greek) and "Corneille" and "Racine," Rachel relies upon the words of others to express herself. Anticipating Miriam's adoration for Racine and Shakespeare, Rachel is propped up and supported by a rich theatrical tradition that ostensibly transcends contemporary fads and movements. Like Robert and Stillfleet who retreat into an ersatz fantasy of the Italian Renaissance in *Cecil Dreeme* and Avis' invocation of the Ancient Sphinx, Rachel and Miriam fashion themselves anew using historical antecedents.

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[59] As suggested by an anecdote that appears in Alice James' diary, James had a fondness for theater photographs. On November 9, 1890, she observed him "tossing about among a lot of photos of actresses and ballet girls in a show, a photo of the beautiful Lady Helen Duncombe—who has just married some one, lying out on a chair or sofa with her arms crossed over her head." *The Diary of Alice James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Penguin, 1964), 154.

[60] While at work on *The Tragic Muse* in February 1889, James visited the Comédie Française, where he witnessed the painting backstage. Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 27–29; Adeline R. Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists in His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 56–69.

Figure 16: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *La Tragédie* (1859)

Courtesy of the Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris (CC0 Paris Musées/Musée Carnavalet)

The Tragic Muse thus renders inspiration as a matter of possession, in which artists and sitters alike serve as a conduit for the muse. Both in terms of Miriam's inspiration to Nick and, in turn, Racine's and Shakespeare's inspiration for Miriam, the novel likens creativity to an act of being consumed by another's style that allows the artist to express internal character via the words or style of another. Just as the nine muses inspire artists to create, contemporary portrait sitters, such as Miriam, inspire artists, such as Nick, to produce art.[61] As sitters inspire artists and muses inspire actresses, aesthetics blurs the distinctions between people. Nick absorbs Gabriel's and Miriam's vehement styles just as Miriam inherits Racine's and Shakespeare's dialogue. Both artists thus become transfigured by consuming and refashioning cultural artifacts that can displace and externalize inner character. Unlike earlier novels and literary works that depict painting as a solitary exercise where an artist retreats into a studio to work, *The Tragic Muse* imagines painting as a collaborative, inherently social, act. The primary muses of the novel, Miriam and Gabriel, encourage Nick to feed his "art appetite" by satiating their own, even if, as I have been arguing, such feeding runs counter to more orthodox conceptions of gender and sexuality associated with Victorian London. But whereas Nick's portrait of Miriam plays an instrumental role in her professional ascent upon the London stage, Nick's portrait of Gabriel is a more sordid affair that lures Nick away from conventional, and increasingly heterosexual, relations.

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[61] The novel's title invokes Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait, *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784). Second only to perhaps Sophia Baddeley, Siddons was one of the most famous actresses of the eighteenth-century British stage. Her niece, the actress and writer Fanny Kemble, was a close friend of James and inspired Madame Carré in *The Tragic Muse* (Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 249–50).

Part Three: "The Merman Wandering Free"

Heaven help us! . . . how far the artistic point of view may take a man!

—Henry James,
The American (1877)[62]

In contrast to Miriam's respectable influence upon Nick, Gabriel represents a decidedly hedonistic understanding of aesthetic experience. As someone whose sole belief is that "I do worship beauty" (361), Gabriel conjures Oscar Wilde through not only a distinct speaking style reminiscent of Wilde's double *entendres* and epigrams, but also his pursuit of pleasure.[63] A classmate of Nick's from Oxford University, Gabriel invokes the Oxford Classics Department's reputation for Neo-Hellenic homoeroticism during the 1870s.[64] Yet in contrast to this recognizable history, Gabriel abhors labels and trends. When Nick's sister Bridget asks Gabriel whether he identifies as an aesthete, he declares: "I've *no* profession, my dear young lady. I've no *état civil*. . . . As I say, I keep to the simplest way. I find that gives one enough to do. Merely to be is such a *métier*; to live such an art; to feel such a career!" (34). Gabriel professes that "I look only at what I do like" and that "All my behavior consists of my feelings" (33). "The great thing," according to Gabriel's *l'art pour*

[62] Henry James, *The American*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 135.

[63] On James and British Aestheticism, see Richard Ellmann, "James Amongst the Aesthetes," in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, ed. John R. Bradley (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 25–44; Freedman, *Professions of Taste*; Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*. James followed the 1895 Wilde trials closely, declaring them "a very squalid tragedy, but still a tragedy" (Edel, *Henry James*, 437). Despite believing that Wilde's "fall is hideously tragic," according to a letter he wrote to William James (Edel, *Henry James*, 439), he refused to sign the clemency petition (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 493). On James' friendships and correspondence with homosexuals and aesthetes during the fin de siècle, see Michael Anesko, *Henry James and Queer Affiliation: Hardened Bachelors of the Edwardian Era* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); James, *Beloved Boy: Letters to Hendrik C. Andersen*, *1899–1915,* ed. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); James, *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*, ed. Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

[64] Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). At Oxford, Pater served as a mentor to Wilde; see Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 83–85; Friedman, *Before Queer Theory*, 88–115.

l'art perspective, is to "encourage the beautiful" (34). Thus when he discovers Nick and his family strolling the Palais de l'Industrie, Gabriel embodies a markedly different relation to the fine arts that does not resemble Lady Agnes' or Bridget's. The value of aesthetics, according to Gabriel, is that it facilitates pleasure above all else. "I accomplish my happiness," he boasts to Nick. "I have feelings, I have sensations: let me tell you that's not so common" (120). By pursuing emotionally fulfilling encounters with art and occasionally other men, Gabriel skirts the boundary dividing the homosocial from the homoerotic.

Gabriel's taste for decadence and pleasure lures Nick into queer territory when he commissions the young painter for a portrait. Developed over the course of multiple sitting sessions, the painting testifies to what Wayne Koestenbaum refers to as the erotics of male artistic collaboration, which for him is "always a sublimation of erotic entanglement, always a glamorous underworld enterprise."[65] As men come together to make and appreciate art in works such as *Roderick Hudson*, *The Tragic Muse*, and "Collaboration," creative improvisation allows spectators to identity and portray queer attachments through visual, rather than verbal, representation. James' aesthetic fiction renders a form of relationality that can only be forged through art. "Art," as Dana Seitler notes, "is where desire finds form" in James' fiction. "It is where the traces of muddled, disjoined, desiring personhood accumulate, it is where affect meets cognition in shaky and epistemologically limited ways, and it is where, as readers, we are confronted with both the frustrations and the pleasures of the impossible art object of desire."[66] The tension between verbal and visual representation allows *The Tragic Muse* to conceive of attachments that predate the vocabulary of homosexual and queer identity. If characters such as Julia Dallow mistake Nick's relations

[65] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 4.

to his muses as extramarital affairs or homosocial fraternizing, they are not mistaken in their assessment that Nick's most vehement attachments exceed marriage and politics. As Gabriel sits for Nick and guides him to how he wishes to be portrayed, the aesthete models a wholly different form of manhood and pleasure than what Nick knows. Yet in donning Gabriel's style, Nick inhabits, however temporarily, a flamboyant masculinity whose extravagance knows no bounds.

Gabriel teaches Nick how to access these alternative forms of gender and sexuality through painting. In an extended metaphor, he likens painting to the act of diving into the ocean. If doctrines are "a raft" that enable passengers to float atop the world, the ocean beneath contains more titillating thrills:

> We're mostly in different tubs and cockles, paddling for life. Our opinions, or convictions and doctrines and standards, are simply the particular thing that will make the boat go – *our* boat, naturally, for they may very often be just the thing that will sink another. . . . Boats can be big, in the infinite of space, and a doctrine's a raft that floats the better the more passengers it carries. A passenger jumps over from time to time, not so much from fear of sinking as from a want of interest in the course or the company. He swims, he plunges, he dives, he dips down and visits the fishes and mermaids and the submarine caves; he goes from craft to craft and splashes about, on his own account, in the blue cool water. The regenerate, as I call them, are the passengers who jump over in search of better fun. I jumped over long ago. . . . I've grown a tail if you will. I'm the merman wandering free. It's the jolliest of trades! (115)

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[66] Dana Seitler, *Reading Sideways: The Queer Politics of Art in Modern American Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 77.

By likening aesthetics to exploring "the fishes and mermaids and the submarine caves" within, Gabriel invokes the art-historical tradition of painters who depicted the unconscious in terms of aquatic imagery associated with floods, ocean floors, and storms.[67] Recalling the gothic imagery of Irving's *Tales of a Traveller* in which painters descend into a psychic underworld of mercurial intensity and volcanic passion, Gabriel's metaphor considers aesthetics as an activity that prompts artists and audiences to "jump over in search of better fun" beneath the surface of a "doctrine" that keeps passengers afloat and ignorant of what lies below. The ocean's sublime immensity thus becomes a space in which to roam the depths that doctrine and ideology otherwise suppress. In labeling himself as a "merman wandering free," Gabriel departs from more conventional forms of identity premised on doctrines and labels. As an amphibious creature equally at home in sea and on land, this "merman" belongs everywhere and nowhere, subject only to his proclivities and desires.

Hence for *The Tragic Muse*, painting does not simply reflect the sitter as he is. Rather, painting serves as a provocation to more capacious forms of identity that have yet to be realized. Far different than the "sweetness and light" that Lady Agnes appreciates, the murky depths that Gabriel imagines contain more cavernous and dark terrain. He tells Nick, "The lurking unexpressed is infinite, and affectation must have begun, long ago, with the first act of reflective expression – the substitution of the few placed articulate words for the cry or the thump or the hug. Of course one isn't perfect; but that's the delightful thing about art, that there's always more to learn and more to do; it grows bigger the more one uses it and meets more questions the more they come up" (117–18). By moving from "the cry or the thump or the hug" to a "few placed articulate words," artists convey the mysteries and

[67] Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–29; Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 177–238.

ambiguities of embodied experience through representation. However, Gabriel's phrasing privileges verbal, rather than visual, representation. Whereas Miriam's acting conveys her characters' inner essence using speech, Nick's painting attempts a mode of "reflective expression" that circumvents language altogether. For this reason, Miriam's and Gabriel's painted portraits embody the silences and insinuations associated with visualizing personhood, thus conveying the nonverbal intimacies that lie in the oceans below.

Working upon Gabriel's portrait, Nick confronts the limits of what he, as an artist, can see. While painting Gabriel, Nick realizes "that he had never *seen* his subject before. . . . What was revealed was the difficulty – what he saw was not the measurable mask but the ambiguous meaning. He had taken things for granted which literally were not there, and he found things there – except that he couldn't catch them – which he had not hitherto counted in or presumed to handle" (474). If a portrait is intended to depict "the measurable mask" by which a sitter or subject presents themselves to the world, Nick only sees "the ambiguous meaning" beneath. Such "ambiguous meaning" constitutes what Ruth Bernard Yeazell has termed "James' portrait-envy," which for her is the notion that "a great portrait could provide . . . an immediacy unavailable to the art of the novelist."[68] In *The Tragic Muse,* this "immediacy" involves the semblance of unguarded psychological interiority that influences, but certainly exceeds, the "measurable mask" which Miriam wears as a literal performer, but also which Gabriel, and even Nick, wear when negotiating Victorian London. A portrait's "immediacy" suggests not only the impression of seeing a person in the immediacy of a glance or look, but also the purported sense of knowledge, or intimacy, unmediated by language. Hence if Nick realizes that "he had never *seen* his subject before," that missing sight refers to his inability to peer behind the mask for signs of inner life. Unable to glean

[68] Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Henry James's Portrait-Envy," *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 309–335, 314.

Gabriel's character from observation and study, Nick must render instead the space between the two men, effectively capturing a mutual relation rather than an isolated sitter.

Nick's portraits thus resist the rise of commercial photography in the late nineteenth century. Although critics and audiences frequently extolled photography as an objective medium, characters in *The Tragic Muse* regard painting as a more appropriate venue in which to represent themselves. By concealing or distorting themselves through various performances, Miriam and Gabriel treat painted portraiture as a performance in which one assumes a temporary persona. James drew upon Wilde's penchant for photography in depicting Gabriel's modification of portraiture. As we see in a photograph taken by Napoleon Sarony (figure 17), Wilde renders and obscures his body in equal measure. Taken during his 1882 lecture tour during which he and James met, the photograph hides Wilde's body beneath a draped cloak. Conjuring the outline of his body and the unclear regions beneath, the pose refuses to expose Wilde for his audiences in ways that uncannily anticipate the visual media and press coverage surrounding the 1895 trials.

Figure 17: Napoleon Sarony, *Oscar Wilde* (ca. 1882)

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

Yet unlike Sarony's photograph, Nick's portrait of Gabriel remains unfinished—a gesture that speaks to, I would argue, James' skepticism regarding the future of queer relations at the turn of the century. Although Nick and Gabriel are emphatic when it comes to marriage, they seem unable to commit to attempting other forms of sociability other than in the art studio. Although Nick's portrait sessions with Gabriel are as exciting as they are rare, the sessions cannot offer a rewarding alternative to Parliament or Julia Dallow. After calling off his engagement, Nick tells his sister that "I can't go on because I've lost my model" (479). Yet James—who mentions in *The Middle Years* (1917) that he has a "perhaps even extravagant aversion to loose ends"[69]—cannot account for Gabriel's mysterious disappearance at the end of the novel. Nick tells Bridget that he suspects "Nash has melted back into the elements – he's part of the great air of the world." In his imagining of his now-absent friend, Nick lapses into an Orientalist reverie in which Gabriel "has gone to India and at the present moment is reclining on a bank of flowers in the vale of Cashmere" (480). Recalling Avis' painting of the Sphinx in *The Story of Avis*, Nick's fantasy renders sexual difference and aesthetic experience as incompatible with Victorian England. Much like Wilde's relocation to France and Italy after his release from prison in 1897, Gabriel seems most at home outside of England.[70] As "a protogay, protocamp character"[71] who resembles the flâneur, Gabriel meanders through the cosmopolitan societies of Paris and London but remains at odds with both.[72] After his mysterious

[69] James, *The Middle Years*, 467.

[70] Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 525-85; Renato Miracco, *Oscar Wilde's Italian Dream, 1875–1900* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2020).

[71] Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity*, 76. On precursors of the aesthete in *Roderick Hudson* and *The Europeans* (1878), see 27–53.

[72] On the flâneur, see Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (New York: Penguin, 1972), 390–436; Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern*

disappearance, Gabriel is transfigured into Nick's fantasy vision and gradually fades away from the text. Nick's unfinished portrait is all that remains of the once unavoidable aesthete.

As a response to his loss, Nick turns to the unfinished portrait as an *ersatz* replacement for his missing muse. While scrutinizing the canvas, he searches for Gabriel's face, "imagining in the portrait he had begun an odd tendency to fade gradually from the canvas." Nick "couldn't catch it in the act, but he could have ever a suspicion on glancing at it that the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little – for all the world as in some delicate Hawthorne tale – and making the surface indistinct and bare of all resemblance to the model" (475–76). Recalling Nick's reference to Racine's *Phèdre*, James couches homoerotic desire in terms of cultural artifacts—this time, to Hawthorne's "The Prophetic Pictures" (1837), a tale that features a renowned artist who can peer into his sitters' innermost selves while painting them. As one of his customers remarks, the artist can portray, "not merely a man's features, but his mind and heart. He catches the secret sentiments and passions, and throws them upon the canvass, like sunshine—or perhaps, in the portraits of dark-souled men, like a gleam of internal fire. It is an awful gift. . . . I shall be almost afraid to sit to him."[73] Nick aspires to possess this "awful gift" of peering into "the secret sentiments and passions" of sitters and displaying them on canvas. But just as he suspects that "he had never *seen* his subject before" (474), Nick can only render Gabriel in partial terms. To be denied access to Gabriel's physical presence is tantamount to being denied his "secret sentiments and passions" that emerge over the course of their collaborative, social activity. Hawthorne's tale considers a form of aesthetic production that

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Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire, ed. Michael W. Jennings and trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[73] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Prophetic Pictures," in *Tales and Sketches*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Library of America, 1982), 456.

exposes and bares sitters' innermost selves through painting, but James ventures even further in imagining depths and secrets that elude even visual capture.

Nick's substitution of Gabriel with his portrait speaks to the novel's imagining of queer relations as a speculative terrain that remains unfinished. As somebody who prides himself upon his ability to "rove, drift, float" (30), Gabriel poses a representational crisis to Nick. The figure of the homosexual aesthete appears out of sync with the late nineteenth century, at least based upon Nick's incomplete painting. Nick's inability to portray his subject may speak to Nick's apprenticeship and developing sense of style, but, given his successful completion of Miriam's portrait, seems to reflect Gabriel's disappearance rather than Nick's burgeoning skill. The painting "suddenly filled [Nick] with an unreasoning rancor. He seized it and turned it about, jammed it back into its corner with its face against the wall" (481–82). Here Nick expresses something resembling shame and anger regarding his abortive attempts to paint his friend and live the life of a bohemian artist. Recalling the imagery of "the charm-compeller . . . ben[t] over his work" (13) in the Preface, Nick's flipping of the canvas suggests an unresolved ambivalence that refuses to disidentify with the work of art. Despite the "unreasoning rancor" with which he beholds the painting, Nick still retains it in his studio. As an emblem of his missing friend and a memento of their relations, the portrait allows Nick to remain living his double lives as both a respectable member of society and a secret devotee of the arts. Consoling himself with representations of desire rather than the desired people themselves, Nick surrounds himself with portraits that endure.

Gabriel's disappearance marks a refusal to accompany the nineteenth century into the twentieth, or, differently put, to forsake homosexuality. Whereas Miriam eventually achieves professional success and marries her stage manager, Nick and Gabriel end the

novel on decidedly anticlimactic notes—with Gabriel fleeing London, on the one hand, and Nick's undecided professional future on the other. (He appears uninterested in reconciling with his fiancée Julia.) Both men seek, from aesthetics and painting, a means to imagine forms of gender and sexuality other than what were available in Victorian England. Like Avis' painting of the ancient Sphinx or Stillfleet and Robert's refashioning of the Italian Renaissance in *Cecil Dreeme*, Gabriel and Nick profess anachronistic activities and attachments that are out of sync with the contemporary moment. In this regard, the two return to Oscar Wilde's jarring reception during his 1882 lecture tour, when illustrators and critics frequently rendered the Irish aesthete as incompatible with Gilded-Age America. To portray Wilde, illustrators and artists drew upon anti-Black minstrelsy, pseudo-Darwinian evolutionary panic, and anti-Irish simian caricature.[74] As historians have argued, Wilde's affected performance as an effeminate and flamboyant aesthete disrupted conventional representations of genteel manhood premised upon gentility and decorous restraint.[75] As early as January 1882, cartoons such as the *Washington Post*'s "How Far is It from This to This?" (figure 18) claim Wilde as a modern equivalent of "a citizen of Borneo." The accompanying caption frames Wilde as a regression that departs from evolutionary progress. The caption asks, "If Mr. Darwin is right in his theory, has not the climax of evolution been reached and are we not tending down the hill toward the aboriginal starting point again?" With a sunflower in his hand, the caricatured Wilde encapsulates a variety of anxieties and stereotypes regarding Aestheticism: its emphasis on reverie and daydreaming; its unorthodox depictions of gender and sexuality; its incompatibility with bourgeois and

[74] On the contested racial and ethnic status of the Irish during the late nineteenth century, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

middle-class white identity; its reverence toward genteel spectatorship; its fondness for extravagance and melodramatic flair. Contrasting "Mr. Wild of Borneo" and "Mr. Wilde of England," the image establishes Wilde as the antithesis to contemporary white American audiences often regarded as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress and civilization.

[75] Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 1–43; Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, 15–34; Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

We present in close juxtaposition the pictures of Mr. Wilde of England and a citizen of Borneo, who, so far as we have any record of him, is also Wild, and judging from the resemblance in feature, pose and occupation, undoubtedly akin. If Mr. Darwin is right in his theory, has not the climax of evolution been reached and are we not tending down the hill toward the aboriginal starting point again? Certainly, a more inane object than Mr. Wilde, of England, has never challenged our attention, whose picture, as given herewith is a scrupulously correct copy of a photograph put out with his sanction and which may be seen in all public windows. Mr. Wild of Borneo, doesn't lecture, however, and that much should be remembered to his credit.

Figure 18: "How Far is It from This to This?"

Washington Post (January 22, 1882)

Like Gabriel Nash, Oscar Wilde and Aestheticism posed a threat to evolutionary narratives by offering a form of masculinity that pursued sensual pleasure and decadent consumption. The implicit whiteness of these understandings of civilization can be seen most clearly in *Harper's Weekly*'s "The Aesthetic Monkey" (figure 19), which imagines the aesthete-dandy as a childlike monkey lost in fascination with a sunflower, the icon of the Aestheticism movement. By drawing upon the simian iconography associated with anti-Black caricature, "The Aesthetic Monkey" likens Aestheticism to an act of undisciplined, uncivilized reverie in which spectators cannot help but be enthralled by what they see.[76] Displaying the impressibility that Kyla Schuller argues characterized female, racialized, and queer embodiment during the nineteenth century, the cartoon portrays the simian aesthete as prone to laziness and naïveté in ways that recast its antithesis, the adult white male spectator, as a detached and disinterested beholder.[77] Anticipating Nick's "dreaminess" at the Palais de l'Industrie, the image positions the "Aesthetic Monkey" as the embodiment of wayward evolution ill-equipped to survive. These images reflect contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality that were shaped by a medical and scientific discourse. As the historian Jennifer Terry suggests, these early conceptions frequently defined homosexuals as "inverts" and "perverts," modern degenerates whose non-normative desires were outdated forms of sexual selection that had outlasted their evolutionary function.[78] Neither genteel nor virile, Wilde was deemed out of sync with contemporary manhood and thus a threat to teleological narratives of progress as to where American and white masculinity was heading. The threat

[76] On anti-Irish visual culture, see L. Perry Curtis Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, revised edition (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 29–67; Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

[77] Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

enjoying beauty posed to manhood speaks to the feminized passivity latent in how late-nineteenth-century critics regarded aesthetic experience. To behold rather than create gestures toward a more ornamental conception of activity that is content to appreciate and remain useless. *L'art pour l'art* imagines a form of pleasure that appears undecided about reforming for a better future but rather staunchly committed to relishing the present. As a member of Parliament, Nick stands on the cusp of contributing to England's future in the twentieth century. Gabriel's and Nick's respective departures from Victorian London signal James' ambivalence regarding the fate of the professional artist who must rely upon an audience that seems apathetic about the artist.[79]

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[78] Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 74–119; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[79] As Martha Banta argues, the late nineteenth-century American novelist remained skeptical about the professional artist's success in the United States. Frank Norris' *Vandover and the Brute* (written 1894–95), Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) and *Martin Eden* (1909), and Theodore Dresier's *"The Genius"* (1915) portend professional failure. See Banta, *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 177–228.

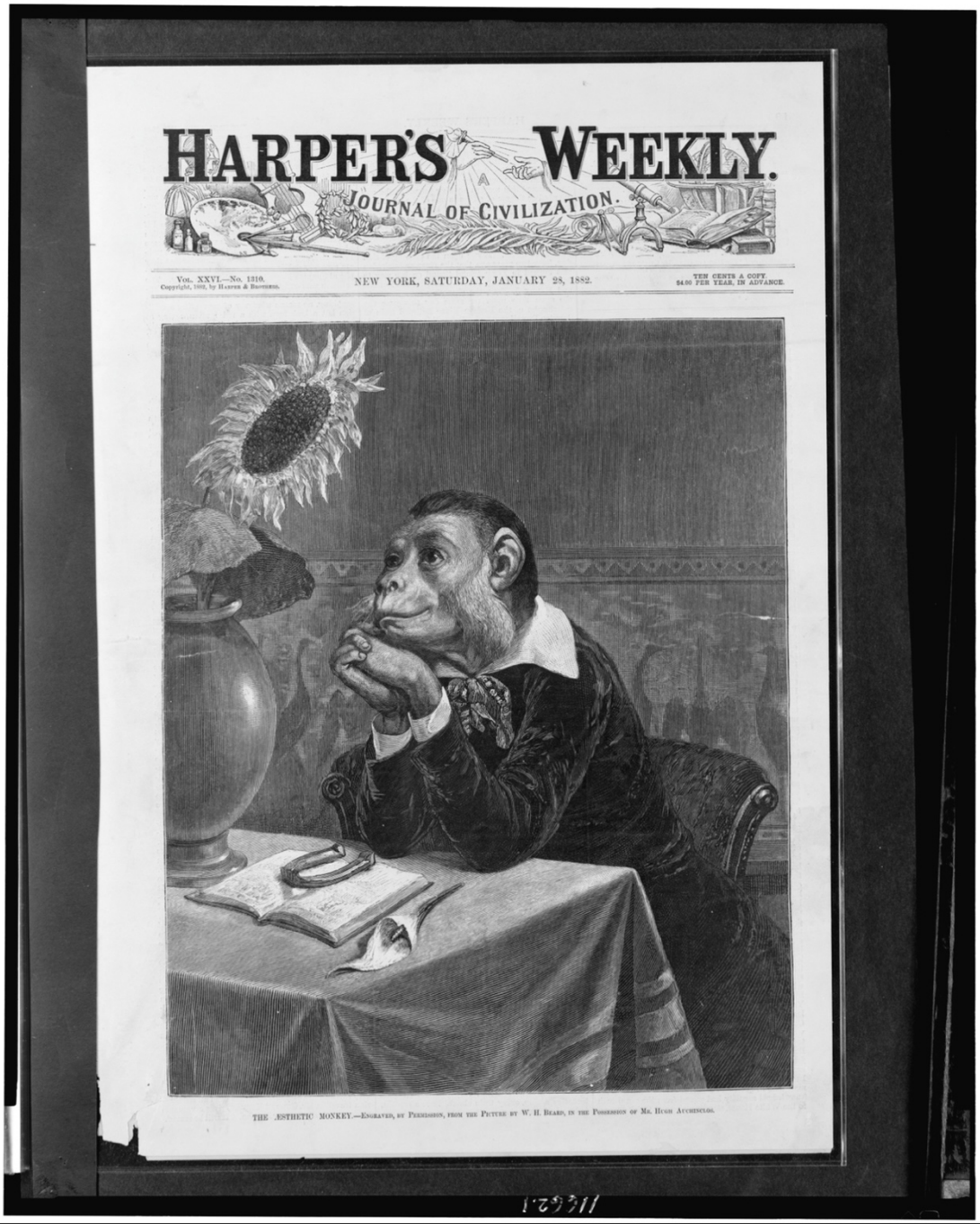

Figure 19: William Holbrook Beard, "The Aesthetic Monkey"

Harper's Weekly (January 28, 1882)

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

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Conclusion: The Art of Opting Out

(This is the secret of James's novels: we can live only because we have missed our life.)
—Giorgio Agamben,
The Use of Bodies[80]

As I have been arguing, James understood sexuality in strikingly aesthetic terms. As depicted in *The Tragic Muse*, artists feed the "art-appetite" through visual representations of other people that enable spectators to inhabit more experimental forms of experience and relation that resist being translated into speech. For the myriad connoisseurs and aficionados in James' fiction, to "miss" one's life does not amount to having not lived, especially when it comes to aesthetic experience that exists adjacent to the quotidian. The fine arts offered a retreat from the modern world that often involved Orientalist and fantasies of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference. Critics and historians have excavated a rich culture of idyllic or pastoral literature in nineteenth-century American literature, often couching this tradition as a conservative retreat from the forces of industrialization and urbanization.[81] Recently, J. Samaine Lockwood has claimed this anachronistic impulse as a source of queer expression, one in which spinsters, the unmarried, and same-sex roommates took an avowed interest in restaging the past using elaborate costuming and props in ways that recall the theatricality of *The Tragic Muse*.[82] Much like the antiquarian desires of *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon* and *Cecil Dreeme*, these queer figures venture into a fantastic past that seems more forgiving when it comes to more capacious forms of gender and sexuality. Just

[80] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 133.

[81] T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[82] J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

as Gabriel Nash opts out from the nineteenth century by departing for "the vale of Cashmere" (480), his historical counterparts sought, and eventually forged, temporalities and geographies beyond the contemporary.

This retreat into the Orientalist pastoral was foundational, I argue, to rise of queer cultural expression. As we see in the work of the photographer of F. Holland Day, the pastoral proved fertile ground on which to imagine queer relations and attachments. Born in 1864 and active in New England, Day advocated for photography as a dignified medium on par with painting.[83] Day incorporated pictorial and theatrical styles associated with painting in his amateur photography that constitutes a private archive of homoerotic portraiture that resonates with the homoerotic dynamics of *The Tragic Muse*. Much like Nick's painting, Day's photography emerges from an amateur perspective. Fueled by the invention of the Eastman Kodak "point-and-shoot" handheld camera in 1888, Day self-trained and experimented with photography in the privacy of his own home.[84] Day's photographs recall the dramatic style of *The Tragic Muse* by rendering sitters as if they were characters. In photographs such as Figure 20, Day's model, Nicholas Giancola, poses as Saint Sebastian. Giancola's performance as the wounded martyr refashions Sebastian for the sake of male beauty. Day's citation to Sebastian allows the photographer to depict his model, Giancola, posed somewhere among pain, death, and orgasmic bliss. On the one hand, Day's photograph descends from an art-historical tradition of religious-sexual iconography that includes Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52). Yet on the other hand, Day's photograph refashions Sebastian to stage an explicitly homoerotic gaze under the

[83] This attitude influenced his co-founding of the publishing firm Copeland and Day, which he ran from 1893 to 1899 and oversaw the American publication of Wilde's *Salomé* (1894) featuring illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley.

auspices of Christian sainthood. Day's work exists somewhere between portraiture and pornography, as the photograph reenacts Catholic martyrdom and renders Giancola's striking beauty in dignified, culturally sanctioned ways.

[84] On the rise of amateur photography, see Reese V. Kenkins, "Technology and the Market: George Eastman and the Origins of Mass Amateur Photography," *Technology and Culture* 16, no. 1 (1975): 1–19; Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 364–83.

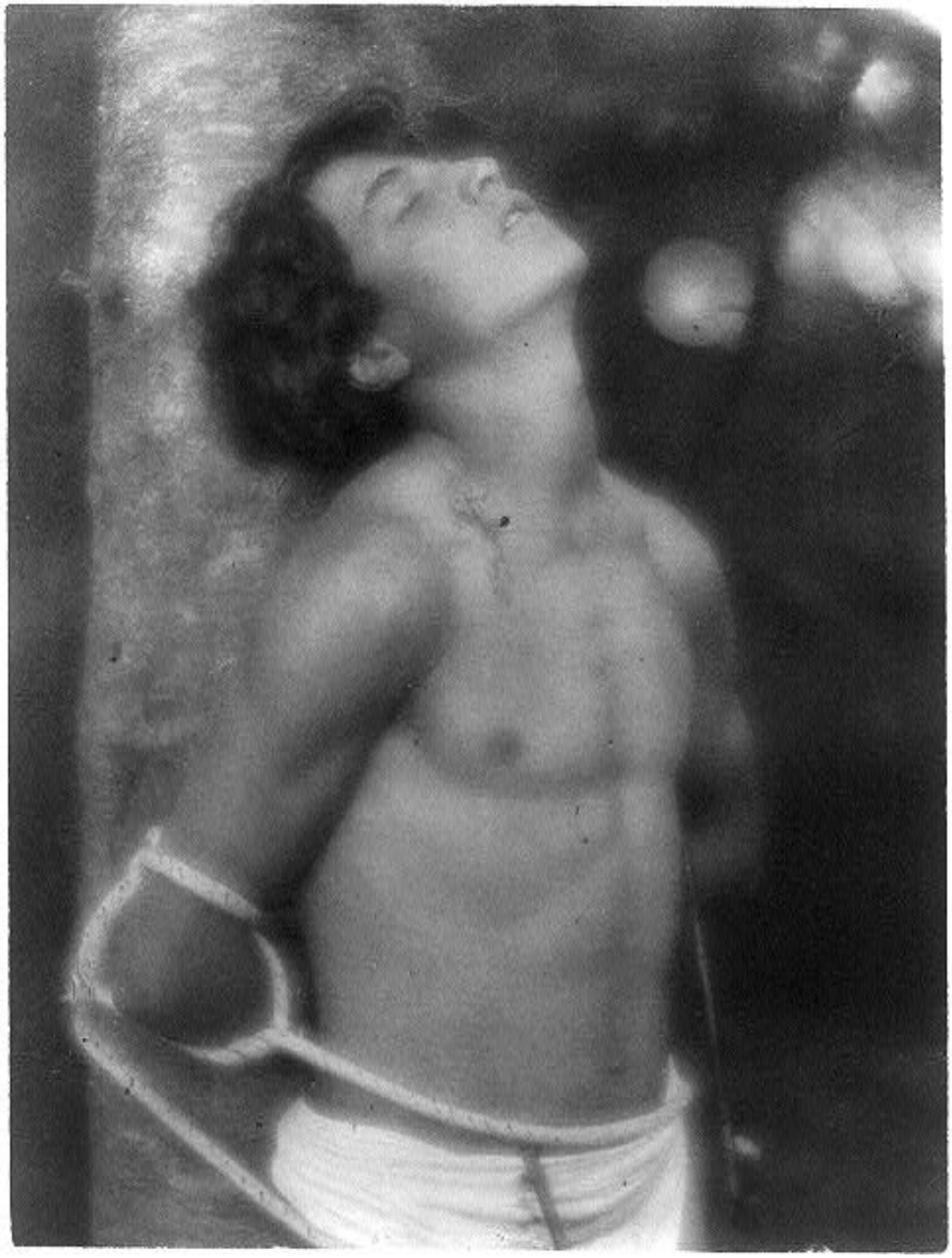

Figure 20: F. Holland Day, Untitled (1906)

The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection

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By curating a fantastic realm ostensibly far removed from nineteenth-century America, Day's photographs project same-sex and queer desire onto exotic and anachronistic environments. In photographs such as Figure 21, Day stages queer beauty as an Arcadian idyll embodied by a nude pubescent boy (Sidney Sergent). Such pastoral imagery presents male beauty against a backdrop of bucolic leisure in ways that recall Thomas Eakins' *Swimming* (1885; figure 22). Here, male nudity strips both images of any concrete historical reference point so that viewers might infer that the scenes occur in a bygone past devoid of technology or industry.[85] As Eakins' swimmers leap into the air and dive into the water below, they recall Gabriel's description of swimmers plumbing the aquatic, murky depths. In this regard, prelapsarian imagery works in tandem with the teleological and evolutionary narratives that animated American cartoonists' response to Wilde's 1882 lecture tour. Although Day's photograph and Eakins' painting render male beauty in Arcadian and Classical terms, the historicity of these images lends itself to imagining this as a bygone, nostalgic period that modern viewers can access and yet otherwise distance themselves from. As staged and meticulously crafted theatrical tableaux, both works curate a queer arcadia in contradistinction to the current day.

[85] As Christopher Looby has recently argued, Eakins based *Swimming* upon so-called "Dove Lake" west of Philadelphia, the site of a former mill. Looby, "See/Eakins/Swimming," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 3, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/see-eakins-swimming/.

Figure 21: F. Holland Day, Untitled (1896–97)

The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection

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Figure 22: Thomas Eakins, *Swimming* (1885)

Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas. Purchased by the Friends of Art, Fort Worth Art Association, 1925; acquired by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 1990, from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth through grants and donations from the Amon G. Carter Foundation, the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, the Anne Burnett and Charles Tandy Foundation, Capital Cities/ABC Foundation, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, The R. D. and Joan Dale Hubbard Foundation and the people of Fort Worth.

Significantly, Day's photography and Eakins' painting depict figures often turned away from the viewer. Recalling Nick's overturned, unfinished portrait of Gabriel or James' image of Nick "[bent] over his work" (13), these models withhold their faces from viewers and in turn suggest the representational crisis that queer identity posed to realist genres such as the novel and photography. That we see backsides rather than faces speaks to, I would suggest, an attempt to locate personhood beyond the face. At a time when visual culture

encouraged spectators to scrutinize facial expression for signs of inner character, these works evoke the so-called "sodomite" as a fully embodied and active presence. Turning away from the viewer as well as the artist, these figures seem unaware of their status as a represented muse or sitter. Much like Nick's failed attempt to render Gabriel on canvas, these works gesture toward a secretive or withheld subjectivity that thwarts the spectator. The nude figures appear unconcerned with their status as eroticized object. In strikingly ambivalent terms, Day and Eakins acknowledge the limits of what visual representation can convey: that we see bodies even as they turn away from us speaks to the hidden recesses of queer personhood that *The Tragic Muse* explores.

Painting and photography enabled Day, Eakins, and Nick from *The Tragic Muse* to render spaces that could sustain non-normative attachments. Recalling Avis' painting of the Sphinx, Day's photographs retreat from the present day and into an imagined past. Yet as we see in photographs such as Figure 23, the modern period was a necessary backdrop for these bucolic fantasies. The photograph depicts Day photographing a nude model (Theodore Thibideaux) against a backdrop of rock, brush, and sea. Ensconced in nature, Day and his model effectively "rove," "drift," and "float" into their surroundings in much the same way that Gabriel theoretically disappears to India. But in the photograph's top left corner, a pole and cables signal technologies otherwise incongruous with Day's staged arcadia. This interplay between fantasy and reality, history and modernity, extended into the twentieth century and intensified as artists and writers established homosexual communities in cosmopolitan locations including New York, London, and Paris.[86] Anticipating this more familiar history of queer modernism, artists and writers conjured queer sociability and intimacies through painting. In contrast to more mimetic media, painting and aesthetic

writing encompassed more fantastic and experimental subject matter. By offering a domain in which creativity and the imagination could push against verisimilitude, painting offered a stay against what was gradually assuming the form and culture associated with heterosexuality. Before the notion of a sexual orientation gradually took shape within legal, medical, and scientific discourses, aesthetics encouraged spectators to inhabit, however temporarily, alternate forms of looking and identification that exceeded the confines of a hetero- or homosexual gaze. Aesthetic writing in general, and the ekphrastic style in particular, hence constitute an archive that emerged prior to more recognizable forms of gender and sexuality and in which queer attachments could flourish.

[86] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994); Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer: A History* (New York: St. Martin's, 2019).

Figure 23: F. Holland Day, *Figure Work* (1912)

The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection

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