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Three Aesthetes in Profile:
Gilbert Osmond, Mark Ambient, and Gabriel Nash

It was in the late 1870s that aestheticism attracted the attention of the public as a vogue at the intersection of art and social life, acquiring that visibility - perhaps that primacy - that would culminate in the apotheosis of the *Yellow Nineties*, when Max Beerbohm consecrated the *annus mirabilis* of the movement by devoting an essay to it, entitled "1880". In that year Henry James was thirty-seven, and had definitely settled in London after his stay in Paris in 1875-76. James's attitude to aestheticism did not answer to any simplistic description, for the author was both deeply sensitive to the new cultural currents and constitutionally cautious. This is proved not only by his critical and theoretical essays, but also by his fiction, as is apparent from works such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81), "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884) and *The Tragic Muse* (1889-90).

All in all, these three texts represent a multifaceted literary rendering of the 1880s and may be regarded as James's answer to various phases of the "aesthetic adventure". In the 1870s, in fact, the impact of the new aesthetic sensibility was mainly felt in painting and poetry, thanks to James Whistler's chromatic experiments, his interest in Japanese blue china, and Algernon Swinburne's pagan inspiration, which was linked by the public to the sensuous medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites, stigmatized as the "Fleshly School of Poetry".¹ It was around 1880 that aestheticism became a sophisticated trend, as Beerbohm remarks when he describes the vogue "Beauty began to enjoy" in furnishing and fashion: "Dados arose upon every wall, sunflowers

and the feathers of peacocks curved in every corner, tea grew quite cold while the guests were praising the Willow Pattern of its cup," every ballroom boasted women dressed "in sinuous draperies and unheard-of greens", as well as "half a score of ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands" (Beerbohm 1930, 38-39). In 1880, however, Wilde was only twenty-six, and his works consisted mainly of uncollected poems. His American lectures, his plays, his novel, his tales, his revolutionary essays - the quintessence of aesthetic theory - were still to come, although Walter Pater's invitation to burn with a "hard, gem-like flame" (Pater 153) had produced a lasting echo.

Against this colourful and everchanging backcloth each Jamesian aesthete plays a highly individual role. Gilbert Osmond (whose sinister charm has been recently flavoured with a distinct propensity to lust and sadism by John Malkovich interpretation in Jane Campion's provocative film) embodies the cynical apologist of the *objet d'art*. Mark Ambient is qualified as the first great aesthetic novelist thanks to his *Beltraffio*, since "People had endeavoured to sail nearer to 'truth' in the cut of their sleeves and the shape of their sideboards; but there had not as yet been, among English novels, such an example of beauty of execution and 'intimate' importance of theme" (*Author* 4). Finally, the unflinching individuality of Gabriel Nash deconstructs the stereotypes that promptly crystallized around the aesthetic *coterie*.

In order to understand James's characters better, it may be useful to notice that each of them subverts in its own way the concepts of *cultural*, *national* and *gender* identity, according to a pattern that is typical of the *art-for-art's-sake* decades. Although it represents an English phenomenon, aestheticism is rooted in Italian culture, as Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) shows. The scholar is attracted by the Italian *Quattrocento* on account of its intellectual and artistic achievements, as well as its "general spirit and character" and its "ethical qualities" (Pater xxxii). The space and time coordinates of the Renaissance embody an ideal of art and life that *fin de siècle* British artists - following the example of the Pre-Raphaelites, - translated into renewed creative impetus: what Wilde calls "The English Renaissance of Arts", to quote the

title of one of his lectures. Moreover, we should not forget the debt aestheticism owes to the *art pour l'art* movement, whose apostle - Théophile Gautier - advocates the search for a form which eschews any form of utility.² Another important French forerunner is Charles Baudelaire, whose *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) is an exquisite hymn to evil, malaise, and malady, and whose translations reveal him to be the inheritor of a great explorer of hallucinatory states and subtle sensations: Edgar Allan Poe.³

These foreign influences combined with the powerful attraction Roman Catholicism had for the Oxford circles. No better example exists than the conversions of John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning, who were both made cardinals in the 1870s, or the case of Gerald Manley Hopkins, who was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1877. A similar tendency pervades Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) or Wilde's early poetry.⁴ In his "Sonnet on Approaching Italy", Wilde proclaims his adoration for the land "for which my life had yearned," but ends his eulogy with an attack on the Italian government, guilty of annexing Rome to the new state, thereby forcing the Pope to live in the Vatican as an exile:

But when I knew that far away at Rome
In evil bonds a second Peter lay,
I wept to see the land so very fair. (Wilde, 725)

Forces as far apart as Hellenism (in its classical and Renaissance version), French spirit, and Roman Catholicism conspired to undermine the cultural and national identity of Britain, which was superseded by a cosmopolitan artistic professionalism; the aesthete's adopted countries are in fact Bohemia, Utopia, the past, "elsewhere".

In the course of the nineteenth century, gender categories were likewise eroded. As early as 1835, Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* revived the myth of the androgyne. The process of blurring the traditional male/female opposition was accelerated both by the dandy and by the emancipation of women. A caricature by Grandville (from *Un autre monde*, 1844) shows gentlemen wearing fur muffs and shawls, while their ladies smoke

a cigar or a pipe, swinging an imposing cane or walking with their hands in their pockets (Grandville 31). Feminism was on the rise, and forty years later, while planning *The Bostonians* (1885-6), James described "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (*Notebooks* 47) as the most salient feature of American society in the 1870s and 1880s. In the meantime, an analogous desire for "male" freedom prompted European writers such as Aurore Dupin and Mary Ann Evans to choose the pseudonyms George Sand and George Eliot, just like the script of a modern *As You Like It*. James pokes fun at these mechanisms of reversal in "The Death of the Lion" (1894), where he introduces Guy Walsingham, the *authoress* of *Obsessions*, and Dora Forbes, the mustachioed *author* of *The Other Way Round*; and the narrator of the story cannot help but recognize that "in the age we live we get lost among the genders and the pronouns" (*Death*, 119).

As regards the aesthete - the Saint Sebastian of publicity, the pleased martyr of scandal, who walked the streets of London chaperoned by a lily or a sunflower - Sinfield remarks that this stereotype has an effeminate connotation, not necessarily a homosexual one. With reference to *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881) - the popular comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, where aesthetes are surrounded by adoring women - Sinfield concludes that "the manifest image of the aesthetic poet is that of lady-killer: he desires and is desired by women" (Sinfield 92). Conscious of the ambiguities inherent in the aesthete, who shuns the canons of cultural, national, and gender identity, we may now approach James's characters.

1. Gilbert Osmond, the aesthete of immobility

Serialized in 1880-81, *The Portrait of a Lady* coincided with a climax in the aesthetic vogue, which was literally in the limelight in those years, being the subject of various plays (among them *Patience*) and of George du Maurier's popular caricatures in *Punch*. According to Freedman, who sees Gilbert Osmond as a product of the satiric aura that surrounded aestheticism, the character sums up the aesthete's upward mobility: the will to break

class barriers thanks to his taste, his brilliant and cultivated conversation, his genius for art and social occasions. The aesthetic side of *The Portrait of a Lady*, however, is far richer, since, as Freedman claims, in the novel "aestheticism is understood as being an endemic - indeed epidemic - contagion." A symptom of this disease is a "reifying vision" (Freedman, 153), that is to say the tendency to regard others as *objets d'art*, as emblems of one's taste, and the consequent desire to place them in one's collection. What differentiates Osmond from Isabel and Ralph, therefore, is not so much his attitude as his motive, since he is selfish and cynical, while the others are disinterested and ingenuous. In the novel, human relations have been imprisoned in a vicious circle that is broken by the author when he chooses an open ending, since by abstaining from depicting Isabel Archer's destiny after her return to Italy, James refuses to close the frame that surrounds her portrait (Freedman 165).⁵

Starting from this general interpretation, I will investigate the profile of Gilbert Osmond, who is defined in negative terms right from the words Madame Merle uses to present him: "He's Mr. Osmond who lives *tout bêtement* in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything." (*Portrait*, III 281). Far from expressing Osmond's nature, this absence of relations is a mask, which happens to correspond to Isabel's romantic aspirations. When Merle explains to the young lady that all human beings have their "shell", made up of "one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps", Isabel refuses to be defined by external attributes. Giving voice to the Emersonian spirit, which privileges the individual over concomitant circumstances, the girl asserts: "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier" (*Portrait*, III 288).

The contrast between Isabel's naïve presumption (prompting her to cherish an ideal of life that seems satisfying only insofar as it is vague) and Osmond's ambition (causing him to regard the absence of social attributes as a symptom of privation, not of liberty) pivots on the concept of identity. Due to his exorbitant egotism, Osmond believes he is "the first gentleman in Europe"

(*Portrait*, IV 197). It is this model of sublime fineness that sets the tone of his Florentine abode - "a seat of ease, indeed of luxury, telling of arrangements subtly studied and refinements frankly proclaimed" - housing a rich collection of "chests and cabinets of carved and time-polished oak", "angular specimens of pictorial art in frames as pedantically primitive", and "perverse-looking relics of mediaeval brass and pottery" (*Portrait*, III 326-27). Osmond's attitude is redolent of Bunthorne's medievalism, which is dismissed in *Patience* as an affectation "Born of a morbid love of admiration" (Gilbert 164). As the female characters in the comedy, being prey to an aesthetic fever, reject the Dragoon Guards and contend for the poet's favours, so Isabel turns down two traditional patterns of male identity - Caspar Goodwood, the athletic American industrialist, and Lord Warburton, the supreme ornament of the British aristocracy - in order to privilege Osmond, whose charm is greatly enhanced by his *objets d'art*.⁶

And yet, although his interest in "primitive" works is typical of aestheticism, Osmond is above the poses stigmatized by satirists in those years. It is Ned Rosier and Madame Merle, rather, who are devoted to old china, Spanish altar lace, and Venetian leather, while Osmond's taste is more complex and refined. In this respect, James's treatment of his character reminds us of the canonic texts of decadence, from Huysman's *A rebours* (1884) to D'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (1889)⁷ and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), with their attention to objects and rituals.

The great adventure around which the first part of *A rebours* is centered is after all the *aménagement* of Des Esseintes's house in Fontenay, where the Parisian takes refuge to perform solipsistic sensorial experiments, according to the Baudelairian motto *Anywhere out of the world* (Huysmans 45). Likewise, in *Il piacere* the furnishings of Palazzo Zuccari reflect Andrea Sperelli's nature, which is described by D'Annunzio with these words: "E poiché egli ricercava con arte, come un estetico, traeva naturalmente dal mondo delle cose molta parte della sua ebrezza."⁸ Andrea Sperelli, however, is an aesthete and a Latin lover at the same time, and his house represents "un perfettissimo teatro" where he may stage his love affairs, a backcloth whose seductive power ensnares Andrea

together with his victims, "a simiglianza d'un incantatore il qual fosse preso nel cerchio stesso del suo incantesimo"⁹ (D'Annunzio 20).

With decadent sensibility, the gilded mouldings of the frame prevail over the painting, the opulent *décor* draws the attention away from the drama that is being acted out. This is what happens in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Dorian's emotions are amplified by gestures and objects that become almost an end in themselves. With the aim of concealing his portrait, the young man theatrically envelops it in a piece of drapery once used as a pall: "a large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work that his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna" (Wilde, 96). This passage bears witness to Huysman's influence on Wilde, a debt the author acknowledged by introducing into his novel a "yellow book" that becomes Dorian's guide to aesthetic excess. Interpreting its spirit as literally as possible, Dorian buys it in nine copies and has them bound in various colours "so that they might suit his various moods" (Wilde 102).

In the aesthetic set of values, objects have a primary role in shaping identity - which is "a form of representation," as Dryden points out (Dryden 127) - and identity takes on the static quality of an object of art. A case in point is Dorian, whose beauty becomes immutable, while his portrait carries the traces of age. Another character in the novel, Lord Henry, remarks that the exercise of thought is sufficient to corrupt beauty, concluding with a witty paradox that among successful men only prelates maintain their looks, since "A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen" (Wilde 19).

The attitude of Wilde's characters does not substantially differ from Osmond's viewpoint, since the utmost desire of the Jamesian aesthete is to become an unalterable icon of ritual and power: "the Emperor of Russia", "the Sultan of Turkey," "the Pope of Rome" (*Portrait*, III 382). Similarly, after attracting Isabel's interest, Osmond feels like an "anonymous drawing on a museum wall", in which an enlightened critic has finally recognised the touch of a master (*Portrait*, IV 12). In other words, Osmond is ready to become an object of aesthetic fruition, inasmuch as Isabel is

willing to "discover" him, thus sanctioning his value. The young lady, in turn, becomes worthy to figure "in his collection of choice objects" (*Portrait*, IV 9) only after refusing the hand of a great nobleman: Lord Warburton. Not only does Osmond conform to the aesthetic injunction "to make one's life a work of art" (*Portrait*, IV 15), but he applies this principle to his wife Isabel and his daughter Pansy, whose innocence he regards as a "plastic" (*Portrait*, IV 84) quality. The rift between husband and wife is due to the fact that Isabel - unlike Pansy, who is docile and easily "moulded" - has an identity of her own, the main feature of which, moreover, is a claustrophobic fear of intellectual, emotional, and physical confinement.

While Osmond's profile tends towards the fixity of a portrait,¹⁰ Isabel is afraid of any "closure". By a tragic misunderstanding, she is drawn to the man because she finds it difficult to define him: "Her mind contained no class offering a natural place to Mr. Osmond - he was a specimen apart" (*Portrait*, III 376), while Goodwood and Lord Warburton are all too predictable. What Isabel desires is an ever-changing self, a ready and enthusiastic acceptance of experience. That which she refuses is a predetermined role. This is apparent from the metaphors James attributes to the young woman, whose idea of happiness corresponds to a journey towards unknown lands: "A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see" (*Portrait*, III 235). This space with no limits - an adolescent dream that is destined to prove unrealistic¹¹ - turns into a nightmare when she marries Osmond: the "infinite vista of a multiplied life" is now reduced to a "dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end" (*Portrait*, IV 189).

Isabel, a creature of the air, is imprisoned within the massive walls of Palazzo Roccanera, "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (*Portrait*, IV 196). Yet her eventual captivity was already implicit in her first visit to Osmond's villa, which "looked somehow as if, once you were in, you would need an act of energy to get out" (*Portrait*, III 364). Osmond is a gravitational centre, a sort of black hole, the master of enclosed spaces. His talent for furnishing enables him to create a perfect

setting for exclusive social rituals, aimed at magnifying his taste and status, thus satisfying his will to power. It is his ability and desire to dominate the domestic space that connects the refined Osmond with Gothic villains, turning him into a jailer whose coercive means are not violence and locks, but a respect for conventions and appearances which is as inflexible as it is cruel.

Osmond's attitude, in fact, may be described as the look of Medusa ("It was as if he had had the evil eye" (*Portrait*, IV 188), Isabel meditates) because he reduces people and feelings to their "shell", depriving them of their vital core. This debased form of aestheticism deeply contrasts with the attitude of Ralph Touchett, Osmond's real antagonist, according to a nineteenth-century critic in whose opinion the book should have been entitled *The Portrait of Two Gentlemen*." Ralph says to Isabel: "One ought to feel one's relation to things - to others. I don't think Mr. Osmond does that" (*Portrait*, IV 71), summing up what in Jamesian terms is a capital sin. Insensitive, egocentric, and manipulative, Osmond is a real villain among whose victims one may count his accomplice Merle. And yet, a frustrated and disillusioned Isabel still defines the character as "The man with the best taste in the world" (*Portrait*, IV 193), unwittingly anticipating a comment that a few years later James was to refer in his own voice to another aesthete of doubtful morality: "ostensibly, transcendently, Signor D'Annunzio's *is* the most developed taste in the world" (*Gabriele*, 268). According to a contemporary reviewer, in fact, "Isabel Archer is only Mr. James in domino" and "Osmond is the sort of man to attract a female James"¹³ - a judgment echoed by Edel when he describes Osmond and Isabel as "two sides of the same coin, two studies in egotism - and a kind of egotism which belonged to their author" (Edel 1977, I 619).

To conclude that the novel reflects James's ambivalent attitude to aestheticism would be almost a truism. What is more significant is that the *aesthete-villain* (set against varieties of *connoisseurs* James draws with a more sympathetic pen, from Ralph Touchett to Ned Rosier) is marked by *immobility*: a concept embracing Osmond's indolence, his relationship with objects, the paralyzing influence he exerts on his family ("I don't want to see

you on your travels. I'd rather see you when they're over" (*Portrait*, IV 14), Osmond suggests to Isabel while courting her, thereby predicting the end of every material and imaginative journey) and the figurative language he uses.¹⁴ The sphere of immobility is also reflected in Osmond's frequent association with confined spaces and with the choice to settle permanently in Italy - a country that in his eyes "had spoiled a great many people", since it makes one "idle and dilettantish and second-rate" (*Portrait*, III 371). The coincidence between Anglo-Saxon identity (Osmond is of American origin) and the Italian dream decrees the failure of the Jamesian aesthete: a numbing of moral and intellectual faculties, a sense of exile from the latest currents of art and thought.

Thus, Osmond's mercenary marriage to Isabel may be seen as the last stage of a descending curve, mirrored by his paintings. When James first introduces his character the reader's attention is drawn to a watercolour representing the Alps (*Portrait*, III 347); when Osmond is last seen he is intent on copying "the drawing of an antique coin" (*Portrait*, IV 352), whose artistic value scarcely conceals its commercial one. In the symbolic geography of the Jamesian novel, by abstaining from crossing the Alps, Osmond refuses to bring aesthetic and ethical values together,¹⁵ and by marrying Isabel he commodifies his life, which is his most precious artwork - by the author's standards - he twice fails in his aesthetic career. This failure is sanctioned by Isabel, since what this "enlightened critic" discovers in the "anonymous drawing" she has bought is not an unknown masterpiece but an aesthetic sham.

2. *Mark Ambient, the aesthete of "elsewhere"*

A controversial and ambiguous story,¹⁶ "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884) has generated a wide range of imaginative critical interpretations, such as the case of Mary P. Freier, who sees in the death of Dolcino - the climax of the story - no more than a trick, "albeit a rather unpleasant one", played on a "susceptible and egotistical narrator". (Freier 309). The dividing line between traditional and more innovative and recent readings is the attempt to bring James out of the "closet" where, according to the image coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, criticism kept him till the

advent of gay studies. And yet, if an appreciation of James's work and life that takes into account the unavowed aspects of his personality commands our interest and respect, the self-assurance of certain *misreadings* induces caution.¹⁷

Labelling Mark Ambient as the *aesthete of "elsewhere"* means recognizing a hiatus between the man and the writer, for although Ambient imaginatively projects himself into the space and time of "elsewhere" (Renaissance Italy)¹⁸ with which he identifies as an artist, he continues to live in all other respects as a perfect Englishman. It is this split which provides space for the narration to grow. Unlike Osmond, who has lost the marks of Anglo-Saxon identity,¹⁹ taking on the hybrid tone of a cosmopolitan, Ambient is presented as "at once an English gentleman and a man of genius" (*Author*, 7).²⁰ That *at once* dynamic (i.e. the coexistence of attributes not easily reconcilable) represents the main feature of the character.

The same can be said of Ambient's house, described by the narrator with a curious play on words: "Mark Ambient called his house a cottage, and I saw afterwards he was right; for if it hadn't been a cottage it must have been a villa, and a villa, in England at least, was not a place in which one could fancy him at home." The image of the building evokes once more a tension: a coincidence that is hinted at and denied. And yet, we should not underrate the presence of an observer behind this account, for the story is reported by a young American inclined to an aesthetic rewriting of reality. Thus when readers are told that the garden walls, covered with creepers, looked as if "copied from a masterpiece of one of the Pre-Raphaelites," they are expected to detect in this remark not only the clue to an aesthetic *genius loci*, but the impression of an observer who tends to interpret reality in terms of artifice: "That was the way many things struck me at that time, in England - as reproductions of something that existed primarily in art or literature" (*Author*, 8). In the eyes of this Yankee of Wildean faith, Ambient's wife resembles a portrait by Joshua Reynolds or Thomas Lawrence (*Author*, 26); while the writer's sister corresponds to the stereotype of the Pre-Raphaelite woman, whose aspect is studiously medieval. Her face is "pale and angular", her dark hair is "intertwined with golden fillets and curious clasps"; she wears a

"faded velvet robe" cut "like the garments of old Italians". In short, she suggests "a symbolic picture, something akin even to Durer's *Melancholia*." (*Author*, 24) As regards Ambient's son, Dolcino, his Italian name reveals a dangerous affinity with his father's work, as the narrator acknowledges when he declares: "He's like some perfect work of art" (*Author*, 21).

Through the misdirected enthusiasm of their American guest, the "aesthetic temperature" (*Author*, 28) of the Ambients intensifies to paroxysm. As Brooke K. Horvath claims, "the master, as his greatest creation, produces the perfect protégé, who in turn invents the masterfulness of his master" (Horvath 102); but this reflexive mechanism has devastating effects in the story, since by inducing Mrs. Ambient to read her husband's "immoral" works, the clumsy admirer contributes to the death of little Dolcino, who is sacrificed to his mother's stern Calvinism. At the origin of this chain of events there is a fundamental mistake: the narrator's tendency to project the artist onto the man, breaking the basic law of the Jamesian ethic of reading: "The artist's life is his work and this is the place to observe him" (*Death*, 119). Mrs. Ambient's mistake does not differ from the narrator's, both in her former superstitious holding off from her husband's novels and in her later purifying frenzy. It is the *at once* dynamic that proves first embarrassing then tragic, since the narrator and Mrs. Ambient both believe in the coincidence between the artist and the man, while in James's view they represent two distinct "beings", as is symbolically rendered in "The Private Life" (1892), where the writer Clare Vawdrey is made up of two parts: the literary genius (who is perpetually bent on working at his desk) and a social alter ego.

Ambient's duplicity, the conflict which divides him from his wife, the privileged relationship between the writer and his American disciple - all these elements provide the ground for Leland S. Person's reading, aimed at showing that "Where the boy evidences the creative power of heterosexual desire, Ambient's writing (at least to the adoring narrator) represents the creative or recreative potential of homoerotic desire" (Person 191).²¹ This interpretation, moreover, is in tune with the model who inspired Ambient: John Addington Symonds (the author of the *History of the*

Renaissance in Italy, 1875-86), who had abandoned his family to settle in Venice - with a gondolier.²² While approaching the text it is important to take these implications into account, without forgetting that they are present only as allusions, for the homoerotic tension the story seems to imply is latent, that is to say directed towards an "elsewhere". Although in his *Notebooks* James claims he has never read any of Symonds's works, labelling them as "most *undesirable*," the mysterious *pruderie* of these words is followed by the project of a short story whose comparatively banal subject is the conflict between art and British Philistinism. The author, in fact, describes Dolcino's predicament with these words: "The father wishes to make him an artist - the mother wishes to draw him into the church"; and if the ecclesiastical ambitions Mrs. Ambient entertains for her son are aimed at expiating something, it is only the "godless ideas in the literary career of the father, who, however, is perfectly decent in life" (*Notebooks*, 57).

Ambient's more or less guiltless failure as a father and a husband is counterbalanced by his triumph as a writer, for his literary meditations repeatedly echo the tenets James proclaims in his critical and theoretical essays. This artistic achievement may be due to the distance that separates Ambient from his ideal, according to the process described by James in another artistic parable: "The Real Thing" (1892), where a painter paradoxically finds two low-class models more inspiring than two aristocrats corresponding in every detail to the subject of the picture he wants to paint. The real thing in art and literature may prove dangerously sterile, because it inhibits the imaginative tension that the artist translates into representation. James, in fact, conceives art as a personal view of reality, advocating a manner halfway between the mechanical adhesion to the real professed by Naturalist writers and the visionary choice of Wilde's aestheticism.

Finally, "The Author of Beltraffio" is not exempt from an autobiographical element, since Ambient is an aesthete in terms of taste, but a gentleman in life, embodying a compromise between eccentricity and convention that mirrors James's own attitude to art and life. Although this precarious balance will almost estrange Ambient from his wife, we know that James's writers can hope for

very little understanding on the part of their spouses, whose only interest in their literary output is the amount of money they may get from it (we need only think of Mrs. St. George in "The Lesson of the Master", 1888). "The Author of Beltraffio" may be therefore described as yet another parable in favour of the Jamesian religion of art, an ideal of celibacy not exempt from misogynous and homoerotic nuances. With a final touch of tragedy (mingled with irony) James has Mrs. Ambient die at the end of the story, not before reading her husband's works, leaving Ambient defeated as a man, but certainly not as an artist.

3. *Gabriel Nash, the itinerant aesthete*

Centered on the conflict between art and the world, *The Tragic Muse* (1889-90) is the story of two young people, Miriam Rooth and Nick Dormer, asserting their respective vocations for the theatre and painting. The novel also features Peter Sherringham - a diplomatist who first helps Miriam become an actress, then tries to dissuade her from acting so that she might marry him - and Julia Dallow, who harbours the design to make a great politician of her beloved Nick. The tension is increased by Gabriel Nash, who persuades Nick to abandon Parliament and devote himself to art.

In a novel where conflicts and "parties" play a major role, the theme of identity is already highlighted in the opening scene, set at the annual Salon of Art in Paris, when the Dormers are described by an impersonal "foreign observer" (*Muse*, VII 16) - an exquisitely Jamesian narrative ghost, who testifies to the author's obsession with the point of view - as "striking products of an insular neighbourhood" (*Muse*, VII 3). Whereas the Anglo-Saxon origin of the Dormer family is written in capital letters in their appearance and behaviour, that is far from the case with Nash. Meeting him for the first time, Nick's sister, Bidy, judges him to be "a gentleman unlike any other gentleman she had ever seen" (*Muse*, VII 22), adding that she would have taken him for a foreigner if his words had not "imposed themselves as a rare variety of English" (*Muse*, VII 23). Once again, the aesthete's identity is elusive, for Nash combines the traits of the gentleman with a continental aura immediately denied by his perfect mastery of English; and when

Biddy - after listening in silence for a little while - suspiciously asks: "Are you then an aesthete?" she obtains a negative answer whose scope is certainly wider than she thought: "I've *no* profession, my dear young lady. I've no *état civil*. ... Merely to be is such a *métier*, to live such an art; to feel such a career!" (*Muse*, VII 33)

Nash's words echo Pater's invitation to enjoy aesthetic impressions *per se*, apart from any artistic or theoretical elaboration - "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (Pater 152). To defend this philosophy of life against Nick's teasing accusations, Nash coins the following syllogism: "Being is doing, and if doing is duty being is duty" (*Muse*, VIII 26). Unlike those people whose success depends on their achievements, he opts for detachment, for a pagan ascetics whose target is the refinement of perception: "People's actions, I know, are for the most part the things they do - but mine are all the things I *don't* do.... All my behaviour consists of my feelings" (*Muse*, VII 31). These words reveal an affinity between Nash and Osmond, who is himself devoted to a negative life, to indifference, to what he labels as "my studied, my wilful renunciation" (*Portrait*, III 381). Having chosen abstention as the guiding principle of their lives, the two characters lack a circumscribed identity; but while in Osmond this is a symptom of inner frigidity and of inordinate self-esteem, in Nash it is a sign of an authentic aesthetic calling, which renders him indifferent to any social conditioning.

What is more, the uncompromising individuality of Nash ("He doesn't shade off into other people; he's as neat as an outline cut out of paper with scissors") (*Muse*, VII 81) marks even his relation to the aesthetic movement (*Muse*, VIII 22), as Nick explains while describing Lady Dormer's view of his friend:

She has the darkest ideas about it - the wildest theories. I can't imagine where she gets them; partly I think from a general conviction that the 'aesthetic' - a horrible insidious foreign disease - is eating the healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!) and partly from the charming pictures in *Punch* and the clever satirical articles, pointing at mysterious depths of contamination, in the other weekly papers. She believes there's a dreadful coterie of uncannily artful and desperately refined people, who wear a kind of loose faded uniform and worship only beauty - which is a fearful thing; that Nash has introduced me to it; that I now spend all my

time in it, and that for its sweet sake I've broken the most sacred vows. Poor Nash, who, so far as I can make out, isn't in any sort of society, however bad!

Although Nash replies to Nick's harangue with a mock confession ("I do worship beauty. I really think it's me the weekly papers mean") (*Muse*, VIII 212), James's solitary "merman" (*Muse*, VII 169) is far from representing a malevolent caricature of the aesthete, or "the great piece of satire in the book" (Edel 1960, xv),²³ as Blackmur claims. The character is certainly not lacking in ambiguities; but he also gives voice - like Ambient - to artistic principles that frequently recur in James's work, as Edel recognizes when he writes: "behind his suavity and his epigrams, his Walter Paterism and his *dolce far niente*, Gabriel Nash talks undiluted Henry James."²⁴

When Nash encourages Nick to accept his artistic calling, arguing that we must recognize the "instrument" that each of us "carries in his being" - his definition of his own talent is both lucid and frank: "To speak to people just as I'm speaking to you" (*Muse*, VIII 27). In other words, Nash is depicted by James as a spokesman for the aesthetic conscience, a herald of beauty, who is endowed with a preternatural intuition that allows him, as Freedman remarks: "to give voice to that in Nick that Nick will not - cannot - accept" (Freedman 184). *Gabriel Nash* is an archangel of art sent to philistine England to convert it, an ethereal being, a spirit perpetually burning with the sacred fire of aesthetics, or even a *jinn*, not unlike those we meet in *The Arabian Nights*. Nash's journeys, in fact, are directed to places associated with fairy-tales rather than reality. From his first appearance, the aesthete claims *not* to live in the nineteenth century, and to stay in London only when he is not in Samarcand (*Muse*, VII 25), while at the end of the story Nick imagines his absent friend "reclining on a bank of flowers in the vale of Cashmere" (*Muse*, VIII 419).

Whereas Osmond's immobility results in a paralyzing influence, Nash's volatile nature (a feature the character partly owes to Herbert Pratt, on whom he is modelled) does not prevent him from exerting a beneficial stimulus on Nick. Faithful to the slogan of the *itinerant aesthete* - "Where there's anything to feel I

try to be there!" (*Muse*, VII 27) - Nash repeatedly disappears to travel to exotic countries, but when his presence is needed he reappears as if by magic, confirming his commitment to the role of artistic mentor: "He emerged out of vagueness - his Sicily might have been the Sicily of *A Winter's Tale* - and would evidently be reabsorbed in it; but his presence was positive and pervasive enough" (*Muse*, VIII 22).

In spite of Nash's formative influence, however, his profile remains a puzzle even for Nick, as the young man realizes when he asks his friend to pose for a picture: "What was revealed was the difficulty - what he saw was not the measurable mask but the ambiguous meaning" (*Muse*, VIII 409). This mercurial spirit does not agree to submit to the artistic vision, to be imprisoned by the fixity of a portrait. "He was so accustomed to living upon irony and the interpretation of things that it was strange to him to be himself interpreted", Nick reflects, when he becomes aware of his friend's uneasiness, concluding: "From being outside of the universe he was suddenly brought into it" (*Muse*, VIII 410).

Although Nash has been the constant object of Nick's admiration (only vaguely tinged with suspicion), under close scrutiny his figure seems to diminish. Acting as an initiator, Nash is at the same time at a higher and a lower level than Nick and Miriam: for he is interested only in the theoretical aspects of art, while the two artists are more attentive to the technical and operative aspects: the "simplifications of practice" (*Muse*, VIII 395). Being the genius of aesthetic conscience implies not only indifference to any compromise with a Philistine society, but also with the concrete side of art. Therefore James prepares the apotheosis of hero and heroine by having Nash disappear "without a trace," like "a personage in a fairy tale or a melodrama" (*Muse*, VIII 412). This sudden exit from the scene of the novel is caused by yet another confrontation on the theme of "doing". When Nick asks his friend how he will face old age, the prophet of "being" refuses that concept as a corollary of the prejudice that imposes action, but for him "there'll be no collapse, no transition, no clumsy readjustment of attitude; for I shall only *be*, more and more, with all the accumulations of experience, the longer I live"

(*Muse*, VIII 411).

After this disagreement, the influence of Nash on his friend weakens, and his portrait symbolically starts fading, as if "the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little" (*Muse*, VIII 412). Nick ranges it together with other canvasses, and when a few months later he picks it up, he realizes that every likeness is gone, reflecting that Nash himself "has melted back into the elements" (*Muse*, VIII 419). Just then, Bidy announces that Julia - the Muse of Politics - will come to Nick's studio to pose, and the young man betrays an expression which "denoted a foreboding that was not exactly a dread, yet was not exclusively a joy", turning the portrait of Nash to the wall with "unreasoning rancour" (*Muse*, VIII 422). The *heart* gets the better of the *art*. At the end of the story, the itinerant aesthete looks defeated; but there are no real winners in this supposedly happy ending. The price Nick has to pay in order to reconcile painting with Julia's hand is compromise (that is, abjuring artistic perfection and its advocate, Nash). The same can be said of Miriam, whose theatrical success is based on her marriage to her impresario. Once again, James refuses to reduce his characters to the fixity of a one-dimensional destiny.

4. *The dynamics of aestheticism*

James's treatment of the aesthete has revealed the existence of an underlying dynamics of art. Of the various combinations of elements such as *immobility / mobility*, *here / elsewhere*, the one corresponding to realism (*immobility + here*) is out of the question in the works where James comes to terms with aestheticism. While realism traditionally implies the coincidence of the artist's creative drive with the surrounding reality ("They who made England, Italy or Greece venerable in the imagination, did so by sticking fast where they were", Emerson claims) (Emerson, 54), James himself turns to an "elsewhere", insofar as he is an expatriate who has renounced depicting the American "real" in favour of portraying Americans in Europe, Europeans in America, Britons in Italy, and so on. Likewise, a journey to Italy, the Middle East or North Africa rates among the formative influences in the lives of several nineteenth-century painters and literati - an experience linked to

the colourful contaminations in Alma-Tadema's antiquarian pictures (where classical architecture is the backdrop to Victorian visages), Lord Leighton's mediaeval Italy or Eugène Delacroix's exotic scenes. Even Flaubert, the avatar of realism, after publishing *Madame Bovary* (1857), chose ancient Carthage as the setting for *Salammbô* (1862). In other words, along with realism, a form of art rooted in romanticism thrived in mid-century, combining *mobility* with *elsewhere*. We need only think of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Wilkie Collins's *Antonina, or, the Fall of Rome* (1850), or George Eliot's *Romola* (1863), set in fifteenth-century Florence. It is in this borderland between a Victorian frame of mind and a geographic/historical elsewhere that the germ of aestheticism develops. A case in point is Walter Pater, who sets the life of Marius the Epicurean during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, but conceives the story as a Victorian *Bildungsroman*, with a rich autobiographical element.

Returning to James's characters, by permanently settling in Italy, abjuring his Anglo-Saxon origin, Gilbert Osmond betrays both his aesthetic calling (the combination between *immobility* and an Italian *elsewhere* seems fatal for James's artists, as is shown by Roderick Hudson's and Theobald's stories)²⁵ and James's ethical imperatives. After all, Italy is not only the country of Leonardo, but also of Machiavelli, the arch-fiend of the Renaissance.²⁶ On the other hand, Mark Ambient and Gabriel Nash derive their artistic vibrations from the interplay between Anglo-Saxon identity and foreign spirit, be it linked to former times or exotic latitudes. This in-between-ness testifies to James's affinity with aestheticism, but the author, like Nash, is a "merman wandering free" (*Muse*, VII 169). Although there is a little of James in Osmond, in Ambient and in Nash, the personality of their creator is too multifaceted to be reduced to the profile of an aesthete.

¹ This label was coined by Robert Buchanan in *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, a pamphlet published in 1871.

² "Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien" (Gautier 23).

³ Poe's stories, which were to be illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley in the 1890s, represent an important antecedent of aestheticism, because of their decadent aura as well as the author's interest in perceptions and objects. This latter element is also apparent in the essay entitled "The Philosophy of Furniture" (1840), which anticipates Wilde's American lectures on house decoration.

⁴ According to Chris Baldick, Pater develops "Arnold's tendency to jettison Christian theology in favour of its liturgical consolations". After quoting an essay where Arnold writes that the man of imagination and the philosopher "will always have a weakness for the Catholic Church", Baldick remarks that in *Marius the Epicurean* Pater extends this concession to ritualism "into a celebration of Pagan and Early Christian ceremony, looking forward to the 'aesthetic charm of the Catholic church'" (Baldick, 51-2).

⁵ Fabi, however, argues that "Isabel's enclosure occurs on a narrative level as well in that *The Portrait of a Lady* is framed by the initial and final absence of the lady and by the comments of others about her" (Fabi 7).

⁶ This is apparent from Isabel's first visit to Osmond. Subsequently, the acute Mrs. Touchett remarks that her niece would be able to marry Osmond "for the beauty of his opinions or for his autograph of Michael Angelo" (*Portrait*, IV 396).

⁷ The relation between D'Annunzio and Anglo-Saxon culture was extensively analysed during a conference held in Pescara in 1988. From the numerous essays that make up the proceedings of the conference (which have been published under the title *Gabriele D'Annunzio e la cultura inglese e americana*), I would like to mention Barbara Arnett Melchiori's "The Early D'Annunzio in England", Alberta Fabris Grube's "La fortuna americana di D'Annunzio" and Sergio Perosa's "Henry James on D'Annunzio".

⁸ Since he was researching with art, like an aesthete, he derived from the world of things a great share of his intoxication."

⁹ "like an enchanter who has been trapped in the circle of his own spell."

¹⁰ In a recent essay on the function of the portrait in nineteenth-century literature, Sergio Perosa argues that nineteenth-century art gradually abandoned its mimetic connotation and became a parallel world, a rival creation (think for example of the story told by Zola in *L'Oeuvre*, 1886). Thus, the uncanny, dangerous portraits described by Hawthorne, James, Stevenson and Wilde may be regarded as symbols of the anxiety generated by the conflict between an all-absorbing cult of art and the claims of life (Perosa 106).

¹¹ Isabel's revolt is actually founded on a rather conventional vision of society and gender identities. As Fabi proves by analysing Isabel's attitude towards the opposite figures of Pansy and Henrietta Stackpole, "The female model Isabel upholds, at the same time that she believes herself exceptional enough to discard it temporarily, derives from the traditional, constrictive prototype of the pious, pure, submissive, domestic 'true woman' that dominated the first part of the nineteenth century" (Fabi 3).

¹² Unsigned review (*Spectator*, November 1881) (Gard 95).

¹³ H.A. Huntington (from a review in *Dial*, January 1882) (Gard 111).

¹⁴ I am referring to the oft-quoted passages where Osmond, conversing with Ned Rosier and Madame Merle, makes use of a refined *double entendre*, apparently talking about china, while actually referring to Isabel and Pansy. The two scenes are in Chapter XXXVII (*Portrait*, IV 104) and XLIX (*Portrait*, IV 337).

¹⁵ As Carl Maves points out, James "always insisted on judging England, France and America morally, as exponents of civilized values and wielders of power whether intellectual or political; Italy, in contrast, represented only aesthetic values" (Maves, 153).

¹⁶ In his essay, Guido Fink underlines the pervasive ambiguity of "The Author of *Beltraffio*", where most details may be interpreted in a variety of ways. The critic also successfully argues that this epistemological uncertainty reveals an underlying equivalence between the opposite poles of the story, since Mark Ambient's art and his wife's morality prove equally artificial and unnatural (Fink, 16-17).

¹⁷ Leland Person's reading of certain Jamesian metaphors in "James's Homo-Aesthetics: Deploying Desire in the Tales of Writers and Artists" is a case in point. On the other hand, after writing this essay I came across a brilliant article where Leland Monk analyses "the mechanisms of homosexual panic at work in James's response to the British aesthetic movement" (Monk 247), with particular reference to John Addington Symonds and "The Author of *Beltraffio*". Monk recognizes that there is an "ambivalent and finally deadly circuitry of homophilia and homophobia wiring the narrative of this lurid little tale about a specifically homoerotic love of beauty" (Monk 248), never losing sight of the interplay between desire and restraint that accounts for the ambiguous tone of the story.

¹⁸ "The time that was dear to him beyond all periods, the Italian cinque-cento" (*Author*, 30).

¹⁹ "You would have been much at a loss to determine his original clime and country ... If he had English blood in his veins it had probably received some French or Italian commixture" (*Portrait*, III 328-29).

²⁰ In "The Lesson of the Master," Paul Overt meditates on the relationship between the gentleman and the artist, drawing this conclusion: "He noted that oftener than in France and in Germany his artist looked like a gentleman - that is like an English one - while, certainly outside a few exceptions, his gentleman didn't look like an artist" (*Lesson*, 14).

²¹ The homosexual undertone of the story was not lost on some turn-of-the-century readers. In 1914 Max Beerbohm remarked: "We are not told what exactly was the title of that second book which Ambient's wife so hated that she let her child die rather than that he should grow up under the influence of its author; but I have a queer conviction that it was *THE DAISIES*" (Beerbohm 1920, 109-10).

²² James had become interested in this Italianate aesthete through Edmund Gosse, who had told him about the estrangement of Symonds from his wife, perhaps leaving out the problem of the writer's sexual preferences, and imputing the failure of their marriage to a purely "ideological" conflict (see Edel, II, 188-91 and Kaplan, 301-3).

²³ "He falsified in the name of truth, degraded in the name of purity, made vivid sloth in the name of hard work, he enslaved in the name of independence, he was the aesthete in the name of art" (Blackmur 9).

²⁴ Edel's judgment is echoed by Freedman who regards Nash as "James's most expansive and sympathetic representation of the aesthete" (Freedman 182).

²⁵ See *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and "The Madonna of the Future" (1873).

²⁶ The ambivalent attitude of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon travellers to Italy is highlighted by Cristina Giorcelli, who describes them as tightrope walkers perpetually oscillating between attraction and repulsion, admiration and diffidence (Giorcelli, 10). Likewise, according to Agostino Lombardo, "Italy is first and foremost, for James, a metaphor of art" (Lombardo, 231), but it is also "an experience of sorrow" (Lombardo, 235). Thus, in James's Italian works, "we can distinguish the double process by which through the representation of life, and beauty, and joy we are led to the vision of death" (Lombardo, 238).

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