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Portrait of an Act:

Aesthetics and Ethics in The Portrait of a Lady

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More than a hundred years have passed and still we are left wondering “Why,” to rephrase Dorothy Berkson, “Does Isabel Return to Osmond?” Readers have puzzled over this since the novel was first published in 1881, and the question continues to polarize critics today. There has been no shortage of reasons proffered. Strong arguments have been made across the ethical spectrum, ranging from fear, misguided renunciation, pragmatic realism, a mature acceptance of suffering, or a renewed sense of responsibility towards Pansy that obliges her to return to the “house of darkness, the house of suffocation” (360).<sup>1</sup> Like most critics, I take this question to be central for understanding the novel’s overriding concern which, again with others, I consider to be the philosophical problem of Isabel’s freedom.<sup>2</sup> But I find that the very persistence of the question of her return, and our collective inability to answer it satisfactorily is emblematic, indeed the result, of our prevailing critical tendency to regard the novel as a novel of education, specifically as a female *Bildungsroman*.

The elementary structure of the *Bildungsroman* is well known. It involves a developmental narrative during which the hero undergoes a series of (usually painful) experiences that teach her about herself and the world, resulting in an ethically-charged

change in consciousness at the end. Its narrative pattern typically follows what M.H. Abrams describes as an “Hegelian” model of negation and recuperation: “the Idea [. . .] evolves through its component aspects, the ‘fluid’ thoughts or ‘concepts’ [Begriffe], which inevitably move out of themselves to the extreme of their own antitheses, only to return into themselves on a higher level so as to constitute ‘self-movements, circles.’”<sup>3</sup> It is clear that this basic structure seems admirably to fit The Portrait of a Lady whose “bipolar” pattern, and its accompanying synthesis through the device of “spiral return” has been noted by Daniel Fogel.<sup>4</sup> In Fogel’s influential reading, the novel is found to correspond with a Romantic pattern of innocence and experience, and it is indeed clear how indebted James was to such dialectical narrative devices when we look again at the various polarities presented by the novel: Isabel’s story can be told in terms of the oppositions between life and art, the real and the ideal, youth and maturity, the private and the public, America and Europe, self and other, necessity and freedom. But the problem facing the reader intent on seeing Isabel’s story through the narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman*, however, is that nobody seems to agree on exactly what it is that Isabel “learns.”<sup>5</sup> Every critic seems to have his or her own reason for Isabel’s return, which implicitly throws the entire pedagogy of the novel into question. If we don’t know what Isabel learns, perhaps James doesn’t either, with the result that Isabel’s “education” is still up for grabs.

Why do the putative reasons given for Isabel’s return to Osmond invariably seem so inadequate? It is because, by reading her decision through the narrative teleology of the *Bildungsroman*, they implicitly *aestheticize* what must be understood as an absolutely *ethical* act. Despite the *Bildungsroman*’s explicit “ethical” aims, a closer look at its

narrative structure will show how it actually precludes us from understanding Isabel's act as a true act of freedom, a strictly ethical act in Kantian terms. Combining Berkson's with my own formulation, the question divides itself between why Isabel first marries Osmond and, secondly, returns to him at the end? The answers, as I will argue below, are found in two very different conceptions of freedom. Isabel first marries Osmond on aesthetic grounds. She returns to him on ethical ones. But as we will see, the ethical grounds for this second choice are far removed from the ethical aims of the *Bildungsroman*.

But before exploring the ethical implications of the *Bildungsroman* as a model for a narrative pattern, I want to note the extent to which the question of ethics has reasserted itself in contemporary criticism over the past decade. As Lawrence Buell puts it in his introduction to a special PMLA issue on Ethics and Literary Study, ethics is fast becoming "the paradigm-defining concept [of the 1990s] that textuality was for the 1970s and historicism for the 1980s."<sup>6</sup> The origins of this "revival of ethics" in critical discourse are many, of course, but we can identify some of the major moments marking this shift which can be loosely grouped as follows: the continuing interrogation of the political and ethical implications of deconstruction, as witnessed by Jacques Derrida's recent works addressing more overtly 'political' concerns, as well as his dialogues on ethics with Emmanuel Levinas; the critical legacy of Michel Foucault, whose examination of the discursive constructions of subjectivity has been invaluable in re-orienting criticism toward the critiques of ideology and the construction of the "other" which the studies of gender, class and race have adopted as their mandate; the politicizing of psychoanalytic concepts by the so-called "new Lacanians" such as Slavoj Zizek and Joan Copjec, and the concomitant refocus of attention on Lacan's Ethics and Encore Seminars in formulating a concept of an

“ethics of psychoanalysis.”<sup>7</sup> What is common to each of these diverse critical practices is that they are all concerned, in one way or another, with critiquing what has come to be called the “metaphysics of presence” whose founding principle is the philosophical concept of identity. Thus Levinas’s philosophical concern to found an ethics of alterity on the Other shares with more deliberately “politically” oriented theory an interest in finding ways of relating to otherness that do not involve the violent subsumption of difference to identity.

It is just such a concern that drives one of the more interesting recent readings of James’s The Portrait of a Lady by Jonathan Freedman for whom the novel presents an education in Isabel’s aesthetic “seeing.” For Freedman, the novel tells the story of Isabel’s aesthetic education, throughout the course of which she is led to reject what he calls Osmond’s reifying “aesthetic vision” and to embrace a more “ethical” mode of seeing at the end of the novel. Through her recognition of the commonality of suffering, Freedman argues, Isabel asserts her own aesthetic vision which grants her an “embeddedness in historical process, her own participation in the human community” (162). I want briefly to examine this essay because I believe it presents explicitly what is only implicit in many of the critical responses that trace the novel’s trajectory in terms of the narrative of ethical progress or *Bildung*. This is the view that holds the aesthetic as having a specifically ethical function to the extent that it is empowered to reconcile social and epistemological antagonisms. The teleological narrative of *Bildung* is unthinkable without the help of a recuperative aesthetic capable of redeeming bad or damaged individual experience for a wider social gain.

Let us look briefly at Freedman's argument in order to identify the features of the reconciling or "redemptive" aesthetic. Freedman divides the aestheticism in the novel between what he calls the bad, "Osmondian" reifying aesthetic which is characterized by a violent objectification of other people into works of art, and Isabel's "higher" form of aestheticism in chapter forty-two where, in a state of heightened perception, she discovers the truth of her relationship with Osmond. This heightened state of perception, Freedman argues, is homologous with Pater's conception of aesthesis in which "a 'quickened, multiplied consciousness' comes into powerful visionary being" (160). Accordingly for Freedman, Isabel's vision in this chapter represents a form of perception which is "structurally different" from that of the Osmondian perceptual paradigm which seeks to force the objects of the world to serve as objects for "detached contemplation" (160). Rather, here Isabel achieves a moment of vision "experienced in, of and for itself" – a vision which, while detaching her from the world of objects, nevertheless allows her to "understand the nature of that world" (160). Yet even this form of aesthetic vision is still implicated for the critic in a negative, because potentially alienated, aestheticism. Such a vision, he argues, is open to the criticism that the transcendence achieved by consciousness alone effectively removes the self from the world, from contact with others, "from any possibility of action, indeed, from history itself" (161). Instead, Freedman offers a third version of aestheticism which he suggests sidesteps this critique: riding on the Campagna a few chapters later, Isabel is struck by the "sadness of the landscape" which seems to reflect her "sadness of mood." Recognizing in the ruins of Rome a place of human suffering, Isabel comes to an understanding of her own share in that suffering. As Freedman puts it, "Isabel achieves at this moment a humanizing vision in which her individual 'sadness' and the sadness of the scene connect to form an image of

commonality and community, not one of alienation and superiority” (Freedman 162). And such an aesthetic vision, Freedman asserts, possesses a certain ethical dimension to the extent that, through the uniting power of sympathy in suffering, it allows an encounter with others that respects their fundamental difference.

Perhaps now is the time to put my cards on the table and admit that I sympathize with Freedman’s desire to rescue the aesthetic from the powerful critiques mounted against its oppressive mechanisms, and its implication in the totalizations of systematic thought, found most tellingly in post-Kantian idealist philosophies and literary Romanticism. However, by answering Osmond’s “malevolent” aestheticism with a vision of community and the commonality of human suffering, Freedman unwittingly participates in the very tropes of the totalizing aesthetic he seeks to circumvent. For Isabel to find in nature a reflection of her own suffering is to call upon the most powerful master trope of the aestheticizing vision, the metaphor that enables the reconciliation of two irreparably severed worlds. It is to subscribe to the idea that a specular relation exists between the sensible and supersensible realms of nature and of mind (or Spirit). Metaphorizing the external world as a reflection of her own consciousness, Isabel is able to bridge Kant’s “immeasurable gulf” between the laws of nature and human freedom. But in order to do so, she must succumb to the violence of a reflective paradigm that, enabling one to see likeness in and through the fractures of difference, implicitly subsumes otherness under identity. In Freedman’s revised aesthetic, Isabel achieves her vision but only at the cost of the very ethical stance it was intended to promote (the respect for otherness). Tellingly, then, Freedman ends his essay with a gesture that confirms his allegiance to the traditional “aesthetic of redemption.”<sup>8</sup> Offering James’s stylistic form as a paradigmatic example of

the redeemed, or “ethicized” aesthetic, Freedman understands the novel’s refusal of closure – the unanswered question of why Isabel returns to Osmond – as the author’s attempt to allow his characters a measure of their own autonomy without being “enmeshed” by the author’s controlling vision. But when he argues that the effect of reading the novel is to give us the vaguely disquieting experience of “seeing a painted picture move” (163), Freedman resorts to what is perhaps the most grandiose (and ethically suspect) of all of the aesthetic fictions that purport to bridge the distance between the world and art, namely, Pygmalion’s gesture of bringing the aesthetic object to life.

Freedman’s argument is interesting mainly because I find it emblematic of this recent “ethical” trend in literary criticism that turns upon the philosophical problem of intersubjectivity, that is, the question of how to relate to otherness in a non-totalizing way.<sup>9</sup> What is useful about Freedman’s essay is the way it highlights what may often otherwise be obscured in many of these attempts to conceive of a non-violent relation toward otherness, namely, an unacknowledged dependence on aesthetic tropes such as reflection and recuperation which, if left unexamined, may work against the ethical solutions being sought after. As I will suggest in this paper, I believe Freedman is right to orient the question of ethics towards the aesthetic realm. James’s novel, however, provides a cautionary tale against the dangers of mistaking aesthetics for ethics.

# 1.

First, then, why does Isabel marry Osmond? Indeed, why does she marry at all, given the high value she places on her freedom? Critics have long noted how, at the



beginning of the novel, Isabel's freedom is conceived largely in negative terms. Isabel's peculiar vision of happiness – "A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads one cannot see" (PL 146) – gives body to this ideal of freedom as an on-going, open horizon of as yet unseen possibilities. Central to this ideal is the idea of choice. As Isabel tells her aunt, she wants to be free "So as to choose" (67). But, as Donatella Izzo points out, because any one choice would close off future choices, her ideal of freedom seems essentially to be the freedom *not* to have to choose.<sup>10</sup> Despite Isabel's prodigious enthusiasm for "life" there is a strange passivity or inertia in this concept of freedom, a trait which leads some critics, like Carol Vopat, to argue that her much touted "independence" actually masks an over-riding fear of the world (43). Ralph makes a similar observation when he gently chides Isabel in his often quoted statement, "You want to see but not to feel" (134).

Nevertheless, Isabel's decision to marry is heavily predicated on her understanding of this decision as an act of freely willed choice. Indeed, this "single sacred act" of her life (386), the choice of mate, is so frequently couched in devotional terms that we understand her choice to have almost religious significance for her. Why should choice be so significant for her? It is because choice is the means by which Isabel believes she actualizes her freedom. Tellingly, then, when Isabel refuses Warburton's suit, she justifies it to herself on the grounds that he had offered her no opportunity to consciously choose:

What she felt was not a great responsibility, a great difficulty of choice; it appeared to her there had been no choice in the question. She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free

exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining. (PL 101)

Similarly, the deprivation of freedom Isabel famously feels in Goodwood's company can be equated with his inhibition of her continuing right and ability to choose. Hence despite his protestations that he wants to marry her in order to make her free – "It's to make you independent that I want to marry you" (142), – to Isabel the kind of freedom he propounds is precisely the opposite of what she means. Goodwood imagines that a woman's independence is to be found in marriage which provides freedom from the social and economic constraints facing a young, unmarried Victorian woman in society: "An unmarried woman – a girl of your age – isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step" (143). As Berkson points out, for Goodwood freedom is assumed to be a "gift which he can bestow" (59). For Isabel, however, the issue is not pragmatic but transcendental. It involves an absolute freedom to judge and to choose her destiny, a freedom of mind which she finds all too restricted in Goodwood's company: "it was part of the influence that he had upon her that he seemed to take from her the sense of freedom. There was something too forcible, something oppressive and restrictive in the manner in which he presented himself" (PL 104-5). She finds him unyielding in the pressure he asserts on her, pressing his suit like a creditor assuring an economic obligation, as Isabel's frequent metaphors of debt imply: "there was something in having thus got rid of him that was like the payment, for a stamped receipt, of some debt too long on her mind" (144). His presence, "the stubbornest fact she knew," only serves to enforce her resolve "to avail herself of the things that helped her to resist such an obligation" (105). Simply put, he deprives her of her freedom to choose.

Much of Osmond's appeal, in contrast, is in the way Isabel perceives him as personifying the act of choice. When, after her first visit to the Val d'Arno, Isabel takes away the image of Osmond strolling on the terrace with Pansy, the image appeals not just for its aesthetic value – the Romantic “lowness of tone” and the “atmosphere of summer twilight” (PL 237) that Freedman points out in his critique of Isabel's early aestheticizing vision – but also, more importantly, because it presents Isabel with a tangible image of a life dedicated to the continual act of selecting and choosing: the life of the connoisseur. Meditating on the image, Isabel recognizes how it “spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly; of the choice between objects, subjects, contacts – what might she call them? – of a thin and those of a rich association” (237). Isabel imagines that life with Osmond will be liberating rather than confining precisely because, epitomizing choice itself, he impresses her with a sense of expansion and possibility. Their life together would be a walk in the “open air of the world, indifferent to small considerations, caring only for truth and knowledge and believing that two intelligent people ought to look for them together and, whether they found them or not, find at least some happiness in the search” (PL 359).

At the beginning of the novel, then, Isabel's love of independence and liberty is characterized by what Paul Armstrong notes is an “essentially futural” notion of freedom. Freedom, for Isabel, means inhabiting the state of possibility. This is a negative rather than positive concept of freedom, understood as an absence of limitation. Isabel believes she is free as long as there is nothing impinging on her continuing ability to choose, and her new inheritance comes to symbolize this concept of freedom. James tells us that, her “fortune [. . .] became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to

her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty” (PL 193). Her fortune incarnates the ideal of choice: “She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty [. . .]. The world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose” (PL 272-3).

However, Isabel rapidly comes to realize what Kierkegaard would consider the “spiritual sickness” attending her understanding of freedom conceived as boundless possibilities. For after the first deep thrill of inheriting the means for doing anything she wants wears off, Isabel takes to her traveling plans with almost a sense of desperation. Reflecting that having money gives her the means for “doing,” she finds she has no idea what she wants to do, and chapter thirty-one finds her roaming restlessly around the Mediterranean basin. James has Madame Merle dryly observe how “even among the scenes most calculated to suggest repose and reflection, a certain incoherence prevailed in her. Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup” (PL 274). After several months of such aimless movement, Isabel returns to Rome with a new sense of the value of limitation. James explains how, the “desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one’s energies to a point” (PL 297). It is at this point that she decides to marry, a decision which Isabel believes will “simplif[y] the situation at a stroke” (PL 297). For Isabel now believes she understands what Armstrong calls the paradox of freedom, namely, that one requires some limitation in order to be truly free. Freedom without boundaries, she discovers, is no freedom at all but rather a wearisome slavery to her immediate whims. By marrying Osmond, Isabel imagines she will expand

rather than contract her freedom – duty will give her a vehicle through which to articulate her freedom.

In fact, Isabel has simply now learned the lesson Madame Merle was trying to impart earlier in the novel when they first speculated on such "metaphysical" matters as whether or not one's "cluster of appurtenances" (175) could be deemed expressions of the self. Recall how Isabel, vehemently opposing Merle's view of the continuity between the self and its surroundings, asserts "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (175). Rejecting what she considers the arbitrary "conventions" of representational structures, Isabel nevertheless found herself unable to articulate what she imagines is her "essential" self: "I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me" (175). In a similar fashion, Isabel's much-touted "freedom" remains meaningless without some kind of stabilizing ground or duty which will contract one's "energies," impose some limitation on her as yet formless freedom. Otherwise, her freedom remains a purely abstract idea, without any actualization in the world. Discovering that she must accept representational structures in order to gain expression for her self, Isabel now also realizes that the promise of unbounded possibilities will remain unfulfilled as long as she refuses to make a choice. Isabel had wanted to be free in order to "see life" but she realizes "that one cannot do anything so general": "One must choose a corner and cultivate that" she explains to Ralph (288), "one must marry a particular individual" (293).

Isabel's choice of Osmond astonishes everyone except herself (and of course the two involved in the deception). But her choice makes perfect sense to Isabel for whom Osmond seems to embody precisely the perfect balance between necessity and freedom she seeks. Osmond, like Merle before him, strikes Isabel as succeeding in the delicate task of managing to retain "one's independence" in the face of the demands of social convention. They do so, not by rejecting necessity out of hand, but by embracing it. In their easy submission to the "language" of manners, Osmond and Merle appear to Isabel to expand the possibilities of self-expression: "To be so cultivated and civilised, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it – that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self" (166), a trait Isabel resolves to try to emulate when she finds herself secretly exclaiming "I should like awfully to be so!" (165). Isabel finds Osmond the perfect counterpart to Merle's "greatness." His very fastidiousness in observing social conventions appears to put him beyond them, enabling him to achieve the appearance of exquisite naturalness: "Everything he did was *pose* – *pose* so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse" (331). What makes Osmond so attractive to Isabel is that he appears to have found the solution to her philosophical dilemma. Rather than rejecting the limitations of (linguistic, social) structures, Osmond identifies with them, confiding to Isabel "I'm not conventional: I'm convention itself" (265). But in this way, through the paradoxical embrace of limitation, he appears to carve out a space of originality and freedom within the social network he inhabits. And, as Armstrong points out, this is precisely the promise that the aesthetic holds out. Art, he explains, especially in the formal rigors of poetry, is a unique example of how the free adoption of limitation has the paradoxical effect of opening up the possibilities of expression (114).

In her portentous conversation with Ralph in chapter thirty-four, Isabel lists her various reasons for choosing Osmond. Where Ralph sees only a “small,” “narrow,” “selfish,” “sterile dilettante,” (291-2), Isabel finds Osmond’s “being so independent, so individual” a sign of his noble nature (290). Deliberately misunderstanding Ralph’s point about Osmond’s “smallness,” Isabel finds that quality to speak of his humility and indifference to the adulation of the world. Listing his qualities negatively, Isabel finds Osmond to have “no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort”(293). But despite the “smallness” of his possessions and position in the world, Isabel sees him inhabiting a far larger, richer, freer world than anyone she has yet met. What is it that gives Isabel this impression? It is because she makes the error of conflating his superior aesthetic sense with a superior morality. Why does she make this mistake?

As a fervent reader of German philosophy prior to her arrival in Europe, Isabel may well have had at least a passing acquaintance with the works of Friedrich Schiller whose popularization of Kant in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man finds in beauty a means for reconciling humankind’s conflicting sensuous and spiritual impulses. Extending the Königsberg philosopher’s claim that beauty forms a symbol for the morally good, Schiller’s contribution to aesthetic theory is to permit Kant’s unrepresentable or noumenal Idea of freedom to acquire phenomenal form in the aspect of an ethical community founded upon an appreciation of beauty. Through acquiring a taste for beauty, Schiller surmises, one is led from the state of nature to the state of freedom which for both philosophers is possible only through morality. Yet this morality is realized for Schiller not

through the harsh imposition of strict laws but, more gently and efficiently (or, as we might say now, “ideologically”), through desire. Seeing nature in the free but lawful state that is beauty, we *want* to shed our natural mode as primarily sensuous creatures and similarly enter into the bound condition of morality.

Pertinently, it is just such a mediating proficiency that underlies the ideal of *Bildung* which, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have shown in their monumental study The Literary Absolute, is similarly implicated in bridging two irreconcilable realms. Through the process of *Bildung* or self-formation, the individual merges with universal humanity by becoming an exemplary person, a tutelary figure whose singular narrative of coming-to-self nonetheless provides a model for all other individuals. Despite her disingenuous comment to Ralph, “if you look for grand examples of anything from me I shall disappoint you” (133), Isabel’s impassioned interest in her own self-development indicates the extent to which she has internalized the teleological narrative of *Bildung* in order to see her life in terms of a progression toward an ethical end. Recall how, at the beginning of the novel, Isabel “was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress” (56). Now, however, using the Schillerian logic she has imbibed through Merle, Isabel discovers that an ethical condition may be reached not through the application of prohibiting laws as she previously thought, (“It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel” 54) but, with Osmond as her tutor, through following the dictates of her own desire. As the telos of *Bildung*’s activity of self-formation, a man whose life is dedicated to cultivating himself, Osmond appears to Isabel as an ideal figure to emulate whose exquisite taste is simply the visible, outward reflection of his equally exquisite morals. It is this, more than anything, that convinces her of the rightness of her choice?



“You might know a gentleman when you see one” Isabel chastizes Ralph, “you might know a fine mind. Mr Osmond makes no mistakes! He knows everything, he understands everything, he has the kindest, gentlest, *highest* spirit” (PL 293) [my italics].

Armstrong argues that pride and idealism are responsible for Isabel’s choice; her decision is the result of her basic self-deception. Believing she has understood freedom’s lesson – the paradox of the “servile will” – Isabel imagines she is freely accepting limitation but rather, in marrying Osmond, she is, in fact, “attempting to defy limitation in the guise of accepting it” (Armstrong 112). Armstrong cites Ralph’s suspicions about Isabel’s choice of Osmond as being the result of a “fine theory” she has invented about him but, as Armstrong puts it, the problem is “it is too much a theory, and it is simply too perfect” (113). He explains, “[a]lthough she is binding her will by devoting herself to Osmond, Isabel’s pride in accepting restraints blocks any sense that she is actually going to be limited. Romantically imaginative still, she senses only the possibilities of which she will avail herself” (113). Armstrong is right, I believe, to pinpoint Isabel’s choice as the result of a “fine theory,” but this stems less from her pride than from her mystified idea of the relation between ethics and aesthetics. Believing she is making an ethical choice, Isabel marries on *Bildung*’s aesthetic “fictitious theory,” namely, that a motivated relationship pertains between moral and sensuous realms whose nadir is found in the man of taste, or the beautiful soul. Where Goodwood represents (among other things) the demands of sensuous impulse, while Warburton, despite his liberal tendencies, personifies the claustrophobic constraints of pre-existing social and moral systems, Osmond presents himself as the perfect (Schillerian) combination of both. As Ralph observes, he is “the

incarnation of taste” (PL 291): he is what Hegel would call the “living concept” of aesthetic ideology, of beauty’s ideal synthesis of both sensible and supersensible realms.

Driven as she is by such aesthetic concerns, it is not surprising that Isabel should choose Osmond over her other suitors. Osmond shows Isabel how to reconcile her ideal of freedom within the constraints of necessity: they would transform themselves into works of art. As Isabel reflects ruefully later, they “had attempted only one thing, but that one thing was to have been exquisite. Once they had missed it nothing else would do; there was no conceivable substitute for that success” (PL 386-7). The problem of course, which James presents with such exquisite irony in his portrayal of Osmond, is that such an aesthetic solution is accomplished only by disguising the violence with which this synthesis is ultimately forged. The violence with which Osmond inflicts his will on everything in his sight is in fact no arbitrary or capricious facility but the underlying truth of what De Man calls aesthetic ideology that succeeds in yoking together two irreconcilable realms. James’s Osmond ironizes the hidden truth behind *Bildung*’s ethical/aesthetic ideal, namely, the violence of a will that wreaks havoc on everything under its purview.

Of course, as a parody of some of the worst excesses of late Victorian aestheticism, Osmond represents simply James’s satiric commentary on contemporary aesthetic matters. However, as with all parodies, it only works to the extent that it contains a grain of truth. The deep insight that James has us discern through Osmond is the way the fantasy of aesthetic reconciliation remains just that, a fantasy that purports to seamlessly integrate the realms of nature and freedom while at the same time veiling the underlying violence by which this apparent synthesis is achieved.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, with respect

to my earlier contention regarding the critical tendency to read The Portrait of a Lady in terms of a novel of development, James's Osmond ought simultaneously to direct a revitalized attention to the mechanisms by which the *Bildungsroman* itself secures its reconciliatory narrative goals. For to the extent that he embodies the telos of the *Bildungsroman*'s ideal of *Bildung*, Osmond's obscene will to power obliges us to confront a similar will expressed structurally in the *Bildungsroman*'s drive toward narrative closure which, as Martin Swales observes in his influential study, typically follows an established pattern. Swales explains how the *Bildungsroman* "operates with a tension between concern for the sheer complexity of individual potentiality on the one hand, and a recognition on the other that the practical reality – marriage, family, career – is a necessary dimension of the hero's self-realization, albeit one that by definition implies a delimitation, indeed, a constriction, of the self" (28-9). Following Marc Redfield, what we might now call the "aesthetic ideology" of the *Bildungsroman* permits Isabel during her aimless travels suddenly to perceive how what had appeared to a constriction of the self is nothing but the actuality, i.e. the practical realization, of her freedom which is finally able to reach temporal and phenomenal expression in the public ritual of marriage. Incorporating the individual into the social body, for Isabel and other heroines of nineteenth-century fiction the beauty of marriage – the ultimate telos of the *Bildungsroman* – lies in the way it offers to realize the ideal synthesis of freedom and necessity, uniting under one term both individual desire (sensuous impulses) and the larger social Good (an ethical or moral community). In marriage, the individual's desire coincides with society's law, transforming what is essentially (as Osmond knows very well) an economic transaction into an expression of personal freedom. Like Schiller's beauty, the marriage contract elicits *voluntary* consent to society's limitations on the individual's erotic freedom by revealing

how, what appeared initially to be opposed (individual desire and duty), are really one and the same thing. But as The Portrait of a Lady makes clear, suggesting through the figure of Osmond what we need not wait until twentieth-century critics such as Adorno to point out to us, is the way such an apparently ideal synthesis is nevertheless founded upon a systematic suppression of individuality or, in Freedman's terms, "otherness." When Osmond conceives of Isabel as a prize specimen for his collection, anticipating how her imagination was to "ring" like a silver bell with the single tap of his knuckle, he performs a metaphorization that, in subsuming Isabel's difference under the sign of his own taste, reduces the "free keen girl" to a mere thing, a "representation", as Ralph discovers to his horror, of her husband. But similarly, in the aesthetic synthesis enabling the *Bildungsroman* to generate narrative closure in marriage, a similar subsumption occurs. When the protagonist leaves home and embarks upon a series of painful adventures, only to emerge from those experiences with a greater sense of self and ethical destiny – when, that is, the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* teaches the individual to sacrifice her presumptuous individuality and voluntarily submit to the greater Good of an ethical destiny within the larger social group by troping it as the realization and expression of her singular desire – the very same aesthetic ideology is in play that makes us blind to the potentially very real violence that may be inflicted in the name of that social Good; a violence upon which, as De Man has repeatedly shown, all such idealizing tropes as metaphorical resemblance, synecdoche, and symbol, not to mention sublime narratives of sacrifice and recuperation, and even, as we saw earlier with Freedman, the virtue of sympathy itself as a metaphorical transfer of affect, depend.

As a satire of aestheticism, then, James presents Osmond as the grotesque end-product of the aesthetic's fundamental promise to reunite the sensible and supersensible realms kept rigorously apart by Kant. But insofar as the man of taste embodies the telos of *Bildung*, even as a caricature James's Osmond simultaneously alerts us to the implicit violence through which the *Bildungsroman* attains its narrative goals. For if, as Freedman cogently points out, Osmond's virulent aesthetic vision brutally reifies people into objects, transforming them into works of art for the collector, so, too, does the apparently gentler (Schillerian) aesthetic of the *Bildungsroman* implicitly reify the individual's experience into an educative mission, recovering and transforming the singularity of Isabel's suffering into a universal moral lesson. It is for this reason, I submit, that readings of the novel that give a thematic reason for the mystery of Isabel's final return to Rome must fail from a (Kantian) ethical perspective. Reading her narrative through the teleological trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*, critics inevitably "pathologize" her decision, that is, give it some form of empirical content or "body" that provides the ground not only for her final choice, but also the yardstick against which our critical judgment of her ethical transformation is measured, enabling us either to celebrate or castigate her according to the pedagogical lesson she is seen to embody. From the narrative perspective of the *Bildungsroman*, in other words, Isabel's decision can only be approached in terms of the final anagorisis, the belated recognition of a previously unseen identity that enables her finally to integrate her individual pathos into the wider social body, regardless of how it is troped (as sexual fear, social responsibility, love of renunciation etc.). But, as Osmond ought to caution us, whether explicitly or implicitly the recognition of identity in narrative resolution is accomplished only by inflicting (and disguising) a certain violence or will to power onto the conditions of the narrative itself.<sup>12</sup> As Osmond directs us to see, at its ideological worst

the “spiral return“ of the *Bildungsroman* is driven by an ethically-suspect, pragmatic utilitarianism masquerading under an aesthetic fantasy of self-affirming free will.

2.

If, as I suggested, the various, contested reasons given for Isabel’s final return to Osmond have one thing in common, it is that each attempts to give her decision an empirical or as Kant would say, pathological content upon which our own critical evaluation (and, by implication, imitation) of Isabel’s ethical development is subsequently to be based. Thus although critics may individually disagree about the precise motivation for Isabel’s return, most are agreed at least upon the novel’s basic picaresque structure that unfolds along a developmental pattern of away/home, and welcome Isabel’s final decision as the collapse of an unrealistic idealism in favor of a more ethical reintegration with a wider social Good.<sup>13</sup> Implicit in this narrative is a certain structure of sacrifice and recuperation facilitated by the aesthetic mediation of opposites that permits two irreconcilable realms to be brought together in a relation of identity. Such an aesthetic mediation not only allowed Isabel to find in Osmond the perfect synthesis of nature and freedom, but marriage itself (especially to him) could then be perceived, according to this aesthetic principle, as the full realization of her individual desire, seamlessly (that is, synecdochally) inserting her into a wider, law-based community. To this extent we might say that the reconciliation brought about by aesthetic mediation takes place within what we might call an economy of “equivalent exchange.” The aesthetic reconciles oppositions by revealing a hidden identity between competing poles but, as the figure of Osmond makes explicit, this discovery comes at a price: the systematic suppression of one side of

the opposition in favor of the other, according to a logic of deferred gain. In James's novel, the pertinence of this exchange economy underlying both the aesthetic resolution and its narratological expression in the reconciliatory devices of the *Bildungsroman* is nowhere more in evidence than in the subplot of the novel, in Osmond's and Merle's attempts to exchange Pansy in marriage to the suitor with the highest bid. Here the novel effectively thematizes the *Bildungsroman*'s driving ideology – and in the process reveals that ideology in its unadorned truth – as a system of exchange that transforms people into reified commodities.

The question remains whether we can step out of this closed economy in which everything is already accounted for, where freedom is merely aestheticized necessity, and where consciousness is doomed to a fateful overpowering subjectivism that imprisons otherness within its dark “house of suffocation” (360). Clearly it seems that James does indeed present an alternative economic paradigm through which the novel should be read, otherwise The Portrait of a Lady would simply end with Isabel's aesthetic resolution and marriage, according to the traditional narrative telos of the domestic novel. The fact that James extends The Portrait of a Lady well beyond the Victorian novel's traditional resolution quite clearly points to the necessity of reading Isabel's narrative as a critique of the *Bildungsroman*'s reconciliatory aesthetic, as much as it situates the novel beyond the Victorianism of its day to suggest an early foreshadowing of James's later representational and ethical concerns in his proto-modernist novels of consciousness. Isabel's story, in other words, should indeed be read as the ethical portrait its title suggests, but as a portrait which challenges the utilitarian ethics of the *Bildungsroman*'s aesthetics of self-development.<sup>14</sup> The logic and, as I will argue, ethics of Isabel's decision cannot adequately

be accounted for in the conventional sacrificial/recuperative terms of the novel of development whose linear trajectory circles around a decisive thematic (i.e. pathological) moment. For me, the vexed question of Isabel's return is resolved only by understanding her decision as the act of a transcendently free subject acting solely in accordance with the moral law, that is, a strictly ethical act in Kantian terms.

To explain this, let us turn to the moment when Isabel finally discovers the truth of her relationship with Osmond and Merle. The turning point occurs in chapter forty-two where, musing on the arrested image of Osmond and Merle in a stance of greater than expected familiarity, Isabel begins to comprehend the truth of her situation. The chapter is famous for the increasing subjectification of the narrative voice, and the paths it traces towards Isabel's growing self-awareness and recognition of Osmond's and her mutual deceptions. But the full realization of the extent to which she has been a pawn in other people's plays comes in chapter forty-nine where Merle's pressure on Isabel to marry Pansy to Warburton finally yields a moment of illumination: "'Who are you – what are you?' Isabel murmured [ . . . ]. 'What have you to do with me?' Isabel went on. Madame Merle slowly got up, stroking her muff, but not removing her eyes from Isabel's face. 'Everything!' she answered" (430). For Isabel, of course, the horror of this moment echoes the horror of the Kantian subject faced with the discovery of the immense gulf separating phenomenal and noumenal realms. Like a De Quincey quivering before the Kantian concept of causation, Isabel recoils at the discovery that what she believed had been her free choice was really determined by forces outside her knowledge and control.<sup>15</sup> What she had taken for freedom was really determination, what she believed essence was



mere appearance. Imagining herself as an active agent, she discovers she has been a passive, “applied, handled hung-up tool” (459).

One might think, then, that this discovery of how her choice had been determined might offer Isabel relief, that is, it might absolve her of responsibility for her unhappiness, and provide her with an excellent reason for getting out of her disastrous marriage. This is, in fact, what both Henrietta and Caspar Goodwood urge. After all, if she was not responsible for her choice, then surely she has no further duty towards her marriage and her husband, and should be free to go. Arguing that society has no right to legislate over questions of personal morality, Goodwood urges Isabel to leave Osmond:

Why should you go back – why should you go through that ghastly form?  
[. . .]. Why shouldn’t we be happy – when it’s here before us, when it’s so easy?  
[. . .]. We can do absolutely as we please; to whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? Such a question is between ourselves – and to say that is to settle it! Were we born to rot in our misery – were we born to be afraid? (PL 488-9)

But it is precisely from Caspar’s libertarian ideal, with its Emersonian possessive individualism and philosophy of self-reliance, that Isabel so resolutely turns away and beats her “very straight path” back to Rome (490). How are we to understand this act?

The most striking thing about James’s novel is the way it presents what is essentially the same act twice: Isabel’s choice of Osmond. The novel, in other words, develops not so much according to the Aristotelian tragic narrative pattern of *peripeteia*

and anagorisis, but around the structure of a repetition.<sup>16</sup> I suggested that Isabel's first choice of Osmond made the error of mistaking aesthetics for ethics. Her second choice, however, marks her shift into an ethical mode. In order to clarify this, let us look again at the final chapters of the novel. With her discovery that Merle has married her, Isabel finds herself suddenly thrown into a world of determination. Everything she believed to have been an act of volition is discovered to have been the result of causes beyond her control. Her choice had been forced, her will the puppet of others far stronger than her own, her knowledge incomplete. The second turning point, however, comes after the momentous talk with Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, who reveals the truth of Madame Merle's relationship with Osmond and Pansy. With this knowledge in hand, Isabel decides to leave for England to see Ralph one last time before his death, but before she leaves she pays a visit to Pansy whom Osmond has banished to the convent after his failed attempt to marry her to Warburton. While at the convent, she encounters Merle, also visiting Pansy. If the first moment, Isabel's discovery of Merle's hand in her marriage, thrusts Isabel into a world of determination where all actions are revealed as being the result of other causes, this second moment, the encounter with Merle, marks the point when what she perceived as the totality of determination begins to break down.

Merle first approaches Isabel with the muted gravity of a woman "more than ever playing a part" (457). Following her old script, she first apologizes to Isabel for her presumption in visiting Pansy without Isabel's consent, and then launches into her usual "brilliant" discourse. Suddenly she falters, though, perceiving a difference in her interlocutor. James writes how

She had not proceeded very far before Isabel noted a sudden break in her voice, a lapse in her continuity, which was in itself a complete drama. This subtle modulation marked a momentous discovery – the perception of an entirely new attitude on the part of her listener. [. . .]. The person who stood there was not the same one she had seen hitherto, but was a very different person – a person who knew her secret. (458)

In this split-second break, this momentary “lapse” in Merle’s continuity, Isabel sees for the first time behind the mask of Merle’s self-representations; what she finds there is a question mark, a query from the other woman as to what she knows. Although the question is immediately answered by Merle herself – “Merle had guessed in the space of an instant that everything was at end between them, and in the space of another instant she had guessed the reason why” (458) – nevertheless the posing of the question, implying a lack in Merle’s knowledge, has the effect of immediately changing Isabel’s status. From being the dupe of appearances, Isabel is transformed into “a person who knew her secret” (458).

This scene is important, I think, not just for the moment of revenge it potentially offers Isabel (who nevertheless subsequently rejects the “moment of triumph” (458) it might have afforded her, and is content to remain silent throughout the encounter). For what it does, as I suggested, is begin the transformation of Isabel from a causal, determined subject into her own free or “intelligible” cause, yet not through some mystified, because aestheticized, reconciliation of freedom and necessity, but through what I am calling the free *choice* of her determined status. Let us look at the steps through which this occurs. Believing she freely enters the world of necessity by choosing Osmond,

Isabel comes to a belated recognition that her choice was in effect “forced” – it was a determined choice. She had been used like any other object, the product of forces not her own:

She saw, in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience and to which the very frailty of the vessel in which it had been offered her only gave an intrinsic price, the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron”.  
(PL 459)

However, in Merle’s “momentary lapse” Isabel recognizes that the world of determination in which she finds herself remains incomplete – there is a gap in the apparently seamless flow of representations emanating from the “great lady.” This recognition collapses the totality of the world of determination, leaving open a space for freedom. But the effect of this discovery is not to throw Isabel back into the absolute freedom of her previous existence – the freedom of the subject without ground. This time the freedom Isabel realizes is ethical, rather than aesthetic. What is different this time?

When Isabel leaves Rome after her encounter with Merle, she begins the process of extricating herself from the economic calculations which, whether overtly or implicitly, have driven her decisions so far. James describes Isabel’s detachment from the scenes surrounding her which previously elicited such eager interest: Isabel “performed this journey with sightless eyes and took little pleasure in the countries she traversed” (464). Now, for Isabel “[a]ll purpose, all intention, was suspended; all desire too save the single desire to reach her much-embracing refuge” (465). Negativity characterizes Isabel’s

journey homeward: Isabel “envied Ralph his dying [. . .] . To cease utterly, to give it all up and not know anything more – this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land” (465). But although in her journey from Rome, Isabel “had moments indeed [. . .] which were almost as good as being dead” (465), it is important to distinguish this negativity from its sacrificial modulation (with its concomitant assumption of recuperation) in the aesthetic narrative: in the narrative teleology of *Bildung*, this episode should mark Isabel’s momentary defeat before the “upward spiral” of recuperation begins once again and cements her within a narrative economy of exchange. However, a number of elements work against this model. In a traditional *Bildungsroman*, Isabel’s return to Gardencourt should symbolize the heroine’s triumphant “return” home after the pain and suffering her presumptuous actions have caused her. But, as we know, it is back to Rome that Isabel finally returns after her vigil in England with Ralph; thus there are too many “returns,” thereby complicating the teleological narrative pattern, much in the way James’s metaphor of death as a series of additional enclosures work against a strict binary dichotomy of hot and cold, life and death (a cool bath, a marble tank, a darkened chamber, a hot land). Similarly, the projected moment of anagorisis, the recuperation of suffering through self-discovery is also somewhat delayed: instead of a flash of sudden insight, of self-knowledge, Isabel only has a vague sense “that life would be her business for a long time to come” (466). Isabel’s new “knowledge” is more a prescience of her capacity for endurance, for perseverance, rather than an empowering new “awareness” – of self, or of social responsibility. Instead, we must see Isabel’s journey as marking the shift towards a different narrative economy, distinct from the series of positives and negatives that have up until now structured the narrative’s exchange.

What are the characteristics of this other economy? Isabel's all-embracing identification with Ralph's death gives us the terms of this economy as one of pure negativity, as Isabel discovers when she finds everyone surrounding her in Gardencourt appearing either dead or dying: she finds Mrs. Touchett becoming an "old woman without memories" (473) while news of Warburton's impending marriage gives Isabel the feeling "as if she had heard of Lord Warburton's death" (474). Ralph's death seems to have inflected everything around her, giving a strange ghostly kind of vitality to inanimate objects, while seeming to suck the life from the living. Waiting for Mrs. Touchett, Isabel grows nervous and scared, "as scared as if the objects about her had begun to show for conscious things, watching her trouble with grotesque grimaces" (471). Ralph himself is already the "figure and pattern of death" (476), but as Isabel watches over him in her silent vigil, she finds herself staring into the vistas of "immeasurable space" in his eyes (476). Death seems to have reversed all of the ordinary temporal and spatial orders, leaving Isabel and Ralph finally together looking jointly at "the truth": "'he married me for the money' she said" (478). With this admission, Isabel gives up the final pretense and with it the last vestiges of the aestheticism that has driven her decisions all along. The admission shatters the aesthetic fiction, revealing the "ideological" (in Adorno's sense) system of rewards and exchanges that underpin the fantasy of aesthetic reconciliation. Along with this admission, Isabel gives up her position in society, her wealth, her relationship with Pansy, even what little feeling she has remaining towards her husband. She gives it up precisely for "nothing," namely, for the truth that Ralph's death has revealed to her: her own destiny in death, her essential negativity.

The question is how negativity can serve in any practical sense as a positive grounding for an ethical subjectivity? When Isabel turns from Goodwoods's kiss and runs back toward the house, she finds in front of her a "very straight path" (490). She knows, now, what it is she must do. She knows she must return to Rome – not because of her promise to Pansy, nor because she idealizes renunciation, nor for any of the other reasons given for her return. Isabel's decision has none of the vacillations of pathological reasons. She returns simply because she must, because, as she tells Ralph, she will do what is "right" (479). But in returning to Osmond, Isabel is not returning out of any conventional idea of a woman's duty towards her husband. Rather, Isabel acts out of duty towards the moral law itself, which for Kant is the only way through which our transcendental freedom can be realized.

To explain this we need to make a brief detour into Kantian moral philosophy. Recall how for Kant, as for Schiller, the moral law gives us access to our state as free (or noumenal) beings, but where for Schiller freedom gains phenomenal expression in the form of the aesthetic state, for Kant freedom, as an Idea of Reason, remains strictly unphenomenalizable. Nevertheless Kant does allow that we can experience freedom "practically" through the moral law that tells us how we should act. But rather than a set of prohibiting laws or positive injunctions, the Kantian categorical imperative simply gives us a principle according to which we might act and live ethically. The Kantian categorical imperative states: act in such a way that the principle of your actions could at the same time hold good as a universal law. Now, at the end of his Critique of Practical Reason Kant makes a peculiar gesture where he praises the "Wise Adaptation of Man's Cognitive Faculties to His Practical Destination." Kant remarks how, should we have direct, sensible

presentations of our moral nature, we would indeed avoid all transgressions of the law. And yet, confronted with the “awful majesty” of God and eternity perpetually before our eyes, our moral acts would not be motivated from duty alone but from hope and fear. Kant writes, “As long as the nature of man remains what it is, his conduct would thus be changed into mere mechanism, in which, as in a puppet show, everything would *gesticulate* well, but there would be *no life* in the figures” (Kant, CPR 176). Here Kant seems to be cautioning against the consequences of the Schillerian aesthetic solution. Presciently, Kant foresees the danger of pathologizing, i.e. of giving *body* to, the ethical, a lesson which the twentieth century would have done well to heed. Instead, with his comment, Kant reaffirms the fundamentally *approximate* nature of all ethical acts which, however much we test them against the Kantian imperative, nevertheless retain something unknowable about them, namely, whether or not our acts have been entirely emptied of pathological content. But it is precisely because of this, because we cannot know whether we have succeeded in evacuating all empirical considerations from our acts that, Kant tells us, “there is room for true moral disposition, immediately devoted to the law” (176).

The moral law in Kant, then, is the guarantee against the dangers of a Schillerian aestheticization of ethics that purports to give us a physical embodiment of the moral law. Rather for Kant, the moral law is the custodian of the eternal gap separating the realms of freedom and determination, a sort of positivation of the negativity that Isabel finds at the heart of her experience. And it is out of respect for this negativity expressed in the moral law, rather than for any empirical reason, that Isabel makes her momentous decision at the end of the novel. She returns neither for Pansy, nor from fear, nor love of renunciation or a wish, as Gilmore puts it, to pursue life “motionlessly seeing” (73). She returns simply



because she must – she must obey the moral law that obliges her unconditionally. The immediately following question is why the moral law requires Isabel to return to Osmond? Why couldn't the moral law instead allow her to break her marriage contract, set off for America with Caspar, remain in England, or even set up shop with Henrietta? But as we know, the most important thing in Isabel's life is her freedom. Freedom is her Thing, it is the "support" a Lacanian would say, of her desire. It is for the sake of freedom that Isabel interprets the moral law as dictating her return to Osmond.

If, as Isabel now discovers, her first choice had been unfree, her decision to choose the same choice again might be conceived as a *remaking* of that first choice. As Irene Ramalho Santos puts it in her penetrating reading of the novel, "There is only one gesture left for Isabel: to invest with freedom, retrospectively, her initially determined, conditioned choice" (125). But where for Santos this gesture is merely symbolic, indicating James's equivocation on the nature of such a willed freedom that points to his "subtle problematization of late-nineteenth-century values" (125), I suggest that Isabel's second choice in fact goes much deeper to represent something more fundamental (and paradoxical), namely, the phenomenal expression of the original free choice by which she first *chose* her determination. Now this sounds rather bizarre. Surely either we are determined subjects – phenomenal beings subject to the laws of causality – or we are free: noumenal subjects inhabiting a world of rational freedom but from which we cannot perform any actions in the world because this would subject us to the natural laws of space and time. How, then, can we freely *choose* our determination?

Psychoanalysis can help us navigate these strange temporal paradoxes whereby the normal relations of cause and effect are inverted such that an effect can, in psychoanalytic terminology, become its own cause. The clearest example of such a temporal inversion in psychoanalysis is found in the way trauma comes about retroactively, i.e. *after* the (traumatic) event has been inserted into a symbolic system of meaning which then causes that first event subsequently to be “traumatic.” But insofar as it relates to our concern with choice here, let us take, for another example, the case of fetishism wherein the subject can never objectively identify a moment in time when he or she said to him or herself “this object is what I will desire.” Nevertheless, the subject can also never say, “this fetish object was imposed upon me from without, I had no choice in the matter,” since the fetishist nevertheless remains fixated upon an object which she refuses to give up – the object, in other words, was in a sense *chosen by the subject*. Although the original choice to freely choose this or that object can never be phenomenalized, it nevertheless must be presupposed, otherwise the object would have no more meaning for the fetishist that it does for any other desiring, non-fetishistic subject. The fetishist’s refusal to give up the fetish object is, in a sense, the act of remaining faithful to that original choice to desire it, even though that choice can never have actually taken place “in time.”

It is something of this paradoxical nature that Isabel undergoes when she decides to return to Osmond. Although, as she and we both know by now, her first choice was “forced” (i.e. we can never know the totality of the situation and hence make an absolutely calculating choice by which all choices are available to us), her decision to return to Osmond carries the burden of remaining faithful to an act of free choice which can never actually have taken place in time. Her second choice, in effect, *causes* the first as a free

rather than determined act precisely because, like the fetishist, she remains faithful to it. Had she given it up and followed Caspar back to America, her first choice would indeed be revealed as determined. But Isabel's decision to remain faithful to that choice retroactively confirms it as free. To use the paradoxical, future anterior formulation familiar to us from psychoanalysis, Isabel's second choice causes the first *to have been free*. Hence Isabel's return to Osmond must be seen as the phenomenal expression of a strictly unphenomenalizable but necessarily presupposed act by which she originally "chose to choose," as Kierkegaard would say.<sup>17</sup> Her return is the repetition or *reduplicatio* in the phenomenal world of something which is strictly impossible, namely, free causality. It is in this sense that I say that Isabel's second choice retroactively confirms her original (free) choice of determination. Although we can never have phenomenal knowledge of that original free act, by repeating that choice in time, Isabel remains faithful to it in the only way possible for her: by acting in accordance with the moral law and returning to Osmond.

Does this simply mean that in a futile or merely symbolic gesture we voluntarily submit to the deterministic natural laws that inevitably direct all our actions? By choosing Osmond a second time, doesn't Isabel simply assume the conditions of her determination in a sort of pragmatic resignation that says, well, this is how things are and the best bet we have for freedom is to voluntarily assent to what is otherwise imposed by necessity? No. When Isabel returns to Osmond, she extricates herself from such an aesthetic economy and performs what is, within the terms of the narrative, a strictly *impossible* act. By choosing again, she bears testimony to something - a freedom - beyond our determined realm of space and time that momentarily suspends the laws of nature. But because, of

course, this is impossible (and because James, like Kant, rejects the aesthetic solution of a Schiller or an Osmond), this freedom can be attested to only in a paradoxical and retroactive way: in the form of a repetition whose sole function is to bear witness and remain faithful to that first, original, impossible choice.

A final question remains, what enables this act to take place? Critics have long pointed to the importance of Caspars's kiss in determining Isabel's final decision but few have explicitly understood it in terms of its aesthetic value. Recall how James revises this moment in his New York Edition to expand upon how

His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free. (489)

Isabel's encounter here with what is essentially her first real experience with erotic sexuality recalls nothing so much as Kant's description of the experience of the subject under the conditions of the dynamical sublime. There Kant uses the same image of lightning which, together with overhanging rocks and thunder clouds, depicts the natural sublime in terms of a terrifying elemental force that threatens to engulf us. With an irony that surely didn't escape James, in the novel Isabel suddenly discovers that the natural drive typically representing our deepest submission to our state as creatures of nature, namely, sex, becomes the means by which she is finally able to achieve freedom. Sexual

desire provides Isabel with an experience of something utterly beyond herself, something greater than all of her previous experience and it is this, I suggest, that leads her, like the subject in the Kantian sublime, to the moral law. Describing nature in a state of fury, Kant writes, “we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature” (Kant, CJ 100-1). Is it not such a courage that Isabel displays in her final act, an act which seems to go against all natural (and narrative) laws? Repeating her choice, Isabel acts in an unprecedented fashion, testifying, in the sole manner available to her, to her absolute freedom of choice.

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## <sup>1</sup>NOTES

See, respectively, Krook, Porat, Blodgett, Templeton and Berkson.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the dialectic of freedom and necessity, see Armstrong. See also Templeton.

<sup>3</sup> Abrams, quoted in Fogel (3-4).

<sup>4</sup> Fogel sees the general pattern of James's fiction as conforming to this "Hegelian" structure by which opposites are reconciled through the trope of the "spiral return" (3).

<sup>5</sup> This is another version of what Marc Redfield has identified as the "phantom" nature of the *Bildungsroman* which, he argues, is most properly defined as a narrative genre that fails its own putative definition. See especially his second chapter, "The Phantom Bildungsroman" (38-63).

<sup>6</sup> Buell (7).

<sup>7</sup> My debt especially to these latter two theorists should be evident throughout the following pages.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is Bersani's.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas is one of the important philosophical resources for this contemporary "revival" of ethics, but so-called "political" readers of Derrida such as Christopher Norris must also be considered as part of this attempt to shift the terms of deconstruction toward political and ethical questions, a concern which has already occupied J. Hillis Miller for many years.

<sup>10</sup> Izzo explains how "choosing constrains – rather than expresses – the self, [since] every choice becomes a limitation of one's infinite potential" (37).

<sup>11</sup> The often-cited correlation between a form of extreme aestheticism and fascism is relevant here in the way both aestheticism and fascism remove themselves from any wider discursive context. The late Victorian aesthetic of art for art's sake finds a sinister parallel in the fascistic sacrifice for its own sake.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to belittle the often powerfully sensitive readings of the novel represented by this tradition, most displaying an acute awareness of James's deliberate intent to leave his heroine "en l'air,"

CN (15). My point is rather to show how, from a perspective of narrative structure, such an approach is unable to account for what I consider to be the specifically ethical dimensions of Isabel's final act.

<sup>13</sup> For the classic Marxist analysis of this narrative structure, see Lukàcs.

<sup>14</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of the history of the *Bildungsroman* see Norton. He identifies one of its origins in the eighteenth-century tradition of presenting literary portraits for general edification, see especially (153).

<sup>15</sup> In a memorable passage in his Autobiography, Thomas De Quincey writes, "Let a man meditate but a little on [causation] or other aspects of this transcendental philosophy, and he will find the steadfast earth itself rocking as it were beneath his feet." (101).

<sup>16</sup> The parallels between Isabel's repetition and the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition are striking. In each case, repetition serves to mark the shift from an aesthetic into an ethical mode through an encounter with something that is beyond the realm of experience proper. See Repetition.

<sup>17</sup> For further elaboration of a very similar idea in Kierkegaard, see the Judge's discussion, "Balance between Esthetic and Ethical" in Kierkegaard, Either/Or, especially (213-223).