Picturing Reality: American Literary Realism and the Model of Painting, 1875-1900

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_Picturing Reality_ proposes new literary historical and art historical contexts for the development of American literary realism in the late nineteenth century. While studies of American literary realism have tended to emphasize the importance of social, political, and cultural contexts in determining the forms and aims of realist representation, _Picturing Reality_ demonstrates the importance of aesthetic contexts for a realist art of fiction. In particular, this project proposes that painting served as a model for the development of American realist fiction of the late nineteenth century that aspired to achieve the status of art because it offered a compelling model for reconciling the aspirations of prose writing to be _artistic_ with the requirements that it be _realistic_.

Painting served as a creative inspiration, a conceptual template, and a practical example for the development of an art of literary realism at a time when realist writing was more often seen to be anything but a fine art. The development of an art of realist fiction was to a large extent predicated on the degree to which extended narratives in prose could “picture” in order to represent dimensions of reality that had been resistant to representation by traditional narrative forms.

_Picturing Reality_ demonstrates this influence through the writings of four American writers – William Dean Howells, Henry James, Hamlin Garland, and Sarah Orne Jewett – all of whom used painting as a model for understanding themselves as realist artists. The model of painting served each of these writers in unique and
idiosyncratic ways, but in all cases the sense that it was the task of the novelist or writer of prose to “picture reality” had a pervasive influence on the form, style, and content of their works. By reading broadly and deeply in their critical and fictional body of work, and by reading reviews and critiques of contemporary critics, as well as the work of other writers and artists who served as both models or obstacles for the development of an art of realism, this project seeks to situate these four writers in their literary historical and art historical contexts. In the first chapter, I show the difficulties William Dean Howells faced as he sought to make an art of realism, and suggest that American Pre-Raphaelitism furnished a model by which realistic representation could satisfy the eye of both the scientist and the artist – a model that could be adapted to the form of the realist novel. In the second chapter, I examine Henry James’s early aesthetic education among writers associated with the art journal *The Crayon*, as well as among painters such as William Morris Hunt and John La Farge, and look at his early career as an art reviewer in order to demonstrate the depth and breadth of painting’s influence on James’s subsequent art of fiction. In the third chapter I demonstrate the ways in which Impressionist painting informed Hamlin Garland’s theory of local color fiction and served as a model for his sketches and stories. And in the fourth chapter I demonstrate the ways in which Sarah Orne Jewett sought to create a form of local color writing in which vivid description and word-painting would take precedence over plot-driven narrative by showing Jewett’s own complex relationship to painting – particularly watercolors. For all these writers, painting served as a complex – and ultimately ambivalent – model for the development of an art of realist fiction.
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Introduction: Painting as Model

Words are an impure medium; better far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint.

- Virginia Woolf, Walter Sickert: A Conversation (1934)

In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James writes that “the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.” James’s statement is bold but perplexing, at once highly specific – aren’t there other reasons for the existence of novels? – and bafflingly vague – what does it mean to “represent life?” Given the existential imperative at its core (that the novel will cease to exist unless it represents life), James begs the question of how a novelist would go about representing life in the first place. What, after all, is meant by “life,” if not simply “anything and everything?” Or, might it rather mean “everyday life,” life as it is actually lived by actual living people, rather than by heroes or by gods or by cartoons – “real” life as opposed to the life

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of fantasy or of romance? Or might “life” refer to something more mystical, some elusive quality clinging to or emanating from our experience of the world, the “life” we try to describe when we invoke the peculiar phrase “life itself?”

The most pressing question that James’s famous definition raises is why and how a novel, of all things in the world, is in any way an appropriate means for such a representation. Aside from the novel’s troublesomely ineradicable foundations in the romance (the mission of which was not so much the representation of life but the representation of something larger than life, or other than life), why would a technology apparently designed for the telling of stories be an adequate way of achieving a successful representation of such a complex and numinous thing? What does narrative have to do with life at all? A story might be a good way of recounting what happens in life, but it does not seem like a particularly good way of representing “life itself,” life in all its sensuous immediacy, in its inexhaustible surfeit of details, in its magnificent and overwhelming abundance and repletenees. Narrative by its very nature transforms primarily sensuous experiences into events accomplished, reducing the depth and breadth of “life itself” to a plotted sequence of verbal actions rushing towards a conclusion (“this happened, then this happened…”). And language by its very nature translates primarily sensuous things in the world into mental concepts, reducing the highly specific (this particular table in all its concrete and tactile fullness) to the general and abstract (“table”). Words may be good at analyzing or defining the essence of beds or tables or any other thing, but they are not especially good at presenting, representing, or imitating them. Words are better at conveying what things mean rather than describing how things are.
James himself was aware of the shortcomings of narrative and of language, and consequently licensed the novel’s representation of life by way of comparison with *painting*. James writes: “the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle), is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another.”³ In one sense, James’s comparison of novel writing with painting seems designed to bestow upon the practice of novel writing, which in 1884 suffered from a relatively low critical and social reputation, the glories of an indubitably “fine” art: as James writes, “fiction is one of the *fine* arts, deserving in its turn all of the honours and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for the successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture.”⁴ But having identified three other “fine” arts (music, poetry, and architecture), the question stands why painting should be singled out as the best model for the aspiring novelist, the novelist, that is, who aspires to write novels that could reasonably be called a “fine art.”

In fact, James’s claim that the inspiration, success, cause, and process of the art of fiction and the art of painting are one and the same is exceedingly strange. We might rather say that the “quality of the vehicle” – or medium – of painted canvases and printed pages is not only rather different, but *entirely* different. A painting, it might be said, is *ontologically* different than a novel. A painting is unquestionably a *thing*, a conglomeration of physical paints on a physical canvas, in a way that a novel simply is not. The Mona Lisa is unquestionably in the Louvre, but it would be difficult to say

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³ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 46.
⁴ Ibid., 47.
exactly where *The Portrait of a Lady* is: it is on my bookshelf and probably on your bookshelf, and it is also in digital code in electronic servers which means it can be accessed from any terminal with internet access virtually anywhere in the world.

So, of course, can *images* of the Mona Lisa, but these are “copies” in a way that a “copy” of *The Portrait of a Lady* is not. The Mona Lisa can be stolen and counterfeited, but *The Portrait of a Lady* can only ever be reproduced (particularly now that its copyright restrictions have expired). An image of the Mona Lisa can be a better or worse approximation of the original (the photograph taken by an art curator might be a very good image while the photograph taken by a tourist at the museum might be a very bad one), but any and every copy of James’s novel is exactly as good as the “original” whether it is read on high quality acid-free paper in a finely-bound collector’s edition or on the tiny screen of one’s smartphone. Indeed, provided only that the spelling remains the same, *The Portrait of a Lady* could be printed in any font on any kind of paper or papyrus or parchment or be written in chalk on a sidewalk or even be broadcast in Morse code to Pluto and still be exactly as much a copy of *The Portrait of a Lady* as any other copy. The Mona Lisa can only be apprehended in silence through the eyes, but a novel may be read silently or aloud, in Braille with one’s fingertips, in a British accent, or an American accent, or a Chinese accent, or any other accent in the world provided that each word is interpreted as the same linguistic sign.

Furthermore, while the form of a painting can be taken in all at one glance, a novel can only be apprehended sequentially page by page. One can “read” a painting or focus on particular “passages” in detail, but the whole composition is capable of appearing to the eye as a totality. Not so the novel: as James’s self-nominated advocate
Percy Lubbock writes in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), “to glance at a book, though the phrase is so often in our mouths, is in fact an impossibility.”

While we can retain a vivid memory or image of an entire painting, Lubbock writes, “we cannot retain the image of the book.”

The form of the novel can perhaps be “mapped” or schematized (as is currently popular among practitioners of “distant reading” or other digital methodologies), but our ordinary experience of reading is like that of moving through a labyrinth, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter. We may remember our directions turn by turn (left here, right there), but the overall structure of the maze resists our attempts to cognize it. We can’t get the structure to hang together.

While the novel occurs or unfolds in time, a painting is inevitably spatial: it “takes place.” A painting is synchronic and condenses meanings through its patterns and forms, whereas a novel is diachronic and unfurls meanings through the experience of reading. In fact, it might be said that there is *no* time in a painting whatsoever, that the dimension of time is simply neither here nor there, like Augustine’s concept of eternity which is neither infinitely long nor infinitely short, but simply “outside” of time all together. In other words, a painting has neither beginning nor end, whereas any spoken or written utterance unquestionably has a beginning and an end, a condition that for Augustine marks linguistic communication as inherently profane (he calls it “the noise of our human

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5 Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 3. Lubbock continues: “[The form of a novel] is revealed little by little, page by page, and it is withdrawn as fast as it is revealed; as a whole, complete and perfect, it could only exist in a more tenacious memory than most of us have to rely on” (3).

6 Ibid.
speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending.”))⁷ Over and against this “noise,” painting embodies the sacred silence of communion, what Virginia Woolf admiringly – if ambivalently – calls “the silent kingdom of paint.”

The silence of a painted picture suggests that it can have an excess of meaning without making that meaning profanely articulate. The Mona Lisa doesn’t necessarily “mean” anything: though we might resort to our knowledge of art history to analyze its various symbols and associations, it might also suggest to us innumerable interpretations of a more inscrutable and subjective character. (Take, for instance, Walter Pater’s famously impressionistic “interpretation” of the sitter as a “presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters” who is “older than the rocks among which she sits.”)⁸ But the painting’s status as painting (as paint on canvas) suggests that any painting can simply be rather than mean, paint and canvas themselves being essentially inarticulate and “meaningless” substances. On the other hand, the words that comprise a novel necessarily produce meaning. More precisely they produce signification inasmuch as they are signs. Though words may, and often do, produce a meaning in excess of their exact literal meaning, their nature as signs means that they must first “signify.” Because words are not things but the concepts of things, any linguistic utterance necessarily requires a translation from thing to concept, and consequently results in the loss of some of the qualities that made any given thing “thing-like.” On the other hand, a painting may

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be said to *transcribe* real things in the world to “real” things on the canvas without suffering any translation from thing to concept.\(^9\)

All of this is to say that James’s insistence that the art of the painter and the art of the novelist are completely analogous is very puzzling. Instead of addressing the shortcomings of narrative and language to “represent life,” choosing painting as a model for the art of fiction only casts those shortcomings in sharper relief. Given the fundamental and we might say irreconcilable differences between the two arts, one might naturally wonder why James selected painting as the means of transforming the novel into a fine art when an apparently more natural analogy was so close at hand. If one were attempting to justify a form of language art with an exalted pedigree that reached back even to classical antiquity, one could certainly do worse than choose *poetry*, particularly *epic poetry*, a genre of large scale narrative writing that addresses large and important themes, and boasts an exceedingly rich critical history with indisputable artistic *bona fides*.

The critical tradition of epic poetry would seem to make it an especially appealing model for an ambitious and rigorous formalist like James, inasmuch as that critical tradition since Aristotle’s *Poetics* tended to praise Homer’s epics for their structural coherence and composition, as well as their rich psychological characterizations, far more than for their value as novel entertainments, exciting spectacles, or moralistic fables. Aristotle, of course, places *mythos* (μῦθος – plot, structure, story, or form) at the top of his artistic hierarchy, while he places *opsis* (ὄψις – spectacle) at the very bottom. This

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hierarchy closely mirrors James’s own, and echoes James’s disparagement of low-brow, sensationalist elements that he and other realists were eager to do away with in their own novels. But James almost never addresses the topic of epic, and indeed rarely addresses poetry at all (epic or lyric), while he remains committed to the analogy between writing and painting from the beginning of his career to the end. From early stories such as “A Landscape Painter” (1866) to late essays such as “The Lesson of Balzac” (1905), James maintains that realist fiction must ever be the “art of the brush.” What was the appeal of painting, and why would James select such a strange model as a means for turning the novel into a literary art?

*Picturing Reality* proposes that painting served as a model for the development of American realist fiction of the late nineteenth century that aspired to achieve the status of art because it offered a compelling model for reconciling the aspirations of prose writing to be *artistic* with the requirements that it be *realistic*. Painting served as a creative inspiration, a conceptual template, and a practical example for the development of an art of literary realism at a time when realist writing was more popularly seen to be anything but a fine art. Indeed, in the 1880s and 1890s, the very notion of a “realist artist” was practically a contradiction in terms – really an oxymoron. The term “art” tended to be associated with the imaginative and the ideal, the creative and the synthetic, whereas “realism” tended to be associated with the visible and the actual, the imitative and the analytic. Art, in other words, was associated with *poēsis* (ποίησις) – creative making – while realism was associated with *mimesis* (μίμησις) – imitative matching. While for its devotees it may have been both a badge of honor and a banner behind which to rally, the

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10 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 136.
term “realist” was just as often hurled epthetically at productions that seemed to be deliberately or officiously un-artistic. Whether aimed at the scandalously prurient novels of Émile Zola or the more genteel fictions of William Dean Howells, to call a writer a realist was to imply that he or she was not an artist.

The idealist definition of “art” was directly opposed to the methods of realism which, as critics of the time often pointed out, represented only the surface of life without penetrating to the meanings behind it. American historian and critic William Roscoe Thayer, for instance, memorably disparaged realist novelists as “Epidermists” that “investigate[] only the surface, the cuticle of life.”[^11] The Epidermist, Thayer holds, fundamentally misunderstands the nature and purpose of art, which is not to record the transient phenomena of the world, but to plumb the depths of the human heart. The Epidermist “has dehumanized himself so that his mind is as impartial as a photographic plate” and thus, like a camera, “sees only the outside.”[^12] On the contrary, Thayer continues, “Only the human can understand and interpret the human; and our Epidermists also will, in time, perceive that not by relying on the photograph and Kodak can they come to know the heart of man. They have mistaken the dead actual for reality, the show of the moment for the essence, the letter for the spirit.”[^13]

As we can see, the stakes of Thayer’s critique are high: not only is the contest between realism and idealism one of literary method and representational technique, it is a contest about the nature of reality itself. For Thayer – as for many other aesthetic

[^12]: Ibid.
[^13]: Ibid.
idealists of the late nineteenth century – reality is not truly perceived by the senses but rather by the imagination: “By the imagination have all the highest creations of art and literature been produced…for the imagination is that supreme faculty in man which beholds reality.”¹⁴ Thayer’s aesthetic idealism disparages “sight” in favor of “insight”: to invoke M. H. Abrams’s classic formulation, it is the art of the lamp that illumines nature rather than the mirror held up to it. The realist novelist who “discard[ed] the imagination” and “hoped by accumulating masses of details to produce…an effect of reality” could be a scientist, or a muck-raking journalist, or a photographer, but he or she could not be an artist.¹⁵

The challenge to make an art of realism was therefore one that American writers of the 1880s and 1890s faced with an intense degree of self-consciousness and self-awareness. Far from the casual practitioners of a self-evidently straightforward manner of imitative representation, we can see in the journals, letters, critical writings, and fictions of American realist writers evidence of an acute anxiety about their status as “realist artists,” and indeed about the very project of realism: the possibility of the written word to accurately or adequately represent reality.¹⁶ Picturing Reality argues that painting served as an appealing model for American writers who wanted to make an art of realism in large part because the novel itself did not serve as a particularly compelling model for

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¹⁴ Ibid.
an art of realism, either in theory or in practice. While James writes that “the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life,” a reasonable person might protest that novels, or any written narratives, are not particularly good technologies for representing life, at least not life as it is actually experienced in the present by living people.

One can hear some of this anxiety over the status of the realist novel in William Dean Howells’s *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), a text often cited for its quotably terse definition of realism as “nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.” The problem with Howells’s definition of realism is that while seemingly straightforward, it is in fact frustratingly tautological: it hinges on the meaning of the word “truthful,” which seems to imply the “real,” just as the real would seem to imply the truthful. In its notorious opacity, the definition has figured as a *locus classicus* for critics intent on picking out Howells’s shortcomings as an artist and a critic (just as Howells’s unfortunate call in the same essay for the American novelist to focus his or her

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18 V. L. Parrington writes that this question “has been the apple of discord among the realists,” and that Howells’s own response (that the “truthful” meant the statistically average) “reduced his stories to the drab level that bores so many of his readers” (*Main Currents in American Thought, Volume III: The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930], 248, 249). David E. Shi writes that the real nature of realist representation was “not so simple” as Howells apparently hoped to make it: “What some realists offered as ‘truthful treatments’ of American life appeared scandalous or superficial to others.” (*Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 5). Alan Trachtenberg, reviving some of the anti-genteel rancor for which Howells was an easy target in the early twentieth century, calls this definition the core of Howells’s “restorative realism” that was meant “to quiet alarms that realism held in store a revolution in letters, morals, and possibly society” (*The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* [1982; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007], 188).
attentions on “the more smiling aspects of life” has damned him as a willfully obtuse Pangloss for generations).  

But while the meaning of realism may have been self-evident for Howells, the means of its expression were not necessarily so. In particular, the question of whether the novel as a literary form was an adequate means to achieve the ends of realist representation was very much an open one. Writing that he values James’s novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890) more “than all the romantic attempts since Hawthorne,” Howells immediately qualifies his praise. He takes a step back, realizing that the comparison between the art of the romancers and James’s art of the novel is not exactly just. James, in fact, is not even really a novelist at all. Instead, Howells continues, “I call Mr. James a novelist because there is yet no name for the literary kind he has invented, and so none for the inventor.”

Howells’s claim that whatever James has been writing aren’t exactly novels should draw the reader up short. Because of the novel’s unfortunate association with unrealistic romances of the kind that Howells disdains, Howells seems to imply that the historical tendency of novels to only tell “stories” impeaches the novel form itself – at least as it had been traditionally construed. On the other hand, modern novels – if that is indeed what they are – attempt to do more than simply recount stories, an attempt which characterizes them as distinctively and self-consciously modern: “The fatuity of the story

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19 Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 62. Lionel Trilling writes in “William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste” (1951) that the unfortunately quotable phrase had “done much to harm his reputation” and Young Turks such as H. L. Mencken had used it “to make Howells’s name a byword of evasive gentility” (in *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000], 221, 206).

20 Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 57.

21 Ibid.
merely as a story is something that must early impress the story-teller who does not live in the stone age of fiction and criticism.”

James’s pseudo-novels, or crypto-novels, or anti-novels – or whatever we may ultimately call them – evade the foolish directive of romancers “to spin a yarn for the yarn’s sake” in large part by evading “stories” in general. The novelist’s traditional role as storyteller threatened the modern novelist’s aspirations to be both a truthful realist (aren’t “stories” suspiciously like lies?) and a serious artist. The fatuous reader of novels (Howells, already looking toward the twentieth century, caricatures him as “a nineteenth-century Englishman, doting in forgetfulness”) believes only that “the story could never have value except as a means; it could not exist for him as an end… it could be the frame, not possibly the picture.”

The modern novel, then, must not be a story so much as a picture, and in this regard painting could serve as a useful model for the novelist hoping to create a picture of life that was both accurate and artistic. While novelists like James hoped to make the novel a “fine art” by appropriating its social and cultural cachet, painting also appeared to offer a conceptual model for overcoming the difficult – really the impossible – limitations of prose writing to represent “reality” in all its obstinate breadth and amplitude. The development of an “art of fiction” – meaning an art of realist fiction – was to a large extent predicated on the degree to which extended narratives in prose could “picture,” and in so doing exceed their function as mere narratives, in order to represent those elements or dimensions of lived and felt reality that seemed beyond or beneath the reach of language itself. As inspiration, as metaphor, as practice, painting was a tempting

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 57, 58.
model for the literary realist who felt an “appetite for reality,” an appetite that the mediating, adulterating, or “impure” medium of language seemed incapable of satisfying.²⁵

I borrow the term “appetite for reality” from Martin Meisel who posits in Realizations (1983), his pioneering study of relations between the arts in the nineteenth-century, that,

The nineteenth-century artist, especially the Victorian artist, working for a comprehensive audience, had a double injunction laid upon him. He found himself between an appetite for reality and a requirement for signification. Specification, individuation, autonomy of detail, and the look and feel of the thing itself pulled one way; while placement in a larger meaningful pattern, appealing to the moral sense and the understanding, pulled another.²⁶

The analogy of painting offered one way of satisfying this “appetite for reality” by giving the worker in language a method for approaching “the look and feel of the thing” – the immediate sensuous particularity of the “real world” as it was actually experienced, not

²⁵ In this insight I also follow Fredric Jameson who writes in The Antinomies of Realism (New York: Verso, 2013) that “the most inveterate alternative to narrative as such reminds us that storytelling is a temporal art, and always seems to single out a painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether” (8). Jameson goes further, however, in claiming that the “antinomy” of realist narrative (the “chronological temporality of the récit”) is not painterly ekphrasis but “the realm of affect” (10). “What we call realism,” Jameson writes, “will thus come into being in the symbiosis of this pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale or récit in the first place” (11). Jameson’s antinomies of récit and affect are a useful heuristic for discussing this constitutive dichotomy, though to a significant degree it is a new name for some old ways of thinking. In particular, Jameson’s use of the term “affect” – a highly contemporary critical category – to describe what was in the nineteenth century a wide-ranging aesthetic ideal associated with multifarious artistic and critical vocabularies seems to me problematically unhistorical (was not this “eternal moment” exactly the ineffable, vague feeling of unattributable significance that Kant calls Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck, which has been described by countless poets, or by the audiences of Wagner, or by Woolf, or by Proust?)

as it became a concept in the mind through its translation into a system of linguistic signs. At the same time, as Meisel writes, the “requirement for signification” pulled the writer of prose in the opposite direction: away from the aesthetic presentation of immediate, sensuous detail and toward the conceptual world of morals and meanings. That the aspiring literary realist had to serve two masters – reality and signification – is the uneven footing on which is built the complex edifice of the period’s experiments in representation. The challenge for the artist, Meisel writes, was to unite these two competing impulses: “a concrete particularity with inward signification, the materiality of things with moral and emotional force, historical fact with figural truth, the mimetic with the ideal.”

*Picturing Reality* argues that American realist novelists were indeed caught between the appetite for reality and the requirement of signification, and attempted to work out this complicated problem in their criticism, letters, journals, and other writings, as well as in the form and content of their own novels and stories. While painting offered a model for representing reality with a maximum of aesthetic meaning and a minimum of signification, nevertheless the fact that realist writers worked in the medium of language meant that their works necessarily produced signification: signification is in the very nature of realist prose. As such, the painterly or aesthetic manner of representing reality in all its sensuous repleteness and singularity was often a *dramatic* rather than a *stylistic* element of their novels. Painterly ways of seeing and expressing are often presented not through the stylistic apparatus of narrative discourse, but are rather attributed to characters themselves through free and indirect speech, a feature which makes that

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aesthetic way of seeing and expressing subject to the dialogic scrutiny that has always been the stock-in-trade of the novel.

While the model of painting appears at first to offer a means of achieving the unification of reality and signification (what Meisel calls “realization”: “both literal recreation and translation into a more real, that is more vivid, visual, physically present medium”), the failure of the novel to achieve such a unification may help the realist artist to clarify the limitations of narrative art and to illuminate and expand the possibilities of the novel’s dialogic form. While initially envious of the possibilities of painting to resist explicit and purposive meaning, the realist novel ends up defining the existential, epistemological, and moral limits of the painterly or aesthetic view of the world, thus demonstrating the ways in which narrative form can offer ways of “seeing” and knowing that, while less immediate, are ultimately more complete. The realist novel that aspires to the condition of art at once indulges and resists the appetite for reality, often finding more complex satisfactions in the chaotically verbal world of meanings and morals than in Woolf’s “silent kingdom of paint.”

Writing is not, after all, painting, and any treatment of the so-called “sister arts” must ultimately contend with and founder upon this common sense observation. At the same time, just because the analogy is not complete (despite James’s claim to the contrary) does not mean that thinking of writing in terms of painting is unproductive. Indeed, in the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century the analogy was very nearly a habit of mind, even a cliché. To refer to novels as canvases or pictures or paintings, to refer to the “color” of a writer’s language, to say that a character was

28 Meisel, Realizations, 30.
admiredly drawn or sketched, to say a scene was well-painted: all of these turns of phrase betray a pervasive and lasting influence the true scope of which is well beyond the reach of this dissertation. *Picturing Reality*, nonetheless, is inspired and motivated by these troublesome analogies, which, perhaps because of their vagueness and difficulty, have not tended to merit sustained and specific critical attention.

While much literary history has been written about the development of literary realism in the United States, and while specific monographs have examined the role of painting and other visual arts in the careers of significant American literary realists, there have been few sustained or specific studies of the influences of painting on the development of the American realist novel in the late nineteenth century. This is a puzzling oversight given the intense degree to which American literary realists existed in a culture steeped in the language of painting, both as metaphor and as practice. While a certain level of general knowledge of painting and other arts was expected of any cultured person of the period, American literary realists were exceptional for the degree to which their interest in the history, techniques, and vocabulary of painting was grounded in first-hand experience. Though he jocularly claimed to be totally insensitive to pictorial art, William Dean Howells in fact associated with many painters (such as the American tonalist George Fuller) and was a habitué of their studios, writing with eloquence and precision of painterly techniques and styles. While much has been written about Henry James and his “painter’s eye,” it is often forgotten that both he and brother William in fact learned to paint from artists William Morris Hunt and John La Farge, two of the most significant and unique American painters of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and that James’s first position as a “professional” writer in the 1870s was as an
art critic for *The Atlantic* (a job given to him by Howells). Hamlin Garland was close with several important American painters associated with the so-called Boston School (such as J. J. Enneking, Dennis Miller Bunker, and Lilla Cabot Perry), and served as president of the Central Art Association of American in which capacity he presented and wrote the catalogues for exhibitions of new painting. Sarah Orne Jewett was herself an accomplished amateur painter, and maintained close friendships and artistic collaborations with several important painters, illustrators, and artists such as Sarah Wyman Whitman and Rose Lamb (both of whom, like James, had studied with Hunt).

*Picturing Reality* argues that the influence of painting on these four American writers was more than coincidental or trivial. Rather, the model of painting deeply informed their sense of the project of realism and how the painterly way of picturing reality could be adapted to the medium of the novel. The model of painting served each of these writers in unique and idiosyncratic ways which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, but in all cases the sense that it was the task of the novelist or writer of prose to “picture reality” had a pervasive influence on the form, style, and content of their works. While much will be written about the ways in which these realist writers used the model of painting to make of the novel a “picture of life,” I will also explore the ways in which the formal particularities of the realist novel as a narrative form push back against its own self-imposed limitation to simply picture. This intense ambivalence over the influence of painterly ways of seeing helps to explain why so many American realist writers feature novels in which painting or painters figure prominently. To give an incomplete list: Howells’s *A Counterfeit Presentment* (1877), *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Minister’s Charge* (1886), *April Hopes*
(1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893), and *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (1897); James’s *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The Tragic Muse* (1890) as well as dozens of short stories; Garland’s *Jason Edwards: An Average Man* (1892) and *The Captain of Gray-Horse Troop* (1902); and Jewett’s *A Marsh Island* (1885) as well as several other stories and sketches. By writing about painting and painters, these novelists worked out complex problems of representation and narrative form, and deepened the novel’s explorations into ethical and aesthetic questions.

It will be the purpose of *Picturing Reality* to closely examine the specific ways in which painting and associated arts functioned as models for these four writers, all of whom in significant and interesting ways conceived of themselves as realist artists. While reading deeply in their critical and fictional body of work, as well as in their letters, journals and other writings, I also seek to situate these writers in their historical and art historical context, reading reviews and critiques of contemporary critics, as well as the work of other writers and artists who served as both models or obstacles for the development of an art of realism. I examine the many ways in which these writers’ own understanding and appreciation of painting and other associated arts was expressed in their theory of realist fiction, as well as in their novels, stories, and sketches. To this end, I look closely at their fictional works, some of which have been largely overlooked by critics and scholars, that prominently feature painters and painting as sites in which those theories of realist representation are worked out in dialogic form.

In the first two chapters of this project, I discuss the question of American realism and its relation to painting through the writings of William Dean Howells and Henry James and explore the ways in which both use the conceptual vocabulary and practice of
painting as a model to mediate their own imitative approach to reality, while also using painting and the figure of the painter as a means of articulating the limits of visual and verbal representation. William Dean Howells, as American realism’s most voluble and influential theorist, is a convenient starting point. In Chapter One, I read Howells’s claim in his essay *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) that the literary realist must “picture” rather than “heap up facts” if he or she wishes to be a realist *artist*, and ask to what extent Howells’s own fictional writing meets his own pictorial requirements. I therefore address the longstanding criticism of Howells that he was “unduly negligent of form,”29 and look at Howells’s own sense of what constituted successful “picturing” in the visual arts and other realist fiction that he admired. I look in particular at movements in American realist painting that anticipate and furnish the intellectual and aesthetic groundwork for literary realism, particularly the American Pre-Raphaelites of the early 1860s, with whom Howells was sympathetic, and claim that these painters served as a model for a manner of realistic and literal representation that, like the realist novel itself, aimed to satisfy the eye of both the scientist and the artist. I then read Howells’s comic novel *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893) as an exploration of many of the representative problems set out by the American Pre-Raphaelites as they butt up against the more fashionable artistic styles associated with Impressionism and the aesthetic movement, and suggest that Howells uses these questions of painterly technique as a means for working out problems of representation facing the modern American novelist, resulting in Howells’s artistic claim that the dialogic art of the novel is capable of producing a more satisfying and complete portrait of a character than the art of the painter.

29 Brander Matthews, “Recent Essays in Criticism,” *Cosmopolitan* 12, no. 1 (Nov. 1891), 125.
In Chapter Two, I discuss in more detail Henry James’s claim that the novel was a picture whose “reason for...existence” was its “attempt to represent life.” By examining James’s early aesthetic education among Henry James Sr. and writers associated with the art journal *The Crayon*, as well as painters such as William Morris Hunt and John La Farge, and by looking at his early career as an art reviewer, I will demonstrate the depth and breadth of painting’s influence on James’s subsequent art of fiction, and deepen our understanding of what James meant when he called the novel a “picture of life.”

By looking at James’s early education in the arts and his own art criticism, I argue that for James successful realist art was primarily invested in representing depth and in facilitating the viewer or reader’s ability to visually and imaginatively penetrate a work’s painted or written surface. In this respect, I also hope to correct the critical overvaluation of James’s later artistic influences – particularly painterly and literary Impressionism, which James believed was primarily interested in representing surfaces, making it artistically limited. The overemphasis on the influence of Impressionism is the symptom of a critical desire to characterize James as a “modernist” writer, which requires ignoring James’s claim that the novel remained always a Balzacian “effort at representation.”

From the beginning to the end of his career, representational painting served as a useful model for a literary realism that aspired to the condition of art.

In the next two chapters I discuss the ways in which American “local color” writers Hamlin Garland and Sarah Orne Jewett used painting as a means of transforming

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regionalist writing from a relatively middle-brow genre with an uncertain reputation into a certifiably literary art by foregrounding the descriptive possibilities of the “word-picture,” while also, like James and Howells, using the figure of the painter or painterly description as a means of exploring and articulating the expressive, representational, and moral limits of both painting and writing. In Chapter Three, I discuss Hamlin Garland whose own appreciation of the radical expressive possibilities of Impressionist painting greatly informed his first literary experiments. For Garland, Impressionism named not just a painterly style but a scientifically grounded perceptual habit available to the literary observer as well as the painter. Understanding the prominence of painting in Garland’s early career also helps us to better understand the scarcity of literary models for local color literature, and clarify the degree to which local color literature was modeled on the methods and values of painting. Garland’s earliest examples of artistic success are painters, not writers, and he largely understands his own local color method in terms of the theory and practice of painting rather than in terms of fiction writing. Garland’s early experimental writings demonstrate attempts to approximate Impressionist visual effects in prose. But at the same time, Garland was skeptical of the sufficiency of Impressionist vision, and in Main-Traveled Roads (1891), he explores the ethical limits of Impressionist vision by submitting it to a traditionally romantic narrative scaffold.

In Chapter Four, I describe the ways in which Sarah Orne Jewett sought to create a form of local color writing in which vivid description and word-painting would take precedence over plot-driven narrative. I show Jewett’s own complex relationship to painting, particularly watercolor painting, both in concept and in practice, and demonstrate the ways in which this relationship informed the development of her own
literary art, while also showing that such a correspondence between Jewett’s literary art and the art of painting was in fact a common way of understanding, appreciating, or critiquing Jewett’s work among her contemporaries. Understanding Jewett’s own understanding of painting also helps us to understand how she could write both such extraordinarily compressed and painterly sketches as well as more sweeping and traditionally melodramatic narratives. While painting functioned as an analogue for her own artistic practice, Jewett also used the figure of the painter as a means of exploring its ethical and aesthetic limits. In the last part of this chapter I read Jewett’s critically forgotten novel *A Marsh Island* (1885) in order to show her self-critical ambivalence towards her own painterly style, in which description no longer exceeds or resists narrative’s teleological demands, but rather falls short of its potentials.

*Picturing Reality* attempts to read the work of American literary realists of the late nineteenth century across “disciplines” and to thereby present a thicker description of arts and culture in the period, as well as to renovate and develop methods for reading and interpreting literary texts that would adequately address their resolutely interdisciplinary or intermedia status. I include the word “discipline” in quotation marks because it is precisely the lack of hard and fast disciplinary boundaries that makes the intellectual and artistic productions of this period so compelling, both as objects of study for the scholar of the nineteenth century and as vivid examples of intellectual and expressive creativity for critics in the twenty-first. Understanding the literature of this period requires more than a thorough understanding of literary or narrative style; it requires a fluency in other vocabularies specific to that period that are often derived from other artistic or intellectual sources. Rather than imposing contemporary vocabularies onto nineteenth
century texts, my project seeks to reconstruct a vocabulary from the literary texts and critical writings of these authors themselves in order to present a detailed picture of the literature of the period and to bring to light aesthetic dimensions of these texts that may have escaped notice.

I am aware, nonetheless, of some of the pitfalls and pratfalls that can occur in the slippery space between the “sister arts” of painting and writing, and in this respect I am informed by Jean Seznec’s methodological claim in “Art and Literature: A Plea for Humility” that “sweeping considerations could be profitably replaced, or supplemented, by modest monographs, based on sure data, and free from any fallacious terminology.”

In this project, I have attempted to ground my analyses of the influence of the painterly imagination on American realist writing in concrete and discrete historical “data”: to look at the painters Howells, James, Garland, and Jewett knew, to read the ways they looked at them in their own words, and to make specific claims about the degree of that influence based on their own sense of what painting was and meant. My own reading practice attempts to be sensitive to those nuances and particularities and to interpret – rather than to explain – the ways in which writers of literary texts situated themselves in cultural and artistic networks of meanings. By casting a light on the these texts and contexts, I hope to show them more clearly for what they are, while also hoping that the attempt might reflect some of that light back into our own cultural and intellectual world.

In choosing to think about American realist writing of the late nineteenth century through the lens of painting, I am animated by a number of interests. Partly the topic is simply a personal predilection: I like looking at paintings, and I like reading the novels

32 Jean Seznec, “Art and Literature: A Plea for Humility,” *New Literary History* 3, no. 3 (Spring, 1972), 574.
and stories of American literary realists, and I therefore chose to undertake a study that would look at one in terms of the other. However, the connection between the two arts is more than a matter of taste. As I read more and more, it became clearer and clearer to me that a more nuanced and complete understanding of American literary realism demanded an equally nuanced and complete understanding of the painting of the period. To understand the writing of American literary realists, one would have to think like a realist, and to a surprisingly large degree this entailed thinking in terms of painting and understanding its pervasiveness, the depth and breadth to which it saturated the late nineteenth century culture of letters.

It is both irresponsible and boring to speak of “the nineteenth century mind,” as though such a numinously general thing ever existed: and yet I continually found that the minds of the nineteenth century writers I explored were remarkably capacious and omnivorous in the ways in which they adapted and adopted other ways of looking and thinking for use in their own literary experiments. My motivation behind this undertaking as a critic and a scholar is to demonstrate this capaciousness and omnivoracity through discussions of these American writers, and also, I hope, to show ways in which modern literary criticism and scholarship could benefit from adapting such interdisciplinary thinking to their own purposes. As Virginia Woolf wrote in 1934, “The best critics [of the past] were acutely aware of the mixture of elements, and wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds. Nowadays we are all so specialized that critics keep their brains fixed to the print, which accounts for the starved condition of criticism in our time, and the attenuated and partial manner in which it deals with its subject.”

Many recent scholars have indeed kept their brains fixed to the print, and American literary realism has fared poorly when it comes to questions of literary aesthetics. While still the subject of a great deal of contextualist literary scholarship, its critical fortunes remain about as dim as they were in 1915 when Howells lamented to James that he was “a comparatively dead cult with the statues cut down and the grass growing over them in the pale moonlight.” Critics such as Amy Kaplan, Alan Trachtenberg, Eric Sundquist, and Walter Benn Michaels have done much to make American literary realism a popular subject of scholarship, while also generally ignoring or disparaging questions of aesthetics as being of either trivial or misleading importance or even of politically pernicious influence.

Contextualist criticism that is not openly critical of American literary realism has worked to reconstruct the intellectual and social contexts that produced realist writing while also generally ignoring substantive connections to the arts, taking realism’s own professed status as an “anti-art” at face value. While such a trend began as early as V. L. Parrington’s *Main Currents of American Thought* (1930), much significant scholarship of the 1990s and 2000s has tried to describe and explain the social and economic factors that produced literary realism as a genre in the first place. As Daniel Borus asks in *Writing Realism* (1989), “why was the privileged literary form of the late nineteenth-century

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United States one that proclaimed as its aims accurate notation and natural expression?”

Borus attempts to answer the question in the form of a thick intellectual history (and is openly critical of what he would surely characterize as a thin New Historicist analysis), and other scholars have used similar historicizing methods to explain the causes behind the emergence of literary realism in America. In *The Problem of American Realism* (1994), for instance, Michael Davitt Bell sees the development of “scientific” literary realism as a response to prevailing gender anxieties over the proper roles of men and women; Brook Thomas in *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1997) links realist fictions to the prevailing late nineteenth century logic of contract by the way in which they do “not posit[] a governing moral order to the world” but rather “evoke the promise of achieving a just social balance by experimenting with exchanges and negotiations among contracting parties;” and Phillip Barrish writes in *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige* (2001) that, “literary realist works elaborate new forms of intellectual prestige, which are, in various cases, identified with an authorial persona, personified through a fictional character, instantiated in a text’s narrating voice, and/or implicitly proferred to readers.”

Eschewing the overtly Marxian historical materialism of scholars such as Walter Benn Michaels, these approaches nonetheless seek to situate the development of American literary realism in its intellectual, historical, and social contexts, implying that literary realism is inextricable from and determined by those contexts. At its broadest, these

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accounts all concur that the “appetite for reality” demonstrated by the main stream of American literary realism was a manifestation of the liberal progressive, scientific spirit of the age.

These studies surely provide valuable and well-researched perspectives on the development of realist writing in the United States, but they have generally overlooked the ways in which American literary realism aspired to be literary. Conspicuously absent from Barrish’s description of the “realist disposition” of writers of the 1880s and 1890s, for instance, is any sense that this disposition included a self-conscious attempt to fashion themselves as artists.\(^\text{39}\) The social scientist, the anthropologist, the urban planner, the photographer, and the journalist were certainly important models for realist writers. But so, of course, was the novelist, and to ignore these literary influences is to fall into a trap that literary realism itself purportedly set: that it was an immediate, scientific, “objective” view of the world and not one highly mediated by its formal and stylistic predecessors.

The painter, too, I argue, served the realist writer as an important model, in large part because his or her status as “artist” was relatively secure. This is a common sense observation that nonetheless has attracted relatively scant attention in recent years, partly due to a pervasive sense that literary realism understood itself as self-consciously \textit{unaesthetic}, a sort of anti-art. Michael Davitt Bell’s influential discussion of American literary realism has made readers acutely aware of the ways in which realist writers fashioned themselves as anything \textit{but} artists, a role associated with the feminine, the amateur, the useless, and the beautiful, which was opposed to the associations of

\(^{39}\) Barrish, \textit{American Literary Realism}, 5.
masculine work with the professional, the practical, and the good.\textsuperscript{40} However, a great part of the project of realism was its insistence that it was in fact an art, and that, in the words of Howells, realism must “picture” reality rather than simply “heap up facts.”\textsuperscript{41} If realism was “work,” a large part of that work was aesthetic work: deciding and selecting how the hard facts would fit together into a coherent and composed picture of reality.

Furthermore, it must be said that the usually dubious and always fuzzy distinction between artistic idealism and scientific materialism was itself a highly contested product of this same historical period, not an ideology that preexisted and determined it. Poets, painters, sculptors, architects, scientists, theologians and other intellects writing at the middle of the nineteenth century for journals such as \textit{The Crayon} (1855-1861) or \textit{The New Path} (1863-1865) were untroubled by such a distinction and felt that the future of both science and art lay in their fusion, not their division. Gustave Courbet – the groundbreaking French painter often credited with popularizing the term Realism – saw himself as both scientist and artist, and American painter Thomas Eakins used various technologies from optics and anatomy to compose his canvases. Likewise, while today we may admire Impressionist painters for their vividly expressive brushstrokes and delicate, colorist beauty, in the late nineteenth century they were frequently held to be the most arrant positivists whose analytical and scientifically-minded theories about color resulted in ghastly, garish \textit{tableaux} – a claim that in some ways is not without merit! These few examples must serve to remind us that while the scientific temperament was indeed a defining characteristic of the late nineteenth century \textit{Zeitgeist}, its intellectual,

\textsuperscript{41} Howells, \textit{Criticism and Fiction}, 15.
cultural, and artistic manifestations were hardly predictable or neatly containable in discrete disciplines.

Like the studies of Borus, Bell, and Barrish, this project seeks to contextualize the development of American realist writing of the late nineteenth century, but will focus on art and literary history rather than social and economic history. In other words I am less interested in what social and cultural forces “caused” American realism than in what literary and art historical influences and models determined its shapes and forms. In discussing the aesthetics of American realism, I am less attentive to what American realism means and more attentive to how American realism was. Much of the difficulty in discussing the aesthetics of American realism is also surely the issue of its historical belatedness. American realist writers emerging in the 1870s and 1880s perhaps felt the challenge to make an art of fiction even more acutely than their English and Continental predecessors. Debates about the artistic merit of realist fiction had been ongoing at least since the emergence of Stendhal and Balzac in the 1830s – but for this reason the reputation of realism in France was relatively more secure. This is not to say that realism there did not have its critics or that its status as literary art was not much disputed. But realist writing, for no other reason than its historical endurance, was a social fact in a way that American realism was simply not. French realism, in other words, had developed organically out of the bourgeois society for which it was a mirror: its social forms and social types were established to a much greater degree, and appeared “natural” to the extent that Stendhal famously likened his novels to mirrors carried along a provincial roadway, while Balzac could consider himself not so much a creative artist as a humble
“secretary” or transcriber of social life, or a sort of zoologist creating a comprehensive taxonomic catalogue of social types.  

American realists, on the other hand, encountered their own belatedness with a certain degree of anxiety and envy: anxiety that their own realist representations were unduly influenced by existing literary realist models which threatened their status as authentically realist accounts, and envy that other literary realisms enjoyed a denser, more comprehensive, and more “natural” society as a subject to represent. But while this belatedness had the disadvantage of making the American realist avant-garde feel that they lagged behind the cutting edge, it had the advantage of making available to the aspiring realist novelist a wide array of narrative and formal techniques, representational and critical concepts, and stylistic influences. The determined American realist thus had at his or her fingertips not only the examples of French realism, but those of English, Spanish, Russian, and Scandinavian realisms, to name only a few. Howells, for instance, in *Criticism and Fiction* and elsewhere frequently expresses excitement at the scope and scale of this cosmopolitan republic of letters (of which he conceived of himself as a national representative), and at the range of possible models demonstrating ways in which realism could be done. Though they lacked the spontaneity and organicity of a novelist like Balzac, the self-consciousness of American realist novelists makes their fictions an interesting subject for the study of the methods and models of realist

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representation and the ways in which those novelists adapted and adopted literary techniques from a variety of Continental and other sources.

But imitation of past models has rarely had much purchase in the cultural and intellectual context of the United States, and it is also for this reason that painting played such a central role in the development of the conceptual and technical vocabulary of American realist writing. In the first place, the obviously large distance between painting and writing as separate media kept the novelist’s anxiety of influence at bay. At the same time, that painting seemed to be a technology for representing reality with a minimum of mediation appeared to promise a useful array of representational techniques that could be transposed or translated into literary terms. Realist painting offered a loose model by which the realist writer could learn to see for him or herself and produce original and individual representations.

At the same time, this relatively replete toolkit of aesthetic techniques also made the aspiring American realist more acutely aware of the problems of realist representation than his or her predecessors. Indeed, while previous assessments of American literary realism have understood realist writers to suffer little anxiety about the “slipperiness of signification” at the center of language itself,43 I argue that American realist writers have always been highly attentive to questions of representation, and have understood the project of literary mimesis – the translation of objects or situations in the world into linguistic signs – to be highly problematic and complex, thus demanding the creative application of a wide and multifarious array of representational models, literary and otherwise.

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Realism, it must be said, is always already written under the sign of anxiety over the “slipperiness of signification”: at its center is the recognition that words are not things, that there is an extraordinarily fraught translation between world and word that requires a high degree of artistic attention. As George Levine writes, “Realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer; it makes inevitable an intense self-consciousness, sometimes explicit, sometimes not. No writer attempting to reach beyond words can fail to be struck by the work words do and cannot do.” At the same time, realist prose must insist to a greater extent than poetic language on what Ian Watt calls the “descriptive and denotative use of language,” a feature which makes the novel “the most translatable of the genres.” Theoretically, realist prose understands language as a maximally transparent medium: a highly polished mirror that gives the clearest possible picture of reality. In order for realism to realistically represent things in the world, it must assume some basic identity between thing and sign that makes such a correspondence effectively – if not essentially – non-problematic.

Understanding realist prose in these terms helps us to understand the depth and breadth of the challenges that the aspiring literary realist faced to make an art of realism, and how resolutely the conventional signifiers of a fine poetic style stood in the way of that objective. To some degree, of course, the contradiction between realism and art was simply conventional, a prejudice particular to the mainstream of American letters in the 1880s and 1890s that was largely a social, historical, and cultural construction. From this perspective, the so-called “realism wars” waged by Howells and others on the pages of

the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s* can be seen as an attempted cultural political coup in which an influential, avant-garde minority attempted to impose a taste for realist novels and stories on a majority readership that preferred either the entertaining story-telling of romantic fictions or the idealizing lyric artistry of more traditional poetry. From this relativist perspective, realism could become an art if it were accepted as one, and since the definition of art is simply a matter of cultural politics it had *only* to be accepted as an art in order to become one.

From another point of view though we can see that while the objections to poetry as a model for the realist novel are in part only conventional, they are also substantive and depend on the categorically distinct natures of poetic and prosaic language. If a “realist artist” seemed to critics like William Thayer to be a contradiction in terms, this was in large part because artistry in language was so strongly identified with poetry, and because “realist poetry” was – and remains – similarly contradictory. Why, if we can speak of realist painting and realist theater and realist opera, can we not speak of realist poetry? The answer lies in the nature of poetic language itself, and can be elucidated by

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47 For a treatment of this topic from the perspective of late nineteenth century American poetry, see Elizabeth Renker, “The ‘Twilight of the Poets’ in the Era of American Realism, 1875-1900,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry,* ed. Kerry Larson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) who writes that “poetry is...almost entirely absent from scholarship on American realism except as the emblem of realism’s opposite: a desiccated genteel tradition” (135). Renker identifies a tradition of “realist poetry” that cut against the grain of the genteel, idealist verse I identify above, but it must be said that this tradition, while interesting as a subject for the twenty-first century literary historian, was hardly part of the mainstream in its own time. In any case, the “realism” of this subterranean poetic tradition is largely a matter of the subjects treated in the poems themselves more than an element of poetic form or style.
thinking about poetry and prose in terms of their medium. What, after all, is the novel in? Surely we cannot say that the medium of a novel is “ink on paper,” as we can say that the medium of a painting is “oil on canvas” or “tempera on board.” The answer then is that the medium of the novel is language itself; the system of signs that produces the coherent body that we call a novel. In a purely theoretical sense, in realist prose the medium of language tends towards absolute transparency, for complete identity between the linguistic sign and its real-world referent. Of course, such identity is impossible, but it can still be said that the accent of realist prose writing falls on developing a more or less transparent linguistic medium that can produce the illusion of life with a minimum of interference.

Poetry, on the other hand, aims to cause a reader not to ignore but to notice its medium, and does so by emphasizing not the semantic dimensions of its linguistic medium, but its material dimensions: the meter, rhythm, and sound of language. In this way, we can say that the medium of poetry is not language itself, but sound, or rather the sonic or metrical dimensions of language in addition to its semantic dimensions. As poetry came to aspire towards the condition of music – that is, towards the absolutely non-referential – it did so precisely by confirming the nature of poetic language as itself fundamentally musical in nature. As Paul Valéry retrospectively wrote in 1924, “What was baptized Symbolism can be very simply summed up in the intention shared by

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48 We might add to this the visual dimensions of the printed word whose “physical” appearance on the page extends and adumbrates the meaning of a poem, a tradition that finds its origins in the high aestheticism of the Symboliste movement (in particular, Mallarmé’s poem Un coup de dés [1896]).
several families of poets to take back from music their own property.” Indeed, this conception of poetry as basically musical became ever more pronounced in the late nineteenth century, particularly among the avant-garde for whom the identity of word and sound was definitional of poetry itself, as distinct from mere prose. Valéry, for instance, claimed that Stéphane Mallarmé’s search for “poetic purity” was underwritten by the example of Charles Baudelaire’s “melodic line and...perfectly sustained sonority that distinguish it from all prose.” “Pure poetry” emphasizes the “wordiness” of words, while realism in prose emphasizes the “sign-iness” of words.

At the same time, other French writers were coming to understand the aesthetic possibilities of a poetic approach to prose writing by emphasizing the aesthetic singularity of the word rather than the referential nature of the sign. The novelist Paul

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50 Valéry, “The Place of Baudelaire,” 211, 210. It must be remembered that Valéry attributes Baudelaire and Mallarmé’s search for a “pure poetry” to the influence of Poe, particularly to his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846).

51 The distinction between poetic and prosaic language might be further elucidated by returning to Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy (1872), where the author claims that the difference between prosaic (epic) and poetic language (lyric) is not a nineteenth century generic development but constitutes of the very beginnings of lyric expression. Nietzsche writes: “we may distinguish two main currents in the history of the language of the Greek people, according to whether language imitates the world of phenomena and images or the world of music. [...] In the poetry of the folk song we see language stretched to the limit in order to imitate music: [the Archaic lyric poet] Archilochus, therefore, represents the beginning of a new world of poetry, one which contradicts the Homeric world in its deepest foundations. Here we find sketched out for us the only possible relationship between poetry and music, word and sound: the word, the image, the concept seeks an expression analogous to music and now feels the force of music in itself” (The Birth Of Tragedy, trans. Douglas Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 40-41).
Bourget, for instance, wrote that the essence of Decadent style lay in the ways in which it pushed prosaic discourse beyond the limits of simple reference in order to emphasize its possibilities of poetic expressiveness: in a Decadent style “the unity of the book decomposes to make way for the independence of the page, the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence decomposes to make way for the independence of the word.”

While Bourget and other Aesthetic writers such as Théophile Gautier, Pierre Loti, Alphonse Daudet, and, in a more satirical vein, J. K. Huysmans, largely remained outside the American mainstream, the example of Gustave Flaubert was more distressing, given Flaubert’s purported designation as a realist. Flaubertian formalism offered the aspiring realist novelist one possible solution to reconciling the seemingly opposed demands of art and realism: the novel as prose poem – the difference between a prose poem and a novel being the degree to which language itself was emphasized. In this sense, Flaubert’s famously fastidious search for le mot juste had the potential to denote both an intensely “poetic” focus on the sonority or associativeness of language, as well as a “prosaic” ability of language to pictorially reference things in the world with a high degree of descriptive specificity.

But while it was clear enough that Flaubert’s intense focus on language opened up avenues for the prosaic novel to be considered an aesthetic object, that same attention to literary style in fact had little bearing on whether and how the novel would refer to “real life.” In fact, Flaubert’s literary style implied no necessary correspondence to literary subject, which meant that the novel could excuse itself from the obligation to serve as a

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mirror of modern life. “What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write,” Flaubert wrote in a letter to his mistress Louise Colet in 1852,

is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style…. The finest works are those that contain the least matter; the closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result. I believe that the future of Art lies in this direction.53

Flaubert’s prophecy was in an important sense correct – but his desire for a “book about nothing” reveals the extremity of his aestheticism. In this way, it is peculiar that Flaubert is so often considered an influential realist, when his influence was largely in the opposite direction. While *Madame Bovary* and *L’education sentimentale* were indeed realistic in their subjects, the fantastical aestheticism of *Salammbô* and *La tentation de Saint Antoine* suggests that Flaubert’s method really had nothing to do with realism as such, as its emphasis on style holds for both works of highly detailed, socially historical realism and fabulously theatrical romantic fantasy.

This distinction between poetic and prosaic/mimetic discourse might seem to be unduly theoretical or even scholastic, except that it was a matter of concern for American realist writers concerned with developing an art of realist fiction for whom the poetic aestheticism of Flaubert or Bourget had relatively little purchase. Henry James himself understood such a distinction between poetic and mimetic language, and was careful to distinguish the art of fiction from the art of poetry. In his late lecture “The Lesson of Balzac,” James admonishes the literary realist to turn away from both romantic fiction and a colorless, enumerative naturalism in order to return realist prose to its proper

artistic purpose. In making realism artistic, however, James reiterates that the art of realist fiction remains “the art of the brush” – the paintbrush, that is – and not the art of the lyre. Indeed, James writes that the literary realist, in order to be a literary realist, must remain committed to representing only the image of life, which makes his or her art distinct from that of the poet. “The Poet,” James writes, “is most the Poet when he is preponderantly lyrical, when he speaks, laughing or crying, most directly from his individual heart, which throbs under the impressions of life. It is not the image of life that he thus expresses, so much as life itself, in its sources – so much as his own intimate, essential states and feelings.”

The novelist, on the other hand, is interested not in the sources of “life itself” but in its representation: writers such as Balzac, Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens are “exclusively lovers of the image of life” and ignore “the lyrical element.” In this way, “lyrical prose” is something of an oxymoron. One may write prose with lyrical dimensions, but the attempt is basically superfluous – and may even prove ridiculous. As evidence, James cites the example of George Meredith – a novelist who was also a poet – who “strikes us as hitching winged horses to the chariot of his prose – steeds who prance and dance and caracole, who strain the traces, attempt to quit the ground, and yearn for the upper air.” But the winged horses do not in the end leave the ground for the upper air of lyric poetry despite their “straining” – and the portrait of the novelist as a dressage rider is more than a little absurd. Lyricism in prose is showy equestrianism, whereas

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54 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 121.
55 Ibid., 122.
56 Ibid.
pictorialism in prose is constitutive of literary realism itself and its requirement to produce illusionistic representations or “images” of life.

Like the painter, the literary realist could artfully craft “truthful” illusionistic representations – “images of life” – that were at once realistic and obviously fictive. Levine writes that “the creation of illusion is essential to the realist process,” and it is for this reason that painting came to be a compelling model for a literary realism that was at once mimetic and artistic.  

57 Illusionistic painting that attempted to literally represent things in the world was recognized as an art, and so, *mutatis mutandis*, could be illusionistic writing. In order to achieve its illusionistic effects, however, realist writing had to develop a prosaic “plain” style devoid of the signifiers of poetic artifice that would have disrupted the illusion by calling attention to the linguistic medium by which the illusion was crafted. Effectively crafting this illusion required a guileless, authentic manner of writing that didn’t call attention to its own literary artifice – the traces and signs of individual artistry that would signal to a reader that he or she was reading words on a page, and not seeing through them to a world behind or beneath.

But again, the invention of a realist *sermo humilis* posed new problems. In its new focus on “concrete particularity,” realist writing had to sacrifice what Watt calls “the extrinsic beauties” of a belletristic style – the prancing and dancing and caracoling of a George Meredith.  

58 But because this new anti-style was evidently un-literary (since poetic style remained the most reliable signifier of literary artistry), a new standard of aesthetic taste had to be created by which to judge this new “anti-literature” artistic. But here too painting naturally suggested itself as a helpful model: it provided those standards

of taste, and thereby helped to effect the transformation of literary realism into a comprehensible and coherent aesthetic. Realist fiction becomes literary as it prompts and measures itself against the criteria of judgment associated with painting. Its claims to realistic representation mirror those of its “sister art”: its successes and failures are the same, and the degree to which a novel fails or succeeds depends upon the degree to which that novel constitutes a comprehensive and composed “picture” of life.

At this point the reader may wonder: why painting as model and not, say, photography? Certainly the photograph “pictured” reality and created and sustained its own air of authenticity by presuming to show the world in its concrete particularities through a maximally transparent medium. As Miles Orvell writes in *The Real Thing* (1989), the adjective “photographic” was in the 1880s and 1890s virtually synonymous with realistic depictions: “Though opinion remained divided on whether or not it was a good thing for a work of fiction to be ‘photographic,’ by 1900 one meaning of the term had become clear: it meant objective, factual, a faithful delineation of life.”

The camera promised an immediate and unrelentingly distinct picture of life that would appear to make it a welcome analogue for the aspiring realist. If the “story-teller” or “yarn-spinner” was an inveterate fabulist, then the picture that was worth a thousand words from the camera that never lied would surely have been a good model for the realist who strove for authentic and concise realistic reportage.

But opinion, as Orvell writes, was divided indeed, and to a large degree photography served the literary realist not as a model but as a negative example. Comparisons with photography were often consciously and conspicuously avoided by

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literary realists who aspired to be “literary,” rather than merely “journalistic.” Why? The problem, as we have seen in the case of William Dean Howells, who himself rejected the “photographic” comparison, dealt with the vexed relationship between “truthful” and “realistic” representations—a problem also raised by William Thayer when he wrote that the Kodak snapshot could not capture an image of the “heart of man.” Orvell writes that the question lay in “the degree to which the camera—a mechanical instrument—could deliver a picture of reality that was truthful,” and that, in consequence, “the real issue was of course buried in the question itself: what was a ‘truthful’ picture of reality? Was truth to be found in literal exactitude or in artistic generalizations?”

The actual “truth” of photographic images is the subject for another discussion; important for our purposes is to understand that whether or not a photograph was “truthful,” it was certainly not considered art which, in the aesthetic idiom of the late nineteenth century, demanded those “artistic generalizations” and for which the recognition of photography’s unsparingly literal vision as art was still a long ways off. Only in the 1890s did the idea that photographs could be “artistic” begin to become even vaguely acceptable, and this by way of making them less like photographs and more like paintings, as in the work of pictorialist photographers such as Alice Boughton or Alfred Stieglitz. Besides, the photographer was capable of showing the world only in black and white, which many in the nineteenth-century felt made his or her pictures of life insufficiently lifelike.

In other ways, painting provided not only the conceptual model for realist fiction that aspired to be literary, but also the practical model for its achievement. While the

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60 Orvell, *The Real Thing*, 85.
street photographer or beat journalist were recognizably professional, they also suffered from a palpably low social reputation. Therefore, American writers of realist fiction also looked towards the relatively professionalized methods and institutions of painters to legitimate their own work, to reify and concretize what had hitherto appeared to be immaterial, imaginative scribbling into productive and valuable labor. Contra Michael Davitt Bell, the figure of the artist in the late nineteenth century imaginary was not necessarily the figure of the effete dabbler or bohemian dilettante. The painter was also a compelling model of the artist as a professional with a resolutely individual vision and a widely recognized cultural purchase. That the social and artistic reputation of realist painting was higher in the 1890s than the artistic reputation of, say, Émile Zola, who was still beyond the pale for most genteel American readers, is yet another feature that helps us to understand why the aspiring American realist novelist would turn to the visual arts as a model for his or her fictions. That painting enjoyed a relatively high cultural repute and was capable of being both taught in schools and bought in markets goaded novelists of the late nineteenth century with envy.

Envy is a central feature of the realist novelist’s relationship with painting, and the often irrational psychological complexities of this dynamic will need to be kept in mind as we explore the manifold ways in which this relationship is articulated in the works of the four writers I will discuss. Envy – wanting what someone or something else has or is – prompts both admiration and disdain, and the novelists I discuss demonstrate an intense and persistent envy over what they see as the painter’s ability to immediately represent reality without translating it into a conceptual medium – even as it also becomes clear that such a translation is the formal and functional essence of the novel.
But while purportedly negative, it is important to recognize the transforming potential of envy, and not simply avoid or repress it. Rather, the dynamics of envy are essential to subject formation – to the recognition and formation of boundaries between self and other – and in this the novelist’s envy of the painter can be said to contribute to the formation of the novel as a specific literary genre.

In this claim I am informed by what David Kurnick memorably and perceptively calls “the melancholy of generic distinction.”\(^6^1\) Kurnick writes that the novelist’s envy of the theater and his or her failure to become a playwright and thereby to enjoy the theater’s representational and social immediacy “[made] visible the regrets that accompany a genre’s process of becoming unmistakably itself.”\(^6^2\) Melancholy – or melancholia in Freud’s sense of the word – is also an appropriate description of the persistent desire of novelists to “picture reality” or to “paint with words,” and the ghost of painting, like the trace of theatrical spectacle, continues to haunt the nineteenth century realist novel even as the conceptual distinction between the two media becomes ever more resolutely unbridgeable. The generic distinction of the novel as a unique form requires mourning the inevitable and irretrievable loss of painting’s representational immediacy and embracing the essentially mediated nature of novelistic discourse. In Melanie Klein’s memorable formulation, envy lays the groundwork for gratitude. The recognition that the other possesses capabilities or resources which the self does not prompts envy, but also furnishes the occasion for developing a loving relation towards

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the other built on the recognition of the other’s “otherness,” which recognition also prompts “greater tolerance towards one’s own limitations.”

An acute source of envy was painting’s more obvious formal and compositional unity. For the realist novelist, the model of painting seemed like one possible resolution to a persistent problem that has dogged the novel since its beginnings: its formlessness. Morris Dickstein, echoing many other theorists of the novel over the centuries, writes that “the novel began as a catch-all of prose narrative, the popular stepchild of the arts, sometimes ragged in its writing, with shifting points of view, undigested historical material, and a puritan pretense that it wasn’t fiction at all, simply a trove of letters or an artlessly told personal history.” In this view, the novel was not an artistic form but a form of forms – a sort of cabinet or grab bag for loosely collecting large amounts of disparate and incongruous material: letters, anecdotes, episodes, dialogues, portraits,


64 Morris Dickstein, The Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9. Whether or not this “formlessness” is in fact problematic has of course been a frequent topic of discussions of novelistic form and novelistic discourse. Indeed, the formal heterogeneity of the novel has often been seen to be constitutive of the “genre” of the novel itself. Mikhail Bakhtin famously writes that “All these genres, as they enter the novel, bring into it their own languages, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways,” and that this generic heterogeneity is embedded even in novelistic prose: “The development of the novel is a function of the deepening of dialogic essence. […] Dialogue moves into the deepest molecular and, ultimately, subatomic levels” (“Discourse in the Novel,” in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 321, 300). In a similar vein, Georg Lukács writes that “the novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in process of becoming” which is “why, from the artistic viewpoint, the novel is the most hazardous genre, and why it has been described as only half an art by many who equate having a problematic with being problematic” (The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971], 72-73).
descriptions, and so forth. Watt writes in a like vein that the task of the realist novel to represent the probable course of human events often results in formal and generic heterogeneity:

since the novelist’s primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger its success. What is often felt as the formlessness of the novel, as compared, say, with tragedy or the ode, probably follows from this: the poverty of the novel’s formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism. As opposed to the obvious artifice of tragic drama or lyric odes, the novel, in order to create its “air of total authenticity,” must appear artless. It must, in other words, appear without pretense or guile – but also without “art.” The novel’s guarantee that it is realistic is secured through its lack of form, but by the same token this realism, once secured, makes the novel difficult to be understood as a formally coherent work of art.

But if the painter was limited only to what he or she could see, why was the novel with its capacious – if loose and baggy – form into which anything could fit, not demonstrably superior? While James writes in “The Future of the Novel” that the novel is indeed “a picture,” it is an unusually flexible one: “The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere – it will take in absolutely anything.” The descriptive “painter with words,” after all, could try to evoke not just the color of light playing on the branch of a tree, but could describe the sound of the rustle of

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66 Watt, The Rise of the Novel, 32.
its dried leaves and the chill of the bright November air in which they did so, the autumn scent of the decaying foliage on the ground, the tang of an apple the observer was recently eating, the complex memories and associations and states of feeling evoked by the body’s presence in the scene. Indeed, as Jane Thrailkill argues, American literary realists were not simply interested in representing the world as a flattened, scientific, schematic map (as some of its critics held), but that they “were first and foremost committed to elaborating what William James…described as ‘feelings of reality,’” the complex, embodied, “affective” dimensions of experience not immediately ascribable to sensory experience or expressible in fixed, conceptual languages, the representation of which dimensions would make the realist injunction to “represent life” itself an aesthetic practice.68

And here too the medium of painting offered an enviable model for a means of representing the ineffable feeling of reality with a minimum of conceptual interference. This point can be elucidated by way of Nelson Goodman’s definition of aesthetic and non-aesthetic systems. If you were to ask, say, Henry James, what that “feeling of reality” was actually like, you would likely get something like his famous definition of experience in “The Art of Fiction”: “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.”69 Goodman would claim that James’s description of experience as the “atmosphere of the mind” is the description of an aesthetic system, characterized by

69 James, “The Art of Fiction,” 52.
“density, repleteness, and exemplificationality,” whereas non-aesthetic systems are characterized by “articulateness, attenuation, and denotationality.” These elusive, complex “feelings of reality,” in other words, require an aesthetic system for their satisfactory representation, a medium that “arises out of, and sustains, the unsatisfiable demand for absolute precision.”

Painting is an aesthetic system par excellence, because it admits of no possibility of what Goodman calls “notation.” The density and repleteness of its medium cannot be adequately or precisely symbolized, or made part of a system of signs that would not merely be an approximation of the original painting itself (theoretically a copier or printer capable of replicating each and every molecule of a painting would be a satisfactory notational system). The medium of language – particularly prosaic language – on the other hand is not primarily aesthetic, inasmuch as it is primarily notational. It may be said to have aesthetic effects, but only insofar as it attempts to approach the fundamental opacity of an aesthetic medium. Put more simply, if an essential element of lived and felt reality is understood to be what William James elsewhere calls the “fringe” whose “relations are numberless,” then “no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades.” This “unclassified residuum” demonstrates the resolutely analog or aesthetic nature of the world that the conceptualizing medium of language will only ever

70 Goodman, Languages of Art, 254.
71 Ibid., 252.
72 Ibid., 198.
From this perspective, a painted picture is ontologically of the same order as the thing it attempts to represent: its representation is a transcription of reality, not a translation into a more articulate, attenuated, and denotational medium that will inevitably simplify or approximate it.

We can see then several imposing obstacles – some historical and generic, others more resolutely cognitive or phenomenological – that allow us to understand why and how painting could serve as a compelling model for the literary realist who aspired to make the novel a representation of life that was also a work of art. While David Kurnick has argued that the theatrical stage offered novelists one means of immediately presenting a picture of life with a minimum of interference, painting offered another way of “picturing reality” that seemed to offer a medium, a model and a method for representing experience in a way that the generic and linguistic obstacles of the novel as a “story-telling” technology seemed to deny. The painter is enviable because he or she can present a personal vision of the world immediately and instantaneously, “at a glimpse” – much as Henry James claims in “The Art of Fiction” that the instantaneous glimpse of a family of French Protestants “made a picture” that “lasted only a moment” but that nonetheless provided the solid foundation on which a “woman of genius” could build a novel and

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75 William James, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,” in *William James: Writings, 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992), 680. James writes in *Psychology: Briefer Course* that while “it is convenient often to treat curves as if they were composed of small straight lines…we are [actually] talking symbolically, and that there is nothing in nature to answer to our words” (157). In this sense it is convenient to think of James’s project to “reinstate the vague” both through his psychological and philosophical writings is analogous to the way in which Newton’s invention of calculus represented a fundamental revolution of arithmetical methods, to adequately express the analog curvature of real lines that digital-arithmetical measurement could only approximate. See also Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1912).
“produce[] a reality.”  The novel as a picture of life posits a dramatic condensation of meaning and an evaporation of linear, narrative time, which means that the “prose picture,” as James calls it, “can do simply everything, and that is its strength and its life. Its plasticity, its elasticity are infinite.” But the pictorial dimension of prose also gives structure to that infinite elasticity: in the novel-as-picture, plot elements, which really take time to occur in a linear fashion, can be said to happen all at once, instantaneously, without any of the sensationalist “effects” of novel reading, and thus “hang together” in a unity of composition not available to the novel-as-story. Painting was both an enviable model of formal and compositional unity, and a means by which a representational medium could attempt to represent the world immediately and aesthetically, and it will be the task of the following pages to demonstrate how this is so.

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77 James, “The Future of the Novel,” 104-105.
William Dean Howells and Realism’s Aesthetic Dimension

When realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too.

- *Criticism and Fiction* (1891)\(^{78}\)

How does William Dean Howells picture reality? The question may initially strike us as an odd one because so many critics, then and now, think that he *doesn’t*. This popular and prevailing view of Howellsian realism was in wide circulation in Howells’s own time, whether it was used to defend Howells for his irreverence and boldness or to admonish him for his undue attention to quotidian things and the apparent lack of artistry of his novels.\(^{79}\) As one anonymous reviewer flatly put it, “He regards novel-writing as science and not as art.”\(^{80}\) More contemporary critics, notably Michael Davitt Bell in *The Problem of American Realism*, have generally agreed that Howells held questions of


\(^{79}\) Bell cites Horace Scudder who writes in the *Atlantic* that Howells has “a latent distrust of any art of fiction” and Brander Matthews who writes in *Cosmopolitan* that “Mr. Howells is unduly negligent of form” (Bell, *The Problem of American Realism*, 18). Criticisms abound; many of them can be found in: *The War of the Critics over William Dean Howells*, ed. Edwin H. Cady and David L. Frazier (Evanston: Row, Peterson and Company, 1962).

selection, form, and style quite cheap, but that this was no mere failure of technique on Howells’s part. Rather, the creation of an ideological divide between the “artist” and the “realist” was a strategy for legitimizing and masculinizing the practice of American fiction by converting novel-writing from the effete hobby of a “damned mob of scribbling women,” to quote Hawthorne’s unfortunately memorable phrase, to a socially useful vocation. By divorcing itself from feminized “art,” realism could adopt “the prestige of science,” thus becoming associated with “men’s activities.” If the writer was a scientist, he was not an ‘artist.’”

Bell’s argument is compelling but it causes Bell to overlook certain moments in Howells’s writing in which the distinction between science and art is not quite so clear. I preface this chapter with one such moment: Howells’s declaration in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) that the object of realism isn’t “mapping” or “heaping up facts,” but “picturing.” Bell is perplexed by this declaration, writing that while it may seem “to describe the art of realism…it is never clear just what, for Howells, distinguishes a picture from a map.” Rather, Bell asserts, “Howells was so notoriously and confessedly insensitive to pictorial art that one wonders what ‘picture’ meant to him.”

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82 A character in Howells’s late story “Though One Rose from the Dead” in the collection *Questionable Shapes* (1903) chides another character for wanting to “heap up facts, Lombroso-fashion” (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903), 172. Cesare Lombroso was the founder of anthropological criminology, suggesting that Howells negatively associates “mapping” and “heaping up facts” with dubiously positivist ways of knowing and the conversion of unique individuals into socially or biologically determined types.

83 Bell, *The Problem of American Realism*, 19. While critics such as Bell have suggested that Howells was uninterested in or unable to “picture” reality, other critics have suggested that Howells was exceedingly good at picturing, and that Howellsian picturing
In this chapter I will discuss what Howells meant by a picture, and will demonstrate that for Howells the representation of reality was far from a relatively straightforward and unproblematic endeavor. Through readings of Howells’s criticism, fiction, poetry, travel writing, letters, and other writings, I show Howells to be deeply engaged with questions of representation, with problems of form and structure, with the status of vision and the difficulty of the visual to convey accurate knowledge of the world – indeed with questions of the nature of reality itself.

I thus take as my cue Bell’s declaration that “it is never clear just what, for Howells, distinguishes a picture from a map,” and make a claim for what I call the aesthetic dimension of Howellsian realism: the ways in which Howells artfully constructs a fictive or representational space between the axes of map and picture. I aim not to clarify this cloudy relationship, but rather to suggest that Howells conceived of the office names a politically insidious way of seeing that makes him unpalatable to modern readers. Emily Fourmy Cutrer neatly summarizes the prevailing view of scholars such as Alan Trachtenberg and Amy Kaplan who hold that “this metaphor of ‘picturing’ indicates Howells’s essential conservatism.” Trachtenberg, Cutrer explains, finds that Howells’s tendency to picture “preserve[s] the moral assurances of his realism,” while Kaplan “notes the way in which Howells’s picturing frames the chaos of his late nineteenth-century environment.” These scholars, writes Cutrer, “implicitly identify Howells’s theories and art with a Cartesian scopic regime and its distanced and dispassionate perspective” (“A Pragmatic Mode of Seeing: James, Howells, and the Politics of Vision,” in American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature, ed. David. C. Miller [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], 264-265). The picturesque view succeeds in harmonizing potentially disruptive elements into a visually satisfying and politically inert composition, and the viewer is able to compose such a view by virtue of seeing it disinterestedly, aesthetically, and from a safe distance. See Amy Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 20-24 and passim. See also Nancy Bentley, Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 22-68. Bentley writes that Howells understood that his “responsibility as a leading man of letters…was not only to publish and disseminate masterpieces of fiction but to counter the degenerative effects of a vast machinery of ‘shows and semblances’ appearing everywhere in the American landscape” (24).
of the realist artist as the deliberate *blurring* of this distinction between picture and map, between art and life. Bell is thus correct to write that “Howells’s conception of the artist’s distinctive ‘office’ remains, at best, extremely cloudy.” Indeed, the realist-artist’s task was not to clarify the disjuncture between art and life but, as Howells writes, “to hide the joint” between them: “I think the effect is like that in those cycloramas where up to a certain point there is real ground and real grass, and then carried indivisibly on to the canvas the best that the painter can do to imitate real ground and real grass.”84 The task of the realist-artist is not so much the imitation of reality as the *continuation* of reality: the construction of neither exactly a map nor a picture but a fictive or virtual *space* defined by the conjunction of the two.

In this way I will suggest that while it has been commonplace to claim that Howells’s fiction generally lacks “picture,” and is thus lacking aesthetically, Howells himself was in fact seeking a new mode of “picturing” that would effectively represent an American scene that seemed immune to “picturing” as such. I will also suggest that in the United States in the years immediately preceding and following the Civil War there was a widely available aesthetic discourse that found a new way of bridging the gap between science and art: that of John Ruskin and American Pre-Raphaelitism. This discourse, I suggest, informed Howells’s sense of the task of the realist-artist but also made explicit the risks of this mode of picturing: that in its attention to minute particulars, it resulted in a general flattening of the picture-plane that made its representations un-lifelike. Howells thus tasked the realist-artist with producing the effect of proportion and perspective through using the dialogic structure of narrative itself to make fictions portrait-like:

artistically composed works of art that also serve as indexes of unique, “real” personalities. In his 1893 novel *The Coast of Bohemia*, Howells dramatizes the process of picturing and portraiture by making portrait painting a subject of fiction, thus attempting to reconcile the problem of the realist-artist through the form of the novel itself.

An “absence of color”: Painting, Poetry, and the Realist Novel

It has become common among contemporary critics to criticize Howells for a variety of literary and political shortcomings, but it is important to recognize the degree to which Howells’s own contemporaries derided him not just for the prudishness and Victorian gentility of his subjects but for his stylistic failures as an artist. Often they framed this artistic failure in terms of his failure to arrange the features, plots, and characters of his novels into aesthetically balanced compositions. Often too they chided Howells for insufficiently painting his characters and settings in a lifelike way. Howells developed a reputation for being scientific, cold, analytical, schematic, and guilty both of making the modern novel on the one hand trivial and on the other hand pedantic.

The influential critic Brander Matthews, for instance, wrote in *Cosmopolitan* in 1891 that, “In his fight for nature, even if it be raw, perhaps Mr. Howells is unduly negligent of form” and that experience must be “composed as a picture is composed.”

Horace Scudder, another influential critic writing in the same year, writes that Howells betrays a “latent distrust of any art of fiction” and that for him “literary art is of necessity

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false.”

Even before writing his literary manifesto *Criticism and Fiction* (to which Matthews and Scudder were responding), critics were quick to point to the lack of artistry in Howells’s realism. One of the most vivid of these critiques belongs to Hamilton Wright Mabie, who writes in 1885 of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* that, “The novelist wrote it in a cool, deliberate mood, and it leaves the reader cold when he has finished it.” The reason for this feeling of “coldness” is Howells’s “dispassionate and scientific impartiality,” which leads to what Mabie identifies as an “absence of color.” If that “throb of life” were present, “[the novel] would flame like lightning, as in Bjornson, or suffuse and penetrate all things with latent heat, as in Turgenieff, or touch all life with a soft, poetic radiance, as in Daudet.”

That a “soft, poetic radiance, as in Daudet” is lacking from Howells’s pages is probably too obvious to bear mention, but it was precisely this pictorial or poetic quality—a soft, poetic radiance—that most critics of the later nineteenth century would identify as the *sine qua non* of a literary work of art. Again, it wasn’t in 1885 clear that a novel could even be a work of fine art—and if it could, whether Howells was interested in the possibility. While he otherwise found many occasions to praise the work of his friend, and once wrote that Howells’s writing was remarkably painterly and pictorial (“I know of no English writer of our hour whose work is so exclusively a matter of painting what he sees”) Henry James, writing of Howells in 1886, took strong exception “to a phrase that

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[Howells] suffered the other day to fall from his pen…to the effect that the style of a work of fiction is a thing that matters less and less all the while.⁸⁹ At a time when James was busy defending the place of style in the novel against moralizing philistines like Walter Besant, Howells’s faux pas is particularly unfortunate.⁹⁰ James continues: “The style of a novel is a part of the execution of a work of art; the execution of a work of art is a part of its very essence, and that, it seems to me, must have mattered in all ages in exactly the same degree, and be destined to do so.”⁹¹

James is partially able to claim the mantle of fine art for the modern novel by way of comparison to the compositional possibilities of its indisputably fine sister art of painting (which will be the topic of the following chapter), but Howells, to James’s chagrin, “appear[s] increasingly to hold composition too cheap… He has an increasing tendency to tell his story altogether in conversations, so that a critical reader sometimes wishes, not that the dialogue might be suppressed (it is too good for that), but that it might be distributed, interspaced with narrative and pictorial matter.”⁹² Such an

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⁹¹ James, “William Dean Howells,” 505. James’s critique of Howells’s “formlessness” or insufficient attention to symmetry and composition is answered by critics such as Everett Carter in Howells and the Age of Realism (New York: Archon, 1954) who writes that the lack of composition and symmetry in Howells is “something very close to the texture of life itself” (313). There remains much more to be said in this direction.

⁹² It is worth noting as well that Howells himself was disappointed by the aesthetic shortcomings and lack of compositional proportion in A Foregone Conclusion (1874). Like James, Howells also felt that the shift of setting to America exceeded the aesthetic
assessment probably tells us more about James than it does about Howells, but it reiterates the criticism that Howells was insuffciently artistic because he was insufficiently pictorial. “The author forgets sometimes to paint,” writes James, “to evoke the conditions and appearances, to build in the subject. He is doubtless afraid of doing these things in excess, having seen in other hands what disastrous effects that error may have; but all the same I cannot help thinking that the divinest thing in a valid novel is the compendious, descriptive, pictorial touch, a la Daudet.”

Horizon of the text, which was primarily from Don Ippolito’s point of view. He writes in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton: “If I had been perfectly my own master – it’s a little droll, but true, that even in such a matter one isn’t – the story would have ended with Don Ippolito’s rejection. But I suppose that it is well to work for others in some measure, and I feel pretty sure that I deepened the shadows by going on, and achieved a completer verity, also” (William Dean Howells to Charles Eliot Norton, Dec. 12, 1874, William Dean Howells: Selected Letters, Volume I: 1852-1872, ed. George Arms, Richard H. Ballinger, Christoph K. Lohmann, John K. Reeves, Don L. Cook, David J. Nordloh [Boston: Twayne, 1979], 198).

James’s claim that Howells’s novels contain too much dialogue perhaps proleptically demonstrates an anxiety of influence over his own “scenic method” that he developed in the 1890s. Novels such as The Other House (1896) and The Awkward Age (1899) are written in virtually nothing but dialogue. James, “William Dean Howells,” 505-506. James in 1886 was a firm believer in the method and manner of Daudet, a writer about whom he was more or less unreservedly ebullient. Indeed, Daudet, like Howells, also lacks “composition” but is able to compensate for it with his fine impressionist style: “Daudet catches it in the finest net of talk, and this fine net is his marvelous style. It plays into the happy and indiscernible instinct which is his triumphant substitute for composition, the instinct which saves him from the penalty of his want of connexion and continuity, his love of jumps and gaps, of the glimpse and the episode. He positively gains indeed by this last tendency; it makes him the novelist with the greatest number of wonderful ‘bits’ to show, of beautiful sharp vignettes, or pages complete in themselves. To think of one of his books is to see a little gilded gallery with red sofas and small modern masterpieces” (“Alphonse Daudet” [1897], in Literary Criticism II: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition, ed. Leon Edel [New York: Library of America, 1984], 256). James would however grow increasingly ambivalent about the stylishness and pictorialism of literary “impressionism,” as will be discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.
The “soft, poetic radiance,” or the “compendious, descriptive, pictorial touch,” of a writer like Daudet is, many readers will no doubt agree, just what Howells hasn’t got, and to a large extent it was these pictorial or painterly qualities that in the late nineteenth century were coming to characterize one possibility for understanding the novel as a fine art, particularly as it came to be developed in France by aestheticist writers such as Daudet himself. But as improbable as it may sound today, the absence of these reliable artistic markers inevitably suggested art’s perennial antagonist: science. Fiction that didn’t demonstrate richly descriptive pictorial effects or contain a poetic quality in its prose was often labeled “scientific,” even if there was nothing “scientific” about its content. An anonymous review of Howells’s *Rise of Silas Lapham* from 1885 makes the distinction between so-called art and science with such clarity that it is worth quoting it at some length:

Two men study some object in nature, say a plant. One of them will drink in with his eye all its visible beauty, its form, its color, the stirring of the wind and the delicate play of light and shade among its leaves. He seizes a brush and with a few bold strokes reproduces all these traits upon the canvas. That is Art. The other observer plucks up the plant by the roots and brings it home to his herbarium. There he makes minute and careful diagrams of it, probably with the aid of a camera. He measures it and weighs it. He cuts it up into sections and makes drawings of the sections. He analyzes the clay at its roots, he counts its juices and tests for acids in them. That is Science; and therein lies the difference between the novel-writing of, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne and novel-writing as Mr. Howells pursues it.  

The distinction this reviewer makes between the artistic novel and the scientific novel is clear to the point of predictability. Artistic representation is defined by color (and the tonal modulation of color values by light and shadow), synthesis or simplification of

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form, and motion (the stirring of the wind). In opposition to artistic representation, scientific representation is defined by the absence of color (cameras are black and white and diagrams are presumably done in ink), the conceptualization or analysis of form (cutting the plant into sections), and the absence of motion (the plant is transported out of the environment to the windless herbarium). In other words, the artistic treatment is primarily an individual impression of the plant, while the scientific treatment is the conversion of the appearance of the plant to information about the plant. The artistic treatment is intended to make you see the plant; the scientific to make you know it. The first is, in other words, a picture; the latter a sort of map, in which the living thing is converted into a diagrammatic schema, in which the point of view of the beholder is sacrificed for an omniscient God’s-eye view, and in which the analog tones and curves and colors of the thing itself are digitized or converted into discrete data. Next to Howells, continues the reviewer, “Even Mr. Henry James…appears quite a child of sentiment. He is capable of receiving ‘impressions’ – which, in Mr. Howells’ eyes, would be a most unscientific weakness – and he manages to retain some smack of art about the work he does.”96 That for this reviewer Henry James has only a “smack of art” reveals a great deal about the critical assumptions facing the realist novelist in 1880s and the uphill battle he or she would have to fight to make an art of realist fiction.

But was Howells in fact so chilly and scientific as this and other reviewers supposed, and was he in fact guilty of facilitating such a split between the novel of science and the novel of art by ignoring the injunction to compose or picture? Certainly there are moments in Howells’s own critical writings that might lead us to think so,

96 Ibid., 36
particularly the ubiquitous claim that Howells makes for the *educative* or didactic function of the realist novel: the “business of the novelist is to make you understand the real world through his faithful effigy of it…to help you be kinder to your fellows, juster to yourself, truer to all.”\(^97\) The functional “business” of the novelist to morally instruct would seem only to come at the expense of the expulsion of a disinterested “art for art’s sake” aestheticism.

Such an understanding would corroborate Bell’s assessment that Howells viewed the man of letters as a man of business and Howells, at times, does indeed make such a rejection: “The art which…disdains the office of teacher is one of the last refuges of the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society, and is now seeking to shelter itself in aesthetics.”\(^98\) “Aesthetics” – and I do think Howells means here the contemporary trend of *aestheticism* – names and marks the boundary or bulwark against which the modern and democratic realist movement presses on, and it also establishes its horizon of possibility: “the aesthetic” is the country into which arts and letters cannot proceed if they are to remain something called “realism.” Thus we would agree with critics like Bell who writes that “Howells needed to dissociate his identity as a writer from its ‘artistic’ implications and that this dissociation was an important, perhaps a crucial component of the realism to which he turned in the 1880s,”\(^99\) or with the anonymous reviewer who writes that “the last thing [Howells’s Puritan mind] would dream of would be to pursue art for art’s sake.”\(^100\)

\(^97\) Howells, “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading,” 231.
\(^98\) Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 87. See also Howells’s essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” (in *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, 298-309).
\(^100\) Anonymous, “Novel-Writing as a Science,” 35.
Howells was certainly no aesthete, but neither was he such a ruthless analyst that he programmatically erased all traces of art from his novels, or saw these two impulses as necessarily opposed. Rather, Howells claimed that the educative value of a realist novel was indistinguishable from its aesthetic value. “The novel can teach, and for shame’s sake, it must teach,” writes Howells in his essay “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading” (1899), “but only by painting life truly. This is what it must above all things strive to do.”101 Much as Aristotle writes in the Poetics that people enjoy creating and admiring representations “because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means,”102 so Howells believes that the task of the novelist is to create a “faithful effigy” or “picture of life.” The picture’s correspondence to reality will make it both instructive and, to the degree to which that “picture of life” is faithful, “a masterpiece of literature.”103

In other words, the realist novel must “picture” in order to become successful either as a tool of instruction, or as a literary work of art – and indeed for Howells it is inconceivable that one of these two qualities could exist without the other. But how then does the novelist go about “picturing” or “painting life truly,” and how does the realist novelist avoid the tendency for the realist novel to “[heap] up facts merely, and [map] life instead of picturing it?” In order to understand what Howells means for the novel to picture and paint, I suggest that we must first look to Howells’s own understanding of painted pictures, and the ways in which painting and picturing might enter into written and novelistic discourse. For someone “so notoriously and confessedly insensitive to

103 Howells, Criticism and Fiction, 49.
"pictorial art," as Bell puts it, Howells spills an awful lot of ink writing about art and artists. A list of novels that prominently feature characters who are visual artists and substantive discussions of works or theories of art would include virtually all of
Howells’s major works from before 1900: *A Counterfeit Presentment* (1877), *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Minister’s Charge* (1886), *April Hopes* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893), and *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (1897), among others. Clearly Howells had at an abiding and complex interest in art and aesthetics, despite what critics of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries may have said to the contrary.

The most obvious reason that critics and scholars have tended to ignore the pictorial in Howells’s body of work is that Howells’s writing is not painterly in its descriptiveness, and unlike the work of, say, Henry James, contains few references to particular works of art or moments of ekphrasis. Howells was openly skeptical about the ability of the written word to give any adequate approximation of a painting or other work of art. In his early volume of travel sketches *Venetian Life* (1866), Howells resists the common practice of travel writers to describe the works of Venice’s Old Masters. “I could not give the imagination and the power of Tintoretto as we felt it,” writes Howells, “nor the serene beauty, the gracious luxury of Titian, nor the opulence, the worldly magnificence of Paolo Veronese.”  104 But Howells is clear that his inability to describe the works of Venetian painters is due not to a personal lack of ekphrastic prowess; rather language by its very nature fails to adequately reproduce their sensuous presence. Howells writes that “the names of the colors, however artfully and vividly introduced and

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repeated, cannot tell the reader of a painter’s coloring,” to which he jocularly adds, “I should be glad to hear what Titian’s ‘Assumption’ is like from some one who knew it by descriptions.”105 Seeing Titian is seeing Titian, and no description in the world will substitute for the experience. And that is all Howells has to say about the Old Masters.

But Howells’s evident distrust of literary descriptiveness conceals an enduring and structuring interest in picturing as a metaphor for novel writing. In fact, Howells’s novels do “picture,” but his pictures generally lack the aestheticist or impressionist style that would have identified his novels as certifiably pictorial and therefore “artistic” in the visual and aesthetic idiom of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the pictorial in literature was, in the 1880s and 1890s, coming to be associated with Romantic aesthetes such as Daudet whose vividly described “word paintings” demonstrated that much discussed “soft, poetic radiance.” Indeed, aesthetic writing of this sort tended to blur the distinctions between painting, poetry, and prose – “prose poems” were admired for their vivid descriptions, their use of color or shadow, their evocation of multiple sensory experiences, and their ability to construct and present rich and compelling visual images.

While his own prose lacked that “soft, poetic radiance,” Howells was by no means ignorant of late nineteenth century aestheticism. Indeed, while it may seem obvious that Howells’s democratic realist project sought to expel the “lingering aristocratic spirit” of contemporary aestheticism, it is important to note that Howells in fact began his career as a poet, and that he continued to write poetry throughout his career. It would perhaps surprise the casual reader of Howells to learn that his first publications were poems so absolutely steeped in the influence of Heinrich Heine

105 Ibid., 156.
(particularly his *Reisebilder*, or *Pictures of Travel* [1826-29]) that James Russell Lowell, to whom he submitted them, suspected they were translations and not Howells’s original work.\(^{106}\) While Howells begins his memoir *My Literary Passions* (1895) by discussing his childhood affection for Goldsmith and Cervantes (a significant choice no doubt intended to frame his career in terms of the tradition of the sentimental and the comic novel), his earliest influences were in fact Romantic and Victorian poets: Heine and Wordsworth, Tennyson (whom Howells memorized and quotes ubiquitously in his novels), as well as Lowell and other Boston poets whom he idolized and later knew personally.

While the 1870s and 1880s saw Howells’s development of his realist novelistic style, a series of personal crises (really mental breakdowns) spurred in part by the death of his daughter, Winifred, in 1890 led to a brief, if concentrated, return to poetry, and, it might be said, an awakened interest in the aesthetic movement that was at that point fully underway in the United States. Several groups of these poems were published in *Harper’s Monthly* in the early 1890s, with radically modern and aestheticist titles: *Impressions, Moods, Monochromes, Stops of Various Quills*, and *Pebbles*.\(^{107}\) Howells also wrote and published in 1890 an introduction to a volume of French *Symboliste* poetry and sketches entitled *Pastels in Prose*, translated by the young American aesthete Stuart Merrill, which includes translations of Daudet, Banville, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam,


Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Mallarmé, among others. These prose poems, writes Howells, are notable in that these poets do not “saddle [their] reader with a moral…in a way very uncommon in English verse, at least, and equaled only, so far as I know, in some of the subtle felicities of Heinrich Heine.” Unlike the pedantic beat of English poetry, these poems are notable primarily for their imagery and subtlety: “The very life of the form is its aerial delicacy, its soul is that perfume of thought, of emotion which these masters here have never suffered to become an argument.” One might expect Howells to dismiss these prose poems for their aristocratic spirit, for disdaining “the office of teacher” and resolutely pursuing art for its own sake. But Howells, ever catholic in his tastes, not only enjoys them but understands that their particular beauty is exactly that “aerial delicacy” or “perfume of thought” that could not become an argument or moral without losing its essential quality. By pressing a perfume into the service of some moral or forcing it to perform the office of teacher, the perfume’s essential quality as perfume is conceptualized and destroyed.\footnote{Howells, introduction to \textit{Pastels in Prose}, trans. Stuart Merrill (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), vii, viii. One is reminded reading this line of T. S. Eliot’s famously ambivalent “praise” of Henry James, who had “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.”}

Howells, in other words, was hardly as antipathetic towards the aestheticist movement as so many allege, and actually had a remarkably sympathetic and complete

\footnote{Cady notes in his introduction to \textit{Pebbles, Monochromes, and Other Poems} that while Merrill was a dedicated \textit{Symboliste}, he also “plunged into the campaign of social protest. He worked so hard for Henry George that his father disowned him. When Howells stood in effect alone to plead the cause of the Chicago Anarchists, Merrill stepped to his side” (“Introduction,” xxii). That Merrill could be both an aesthete and a committed Georgist suggests that for Howells a dedication to the amorality of art does not necessarily entail forsaking or transcending human and social commitments.}

\footnote{See: Jameson, \textit{The Antinomies of Realism}, 33-35. Jameson describes the difference between Balzac’s “boarding house smell” in \textit{Pere Goriot}, which is allegorical, and the autonomous and unnamable odors of Baudelaire and Proust.}
understanding of its means and ends. But his admiration remains ambivalent. These prose poems are beautiful but frail: “I have felt, in going over these little pieces,” writes Howells, “that the slightest rudeness of touch might shake the bloom, the color from them.” Pastels are subtler and more nuanced than, say, the mineral paints of Silas Lapham, but they are also easily smudged.

Like the delicate mechanical butterfly in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s parable of aesthetic idealism “The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844), these prose poems cannot bear contact with the vulgarity or solidity of “real life,” and are too subtle in their effect to be widely appreciated or publically useful. Despite his obvious appreciation for the effects of the aesthetic movement, Howells was more comfortable limiting those effects to the genre of poetry, reserving prose (and particularly the novel) as the medium that deals in harder edges, cleaner lines, clearer images, and bolder strokes. Pastels are not reproducible, their “soft, poetic radiance” not convertible to printed images (especially in black and white), and they are thus unsuitable for the prosaic, democratic art of the left hand that Howells envisioned the realist novel to be. Howells, as a former typesetter and printer, as well as a lifelong editor, would have been particularly aware of the delicacy of the pastel and of the inability of the aestheticist movement as a whole to appeal to a wide and culturally diverse audience. The aesthetic prose poem was a private pleasure, not a public duty.

Howells was also ambivalent about pictorialism and aestheticist “word painting” in novels. In a review of Lafcadio Hearn’s novel Youma (1890), for instance, Howells

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111 For more on Howells and the aesthetics movement see: Brad Evans, “Howellsian Chic: The Local Color of Cosmopolitanism,” ELH 71, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 775-812. See especially 787-790.
112 Howells, “Introduction” to Pastels in Prose, viii.
admits that he will not “refuse the pleasure” of “an artist of those who think in color,” while also writing skeptically that “perhaps one doubts whether it might not be better for him to paint his sketches than to write them.” Hearn’s richly descriptive and painterly prose represents for Howells a site of contradiction. Ever a defender of “modern” fiction, Howells must admit that, “As a painter [Hearn] is of the most modern school: an impressionist who puts on pure color, and loves to render light in its fiercest and brightest tints.” But while suggesting the possibility that modern prose writing could adapt the visual effects of modern painting, Howells writes that Hearn nonetheless remains mired in romance, giving the reader an improbable plot in an unrealistically exotic setting: “as a fictionist…he seems a reversion.” Howells is able to resolve the conflict of admiration and anxiety by writing that Youma “should perhaps more fitly [be] call[ed] a poem,” a declaration that allows him to eat his cake and have it.113 By delimiting pictorial effects to the more private realm of poetry, Howells can defend the realist novel from its “aristocratic” influence.114

A “lunar bareness”: Picturing the American Scene

113 William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Study,” Harper’s Monthly 81 (September 1890), 642.
114 That Howells implicitly or explicitly delimited the pleasures of aesthetic art to the domestic sphere can be further demonstrated by the example of Howells’s own house. An interview in Cosmopolitan from 1890 describes Howells’s rooms on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston as the perfect expression of the fashionable modern aestheticist style: “The rooms are poetic, with some old paintings from Florence on the walls; an original water-color by [the Orientalizing painter Marià] Fortuny, … There are Venetian views; a picture by [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti, and one by [Lawrence] Alma-Tadema with ‘To my dear Howells’ in the artist’s writing in the corner, and many other bits of artistic value and association.” Quoted in Kirk, W. D. Howells and Art in his Time, 143. See also Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 226-227.
All of this ambivalence toward the aesthetic would seem to confirm Bell’s assertion that Howells deliberately eschewed “art” in order to focus on the moral and social business of novel writing. I discuss Howells’s awareness of the principles of aestheticism at such length in order to suggest that Howells’s dismissal of impressionist or aestheticist effects in his novels is a deliberate aesthetic choice, not the result of ignorance or inability, and that while Howells might have dismissed aestheticist effects (the “soft, poetic radiance”) from his prose, this by no means suggests that his realism had no aesthetic dimensions. Rather, the difficulty facing the American novelist at the time was exactly the problem of composition and coloring – in a word, of picturing – the American scene in a climate of taste in which aestheticism predominated. In fact, the qualities that aestheticism so prized – the soft, poetic radiance; the compendious, pictorial touch – were not widely held to even exist in the American social or physical landscape, which was widely seen as glaring, barren, harsh, unrelenting, monotonous, and so on. The challenge facing the American realist-artist was to represent accurately and truthfully a scene in which those qualities were starkly and overwhelmingly absent. In other words, any representation of American life or the American scene, if it were honest, would appear “unartistic” to virtually any reader at the time. The American scene itself – not merely Howells treatment of it – lacked specifically those qualities that would strike the cultivated late nineteenth century reader as “art.”

That the American scene literally looked different from the European scene and lacked the “atmosphere” that would furnish both the style and substance of works of art was a fact widely commented on in the nineteenth century, a fact that presented a nearly
insuperable challenge for any American artist looking to represent his or her own land and society. “The everlasting complaint,” wrote art critic Sadakichi Hartmann in 1894, is that “there is no atmosphere in America.” Howells was well aware of this common lament. Writing in *Criticism and Fiction*, for instance, Howells claims that the American “lives in a world wholly different from the Englishman’s…he breathes a rarefied and nimble air full of shining possibilities and radiant promises which the fog-and-soot clogged lungs of those less-favored islanders struggle in vain to fill themselves with.” The English reader, accustomed to the thicker atmosphere of his gross and palpable society, is a fish out of water in the vacuous American air. Indeed, the English reader finds himself “coughing and sputtering” for oxygen upon finding himself in the “exhausted receiver” of an American novel (a “receiver” is the bell jar of a vacuum pump). What made representing the American scene difficult was its vacuity and lack of atmosphere, its severe lighting that cast everything in a harsh glare. Henry Adams eloquently announces this problem in *The Education* in both moral and aesthetic terms:

> The New England light is glare, and the atmosphere harshens color. The boy was a full man before he ever knew what was meant by atmosphere; his idea of pleasure in light was the blaze of a New England sun. […] After a January blizzard, the boy who could look with pleasure into the violent snow-glare of the cold white sunshine, with its intense light and shade, scarcely knew what was meant by tone. He could reach it only by education.

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117 Ibid.
Adams associates the actual severity and vacuity of the New England atmosphere with its social, educational, and cultural vacuity, while he associates the physical qualities of atmosphere and “tone” with the cultural sophistication associated with the Old World. Seeing the American scene required a different set of eyes able to take in and admire the broad, harsh light of American life, both literally and figuratively, and Howells himself understood that the task facing the American artist was to look at his or her subject immediately, even if it was dangerously or dazzlingly bright: “I said to myself that I would throw away my English glasses, and look at American life with my own American eyes, and report the things I saw there, whether they were like the things in English fiction or not.”

Howells’s “English glasses” are at once the distorting lenses of novelistic style as well as shades—sunglasses—that not only mediate and distort, but partially protect.

From the perspective of the thick atmospheres of the English or Continental novel, full of the furnishings of a dense and historic society, the American stage looks not only unfurnished and atmospherically vacuous, but dangerously blinding. For this reason it appears, from the European perspective, quite literally extra-dimensional, almost beyond the reaches of conscious perception, like infrared or ultraviolet light. Continental

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120 It is worth noting that in the nineteenth century, tourists still often made use of the “Claude glass,” a sort of dark mirror that would reflect a landscape to bring out its tonal values and render it more picturesque. The use of shaded lenses was also thought to bring out the picturesque elements of a scene that was too much a glare. Henry James, for instance, writes in *Italian Hours* that while riding on the Roman campagna, “I found tremendous uncemented blocks; they glared and twinkled in the powerful light, and I had to put on a blue eye-glass in order to throw into its proper perspective the vague Etruscan past, obtruded and magnified in such masses quite as with the effect of inadequately-withdrawn hands and feet in the photographs” (*Collected Travel Writings: The Continent*, ed. Richard Howard [New York: Library of America, 1993], 510).
and English readers, on the other hand, “require[] something gross and palpable for [their] assurance of reality.”\textsuperscript{121} From that perspective, Howells’s realism is aesthetically deficient since any novel without the kind of dense atmosphere generated by all the stuff of European civilization would undoubtedly look paltry. The challenge for the American writer was to write \textit{without} that dense atmosphere, without all the stuff of European civilization, and to set it all in the vacuous, broad “light of common day,” to use Howells’s own phrase that has since become virtually synonymous with his art of realism, that predominates in the American latitude.

In this regard, it is illuminating to read Howells’s project for the American novel in light of a letter he received from James in 1880. Here James lauds Howells for trying to write without “paraphernalia,” without, in other words, all the gross and palpable things to which most readers are accustomed from reading English and Continental literature, whether romantic or realist. While James admits that representing the American scene has proven challenging to him (he has just published “Washington Square,”) he writes that Howells seems perfectly up to the task: “You are certainly right—magnificently and heroically right—to do so, and on the day you make your readers—I mean the readers who know and appreciate the paraphernalia—do the same, you will be the American Balzac.”\textsuperscript{122} James confirms the difficulty of making modern readers who may even have begun to develop a taste for realism through Balzac appreciate an American version of the same, a version, that is, utterly unlike Balzac and without so much of its interesting texture and detail. The obvious irony is that a Balzac...

\textsuperscript{121} Howells, \textit{Criticism in Fiction}, 60.
without paraphernalia – without all the incredible surfeit of material and social stuff that crowds La Comédie humaine – wouldn’t be anything like Balzac at all.

Again, James’s letter to Howells tells us more about James in 1880 than about Howells, and it is significant in its assumption that Howells as a budding realist would want to be a realist in the manner of Balzac in the first place. He did not. But James’s identification of the challenge facing the American novelist is precise, and no doubt recalls his own discussion of the challenges facing Nathaniel Hawthorne in his critical biography published just one year before. In Hawthorne (1879) James famously lists a lengthy catalogue of stuff missing from the American scene of the early nineteenth century, a list which significantly includes “literature” and “novels” among other accoutrement in a rather more satirical vein (“No Epsom nor Ascot!”). For James, the lack of cultural and social texture must have deprived American novelists such as Hawthorne of adequate materials with which to furnish and stage their own novels.\footnote{123}

James is struck by “a phrase in the preface to his novel of Transformation [The Marble Faun], which must have lingered in the minds of many Americans who have tried to write novels and to lay the scene of them in the western world.”\footnote{124} The phrase is this:

\textit{No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools--no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class--no Epsom nor Ascot!”} (Hawthorne, in Literary Criticism I: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers, ed. Leon Edel [New York: Library of America, 1984], 351-352).

\footnote{124} James, Hawthorne, 350. James undoubtedly is thinking of himself, but also, I think, of Howells with whom it is very likely that he discussed just this preface. On the early friendship of Howells and James see e.g.: Lynn, William Dean Howells, 178-189. There isn’t much detail on these early discussions, but Lynn cites a letter from Howells to E. C.
“No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land.”

James finds Hawthorne’s felicitous description of the situation facing the American romancer more than a little tongue in cheek. Indeed, the American scene of Hawthorne’s American Note-Books is characterized for James not by “broad and simple daylight” but rather by “an extraordinary blankness – a curious paleness of colour and paucity of detail.” Hawthorne’s America was defined absolutely by this blankness, and by all “the items of high civilization…which are absent from the texture of American life.” The Marble Faun, James suggests, takes place in Italy precisely in order to compensate for these lacks, to evoke “the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle” which is the necessary medium of romance.

The existence of atmosphere is of paramount importance for Hawthorne’s art of fiction, and is one of the key features that characterizes his fictions as romances rather than novels. “Atmosphere” writes Hawthorne elsewhere, “is what the American romancer needs. In its absence, the beings of imagination are compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and

Stedman in 1866 in which Howells writes, “Talking of talks, young Henry James and I had a famous one last evening, two or three hours long, in which we settled the true principles of literary art” (Lynn, William Dean Howells, 180).


126 James, Hawthorne, 351.
pasteboard of their composition too painfully discernible.”¹²⁷ As an artist then, the romancer’s prerogative is the right and the ability to “manage his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen or enrich the shadows, of the picture.” The discerning artist will “make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public.”¹²⁸ Among other qualities of his writing, Hawthorne’s creation of literary atmosphere made him the most influential example of American literary art – art, in other words, that conspicuously and self-consciously used a kind of moral and pictorial chiaroscuro to create dramatic moral and pictorial effects, and which sought deliberately to remove itself from the world of “actually living mortals.”

Howells’s realist novels, on the other hand, are entirely devoid of Hawthorne’s romantic “atmosphere.” It is as if Howells took Hawthorne’s tongue-in-cheek description of the American scene as “nothing but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight” with complete seriousness and sought to represent characters in precisely such a medium – a medium, that is, totally inclement to the creation of literary art as it was commonly understood. In the novels of Howells there is indeed “no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong,” and in the absence of the picturesque “atmosphere” that these conditions create, literary characters are indeed obliged “to show

themselves in the same category as actually living mortals.” While Hawthorne’s romances strove to “establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel…without exposing [imaginary figures] to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives,” in Howells’s realism there is no distinction between life and art, and thus no “atmosphere of strange enchantment” thrown over the whole picture.  

Beyond even a map or a picture, Howells’s realism could be interpreted as an attempt not to represent but to literally extend “life itself” onto the page.

The problem of whether prose fiction ought to picturesquely represent the improbable and the ideal or faithfully represent the probable and the real returns us to the shopworn critical distinction between the romance and the novel – a distinction that Hawthorne and Howells both inherited and helped to perpetuate. However, the degree to which Howells’s choice to renounce the picturesque “atmosphere” of the romancer for the “light of common day” was more than a moral choice: it was also an aesthetic choice with consequences often difficult to discern, but which seems to have blinded critics to the possibility that Howells had aesthetic concerns in the first place, and which caused them to label his novels “scientific.” The general renunciation of atmosphere – the recognition that the American scene is distinctly vacuous – seems to preclude the kind of “picturing” that would in the nineteenth century parlance distinguish art from mere reportage. The creation of “atmosphere” or “soft, poetic radiances” was the distinguishing feature of literary writing as opposed to, say, journalism, just as it was the

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129 Hawthorne, “Preface” to The Blithedale Romance, 2. Hamilton Wright Mabie comments that The Rise of Silas Lapham, even while technically adept, is “defective in power, in reality, and in the vitalizing atmosphere of imagination. […] It throws no spell over us; creates no illusion for us, leaves us indifferent spectators of an entertaining drama of social life” (quoted in Cady, War of the Critics, 39).
determining feature of visual art as opposed to, say, photography. Both journalism and photography sought merely to present “the facts” in black and white, in as glaring and unsparking a light as possible – and certainly neither photography nor journalism were art.

Howells himself was cognizant of the literary writer’s obligation to create pictorial effects – to “manage his medium” – if he were to enjoy the repute of the artist, and was well aware of the problems that this presented for the artist striving to represent the American scene. We might approach what Howells thought of the American scene by looking briefly at his attempt to represent the English scene: his much neglected but very interesting work of travel writing London Films (1905). Howells’s book is really a comparative study of the manners and morals of London and New York, and proceeds by “keep[ing] about me a pocket vision of New York, so as to see what London is like by making constantly sure what it is not like.”130 The book is a catalog of such comparisons: London “extend[s]” while New York “tower[s]”; “New York is…one-third less morally, as she is one-third less numerically, than London,” and so forth. But the most dominant and striking quality of the London scene is its atmosphere – its fogs and soot and vapors: “the London atmosphere…deepens and heightens all the effects, while the lunar bareness of our perspectives mercilessly reveals the facts.”131 The long perspectives of New York’s streets and avenues are brutally un-picturesque and tend to conceal the life within them, whereas London “overwhelm[s] you with the sense of life:” “If the day is such as a lover of the picturesque would choose…when the scene is rolled in vaporous smoke, and a lurid gloom hovers from the hidden sky, you have an effect of majesty and grandeur

131 Ibid., 11-12.
that no other city can offer.” The “effect” or drama of the scene is managed quite literally by London’s atmospherical medium: “As the shadow momentally thickens or thins in the absence or presence of the yellowish-green light, the massive structures are shown or hid….” London’s smoke which gives ‘atmosphere,’ softens outlines, tenderly blurs forms, makes near and far the same…. It gives a wild pathetic glamour to the late winter sunsets…. In my most recent autumn, it mellowed the noons to the softest effulgence; in the summer it was a veil in the air which kept the flame of the heated term from doing its worst. It hung, diaphanous, in the dusky perspectives, but it gathered and thickened about the squares and places, and subdued all edges, so that nothing cut or hurt the vision.

Unlike the harsh glare of Henry Adams’s New England, the London scene has “tone” – both literally in that the atmosphere casts disparately colored and textured objects in a common coloring, and figuratively in terms of its cultural and social density. While in fact composed of noxious coal-smoke, London’s atmosphere renders the city beautifully picturesque. New York, on the other hand, cannot be easily be made to compose as a picture. It has not “the adventitious aid which the London atmosphere renders; her air is of such a helpless sincerity that nothing in it shows larger than it is; no mist clothes the sky-scraper in gigantic vagueness, the hideous tops soar into the clear heaven distinct in their naked ugliness; and the low buildings cower unrelieved about their bases.”

Because of its lack of atmosphere, the New York scene resists artistic treatment.

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132 Ibid., 12.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 123.
135 Ibid., 13.
136 For a fictional treatment of this problem, see Henry James’s story “The Impressions of a Cousin” (1884). Written as a series of diary entries from the point of view of a painter (much like James’s early story “A Landscape Painter”), the protagonist returning to New York from Rome laments the denuded artistic possibilities of her new environment: “But how can I sketch Fifty-third Street? […] When I turn into it from the Fifth Avenue the
Reading *London Films* one can understand how challenging it would have been to represent the American scene in the nineteenth century as accurately and unblinkingly as possible, and *not* be charged with philistinism or a failure of taste. The novelist or painter of the European scene had the good fortune of being able to represent both accurately and artistically: the scene itself provided for such a lucky confluence. The novelist or painter of the American scene, because of the subject he or she had to represent, was put in the unfavorable situation of having to either represent the scene exactly as it was (with a glaring distinctness), and suffer the consequences of being called “scientific,” or aestheticizing the scene by presenting it with qualities that it did not in fact possess. An American could not be both an artist and a realist without radically reenvisioning what art looked like and meant.

Some American artists did of course attempt to aestheticize the American scene by presenting it with a “soft, poetic radiance.” One such artist was the American Tonalist painter George Fuller (1822-1884), who, influenced by Millet and other painters of the Barbizon school, sought to present the American scene in a romanticized, crepuscular, and one might say Hawthornian light. Paintings like *Afterglow*, *Moonrise*, or *Twilight on the Prairie* achieve their aesthetic effect through the management of atmosphere and vista seems too hideous: the narrow, impersonal houses, with the dry, hard tone of their brown-stone, a surface as uninteresting as that of sand-paper; their steep, stiff stoops, giving you such a climb to the door; their lumpish balustrades, porticoes, and cornices, turned out by the hundred and adorned with heavy excrescences – such an eruption of ornament and such a poverty of effect!” (*Complete Stories, 1874-1884*, ed. William L. Vance [New York: Library of America, 1999], 650). Henry James’s writes in “The Lesson of Balzac” that the tone of Hawthorne’s work is like that of “the afternoon hour later than anyone else? – oh, late, late, quite uncannily late, and as if it were always winter outside” (*Literary Criticism II: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces*, ed. Leon Edel [New York: Library of America, 1984], 126). See also Sarah Burns, “George Fuller: The Hawthorne of Our Art,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, nos. 2-3 (Summer-Autumn, 1983), 123-145.
the subtle modulation of tone. Howells himself was close with Fuller, admired his work, and often watched him in his studio. He even contributed a biographical essay to a memorial volume on Fuller’s work, featuring tributes by central figures in American arts such as William James Stillman, John Joseph Enneking, and James Greenleaf Whittier.138 Howells ascribes to Fuller’s art many of the same aesthetic qualities he found in the prose poems of the French Symbolistes and the visual tableaux of the London scene. Fuller’s genius was to see the landscape of Massachusetts not as Henry Adams saw it with its harsh, violent glare, but as “a vision of beauty,” a vision of encircling mountains, with their varying local tints, from richest green to faintest blue, but varying still with every shifting circumstance of atmosphere wherever the river intervenes. Every shade of amethyst, of sapphire, is on the hills, and on the sky, opaline or refulgent, flashing or serene, tints never to be exceeded by the skies of Italy or Switzerland.139

Howells’s catalogue of gems recalls similar tropes in aestheticist writing, while his identification of richly toned atmospheric effects local to Europe suggests that Howells sees Fuller as an American painter attuned to presenting the American scene in the exact manner to which it was apparently most resistant. Indeed, much like the atmospheric scenes of London, Howells writes that Fuller’s landscapes are “toned by atmospheric effects until seen as through a veil of imperceptible mist.”140 Howells’s criticism too demonstrates an ample fluency with the terms, technologies, and techniques of the painter’s studio, a fluency gained by close association with the painter himself: Fuller, Howells writes, “considered gradation, or the relation of one part to another, of the most importance in a picture. He said that color in its highest meaning was a delicate sense of

139 Ibid., 13.
140 Ibid.
gradation. […] He sought to express color by tones rather than by pronounced tints.”

For Howells, George Fuller was a painter who tried to make the American scene an appropriate subject for art by presenting it with a “soft, poetic radiance.”

Howells’s biographical essay, written in 1886, is very much a product of its moment, when aesthetic idealists working in the Tonalist style such as Fuller dominated the Boston artistic scene.142 Still, Howells’s appreciation of and relationship with Fuller is among the most compelling and comprehensive pieces of evidence to underwrite Howells’s appreciation and understanding of the painter’s art, and of ways in which both painters and writers could encounter and resolve similar problems of representation.

While Howells admired Fuller’s paintings and had a firm grasp of their artistry and technique, he also tended to ironize his admiration, perhaps aware that this admiration for art in the manner of George Fuller contradicted his own tenets of realism. Ever keen to represent himself as a philistine, Howells, like Lambert Strether in The Ambassadors (1901), writes in the same essay that, “Even I could not go into that little gallery of Doll’s, on Tremont Street, and find myself amid the delicate glow of the canvases with which he had hung it round, and not feel their exquisite, their authentic and singular charm.”143 Indeed, Howells aligns his admiration for Fuller’s art with, say, his admiration for the word-painting of Lafcadio Hearn: both are basically poetry. Putting his ambivalence on full display, Howells writes that “if I had been a painter I should not have wished even if I could, to do those faces and figures and landscapes often teasingly

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141 Ibid., 46.
143 Howells, George Fuller, 48-49. The Doll and Richards Gallery on Tremont Street is the site of Lambert Strether’s initial encounter with the Lambinet canvas that later plays such an important role in the moral climax of that novel.
withdrawn into their glows and mists; my liking, in literature at least, is to the strong, full light of day, to visages unsparingly distinct, to scenes in which nothing is poetically blinked."\(^{144}\) While Howells certainly enjoyed Fuller and the Tonalist painters, it was perhaps the same enjoyment he took in the prose poetry of the *Symbolistes* translated by Stuart Merrill, or in the romantic prose of Hawthorne, or in the atmospheric associations of the London scene – a pleasure about which he was dubious and which he had difficulty reconciling with his realist convictions.

“The light of common day”: John Ruskin and American Pre-Raphaelitism

There *did* exist, however, in the United States at the middle of the nineteenth century a discourse that could achieve the reconciliation of the scientific and the aesthetic, the realistic and the artistic, an art movement that hoped to prove that art could, and indeed must, exist in “the strong, full light of day”: American Pre-Raphaelitism. It is in fact strange, historically speaking, that realism and art should have come to be seen as so opposed, that the supposedly aristocratic “aesthetic” was the unapproachable horizon for the democratic and “scientific” project of realism. John Ruskin was a conspicuously available model of a critic who had managed to reconcile Truth and Beauty, science and art, realism and aestheticism. Indeed, Ruskin’s genius was to suggest that the two had never really fallen out. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), Ruskin claimed that the genius of J. M. W. Turner (what made him truly a *modern* painter) was his truth

\(^{144}\) Quoted in Ibid.
to nature: not how his paintings expressed some transcendental ideal, but how accurately they represented the world both as it appeared and as it actually was.

Ruskin’s influence was pronounced, if not exceedingly widespread, in America in the years immediately preceding and following the Civil War.\textsuperscript{145} Ruskin largely entered the mainstream of American thought through the journal \textit{The Crayon}, published from 1855-1861, conceived and edited by the self-styled Ruskin acolyte William James Stillman (with whom Howells collaborated on the George Fuller memorial volume).\textsuperscript{146} \textit{The Crayon} was among the first serious art journals in the United States, and featured contributions by luminaries (and associates of Howells) such as Lowell, T. B. Aldrich, Charles Eliot Norton, and Henry James Sr. Howells himself was certainly aware of the movement, since he refers to it explicitly in his biographical essay on Fuller in which he both connects Fuller to its conceptual developments while also distinguishing him from its styles and techniques. There, Howells wrote that by the late 1850s,

\begin{quote}
The English pre-Raphaelite movement had made itself felt on this side. Stillman’s ardent temperament and Durand’s convictions had given force and character to ‘The Crayon,’ which they edited for the expression and development of the new ideas; there was great reading of Ruskin on all sides, much writing, much talking, much thinking.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

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146 The extent of Howells’s relation with Stillman is unclear, but he was clearly familiar with him as a critic and as an artist. While he noted him in his biography of Fuller, and collaborated on him for that same volume, Howells had written to Charles Eliot Norton as early as 1868 that, “I was there [at your house] with Mead, who is at home on a few weeks’ visit with his wife, and whom I wanted to have see your Tintoretto. He was greatly charmed with that and with Stillman’s picture” [\textit{Selected Letters, Volume I}, 163]. Also interesting to note is that Stillman, rather reckless with his finances and no doubt influenced by Ruskin’s \textit{Stones of Venice}, eagerly sought a consular post in that city, but was turned down. The post was given to Howells instead. See: Stephen L. Dyson, \textit{The Last Amateur: The Life of William J. Stillman} (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 105.

147 Howells, \textit{George Fuller}, 27.
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Howells understood the artistic movement associated with *The Crayon* as a vital and productive one, and one in which the philosophies and techniques of realist and naturalistic representation were being fiercely debated and developed.

While this early iteration of American Pre-Raphaelitism remained somewhat idealist in its vision of the relation between art and nature (as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), a subsequent movement galvanized by the writings of Ruskin and less pious than their forebears was attempting to fuse art and science by nothing but the patient study and meticulously detailed representation of reality. The Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art was founded in New York City in 1863 by naturalists-cum-painters such as Clarence King, John William Hill, and William Trost Richards. Their conception of “Truth” in Art irreverently flipped the earlier generation’s belief that “Truth” in art was achieved by expressing the ideal form of a given subject through an artist’s sensibility. Rather, “truth” was found in direct, unmediated transcription of the thing itself. As founding member Charles Herbert Moore wrote, “the best artist is he who has the clearest lens, and so makes you forget every now and then that you are looking through him.”

The journal of the association, *The New Path* (1863-1865), whose inaugural publication featured an endorsement by Ruskin himself,

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148 Stillman writes in an essay “The Artist as Teacher”: “[The artist] must pass from the merely actual into the ideal of Nature, and not only tell us that flowers exist, but that there is a perfect type of the flower, more fully beautiful than any which we see – free from all imperfection of accident and circumstance,” quoted in: William H. Gerdts “Through a Glass Brightly: The American Pre-Raphaelites and Their Still Lifes and Nature Studies” in *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerdts (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, exhib. cat, 1985), 56.

149 Quoted in Linda S. Ferber, “‘Determined Realists’: The American Pre-Raphaelites and the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art,” in *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*, 31.
gave voice to the next generation of important American art critics such as Clarence Cook, Russell Sturgis, and James Jackson Jarves, and treated many questions of interest to the new realist movement: “Pictures and Studies,” “Science in its Relation to Art,” “Art and Photography.”

It is important to note that American Pre-Raphaelitism was an *American* manifestation of the English movement, and thus differed significantly in its sources, subjects, and styles. The American Pre-Raphaelites were markedly distinct from English Pre-Raphaelites such as Rossetti, Holman-Hunt, Millais, or Waterhouse in that they generally eschewed portraiture and medieval, literary, or fanciful subjects in favor of still-lifes and landscapes; painted with less saturated color and in a lower tonal range; favored watercolors over oil paints; and generally painted *en plein air*, or in a *pleinairist* style. They share with the English Pre-Raphaelites, however, an almost preternaturally acute attention to detail and to drawing.

But unlike the English, the American Pre-Raphaelites did not see the movement as a return to an earlier Quattrocento style, but as a truly unmediated “anti-style”: an *exact*, quasi-photographic reproduction of nature itself seen with as clear a lens as possible. In many ways, their adherence to Ruskin’s naturalistic aesthetic philosophy was much closer than their English counterparts, though it was also inflected by the self-reliant philosophy of Emerson: they took no truths at second hand, but sought to see with their own eyes, often presenting their subjects in unsparingly bright daylight. Scholar William H. Gerdts writes that, “Pre-Raphaelites on both sides of the Atlantic abolished

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dark shadows, in which detail was lost, and made the range of prismatic color more brilliant, another hallmark of their art.”¹⁵¹ Studies were done from life, not from studio models. Like Emerson’s irreverent American scholar, one early Pre-Raphaelite, Thomas Charles Farrer, insisted on

the total abandonment of the paraphernalia and machinery of drawing and painting academics – the plaster casts, the lithographic models – and in putting in their place whatever natural objects could be easily procured and conveniently employed. Single leaves, small twigs and boughs, a lichenized branch or stone, small stuffed birds (employed as studies in color), an apple or a pear, a pine-cone or a cluster of acorns – were placed before the pupils, and they were set to copying them with all the accuracy possible to their unaccustomed hands.¹⁵²

The “true,” and therefore the beautiful, was aligned in the eyes of the American Pre-Raphaelites not with the ideal and the transcendent but with the natural and with the real.

The American Pre-Raphaelites, in other words, were basically naturalists, painting exactly what they saw with their own eyes as clearly and crisply as possible, as for a scientific record. Linda Ferber writes that these painters “were known variously as Realists, Naturalists, and, of course, Pre-Raphaelites.” She continues:

*The New Path*’s prototypes and models for landscape were located in the realm of site-specific documentation and properly recorded natural history, with ‘the photograph’ and the ‘topographical report’ as standards of accuracy. The landscape of an American Pre-Raphaelite was to serve both science and art, conceived and rendered ‘in such a way that the poet, the naturalist and the geologist might have taken large pleasure from it.’¹⁵³

The American Pre-Raphaelites, in other words, were striving to effect a radical revolution in taste. The “study,” formerly disparaged or merely treated as a step on the way to a finished composition, became an artistic end in itself, and because of its rigorous and

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¹⁵² From an anonymous article in *The Round Table* 2 (October 14, 1865), 93, quoted in Gerdts, “Through a Glass Brightly,” 62.
scrupulous accuracy and detail, it also shared the prestige of the scientific study. A study of a landscape could be enjoyed by the painter and the geologist, and for the same reasons: that it was an accurate, detailed representation of nature. Art would be beautiful because it was natural, and therefore “true.”

Scholarship on Howells and the Pre-Raphaelites has tended to focus on Howells’s relationship with English Pre-Raphaelites, especially Rossetti and Burne-Jones.  

Howells, as I wrote above, even owned a picture by Rossetti, and it has generally been assumed that his interest in the Pre-Raphaelites was that of an aesthete who had a private taste for the decorative value of their poetically beautiful canvases, but who did not let any of their artistic styles influence his own. Discussions of Howells and Ruskin have focused more on the negative influence of Ruskin (while in Venice, Howells was openly dismissive of the cult of Ruskin, and lamented the ways in which American tourists there

154 See for instance Kirk, William Dean Howells and Art in His Time, 73.
155 Kirk recounts a review in which Howells admires Morris’s politics while lamenting the medievalism of the Arts and Crafts style. Reading Morris’s poetry was “like looking through a modern house equipped with Eastlake furniture, adorned with tiles, and painted in the Pompeian style, or hung with Mr. Morris’ own admirable wall-papers; it is all very pretty indeed; charming; but it is consciously mediaeval, consciously Greek, and it is so well aware of its quaintness, that, on the whole, one would rather not live in it.” Morris’s poems “are the sort of thing that one would like to have painted on large, movable screens. As it is, they are rather painted than written, and might perhaps serve the desired purpose of decoration if pasted on the screens” (Quoted in Kirk, William Dean Howells and Art in His Time, 187). Rossetti too is generally dismissed as a mere aesthete, confused about the proper function of his medium. Howells writes in an 1870 review in The Atlantic Monthly that “It will always be a question, we think, whether Mr. Rossetti had not better have painted his poems and written his pictures; there is so much that is purely sensuous in the former, and so much that is intellectual in the latter. … But as it is, though one cannot here see the poetry in the painting, the painting in the poetry is plain enough” (Atlantic 26, no. 153 [July 1870], 115). Rossetti’s poetry “has many charms, and at eighteen, if you are of one sex, or at twenty-two if of the other, you might wish to be parted from it only in death. The trouble is, you cannot always be eighteen or twenty-two” (117). In other words, aestheticism is associated with immaturity. Lamentably, Howells was close friends with and a warm admirer of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, a man whom Ruskin reputedly called “the worst painter of the nineteenth-century.”
got their impressions out of *Stones of Venice*, rather than from their own unmediated experience; Howells’s first book of travel writing, *Venetian Life*, can be read as a deflationary piece of anti-Ruskinism somewhat in the manner of Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*;\(^{156}\) or the moral and socialist influences of the later Ruskin of *Unto this Last* and *Fors Clavigera* (at a time when Howells was also under the influence of Romantic anti-capitalists such as William Morris and Tolstoi).\(^{157}\) But scholars have not generally noted the influence of the early Ruskin and his American followers, particularly the ways in which these movements offered a realist vocabulary in which the beautiful and the natural were so organically intertwined, and which reconciled so many seeming cultural, aesthetic, and conceptual paradoxes.

We can hear echoes of the language of the American Pre-Raphaelites in Howells’s own defense of realism, *Criticism and Fiction*, particularly in Howells’s polemical contest between real and ideal grasshoppers. While a scientist might examine and attempt to describe a real grasshopper found in the grass, the idealist artist would reply that the scientist was wasting his time with something trivial when he himself possessed

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    a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable paints and expense out of the grasshopper in general; in fact, it’s a type. It’s made up of wire and card-board, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it’s perfectly
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\(^{156}\) See Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America*, 219-225. Stein writes that “Aesthetically, Howells’ *Venetian Life* (1866) is the work of a reluctant Ruskinian” (219). Henry James also had an ambivalent relation to John Ruskin, and lamented the ways in which *Stones of Venice* mediated the experience of Americans visiting that city (a topic discussed in detail in the following chapter).

\(^{157}\) See Kirk, *William Dean Howells and Art in His Time*, 189. See also Stein who writes, “Howells had been reading Ruskin on art, but like a number of other Americans he had been following Ruskin from art to social theory and to the belief that art could not thrive in a society the economic and social bases of which were rotten” (*John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America*, 248).
indestructible. It isn’t very much like a real grasshopper, but it’s a great deal nicer, and it’s served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. You may say that it’s artificial. Well, it is artificial; but then it’s ideal too; and what you want to do it to cultivate the ideal.\textsuperscript{158} Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk note that Howells makes reference to the practice of the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz who once, in the words of Agassiz’s biographer, “entered a class with a bottle of grasshoppers, gravely distributing the kicking insects to the students, then began a lucid, even charming, discourse, which was followed by the students from thorax to eye, and antenna to mouth parts and back again, after which the grasshoppers were allowed their liberty.”\textsuperscript{159} Agassiz’s method of observation and description is indeed “scientific,” but also mirrors the minute, detailed methods of observations current among American Pre-Raphaelite painters who similarly made studies from the life that were meant to be anatomically and literally accurate.

On the other hand, the voice of the idealist artist hawking the grasshopper “type” is something of a “type” himself: Howells’s disparaging tone makes him sound less like a serious artist than the caricature of a typical nineteenth century stage “drummer” peddling his wares. Indeed, the association of the “ideal” grasshopper with the vulgarity of the traveling salesman suggests that its “beauty” is cheap and flimsy, despite claims to the contrary: a painted effigy of wire and cardboard is not at all “indestructible,” and is flat, garish, and inaccurate. It is a decorative \textit{objet d’art} that appeals only to vulgar tastes.

\textsuperscript{158} Howells, \textit{Criticism and Fiction}, 13.
\textsuperscript{159} Charles Frederick Holder, \textit{Louis Agassiz: His Life and Work} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1893), 196. The reference is corroborated both by Howells himself in \textit{Literary Friends and Acquaintances} (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911), 271-272, as well as a letter to James from 5 December 1873, in which Howells makes reference to a certain “Russian amongst us, studying bugs with Agassiz – one Baron Ooten-something, whom I want to be calling Gregory Ivanovich, out of Turgenieff” (\textit{Selected Letters, Volume I}, 182).
rather than a living representation. The failure of the idealist artist’s grasshopper makes room for the naturalistic representation of real grasshoppers, just the kind of study that would have appealed to Pre-Raphaelite watercolorists who were scrupulously attentive to details.

Howells too shared the American Pre-Raphaelites’s synthetic feeling for the arts, writing that his own “formulated creed” for realism was “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.” This frustratingly vague credo perhaps loses some of its Keatsian ambivalence and gains some relevant specificity when we read it alongside the naturalist artists of The New Path. Indeed, to read Criticism and Fiction through the lens of American Pre-Raphaelitism is to reconcile many of its apparent contradictions and thicken and enrich its sometimes obtuse or tautological language. For instance, when Howells writes that “[the realist] cannot look upon human life and declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry….his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives,” we can easily see the identity of “truth” and “reality,” as well as a typically Pre-Raphaelite disparagement of the “ideal.”

The American Pre-Raphaelites thus provided an aesthetic and conceptual scaffold for an American literary realism that reconciled the requirements of both art and science, and their vocabulary was certainly encountered by Howells. While Howells was in Venice during the years of the Civil War, he no doubt would have been cognizant of the avant-garde currents in New York, and he was close friends with co-founder of the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art Clarence King as well as the key

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160 Howells, Criticism and Fiction, 10-11.
161 Ibid., 15.
American ambassador of Ruskin, Charles Eliot Norton. Howells praises King, for instance, for his ability to synthesize his artistic with his scientific interests:

as an artist, as a realistic observer, every kind of life appealed to him for report. … In one glowing picture he has portrayed a sublime mood of nature, with all those varying moods of human nature which best give it relief. The picture is none the less striking for being of a panoramic virtue; that is the American virtue, as far as we have yet got it in our literature.162

That Howells easily juxtaposes the two apparently contradictory roles of “artist” and “realistic observer” demonstrates the degree to which the aesthetic values of American Pre-Raphaelitism had entered his criticism. King’s “report” isn’t mere reportage (the topographical or geological information one would expect of a naturalist), but rather forms a “picture.”163

162 Quoted in Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America*, 177. Howells also praised King in a letter introducing King to President Hayes, writing of King’s *Mountaineering*: “…my sole grief against him, namely that a man who can give us such literature, should be content to be merely a great scientist” (Howells, *Selected Letters, Volume 2: 1873-1881*, ed. George Arms, Christoph K. Lohmann, and Jerry Herron [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979], 217). Howells also praised King in an 1872 review in *The Atlantic*: “We leave wholly to science the estimation of Mr. King’s services to geology and geography; for our pleasure in him is chiefly, we own, a literary pleasure, and if we were to tell the whole truth, perhaps our readers would be shocked to know how much we value the extraordinary beauty and vigor of his descriptions above the facts described. We accept the information he gives with mute gratitude… His ‘Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada’ is mainly the record of his ascent of different peaks of that chain, in language so vivid that it all seems an experience of the reader’s; and interspersing these memories of Mount Tyndall and Shasta and Whitney and Yosemite and Merced are such sketches of life, Pike and Digger and Californian, as make us wish from him the fullest study of varieties of human nature which we as yet know only by glimpses” (“Recent Literature,” *The Atlantic* 29, no. 174 [April 1872], 500). On the relationship of King and Howells, see: Goodman and Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life*, 224.

163 King’s descriptive language is often deliberately painterly, even describing landscapes in terms of particular pigments that a painter would use to depict the scene. In *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1872), King describes a field of grain “whose pale Naples-yellow stubble and stacks contrasted finely with the deep foliage, and served as a pretty groundwork for stripes of vivid green” (114).
The Pre-Raphaelites had shown that the name “art” could be applied to realist works painted with unspiring distinctness in the broad “light of common day.” That these works sought both to picture and to map – to be beautiful and useful to the poet and the geologist both – provides us with a suggestive new framework for discussing Howellsian realism and for understanding some of its assumptions and techniques. It also furnishes a scaffold for further understanding many of its representational challenges. Indeed, the vocabulary of the American Pre-Raphaelites was also available to the movement’s critics. Unsurprisingly, criticisms of Pre-Raphaelite style were very much like those leveled at Howells. While idealist aesthetic tastes admired the softening, warming effect of hazes or atmospheres that blurred hard edges and soothed the eye, the Pre-Raphaelites were dismissed for their “painful fidelity,” their “agonizing fidelity,” or their “cold, remorseless fidelity” to details. One critic of the early American Pre-Raphaelites, publishing in The Atlantic in 1858 sounds very similar to Howell’s anonymous critic from 1885: the new school of realism “is the embodiment of the new-age spirit of truth-seeking, of the spirit of science, rather than that of song.” Much like the critics who condemned Howells for holding composition too cheap, or for merely heaping up facts, this critic writes that the Pre-Raphaelites look at Nature as full of beautiful facts, and, like children amid the flowers, they gather their hands full, ‘indifferent of worst or best,’ and when their hands are full, crowd their laps and bosoms, and even drop some already picked, to make room for others which beckon from their stems, - insatiable with beauty. This is delightful, - but childlike, nevertheless. Turner was, above all, an artist; with him Art stood first, facts secondary; - with the Pre-Raphaelites it is the reverse; it is far less important to them that their facts should

and writes that the plains around Mount Shasta appeared to him “in monotonous Naples yellow, stretching on, soft and vague, losing itself in a gray, half-luminous haze” (224).  

165 “Art: The British Gallery in New York,” The Atlantic 1, no. 4 (February 1858), 504.
be broadly stated and in keeping in their pictures, than that they should be there and comprehensible. ... A Pre-Raphaelite would paint with a stop-watch, to get the rainbow in the right place.\textsuperscript{166}

Another critic writing in 1859 echoes the familiar complaint that Pre-Raphaelites merely “copy” from nature:

If we want nothing more of painters than absolute representations of old buildings, or copies of oak trees and fern leaves, Pre-Raphaelitism is very well; but if artists are to awake emotions, to excite sentiments, to arouse feeling, then Pre-Raphaelitism is not well.... This fault I find with the Pre-Raphaelite brethren – that their doctrine leads directly to a worship of the material; to an ignoring of the ideal...\textsuperscript{167}

Pre-Raphaelitism, from an idealist point of view, was merely superficial and imitative, rather than creative. Theirs was a mimetic, not a poetic art. While some of these criticisms were simply matters of taste, or the inevitable grousing of an idealist older generation being displaced by positivistic young Turks, other problems with American Pre-Raphaelitism ran deeper, and were more technical and conceptual than generational. For instance, while George Inness, a painter who bridges the old and the new sensibilities but who had a decidedly idealist bent, found the movement “necessary as a reactionary force” against traditional idealism or academicism, the amount of detail in the canvases of Pre-Raphaelites was for him impossibly overwrought. The American Pre-Raphaelites, he wrote in 1879, were “a true outgrowth of the scientific tendency of the new age” but “carried the love of imitation into irrational conditions. Objects were painted without regard to their distances...”\textsuperscript{168} The amount of detail pressed into a Pre-Raphaelite picture was a compositional and perspectival problem as much as a philosophical one.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 503.
\textsuperscript{167} Quoted in Gerdts, “Through a Glass Brightly,” 61.
\textsuperscript{168} Quoted in Ibid., 71.
Painter Charles Henry Miller vividly clarifies this crucial problem of perspective, writing long after the movement proper has vanished in 1885 that Pre-Raphaelite works were “produced through rarest ape-like imitation, apparently with eyes able to see a little fly upon a barn door ‘a mile and a half off’ without including a sight of the barn itself.”

The level of microscopic detail distributed across the canvas is psychologically or perceptually inconceivable: their scrupulous attention to particulars lead these painters to forsake composition and proportion, to collapse the distinction between foreground and background, and to flatten the picture plane to an undesirable degree. For instance, in John William Hill’s *West Nyack, New York* (1868), the day-lilies in the foreground are painted with as much detail as the house in the distance: the stamens of the flowers are as explicit as the individual mullions on the windows. Without the relief of perspective created by the tonal gradations of atmosphere, these unsparingly distinct paintings, despite their extreme naturalness, appear at times overwhelmingly artificial: more like sketches or decorations or even textbook illustrations than paintings. By failing to distinguish between foreground and background, in other words, these pictures lack proportion and perspective, and therefore don’t create the illusion of space.

To some extent, these critiques of Pre-Raphaelitism were transposed from the visual to the literary arts, and applied to realist writing that was unduly scientific, or which lacked adequate perspective. Thomas Sargent Perry, in a review of John Gibson Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1879) claims that unlike the broad, sweeping historical scope of Scott’s novels, modern writers no longer choose large canvases. Where [Scott] took a whole century and packed it full of living people, the novelists of to-day busy themselves with a sort of

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169 Quoted in Ibid., 75.
literary Pre-Raphaelitism. They take a brief period and, generally, commonplace people, and describe a few tepid passions that flourish in every block of the street....The principal unromantic fetish of the present day is for scientific exactness....[Scott’s] novels have a sort of old-fashioned art; they are set in frames, as it were, like works of art, and nowadays novels are what someone has called slices of life.\footnote{Quoted in Kirk, \textit{William Dean Howells and Art in His Time}, 167 n. 27.}

Understanding that Perry meant \textit{American} Pre-Raphaelitism helps us to clarify the meaning of his criticism, and suggests that Pre-Raphaelitism was culturally influential enough to serve as a metaphor for an equally exacting literary style. It suggests that both literary realism and Pre-Raphaelitism faced an audience that was more than a little ambivalent about their radical redefinition of art and beauty.

While commonplace people, tepid passions, and scientific exactness might seem like typical criticisms of Howells himself, Howells too had once written that a too minute fidelity to details represented a compositional problem for writers as for painters. In an early review of Hans Christian Andersen from 1870, Howells writes that while “The author [Andersen] speaks scornfully of realism in fiction...he is a pre-Raphaelite in some things; and he is apt to spend so much time upon the beautiful rendering of particulars in his pictures, as to lose his control over the whole effect.”\footnote{William Dean Howells, “Review of Andersen’s \textit{Only a Fiddler},” \textit{Atlantic Monthly} 26, no. 157 (November 1870), 632.} We can see then that even for Howells, while it furnished a model by which the American scene could be represented realistically and with great distinctness in the broad light of the American latitude, Pre-Raphaelitism ran the risk of being insufficiently composed. Thus, while the Pre-Raphaelite picture served as an important model for Howells’s own art of realist fiction, it served only as a prototype and one that would require significant reworking if its
pictures of life would fulfill the directive of the realist novelist to “picture” instead of merely heaping up facts.

“Mountains where there are no mountains”: Perspective, Depth, and Literary Space

The most glaring problem with Pre-Raphaelite style was its lack of perspective and depth. It rendered beautiful details in an unsparingly distinct light, but in paying too much attention to those details it failed to distinguish between foreground and background, making them appear flat. While they promised a synthesis of picture and map, the Pre-Raphaelite style lost the effect of space and perspective that a picture in the first place was meant to achieve. As Howells himself was aware, the effect of atmosphere was necessary not only for artistic effect but for the creation of what a painter would call aerial perspective: the effect of recession caused by the interposition of atmosphere between objects in space.

But if pictures so often risk flattening their subjects or scenes into two-dimensional space, why would they be desirable models for the realist novel in the first place? While they appear to be a tempting alternative to the coercive and unrealistically sensationalist associations of plot, pictures also risk producing too much aesthetic effect and too little moral significance. Their perspective on the world, as the lesson of the Pre-Raphaelites made clear, was worryingly flat since they are capable of giving only one point of view. Sami Ludwig writes in depth about the problem of pictorial ways of seeing in his excellent book *Pragmatist Realism* (2002), writing that Howells’s novels featuring painters and other artists constitute what Ludwig calls a “perceptualist critique” of the
visual and a thoroughgoing “preoccupation with the shortcomings of pictorial ways of understanding reality.”172 Painters such as Ferris in A Foregone Conclusion or Angus Beaton in A Hazard of New Fortunes are trapped in a cognitive and aesthetic paradigm that Ludwig calls “the flatness of momentary perception.”173 This mode of perception becomes particularly troublesome when they attempt to represent human subjects. In Ludwig’s words, “pictorial ways of representation…automatically ‘other’ not only other things but also other people and represent those possible subjects (who are capable of ‘selfhood’ and autopoeisis) as mere objects of a projective gaze.”174 To put it somewhat more simply, the painter is capable only of seeing from one perspective, and tends to flatten and reduce the object of his gaze, thus “forcing a human being into a concept.”175 Though picturing purported to present human characters with greater depth and detail than the flattened, allegorical, or unrealistic heroes and heroines of romantic fiction, pictorial treatments risked a different kind of flatness in which a human subject was reified, aestheticized, or otherwise reduced into a mere picture.

Howells was intensely concerned about the flattening effect of representations whether in the visual or literary arts, and to a large extent he understood the main task of the realist artist – if he or she was to be both a realist and an artist at once – to be the illusionistic creation of perspective, proportion, and space. As Ludwig also points out, this compositional problem of perspective is often discussed dramatically and

173 Ibid., 115.
174 Ibid., 121.
175 Ibid., 95.
dialogically in Howells’s fiction, and it is largely through the tension and interplay of multiple narrative perspectives that the problem is worked out and potentially resolved.\textsuperscript{176}

One such scene that will be worth discussing in some detail occurs in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) during the dinner party at the Corey family’s genteel, if increasingly shabby, family home on Brahmin Beacon Street, at which Silas Lapham, a *nouveau riche* paint-manufacturer recently arrived to Boston, makes a fool of himself by getting drunk for the first time (as a Vermonter he is only accustomed to drinking ice water). The party-goers have just been discussing a recently published sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears* (which the Corey daughter suggests ought to be called *Slop, Silly Slop*). A Miss Kingsbury suggests that the book is “perfectly heartbreaking,” summarizing, “there’s such a dear old-fashioned hero and heroine in it, who keep dying for each other all the way through and making the most wildly satisfactory and unnecessary sacrifices for each other. You feel as if you’d done them yourself.”

The sentimental foolishness and indeed the literal impossibility of a novel in which the characters “keep dying for each other all the way through” is not lost on the patrician Bromfield Corey, who ironically suggests that the book’s lack of all proportion is exactly “the secret of its success. It flatters the reader by painting the characters colossal, but with his limp and stoop, so that he feels himself of their supernatural proportions.” The minister, Mr. Sewell, thumpingly concurs, replacing Corey’s light irony with his ministerial moralism: “The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious.” Corey wonders whether

\textsuperscript{176} See Ludwig, *Pragmatist Realism*, 108, 121.
“life as it is” isn’t so “amusing” as the romantic situations to which popular fictions have accustomed us, but the Reverend Sewell won’t budge: “The whole business of love and love-making and marrying, is painted by the novelists in a monstrous disproportion to the other relations of life.”¹⁷⁷

For Sewell, the project of realism – the representation of “life as it is” – is a matter of adjusting proportions and relations, and the main difference between sentimental or romantic novels like *Tears, Idle Tears* and realist novels has less to do with any particular style, or even with a particular choice of subject, and much more to do with the proportion in which that subject is represented. Indeed, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* itself can be seen as an attempt to establish the kind of correct proportions that Mr. Sewell prescribes. The main love-plot between the young Tom Corey and Penelope Lapham is just such a realistically proportioned and unsentimental affair, and it is balanced and brought down in scale by its coexistence with “the other relations of life.” These other relations are simply the novel’s other plots, all of which provoke our worst suspicions (Lapham’s mysterious relation with his office girl, Zerilla; the house fire; Lapham’s financial collapse,) but which are all revealed to be much less nefarious or severe than we may have been taught to imagine from reading too many romantic novels. As soon as an event begins to swell out of proportion, Howells corrects the perspective by pulling back the point of view, or by juxtaposing crisis with banality. “Our theory of disaster,” speaks the narrator, “of sorrow, of affliction, borrowed from the poets and novelists, is that it is incessant; but every passage in our own lives and in the lives of

others, so far as we have witnessed them, teaches us that this is false.\textsuperscript{178} Silas Lapham is lifelike in this regard because closely-written dramatic passages that begin to edge into melodrama are broken by the recognition that Lapham “was full of jokes at the tea-table, and wanted to go to the theater, or to do something to cheer Penelope up.”\textsuperscript{179} Howells’s realism is basically comic. It is the art, says biographer Edwin Cady, of batrachomyomachy, the tempest in the tea-cup.\textsuperscript{180}

Howells was explicit that it was the task of the novelist to artfully craft the effect of proportion and perspective, a task that would both fulfill the enjoinments of both realism and art at once. In an October 1894 interview with Stephen Crane, Howells writes that, “It is the business of the novel to picture the daily life in the most exact terms possible with an absolute and clear sense of proportion. That is the important matter – the proportion. As a usual thing, I think, people have absolutely no sense of proportion.”\textsuperscript{181}

The problem, writes Howells, it that most peoples’

noses are tight against life, you see. They perceive mountains where there are no mountains, but frequently a great peak appears no larger than a rat-trap. An artist sees a dog down the street – well, his eye instantly relates the dog to its surroundings. The dog is proportioned to the buildings and the trees. Whereas many people can conceive of that dog’s tail resting upon a hill-top.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 306.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 307.
\textsuperscript{180} Edwin Cady, \textit{The Light of Common Day: Realism in American Fiction} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 72. Walter Benn Michaels in his essay “Sister Carrie’s Popular Economy,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 7, no. 2 (Winter 1980) reads Howells’s anxiety over literary disproportion in \textit{Tears, Idle Tears}, and in \textit{Silas Lapham}, as a displacement of his anxieties about “the sudden development of American capitalism in the late nineteenth century” (379). Proportionate representation thus “stand[s] in precarious opposition to the excesses of capitalism and the sentimental novel or, rather, to the excessiveness which is here seen to lie at the heart of both the economy and the literature” (381).
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
These people (meaning, one presumes, either non-readers or readers of sentimental, non-realist fiction, or both) are untutored or inexperienced in correct seeing. When they see an object in space – in this case a dog – it is only part of a foreshortened composition, in which a receding horizontal space has been collapsed into a vertical one. That a dog should be the same size as a hill-top is an impossibility, much like a plot in which the main characters “keep dying for each other all the way through.” Nonetheless, to one who has no ability to perceive linear perspective, it cannot seem otherwise, and sentimental fictions, like *Tears, Idle Tears*, prime one to see only from their own flattened point of view. Indeed, the function of the realist novel, for Howells, is to create “perspective,” rather than to present a single point of view: “It is a perspective made for the benefit of people who have no true use of their eyes.” Perspectival seeing is *true* seeing; those who haven’t learned to distinguish, measure, and judge have only a *false* use of their eyes.

Like Bromfield Corey to Reverend Sewell, Crane asks Howells whether novels that educate their readers in perspective will be very popular, and whether writers who “try[] to reflect the popular desire” will not lead to “a bad quarter of an hour for the laws of proportion.” Howells responds much like Sewell, by invoking the “monstrous disproportion” of sentimental love stories:

Do you recall any of the hosts of stories that began in love and end a little further on. Those stories used to represent life to the people and I believe they do now to a large class. Life began when the hero saw a certain girl, and it ended abruptly when he married her. Love and courtship was not an incident, a part of life – it was the whole of it. … Do you see the false proportion? Do you see the dog with his tail upon the hill-top?\(^{184}\)

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\(^{183}\) Ibid.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 617.
Such a representation of courtship, Howells feels, is “a monstrous disproportion” that
occludes and distorts the “things that we live in continually.” Crane then asks him
whether or not he has “observed a change in the literary pulse of the country within the
last four months” and whether a “counter-wave” of romantic fiction is again dominating
the market.\textsuperscript{185} Crane is doubtless alluding to Du Maurier’s \textit{Trilby}, which was then being
published serially in \textit{Harper’s}, alongside Howells himself, and which, like \textit{Tears, Idle
Tears}, was then “making such a sensation.” Howells admits there is indeed a reaction
against realism, but advises “courage”: “It is a long serious conflict sometimes, but he
must win, if he does not falter.”\textsuperscript{186}

With all of this in mind, it seems natural to identify Howells himself with the
programmatic, crusading realism of the Reverend Sewell, and to identify his reaction
against \textit{Tears, Idle Tears} and all sentimental romantic fiction as a moment in the novel
when Howells authorizes a particular voice to speak for him, a moment in which his own
theory of representation can be clearly discerned.\textsuperscript{187} But other competing perspectives,
such as those of Bromfield Corey, the aesthete Charles Bellingham, and even Lapham
himself complicate this easy picture. Indeed, through this complication of perspective we
come to realize that it is precisely by way of such dialogic complication that Howells
sought to create realistic proportion in the first place. As the artist Angus Beaton claims
in \textit{A Hazard of New Fortunes}, “the man of one idea is always a little ridiculous. […] He’s

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Phillip Barrish makes a claim similar to this in his discussion of realism in \textit{American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige: 1880-1995}: “Sewell’s clear
sense of this inevitable distortion [of class differences mediating social experience] earns
him intellectual credit, both from the other characters and from Howells” (36).
flat; he has no relief, no projection.”\textsuperscript{188} Besides, Sewell is a minister, not an artist, and the suggestion of an identity between him and Howells is no doubt more than a little tongue in cheek, and a canny and characteristic moment of self-deprecation.

For Howells, adjustment of narrative perspective is the primary means by which he hoped to create the “life-like” effects of proportion and perspective, but it was through creating such proportion and perspective that a novel became not only life-like but also beautiful. For Howells, “to arrange a correct perspective, in which all things shall appear in their very proportion and relation” was the supreme task of the novelist, upon the achievement of which “he will have mastered the secret of repose, which is the soul of beauty in all its forms.”\textsuperscript{189} Creating “repose” through perspectival incongruity satisfies the demands of both realism and art by both picturing accurately and composing meaningfully.

\textit{“Irregularly spheroidal characters”: Portraits and Painterly Failure in The Coast of Bohemia (1893)}

We could say that for Howells, a picture of life was basically portrait-like. In rejecting the grotesque proportion of sentimental plots, realism adopted a pictorial form that prioritized the representation of character. In “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading,” Howells reiterates his belief that picturing is definitional for the novel (“The novel I take to be the sincere and conscientious endeavor to picture life just as it is”) while specifying what this picturing entails: Howells enjoins the novelist “to deal with character as we

\textsuperscript{188} William Dean Howells, \textit{A Hazard of New Fortunes} (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), 361.
\textsuperscript{189} Howells, “Novel-writing and Novel-reading,” 228.
witness it in living people, and to record the incidents that grow out of character."\(^{190}\)

Overturning the Aristotelian hierarchy that prioritized plot (\textit{mythos}) over character (\textit{ethos}), Howells writes instead that “incidents…grow out of character” and are logically subordinate in interest and importance. Though we are maybe more accustomed to associating a portrait-like literary realism with, say, Henry James, it is also the key to understanding Howells’s art of fiction.

The portrait was a form of art that could succeed in satisfying the requirements of both art and realism: an artistic portrait must have both a reasonably close resemblance to actuality while also being sufficiently expressive and composed. It is both a picture and an index of reality. Indeed, the ways in which portraits could synthesize the demands of both art and realism are of central importance in nineteenth century realist aesthetics. Hegel, in his \textit{Aesthetics} (1835), writes that all modern art is essentially “portrait-like” \textit{[porträtartig]} in that it is both prosaic and aesthetic at once: “it completely dissolves into the presentation of a portrait, whether in plastic art, painting, or descriptive poetry; and it reverts to the imitation of nature, i.e. to an intentional approach to the contingency of immediate existence which, taken by itself, is unbeautiful and prosaic."\(^{191}\) In this way, portraiture, in Hegel’s sense of the term, is a useful way to discuss the aesthetic dimensions of Howells’s realism. The portrait presents the permanent and the general \textit{through} the transient and the particular. It distills the common or the average qualities of a particular object or setting without sacrificing its sensuous particularity by reducing it to a \textit{type}. Portraits, in other words, sit at that angle of repose between the actual and the

\(^{190}\) Ibid., 218.

aesthetic: they blur the boundaries between map and picture, between information and art, since a successful portrait is only successful if it both accurately represents the sitter, expresses something of the person’s character, and also composes as a picture. Even more importantly the portraitist attempts to create the illusion of depth and recession both visually and psychologically: to capture the “fulness of life.” A portrait makes a statement about a particular subject’s “incalculable mutability” while seizing the representative elements of that transience to make it an object of “permanent contemplation.”

Howells saw the task of the realist to produce portrait-like representations of characters, and saw these representations in distinction to the flat, cartoonish characters of romantic fiction. Thinking of realist art as “portrait-like” may call to mind E. M. Forster’s memorable distinction between “flat” and “round” characters, and Howells’s conception of human character doubtless recalls this heuristic, while making it remarkably literal. Howells writes, for instance, in A Hazard of New Fortunes that the character Alma Leighton was, “Like everyone else…not merely a prevailing mood, as people are apt to be in books, but…an irregularly spheroidal character, with surfaces that caught the different lights of circumstance and reflected them.” Like Forster’s “round” character, Howells’s character is “irregularly spheroidal,” and it is this irregular surface that produces aesthetic effects. Placed in different lights and seen from different points of view, this irregular surface produces different effects and reveals different facets and dimensions of itself.

193 Howells, A Hazard of New Fortunes, 94.
While portraiture is an appropriate lens for reading Howells’s fiction, it is undoubtedly also a characteristic of his writing that has made him unpalatable to certain modern critics. Amy Kaplan, for instance, writes scornfully of Howells’s admiration of portraiture: for Howells, “‘Character painting,’ not ‘story-telling,’ is the hallmark of realism.”¹⁹⁴ In Kaplan’s view, it is Howells’s emphasis on portraying character rather than delineating conflicts between social types that makes his novels both politically and aesthetically conservative: “Ideologically, the delineation of character marks off the serious from the popular while formally it offers a way of controlling and ordering the potentially fragmentary and conflicting consequences of plotting.”¹⁹⁵ Howells does indeed value individual character more than social type, and is often intent on demonstrating the ways in which individuals exceed their social and class positions, but Howells’s “character painting” is by no means a straightforward process. Rather, Howells’s frequent staging of artistic failure is designed to show the ways in which novelistic portraiture is achieved by synthesizing “fragmentary and conflicting” perspectives.

The Coast of Bohemia (1893) is Howells’s most compendious treatment of art and artists, and features Howells’s attempts to both create proportion and perspective through perspectival incongruity and the staging of painterly failure. In brief, the novel is the story of an ambitious young artist, Ludlow, who has trained in France under the Impressionists and returned to America in order to apply his training to the American scene. There at a country fair in the Midwest, he encounters a talented young artist,

Cornelia Saunders, whom he encourages to move to New York to train at “The Synthesis,” an art school evidently modeled after the Art Student’s League. The novel follows the friendship of Ludlow and Cornelia through a bohemian world of painters, sculptors, and other artists, and this friendship eventually leads to a romance that is mediated in large part by Ludlow’s failed attempts to produce a commissioned portrait of Cornelia’s classmate, Charmian Maybough. The novel ends with Ludlow and Cornelia’s marriage.

The plot, in other words, is conventional enough, and certifiably “Howellsian,” inasmuch as its picture of urban bohemia has none of the high romantic intrigue of Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) or the exotic sensationalism of Du Maurier’s *Trilby*, which was published just the next year in 1894. But Howells’s vanilla bohemia is intentionally bland. Indeed, its very blandness is thematically significant, and recognized to be so even within the world of the novel itself. As Ludlow’s painter friend Wetmore claims, “We Americans are too innocent in our traditions and experiences; our Bohemia is a non-alcoholic, unfermented condition.”

As the title suggests, the novel only scouts the coast of Bohemia, and declines to penetrate inland. At the same time, the joke is that Bohemia has no coast (the joke is Shakespeare’s): Bohemia is as mythic and fictive as Utopia or Arcadia.

The novel is interesting, however, both for the many ways in which it elaborates theories of painterly representation, and for the ways in which these failures of painterly representation create opportunities for literary representation. Through dramatizing Ludlow’s failures as an artist to fuse realistic representation with art, Howells implies
ways in which literary realism might be able to achieve such a fusion. The novel opens at the Pymantoning County Fair (presumably in Ohio) with Ludlow, a twenty-two year old American painter who has recently returned from training with the Impressionists in France, attempting to express his impression of the fair’s trotting match on canvas. From the outset, we might be inclined to support Ludlow’s efforts, partly because he seems to resemble Howells himself. Ludlow spent time in Europe, but then “changed his mind all at once, and under an impulse of sudden patriotism, declared for the American sky, and the thin, crystalline, American air” (CB 33). Like Howells, Ludlow wants to express “the joyous aspects of American common life” which is both “his pleasure as an artist and his duty as a citizen” (CB 6). Both Howells and Ludlow are defiantly modern and patriotic, and they both want to represent the American scene with its “thin, crystalline, American air” – its lack of social and physical atmosphere that makes it so resistant to artistic treatment. Both are also aesthetic populists, though they also disdain the low-brow and conventional taste of their audience and share a skepticism that their art will be accepted. Ludlow wants to do a picture of Pymantoning that the people of Pymantoning themselves would like:

Can the people themselves be made to see it and feel it? [...] Can they be interested in a picture – a real work of art that asserts itself in a good way? Can

197 Howells wrote relatively little about the Impressionists, though their influence was felt in the United States by late 1880s and was becoming increasingly popular throughout the 1890s. Kirk writes that Howells remained devoted to “the painters exhibiting at the Royal Academy, as opposed to the followers of Whistler and the Impressionists, who were excluded from the annual exhibitions” (William Dean Howells and Art of His Time, 156). Howells’s attitudes towards Impressionism as a method and a style as demonstrated in The Coast of Bohemia are relatively conventional for an American viewer of the time. These attitudes will be discussed in more detail in following chapters. Kirk notes Howells’s admiration for the British genre painter William Powell Frith (151-167). Frith’s panoramic canvas The Derby Day (1856-1858) may serve as a counter-example to Ludlow’s Impressionist portrayal of the County Fair.
they be taught to care for my impression of the trotting-match at the Pymantoning County Fair, as much as they would for a chromo of the same thing, and be made to feel that there was something more in it perhaps? (CB 154).

Much like the artist Westover in *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (1897), and of course much like Howells himself, Ludlow seeks to fuse high and low art, to create a real work of art representing American life that would be appreciated by art connoisseurs and common people at once.

The difficult of effecting this fusion of fine and popular art is vividly presented in the novel through Howells’s description of the Pymantoning County Fair’s “Fine Arts Department.” Howells’s description of the department is worth quoting at length:

The fine arts were mostly represented by photographs and crazy quilts; but there were also tambourines and round brass plaques painted with flowers, and little satin banners painted with birds or autumn leaves, and gilt rolling-pins with vines. There were medley-pictures contrived of photographs cut out and grouped together in novel and unexpected relations; and there were set about divers patterns and pretences in keramics, as the decoration of earthen pots and jars was called (CB 7).

The “fine arts” department, in other words, is full of anything but fine art, a fact that causes Ludlow nearly to despair. But worse even than the decorative crafts on display are the peoples’ hapless attempts at painting, their “sketches in oil and charcoal, which Ludlow found worse than the more primitive things, with their second-hand chic picked up in a tenth-rate school” (CB 7). Ludlow’s reaction is obviously that of a young snob, but it also vividly demonstrates the distance between his own views of art and those of his audience, a distance that makes him doubt even his own artistic project: “He began to ask himself whether people tasteless enough to produce these inanities and imagine them artistic, could form even the subjects of art; he began to have doubts of his impression of the trotting-match, its value, its possibility of importance” (CB 7-8).
Ludlow’s fears are evidently well-founded, since his own paintings have already been poorly received by the Pymantoning public. Ludlow’s were “the first impressionistic pictures ever seen in the West,” but at their exhibition “the village cynic asked which was right side up, and whether he was to stand on his head or not to get them in range” (CB 33). The response of the village cynic to Ludlow’s style is the stock response of a typical philistine. But neither does Howells fully support Ludlow’s rarefied style. Instead, Howells criticizes Ludlow for his fanatical adherence to impressionism as a *style*, rather than as a method for immediate seeing, an adherence that makes his status as an “American” artist subject to doubt.\(^{198}\) While Ludlow professes to be a realist and to paint immediately from the thing itself, his training in France has mediated his vision, making his representations of the American scene “French.” For Ludlow, Impressionism is not so much a way of seeing as it is an affectation of the latest fashion from Paris – a fashion that colors his perception of the trotting race that he hopes to realistically depict. The eyes with which he beholds the scene are not his own, but are instead “eyes trained by the French masters of his school” (CB 2).

Indeed, the bright, unsparing light of the trotting match is both a perfect opportunity for an Impressionist approach, and appears to fulfill Howells’s criteria for a realist representation of life made in the “light of common day.” “If he had the courage of his convictions,” writes Howells, “this purely American event could be reported on his canvas with all its native character” (CB 2). But Ludlow’s own impression has none of the effect of the “high, crystalline, American air” that the scene in fact contains. Rather, he projects French Impressionist colors onto the scene: his “impression” of the trotting

\(^{198}\) This topic will be addressed in more detail in my discussion of Hamlin Garland in the third chapter of this dissertation.
matches is composed of “deep purples…the indigo blues, the intense greens, the rainbow oranges and scarlets” (CB 2). Rather than seeing what is really there with his own eyes, Ludlow composes the scene into a painting that is recognizably “impressionist,” and reduces forms into the language of impressionist style: the plainness of the Ohioan crowds is exoticized into a “gypsy gayety” while the bodies of men are reduced to a “dark blur” and the women to “flower-like” masses (CB 3).

Similarly, Ludlow’s claim that “he could get as much pathos out of our farm folks as Millet got out of his Barbizon peasants,” is an equally Romantic conceit, one that sees American life not as it in fact is but as merely a translation of an idealized French ruralism. Indeed, Ludlow’s desire is not to look at the scene with fresh eyes, but to scan it for the “effects which he hoped to get again in his impression” (CB 2). As such, the way in which he sees the trotting match as a picture is exactly opposite to the way in which the impressionist method is “supposed” to work. In a “real” work of art, one has an impression first, and then tries to create the effects that will produce that impression on the canvas. But Ludlow sees his “effects” in the scene itself, then tries to go back to produce the impression he ought to have had in order to match his sense of how his impression ought to have looked. In consequence, the picture is a failure both as realism and as art. As Cornelia says of it later in the novel, “It looks as if it were somewhere else” (CB 161). That is, it looks as if it were in France, not in America.

While the reader may have wanted to be sympathetic towards Ludlow’s noble goals to produce art for the American people, Howells makes such sympathy impossible by ironizing Ludlow’s technique and expressing disdain for his highly mediated way of seeing. Indeed, for Ludlow Impressionism is more a religious faith than a practical
method. Impressionism is the “new faith in painting” and Ludlow is a “fanatical” follower: he “believed in the prismatic colors as in the ten commandments” and “hoped to be saved by tone-contrasts” (CB 3). As one of the faithful, the philistinism of his American compatriots and their decorative “arts” is almost violently galling: “The senseless ugliness of the things really hurt him: his worship of beauty was a sort of religion, and their badness was a sort of blasphemy” (CB 8). But Ludlow’s “faith” in the Impressionist method betrays his bad intentions, and ironizes his approach to his subject. The reader’s own faith in Ludlow’s good intentions to do justice to the “high, crystalline, American air” is betrayed by Ludlow’s actual motivation, which is to “testify to the excellence of the French method” (CB 3). If there is any doubt where Howells’s own sympathies lies, the narrator witheringly cuts down Ludlow’s youthful faith: “At twenty-two, one is often much more secure in one’s conclusions than one is afterwards” (CB 3).

Ludlow’s failures, however, furnish the occasion for Howells to highlight the sensuous elements of the scene that Ludlow’s flattened impressionist picturing cannot represent. At the trotting match in the opening pages, for instance, Howells’s own description further undercuts Ludlow’s mediated impression, calling attention to the many sensuous dimensions of the scene that the merely visual language of painting cannot express. Howells’s own impression is rich with sound – the shrieks, cries, shouts, and applause of the crowd – as well as with the tactile immediacy of the scene’s physical action (“the quick throb of the hoofs on the velvety earth and the whir of the flying wheels”) and the sensuousness of its odor (“the sweet smell of bruised grass”) (CB 2, 4). That Howells’s own impression is primarily auditory and tactile undercuts Ludlow’s impression further, since he can see only the “spectacle” of the event (CB 2) and is
limited both by what Ludwig calls “the flatness of momentary perception” and by its inability to make use of a full human sensorium.\footnote{See also Kirk, \textit{William Dean Howells and Art in His Time}, 151-154.}

More damningly though, Ludlow’s impressionist mode of vision mediates his ways of encountering and interacting with others. As in his earlier attempt to render the grouping of women at the race as “flower-like,” Ludlow’s first impression of Cornelia Saunders, then just a girl but who will become his wife by the end of the novel, reminds him of “a hollyhock, by the tilt of her tall, slim, young figure, and by the colors of her hat from which her face flowered” (CB 11). Ludlow’s impression of Cornelia is \textit{poetic} rather than \textit{mimetic}, since it is mediated by a metaphor, and casts further doubt on his ability to represent accurately or to see people as they in fact are. Likewise, in his conversation and his personal appearance, as in his paintings, Ludlow concentrates on his “effect.” His affectedly Francophile mustache gives him an “effect of distinction” (CB 12) while his response to Cornelia’s questioning whether or not he is a student of art has “the effect of uncovering himself in a presence” (CB 14). Examining Cornelia’s drawings, he replies “with various inarticulate notes of comment imitated from a great French master” and lauds them pompously in French (CB 14). While he quickly decides that he needn’t put on airs in front of such a “simple presence,” his reversion to his native tongue is more patronizing than genuinely apologetic.

Ludlow returns to New York and some five years elapse. The great deception of the novel, however, is to make the reader feel as though Ludlow has matured in those years, when in fact he has grown very little. As he mellows with age, some of Ludlow’s earlier “effects” have softened: his mustache “could no longer be brushed up at the points
with just the effect he desired” and his painting likewise “was somewhat modified…his purples and greens were less aggressive” (CB 36). However, Howells’s description is a subtle feint. While his mustache is less of an “effect” than it had been at age twenty-two, it is only because it has grown so thick, and not because of his desire to moderate his appearance; indeed, Ludlow’s beard is “conscientiously trimmed to a point that it might be described as religiously pointed” (CB 36-37). In other words, while his style may have softened somewhat, he has not fundamentally changed, nor has he learned any better to see with his own eyes. Ludlow is still after “effects”: “I was in the Park to-day for a little effect I wanted to get, and it was heartbreaking to leave the woods” (CB 182). His palette, like his facial hair, has modified, but is still fundamentally affected.

Ludlow’s continued immaturity makes him unable to see things “as they are,” but the problem is not simply a failure of personality but of artistic method. The Impressionist technique of seeing and painting only from a highly specific single point of view translates morally to a highly narcissistic and insensible approach to life, a problem that Ludlow himself recognizes: “…it seems to me that the worst effect of an artist’s life is to wrap him up in himself, and separate him from his kind” (CB 155). As an impressionist, Ludlow has been trained to reduce his field of vision to a flat screen of colors, and this reduction applies as well to his personal relationships. Likewise, and more problematically for him as an artist, Ludlow’s insensitivity makes him incapable of painting anything but landscapes. Early in the novel, Ludlow wanders the fairgrounds looking for suitable subjects, but finds that only the trotting match could lend itself to his purpose. Certainly, there was nothing in the fair-house, with those poor, dreary old people straggling through it, to gladden his artistic conception. Agricultural implements do not group effectively, or pose singly with much picturesqueness; tall stalks of corn, mammoth squashes, huge apples and
potatoes…[and] piles of melons fail of their poetry on a wooden floor, and heaps of grapes cannot assert themselves in a very bacchanal profusion against the ignominy of being spread upon long tables and ticketed with the names of their varieties and exhibitors (CB 6-7).

While he earlier expressed interest in doing a Millet-like treatment of rural people, he has none of the imagination or empathy that such a project would require of an artist. Rather, all he sees are “poor, dreary old people straggling” along. Millet’s French peasants are to American eyes certifiably picturesque, but American farmers fail to be similarly worthy subjects. In like manner Ludlow pedantically notes that, “agricultural implements,” crucial in a Millet canvas, “do not group effectively.” The fruit too he finds too large and ugly to be a suitable subject, though a Barbizon or a Dutch painter could perhaps have made much of the low light of the fair house and its interesting forms. Simply put, Ludlow is not receptive and looks only for aestheticized “French” qualities in his familiar surroundings. He desires to paint in the “light of common day,” but can only paint in the light of common day, and then only in an affected French style.

Cornelia, on the other hand, has not had academic training and her vision remains unclouded by aesthetic associations. In the years intervening between their meeting and her move to New York, in which Ludlow learns nothing, Cornelia has gone through a tumultuous courtship with a Mr. Dickerson, “a young man who sold what he called art-goods by sample – satin banners, gilt rolling-pins, brass disks and ceramics” (CB 37) – the very same crafts which Ludlow disparages at the Pymantoning Fair as examples of America’s hopeless insensitivity to art. Nonetheless, Cornelia’s experience has put her romance into perspective and she appears to have acquired real wisdom: “She had come to see things better than she used, and she had learned to be faithful to what she saw, which is the great matter in all the arts” (CB 45). While Ludlow has only changed his
style without changing his vision, Cornelia has learned to see better. Experience has not mediated her vision, but instead rendered it more clear. Through Cornelia, Howells formulates an aesthetic credo different than that of Ludlow. While Ludlow is faithful to art, Cornelia is faithful to “what she saw.” Ludlow’s is an aestheticist credo, while Cornelia’s is a realist one.

Cornelia’s ability to see for herself makes her uniquely talented, a fact that Howells recognizes and commends, and she is staunchly faithful to her own vision of the world. While Ludlow quickly fell under the spell of his Impressionist training and let it color and mediate his style of painting, Cornelia resists becoming indoctrinated by artistic method, even as she trains in it at the Synthesis. At the Synthesis, a New York art school evidently based on the Art Students League, Cornelia’s impression of artistic training is grim. She spends weeks copying from plaster casts of hands and feet, and even classes where students draw from live models are for her an “irregular hemicycle of students silently intent upon the silent forms and faces of those strange creatures who sat tranced in a lifeless immobility, as if the long practice of their trade had resolved them into something as impersonal as the innumerable pictures studied from them” (CB 106). Cornelia finds art instruction lifeless – mere copying from models – even when the models are living.

In this way, the unique vitality of Cornelia’s art is due in large part to her “artlessness” (CB 220). Christopher Diller, in one of the few critical studies of the novel, explains that Cornelia’s “artlessness” is praised throughout the novel because of the way in which the novel embodies a masculine “ideology of domesticity,” in which Cornelia’s “artlessness” is praised above her “art”: “her masculine aestheticist training has not yet
tainted the artistic vision that they conflate with her identity as a domestic subject. By virtue of being an aspiring woman artist, Cornelia offers for the men an acceptable amalgam of ethical realism (portraiture) and aestheticism (picture painting) that Ludlow, as a modern male artist, cannot. As such, The Coast of Bohemia, in a strange and somewhat patronizing way, ends up making an argument that there be more women painters, since, as Ludlow explains: “A man’s idea of a woman, it’s interesting, of course, but it’s never quite just; it’s never quite true; it can’t be. Every woman knows that, but you go on accepting men’s notions of women, in literature and in art, as if they were essentially, or anything but superficially, like women” (CB 233). In other words, the novel constructs a sexual politics in which women are more receptive and sensitive than men, and attuned to subtle nuances of mood, tone, or atmosphere, whereas men, who are either Impressionists or Academic painters, are attuned to blunter and more obvious aesthetic effects. Cornelia’s portraits, as opposed to Ludlow’s, are “invariably the very person, without being in the least photographic” (CB 233). They are accurate, in other words, without being flat.

Other women in the novel also seem to demonstrate greater aesthetic sensibility than men. One such instance occurs during a conversation among both men and women over the meaning of the word “beauty.” While one of the men recapitulates the familiar Idealist notion that Beauty “exists in itself, independently of our pleasure or displeasure,” and “is something of an absolute truth,” a Mrs. Rangely retorts that, “the beautiful is whatever pleases and fascinates. There are lots of good-looking people who are not

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beautiful at all, because they have no atmosphere.” The man responds, “Charm, fascination, atmosphere, are purely subjective; one feels them and another doesn’t. But beauty is objective” (CB 221-222). The unnamed man’s rigid aesthetic philosophy is informed by the Classical tradition in art, and as such it seems unconvincingly old-fashioned. Mrs. Rangely’s more modern definition would have been much more current in aesthetic circles at the time, though it also maps on to a predictable sexual division in which men’s perception of the world is “objective” while that of women is “subjective.” Cornelia’s success as a painter of portraits is due to her nature as a woman, but because her success is only due to her status as an “insider” of women’s minds, it also greatly limits the range of her artistic possibilities.

Nonetheless, the novel makes clear that despite her limited professional opportunities, Cornelia is a more talented painter than Ludlow, a fact that is developed in detail by Ludlow’s inability to paint a portrait of Cornelia’s friend and fellow art student, Charmian Maybough. Charmian is the daughter of a wealthy New York family who studies with Cornelia at the Synthesis. She has little talent, and like Ludlow, she has bohemian affectations. Ludlow, despite many attempts, cannot produce his portrait, writing that he could only “make a picture of her…but could I make a portrait? There is something in every one which holds the true likeness; if you don’t get at that, you don’t make a portrait, and you don’t give people their money’s worth. They haven’t proposed to buy merely a picture of you; they’ve proposed to buy a picture of a certain person” (CB 186).

Diller writes that Ludlow’s recognition of the distinction between picture and portrait “begins to define a model of pictorial realism…rather than sheer mimesis” and
that “the potential nonidentity between a person’s character and its visual representation, define the essential difference between ‘pictures’ and ‘portraits.’”

Diller continues, “portraiture is a mode of representation that can simultaneously secure the moral, aesthetic, and economic success of a work of art.”

But Ludlow – trained only to “make pictures” – despairs of his ability to paint portraits, which is ascribable to his inability to imagine a person’s character. As his depiction of the trotting match reduced human forms to masses of color that resembled inanimate objects, Ludlow has no ability to imaginatively penetrate peoples’ characters: “There’s scope for the greatest imagination, the most intense feeling, in portraits. But I can’t do that kind of thing, and I must stick to my little sophistical fantasies, or my bald reports of nature” (CB 232).

That Ludlow thinks of painting in such extreme terms – “sophistical fantasies” or “bald reports” – confirms his limitations as a portraitist, but it also corroborates the difficulty of the portraitist’s art, particularly in representing a subject as difficult as Charmian Maybough. Charmian is a unique character, a rich, spoiled, and affected girl who is constantly posing and suggesting that events or situations in her life are like events from novels, plays, or other works of art. Speaking of Cornelia’s continued troubles with her former fiancé Dickerson, for instance, Charmian suggests that the situation is “perfectly Hawthornesque. Don’t you think it’s like the Marble Faun, somehow? I believe you will rise to a higher life through this trouble, Cornelia, just as Donatello did through his crime” (CB 312). Charmian constantly interprets her life as romantic fiction and tries to craft her life according to models from plays and novels; but while she affects to be a bohemian by threatening to smoke cigarettes and move to a cold

\[201\] Ibid., 378.
\[202\] Ibid., 379.
water flat in the Village, she is insulated by her family’s wealth. She is also self-consciously “aesthetic” in the pejorative sense in which the term was used in the late nineteenth century. Her claim that “art is one…and the great thing is to live it” (CB 91) links her to aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and fictional characters such as Gabriel Nash in James’s *The Tragic Muse* (1890). Charmian is more interested in the “art atmosphere” than in art. Her own attempts at drawing and painting are woefully undisciplined and demonstrate little promise: more characteristic of her style is “a fantastic medley of grotesque shapes, out of [her] imagination” which she executed while attempting to represent a plaster cast of a hand (CB 93).

This sketch of Charmian, however, makes her seem like a decidedly self-deluded and unappealing character. However, the opposite is true: Charmian is extremely sympathetic and, as her name suggests, charming. Her incessant posing, however, presents a perceptual and representational challenge for Ludlow and, we might say, for the novel itself. Charmian is sympathetic because she herself recognizes that her affectations are just that: affectations. Ludlow, on the other hand, is unaware that the narrator (and thus the reader) perceive him as foolishly affected, and neither can the other self-serious male artists in the novel who deride her immaturity. Indeed, Charmian’s affectation is precisely the dimension of her personality that Ludlow can’t literally depict, and therefore represents the greatest obstacle to his portrait. Ludlow attempts to “solve” the question of her character by either unmasking her, like the crusading portrait artist of James’s “The Liar” (1888), or else by taking her affectation seriously, as he explains to Cornelia: “At first, when I wanted to do her as Humbug, you wouldn’t stand it, and now, when I’ve done her as Mystery, you laugh” (CB 266). But to Cornelia, who knows
Charmian much better and understands the real nature of her character, Ludlow’s attempts are hopelessly midguided. Ludlow’s portrait fails, Cornelia explains, “because she isn’t either. Can’t you understand?” (CB 266). Ludlow, of course, does not understand and his portraits swing between allegorical treatments – “sophistical fantasies” – and literal representations – “bald reports” – neither of which succeed at capturing Charmian’s character.

But again Ludlow’s failure is Howells’s – and the novel’s – success. Ludlow’s failed attempts at portraying Charmian in fact allow the narrative to present us with multiple “sittings” in which the reader composes a composite portrait of Charmian’s character. Also, because of the domestic spaces into which the novel permits the reader access, Cornelia’s own experiences with Charmian can also be taken into account. Through these scenes in which Charmian is presented out of the studio light, we are given a more highly dimensional and proportional view of her character, which we come to understand as both more rich and more complex, even as Ludlow’s failures to accurately represent her seem to foreclose the very understanding that the novel achieves. While Ludlow only sees Charmian posing, the reader sees Charmian, we might say, posing to pose: “‘This is the way I shall look.’ She took a pose in Cornelia’s one chair, and put on an air of impenetrable mystery, which she relinquished a moment to explain, ‘Of course this back is rather too stiff and straight; I shall be more crouching.’ She pushed a ginger-snap between her lips, and chewed enigmatically upon it. ‘See?’ she said” (CB 195-196). This brief passage effectively disrupts Ludlow’s belief that Charmian is either Humbug or Mystery: the deflatingly comic detail of Charmian “enigmatically” chewing a ginger-snap empties the binary, revealing that her pose itself is posed. By portraying Charmian
through a multiplicity of perspectives, the novel creates the depth and “atmosphere” that a flattened pictorial composition attentive only to concrete details would miss. The consequence of Ludlow’s painterly failure has been the comic presentation through novelistic form of a successful portrait.

The romantic conceit of the novel, however, is that Ludlow has been unable to do a portrait of Charmian because he is in love with Cornelia, and is unconsciously projecting his feelings for Cornelia onto the figure on the canvas. In his friend Wetmore’s assessment, Ludlow “[has] the wrong training” and can not paint her as a portrait, but only as a landscape, and a confused one at that: “The topography [of the portrait] was the topography of Miss Maybough, but the landscape was the landscape of Miss Saunders” (CB 218, 224). But even after Cornelia and Ludlow have married, Ludlow has not learned the secret of portraiture. On their honeymoon, Ludlow decides to paint his earliest impression of Cornelia at the Pymantoning County Fair, when he likened her to a hollyhock. It is worth reading Howells’s description of the painting at some length:

As far as could be made out with the naked eye, it represented a clump of hollyhocks, with a slim, shadowy and uncertain young girl among them, and the painter had apparently wished to suggest a family resemblance among them all. […] The piece was called ‘Hollyhocks’; it might equally well be called ‘Girls,’” though when you had called it one or the other, it would be hard to say just what you were to do about it, especially with the impression curiously left by the picture that whether it was a group of girls, or a clump of hollyhocks, they were not in very good humor (CB 335-336).

In other words, the picture is terrible, and represents an almost freakish misunderstanding of portraiture. Ludlow’s unimaginativeness and lack of empathy make even a portrait

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[203] Diller writes that painterly representations likening women or girls to flowers, and particularly to hollyhocks, were so common as to be generic. He quotes art historian Bailey Van Hook who in Angels of Art writes that “Sometimes the female model was placed outdoors—to allow us to study the effects of sunlight on her delicate flesh—in
of someone with whom he now has an actual intimate relation a bizarre mixture of mimetic and allegorical representation. Ludlow has not learned to synthesize his personal impression of Cornelia with an accurate portrayal of her. As the narrator concludes, it was “the duty of impartial criticism, to advise Mr. Ludlow, if he must continue to paint at all, to paint either girls or flowers, but not both at once, or both together, convertibly” (CB 336). Ludlow, because of his academic training, can only picture, and the result is a “forced” and “ineffectual” design (CB 336). Even Cornelia is “aware of a measure of justice in the censure that condemned it for obscurity” (CB 337).

Diller understands Ludlow’s failure at the conclusion of the novel as a failure that confirms the novel’s disparaging attitude towards art and its violent attitude towards women: “Ludlow’s art has devolved into a solipsistic practice that reifies his wife and fellow artist as a domestic subject in a pseudo-impressionist painting.” Diller’s conclusion also corroborates Ludwig’s assessment that Howells’s novels featuring art and artists demonstrate his “preoccupation with the shortcomings of pictorial ways of understanding reality.” Both assessments are correct. But take Howells’s deficiencies at face value. They constitute the consciously made point of his representation of painterly failure. The Coast of Bohemia represents such a catastrophic failure of character painting in order both to demonstrate its difficulty and to model ways in which such portraiture could be achieved through the perspectival and dialogic form of the novel itself. While Diller reads the novel as essentially tragic, it is basically, like almost all Howells’s other novels, comic. While the novel demonstrates the failure of a male artist,

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204 Diller, “Color in Fiction,” 382.
205 Ludwig, Pragmatist Realism, 91.
it offers a counter-example of a successful female artist whose approach to art is both sympathetic and relational, as well as explicitly “realist.” In this way, we can also say that Howells’s “character painting” does not necessarily rely for its aesthetic effects on the expulsion of the social. Rather, it understands with a rare generosity the “reality” of theatricality, of the obligation for all characters to “pose.” It suggests that a portrait satisfying both the demands of realism and of art is one in which the “irregularly spheroid” nature of a human personality has been pictured by viewing it in a multiplicity of lights and from a multiplicity of perspectives in the virtual space of the novel.
The manner of the thing may illustrate the author’s incorrigible taste for gradations and superpositions of effect; his love, when it is a question of a picture, of anything that makes for proportion and perspective, that contributes to a view of all the dimensions. Addicted to seeing ‘through’ – one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through that – he takes, too greedily perhaps, on any errand, as many things as possible by the way. It is after this fashion that he incurs the stigma of labouring uncannily for a certain fulness of truth – truth diffused, distributed and, as it were, atmospheric.

- Preface to What Maisie Knew (1908)²⁰⁶

While critics have had a difficult time taking William Dean Howells at his word that the task of the realist novelist was to “picture” reality, they have had no such trouble with Henry James. Whether Howells was insensitive towards the visual arts or just reticent to express his views, James was effusive on the subject of pictures: letters, critical essays, and travel writings are rife with impressions and critical assessments, and James wrote at least sixty professional art reviews and notes on exhibitions for magazines, some of which were revised and collected in book form.²⁰⁷ His stories and novels, of course, feature no shortage of painters, artists, and collectors: encounters between characters and actual or imagined paintings often form significant and climactic

events, and aesthetic sensibility and taste are important and complex indices of a character’s moral life. More, James insisted that his novels themselves were like painted pictures in their form and structure, and sometimes in their abundance of visual descriptiveness. If the novel was to become a fine art, it was to become so by analogy with its “sister art.” The effort of the painter to represent was identical to the representational effort of the novelist: as James writes, “the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete.”

The influence of painting on Henry James’s career is, so far as the critic or scholar is able to see, overdetermined, and it is impossible, not to mention undesirable, to parse the densely woven strands of that influence in order to analyze James’s art of fiction. The purpose of this chapter will be to address a few such strands in order both to develop our understanding of what it meant for James to call the novel a picture whose “reason for…existence” was its “attempt to represent life” (AF 46). In particular this chapter will begin by examining James’s early education and career in the arts in order to demonstrate the depth and breadth of painting’s influence on what James meant when he called the novel a “picture of life.” I intend this discussion both to develop a more coherent picture of the ways in which James’s aesthetic education was focused on the visual arts, and also as a corrective to what I take to be a critical overvaluation of James’s later artistic influences in both the visual arts and in literature, influences that could broadly but confidently be labeled “Impressionist.” The overemphasis on these later influences is

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no doubt due to a critical desire to characterize James as a “modernist” writer, a characterization that nonetheless causes us to lose perspective on what James meant when he claimed that despite constant experimentation, the novel remained always “an effort at representation.” By reexamining James’s early influences in the visual arts and the ways in which the visual arts informed the development of the realist novel, I hope to resolve the apparent contradiction between the seemingly opposed directives for the novelist both to “search for form” (AF 48) and to represent life. Representational painting was capable of effecting such a reconciliation and thus served as a useful model for a literary realism that aspired to the condition of art.

In calling attention to James’s early education in the arts and his own sense of what constituted successful painting, I hope to emphasize the fact that for James realist art was primarily invested in representing depth and facilitating the ability of a viewer or reader to visually and imaginatively penetrate a work’s painted or written surface. By eliding the differences between visual and imaginative penetration, I am reasserting the importance for James of a primarily sensuous perception of the world that resists treating the world only as a sign to be interpreted for the meaning that stands behind or beneath it. In this respect my analysis of James is motivated by T. S. Eliot’s notoriously ambiguous (and often quoted) assessment that James had “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.” Sometimes cited as evidence of James’s obtuse density and baffling difficulty (George Monteiro writes that “Eliot’s dictum became a familiar and much abused

shibboleth, especially in anti-James criticism”\(^{212}\), or as a Wildean *bon mot* (Gore Vidal called it a “wisecrack”\(^{213}\), Eliot evidently intends his apercu as the highest praise: James’s resistance to “Ideas” is “the last test of a superior intelligence.”\(^{214}\) Eliot’s assessment frames James as a modernist master, one who corroborates, for instance, William Carlos Williams’s dictum that there are “no ideas but in things.”\(^{215}\)

Mary McCarthy, on the other hand, cites Eliot’s epigram as evidence of the great modernist mistake in which “the power of the novelist, insofar as he was a supreme intelligence, was to free himself from the workload of commentary and simply, awesomely, to show.”\(^{216}\) But while he “showed” rather than “told,” in so doing James evidently set the novel at a far remove from the palpable, sensuous, material world that so animated earlier realist novelists. McCarthy’s James is a “Puritan” who chose not to represent the dense tapestry of social and material life and consequently “etherealised the novel beyond its wildest dreams”\(^{216}\): while Balzac would have taken the treasure in *The Spoils of Poynton*, for instance, as an opportunity for exuberant enumeration and elaborate description, James refuses to give us any details of the objects in question beyond a few suggestive hints. For McCarthy, *Spoils* “is not a novel about material tables and chairs: it is a novel about the possession and enjoyment of an immaterial Idea.”\(^{217}\)

James’s radical experiments with compositional foreshortening have converted the

\(^{217}\) Ibid.
palpable tactile world into the occasion for a Platonic, metaphysical play of the imagination.\textsuperscript{218}

James’s interest in painting as a model for novel writing can help us to explore, develop, and reconcile some of these tensions between things and ideas, between the material and the immaterial, between, to again invoke Martin Meisel’s useful dichotomy, the “appetite for reality” and the “requirement of signification.” In particular, I suggest that painting served James as an aesthetic model because it pushes back against the function of language to represent or emblematize ideas, rather than things in the world. If the novel was a picture of life, it was \textit{not} at the same time an allegory \textit{for} life. The meaning or “moral” of a work of art was not something extraneous or “behind” its surface, but something that inhered in its very form and composition. At the same time, James expressed skepticism about the ways in which painting could only produce a flattened and superficial picture of life, one that was resistant to intelligent reflection. In attempting to reconcile this contradiction, James came to prize the creation of atmosphere and depth as the qualities of a work, whether in painting or in literature, that guaranteed both its correspondence to reality and its value as a work of art.

It has been frequently noted but still persistently understated the degree to which Henry James’s early education and career was saturated with the visual arts. Many of James’s earliest important memories as recounted in \textit{A Small Boy and Others} (1913) deal with visual or painted representations, or with the settings in which they were displayed: his encounter with Leutze’s colossal \textit{Washington Crossing the Delaware}, his first confusion about the nature of representation prompted by a Thomas Cole painting in the

\textsuperscript{218} See also Sharon Cameron, \textit{Thinking in Henry James} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 21-31.
family salon, his own earliest attempts at dramatic representation that wedded picture and text, his strange and epochal nightmare of the Gallerie d’Apollon at the Louvre. Before coming across both modern painters and Old Masters in Europe and meeting Pre-Raphaelite painters in England, James had already largely formed his tastes and his ideas about what painting was and meant by first hand experience in the United States studying with the important American painters William Morris Hunt and John La Farge, and by virtue of that experience had already begun to develop an understanding of what it meant for the novel to be a picture of life. James’s first professional writing was as an art critic for the Atlantic Monthly, and he continued to write reviews for that and other magazines throughout the 1870s. His art writing was apparently so successful that no less a figure than John Ruskin once suggested that he be appointed Slade Professor of the Fine Arts at Cambridge.

Given the depth and breadth of this influence it is unsurprising that James would select painting as his model for the novel, despite the obvious technical, conceptual, and material differences between the two arts. In a broad sense, painting served as a natural model for the realist novelist for at least two reasons, one cultural and historical, the other technical and conceptual. The cultural and historical reason that painting served as a useful model for the realist novelist was that painting enjoyed a high cultural repute relative to the low status of the novel, a point that was particularly important for James. It must always be remembered that when James writes that “fiction is one of the fine arts” (AF 47) he is not articulating a widely held position but rather staking a claim that would probably have surprised many or even most novel readers at the time. Writing an essay called “The Art of Fiction” in the late nineteenth century is roughly analogous to writing
an essay called “The Art of Television” in the early twenty-first. Television may be very entertaining, it may even be very good (particularly in the so called “Golden Age” underway since at least the mid 2000s), but is it really a fine art? Probably most people who enjoy television are glad that it is not a fine art: as James writes, mutatis mutandis, “the ‘artistic’ idea would spoil some of their fun” (AF 48). While James comments in Hawthorne (1879) and elsewhere on the dearth of satisfactory models for the American novelist, and laments the novelist’s relatively low social and critical reputation, the rising critical fortunes of painting – particularly realist painting – made it a compelling analogue for realist fiction in prose. By comparing the novelist to the painter, James could acquire some of the sister art’s cultural cachet.219

The painter, furthermore, was more obviously a professional in a way that would naturally make him or her (though usually and significantly him) an object of the novelist’s envy. In my discussion of William Dean Howells I have already mentioned some of the ways in which the figure of the painter could serve as a model for the realist writer looking to corroborate the seriousness of his profession. But it must be further stated that the social and cultural value of painting was ensured by the art’s participation in an extensive and well-established network of schools, institutions, exhibitions, and other social bodies. A physical canvas acquired actual value (that is, cash value) by being a product of these networks: the price of a picture was not just an index of the cost of paint and canvas but of the years of training gone into its production and of its certification by a network of cultural authorities and a flourishing market of buyers and

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dealers. In other words, people understood that painters trained and worked at their art, and consequently deserved to get paid for making a thing that could be bought.

That painting is more obviously or more evidently a labor than writing also helps to explain why James would often choose the figure of the painter rather than the figure of the writer for his short stories that explore problems of representation, perception, epistemology, and like questions (“A Landscape Painter,” “The Story of a Masterpiece,” “The Madonna of the Future,” “The Sweetheart of M. Briseux,” “The Impressions of a Cousin,” “The Liar,” “The Real Thing,” “The Tone of Time,” “Flickerbridge,” “The Beldonald Holbein,” “Mora Montravers,” etc.). While there are many other substantial reasons why James would choose to write about painters on so many occasions, one simple reason is that they are plainly better subjects for dramatic or scenic treatment. Their art is physical and produces a physical object that can more easily and more compellingly be written about in narrative form. You will often see a crowd of bystanders watching a painter working in the park or studio; you will not often see a crowd watching a writer hunched before his or her desk.

This may seem like an obvious or even a trivial observation, but it also suggests a broad shift in the perception of the novelist as an artist, a shift that to a large extent depends on understanding writing as an action that can be practiced. But just as importantly as its status as model for an art of high cultural repute and serious professional method, painting served as a conceptual and technical model for the realist writer who aspired to make novels artistic. The painted picture was naturally James’s earliest model for a coherent, composed, and unified work of art – indeed, the language of coherence, composition, and unity that would form such a large part of James’s art of
fiction was already the well-established idiom of the painter. In this chapter I will demonstrate specific ways in which James was likely to have encountered this idiom and also show how that idiom informed his own art criticism, which in turn informed his developing theory of realist aesthetics in prose writing.

But before discussing the specific content of James’s education and career in the arts, we ought first to explore one of James’s earliest significant encounters with the problem of realist representation. In his memoir *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) James recalls that a large painting by the American Hudson River School artist Thomas Cole used to hang in the family parlor. The painting was a *View of Florence* (1837), a scene in which James could “always lose [himself] as soon as look.”

*View of Florence* is more or less typical of Cole’s style: it represents a low-toned sunset view over Florence from San Miniato done in a tonally unified pinkish haze, with the luminous Arno retreating into the distance to where the sun sets behind distant mountains which themselves fade into atmospheric perspective almost indistinguishable from the surrounding air. (The foreground that occupies the bottom tenth of the painting represents the terrace of the monastery and is peopled by a Benedictine monk, a quartet of youths, and a young shepherd with his goats). Next to the Cole hung another picture by one Robert-Jacques-François Lefèvre (1755-1830), a Neoclassicist painter, which “represented in frank, rich colours and as a so-called ‘view in Tuscany’ a rural scene of some

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221 James would later set a scene in his first novel *Roderick Hudson* (1875) at the San Miniato monastery, and it is highly likely that he had the stage-like lower tenth of the Thomas Cole painting in mind. See *Roderick Hudson* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 251-252.
exuberance, a broken and precipitous place, amid mountains and forests, where two or three barelegged peasants or woodmen were engaged, with much emphasis of posture, in felling a badly gashed but spreading oak.”

While the Lefèvre has not been identified, based on James’s description and our knowledge of Neoclassical style, it would be difficult to imagine two more dissimilar pictures: the “frank, rich colours” of the Lefèvre obviously clash with the low-toned atmospheric haze of the Cole. As such, the fact that both pictures purport to represent Tuscany presents a problem. James recalls an episode in which a houseguest – identified by Peter Collister as family friend Edmund Tweedy, who had been to Italy – questions the title of the Lefèvre, asking whether the picture really represents Tuscany. James Sr. maintains that it does, and Tweedy replies that “in Tuscany, you know, the colours are much softer – there would be a certain haze in the atmosphere.” At this point, young Henry, who has been listening to the debate, interjects, “Why of course…the softness and the haze of our Florence there: isn’t Florence in Tuscany?” By “our Florence” James of course means the canvas by Thomas Cole, and upon recognition of this disjuncture between the two pictures of Tuscany, “a certain malaise reigned, for if the Florence was ‘like it’ then the Lefèvre could be, and if the Lefèvre was like it then the Florence couldn’t.”

Viola Hopkins Winner writes that this scene represents James’s “earliest conscious experience in criticism” the significance of which “hinged on the question of

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224 James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 154.
representational truth.”

Winner is correct, but it is important to understand that “representational truth” must be distinguished from literally exact imitation. Specifically in this case the quality of a representation that makes it a truthful representation of a particular place or scene is its ability to faithfully reproduce the effect of local atmosphere. The Thomas Cole is not necessarily a good representation because it accurately represents the architectural or geographical layout of Florence (whether the Cathedral and the Arno are in the right place), but rather because the atmosphere in which those architectural and geographical elements are presented looks like the Tuscan atmosphere. In this sense, a view of Tuscany done in the style of Lefèvre would always be wrong if the atmosphere were wrong, even if Lefèvre were to faithfully represent the Cathedral or the Arno with photographic accuracy. Such a picture may have other artistic values, but its value as an index of reality would be diminished. The truthfulness of any representation is not the consequence of imitative exactitude but of the tonally unified presentation of its pictorial elements. It is this atmospheric realism that allows Henry to “lose himself” in the Thomas Cole, while the Lefèvre resists imaginative penetration.

*Henry James Sr. and Asher B. Durand: The Crayon and Aesthetic Education*

The solution to James’s earliest conscious critical problem was to link representational truth with the ability of an artist to represent depth and thus facilitate the viewer’s visual and imaginative penetration of a work’s painted surface. In this belief James was by no means unique or original. Rather James perhaps unconsciously echoed

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the painterly values that would have been in circulation in artistic circles at the time, values that were very likely discussed even within the very parlor where the Thomas Cole painting hung. The creation of atmospheric depth and space was paramount among the American writers and artists associated with the journal *The Crayon*, published in New York from 1855 to 1861 by William James Stillman and John Durand. Published earlier than *The New Path*, the short-lived journal associated with the more naturalistic wing of American Pre-Raphaelite painters which I discussed in the previous chapter on Howells, *The Crayon* was the earliest manifestation of the influence of John Ruskin on American aesthetics, and it retained the earlier generation’s more idealist, Emersonian bent. Among those published in the journal were American poets and critics such as James Russell Lowell, William Cullen Bryant, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and Charles Eliot Norton, the last of whom would have a direct, personal influence on James’s introduction to Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed, Ruskin and other writers associated with Pre-Raphaelitism such as William Michael Rossetti (editor of *The Germ*, in many ways the English counterpart and precursor to *The Crayon*) were also featured in the journal’s pages. The journal also printed articles by practicing painters such as the famous portraitist Rembrandt Peale and the Hudson River School landscapist Asher B. Durand (father of the journal’s founding editor), as well as by sculptors such as Horatio Greenough.

The idealist temper of *The Crayon* is perhaps most evident in four articles written by Henry James Sr. himself, all published in 1855.226 Taken together, these four articles

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226 These articles are attributed to “James Henry” but publisher William James Stillman confirms in his 1901 autobiography that the author in question was indeed Henry James Sr. See William James Stillman, *The Autobiography of a Journalist, Volume I* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1901), 171.
constitute something like a comprehensive treatise on idealist aesthetics, and provide us with a rich picture of the intellectual and aesthetic environment in which Henry Jr. was certainly raised. In the first of these essays, “The Incentives and Aims of Art,” James Sr. echoes his son’s precocious observation of the inadequacy of imitative exactitude, writing that artistic representation supersedes “mere mechanical imitation of Nature,” which is “altogether inadequate to the purposes of Art.” While Art begins with merely naturalistic imitation, the infusion of the “faculty” of intelligence “which enters into the spirituality of human action…delineates all the finer shades of the human mind. From the actual, he passes to the ideal man.” By remaining only in “prosaic” exactitude, Art will never rise above “that mere daguerreotype faculty of ever presenting one exact copy of Nature.”

In an observation that foreshadows James Jr.’s own claim for the absolute freedom of the literary artist in “The Art of Fiction” or his description in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* of the “house of fiction” that “has…not one window, but a million,” James Sr. writes that the manifold ways in which “the outer world lays its impress upon man” produces infinite varieties of artistic expression that “seem to have no

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York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 229. For confirmation of James Sr.’s authorship of these articles I am indebted to Dennis Raverty, “Art Theory and Psychological Thought in Mid-19th-Century America: The Case of The Crayon,” *Prospects* 24 (1999), 295 n. 13. The articles are “The Incentives and Aims of Art,” (Jan. 24); “Pennsylvania Forest Scenery,” (Feb. 28); “The Transition from the Un-Beautiful to the Beautiful” (published in two parts, May 23, Jun. 27); and “Studies of Nature” (Oct. 3), a somewhat humoristic account of a trip to the Pennsylvania woods that I will not address in this discussion.  
228 Ibid., 52.  
229 Ibid., 52, 51.  
climax.” In “The Transition from the Un-Beautiful to the Beautiful,” James Sr. writes that the merely objective “daguerreotype” faculty of unmediated imitation is impossible because it is primarily intellectual and personal association that forms our impressions of objects. The object itself is only “the material symbol” of “the history, story, or poetical interest” that an object provokes, and it is through the “disclosure” of these associations that even objects “outwardly repulsive…become[] transcendentally beautiful, received as a whole conception.” For James Sr., intellectual and personal association, whether furnished by historical, scientific, or experiential knowledge, has the ability to convert “Un-Beautiful” objects or scenarios into beautiful works of art: “by the process of reasoning ourselves into the Beautiful, from the study of mere pictures of Nature and human action, we, necessarily, enter within the realm of ideal thought.”

This “ideal” dimension makes the creation and interpretation of art practically boundless: “no limits can ever be set to the interpretations of Art. The process of unfolding the meanings and intent of her works, goes on ad infinitum.” Again, foreshadowing his son’s observation in “The Art of Fiction” that “Experience is never limited and it is never complete” and that “when the mind [of an observer] is imaginative…it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, [and] converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (AF 52), James Sr. writes that for an observer of a daguerreotype habit of mind who remains mired in “associations of a sensuous tendency, the range of artistic thought must needs be limited…on the contrary, where the imagination is of a

\[231\] “The Incentives and Aims of Art,” 51.
\[232\] “The Transition from the Un-Beautiful to the Beautiful [Part 1],” The Crayon 1, no. 21 (May 23, 1855), 322.
\[233\] Ibid., 323.
\[234\] Ibid.
cultivated order…the works of the master are an endless theme, and can, with perfect consistency, be regarded with different views by different minds.”

“This truth,” writes James Sr., “should prove a weighty consideration for the guidance of artistic criticism,” a prediction that his son’s critical and artistic career would certainly bear out.

James Sr.’s aesthetics can be considered idealist inasmuch as it affirms the priority of the constitutive and perceiving powers of individual minds, but it is important to recognize that his emphasis on psychological and historical association tends to blur together the material and the ideal more than it distinguishes them. In other words, the ideal is not posed as antithetical to the material. Rather, naturalistic observation is the occasion for development in an idealist direction. This point is made most clearly in “Pennsylvania Forest Scenery,” an essay that practically demonstrates several of James Sr.’s critical dicta. The essay is an account of a trip to the Pennsylvania forest, and is replete with sensuous and detailed descriptions of the dense surfeit of natural scenery. This practice of “minute outer description, detailing the features of wood and glen, with the purpose of offering an exterior picture of these remarkable scenes of a characteristic portion of our country” James Sr. refers to as “word-painting,” which is the study of the “whole vestiture of Nature.”

But while James Sr. spends the majority of the essay engaging in just such “word-painting,” he insists that “word-painting alone will not lead us into the arcana of our cosmic system.” Rather, “the beauty of vegetable forms and variety of color…are viewed not merely as such for the gratification of the eye, as a simple word-painting

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235 Ibid.
236 Ibid.
237 “Pennsylvania Forest Scenery,” *The Crayon* 1, no. 9 (Feb. 28, 1855), 131.
238 Ibid., 132.
would design them...they are taken in the grand connection of all created matter, and as forming but minute links in the chain of organized creation.”\(^{239}\) But while it may seem that James Sr. disparages “the grossness of earthly reality” which must be “refined into the magic of Art,” it is nevertheless evident that the knowledge of spiritual idealities comes only through the cultivation of aesthetic perception: “To arrive at this stage of aesthetic perception, our own literature has to strive after a more scientific scope and tone; and an infusion of learning into word-painting, although an object of the rarest attainment, will alone raise our authors to the level with those of European fame.”\(^{240}\) As we will see as this chapter progresses, James Sr.’s critiques of mere “word-painting” as an art that remains content to describe natural phenomena in sensuous detail without engaging the complex associations that these phenomena provoke will form a central critical problem for James Jr.’s art of fiction, particularly in his critical treatments of French “impressionistic” and aesthetic writers. Reconciling the primary importance of the description and representation of sensuous reality with the recognition that to merely do so without understanding the ways in which that sensuous reality “receives an impress from the mind, which recalls...a thousand associations of feeling and intellect” constitutes the central challenge of mimetic representation and artistic creation throughout James Jr.’s body of work.\(^{241}\)

While James Sr.’s idealist aesthetic philosophy offers an important perspective on his son’s early aesthetic education to which we will return in more detail later, it is more philosophical than technical. Other articles in The Crayon can help us to develop a

\(^{239}\) Ibid., 131.
\(^{240}\) Ibid., 130, 131-132.
\(^{241}\) Ibid., 131.
picture of the ways in which these ideas could in fact be put into practice. In the first two volumes, Asher B. Durand published several “Letters on Painting” which systemically lay out his aesthetic values. Durand, like other members of the Hudson River School, shared with James Sr. a belief that the aesthetic study of nature would uncover ideal, spiritual truths, but, as a practicing artist, he was naturally more explicit about the artistic techniques by which this discovery could be achieved and presented in a formally coherent work of art.

Central among these formal qualities is the artist’s resistance to imitative exactitude in favor of creating what Durand calls a “representation.” An “imitation,” which strives for a high fidelity to particular detail, is distinct from a “representation,” defined as “the production of such resemblance as shall satisfy the mind that the entire meaning of the scene is given.”\(^{242}\) As for James Sr., imitation is associated with mere “facts,” while a good representation is an expression of important “truths.”\(^{243}\) “Although painting is an imitative Art,” writes Durand, “its highest attainment is representative.”\(^{244}\) This is the case because the surfeit of details that constitutes material reality is impossible to imitate: imitating the absolute complexity of a tree, for instance, would be an impossibility, and the tree’s forms must therefore be selected, simplified, and reduced. In this way a simplified representation may yet “satisfy the eye as fully as an imitation.”\(^{245}\)


\(^{243}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^{244}\) Ibid., 146.

\(^{245}\) Ibid.
Paramount among the qualities that made a given representation visually satisfying was the artful representation of “atmosphere.” Durand defines atmosphere as “the power which defines and measures space” and calls it an intangible agent, visible, yet without that material substance which belongs to imitable objects, in fact, an absolute nothing, yet of mighty influence. It is that which above all other agencies, carries us into the picture, instead of allowing us to be detained in front of it; not the door-keeper, but the grand usher and master of ceremonies and conducting us through all the vestibules, chambers and secret recesses of the great mansion, explaining, on the way, the meaning and purposes of all that is visible, and satisfying us that all is in its proper place.\textsuperscript{246}

While it may seem to share in James Sr.’s numinous idealist philosophy, the “magic power” of Durand’s atmosphere is unquestionably material inasmuch as it can be naturalistically represented – though not, as it were, by simple imitation.\textsuperscript{247} The effect of atmosphere is achieved through the artful modulation of tone, value, and color temperature as the planes of the picture recede in space (an effect also known as aerial perspective), and it is this quality of a representation that facilitates the entrance of the viewer into the fictive space of the canvas. Atmosphere creates depth and “conducts” the eye, while also satisfying the mind’s desire for the “meaning and purposes” of the representation. Further, while James Sr.’s idealist aesthetic philosophy resorts to an allegorical or metaphorical understanding of language in which merely prosaic description or narrow imitation must be translated to the realm of ideas by way of analogy, Durand’s aesthetic practice facilitates imaginative penetration through the artifice of the painted surface itself. It achieves imaginative penetration not by making material objects symbols of intellectual or spiritual truths that lay “behind” or “within”\textsuperscript{246}

\textsuperscript{246} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid.
the material world, but produces “meaning and purposes” by nothing more than naturalistic representation.

While Durand’s emphasis on simplification and reduction of form, as well as on the modulation of light and shadow and attention to color temperature, might call to mind the aesthetic techniques of the Impressionists who would come to supersede him in popularity and influence some twenty or thirty years later, anyone who has seen one of Durand’s own paintings would be quick to notice that there are few stylistic similarities between the two schools. Durand’s Claude Lorrain-like manipulation of light and dark and his attention to fine gradations of tone create the effect of pictorial space, while painting in the Impressionist line is more attentive to color than value for its light effects and thus tends to flatten the pictorial space of the canvas. Indeed, painting in the Impressionist line was conspicuously flat, and this radical flatness was aimed directly at overturning the ideal of visual and imaginative penetration that painters such as Durand most admired and for which they most strove in their own painting. “Flatness,” writes art historian T. J. Clark, “was construed as a barrier put up against the viewer’s normal wish to enter a picture and dream, to have it be a space apart from life in which the mind would be free to make its own connections.”248 The resistance to imaginative or visual penetration that Impressionist painting achieved is directly antithetical to Durand’s purposes, for whom an unsuccessful painting was one in which the viewer remained “detained in front of it.” While we may be inclined today to associate painting in the Impressionist line – which is to say the Modernist line – with the viewer’s interpretive

freedom, Durand associates flatness with static detainment – “door-keeping” – while representational depth is associated with energy, power, motion, and “satisfaction.”

_William Morris Hunt and John La Farge: Painting and Aesthetic Education_

While it isn’t possible to know whether James himself read Durand’s influential letters, their publication in a journal in which his father was also printed suggests that his ideas about representation in general and about painting in particular would have been part of the educational environment in which James was raised, and, as I will show below, James will express many elements of Durand’s aesthetic values in his own art criticism. In parallel to these influences, James’s experiences with painters William Morris Hunt and John La Farge in Newport in the late 1850s also furnished James with important elements of his developing art of realism. The influence of both Hunt and La Farge, I claim, is larger than has been previously suggested: scholarship on these connections has been relatively limited, partly due to scanty evidence, but also due to the peculiarity of both artists and the difficulty of fitting them into a coherent art historical narrative. Viola Hopkins Winner, for instance, writes that “Both William Morris Hunt and John La Farge had the impressionist eye, though they did not practice the technique of the color spot, rainbow palette, broad brush stroke, and color perspective invented by Pissarro, Monet, Renoir, and others of the school.”

James Kirschke too writes that “As early as 1859…La Farge has moreover shown in his theoretical comments on art and,

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249 On Durand’s influence, see also Susan M. Griffin, _The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James_ (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 100-107.

250 Winner, _Henry James and the Visual Arts_, 89.
occasionally, in his paintings themselves, a cast of mind that can best be described as Impressionist,” even though La Farge “worked in the Impressionist vein years before the term ‘Impressionism’ was recognized as a properly descriptive term in the arts.”

These observations are perplexing and, I think, misleading. Winner writes that both Hunt and La Farge were “impressionists,” but qualifies her claim by observing that virtually no aspect of their actual painting practice resembles Impressionism in the least – as indeed it does not. In like manner Kirschke claims that La Farge had an Impressionist “cast of mind,” a vague observation, while also noting that of course La Farge had already developed most of his theories and techniques of painting nearly fifteen years before the term “Impressionism” came into existence. Both Winner’s and Kirschke’s claims that Hunt and La Farge were Impressionists, in other words, seems to me guided by a critical desire to see James himself as an Impressionist, and ignores the more conservative painterly influences and aesthetic philosophies that informed their actual practice.

Hunt and La Farge were not Impressionists nor even, properly speaking, “proto-Impressionists.” While both had studied in Paris under Thomas Couture, who was also an important influence on the Impressionists, the degree of this influence was at least one step removed. Sharing none of the Impressionists’ interest in the analysis of colored light, Couture’s style was decidedly more conservative; and while he was a major influence on his student Édouard Manet, his style more closely anticipates that of painters such as Henri Fantin-Latour or Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who also studied with him. To

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compare Hunt and La Farge to Impressionists such as Pissarro, Monet, and Renoir is to misrepresent them and to paint them, so to speak, in the wrong light.

Hunt’s painterly practice and aesthetic philosophy belong to this earlier art historical moment before the scientifically-motivated analytical breakthroughs that would produce Impressionist technique and style. Hunt’s canvases are more obviously in the manner of the Barbizon school, a movement that certainly influenced Impressionism’s painterly turn but shared few of its stylistic traits. While he studied with Couture and propagated many of his theories and techniques, Hunt also often painted with Jean-François Millet at Fontainebleau in the 1850s, and Hunt’s low-toned, pastoral landscapes often feature picturesque groupings of rural laborers much in Millet’s style, while also echoing painters such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Constant Troyon, Théodore Rousseau, or Émile Lambinet – painters who James claims in *A Small Boy and Others* “summed up for the American collector and in the New York and Boston markets the idea of the modern in the masterly.” Hunt’s paintings, nonetheless, were remarkably original, and anticipated the style of American Tonalist painters such as Albert Pinkham Ryder, who also studied with the Barbizon painters, and Thomas Dewing.

The same could be said of La Farge, whose own distinctive and singular style predated the development of Impressionism by at least a decade. La Farge’s palettes tend towards the pastel and the opalescent rather than towards the high-keyed “rainbow” palette of primary colors used by Impressionist painters, and he consistently demonstrates an attunement to subtle tonal gradations and fine brush-work rather than towards broad strokes and glaring juxtapositions of color. Art historian Henry Adams writes that while

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252 James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 193.
La Farge’s paintings “at times bring to mind the work of the French Impressionists, as well as that of James McNeill Whistler and Henri Fantin-Latour” they in fact “both predated and developed independently from the compositions of these European figures.”

La Farge’s unique style was to a large extent “a solitary and isolated phenomenon, little known even in the United States except to figures such as Henry and William James who formed part of his most intimate circle.”

Discussions of Hunt and La Farge as they pertain to Henry James tend to focus on their status as figures rather than on their status as teachers or painters. Winner, for instance, writes that “the impress of Hunt on James’s imagination was not so much what he said but what he was – ‘the living and communicating Artist,’” while La Farge – cosmopolitan, Catholic, cavalier – “stood out as ‘an embodiment of the gospel of esthetics’ in a utilitarian America before the days foundations and universities made the artistic career respectable.”

In a similar vein, both Hunt and La Farge are seen as influential on Henry James not because of the quality of their art but because of the quality of their speech. Winner, for instance, explains that it was the peculiarly “aphoristic mode of Hunt’s speech” that most influenced James, while the art historian Henry Adams writes that “La Farge played a significant role in shaping Henry James’s literary style” because “La Farge was a famous conversationalist, who was noted for the complexity of the ideas that he could suspend in a single sentence, the virtuosity with

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254 Ibid.
which he could hold his collateral lines of thought without quite dropping or forsaking his initial meaning." What mattered for James, in other words, was the fact that they were artists. The kind of artists they were was of little importance.

I certainly do not mean to deny the importance of both Hunt and La Farge as figures. Rather I want to suggest that both Hunt and La Farge stood for James as more than just embodiments of the aesthetic life, but that they made available a conceptual vocabulary to describe a particular kind of relationship between art and reality that would prove lastingly influential in James’s own theory and practice of realist prose writing. La Farge and Hunt, in other words, played significant roles in shaping James’s literary style not just for their status as conversationalists but also as practicing painters.

*William Morris Hunt as Painter and as Teacher*

Hunt was an influential, popular, and notoriously idiosyncratic teacher in the genteel circles of the Northeast, and he taught students in Brattleboro, Vermont, in Boston, and in the studio behind his home in Newport, Rhode Island. It was there between 1858 and 1860 that Hunt taught at least a dozen students including William James and La Farge, as well as Theodora Sedgwick (a relation of Charles Eliot Norton),

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258 Winner suggests, somewhat unpersuasively, that Hunt may have provided the model for the quixotic and temperamental Roderick Hudson (*Henry James and the Visual Arts*, 101), while Adams, more persuasively, suggests that La Farge was the model for the protagonist of James’s early story “A Landscape Painter” (Henry Adams, “The Mind of John La Farge,” in *John La Farge* [New York: Abbeville Press, 1987], 17). See also Kimberley Vanderlaan, “The Painter Henry James Might Have Been,” *American Literary Realism* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 1-13.
Frank Furness (who would later become a noted architect), and Edward Wheelwright, who had also studied with Millet and who was art editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*.\(^{259}\) Henry himself was not formally enrolled, but he spent long hours in the studio as well as alone in the studio’s lower floor often drawing and copying among its plaster casts and canvases.\(^{260}\) At the same time, James also engaged in drawing studies according to the instructions of Ruskin and his American Pre-Raphaelite followers. According to T. S. Perry, young Henry would sometimes engage in “the conscientious copying of a leaf and very faithfully drew a little rock that jutted above the surface of Lily Pond,” exactly the kind of practice recommended by Ruskin and his acolytes.\(^{261}\)

Though James himself admits in *Notes of a Son and Brother* that Hunt’s influence on him (and on William) was “truly fertilising,”\(^{262}\) the exact degree of Hunt’s direct pedagogical influence is impossible to measure. Winner writes that it is difficult to say “whether any of Hunt’s ideas were assimilated by James” in large part because Hunt’s own theories of art were mostly “aphoristic” and are thus “contradictory and inconsistent.”\(^{263}\) Indeed, Hunt’s own teaching was unsystematic on principle. Eschewing the rigorously graduated hierarchies that characterized art academies organized under the European model, Hunt’s students, on the other hand, “were directly engaged with artistic

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\(^{260}\) See Edel, *The Untried Years*, 191.

\(^{261}\) Quoted in Edel, *The Untried Years*, 144.

\(^{262}\) James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, 284.

expression uninhibited by years of academic drill.” Spontaneity, immediacy and impressionability were prized over virtuoso technical ability and stylistic finish.

Hunt did not himself write any pedagogical works, but, popular as he was, many of his theories of art were collected in an appropriately unsystematic fashion by his students in a book entitled Talks on Art, the first volume of which was published in 1875, and which would prove enduringly popular, going through several printings and editions through the last quarter of the century. Hunt’s principles as recorded in Talks on Art are certainly contradictory and inconsistent, but patterns do emerge, giving us a picture of an artist and a teacher whose painterly style and philosophy of aesthetics was close to that of Durand in its focus on the artful representation of space, distance, and atmosphere through the modulation of value and tone.

When asked to state his artistic credo, Hunt replied that

We begin with the study of ‘values’ in order more readily to get the power of expressing the roundness and fulness of objects, the effect of light and shadow, and the mystery of distance and atmosphere. […] The firmest outline drawing is most excellent exercise, but that alone will not suffice to render the impression which nature produces upon our mind. Like Durand, Hunt was primarily concerned with representing “the roundness and fulness of objects” and “the mystery of distance and atmosphere,” and was more concerned with what Durand would call representation than with literal imitation. Hunt’s pupil Edward Wheelwright confirms his teacher’s distaste for “mere imitation of nature” in a review of his painting in the Atlantic Monthly from 1877. “No photograph, no pre-Raphaelite rendering of sticks and stones, could give this impression,” writes Wheelwright, or

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264 Webster, William Morris Hunt, 94.
265 Quoted in Helen Mary Knowlton, Art-Life of William Morris Hunt (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1899), 145.
“could have his suggestiveness.” While partly sympathetic to the American Pre-Raphaelite practice of naturalistic representation, he also admonished them for overvaluing imitative detail at the expense of representative breadth: “When English Artists paint their impressions,” wrote Hunt, “their Art has weight! When they accumulate facts, their pictures are like dictionaries!” Much as William Dean Howells cautioned the realist artist against “heap[ing] up facts merely,” so Hunt felt that a realist picture in order to be worthy of the title of art demanded a degree of compositional unity that detailed cataloguing alone could not attain.

As with Durand, Hunt’s technique is primarily focused on representing value – tonal contrasts rather than color contrasts. The “big things,” Hunt writes, are “1st. Proportions! 2d. Values – or masses of light and shade.” While “impressions” are also of primary importance, Hunt’s use of the term is very different than that of the Impressionists: for Hunt, representing the solidity and spatial presence of objects is more important than presenting those objects as they would appear to an apparently innocent eye by flattening them into a screen of colored pigment meant to represent analytically decomposed light. This feature of Hunt’s aesthetic philosophy art historian Barbara Novak attributes to the “persistent mental component” in American painting which made

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267 Ibid., 710.
269 Ibid., 3.
the scientifically-driven “coloristic analysis and dissection” of Impressionism unappealing.²⁷⁰ Hunt himself was certainly skeptical of an analytic approach to painting, claiming that “scientific scrutiny may take things to pieces, but it can’t put them together again. It dissolves diamonds, and obtains – gas!”²⁷¹ While Impressionist technique was more interested in discomposing or simplifying objects or surfaces into their constituent parts in order to furnish the painter with occasions for representing the reflection of light, Hunt was more interested in representing the material wholeness of things: “see what the shape of the whole thing is,” he told his students, and “establish the fact of the whole.”²⁷²

Hunt prized and encouraged working in the open air for its vibrancy and immediacy, but was also skeptical of the tendency of modern painters, including Pre-Raphaelites, to paint entirely en plein air, and enjoined his students to marry the spontaneity of open air studies with the idealizing dimensions of memory expressed by the techniques of the studio: “I believe that the best paintings of landscape are made from memory,” Hunt wrote; “for the picture, paint it in-doors, from memory. I never saw Millet out with an umbrella. When before nature you are so much occupied with representing what you see, that you can’t study combination and composition. You can’t make a picture.”²⁷³ Hunt’s recognition that there existed a distinction between study and “picture” carries with it a certain skepticism towards John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, though Hunt’s criticism was more a criticism of any systematic method of painting than of Ruskin himself: “John Ruskin’s receipts make a book, but never made a

²⁷¹ Hunt, Talks on Art, 73.
²⁷² Ibid., 11.
²⁷³ Ibid., 63.
painter and never can make a picture,” says Hunt. In sum, Hunt’s sense of painting was indeed idiosyncratic and even deliberately ambivalent. Hunt prized paintings that demonstrated both the intensity of primary perception, as well as the compositional balance and interest brought by filtering that primary perception through the memory and imagination. Both impressionability and reflection, Hunt held, were needed to paint a successful picture.

While Hunt’s self-contradictory and inconsistent manner make gauging the degree of his influence on James difficult, it is also surely the case that his general loathing of systematic teaching fit nicely in “the queer educative air” in which young Henry was raised, an environment in which he and William “breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions,” and over which reigned his father’s prevailing belief in “the inhumanity of Method.” Hunt himself would have shared such a belief. He felt that painting could only be apprehended and mastered by way of constant technical practice, not by theoretical understanding. “I would as soon listen to a lecture on Art,” Hunt tartly claimed, “as to smell music, or to eat the receipt of a plum pudding!” As such, painting was fundamentally a matter of personal experience. Disdaining the tendency of “some…older scholars…to settle upon some system,” Hunt enjoins his student to “express something as it looks to him” before the habits of age have made his vision conventional. “When everybody is original,” Hunt writes, “then life will be

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274 Ibid., 75.
275 James, A Small Boy and Others, 124.
276 Hunt, Talks on Art, 52.
277 Ibid., 16-17. Such an idea is also echoed in William James’s discussion of habit in The Principles of Psychology (1890). Of course William studied closely with Hunt as he nurtured an ambition to become a professional painter, and it can be presumed that Hunt’s influence was also felt by him.
worth living for. A few people half dare to express themselves, and how interesting they are!"  

Hunt meant more by self-expression than the banal sense in which we might hear the term used today. Hunt wanted interesting and original artists, which meant that impressionability and expressiveness were both continuous and communicating parts of human personality.

In this sense, Hunt’s understanding of the painter’s art dovetails nicely with James’s pervasive sense that the novelist’s art was the expression of an “immense sensibility” (AF 52). We can hear echoes of Hunt in James’s claim that a novel was a “personal…impression” (AF 50) of life, as well as his claim in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady that “the house of fiction has…not one window, but a million.”  

In the same sense, Hunt claimed that painting – even apparently naturalistic painting – was an expression of individual sensibility. Hunt writes that if “Raphael and Titian [were to] draw the same nose…their drawings will be totally unlike. You don’t see with my eyes; I don’t see with yours. Let each see with his own, and let his attempt to render what he sees be respected!”  

Much as Henry James Sr. held that “the outer world lays its impress upon man” and produces innumerable expressive styles, so James saw in painting an appropriate and obvious analogue for the ways in which the novel too was expressive of the mind of its creator even at its most ostensibly objective.

James also shared with Hunt a belief that novel writing, like painting, was essentially an art without a formulaic method which in consequence made it essentially unteachable. Just as Hunt despaired of painting from “receipts,” like those apparently

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278 Hunt, Talks on Art, 17.
279 James, Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, 1075.
280 Hunt, Talks on Art, 17.
doled out by Ruskin, so James wrote that while a novel must “possess the sense of reality…it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being” (AF 52). While Hunt was a popular teacher, his pedagogy was basically a practical one that involved students working out problems of representation as they arose according to the broadest possible principles, a pedagogical style that obviated the usefulness of any programmatic treatise on painting. So too did James feel that the principles of novel writing were basically impossible to express or learn systematically (the novice writer “can never learn in any manual” [AF 54]) and had to be worked out by each novelist individually. “We must leave [the novelist] alone when it comes to the application of precepts,” James writes, “as we leave the painter in communion with his palette” (AF 54).

While neither painting nor writing can be taught in a systematic or programmatic fashion, James nonetheless demonstrates a complex envy towards the communicability of the painter’s technique, and doubtless has his experiences with Hunt in the back of his mind when he does so. “The Art of Fiction” is structured by its many substantial parallels and analogies between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist, but one discrepancy between the two arts is the degree to which painting enjoys a discrete technical vocabulary. James expresses envy that “the grammar of painting is so much more definite” than that of the novelist, and the painter “is able to teach the rudiments of his practice” (AF 50). “The literary artist,” on the other hand, “would be obliged to say to his pupil much more than the other, ‘Ah, well, you must do it as you can!’” (AF 50). The voice of James’s despairing literary pedagogue clearly recalls Hunt himself, who spoke in

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281 In *Henry James and the Visual Arts*, Winner discusses how James adapted certain terms from the vocabulary of painting to his own art of fiction. See especially 193-196.
much the same manner, and who is recorded in his *Talks* admonishing a frustrated student to “Do as well as you can!” and who replies to another student who complains that his picture isn’t right by saying, “Of course it isn’t [right], and it can’t be. No matter! Push on! You mustn’t expect to do anything perfectly. Do as well as you can, and let it go!” Reading it through the lens of Hunt’s *Talks on Art*, one can see James’s own essay as decidedly Hunt-like in tone and attitude, in its occasional contradictions, its overturning of received ideas, and its surprising resolutions of apparent paradoxes (narrative and description, incident and character, etc.). It at once teaches and disdains to teach, suggests principles and ignores them, and ultimately has a capacious good humor and expressive personality that echoes Hunt’s own.

Of greatest importance for James was that Hunt was both a realist and an artist, and that he demonstrated a concrete practice for synthesizing these two apparently opposed vocations. Hunt’s example showed that the representation of the palpable, actual world was in itself a worthy pursuit, as James writes in “The Art of Fiction” that producing the “air of reality…[was] the supreme virtue of the novel” (AF 53). Producing that “air of reality” was also a supremely difficult business, as well as one of unlimited interest. In this it is unsurprising that, pace Hunt, James would select painting as the epitome of artistic difficulty to which novel writing could be compared: like “his brother the painter,” James’ novelist attempts “to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning” (AF 53). However, “to ‘render’ the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business” (AF 53). So too Hunt (like his mentor Millet) was defiantly realist and scorned romanticizing and fantastical subjects,

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282 Hunt, *Talks on Art*, 14, 32.
not just on moral grounds but on the grounds that works which deal in fabulous subjects were actually less challenging and therefore the lesser artistic achievement. “More imagination is required to express a human being,” wrote Hunt, “than to express all the dragons.” In like manner, James hoped to erase the apparent distinction between romantic novels of “incident” and more realistic novels of “character.” It was a supreme artistic challenge to do a psychologically penetrating portrait: “a psychological reason is, to my imagination, adorably pictorial; to catch the tint of its complexion – I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts” (AF 61).

John La Farge: James’s “Brother of the Brush”

It is difficult to know the extent to which James himself would have been explicitly aware of Hunt’s artistic practices and philosophies, but it may be assumed that the same general approach to the teaching of painting as evidenced in Talks on Art and elsewhere would have been current in the Newport studio and would have been available from conversations with Hunt himself, or with William or John La Farge. In any case, the influence of La Farge on James’s understanding of the visual arts is clear and explicit. At Newport, James became close with La Farge and on at least one occasion joined him on one of his painting excursions during which James also brought along his easel and paints. Influenced by Hunt and the Barbizon painters, as well as the naturalistic American Pre-Raphaelites, La Farge often painted en plein air directly from nature; but unlike the American Pre-Raphaelites, La Farge “moved away from the detailed factual

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283 Ibid., 11.
284 See James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 297.
recording of nature practiced by most of his American contemporaries." Eschewing the explicit clarity that characterized the detailed brushwork of the American followers of Ruskin as well as the earlier painters of the Hudson River School, La Farge also rejected the broad, simplifying brushstrokes and thick impasto that would come to characterize the work of the Impressionists, favoring instead a more refined and “finished” style that was more reminiscent of idealizing studio works than the brisk studies of both the Impressionists and the American Pre-Raphaelites.

Indeed, part of the interest of La Farge’s painting is that it tends to reveal the shared naturalism of these two seemingly opposed aesthetic styles, American Pre-Raphaelitism and Impressionism. La Farge’s pictures, on the other hand, writes James T. Yarnell, “are evocative compositions of nuance and subtlety, combining generalized landscape elements with moods reflective of inner experience and states of mind.” Art historian Henry Adams writes in a similar vein that

La Farge’s paintings created a new relation between the artist and his subject. His paintings unite the external world with the subjective inner experience to the point where subject and object, the viewer and the thing seen, merge into one. Perception ceases to lead to solid, substantive qualities but culminates instead in feelings of transition and relation – in ever-changing gradations of light, focus, interest, and emotion, in continually fluctuating perceptual nuances, which never become fixed or solid.

Rejecting the positivistic realism of both the American Pre-Raphaelites and the early strains of French Impressionism, a core of idealism remained at the center of La Farge’s painting, as it did with many other contemporary and subsequent American painters. But

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286 Ibid.
La Farge’s idealism differs significantly from that of Henry James Sr., who as we have seen felt that natural objects provided the artist or aesthetic observer with the occasion for personal communion with the divine. Rather, La Farge’s painting blurs the distinction between the objectively natural world and the personal world of associations, representing “not the actual world but the meeting of that world with the mind as a percept in the field of consciousness.” La Farge’s style blends objects of representation into one another even as it represents them with a durable solidity: as Adams writes, “the peculiar quality of La Farge’s images is that they at once dematerialize objects and give empty space an aura of tangibility.” This unique style Adams links to La Farge’s essentially relativistic or even radically empiricist philosophy which is nonetheless distinct from the more scientifically-informed positivism of American Pre-Raphaelite naturalism and the analytically-driven positivism of the French Impressionists.

While inclined towards the naturalistic techniques that characterized modern painting, La Farge felt that “objective” imitation was not only impossible, but undesirable, and like Henry James Sr. and William Morris Hunt, he felt that any attempt to represent naturalistically inevitably involved acts of subjective projection and interpretation. Because perception was influenced by personal associations of temperament, mood, and so on, seeing with Ruskin’s “innocent eye” was a hopeless fantasy. In a series of lectures given at the Metropolitan Museum in 1893 published as Considerations on Painting, La Farge recounts an experiment in realism he undertook with several fellow painters in which everyone attempted to represent a single scene.

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289 Ibid.
under identical circumstances as realistically and objectively as possible. Naturally each result was quite unique, despite the group’s deliberate attempt to eschew painterly expressiveness. “We had not the first desire of expressing ourselves,” writes La Farge, “and I think would have been very much worried had we not felt that each one was true to nature.”290 The failure – or success – of this experiment leads La Farge to understand that since “each one was true to nature,” in consequence “there is no absolute nature.”291

La Farge’s anecdote recalls the famous painting excursion in 1869 in which Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir both set their easels side by side to paint the baths at La Grenouillère on the banks of the Seine; but while early Impressionism largely maintained a positivistic and analytic approach to representation, La Farge’s own experiment leads him to conclude that the essential subjectivity of perception made “objective” representation impossible. On the other hand, the failure of objective imitation also freed the visual artist to explore the more personal, creative, or even spiritual aspects of perception (these spiritual dimensions became increasingly important for La Farge as his career progressed and he devoted more attention to Catholic and Buddhist subjects and styles). While purportedly realistic painting was always already colored by personality, for La Farge this coloration was something to be celebrated rather than evaded or denied. “You need not be afraid,” writes La Farge, “of indulging the illusion that you are rendering the real reality of the things that you look at—that you are copying, that you are transcribing. If you ever know how to paint somewhat well…you will always give to nature…the character of the lens through which you see it—which is

291 Ibid.
Like Durand, La Farge held that mere imitation – or “copying” – of nature was both insufficient and misguided; rather, for La Farge, “all of these so-called copies, which are really representations, will be stamped in some peculiar way” by the artist’s consciousness.

Like both Hunt and James Sr., La Farge held that the artist’s vision was inevitably colored and informed by personal association, history, or intelligent reflection, and believed that a painting was consequently an index of the quality of the mind of its producer. To judge a painting was naturally to judge its painter. La Farge claims in his *Considerations* that “of [the painter] we can judge as we judge men; and strange to say, it will always be more or less by a moral idea, by an appreciation of the way he looked at the world.”

La Farge’s claim that the inevitability of individual projection is an important index of an artist’s moral life differs significantly from the thinking of French Impressionists and American Pre-Raphaelites, for whom the “moral” quality of a work of art either did not exist or, *pace* Ruskin, inhered only in its status as a realistic representation.

La Farge’s claim that individual perception contains a moral dimension mirrors Henry James’s own ideas about the place of the moral in works of art, and helps to demonstrate the depth and significance of La Farge’s influence on the budding novelist. Like La Farge, James too felt that the individual mind of an artist colored his or her perception, and felt that this coloration was both inevitable and characteristic of any artistic production. The watcher at the window of the house of fiction, James writes in his

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292 Ibid., 75.
293 Ibid., 70.
294 Ibid., 69.
famous extended conceit on the novelist’s art in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, is equipped with “a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.”295 It is unsurprising that James would select a visual metaphor, and one that closely mirrors La Farge’s own sense that one’s personality was a “lens” through which the world is apperceived. All the techniques of literary form, James writes, “are...as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without...the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has been conscious.”296 The consequence of this fact – that an artist’s consciousness necessarily informs and colors his or her attempt at representation – is, as for La Farge, the critical recognition that the artist’s “boundless freedom” to represent is indissoluble from “his ‘moral’ reference.”297 By putting “moral” in quotation marks, James attempts to distance his complex sense of what it means for a novel to have moral reference from the simplistic, didactic “conscious moral purpose” (AF 62) – Walter Besant’s phrase – that characterized the kinds of popular, poorly-written novels that James openly criticizes in “The Art of Fiction,” and implicitly critiques throughout his own novels and stories.

But while James clearly disdained novels with a “conscious moral purpose,” he nonetheless felt the matter of morality to be “of immense importance” (AF 62). La Farge’s claim that the very form of the painting, inasmuch as it contains the impress of the consciousness of the artist, contains a “moral idea” helps us to understand James’s perplexing discussion of the moral dimension of the novel in “The Art of Fiction.”

295 James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1075.
296 Ibid.
297 Ibid.
picture or a statue, James writes, cannot have a “conscious moral purpose,” and since “a novel [was] a picture,” “questions of morality are quite another affair” and separate from the novelist’s art (AF 62). But while he claims that there existed a vast distance between art and morality, James also claims that, “there is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together”: “that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth” (AF 63-64). The moral dimension of any work of art inheres and is indistinguishable from its form, which bears the impress of the consciousness of the artist. For James, as for La Farge, a work of art was both thoroughly moral and thoroughly aesthetic. “To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough,” James continues. The principle that “no good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind” – and we must hear in the word “good” both its moral and aesthetic meanings – is “an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground” (AF 64).

This axiom – that “no good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind” – is a useful axiom for understanding much of James’s own work, and a syllogism that follows from it would seem to be that a “good” novel must in some sense be the opposite of “superficial”: complex, nuanced, textured, deep, and so forth. In this too James’s aesthetic and moral values mirror those of La Farge, who prized depth, nuance, and subtlety above all else. Indeed, unlike the Impressionists and the Pre-Raphaelites, La Farge was extraordinarily sensitive to nuance of tone and subtlety of gradation. William Morris Hunt himself reportedly once told La Farge that “it [was] useless to carry the
refinement of tone and color to the extent…that there would not be one in a hundred or five hundred artists capable of appreciating such differences of accuracy.” “So much the better,” La Farge answered, “if only one man in a thousand could see it; I should then have exactly what I wanted in the appeal to the man who knew and to the mind like mine.” While critics have noted the ways in which La Farge’s personality and refined conversation demonstrated “a tendency towards elaboration, intricacy, and the quite tireless pursuit of nuance” that would influence James’s own prose, La Farge’s painting also consistently sought after such supersubtlety, and surely the example of successfully composed pictures of life that embodied such values would also be influential on James’s own burgeoning art of fiction.

James certainly understood the lesson of La Farge’s painting to be its unapologetic supersubtlety, and identified this quality with La Farge’s status as a realist artist. James remarks in Notes of a Son and Brother that La Farge painted “with devotion, with exquisite perception,” and that the lesson of his style was “above all…the implication, a hundred times beneficent and fertilising, that if one didn’t in these connections consistently take one’s stand on supersubtlety of taste one was a helpless outsider and at the best the basest of vulgarians or flattest of frauds.” As he did with Hunt, James confirms that the example of La Farge’s art was “fertilising” for his own, and also demonstrates a careful understanding of La Farge’s own aesthetic style with which he was largely sympathetic. In their discussions and painting excursions together

300 James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 292.
La Farge and James agreed that a successful work of art in “picture and story” was characterized primarily by “possibility of…nuance” which quality made a given work “unutterably…the real thing.” Representing the “real” for both James and La Farge meant being attuned to nuance, subtlety, atmosphere, and depth (as opposed to a fraudulent flatness), and the challenge for the realist artist lay in finding concrete ways of representing these qualities on the canvas or the page.

Unlike the Impressionists to whom he has been mistakenly compared, La Farge was keenly attuned to the ways in which one of the key challenges of painting was to represent the effect of depth on a flat surface: the artist must at all costs “give the sense of space.” While most “paintings of the modern school make the sky look like a veil hung behind the landscape,” La Farge, echoing John Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, writes that, “the skies of the good Dutch painters curve over and are wrapped around the landscape, so that you see the clouds hang over you. The sky is a place in which a picture is. It is not something behind the picture.” Attunement to atmospheric relations disrupts the foreground/background, or surface/depth relation of conventional representational painting, while also creating and maintaining a sense of penetrability. “The real sky,” La Farge writes, “is full of innumerable movements – movements of shade, of form, of colour, of light, of transparency,” of “such infinite detail flooded in light that you cannot quite detect it.” The opalescent quality of La Farge’s painting so often remarked on by

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301 Ibid., 293.
302 La Farge, *Considerations on Painting*, 188.
304 La Farge, *Considerations on Painting*, 262-263.
critics is less a peculiar aesthetic style than an attempt to artfully represent space through fine tonal gradations.\textsuperscript{305}

James was aware of the aesthetic importance of representing atmosphere and depth, and discusses these qualities explicitly with La Farge. A letter sent by James to La Farge from Venice in September of 1869 makes evident some of their shared aesthetic concerns, and demonstrates a shared aesthetic vocabulary: James writes that in Venice “I have seen a vast number of paintings, palaces + churches + received far more ‘impressions’ than I know what to do with.” Among these impressions is the strange observation that “Newport by the way is extremely like [Venice] in atmosphere + color, + the other afternoon, on the sands at the Lido, looking out over the dazzling Adriatic, I fancied I was standing on Easton’s beach.”\textsuperscript{306} While such a comparison may at first strike us as the kind of comparison made by insensibly provincial American travelers such as Henrietta Stackpole from \textit{The Portrait of a Lady} or Waymarsh from \textit{The Ambassadors}, for whom the American scene remains a constant point of reference, James’s observation that Newport and Venice share a similar “atmosphere + color” in fact demonstrates a

\textsuperscript{305} Henry Adams, who was close with La Farge and accompanied him on trips to East Asia and the South Seas, described his friend’s mind as “opaline with infinite shades and refractions of light, and with color toned down to the finest gradations” (\textit{The Education of Henry Adams} [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000], 371). See also David Cleveland, \textit{A History of American Tonalism, 1880-1920} (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2010), who writes that La Farge’s subjects are characterized by being “composed under natural light with delicate sometimes infinitely modulated opaline tonal masses” (21). A contemporary review of La Farge from 1907 describes his style in the following manner: “The local colors must be represented in their own medium of lighted atmosphere, which surrounds all things and draws them together into a natural appearance of tone. Light, in a word, became the study of La Farge; light in its operation upon local color…and the diminution of light on objects; as things recede from the eye, owing to the layers of intervening atmosphere” (Quoted in Cleveland, \textit{A History of American Tonalism}, 30).

remarkable attunement to the painterly possibilities of atmospheric influences, particularly since it would be difficult to imagine two more dissimilar locations than Old World Venice, with its crumbling buildings and rich cultural history, and the relatively undeveloped pastoral landscape that was then Newport, Rhode Island (where James and La Farge had painted together). Indeed, rather than holding some corrupt and decaying Venice up against the moral and aesthetic standard of the fresh and unpolluted Newport, James’s observation rather alludes to the interesting artistic possibilities for representing the American scene based on a sophisticated aesthetic understanding of natural phenomena, exactly the kind of insight that La Farge himself most prized and for which he most strove in his own painting.

It is likewise unsurprising that James should write such an observation to La Farge from Venice in particular, since it was the Venetian manner of painting with which La Farge was most sympathetic and which most informed his own technique and style. Venice was of course the cradle of the development of the colore or colorito manner of painting (as opposed to the disegno manner associated with Renaissance Florence), and it was often assumed that the low-toned, finely modulated colors of Titian and Tintoretto were in part the result of Venice’s prevailingly humid climate. The popular *Home Book of the Picturesque* published in the United States in 1852, which contained essays by many of the artists and intellectuals who also published in *The Crayon*, for instance, remarks that “the moistened air of Venice enabled her artists to study the coloring of nature.”

That James is likewise attentive to the subtleties of atmosphere and communicates his impression to La Farge suggests the depth of his understanding of the

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painter’s art and his acknowledgment that the representation of atmosphere, as in the case of the Thomas Cole view of Florence that hung in the family salon, was a crucial criterion of a picture’s success as both realist representation and work of art. La Farge’s choice to adapt a Venetian colore style towards the representation of the light and atmosphere of the Newport scene is both a marker of individual style and an index of naturalistic representation.

Venetian colore was La Farge’s manner much more than Florentine disegno, so it is unsurprising and natural that James would have made this connection, and that he had La Farge’s own paintings in mind when he encountered Venice.308 Roger Stein has written about the ways in which treatments of the Venetian scene by American realist writers self-consciously attempted to evade the mediating influence of Ruskin’s Stones of Venice on their own perception and representation of that city.309 (James himself calls it “the Ruskinian contagion” and asserts that “one hour of the lagoon is worth a hundred pages of demoralised prose” that “might be supposed to emanate from an angry governess.”)310 But James’s view of Venice is not so much immediate as it is colored by a painterly sensibility informed by his understanding of La Farge’s painting.

James himself demonstrates his awareness of the association between Venetian painterly style and the Venetian atmosphere in a long travel piece published in the Century in November 1882 (republished in Italian Hours [1909]) that in Venice one can

308 Cleveland refers to the distinction between the colore and disegno manners of painting and identifies the style of American Tonalist painting of which La Farge was a central influence with the Venetian colorists (A History of American Tonalism, xxi.)
309 See especially Stein, John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900, 217-220, which deals with the ways in which Mark Twain’s Innocents Abroad and Howells’s Venetian Life lampoon and self-consciously evade Ruskin’s influence.
“feed one’s eyes on the molten colour that drops from the hollow vaults and thickens the air with its richness.”

The whole city, James writes, “has a kind of suffusion of rosiness.”

This prevailing atmospheric “tone” presents itself to James’s eye and seems to him most available for painterly representation in much the same manner as one of La Farge’s paintings. In an earlier travel sketch, James writes that much like the canvases of La Farge, in the Venetian light “sea and sky seem to meet half-way, to blend their tones into a soft iridescence, a lustrous compound of wave and cloud and a hundred nameless local reflections, and then to fling the clear tissue against every object of vision.”

Likewise, the lagoon, James writes, seemed to him “in a glow. The sea took on a thousand shades, but they were only infinite variations of blue, and those rosy walls…began to flush in the thick sunshine. Every patch of colour…began, as the painters say, to ‘compose.’”

When James looks at the Venetian scene he admires it for the same qualities – color, tone, gradation, iridescence, softened blending, subtlety – that one would admire in a Venetian painting by Titian or Veronese, or in a painting by La Farge, who furnished James with a concrete example of painterly practice in the Venetian manner.

James was equally attentive to the qualities of atmosphere and depth in La Farge’s own paintings. Writing of La Farge’s The Last Valley – Paradise Rocks (1867-68), which

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311 James, “Venice,” 295. Viola Hopkins Winner also comments that James was “aware of basic differences in style between the Venetians and other Italian painters. He thought the Venetians felt the ‘indissoluble unity’” while Florentines “saw ‘in beautiful, sharp-edged elements and parts” (Winner, Henry James and the Visual Arts, 38-39).

312 James, “Venice,” 296.


314 James, “Venice,” 298.
hung at an exhibition in 1872 of French painters at the Doll and Richards Gallery on Tremont Street that will be discussed in more detail below, James observes that the picture is “full of the most refined intentions and the most beautiful results, of light and atmosphere…. We have rarely seen a work in which the painter seems to have stored away such a permanent fund of luminosity.” In 1911, James again had the opportunity to view his canvases at a retrospective of La Farge’s work held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. One canvas – probably Paradise Valley (1866-68), painted around the same time as The Last Valley – Paradise Rocks – prompts James to fondly remember joining La Farge on Newport painting excursions, and to La Farge’s self-appellation as a “colourist” laboring towards expressing “tonalities” of his own. James is sympathetic towards the supersubtle, finely-toned, and opalescent quality of the painting, which appreciation precipitates his imaginative penetration and perambulation of the painting’s illusionistic space. Like Lambert Strether in The Ambassadors, James’s reminiscence of his days with La Farge and the painted scene before his eyes merge into one, and he imaginatively inhabits the “wasted thankless pasture” of a bygone Newport that reminds

315 James, “French Pictures in Boston,” in The Painter’s Eye, 49.
316 The exhibition was held in the month of January, 1911. See James J. Yarnell with Amy B. Werbell, “Major Exhibitions and Sales,” in Adams et al., John La Farge: Essays, 246. No catalog from this exhibition is extant, but James’s description of the canvas as a “view of the Paradise Rocks over against Newport” and his attention to its pastoral imagery suggests that the painting was Paradise Valley (Notes of a Son and Brother, 299). According to its exhibition history, Paradise Valley was evidently shown at the 1911 memorial exhibition. This painting was reviewed under the title “New England Pasture-Land” in the June, 1876 issue of The Atlantic 37, 760, and again in August of that same year (volume 38), 251-252. The language of this later review is markedly similar to the language used by James in the 1911 exhibition and appears to confirm the identity of the painting. See also Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years: A Critical Edition, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 85 n. 157.
317 James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 298.
him of “the isles of Greece”: the “bare, though ever so fine-grained, toned and tinted breast of nature and field of fancy.” James conceives of the painting’s illusionistic space as “a kind of boundless empty carpeted saloon” that is “practically roadless.” La Farge’s “tonalities” and attention to atmospheric gradation – in short, his creation of pictorial space – create opportunities for imaginative penetration in which James engages. James uses his encounter with La Farge’s picture as an occasion to express his sympathy with La Farge’s style, which was indissociable from his artistic temperament. As La Farge prized his own supersubtle “tonalities,” James writes that he too “like[s] ambiguities and detest[s] great glares; preferring thus for my critical no less than for my pedestrian progress the cool and the shade to the sun and dust of the way.”

La Farge’s influence as a painter helps us to understand James’s own art of fiction that was and is still so often characterized by its supersubtlety and ambiguity. To a large extent, James’s feeling that a novel was like a picture meant that the novel was a picture with a certain style and manner: that of John La Farge. As James’s earliest close personal

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318 Ibid., 300.
319 Ibid. The boundless freedom of this “roadless” saloon, along with its Arcadian topoi, mirror James’s description of the Roman campagna in other of his travel sketches. See “Roman Rides,” in Italian Hours, in Collected Travel Writings: The Continent, especially, 442-445. See also James’s treatment of Newport in The American Scene (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 209-225. For a contextual analysis of the Newport episode and James’s reminiscence of La Farge in Notes of a Son and Brother, see Peter Collister, Writing the Self: Henry James and America (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 131-134.
320 James, Notes of a Son and Brother, 299. James also recalls La Farge in The American Scene during a visit to New York City in which he “penetrat[es]” Richard Upjohn’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension on West 10th Street to see a large recent mural by La Farge, which visit also recalls to him the Italian scene: “The hot light, outside, might have been that of an Italian piazzetta; the cool shade, within, with the important work of art shining through it, seemed part of some other-world pilgrimage” (93). La Farge’s stained glass windows too are “deeply pictorial,” and strike James with the “clearness of picture and fulness of expression” that “consort so successfully with a tone as of magnified gems” (94).
contact with a practicing painter, La Farge’s status as a colorist attuned to subtle
gradations and fine nuance should not be understated. When James compares the novel to
a picture in “The Art of Fiction,” he attempts to claim that the novel is likewise capable
of pictorial form and composition, that it may be structured in a coherent and cohesive
way. But on the level of style, rather than structure, James strongly associates the goal of
the realist novelist to “try to catch the colour of life itself” with the painter’s art (AF 65).
When James writes that “a psychological reason is…an object adorably pictorial” that
could “inspire one to Titianesque efforts” he is not arbitrarily selecting any Old Master.
To represent a person with subtlety and “to catch the tint of its complexion” was exactly
Titian’s art, and one with which La Farge was sympathetic. It was also implicitly opposed
to Walter Besant’s disegno-like directive that the characters in novels “must be clear in
outline” (AF 54). We might say that James’s ideal novel in which incident and character
are organically fused mirrors an ideal form of picturing in which the apparently opposed
manners of Venetian colore and Florentine disegno are likewise fused into one.321 La
Farge’s tendency to blur sharp outlines between compositional elements, between figure
and figure, between figure and ground, is a vivid visual metaphor for and a demonstrable
influence on James’s own art of fiction, which likewise sought to represent fringes of
consciousness and subtleties of feeling, and sought to reduce the discrepancy between
subject and object by replacing them with feelings of relation. In this sense, it is hard to

321 Viola Hopkins Winner perceptively alludes to this ideal work of art in identifying
James’s admiration for Tintoretto, a painter who marries Venetian colorism with
complex, multi-subject composition. See especially Winner, Henry James and the Visual
Arts, 90-91. James praises Tintoretto not just for his colorism or for his composition, but
for his creation of visual depth: “You seem not only to look at his pictures, but into
them.” (Henry James to William James, 25 Sept. 1869, quoted in Bonney MacDonald,
Henry James’s Italian Hours: Revelatory and Resistant Impressions [Ann Arbor: UMI
overestimate the significance of James’s claim that the art of the novel must ever be “the art of the brush,” as opposed to “the art of the slate-pencil” that had come, lamentably for James, to characterize literary realism and naturalism at the turn of the twentieth century.322

James as Art Critic: The Lesson of Ruskin

I write at length here in order to describe and characterize the content and context of James’s early aesthetic education and to suggest that to a large extent the first artists James was to encounter were painters with a particular philosophy and approach to the representation of reality. The salient features of the aesthetic education James would have gleaned from James Sr., Durand, Hunt, and La Farge included the valuing of spontaneity and immediacy of expression, impressionability, attention to nuance of tone and subtlety of gradation, and a recognition that among the most important qualities that determined the success of a work of art was its creation of depth, atmosphere, and space which facilitate the imaginative or perceptual penetration of the picture plane. The values of this aesthetic education also imply skepticism towards both literal imitation and towards the “effects” of juxtaposed contrasting colors, both of which tend to flatten the canvas and hinder the eye’s attempt to penetrate its surface. While the painter must have an “innocent eye,” in Ruskin’s memorable phrase, capable of being impressionable to purely sensory phenomena, the eye must not be, and cannot be, entirely innocent: the reduction of impressionability to the mere registration of visual sensation leads to a superficial art

322 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 136.
to which must be added intelligent reflection and imagination. First hand experience
with the techniques and accouterments of studios added texture and depth to this
education, and made its claims to picture reality in a particular way less theoretically
abstract.

While the real extent of these early influences is difficult to measure, what is
certain is that by the late 1860s James had embarked on a career in art criticism and
appreciation and was writing professional reviews for major American magazines. While
his aesthetic education in New York and Newport had been decidedly unstructured, by
1869 James had begun what John L. Sweeney calls “a planned and purposeful novitiate
in the appreciation of painting…under the sympathetic directorship of Charles Eliot
Norton.” In London James was introduced to Ruskin and other Pre-Raphaelite painters
and critics, and after travelling through Venice, Florence, and Rome; James returned to
America where he accepted an offer from the new editor of the Atlantic Monthly, William
Dean Howells, “to write a monthly report on the Fine Arts in Boston,” as James wrote to
Norton. James wrote regular columns for the Atlantic as well as the Galaxy, The
Nation, and the New York Tribune throughout the 1870s, and continued to write
occasional criticism for those and other publications such as Harper's Weekly and
Harper's Monthly throughout the 1880s and 1890s. There are more than sixty such notes

323 See E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial
Representation (London: Phaidon, 1960) who writes extensively against Ruskin’s
“innocent eye” and whose associationist and cognitive model of aesthetic perception and
representation complements many of the points made in this chapter. See also Wilhelm
Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997).
Stein, John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 105-106.
325 Henry James to Charles Eliot Norton, February 4, 1872, quoted in Sweeney,
and reviews. At the same time, throughout the 1870s James wrote dozens of travel essays for *The Nation*, the *Atlantic*, and elsewhere, many of which feature discussions of paintings and other works of art in relation to the author’s broader cultural impressions.\textsuperscript{326}

In addition to the particular details of these reviews, which reveal much about both James’s taste and his sense of the vocation of the realist artist (discussed below), it is significant in and of itself that James was employed in such a position. Paul Fisher has written astutely on the consequences and significance of James’s early “apprenticeship” in art criticism, and aligns this apprenticeship with his travel writings of the 1870s as a deliberate means of appropriating and demonstrating the high cultural cachet required to make a career in the arts. This cultural cachet, by extension, could be appropriated and applied by the *literary* artist working in the relatively disreputable genre of the sketch, short story, or novel. James’s “foray into art criticism may have been instigated and inspired by models like Ruskin and Norton,” writes Fisher, “but, more importantly, it was a bid, like James’s travel writing, for cultural authority.”\textsuperscript{327} Fisher’s claim certainly has merit, but it overstates the degree to which European high culture was only an empty signifier of authority, and understates the degree to which James’s practices as art reviewer and travel writer were essential components of his continuing aesthetic education, an education that continued to form his sense of how the *literary* artist could produce works of art of equal value and quality. In other words, if James held that the novel was “a personal, direct impression of life” that “made a picture” (AF 50, 52), it is logical to assume that the habits of looking at actual pictures of life would form a useful if not an indispensable model for such a creation.

\textsuperscript{326} See *The Painter’s Eye*, 262-267.
\textsuperscript{327} Fisher, *Artful Itineraries*, 75.
We can glean from James’s art critical writings of the 1870s not just evidence of an attempt to accumulate cultural cachet, but important details that help us to compose a picture of James’s tastes and values that would prove enduring and transferable to his own literary art. It is everywhere evident that the greatest influence on James’s art criticism was John Ruskin – the Ruskin of *Modern Painters* and the naturalistic wing of American art criticism associated with journals like *The Crayon*, more so than the moralistic Ruskin of the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Arts and Crafts movement. In James’s first published review of P. G. Hamerton’s *Contemporary French Painters*, James explicitly claims that English reviewing has “but a single eminent representative” – Ruskin. From Ruskin, James had evidently understood that art criticism was an approach both objective and subjective. The equable critic balanced cultivation and naïveté, and had to be at once impressionable and decisive, capable of judging representations against a universal standard of accuracy and fineness while also leaving room for individual sensibility and expressiveness. James calls this “the aesthetic

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328 See Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America*, 102-105. Stein clarifies that Ruskin’s influence on American art writing must be distinguished from Ruskin’s association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Stein writes: “In America the [English] Pre-Raphaelites were usually associated with Ruskin’s name…but the reverse was not necessarily the case. Ruskin’s writings appealed to a much broader audience, one concerned not only with painting but also with nature, religion, and later, social theory. […] Ruskin had praised the Pre-Raphaelites as one group whom he felt were fulfilling the ideals of *Modern Painters*, but his writing had larger aims than merely finding a buying public for the Pre-Raphaelites. […] Thus to call the *Crayon* a Pre-Raphaelite journal and to confuse the roles of Ruskin and the British Brotherhood is to distort the picture and to miss the central importance of the American magazine” (102-103).

329 “An English Critic of French Painting” (1868) quoted in Sweeney, ed., *The Painter’s Eye*, 33. Stein writes, mistakenly I think, that “Ruskin was never a major force in shaping James’s critical outlook” (*John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America*, 212). James was indeed “increasingly irritated with Ruskin’s moral narrow-mindedness” but tended to apply this criticism to English reviewers and artists more generally (including the famous case of Walter Besant in “The Art of Fiction.”)
standpoint,” a standpoint that Ruskin universally adopts regardless of his subject whether of painting and architecture or “manners and politics.” While James may have come to see Ruskin’s own criticism as too moralizing and pedantic, the example of Ruskin – Ruskin’s critical method – was enduringly significant for James’s sense that any subject was capable of “aesthetic” treatment.

More specifically, however, it was Ruskin’s role as a great champion of realism that, coupled with the influence of James Sr., Durand, Hunt, La Farge and others, most influenced James’s sense of what constituted successful art. These influences are clearly expressed in an early review for the *Atlantic*, written at the request of Howells, of an exhibition of French painting at the newly relocated Doll and Richards Gallery at 145 Tremont Street on the Boston Common. For 1872 (and for conservative Boston) the painters on display were decidedly modern: Constant Troyon, Théodore Rousseau, Jules Dupré, Charles-François Daubigny, Narcisse Virgilio Diaz de la Peña, as well as La Farge and some other American painters who demonstrated the French influence. These painters of the Barbizon School were influential on both Hunt and La Farge who praised their vivid brushwork, *plein air* approach to the representation of rural landscapes, and their tonally unified canvases. Indeed, it was largely through Hunt’s

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331 In his essay on Venice published in the *Century* magazine in November, 1882, James demonstrates his ambivalence towards Ruskin but clearly succeeds in distinguishing between Ruskin’s “narrow theological spirit, the moralism à tout propos,” and his “splendid genius.” Ruskin’s “queer provincialities and pruderies,” writes James, “are mere wild weeds in a mountain of flowers” (*Italian Hours*, 288).
332 Peter Collister writes that he has been unable to recover a catalog for the exhibition, though he speculatively identifies some of the paintings based on their descriptions. See *Henry James on Art and Drama, Volume 1: Art*, ed. Collister, 14-24.
influence on the Boston art world that these painters ended up in Boston at all, since Hunt knew several of them personally.

They are not, however, as one commentator has pointed out, “early French Impressionists, important to James both in themselves and as offering hints to experimental writers in the use of color, light, and design.”333 While it is true that certain qualities of painters like Rousseau and Daubigny would become important for Impressionists such as Monet and Pissarro, these were not the qualities that impressed James. James does not admire the Barbizon painters for their “experimental” use of color, light, and design, but rather for their ability to realistically represent objects in space. James’s evaluations tend to view the canvases on display in the Doll and Richards Gallery not as flattened, painterly compositions but as windows opening onto a world. The critical tendency to treat these painters proleptically as Impressionist (and Modernist) predecessors obscures their qualities as realists, which were the qualities that James admired and appreciated.

James’s assessment of a landscape by Constant Troyon is exemplary in this regard. It is perhaps significant that James’s review begins with Troyon, whom he calls the most “eloquent” of the French painters on display.334 Among the Barbizon painters, Troyon least recalls the visual style of the later Impressionists, and most recalls the style and subjects of the seventeenth century Dutch landscape school, particularly the work of Aelbert Cuyp. James elsewhere admits that he admires the Dutch Golden Age painters for their “characteristic perfections” as “delectable realists” from whom he “derive[s] a deep satisfaction”: “In a certain sense, no pictures are richer than the Dutch; the whole subject

333 Kirk, William Dean Howells and Art in His Time, 49.
334 James, “French Pictures in Boston,” in The Painter’s Eye, 43.
is grasped by the treatment; all that there is of the work is enclosed within the frame.”

James’s assessment of Dutch painting in this review from 1873 mirrors and anticipates his developing understanding of the fine art novel in which the “subject” and “treatment” are likewise indissociable from one another, a synthetic or organic quality which constitutes a given novel’s “richness” and ability to “satisfy.” That James associated these qualities with explicitly realist visual styles, such as those of Troyon and the works of Dutch Masters, and not with the visual style of Impressionism, suggests the pervasiveness of James’s commitment to Ruskinian and American Pre-Raphaelite naturalism even as its critical fortunes were fading.

The vocabulary of James’s discussion of Troyon in his 1872 review reveals the influence of Ruskin and the naturalistically inclined American Pre-Raphaelites: the painting is of “the edge of a wood, seen on a dampish day in September” at a time when the “sturdy foliage” of the oaks is “just beginning to rust and drop, leaf by leaf, into the rank river-grass…at their feet.” The picture’s highly specific details recall for James the American Pre-Raphaelite method of making studies from nature, and James first remarks that “the trees are a magnificent study,” though he quickly amends his assessment, writing that the trees are “rather not a study, but a perfect achievement.”

James’s awareness of the fluidity between study and finished achievement certainly recalls the aesthetic values of American Pre-Raphaelitism, and yet differs significantly from those of what would become French Impressionism. While the Troyon canvas indeed has its impressionistic touches (in terms of its loose brushstrokes and *plein air* 

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335 James, “The Wallace Collection in Bethnal Green,” in *The Painter’s Eye*, 77.
336 James, “French Pictures in Boston,” in *The Painter’s Eye*, 43.
337 Ibid.
light), it is not the play of light on surfaces that impresses James, but rather the solidity and sturdiness of the objects represented. The foliage itself is “sturdy” and the oak trees are “solid and mighty.”

Unlike an impressionist canvas, the trees do not call attention to themselves as daubs of paint on a canvas; rather, in their presence as “only part of the great landscape beyond and beside them…they seem, really, as we may say, to irradiate atmosphere and space.” As for Durand and Hunt, the creation of atmosphere and the illusion of spatial depth was for James the supreme mark of artistic success. The color too of the canvas has little in common with the bright, primary color technique of Impressionist painters, but demonstrates attention to subtle gradations of tone and modulations of value. As James writes, “the tone of colour in this work is extremely subdued…a powerful harmony of gray and gray-green, relieved with quiet russet and brown.” Just as its subject demonstrates the subtle transition between seasons (“the drama of lusty summer just conscious of the touch of autumn”), so its colors are remarkable for their subtle shifts in tone that “play along a narrow scale.”

Like Troyon, James admires a small canvas by Théodore Rousseau for the painter’s “effort…to enter more and more into his subject,” which results in “an admirable expression of size and space.” Another larger canvas by Rousseau representing a landscape at sunset is for James “thoroughly noble and perfect”: it is “as

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338 Ibid.
339 Ibid., 43-44.
340 Ibid., 44.
341 Ibid.
342 Ibid., 44-45.
true a sunset as ever was painted.”\textsuperscript{343} That James calls this painting “true” recalls Ruskin’s critical method in \textit{Modern Painters} in which the author describes the means by which the modern artist might “truthfully” represent various natural elements and phenomena. In this vein, James, like Ruskin, describes the sky and clouds of the Rousseau as “immense” and “distrib[ed],” resulting in an admirable “sincerity.”\textsuperscript{344} Like the Troyon, James admires this picture for its subdued and subtle gradations of tone: it “is admirably free from that cheapness of effect which attends upon the common sunset of art. It is not an American sunset, with its lucid and untempered splendour of orange and scarlet, but the sinking of a serious old-world day, which sings its death-song in a muffled key.”\textsuperscript{345}

James admires the narrow tonal range of the painting, and applauds its refusal of sensational colors, glaring juxtapositions, and exaggerated pictorial effects. Nowhere does James admire the painting for its colors or composition; rather he admires the qualities of the painting that produce the illusionistic effect of a receding window that opens up into real space. It “is all admirably true; you seem, as you look, to be plodding heavy-footed across the field and stumbling here and there in the false light which is neither night nor day. The struggle and mixture of the dusk and glow in all the little ruts and furrows of the field is perfectly rendered.”\textsuperscript{346} Like the Troyon, and like La Farge’s \textit{Paradise Valley}, the Rousseau is prized for the qualities that make it an occasion for

\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{344} Ibid. James’s attention to the spatial qualities of clouds and sky and their capability of “sincere” treatment specifically recalls Ruskin’s discussion in the first volume of \textit{Modern Painters}, particularly the sections “Of Truth of Space” and “Of the Open Sky, and Of Truth of Clouds.”

\textsuperscript{345} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{346} Ibid.
visual or imaginative penetration in which the eye is encouraged to go behind the surface of the canvas and enter into and inhabit its illusionistic dimensional space. The perfectly naturalistic rendering of details is admirable mostly because it facilitates the viewer’s entrance into the picture.

In his assessments of these two pictures we can see how James’s tastes echo the values of his early influences in the visual arts, particularly in his attention to nuance of tone and subtlety of gradation, as well as in his admiration for their representation of atmosphere, space, and depth. Rather than seeing them as examples of modern painting that anticipate the radical flattening of the Impressionists that leads to modernist formalism, James tends to view these French painters as sophisticated realists not unlike the Hudson River painters or American Pre-Raphaelites. At the same time, while they are unquestionably detailed, these pictures exceed merely literal “imitation” in their expressiveness and looseness of treatment and achieve the status of “representations,” to invoke Durand’s language. For James, these pictures serve as an example of a means of realist representation that bridges, or rather closes, the gap between two seemingly opposed aesthetic modalities. Troyon, writes James, stands “between the hard definiteness of some of our recent English and American ultra-realists in landscape” – by which he means the Pre-Raphaelites on both sides of the Atlantic – and “that exaggerated make-shift breadth and tendency to rough generalization which marks so many French landscapists.”

Troyon, in his attention to gradation, atmosphere, and space, offers a via media between the overly detailed miniaturism of Pre-Raphaelite style and the superficial

347 Ibid., 44.
insouciance of what was by 1872 already beginning to become the style of what would come to be known as Impressionism.

The distinction between English ultra-realism and French looseness of treatment was an important one for James, and his own sense of what realism in both painting and literature meant was developed in opposition to both. James, despite what many critics and scholars have said over the years, was not just ambivalent about Impressionism in both literature and painting. He was openly critical of it. In a review of the Second Impressionist Exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in 1876 that featured works by Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, and Sisley, other others, James writes with scorn that the paintings on display make me think better than ever of all the good old rules which decree that beauty is beauty and ugliness ugliness…. The young contributors to the exhibition…are partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection, to the artist’s allowing himself, as he has hitherto, since art began, found his best account in doing, to be preoccupied with the idea of the beautiful.348

Perhaps lost to the twenty-first century reader or viewer is James’s observation, echoed by many of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, that Impressionist painting seemed deliberately and almost officiously ugly, and also that its practitioners were understood to be brutal and unsparing realists.

For James, however, the aesthetic problem of Impressionism has less to do with its scandalously common and modern subjects, and more to do with the ways in which these artists eschewed their duty to arrange those subjects in such a way as to compose a coherent picture. Arrangement and selection are, of course, key words in James’s own aesthetic vocabulary throughout the prefaces and elsewhere, and that the Impressionists

ignore these principles is damning enough. But even more damning for James than their conspicuous absence of beauty is their conspicuous flatness: “To embrace them you must be provided with a plentiful absence of imagination.” In their flatness, Impressionist paintings become pictures merely. Lacking the “atmosphere” and depth that facilitates visual and imaginative penetration of the picture plane, an Impressionist composition presents a picture of life reduced to its merely superficial appearance. James draws a moral conclusion from Impressionist style and method, and contrasts it to the ultra-realism of the English Pre-Raphaelites. “When the English realists ‘went in,’” writes James, “for hard truth and stern fact, an irresistible instinct of righteousness caused them to try and purchase forgiveness for their infidelity to the old more or less moral proprieties and conventionalities, by an exquisite, patient, virtuous manipulation – by being above all things laborious.” On the other hand, the Impressionists “abjure virtue altogether” and “send detail to the dogs.” “The Englishmen, in a word,” James concludes his review, “were pedants, and the Frenchmen are cynics.” As we will see in the next section, finding a satisfying way of negotiating between English moralism and French cynicism – in both painting and in literature – was a problem that James spent much of his career attempting to solve.

*The Problem of Impressionism on Canvas and on the Page*

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349 Ibid., 115.
350 Ibid.
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.
Fisher writes that “James’s celebrated verdict in the Impressionists [sic] has puzzled critics for generations, since, as a critique of a form of ‘high’ painterly art, it seems inconsistent with his other views.” In opposition to the vaunted “sincerity” of the Troyon and the Rousseau, Impressionism in painting – and, as we will see, in literature – was for James characterized primarily by a pervasive cynicism that made it artistically limited. “The weakness of the impressionists,” for James, writes Viola Hopkins Winner, “was that they did not ‘represent’ reality by distilling its essence from a welter of sense impressions…. To James’s way of thinking, the painter who records a quick visual impression of a scene runs the risk of being shallow if his perceptions are limited.” Such a belief is largely, as we have seen, a consequence of James’s unique aesthetic education and the influence of James Sr., Ruskin, Hunt, La Farge and others, and is not nearly so “inconsistent” as Fisher and others might suggest. James was already over thirty years old by the time of the exhibitions of the first Impressionist painters in the mid 1870s, and by then his tastes and values in painting and literature had already been formed to a large degree.

This insight necessitates a revaluation of James as a “literary impressionist.” Despite James’s evident distaste for Impressionist painting and his belief that it represented a cynical and superficial manner of art, it has been common to suggest that Impressionism in one form another is a useful – if vexed – descriptor for several

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353 Fisher, Artful Itineraries, 96. Fisher’s solution to this riddle is to suggest that James’s assessment of the Impressionists reveals his basically conservative taste: “In 1876 James espoused a direct and objective process of representation, based on traditional painterly forms, ‘arrangement, embellishment, selection,’ and the ‘good old rules’ of ‘beauty.’ This was not, incidentally, only representation in the traditional sense but art according to established genteel (and developing high-culture) doctrines” (97). The Impressionists, in other words, are scandalous because they are déclassé.

354 Winner, Henry James and the Visual Arts, 50.
important features of James’s art of fiction. In most cases, this characterization is motivated by a critical desire to promote qualities of James’s prose that align with the values of literary modernism while demoting qualities that align with earlier, outmoded styles of Victorian realism. Book length studies of James and Impressionism include H. Peter Stowell’s *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov* (1980) and James J. Kirschke’s *Henry James and Impressionism* (1981), both of which invoke the comparison in order to remove James from comparisons with other contemporary literary realists such as Zola, Turgenev, and Howells, and re-characterize him as a proto-modernist. Stowell, for instance, writes that “James’s multiple impressions of consciousness led [him] to the architectonic prose of modernism” and that “it is literary impressionism that marks the beginning of literary modernism.”

Similarly, Kirschke writes that “Impressionism [is] a key to understanding the Modernist Movement in the arts” and that “we get closest to the heart of James’s *oeuvre* when we consider his work in terms of Impressionism.”

Much recent scholarship on James would concur with Kirschke’s assessment, though in a more complex and developed way. Whether or not Impressionist painting was a direct influence on James’s prose (on this more below), several recent scholars have all attested to the central importance of the impression or Impressionism in understanding James’s fiction. The most important recent work is Jesse Matz’s *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (2001) which claims, as the title of the book suggests, that for the literary impressionist, “impressions” form a sort of bridge, mediating between the

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356 Kirschke, *Henry James and Impressionism*, 1, 188.
sensory and the conceptual, between the objective and the subjective, and therefore between the naïve and unexamined presumption of realist prose to objectively represent the world “as it is,” and the modernist skepticism towards objective representation which precipitates a turn towards the specificity of its own medium.\textsuperscript{357} Matz makes clear that definitions of literary impressionism tend to be complex and self-contradictory because the nature of the impression, as well as Impressionism’s place in literary and art history, is essentially mediatory or transitional. Just as painterly Impressionism is concerned both with presenting the world more “objectively” than traditional painting (because it attempts to paint the actual phenomenon that presents itself to the eye) and more “subjectively” than traditional painting (because each eye is essentially different and any given view is the result of an extraordinarily specific perspective on the world); so literary impressionism attempts to do away with received ideas of an object, character, or scene and present it as it would be seen to an untutored eye, while also rejecting an omniscient third-person point of view in favor of highly situated individual perspectives.\textsuperscript{358}

Other recent books that attest to the continued importance of literary impressionism as an organizing category for understanding Henry James include Robin Hoople’s \textit{In Darkest James: Reviewing Impressionism, 1900-1905} (2000), which attempts to reconstruct contemporary reviews of James’s fiction in order to demonstrate the degree to which reviewers at the time understood or failed to understand James’s Impressionist technique; Elaine Pigeon’s \textit{Queer Impressions: Henry James’s Art of

\textsuperscript{358} See Matz, \textit{Literary Impressionism}, 45-52.
Fiction (2005); and Daniel Hannah’s Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public (2013), which builds on many of the critical assumptions developed by Matz about the mediatory nature of Impressionist aesthetics while also locating that mediation more explicitly in the cultural and historical context of publicity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\footnote{Other recent books that do not focus on James, but which continue to attest to the central importance of impressionism for understanding the literature of the period include: John G. Peters, Conrad and Impressionism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Tamar Katz, Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Adam Parkes, A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Jesse Matz’s Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), which demonstrates the continuing influence of literary impressionist perception and style throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries.}

While this literature on James’s Impressionism has surely proven valuable, as my brief and incomplete survey of the literature here may suggest the very breadth of possible meanings that inhere in the term “Impressionism” attenuates its usefulness as a critical category, particularly in the context of Henry James. Simply put, the term “Impressionism” compels too many contradictory associations, many of which distract us from seeing other dimensions of James’s art of fiction. Whether Impressionism is invoked as an analogue for painterly or pictorial techniques in literary fiction or as a mode of phenomenology in which the “impression” comes to define and organize a certain type of perceptual and cognitive experience characteristic of modernity, the term is misleading when applied to the context of studies of James inasmuch as the choice of such a term is overdetermined by a proleptic critical motivation to place James in an art historical narrative of the avant-garde in which the principles that underlie Impressionist art lead logically to Post-Impressionist art, which in turn lays the groundwork for the
radical formalism that characterizes high Modernism. In invoking Impressionism, critics from Kirschke to Peter Brooks have worked to claim James as a major figure in this history, a modernist Master who broke new ground with his innovative literary techniques and whose “impressionist” epistemology is characteristic of an experience of modernity and a modernist aesthetic which scholars and critics have an interest in preserving and perpetuating.

These scholarly assessments consequently ignore the degree to which James himself openly disparaged Impressionist values in both painting and in prose, and aligned it with a cynical, superficial view of the world that was at odds with his early understanding of what constituted successful painting and successful literature. I suggest instead that discussions of James’s “impressionism” tend to be misleading, freighted as the term is with assumptions about the value of the impression as a step on the march to literary modernism. Rather, I concur with scholar Marianna Torgovnick who writes incisively that while James’s writing does indeed demonstrate many qualities that could conceivably be described as “Impressionist,” including “an emphasis on the perceiving subject” and “the fleeting, ‘unfinished’ quality of the perceptions involved…the identification of James’s method…too closely with the Impressionists or the frequent notion that ‘impressions’ reflect a modern perception of reality and are, therefore, ‘good,’ can be misleading.”360 In other words, while James certainly understood that an impressionist mode of perception was characteristic of modern experience, the degree to which this mode of perception flattened or reduced reality was something to be critically explored, rather than made the defining element of a literary method.

It is no secret that James was highly critical of Impressionist painting. In a book in which he attempts to argue that “belatedly, begrudgingly, James ha[d] learned from the impressionists,” Peter Brooks must yet admit that James “doesn’t like them” and “rejects them in favor of something much more conventional and, to our retrospective eyes, far less valuable.”361 Brooks’s “retrospective eyes” are to my own a dubious, whiggish historical lens for understanding James’s artistic tastes. But several other scholars and critics have also suggested that while early reviews of Impressionist painting may be mostly dismissive, James would come to amend his critical assessment by the end of his long career. Daniel Hannah, for instance, writes that by the early twentieth century, “James moved from sardonic derision to cautious celebration of French impressionist painting.”362

As evidence, Hannah cites The American Scene, one of the few other moments in James’s body of work in which actual Impressionist canvases are spoken of and evaluated. James encounters “an array of modern ‘impressionistic’ pictures, mainly French, wondrous examples of Manet, of Degas, of Claude Monet, of Whistler” at a home in Farmington, Connecticut, and likens the experience to the “momentary effect of a large slippery sweet inserted, without a warning, between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanition.”363 Hannah writes that this moment “suggests [James’s] growing sense of a joint critical investment in the ‘impression,'” but in fact, James’s assessment is

362 Daniel Hannah, Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 17. Winner also writes of “James’s changed opinion of Whistler and eventual acceptance of the impressionists” and that “he himself had experienced a change in aesthetic values” and “had assimilated the impressionist method” in some of his fiction (Henry James and the Visual Arts, 51).
363 James, The American Scene, 45-46.
not quite so glowing. The “morsel” – a “slippery sweet” – James swallows satisfies him somewhat, but only because “one hadn’t known one was starved.” The cultural environment of the United States, in other words, is so generally barren, that any art would have done: “It happened to be that particular art,” writes James, “it might as well, no doubt, have been another.” Read in this context, James’s evaluation is hardly celebratory, but rather recapitulates James’s sense that Impressionist art is barely nourishing, and only a temporary remedy to the cultural “inanition” in which he finds himself. It is, so to speak, eye candy.

Nonetheless, critics such as Peter Brooks try to excuse James’s evident distaste for Impressionist painting in order to fit the author into a modernist pantheon in which James himself – as a literary Impressionist – was an important predecessor. Preceding from the assumption that James is such a figure, Brooks reads back into his early Paris years of 1875-76 in order to suggest that while James was at the time skeptical of the experiments of artists such as Flaubert, Monet, and Whistler, their influences would prove fertilizing in the fiction of the 1890s. While James, at the time, “is not yet prepared to see” these formal experiments,

much that he experiences in Paris in 1875-76 will stage a kind of return of the repressed in his work of the mid-1890s on. It’s as if it lay for some twenty years in what James calls ‘the deep well of unconscious cerebration’ before he was

364 Ibid., 46.
365 Ibid.
366 In this regard, we might compare James’s assessment of Impressionist painting as a “large slippery sweet” with James’s disparaging remarks about “the cult of candy” on the Bowery, “the wondrous consumption by the ‘people,’ over the land, of the most elaborate solid and liquid sweets,” which “cult” is for James a paltry, though significant, stand-in for “culture”: “The wage-earners, the toilers of old, notably in other climes, were known by the wealth of their songs; and has it, on these lines, been given to the American people to be known by the number of their ‘candies’?” (The American Scene, 197).

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ready for it – before he saw that it could be of use to him, that it was trying to do something similar to what he now felt he needed to do.\footnote{367}{Brooks, Henry James Goes to Paris, 5.}

The embarrassment of James’s apparently inexplicable devotion to a “more conventional” and “less valuable” manner of realist representation even “in the very crucible of the modernism [James] will come to represent, even embody”\footnote{368}{Ibid., 4.} is excused by explaining that James must simply have repressed the influence of those literary and artistic experiments of Paris in the 1870s because they were uncomfortably or uncannily close to his own still inchoate theory of fiction. In Brooks’s assessment, James’s professed admiration for more aesthetically conservative and traditionally realist painting and writing serves as a screen for his real, unconscious admiration for Impressionism on canvas and on the page.

But James’s coolness towards Impressionist aesthetics in both painting and literature was not an unconscious repression but a principled rejection predicated on the ways in which such an aesthetic produced a picture of life that was flattened and reduced. Rather, as we have seen, James continued to be motivated by his belief in the ability of literary and artistic representations to produce the effect of depth and to facilitate the viewer’s or reader’s visual and imaginative penetration of fictive space. Depth – the quality in which one perceives things behind other things – is for James an index of reality, a quality whose presence of absence marks a particular representation as either real or unreal, as successful or unsuccessful, and it was to a large degree through his understanding of painting as a mode of realist representation that James came to see the novel as equally capable of producing such an effect.
The critical understanding of James as a literary Impressionist and literary proto-modernist is subtended by the assumption that James gradually came to reject many of the aesthetic principles of his earlier, more traditionally realist writing and replaced them with more radically perspectival literary experiments. James traded, as it were, Balzac for Flaubert: a more capacious, loose, social, descriptive, and pictorial realism for a more precise, narrow, authorial, and linguistically self-conscious aestheticism. The contest between these two figures serves as a convenient shorthand for discussing many of James’s concerns about literary Impressionism and the ways in which an understanding of the novel as a “picture of life” could serve the ends of literary realist representation.

*Balzac: The Painter of Modern Life*

Many of the qualities that James admired in the painting and took to be indices of their success as realist representations – particularly a picture’s creation of atmosphere and depth that facilitated the viewer’s visual andimaginative penetration of its surface – found their exemplar in Balzac. In this regard it is perhaps not coincidental that the first work that John La Farge gave to James was *Eugénie Grandet* (1833). It was La Farge who had told James that he had “the painter’s eye” (with the implication that he had not, for better or worse, the painter’s hand), and La Farge and James both evidently felt that

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369 See Edel, *The Untried Years*, 163-164. The other important work that La Farge gave to James was Prosper Mérimée’s “La Vénus d’Ille” (1835), a story in which a cursed statue of Venus comes to life to kill a man she mistakenly understands to have married her. It would be interesting to pose Mérimée’s short story against Balzac as two prototypes or figureheads of James’s short stories and novels respectively, the short stories dealing more with intellectual, allegorical, aesthetic, or even supernatural problems, and the novels striving for a more capacious, descriptive, and portrait-like breadth and depth.
this was enough of a qualification to pursue a career in literature.\textsuperscript{370} Winner writes that “to La Farge must be given much credit for helping James grasp the fact that literature was no less art than painting…and that his aesthetic impulses would find successful issue in the practice of the art of fiction.”\textsuperscript{371} That fiction was no less an art than painting is indeed one conclusion to be drawn from La Farge’s seminal encouragement, but La Farge also evidently felt that fiction was substantially an art of the same kind as painting. Another implication is that the lessons of painting are readily transferable or transposable to the production of a specifically realist literature. The painter’s eye, not the poet’s ear, was the pre-requisite for the novelist débutant, an assumption that speaks volumes about James’s sense of novelistic structure and purpose.

In this sense it is appropriate that La Farge would introduce James to Balzac, another writer who undoubtedly had the painter’s eye and who explicitly called himself a painter in literature. In fact, in the preface to \textit{Eugénie Grandet}, the novel that La Farge evidently gave to James (or anyway the novel which is recalled by remembrances of La Farge in \textit{Notes of a Son and Brother}), Balzac identified himself as a “literary painter,” and describes his efforts at representation by analogy with the painter’s art.\textsuperscript{372} Much as the painters of the Barbizon schools came to admire the rural scenes and muted colors of the forests and fields of Fontainebleau in opposition to the relatively high-keyed colors of fashionable academic painters, so Balzac too felt that in order to represent the “slow

\textsuperscript{370} Cortissoz, \textit{John La Farge}, 117.
\textsuperscript{371} Winner, \textit{Henry James and the Visual Arts}, 15.
\textsuperscript{372} “Si les peintres littéraires ont abandonné les admirables scènes de la vie de province, ce n’est ni par dédain, ni faute d’observation; peut-être y a-t-il impuissance” (Preface to \textit{Eugénie Grandet} (September 1833), in \textit{La Comédie humaine, Vol. III} [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976], 1075.) All translations from this preface are mine.
action of the *sirocco* of the provincial atmosphere,” the artist had to acquire a “more muted interest, which lies less in action than in thought.” Balzac’s approach to representing these “scenes of provincial life” is explicitly painterly:

> in order to render these figures, which at first glance are not very colorful, but whose details and half-tints solicit the most skillful touches of the brush; to return to these pictures their gray shadows and their chiaroscuro; to probe their nature that appears hollow at first, but that upon examination is found to be full and rich under its solid bark – for this do we not need a multitude of preparations, unheard of care, and, for such portraits as these, the fineness and delicacy required of an antique miniature? Balzac’s literary “painting” is, like the painting of Hunt and La Farge, attuned to tonal values (“gray shadows” and “chiaroscuro”) and subtle gradations (“details and half-tints,” “fineness and delicacy” [*finesse*]) rather than garish juxtapositions of color. These “portraits” thus require an enormously skillful [*savant*] and refined hand. At the same time, Balzac suggests that he is not content to merely represent surfaces, but must probe and measure the depths of objects and figures in order to represent them with all of their natural solidity and suggest their innate “richness.”

Balzac’s admiration for painting has been often noted, as has his influence on James. David Gervais, for one, writes that “no great novelist has owed more to a foreign

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373 “la lente action du *sirocco* de l’atmosphère provincial” (Ibid).
374 “un intérêt presque muet, qui gît moins dans l'action que dans la pensée” (Ibid)
375 “pour rendre des figures, au premier aspect peu colorées, mais dont les détails et les demi-teintes sollicitent les plus savantes touches du pinceau; pour restituer à ces tableaux leurs ombres grises et leur clair-obscure; pour sonder unde nature creuse en apparance, maid que l'examen trouve pleine et riche sous une écorce unie, ne faut-il pas une multitude de préparations, des soins inouis, et, pour de tel portraits, les finesse de la miniature antique?” (Ibid., 1075-1076).
376 See Anka Muhlstein, *The Pen and the Brush: How Passion for Art Shaped Nineteenth-Century French Novels* (New York: The Other Press, 2017), 13-34. Balzac, like James himself, was particularly enthusiastic about Delacroix. Muhlstein writes that in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, “Balzac wholeheartedly admired the painter, so much so that, inspired by Delacroix’s brio, his mastery of color, and his taste for the exotic, Balzac
predecessor than Henry James did to Balzac,” a claim the scope and specificity of which make it difficult to dispute.\textsuperscript{377} Certainly a great deal of this influence lay in Balzac’s resolutely descriptive and pictorial manner that James felt superseded the relatively debased story-telling function of the novel and raised the genre to the rank of art. Ruth Yeazell has demonstrated in \textit{Art of the Everyday} (2008) how Dutch painting, with its homely scenes and detailed tableaux, served as a model for a burgeoning European literary realism. The comparison with Dutch painting, which was both avowedly realist and, as nineteenth century tastes changed, increasingly considered artistic, inspired Balzac’s \textit{Scènes de la vie privée}, [which] were not Balzac’s first works of fiction, but their uneasy identification with Dutch pictures marks a self-conscious turn in his art. Unlike the pot-boilers that he had written under several different pseudonyms in the 1820s, these “scenes” – explicitly labeled as such and signed with his own name – would apparently count less on their twists of plot than on the abundant details with which they were composed.\textsuperscript{378}

\textsuperscript{377} David Gervais, “The Master’s Lesson: Balzac and Henry James,” \textit{The Cambridge Quarterly} 33, no. 4 (Jan. 2004), 316. Gervais’s article claims that Balzac’s influence on James was manifold and complex, and pushes back against a simplistic “literary history [that] may have given us a simple unitary notion of Balzac as a ‘realist’” (317) in which “the ‘lesson of Balzac’ [was] mere verisimilitude, as if all Balzac could be boiled down to the famous opening description of the Pension Vauquer in \textit{Le Père Goriot}” (323).

\textsuperscript{378} Yeazell, \textit{Art of the Everyday}, 61.
James too understood the connection between Balzac and Dutch painting. Many of the qualities that James admired in Dutch painting – its realism, its richness, its ability to “satisfy” – James also identified and admired in Balzac. James writes that Balzac had an “immense supply” of descriptive detail which he “expends…with a royal liberality; where another writer makes an allusion Balzac gives you a Dutch picture.” Balzac’s descriptive pictorialism is central to James’s admiration. Indeed, Balzac’s own use of the word “scene” stressed its pictorial, rather than its dramatic associations, and it is in this sense that James understands Balzac as a primarily pictorial novelist. Indeed, James felt that as a dramatist Balzac was decidedly inferior. “His touch,” James wrote in 1875, “so unerring in portraiture and description, often goes woefully astray in narrative, in the conduct of a tale. Of all the great novelists, he is the weakest in talk; his conversations, if they are at all prolonged, become unnatural, impossible.” Balzac’s “scenes” are admirable as richly described and vivid tableaux, not melodramatic set-pieces.

Kendall Johnson writes in Henry James and the Visual (2007) that “James borrows Balzac’s painterly connotations of the ‘scene’ to fantasize literary mastery”: “Balzac’s ‘scene’ is something that the author both registers as visual phenomena, and invents as an arresting microcosm of the real.” A novel chez Balzac is scenic to the degree that it composes its disparate descriptive details into a coherent picture of reality,

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380 Ibid., 58.
381 His admiration for Balzac’s painterly qualities notwithstanding, James was certainly influenced by Balzac’s “unnaturally” stagey dialogue. See Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination.
or, as Johnson puts it, becomes “a system that accrues meaning in the interdependence of its parts as a configured whole. Balzac’s ‘facts’ are innately relational, and they cannot be measured as discrete objects.”  

As in its dramatic sense, “scene” in the pictorial sense implies that paintings served as a model of narrative and descriptive unity. In 1865 James had expressed admiration for Balzac’s photographic accuracy – what Durand would have called his facility of imitation, rather than representation: his exquisitely detailed tableaux are expressed with the “fidelity of the photograph.”  

But by 1875, James had come to a more developed sense of Balzac’s realist artistry, admiring him not just for his imitative facility but for his ability to produce coherent and composed representations that hang together as complete works of art.

Many of the qualities that James admired in the painting of the period, including the paintings of La Farge himself, James also found in Balzac’s novels. Predominant among these qualities was what James calls Balzac’s density. While James claimed that other writers, such as Dumas, George Sand, or Anthony Trollope, are equally “prolific…they weave a loose web, as it were, and Balzac weaves a dense one.”  

Balzac’s density remains the essential quality that James admires from his earliest critical essays (in 1875 James writes that “Large as Balzac is, he is all of one piece and he hangs perfectly together”) to his late lecture “The Lesson of Balzac,” in which James writes that throughout the entire Comédie humaine, Balzac demonstrates “his apprehension of

383 Ibid., 93.
385 James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 37.
386 Ibid., 47.
the dense wholeness of reality”. Partly Balzac’s density can be attributed to his “mighty passion for things,” the incredible amount of specifically described stuff that crowds his novels (James writes that Balzac’s picture of Parisian life was “a rank tropical forest of detail and specification”). Even compared with the realistic portraits of Turgenev, about whom he was otherwise unreservedly ebullient, James yet claims that Balzac’s characters are “pictorially larger, sturdier…the fertility of his imagination in this respect was something marvelous.”

But Balzac’s density must not be confused with mere overcrowding. Unlike Émile Zola, for instance, who James writes had an equal passion for literally descriptive detail, Balzac’s novels, while equally crowded, effect “the mystic process of the crucible, the transformation of the material under aesthetic heat.” Zola, on the other hand, doesn’t convert details into a coherent picture; he merely heaps them up. Drawing on Durand’s distinction between imitation and representation, James writes that Balzac represents life, while Zola only makes “an extraordinary show of representation imitated.” Balzac’s picture of life, on the other hand, is like a “tapestry,” densely woven with a “myriad of ordered stitches” and “harmonies of tone” that above all are the result of his weaving’s “closeness.” In consequence, his body of work is perfused with vital energy: “All this in Balzac’s hands becomes an organic whole; it moves together; it has a pervasive

387 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 146.
388 Ibid., 120.
389 James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 48.
390 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 123.
391 James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 53.
392 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 130.
393 Ibid.
394 Ibid., 138.
These are characteristics of a work of art that James would echo explicitly in “The Art of Fiction” when he called the novel “a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each in the other parts” (AF 54).

James’s organic metaphor is drawn from the natural sciences (and from the organicist aesthetic philosophy of Goethe and the Lebensphilosophie tradition), but it also echoes his understanding of the visual arts, particularly his idea that successful paintings are characterized by a pervasive atmosphere that makes its discrete elements “hang together.” This is the sense in which we ought to understand James’s discussion of literary “atmosphere,” which James defines as “the color of the air with which this, that or the other painter of life...more or less consciously suffuses his picture.” Atmosphere is, “for each seer of visions, the particular tone of the medium in which each vision, each clustered group of persons and places and objects, is bathed” and is an atmospheric effect “distinct from the effect sought on behalf of the special subjects to be treated.” By “the tone of the medium,” James means the character of each individual authorial consciousness – “the very complexion of the mirror in which the material is reflected” – and invokes La Farge’s language as well as his own in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady, implying that this personal atmosphere is the mediating lens that “colors” each individual point of view. James treats each author he discusses as though he or she were a painted landscape under particular seasonal or atmospheric conditions, or under different angles and degrees of sunlight. Dickens, for instance, seems always to take place in the

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395 James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 41.
396 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 125.
397 Ibid.
398 Ibid.
morning, while in George Eliot “the sun sinks forever to the west, and shadows are long, and the afternoon wanes, and the trees vaguely rustle, and the color of the day is much inclined to yellow.” Charlotte Brontë seems to always take place in autumn, while Jane Austen occurs in “an arrested spring,” and Hawthorne appears “quite uncannily late” in the winter gloaming.  

At first blush, James’s descriptions might seem perplexingly literal even to a generous reader, and to an uncharitable reader they may seem an arrant case of Paterian “impressionistic” criticism. However, an understanding of the painterly meaning of atmosphere can help us to better understand and appreciate it. Among these authors, James writes, Balzac is superlative because his atmosphere is uniquely dense: “It is rich and thick, the mixture of sun and shade diffused through the ‘Comédie Humaine’—a mixture richer and thicker, and representing an absolutely greater quantity of ‘atmosphere,’ than we shall find prevailing within the compass of any other suspended frame.” James’s reference to the “suspended frame” makes his connection of literary atmosphere to pictorial atmosphere explicit: like Thomas Cole’s *View of Florence*, the paintings of the Barbizon school, or the canvases of John La Farge, Balzac’s density of atmosphere tonally unifies a composition by linking together its discrete elements while also serving as an index of a particularly situated reality.

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399 Ibid., 126. Thomas J. Otten offers an interpretation of this list and of the question of Balzac’s atmosphere in order to suggest “how the material can become, in James, a complex amalgam of physical qualities, visual impressions, representational practices, and signs of a larger political economy.” In other words, Otten “examine[s] the passages that lie behind the figure of colored air” in order to “find that it is produced by a whole system of objects, indeed that it is the figure of the object system itself” (Thomas J. Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World* [Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2006], 155).

400 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 126.
Zola’s atmosphere, on the other hand, is comparatively thin: it makes a “show of representation imitated” because it lacks the harmonious coloring and tonal gradation that make Balzac’s picture of life coherent. It is in this sense that we can understand James’s claim that the novel must turn away from “the art of the slate-pencil” (which James implies is Zola’s art) and return to “the art of the brush.” Like the heaping up of facts against which Howells cautioned or the dictionary-like accumulation of facts that Hunt saw in the work of Pre-Raphaelite naturalists, James claims that inattention to composition and atmosphere makes the novel resemble a mere catalogue: Zola and other novelists of this sort excel only at “emulating the column of numbers of a schoolboy’s sum in addition.”\(^4\) As such, atmosphere is a compelling metaphor that James can use to discuss the ways in which Balzac’s literary representations express the “dense wholeness of reality,” and it becomes a particularly compelling metaphor when understood alongside the kinds of nineteenth century painting James understood and admired.

The atmosphere of Balzac’s “pictures of life” also renders them imaginatively penetrable and ushers the reader into their representational space. Just as Durand called atmosphere a “magic power” that “conducts us through all the vestibules, chambers and secret recesses of the great mansion” of a picture, so James writes that literary atmosphere is a “magical wand” that facilitates our “excursions” into the “general

\(^4\) Ibid., 136. Worth noting in this connection is James’s professed inability as a child to do even the most basic arithmetic. “I so feared and abhorred mathematics,” writes James in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, “that the simplest arithmetical operation had always found and kept me helpless and blank, the dire discipline of the years bringing no relief whatever to my state” (240). Embarrassed by his persistent failures, James wonders whether he might not understand his total lack of facility “as a blessing perhaps in disguise,” his weakness in this area of understanding signaling strength in others (240). James suggests that his interest in literature is the product of this inverse relation, writing that his parents attributed their child’s failures in math to his habit of “read[ing] too many novels” (241).
landscape” of a novel. And just as Thomas Cole’s *View of Florence* or Rousseau’s rural landscape or La Farge’s *Paradise Valley* offer James opportunities for imaginatively penetrating the surface of the canvas and inhabiting its represented scene, so Balzac’s novels “succeed in opening a series of dusky passages in which, with a more or less childlike ingenuity we can romp to and fro.” Balzac’s superlative amount of atmosphere corresponds to his superlative depth. “Balzac’s luxury,” writes James, “was in the extraordinary number and length of his ramifying corridors…. It is a question, you see, of *penetrating* into a subject; his corridors always went further and further and further.”

But James is careful to state that in penetrating into his subject, Balzac in no way sacrifices the immediacy of the concrete, tactile reality before him. Balzac, in other words, does not penetrate into the world of objects and appearances by suggesting that such penetration will reveal an allegorical or “spiritual” meaning behind or beneath such sensory phenomena. While his work affords opportunities for imaginative penetration, such penetration is not purchased at the cost of sacrificing or diminishing the material world before his eyes. “His plan,” James writes, “was to handle, primarily, not a world of ideas, animated by figures representing those ideas; but the packed and constituted, the palpable, proveable world before him.” Understanding Balzac’s self-definition as a “literary painter” helps us to understand the ways in which his realism – and by extension that of James – strove for a manner of meaningful representation that would not at the same time reduce the sensuous and concrete particularity of the world – what I have

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402 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 125.
403 Ibid., 127.
404 Ibid.
405 Ibid.
elsewhere identified as Meisel’s “appetite for reality” – into the handmaid of a moral or conceptual ideality above, beyond, or behind it.

Balzac’s novels are for James thoroughly aesthetic to the degree that they are thoroughly painterly. They can also be considered radically empirical inasmuch as no meaning exists outside of the world of the text – to use William James’s language, the world of the Comédie humaine “possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure.”406 But at the same time their correspondence with the actual material and social world guarantees both their significance as representations and their value as works of art. Balzac, in other words, was able to achieve a manner of representation that satisfied several mutually exclusive aesthetic requirements, and resolved several aesthetic contradictions that were for James of crucial importance. As a materialist and a realist, Balzac satisfies an “appetite for reality,” and in the very depth and detail of his representations he also satisfies Meisel’s “requirement of signification,” without idealizing that same reality it purported to represent. Meaning in Balzac, as in James, is immanent to representation: it inheres in the very practice of literary painting itself.

“Apostles of Surface”: Literary Impressionism as Cautionary Tale

Balzac’s comprehensiveness enables him to be extraordinarily detailed and literal, like the Pre-Raphaelites, without by that same stroke failing to sufficiently compose his

406 William James, The Meaning of Truth, in William James: Writings, 1902-1910, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1987), 826. James’s definition of a radically empirical world is one in which “the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct experience…than the things themselves” (826).
tableaux. It also prevents him from falling into what James derides as the tendency of French authors and painters towards cynicism. The lesson of Balzac stands behind James’s criticism of Impressionist painters and greatly informs James’s criticism of writers whose superficial aestheticism James understood to be their literary analogue. Balzac’s density and expansiveness, like the Dutch painting he resembled, made him richer and more satisfying – more nourishing – than the slippery, sweet “morsel” that was loosely composed Impressionist art. The inability to provide nourishment was similarly the basis of James’s coolness towards Gustave Flaubert, whom James criticized in like terms for his shallowness and superficiality.\footnote{Even Peter Brooks, who argues for the pervasive influence of Flaubertian aesthetic modernism on James, admits that James’s belief in “representation…leads him over and over again to set against Flaubert’s practice the more nourishing example of Balzac” \textit{(Henry James Goes To Paris}, 2).}

In an 1874 review of \textit{The Temptation of Saint Anthony}, James writes that Flaubert’s art is, like that of Balzac, essentially “pictorial”: “M. Flaubert’s peculiar talent is the description – minute, incisive, exhaustive – of material objects, and it must be admitted that he carries it very far. He succeeds wonderfully well in making an image, in finding and combining just the words in which the \textit{look} of his object resides.”\footnote{Henry James, “La Tentation de Saint Antoine,” in \textit{Literary Criticism II: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces}, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 290.}

Nonetheless, these images, while “tremendously pictorial,” differ from those of Balzac in that they present the reader with “a strangely artificial and cold-blooded picturesque…. It is all hard, inanimate, superficial, and inexpressibly disagreeable.”\footnote{Ibid., 294.}

While Balzac’s picture of life was like Dutch realist painting, Flaubert’s highly refined style recalled for James in 1868 the stilted, lifeless academic painting of Jean-Léon
Gérôme, whose “pictures are for art very much what the novels of M. Gustave Flaubert are for literature.”\textsuperscript{410} James refers to Gérôme’s painting “The Prisoner” (1861), which represents an Orientalizing tableau similar to those of The Temptation of Saint-Anthony. Both pictures of life, James writes, share a quality of “heartlessness.”\textsuperscript{411} While Flaubert’s self-conscious artifice evoked the visual style of French academic painting, also lacking from Flaubert’s prose was exactly what was lacking from the painting of the French Impressionists: “any abundant degree of imagination,” and any “underlying moral unity of what is called a ‘purpose.’”\textsuperscript{412} Flaubert, like the Impressionist painter, cannot “permanently satisfy their public, for the simple reason that the human mind, even in indifferent health, does after all need to be nourished, and thrives but scantily on a regimen of pigments and sauces.”\textsuperscript{413}

Like the “large slippery sweet” of Impressionist painting, Flaubert’s “sauces” are only, so to speak, an amuse-bouche: all flavor and no nutrition. By 1893, James’s opinion had changed little. “Poor Flaubert,” as James repeatedly calls him, “hovered forever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendour of which properly beguiled him…. But that immobility and even that erectness were paid too dear. The shining arms were meant to carry further, the other doors were meant to open. He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul.”\textsuperscript{414} As we have seen, Balzac’s corridors, on the other hand “go further and further and further”: we “walk with him in the great glazed ambulatory of his

\textsuperscript{410} James, “An English Critic of French Painting,” The Painter’s Eye, 42.
\textsuperscript{411} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{412} James, “La Tentation de Saint Antoine,” 293.
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 294.
thought.” But Flaubert, unable to penetrate the temple of art, remains forever outside, admiring and describing its magnificent façade, but never enters its sanctum. He was, as James writes in a review of Pierre Loti, “the very apostle of surface.”

James recognizes Flaubert as part of a larger French school of writing – James calls them a “band of painters” – that might be reasonably described as impressionist inasmuch as the united characteristic of writers such as Flaubert, Pierre Loti, Émile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant, the brothers Goncourt, and, to a lesser extent, Paul Bourget, was the “profuse development of the external perceptions – those of the appearance, the sound, the taste, the material presence and pressure of things.” The French academician and editor of the Revue des deux Mondes Ferdinand Brunetièr had identified just such a school in his 1879 review of Daudet’s novel Les Rois en exil entitled “L’impressionisme dans le roman,” in which the essayist harshly critiqued the tendency of this school towards superficial description and literary painterliness which Brunetièr, as a classicist academician, understood to proceed from a decadent misunderstanding of the proper domain of writing itself. Brunetièr’s essay will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

James’s criticism of literary impressionists echoes that of Brunetièr. While he admired their ability as “painters” to “go straight to the mark,” James writes in the same

415 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 129.
417 Henry James, “Pierre Loti (1888),” 485, 484.
breath that “as analysts they only scratch the surface.” While enjoying the sensuous description of Loti, for instance – “enjoying at every turn the colour and the rustle and the light” – Loti’s books taken as a whole “are simply the record of impressions:” like an Impressionist painter, “to Loti things come with the sun and the wind and the chance of the spot and the moment; his perception is a sensitive plate on which aspects are forever at play.” James’s criticism of Loti mirrors his earlier criticism of Impressionist painting, while also developing the other resonances of the term “impression” to evoke the similarities between the superficial positivism of Impressionist perception and photography – what James Sr. had earlier derided as the “daguerreotype faculty” that seeks only to make an exact copy of nature innocent of intellectual or moral associations. While Loti is a somewhat felicitous case whom James more or less appreciates for his beautiful style, he also prompts “the general question of how long and how far accomplished and exclusive…impressionism will yet go, with its vulture on its back and feeding on it.” Like Flaubert, Loti is mostly an example of an extraordinarily perceptive eye and a fine literary style gone to waste.

Like Flaubert and Loti, Théophile Gautier, while in many ways an admirable or even supreme literary artist, serves James as an instructive example of a similarly wasted talent, and serves us as a useful occasion to explore James’s ambivalence about what would come to be known as literary impressionism before Impressionism proper came

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418 Ibid., 486.
420 James, “Pierre Loti (1888),” 505.
into being. Like Flaubert, Gautier “is the apostle of visual observation – the poet of the look of things;” like Balzac, “his pen is almost a brush.” But unlike Flaubert and Loti, whose impressions tend to be disconnected, Gautier was so true an artist that everything he wrote has a singular unity, and one may trust it from beginning to end to contain no false notes. Indeed, James writes in another review, Gautier’s “style is such a perpetual tissue of images and pictures, that it is almost as unfair to detach examples from the context as it would be to make an excision in one of Titian’s canvases for a specimen of his color.” Titian, as we have seen, was an emblem for James of a supremely fine colorist style, and this comparison married to his praise for the way his pictures hang together as a coherent unity in the manner of Balzac ought to suggest that James’s assessment of Gautier’s fine pictorialist style was high indeed.

But for all his obvious admiration for Gautier’s pictorialism, James confirms that Gautier’s problem is that he is only pictorial: “he cared nothing and knew nothing in men

422 Flaubert “has resolved the whole into a series of pictures” (“La Tentation de Saint Antoine,” 293) while Loti “arrives with his bundle of impressions” (“Pierre Loti [1888],” 505.)
425 Also like Balzac, Gautier, who had himself trained as a painter as a young man before turning to literature, considered himself a literary painter, writing that at a certain point he arrived at a crossroads where he determined that “painting with words seemed more convenient [plus commode] than painting with colors” (Théophile Gautier, Histoire du Romantisme, suivie de Notices Romantiques et d’une Etude sur la poésie française 1830-1868 [Paris: Eugène Flasquelle, 1927], 17, quoted in Vladimir Kapor, Local Colour: A Travelling Concept [Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009], 148-149; my translation).
and women but the epidermis.” Gautier’s pictorial genius in other words, comes at the expense of his “extraordinary intellectual simplicity”: “Nature had furnished him with an unequalled apparatus for aesthetic perception and verbal portraiture, and she had attempted, in the intellectual line, to do nothing else.” Like Loti and like the Impressionists, Gautier is uniquely sensitive, but can only passively register impressions: he “merely observes and describes.” That Gautier, like Flaubert, is merely a writer of exquisite observation, gives him “an odd sort of isolated, unsupported, unfriended air in the midst of the beautiful material world to which he spent his life in paying exquisite compliments.”

As poor Flaubert remained outside the temple of art admiring its façade, so “Poor Gautier seems to stand forever in the chill external air which blows over the surface of things; above his brilliant horizon there peeped no friendly refuge of truth purely intellectual, where he could rake over the embers of philosophy, and rest his tired eyes among the shadows of the unembodied.” To live merely on the surface of things, as an Impressionist does, is to live stupidly, and in identifying this deficiency James’s criticism of Gautier reaches very near the pitch of cruelty: while “[Gautier] was an admirable

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428 Ibid., 378.

429 Ibid.

430 Ibid.
descriptive poet…we heard it truly, although somewhat uncivilly said, that his powers of reflection were about equivalent to those of an intelligent poodle."

James’s criticisms reveal the limits of his admiration for literary impressionism and consequently for a particular type of “art for art’s sake” aestheticism. They also help us articulate his sense of what it meant for the novel to be a picture of life without being at the same time merely flat or superficial. In this regard, James’s criticisms demonstrate the lasting influence of figures like James Sr., Hunt, and La Farge on the author’s sense of what constituted a successful picture in paint or prose. James’s criticism of Gautier’s and Loti’s evanescent superficiality echoes his father’s earlier criticism of mere “word-painting” of natural phenomena, which served only as a “gratification of the eye,” and which was a necessary but insufficient step towards creating a work of art, which creation required “an infusion of learning into word-painting.” From Hunt too, James retained his sense that painting in prose meant that seeing with a Ruskinian or Impressionist “innocent eye” was insufficient to produce works of satisfactory composition or interest, the production of which required that primary perception be filtered through the imagination and the lens of personal association. And from La Farge, James also retained a sense that in painting as in literature one’s view of the world is necessarily colored by “the character of the lens through which you see” the world, which implied that individual vision necessarily had important moral consequences.

Understanding James’s criticism of literary impressionism in the light of his early aesthetic influences, including Balzac, helps us to reconcile the apparent contradiction between James’s rejection of the requirement that a novel contain a “conscious moral

431 James, “A Winter in Russia,” 386.
purpose” and his equally harsh assessment of cynical French aesthetes whose resolute amorality similarly repulsed him. Since James openly disavows Walter Besant’s injunction that a novel be consciously moral by writing that “questions of art are questions of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair” (AF 62), we might expect James to come down firmly on the side of Gautier, who is sometimes credited with originating the idea of “l’art pour l’art” in the preface to his novel Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835). Indeed, Gautier “never judged morality: he knew no more about it than a Fiji-Islander about coal smoke.” But as his choice of analogy suggests, James’s assessment of Gautier’s amorality is decidedly ambivalent: is Gautier a sort of virtuous pagan or noble savage, blissfully ignorant of the corrupting influence of modern moral strictures – or is he a barbarian whose innocence implies the possibility of uncivilized cruelty?

It is clear that James felt that Gautier’s pursuit of the beautiful had distinct moral risks. Gautier, James writes, “could look every day at a group of beggars sunning themselves on the Spanish Steps at Rome, against their golden wall of mouldering travertine, and see nothing but the fine brownness of their rags and their flesh-tints.”

James identifies Gautier’s otherwise alluring pictorialism with the problematic way in

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432 The phrase l’art pour l’art does not actually appear in the preface, but Gautier writes that “the only things that are really beautiful are those which have no use” (the corollary being that all useful things are necessarily ugly: “The most useful place in the house is the lavatory”) (Théophile Gautier, preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin, trans. Helen Constantine [New York: Penguin Classics, 2005], 23). Gautier’s hilarious preface is a good example of the kind of cynicism James avoided. Gautier writes with withering irony, for instance, that “there is very little use in our being on earth and alive” and that art – to be art – must be utterly superfluous: “What is the good of music? What is the good of painting? Who would be mad enough to prefer Mozart to M. Carrel, and Michelangelo to the inventor of white mustard?” (22, 23).


which the composition of picturesque and beautiful “scenes” has the tendency to conceal or erase the moral ugliness that may linger at their peripheries, or even at their center. Gautier evidently was not troubled by this troublingly familiar phenomenon of modernity in which a touristic observer aestheticizes urban or rural poverty, and his blithe resolve to admire superficial appearances without any concern for their underlying reality is for James, who himself was prone to those “irresistible revulsions of mood in which the ‘mellowest’ rags are but filth, and filth is poverty, and poverty a haunting shadow, and picturesque squalor a mockery,” is nothing less than a shock. Doubtless James’s revulsion is to some degree the result of an uncomfortably powerful attraction to—and close identification with—exactly the kind of willful moral ignorance of which Gautier is such an irresistible example.

James amplifies these criticisms in his review of Gautier’s *Tableaux de siège*, a collection of sketches about the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870-71. The most salient feature of these sketches is “the oddest contrast between [Gautier’s] descriptive brio and grace and the feeble note of reflection which from time to time crops through” them. Seeing Gautier apply his considerable descriptive skill and “exquisite genius” as a painter with words to what was so obviously a major humanitarian crisis in which even zoo animals were slaughtered to feed the city’s starving citizens reveals in James’s estimation “a moral levity so transcendent and immeasurable as to amount really to a psychological curiosity.” “The ineffable frivolity of his peroration,” James continues, “recalls

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435 Ibid.
436 James, “Tableaux de siège,” 355.
437 Ibid.
irresistibly that sternly unsavory Scriptural image of the dog and his vomit. It is enough
to disgust one with the pursuit of local color.”

While James’s thumpingly ministerial tone might seem to betray the momentary
resurgence of a lingering Puritanical cultural heritage that invariably recoils from
physical pleasure or aesthetic beauty, James’s overarching criticism is not that Gautier is
too artistic, but that by merely “painting” he is not artistic enough. Indeed, James feels
that well-written and beautifully painted as they are, the “moral levity” of Gautier’s
sketches disqualified them as art: “In this matter M. Gautier is little better than one of
those Philistines of taste whom he despises.” That James was capable of charging the
creator of the phrase “l’art pour l’art” with the sin of Philistinism forces us to refine and
revise the apparently hard and fast distinction between the moral and the aesthetic. In a
successful novel, “the tale and the moral hang[] well together” while “artists who
cultivate ‘art for art’ are usually so extremely mistrustful of” morality “exhibit[]…a most
injurious disbelief in the illimitable alchemy of art.” This alchemical fusion was
effected through the reconciliation of two apparently opposed principles in realist works
of art whose depth, breadth, and density inevitably erased such a distinction in the first
place.

Again, Balzac stands for James as the supreme artist capable of achieving such a
synthesis. Like Gautier, Balzac “had no natural sense of morality,” and “we cannot help

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438 Ibid. Gautier was influential in developing the Romantic taste for “local color,” which
James invokes here. To its critics the term often carried with it a pejorative sense of being
unduly exotic or sensationalizing. See Kapor, Local Colour, 148-149 and subsequent
pages.
439 James, “Tableaux de siège,” 355.
440 Henry James, “Charles de Bernard and Gustave Flaubert,” in Literary Criticism II:
French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces, ed. Leon Edel (New York:
Library of America, 1984), 170.
thinking [this] a serious fault in a novelist." The difference, however, is that Balzac is redeemed from his lack of morality by his largeness, his depth, and his density: “Large as Balzac is, he is all of one piece and he hangs perfectly together.” In consequence, “in place of a moral judgment of conduct…Balzac usually gives us an aesthetic judgment” – which in his unique case amounts to very much the same thing. While Flaubert or Gautier simply replaced moral judgment with aesthetic judgment, Balzac succeeded in synthesizing the two by being immanent to the world he represented, by representing the world in all its depth and breadth. Balzac’s success, we might say, was that he remained painterly rather than “writerly,” since the Balzacian novel remained ever “an effort at representation” and not an opportunity for literary experiment that called attention to the practice of literary descriptiveness. In this, Gautier like Flaubert could only be the “apostles of surface,” whereas Balzac, to draw out the metaphor, was both the architect of the temple and the idol in its center.

Gautier’s problem represents the larger problem James has with impressionism: that the French take no real impress from their impressions. The problem of what to do with impressions is the consequence of an ambivalence built in to the very definition of the word. “Impressions” are at once strong and weak, permanent and fleeting. First impressions, we are told, are the hardest to change – but by the same stroke we are accustomed to thinking of impressions as being only vague, momentary, inarticulate (“It’s only my impression.”) James is surely aware of this fundamental ambivalence, and demands an “impressionism” sensitive to the impression’s self-contradictory nature.

441 James, “Honoré de Balzac,” 47.
442 Ibid.
443 Ibid., 49.
444 James, “The Lesson of Balzac,” 131.
Writing of Gautier – and by extension of literary impressionists such as Pierre Loti – James asserts that it is insufficient to merely record or register impressions. Instead, “We do not really react upon natural impressions and assert our independence, until these impressions have been absorbed into our moral life and become a mysterious part of moral passion.”

Much of the desire to see James as a literary “impressionist” has been underwritten by James’s own use of the word “impression” to describe his increasing attention to narrative perspective. In an 1894 notebook entry, for instance, James wrote that he sought to compose the short story “The Coxon Fund” as “an Impression—as one of [John Singer] Sargent’s pictures is an impression…. That is, I must do it from my own point of view—that of an imagined observer, participator, chronicler. I must picture it, summarize it, impressionize it, in a word—compress and confine it by making it the picture of what I see.” Sargent, James writes in 1893, was a somewhat ambiguous member of the Impressionist school of painting, but while Sargent has been reasonably successful, “this is by no means inveterately the case with those of the ingenuous artists who most rejoice in the title in question. To render the impression of an object may be a very fruitful effort, but it is not necessarily so.” Like Gautier, Sargent too was for James a cautionary tale of the potential for talent to waste itself on fruitless endeavors. He possessed like Gautier an astoundingly “quick perception” – but “a certain faculty of brooding reflection” is sometimes lacking. By “brooding reflection,” James means something like the “embers of philosophy” that Gautier also lacked: it is “the quality in

the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface.”\textsuperscript{448}

For James, art was a practice not of registering and reflecting impressions, but of absorbing and converting them. James’s early aesthetic education, it will be recalled, largely or even solely consisted of such “conversions,” as James remembers in \textit{A Small Boy and Others}: “Convert, convert, convert! […] We were to convert and convert…simply every thing that should happen to us, every contact, every impression and every experience we should know, were to form our soluble stuff.”\textsuperscript{449} Unlike the “slippery sweet” of Impressionist painting, the unnourishing Flaubert, or the superficial Gautier, impressions must be digested and metabolized if they are to become a part of experience. The Impressionists, in literature or in painting, are content merely to linger on the surface of things, representing only appearances.

An understanding of James’s painterly tastes and values helps us to understand how he could remain committed to a pictorial form of representation despite the medium’s obvious superficiality. What else, other than surface appearances – whatever appears to the eye – \textit{can} a painter show you? Of course, the painter can insert meaningful signs into painted pictures, but this is a “literary” dimension of painting not strictly associated with the fact of the medium itself (an hourglass, for instance, “signifies” but does not “represent” impermanence.) As realist painting of the nineteenth century came more emphatically to reject allegorical or symbolic (that is, literary) meaning and remain content with the representation of sensuous appearances, it also became an object of envy for literary artists who likewise sought to find intrinsic satisfaction in the simple

\textsuperscript{448} Ibid., 228.
\textsuperscript{449} James, \textit{A Small Boy and Others}, 123.
registration of phenomena. James at times expresses envy towards painters for their ability to remain content with representing appearances, even as he simultaneously belittles the superficiality of that achievement. In Venice, for instance, James writes that upon encountering a young painter working *en plein air* he “could have assaulted him for very envy. [...] To be a young American painter unperplexed by the mocking, elusive soul of things and satisfied with their wholesome light-bathed surface and shape; keen of eye; fond of colour, of sea and sky and anything that may chance between them.”\(^{450}\)

That the painter can be “satisfied” by the “light-bathed surface” of things prompts both admiration and resentment. The painter’s eye is an object of envy because it can so easily remain unperplexed by meanings that lay behind or beneath appearances, but by the same stroke it remains ignorant – merely “fond” – of richer, more complex meanings. Still, painting prompts envy to the degree that its manner of representation was purely aesthetic – purely perceptual – and could represent the world in its sensuousness fullness without reducing appearances to mere signs that conceal – and reveal – “deeper” meanings.

A form of painting – and by extension a form of writing – that managed thus to erase the distinction between surface and depth would be able to resolve this basic problem of aesthetics, and would blur the boundaries between written and painterly form. It is in this sense that we can appreciate James’s understanding of painting as a model for the literary artist who likewise sought to restore to realist representation in prose the sensuous immediacy of a primarily sensuous perception of the world. This is the argument of Bonney MacDonald in her important monograph *Henry James’s Italian Hours: Revelatory and Resistant Impressions* (1990), which “seeks to rehabilitate the

\(^{450}\) James, “Venice: An Early Impression,” 336-337.
status of primary perception in James’s writings and, in so doing, correct an imbalance in James criticism which leans perhaps too heavily toward the constructive and independent powers of the imagination found in later works.\textsuperscript{451} MacDonald hopes to reassert “the pictorial primacy and visual origins of the early writings” because she is convinced that the critically constructed dichotomy between the “power of the visible world to impress itself directly onto the receptive vision of the artist, and ... the power of creative consciousness itself to construct, indirectly constitute, and ‘make life’” is a false one.\textsuperscript{452}

In other words, the critical tendency to assert the supremacy of \textit{poesis} over \textit{mimesis} (James’s much-quoted claim in a letter to H. G. Wells that “it is art that MAKES life”) requires a corrective “bridge” that links “the more pictorial, perceptual, and receptive style of the early writings, and the more abstract, conceptual, and constructing style of the late works.”\textsuperscript{453} By constructing such a bridge, MacDonald suggests that “The Italian sketches suggest that the sensorial world actively participates in acts of imagination and thought, and that the whole felt and lived world, or \textit{Lebenswelt}, generates meaning and artistry.”\textsuperscript{454} MacDonald thus suggests a cognitive model in which the observer actively engages with sensory impressions rather than passively takes them in, thereby offering a mode of literary “impressionism” that is able to construct a picture of the world that

\textsuperscript{451} MacDonald, \textit{Henry James’s Italian Hours}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid., 4, 5.
\textsuperscript{453} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{454} MacDonald, \textit{Henry James’s Italian Hours}, 47. MacDonald’s term \textit{Lebenswelt} is drawn from twentieth century phenomenology (Husserl), but it resounds with earlier nineteenth century philosophical traditions by which it was influenced: the \textit{Lebensphilosophie} tradition, and particularly Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of the \textit{Lebenszusammenhang} that would have also been in tune with the developing pragmatist philosophy of William James. See also Paul B. Armstrong, \textit{The Phenomenology of Henry James} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). The term \textit{Lebenswelt} also recalls the art historical approach of Wilhelm Worringer, and the cognitive art historical approach of E. H. Gombrich, about both of whom much could be said in this connection.
doesn’t by the same stroke render it merely flat. MacDonald implies this by rejecting the distinction between “painterly” surface and “literary” depth: impressions are not superficial husks containing meaning to be drawn out and extracted. There is no “latent” content hidden behind apparent surface; it is all surfaces, which is the same thing as saying that it is all depths.

MacDonald’s study offers a useful model for understanding ways in which perception and imagination might be seen as intimately fused without placing them in a hierarchy that values one above the other or sees one as being more “primary.” Sensuous impressions can remain *aesthetic*, in the sense of being primarily perceptive, without sacrificing their tangible immediacy by acquiring *depth* – in much the same way that Balzac’s descriptions or La Farge’s paintings are “deep.” While the narrative of the development of Impressionist and Modernist art is a story of increasing flatness, the essential quality of the “whole felt and lived world” that MacDonald claims James sought to represent in his many writings is *space*. The representation of space – the sensation of things behind or in relation to other things – guarantees the significance of sensory impressions while also making them reliable indicators of reality. MacDonald writes that James most embodies “an artistic stance in which immediate and direct primary perception itself is a ‘way of knowing’”⁴⁵⁵ and as such offers a way of thinking about representation that escapes the surface/depth paradigm.

It thus helps us to understand James’s claim that *What Maisie Knew* strove for a mode of “atmospheric” representation, since the novel “illustrate[s] the author’s incorrigible taste for gradations and superpositions of effect; his love, when it is a

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⁴⁵⁵ MacDonald, *Henry James’s Italian Hours*, 5.
question of a picture, of anything that makes for proportion and perspective, that contributes to a view of all the dimensions. Addicted to seeing ‘through’ – one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through that.” While Brooks claims that “in [What Maisie Knew] James appears to discover some of the radical issues in perspective that we associate with modernity in French painting, and with the later work of Flaubert,” issues which demonstrate that “post-1895 James seems already to have left the nineteenth century behind, and to be launched toward the fictional experimentation of Joyce, of Woolf, of Proust,” we can see by reading James’s own criticisms of Flaubert and Impressionist artists in context that on the contrary these issues in perspective are best understood not proleptically from the point of view of the twentieth century as Brooks has it, but in the context of the realism of the nineteenth.

456 James, Preface to What Maisie Knew, 1168.  
457 Brooks, Henry James Goes to Paris, 134.
Hamlin Garland, Impressionism, and The Invention of Local Color Literature

Each morning in my quiet sunny room I wrote, with complete absorption…. I worked like a painter with several themes in hand passing from one to the other as I felt inclined.

- A Daughter of the Middle Border (1921)458

Hamlin Garland never met Sarah Orne Jewett, but he recounts in his retrospective Roadside Meetings (1930) once sending her an admiring letter. While Garland admired other local color writers, such as Mary Wilkins Freeman, Garland was careful to note that while the two shared certain generic similarities and wrote about a similar region, Jewett was “more adroitly literary.”459 Garland received a gracious response from Jewett agreeing with Garland’s perplexity as to “why we read realistic sketches with such delight, when the scene is laid in foreign countries, and are apt to find equally truthful and truly artistic sketches of our own neighborhood a trifle dull” (this apparently in spite of Jewett’s habit of giving her fictional places deliberately dull names, such as Dulham or Dunnet Landing).460 Rather than insisting on the inherent sufficiency of accurately representing local particularities or calling for the cultivation of a readership more attuned to the implicit beauty of local scenes which the force of habit had rendered merely banal, Jewett instead places the burden of vivifying and enlivening seemingly dull settings solely on the writer him or herself. American local color writing, writes Jewett, is

460 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 35.
not a priori “artistic,” at least not “as artistic…as our foreign neighbors.” Rather, she continues, “it is not the accuracy of the likeness but the artistic quality of the work that does count and should count most.”

That Jewett makes a distinction between accurate likeness and artistic quality in works of fictional prose writing is yet another instantiation of the tension between art and realism that this project has explored in the previous two chapters. In this case, however, the anxiety facing both Jewett and Garland—whether or not local color writing can be “literary” or “artistic”—mirrors contemporary debates by scholars and critics interested in the practical work of formulating and reformulating canons, and constructing classroom syllabuses. As Garland and Jewett’s correspondence makes clear, the status of “local color” writing was a topic of controversy and uncertainty even in its own time, and while this situation has long been acknowledged by scholars, it is worthy of renewed attention as questions of aesthetics are again coming to be a topic of interest. That Jewett was for Garland “more adroitly literary” implies that other “local color” writers were less so, and therefore that the status of local color writing as literature and as art was by no means certain—even in the mind of as ardent and articulate a supporter as Hamlin Garland.

Indeed, that Jewett so squarely placed the burden of making local color “artistic” on the practicing writer (rather than on audiences who had grown accustomed to racy plots and exotic characters) suggests that the relationship between local color subjects and an engaging local color style was very much an open question. That Jewett opposes accuracy of likeness—what we might call, to use Asher B. Durand’s language from the

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461 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 35.
previous chapter, the faculty of imitation – and “the artistic quality” of a work – what Durand calls the quality of *representation* – suggests that for Jewett at least, whatever “local color” writing turned out to be, it was not, as critics such as Eric Sundquist have pointed out, necessarily a patronizing term for realist representations by cultural, racial, gender, or ethnic minorities. Rather, in developing its own unique “artistic quality,” local color writing could distinguish itself from a manner of literary realism that was merely imitative. If local color writing, in order to become literary, depended on the expression of a particular “artistic quality,” distinct from its value as a faithful and detailed imitation of local particulars, what exactly were these “artistic qualities?” How did regionalist and local color writers attempt to transcend mere “accuracy of likeness” to achieve the “artistic” quality that would make a given work sufficiently literary and fuse a given representation’s value as a work of realism with its value as a work of art?

In this and the following chapter, I will suggest that it was largely through the conceptual and technical vocabulary of painting that local color writing attempted to evade and exceed its status as a second-rate genre (one associated with expectations that it be either humorous, documentary, sentimental, or some combination of these three qualities), and thereby achieve the status of literary art. Painting offered the medium or means – either by way of analogy or by the example of its practical method – by which local color writing could become local color literature, and created a generic horizon of expectation against which local color productions could be judged as more or less “artistic.” Whether or not these generic qualities do or do not accurately measure a given work’s literary merit is for our purposes here beside the point. The purpose of this and the

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following chapter will be to reconstruct a picture of the ways in which both Jewett and Garland sought to develop a system of values drawn from the language of painting in which their own literary experiments could be registered, understood, and assessed. At the same time, these writers exploited contemporary developments in artistic taste and a new critical interest in artistic experimentation between media in order to make their achievements understood as part of a cosmopolitan and international literary movement which further guaranteed the artistic character of their work. Far from being distinctly and definitionally parochial, local color writing that aspired to the status of art saw itself as participating in an increasingly cosmopolitan métier that was defiantly and even revolutionarily modern in its approach to representation.

The specific details of how local color writing adopted and adapted the languages and techniques of painting in order to achieve the status of literary art will be developed in depth in this and the following chapter, but in broad strokes we can say that both Garland and Jewett sought to renovate and revaluate the “sketch” form by erasing its associations with the popular humoristic local color writing of the previous generation as well its associations with popular documentary travel writing of exotic, quaint, or picturesque cultural situations. Instead they identified the “sketch” form with contemporary European movements in both painting and literature whose deliberate and self-conscious modernity were just beginning to be felt on the other side of the Atlantic. Impressionism in both painting and literature was a subject, as we have seen, of much skepticism in the United States in the 1870s and 1880s, and remained so well into the 1890s, even as its critical fortunes were rising in France and elsewhere. But over the course of the 1890s the “sketchy” qualities of painting and writing executed under the
sign of Impressionism gradually changed in meaning, and developed a revolutionary significance. Overturning the traditional hierarchy of genres that diminished landscape, genre, and still life painting at the expense of highly finished and elaborately composed tableaux of historical, mythological, or religious subjects, Impressionism’s radical style and method came to be associated not with a lack of finish but with a freshness, vitality, and immediacy absent from traditional and idealizing Academic representations.

The same revolution of values could be transposed into literary terms providing an occasion for literary realism to acquire cultural and artistic cachet. Replacing the traditional importance ascribed to idealized or heroic characters, as well as to well-crafted, exciting, and exotic plots whose outcome had a moral or didactic significance, literary impressionism, like its counterpart in painting, valued vividly picturesque description and ordinary or deliberately modern subjects and tableaux. Impressionism, it might also be said, focused the attention of the artist on the way that things in fact appeared to the eye, rather than on how the perceiver “knew” the thing to be. In this sense we can say that the Impressionist painter – and by extension his or her literary counterpart – was uniquely attuned to colors as they appeared in their specific locality: both due to atmospheric effects, to the quality of direct, indirect, and reflected light, and even to other colors to which any given color was proximate. As such, the values of

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463 On the various meanings and etymologies of local color see Vladimir Kapor, *Local Colour: A Travelling Concept* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009). Meaningfully, Kapor distinguishes between three distinct senses of the term: the first derived from the French couleur locale that “had a precise technical meaning relating to the theory of colouring and perspective in painting” (6), a second sense that indicates the transposition of this concept into literary terms that “took shape in the late eighteenth century, and was institutionalised in the early nineteenth century” (7), and a third specifically American sense that “is regularly used with reference to regionalist prose” (7). I hesitate to develop close connections between the conventional American usage and the precise, technical
impressionism appeared to offer a way of making realist literature – and its local color variant – “artistic.” While both Jewett and Garland also continued to write in more conventional, plot-driven narrative forms throughout their career, attention to the painterly form of the sketch enriches our understanding of the manifold ways in which local color writing, in order to both license and effect its own apotheosis into literary art, did so by analogy with the values and methods of late nineteenth century painting, and in so doing developed a unique perspective on a literary text’s ability to represent reality.

Why Garland and Jewett among the many other local color and regionalist writers of the late nineteenth century from which one could choose? To some degree the choice is arbitrary, but in another sense Jewett and Garland were unique among their contemporaries for the degree to which they self-consciously conceived of local color writing as a unique and radical literary art, and for the degree to which their conception of local color’s aesthetic dimensions was outlined by the methods and values of painting.

While remarkably different in style, subject, and temperament, and while Garland was some ten years Jewett’s junior, both writers were deeply invested and immersed in art circles and movements of their times. As we will see in this chapter, Hamlin Garland was himself a devoted acolyte of the new painting, and confessed to having had his very

meaning of “local color” in painting, which describes either the hypothetical identity of a discrete color unaffected by variant effects of light or atmosphere (an obvious impossibility, since there is definitionally no condition under which light could be said to be truly neutral), or the psychophysiological effect by which colors appear differently to the eye dependent on their situation relative to other colors and hues. The connection here, while suggestive, is too imprecise and, I think, probably mostly coincidental, especially given Kapor’s persuasive claim that “the very idea of the Local color movement, which underpins contemporary discussions of the concept of local color, is an after-the-fact fabrication of literary historians, coined to fit a specific aesthetic and ideological agenda” (26). For a different reading of these connections, see Jonathan David Shelly Schroeder, “The Painting of Modern Light: Local Color before Regionalism,” American Literature 86, no. 3 (September 2014), 551-581.
understanding of the world revolutionized by both its habits of perception and its expressive style. Garland was close with several of the first American painters to bring Impressionism to the United States and was a habitué of their studios. He was also a tireless practical supporter of the new method, giving lectures and writing articles and reviews, and even serving as the president of the Central Art Association of America which he was instrumental in founding, and which served as an important institution supporting new American painters, many of whom worked in a self-consciously Impressionist style. Likewise, Jewett’s own ideas of the sketch were to an important degree mediated and licensed both by comparison with European literary impressionists, but also through her own experiences with water-color painting, a medium in which she was a practiced amateur as early as the 1860s, a period when water color was becoming a popular medium associated with radical new movements in American art. She was also a close friend of many painters, illustrators, and other artists associated with the circle of her partner Annie Fields.

Additionally, both Garland and Jewett shared an admiration for the French painter Jean-François Millet, and, like Millet, who was more or less unique among his Barbizon contemporaries for his sympathetic portrayals of rural laboring bodies, both Jewett and Garland shared a belief in the ethical function of local color literature which was predicated upon an understanding of regionalist writing as realist writing. For Garland that function entailed the de-romanticization of rural labor and the laboring body, the presentation of which required a parallax vision of rural life from both an interior and an exterior perspective: that of the native and that of the tourist. For Jewett too, the ethical dimensions of regionalist writing were indistinguishable from its aesthetic dimensions.
For Jewett, better understanding and appreciating other people through literary representations mirrored the ways in which better understanding and appreciating landscapes and localities could be achieved through the medium and practice of painting. For both Jewett and Garland, in other words, the ethical dimensions of local color writing were indistinguishable from and indeed predicated on its aesthetic dimensions, and the dimensions that distinguished local color literature from humoristic, documentary, or sentimental local color writing were to a large extent furnished by analogy with painting.

Furthermore, by writing on both Jewett and Garland, I hope to apply some pressure on the assessment of Fetterley and Pryse in Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture (2003) that women’s regionalist writing is a separate and distinct genre from local color writing more broadly. Rather, I hope to show several ways in which a discussion of the influence of painting on local color writing reveals aspects of the genre’s participation in more cosmopolitan aesthetic movements that were at least theoretically indifferent to gender in a way that Fetterley and Pryse’s emphasis on regionalism’s domestic aesthetic obscures. This is not to undermine Fetterley and Pryse’s claims, only to look at local color writing across another grain, and I hope this perspective will enrich and deepen rather than diminish their insights.

But Is It Art?: Local Color Writing in Context

Before discussing Garland specifically, it will be necessary to establish some definitions and contexts with which and by which we will read his theoretical, critical, and fictional writings. Local color writing has usually been defined as a loose genre
arising after the Civil War notable for its detailed focus on a particular locality or region, usually a region removed from a more cosmopolitan urban center, that pays particular attention to local idiosyncrasies of culture, customs, technology, geology, meteorology, and dialect. Given its attention to cultural reportage, it is no surprise that much scholarship on local color writing has tended to focus on what Jane Tompkins would call the genre’s “cultural work.” Jean Bernardette, for instance, writes in *American Realism* (1972) that, “The vogue for local color, coming at the end of the Civil War, seems to have reflected a lingering, sentimental sectionalism which saw political nationalism as a threat to the independent village life of earlier America. Local colorists were consciously nostalgic, historians of a vanishing movement, recorders of a present that faded before their eyes.”

Other scholars, while agreeing with Bernardette’s assessment that local color writing “reflected a lingering, sentimental sectionalism” and was “consciously nostalgic” for folk ways threatened by an industrializing and nationalizing political economy, in fact suggest that local color writing as a genre, rather than resisting modernization and homogenization, in fact helped to mediate the incorporation of discrete regions into a larger national body. As Stephanie Foote writes, “Regional writing was produced at one of the most volatile moments in American history, and it was a form of writing particularly well suited to the task of processing and mediating the social and political conflicts that occurred with surprising rapidity at the turn of the century.”

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words, while purporting to play the role of cultural historians, advocates, and preservationists, through the sentimental nostalgia of their representations local color writers in fact belittled and patronized sectional and cultural differences by shelving them under the headings of sentimental fiction and ethnographic interest. Local color writing thus implicitly declared the supremacy of the national culture to whose gaze these localities were now subject. As Richard Brodhead writes in *Cultures of Letters* (1993), local color writing of this sort worked “to tell local cultures into a history of their supersession by a modern order now risen to national dominance.”

Given the assumption that local color or regionalist writing is performing cultural work, recent scholars have worked to analyze the manifold cultural, political, racial, class, or gender contexts and subtexts that the genre crystallizes. As such, local color writing has become a rich field for cultural historians and historicists eager to better understand the social, political, and economic world of which local color writing was a product and in which local color writing participated. While this work has been undoubtedly valuable, what has received insufficient attention is the “how” of local color writing: critics have told us what it is, and what it means, but have not yet sufficiently told us how it is made. For instance, while Richard Brodhead has convincingly argued that the creation of an audience for local color writing in the late nineteenth century was predicated upon the reception of local color style as literary “high” art through its publication in distinguished magazines such as the *Atlantic*, a literary market which both Jewett and Garland helped to create and from which they both benefited, Brodhead spends relatively little time describing the qualities of local color style that make it so.

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Writing of Jewett, Brodhead argues that, “By virtue of the reception her writing won her in this journal [the Atlantic], Jewett won a secure place in literature and as literature at a moment when a hierarchical reorganization of the literary sphere was pushing other writers – including popular women writers – into a newly disparaged condition.” In distinguishing her own work from the work of “popular women writers,” Jewett – and local color writing more generally – gained cultural capital even as she lost market share, or, as Brodhead writes, “what [Jewett] lost in popularity and income through this change of mode of production she gained back in status.” But what exactly about Jewett’s writing made it literary in a way that distinguished it from the work of “popular women writers,” and what about local color writing with aspirations towards the literary distinguished it from other more popular forms of writing?

To answer this question, we must look both at both the literary genealogy of local color writing as well as at the ways in which forms of local color writing that aspired towards the status of literature both accepted and rejected parts of this inheritance. While relatively little has been written about the aesthetics of local color writing, it is generally agreed that its most characteristic form is the sketch, and therefore that it can be best understood as a genre inheriting a rich tradition of American sketch-writing, a tradition that extends back to the earliest literature of the republic and which has often been seen as a unique and characteristic form of American writing. Lawrence Buell writes in New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance (1986) that, “Owing to the precedents of [Washington] Irving and [Mary Russell] Mitford, from the 1820s on a standard item in the repertoire of antebellum literary magazines and annuals was the short

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467 Brodhead, Cultures of Letters, 152-153.
468 Brodhead, Cultures of Letters, 153.
That Irving was among the first American authors to become popular in European literary markets certainly contributed to the identification of the sketch with American writing more broadly, and could lead Mitford herself, who was English, to “identify the short story or sketch as a specifically American art form.” Irving’s critical success also certainly contributed to a sense that sketch writing could compete in the literary marketplace with the more obviously popular novel, whose generic supremacy only grew over the course of the century.

The fact that Buell cites Irving and Mitford is perhaps illustrative of two “styles” of regionalist sketch-writing that would inform local color writing of the later nineteenth century, styles which we might call the humoristic and the sentimental. Indeed, when Donna Campbell writes that, “The two writers traditionally credited with establishing local color as a genre were Bret Harte and Harriet Beecher Stowe” she names the two modes in which local color writing has generally been understood. The humoristic mode informing local color writing reaches back to the sketches of Irving and tends to traffic in recognizable character types – stereotypes, really – the kind of characters that early twentieth century cultural critic Constance Rourke identified in *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931): the stoical but witty Yankee, the larger-than-life

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backwoodsman or frontiersman, the black minstrel and the like. The sentimental mode informing local color writing reaches back to writers such as Mitford and finds its immediate predecessors in romantic novels such as Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862) and *Oldtown Folks* (1869). Of course there is significant overlap between the humoristic and the sentimental modes, and both Harte and Stowe frequently write in both modes at once. But the consensus view among critics seems to be that the literary heritage of the sketch or sketchbook form in local color writing is a refinement or development of the humoristic tradition inherited from writers such as Washington Irving, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain, and of the sentimental tradition inherited from writers such as Mary Russell Mitford, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Rose Terry Cooke.

Another important predecessor of the local color sketch was the genre of travel writing, which remained a popular form of writing throughout the century. The literature is too vast to describe in much detail, and dates back to the promotional writing of the colonial period, but travel writing about the various regions of the American scene as a recognizable literary genre date back at least to popular writings such as Fanny Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), Irving’s *Astoria* (1836), Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), and Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life* (1849), to name but just a few. As the subtitle of Parkman’s book makes clear, travel writing as a genre was strongly associated with the sketch or collection of sketches, a term which itself derived from analogy with pencil drawings done by travelers to record unique or remarkable details of local landscapes or cultures. Indeed, the legitimacy or authenticity of the sketch was ensured by its very sketchiness: the unstudied or unaffected nature of a sketch guaranteed its documentary
value as an accurate representation done on the spot rather than from memory. Many popular works used both kinds of sketches to represent exotic locales, incorporating both writing and illustration, such as the popular *Home Book of the Picturesque* (1852) to which I referred in the previous chapter. Travel writing only increased in popularity in the post-war period, culminating in the monumental *Picturesque America* (1872-1874), edited by William Cullen Bryant and composed of dozens of travel sketches by well-known writers and engravings by well-known artists, a work which can certainly be seen as doing the kind of cultural work of Reconstruction era nation-building which local color writing has often been described as doing. Travel essays and sketches of both domestic and international locales were mainstays of magazines such as the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s* through the end of the century and beyond.

The sketch form of local color writing then has been primarily understood as the inheritance of these three sometimes overlapping sources: the humoristic, the sentimental, and the documentary. While it is certainly true that much of local color writing is greatly informed by these, none of these generic predecessors makes particularly available an understanding of local color writing as *literary art*, a term which in the nineteenth century was still reserved for the most part for productions written in verse and perhaps for novels of particularly high quality. On the other hand, local color writing’s inheritance of styles and generic expectations from the humoristic, sentimental, and documentary modes may occlude another dimension of sketch-writing available to writers in the late nineteenth century that was more self-consciously cosmopolitan and modern, a dimension by which the local color sketch could achieve an aesthetic value above and beyond the “lighter” generic expectations of the sketch’s American
progenitors. That genre is the literary impressionist word-painting that developed in France and elsewhere in Europe in the mid to late nineteenth century, a genre that had its origins in writing of the Romantic era but that achieved a new popular and critical status as it incorporated and synthesized developments in Impressionist painting.

When Jewett wrote to Garland that much American local color writing was not “as artistic…as that of our foreign neighbors” she refers, I claim, to these new movements in European circles and to a new aesthetic dispensation in which the form of the “sketch” was being radically revitalized and revaluated. This new dispensation replaced the humoristic, sentimental, or documentary value of the sketch with a purely aesthetic value, making the once minor “sketch” not only a major art, but the major art. Under this new dispensation, the sketch as a form underwent a complete revaluation in which it was not only no longer seen as merely a preparatory step on the way to a more finished production but was rather considered an end in itself, and indeed the end towards which modern art – inasmuch as it was modern art – tended. I have already discussed in some detail the misgivings that Henry James had about literary impressionism, and the risks that an artist in either painting or literature ran when he or she attended only to sensuous surfaces and superficial appearances without at the same time synthesizing those “impressions” with intellectual associations or moral reflection. But for a younger generation, or for writers without recourse to the substantial cultural resources that a formidable figure like James possessed, Impressionism appeared to offer a vital, modern, and democratic mode of painting and writing committed to overturning established hierarchies and authorities that had kept them from representing subjects and settings that they considered urgent.
While the sketch form was firmly established among American reading publics in the mid to late nineteenth century along the lines which I have just discussed, the sketch was simultaneously the source of acute aesthetic problems in Europe. Much of the opposition to the paintings exhibited at the First Impressionist Exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in Paris in 1874 was based not only on their scandalously modern subjects and settings and disconcertingly revolutionary perspectives, but on the prevailing feeling that they were mere “sketches” as opposed to “finished” works of art – and that they were consequently an outrage, even a scam. Of course Impressionist painters were the opposite of lazy, and their sketch-like method and style was the consequence of a principled and serious engagement with new developments both in the history of modern painting and in the psychophysiological bases of human perception.

Impressionist admiration for the sketch goes back at least to the influence of the remarkable oil sketches and cloud studies of John Constable which, though preparatory, were widely seen in France as expressing a unique vitality, spontaneity, and immediacy when they were displayed. Painted from nature, rather than from memory or the imagination in the light of the studio, Constable’s sketches represented a radical break with the idealist values that had hitherto defined classicist art, and paved the way for the plein air techniques that would occupy Impressionist painters such as Monet and Renoir.⁴⁷² Constable’s influence on Delacroix (and the Impressionists by extension) is well known, but of more immediate influence were Corot and the Barbizon painters whose plein air sensibility served as a model for Impressionist technique and whose sketches – rather than their finished works – Impressionist painters saw while visiting

their studios and felt were remarkable for their boldness, their immediacy, and their vitality.⁴⁷³

While perhaps difficult to see today, it was the “unfinished” or “sketchy” quality of broken brush strokes broadly and hastily laid on, sometimes with the aid of palette knives, that so engaged audiences and reviewers at Durand-Ruel – for better or for worse. Louis Leroy’s jocoserious review “The Exhibition of the Impressionists,” which coined the movement’s name, wrote of Monet’s Impression – soleil levant that its “impressionistic” qualities were most characteristically evident in the painting’s sketchy style (as well as its conspicuous flatness). “Wallpaper in its embryonic state,” he wrote with either disdain or good humor (perhaps both), “is more finished than that seascape.”⁴⁷⁴ Other reviewers, such as the novelist and critic Edmond Duranty, who had earlier observed the continuities between the earlier Barbizon movement and the “new painting,” were far more sympathetic, and tried to explain why the sketch-like style of the Impressionists represented a true revolution in taste.⁴⁷⁵ “Why, then,” asks Duranty in The New Painting (1876), “are people interested in them? Why are they forgiven for too often

⁴⁷³ See Steven Adams, The Barbizon School and the Origins of Impressionism (London: Phaidon, 1994), esp. 177-210. Adams writes that “the litany of historical links between the two movements is extensive” (178) and points in particular to the changing style of Charles-François Daubigny who began to paint in a sketchier and more unfinished style beginning in the 1860s (Théophile Gautier called it “lazy,” while a contemporary newspaper felt that he had become possessed by “an evil demon” [quoted in Adams, The Barbizon School, 190]). Before he championed the Impressionists, Durand-Ruel was an important dealer of Barbizon painting, and his financial support of this earlier movement helped to construct the institutional structure that would support the subsequent generation of “new” painters. I am indebted to Margot Bernstein in the art history department at Columbia University for helping me to understand these connections.


⁴⁷⁵ See Adams, The Barbizon School, 178.
producing – and with a touch of laziness – nothing but sketches, abbreviated summaries of works?” While confirming the difficulty which sketch-like form presented to more conventional expectations of painterly style, Duranty writes that the Impressionist technique is not only forgivable but bears the weight of historical necessity: “we suffocate under the weight of the creations of past centuries,” he writes, “[and] it is a great surprise to see new ideas and original creations suddenly burst forth.”

Like Constable and the Barbizon painters before them, Duranty writes that the Impressionists’ embrace of sketch-like style was more than an arbitrary expression of revolt: rather, the sketch was the appropriate form for the new painting which strove “to know nature intensely and to embrace nature with such strength that it can render faultlessly the relations between forms and reflect the inexhaustible diversity of character.”

That the sketch was the form in which this inexhaustible diversity of nature could be adequately represented is somewhat ironic, considering that other earlier painters, such as those of the Hudson River School or the English Pre-Raphaelites, had sought to represent that inexhaustible diversity by attending to detail as much as possible, rather than by sacrificing it. Duranty explains, however, that the inexhaustible diversity of nature is not so much a diversity of substance as a diversity of appearance. The appearance of a scene, Duranty writes, “depends on the hour, the season, and the place in which it is seen. […] If one wants to be truthful, one must neither conflate time and place, nor confuse the time of day and the source of light.”

For Duranty, reproducing the

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reality of an appearance depends on reproducing the particularity of time and place to an almost obsessive degree: “Here, in our homes,” he writes, “tonal values vary infinitely, depending on whether one is on the first floor or the fourth, whether a home is heavily furnished or carpeted, or whether it is sparsely furnished.”479 The sketch then is the only form adequate to represent this infinite diversity of appearance, since it can be quickly produced on the spot and in the moment.

Critic and poet Jules Laforgue further discusses the challenge of using the sketch form to capture the fleetingness of reality in his essay “Impressionism:”

Let us suppose that instead of painting a landscape in several sittings, [a painter] has the good sense to record its tonal values in fifteen minutes…. In the course of these fifteen minutes, the lighting of the landscape – the vibrant sky, the fields, the trees, everything within the insubstantial network of the rich atmosphere with the constantly undulating life of its invisible reflecting or refracting corpuscles – has undergone infinite changes, has, in a word, lived.480

Laforgue’s choice of words is not coincidental: nature, once perceived as relatively inert (as in the static, timeless, God-drenched tableaux of the Hudson River School), is now seen as the source of an almost impossibly incessant vitality, to capture which requires an equally vital and expressive form sensitive to its immediacies and nuances. The painting that can reproduce the particular effect of a fleeting moment shares in that vitality and immediacy, approaching by degrees the representation of life itself in all its sensuous fullness.

The very familiarity of this art historical narrative to a large degree obscures the truly radical revolution in artistic values that this movement effected. What is important

479 Duranty, The New Painting, 583.
for our purposes here is to describe the ways in which the revaluation of the sketch form also became distinctly legible in the literary arts around the same time. I have already sketched some of the outlines of these literary developments in my discussion of Henry James and his ambivalence towards these artists’ tendency to “paint” with words, but it will be worthwhile here to develop this picture in greater detail. This transformation, in which the literary sketch found means of achieving the status of high art, doubtless finds its precursors before the emergence of Impressionism through the highly aestheticized travel writing of late French Romantics such as Théophile Gautier’s *Voyage en Espagne* (1843), *Constantinople* (1853), *Voyage en Russie* (1867), and *Tableaux de siège* (1871) (many of which James himself reviewed), as well as Alphonse Daudet’s *Lettres de mon moulin* (1869), an album of richly descriptive and often humorous sketches and tales.

The *succès de scandale* of the Impressionist exhibitions of the 1870s, however, gradually made available a conceptual vocabulary in which highly stylized writing that resisted traditional assumptions of narrative form and function could be freshly understood. Comparing the works of new writers such as Pierre Loti and Guy de Maupassant, as well as those of older writers such as Daudet and Flaubert, to Impressionist painting became an increasingly common way of understanding their formal experiments, and was broadly characterized by the ways in which “impressionist” writing resisted the demands of traditional plot structures through a focus on reproducing the visual or sensory effects of objects or phenomena, as opposed to the ideas or concepts to which those objects or phenomena give rise.

The first substantial treatment of what is known as “literary impressionism” is an 1879 review of Alphonse Daudet’s novel *Les rois en exil* (1879) titled “L’impressionisme
dans le roman” by Ferdinand Brunetière, member of the conservative Académie Française and later editor of the Revue des deux Mondes, in which the review was published. What makes Les rois en exil “impressionist” is primarily the way in which it resists what Brunetière calls “drama,” “the sort of drama which draws all that is dramatic in it from the play of the characters alone and from the shock of inimical passions, the sort of drama which keeps straight on its way, crashing and breaking through obstacles, enticing the reader with its feverish movement, by its tight, simple, and violent action.” Daudet’s “novel,” on the other hand, resists such relentless plotting through its emphasis on what Brunetière calls the tableau: “Each scene becomes a tableau, each episode a canvas hanging before the eyes of the reader. Each tableau is complete in itself, isolated from the others as in a gallery by its frame, by its setting, by a large section of empty wall.” Conceptually, Daudet’s novel is less a stream of continuous actions than a discontinuous series of static images: Brunetière’s own metaphor literally recalls the experience of viewing pictures at an exhibition, in which a linear narrative between canvases may be implied by its curator, but in which the viewer may wander more or less freely.

For Brunetière, Daudet’s writing aspires towards the condition of painting inasmuch as it resists dramatic or verbal narrative and approaches static description, a

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481 Ferdinand Brunetière, “L’impressionisme dans le roman,” Revue des deux mondes (November 1879), 446-459. All the following translations from this text are my own.
482 “drame…qui sort du seul jeu des caractères et du seul choc des passions contraires, qui va adroit devant lui son chemin, franchissant ou brisant les obstacles, entraînant le lecteur dans le mouvement et comme dans la fièvre d’une action serrée, simple et violente” (448).
483 “Chaque scène alors devient un tableau, chaque épisode une toile suspendue sous les yeux du lecteur. Chaque tableau d’ailleurs est complet en lui-même, isolé des autres, comme dans une galerie, par sa bordure, par son cadre, par un large pan de mur vide” (452-453).
condition which Brunetière, as a member of the Académie Française, discovers largely in Daudet’s idiosyncratic grammar, including his use of the imperfect tense (“The perfect tense is narrative, the imperfect is picturesque”), his suspended sentences, and his suppression of coordinating conjunctions. Brunetière also finds evidence of pictorial style in Daudet’s peculiar writing method, which he supposes (probably without evidence) to be remarkably physical and painterly. Just as an impressionist painter became a mechanical instrument registering the impressions of the eye, so Daudet’s prose is produced by “the continuous action of exterior objects upon the eye and the impression of the eye upon the movement of the hand.” But while Daudet’s writing tends towards the static, the images he paints ironically give his art a highly original vitality: for Brunetière, Daudet’s unique “fidelity of the brush” gives him the ability to “give even inanimate things the appearance of life.” Like an impressionist painting, what appears initially to be a “jumble” or “mess” (fouillis) is suddenly and even miraculously “[brought] together into one living unity.”

Brunetière, like Henry James in the previous chapter, is at once cautiously admiring of Daudet’s talent and also dismissive of it as a form of art that, while perhaps beautiful and vivid, is more like painting than like writing: “Let us say [this] for the novels of M. Daudet, for his portraits and his tableaux: If they are not well written, they

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484 “Le parfait est narratif, l’imparfait est pittoresque” (450).
485 “l’action continue des objets extérieurs sur l’œil et de l’impression de l’œil sur le mouvement de la main” (449).
486 “avec cette fidélité de pinceau, mais surtout avec cet art infiniment subtil et patient qui réussit à donner même aux choses inanimées l’apparence de la vie” (448).
487 “tout à coup, fait surgir l’ensemble vivant” (449).
are very well painted, and very much alive.”

It is precisely for this reason that Brunetière is in fact scandalized by Daudet’s revolutionary new techniques: they introduce a category mistake in which the appearance of things takes precedence over ideas. “It is no longer literature,” he writes, “if we get things in and of themselves, and no longer the ideas of things that language claims to evoke.” For Brunetière, literature in the impressionist mode becomes conceptually more like painting in its attention to the appearance or surface of things rather than to the substance or nature of things, which for him represents a perversion of the nature of language itself. “It is only possible metaphorically to ‘paint with words,’” Brunetière writes, “and it is a particularly damaging business to language to want to realize that metaphor.”

Why is this metaphor so damaging to language? Brunetière is informed by the neoclassical and Aristotelian formal constraints of Gotthold Lessing’s *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits [Grenzen] of Painting and Poetry* (1766), in which the boundaries of painting and writing are rigorously defined and policed. “We conclude, then,” Lessing emphatically and pithily declaims, “that succession of time is the department of the poet, as space is that of the painter.” But for Lessing and Brunetière these boundaries are not the arbitrary and historical ossification of received ideas about literary and painterly form and style; they are, we might say in the parlance of our own time, the consequence of cognitive laws of the human perception of sensory media. Lessing writes that literary

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488 “Dison à notre tour des romans de M. Daudet, de ses portraits et de ses tableaux: Si cela n’est pas écrit, cela est peint et cela est vivant” (449).
489 “Il n’y a plus de littérature si ce sont les choses elles-mêmes et non plus les idées des choses que la langue prétend évoquer” (457).
490 “Il n’est possible que par métaphore de peindre avec des mots, et c’est une entreprise particulièrement préjudiciable à la langue que de vouloir réaliser la métaphore” (457).
“painting” is essentially impossible because the desire to compose whole images of bodies “comes into collision with the consecutiveness of language” – the very fact that words themselves must be taken in by eye or ear one by one. 492 In this same vein, Brunetière writes that literary impressionism chez Daudet “is the attempt to render that which simply cannot be rendered, the attempt to express that which is not in the nature, in the constitution of writing to express.” 493

The desire of the literary impressionist to represent things in themselves is a radical and even impossible step in the history of representation, and one that language itself, by its very nature, is not constituted to achieve. This impossibility, Brunetière explains, quoting Lessing’s neoclassical insight, is because “painting takes place entirely in space” while “language on the contrary takes place entirely in time. A canvas can be taken in all together and in one glance. A narrative, like a speech, can only be taken in by successive fragments which are added together one by one, which are changed by this additive process, and which compensate and complement one another.” 494

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492 Lessing, Laocoön, 116.
493 “mais surtoit la corrompre jusque dans ses sources en la contraignant de rendre ce qu’elle ne peut pas rendre et d’exprimer ce qu’il n’est ni dans sa nature, ni sans son institution d’exprimer” (457).
494 “la peinture est tout entière dans l’espace, mais que la parole au contraire est toute dans le temps. Une toile se saisit d’ensemble et d’un coup d’oeil; une narration comme un discours ne sont perçus que par fragmens successifs qui s’ajoutent un à un, pour se modifier en s’ajourant et se compenser en se complétant” (458). It is worth noting the similarities between Brunetière’s neoclassical aesthetics and the critical insights of his conservative literary and critical protégés, particularly Irving Babbit whose The New Laokoön (1910) recapitulates many of the same conservative arguments against artistic freedom, and T. S. Eliot. Also worthy of further research would be the influences of conservative or neoclassical aesthetics on the writing of Percy Lubbock, whose Craft of Fiction seems to be informed at least partly by similar impulses towards specificity of media and the cognition of reading. The literature on Lessing’s well-known distinction and the consequences for modern art is large. See e.g. Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” The Sewanee Review 53, no. 4 (Autumn 1945), 643-653; W. J. T.
impressionism, which Brunetière defines as “the systematic transposition of the means of expression of one art, which is the art of painting, into the domain of another art, which is the art of writing,” is a contradiction in terms.\textsuperscript{495} “Painting with words” is a categorical mistake that throws into confusion the essences of both painting and writing as separate media, and misunderstands the way in which the human organism perceives and cognizes each medium.

This separation of media, in other words, is not so much an arbitrary ordinance of the French Academy but “a law even of nature.”\textsuperscript{496} The generic novelty of Daudet doesn’t merely trespass on accepted standards; it is a monstrous affront to language itself. In consequence, Brunetière calls on prose writers to reject painterly descriptiveness and return language to its purely semantic or narrative function. Language must give the substance or meaning of things rather than the sensuous appearance of them, and he recommends a predictable list of approved, conservative authors as models – Rousseau, Voltaire, Lesage, and the Abbé Prévost – who “did not stop at appearances, did not play at being artistes (or rather dilettantes) on the undulating and multiple surface of things” but “got right to the bottom at once.”\textsuperscript{497}

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But while Brunetiere argues for a conservative and traditionally neoclassicist approach to the arts, in its dismissal of Daudet’s modern syncretic approach he ends up making the most persuasive claims for its importance and significance. Indeed, the very existence of Daudet’s novel as well as his critical and commercial success belies the supposed impossibility of his radical new method and announces a new aesthetic dispensation in which the immediacy of sensuous description replaces narrative or dramatic plotting. Indeed, Brunetière’s discussion of Daudet helps us to see the influence and legacy of the importation of the values of impressionist painting into prose writing of the late nineteenth century, particularly prose writing that embraced the sketch as a genre or which demonstrated stylistically “sketchy” features.

In this way one possibility for “artistic” prose writing was a painterly approach modeled after that of the Impressionists. The unfinished quality of the prose sketch ensured not only its accuracy but also its unique immediacy and vitality: it was a direct record of a personal impression done without the mediation of memory or imagination, and was therefore closer to the vitality of nature. The increasing popularity and cultural cache of French writers such as Daudet, Maupassant, and Pierre Loti, as well as Russian writers who were being translated into both French and English, particularly Ivan Turgenev whose Zapisky Oхотника (1855) [best rendered in English as A Hunter’s Sketches, but usually rendered in French as Mémoires d’une chasseur] was seen as an early predecessor of the genre, distinguished the relatively vulgar pleasures of narrative or plot-driven story-telling from the more refined aesthetic pleasure of painterly prose, and thus certified sketch-like writing as literary high art.
Brunetière’s critique of Daudet, I think, is not only insufficiently appreciated in American literary criticism, but can provide the terms to help us better understand Jewett’s lament to Garland that American local color writing is not “as artistic…as our foreign neighbors.” The lens of literary impressionism can help us to see aesthetic dimensions of American local color writing that may have previously escaped notice, and to better see the ways in which local color writing sought to distinguish itself from the relatively “lighter” generic expectations of the humoristic, the sentimental, and the documentary, the generic landmarks among which local color writing has been previously located. The impressionist sketch provided the local color writer with a vocabulary of forms and values by which prose writing, in order to become “artistic” or literary, did so by means of being like painting: by being, in other words, focused on the descriptive, static, or visual dimensions of language rather than on the narrative, dynamic, or verbal dimensions of language, as well as by paying attention to features such as setting, color, objects, architecture, weather, topography, geology, and the like, without necessarily ascribing semantic or narratively purposive meaning to those features. We might say that the vocabulary of literary impressionism helps us to better locate both the “local” and the “color” in local color.

In the rest of this chapter, I will develop in detail the particular ways in which Hamlin Garland sought to raise local color to the level of literary art by means of the visual logic of painting, both in terms of his intellectual biography and through his own fictional experiments.
Upon arriving in Boston in 1884, Hamlin Garland threw himself into an intense program of self-education. Nearly penniless, Garland recounts spending hours and hours at the public library reading and studying with the passionate dedication of a young man from the provinces trying to attain for himself the level of culture and education required to join the city’s literary cliques and coteries, which at that time were still overwhelmingly dismissive of provincial interlopers. He labored like an ascetic: “I was only a brain,” Garland writes in his retrospective *Roadside Meetings* (1930). “My mind was at once a photographic plate and a phonographic film. Nothing escaped me.”

But reading Garland’s memoirs and letters of the period, one is impressed not so much by his assiduous focus as by the relative lack of literary reading that he describes. While he expressed some interest in Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, and Walt Whitman, and apparently gave an evening series of lectures on “Victor Hugo and His Prose Masterpieces” and “Some German and American Novels,” reading Garland’s own retrospective account of his interests at the time, one is rather surprised that he became a writer of prose fiction at all, so small a part of his own self-education it seems to be.

Even as he was writing and publishing his first pieces in magazines and journals, Garland wrote that he “had no intention at that time of becoming a fictionist.” Garland would later come to call himself a “veritist,” a term which he invented and which was

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meant, apparently, to take him a step beyond even the “truthful treatment of material”
that made one a realist in the words of William Dean Howells. Opposed to a term as
resoundingly noble as “veritism,” “fictionism” sounds disparaging indeed. Next to
verities, fictions sound like little more than lies.

Garland’s self-appellation of “veritist” – rather than “fictionist” – recalls
Howells’s provoking claim that realist novels were not quite novels, at least not novels in
the traditional sense of the word: writing of James’s The Tragic Muse in Criticism and
Fiction, Howells writes that, “I call Mr. James a novelist because there is yet no name for
the literary kind he has invented, and so none for the inventor.”

Garland seems to have felt that he hit on just such a name in “veritism,” and reveled in the label’s capacity and
latitude to search for and express “truth” in a multitude of métiers. While Garland says
little about his early influences in fiction, he is both voluble and articulate about his many
other interests and influences in other areas of art and philosophy. His many memoirs
present a compelling portrait of a young man passionately engaged with a wide range of
ideas and media: theater and acting, particularly the art of Edwin Booth and the rhetorical
language of the Delsarte system of oratory; the synthetic and evolutionary philosophy of
Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, John Fiske, and Ernst Haeckel; the aesthetic
philosophy of Eugène Véron and Hippolyte Taine; and the radical economic theories of
Henry George.

While obviously quite distinct, Garland’s diverse intellectual and artistic interests
can be said to share a common central concern: human expressiveness and a progressive

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501 Howells, Criticism and Fiction, 57.
502 See especially: Roadside Meetings, 12-24, 61-68, 272-293. See also Keith Newlin,
Hamlin Garland: A Life (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2008), 64-78.
belief that expression will evolve and grow more refined as a result of developing social and historical conditions. Material and scientific progress were not ends in themselves but the means of achieving ever more complete and complex modes and manners of expressiveness by liberating the individual through the gradual destruction of tradition-bound pieties and petrified hierarchies.

The evolutionary march of civilization was also the march of art, and in both cases progress occurred through the demystification of received ideas, and by the systematic rationalization of dimensions of expression and experience that had hitherto been considered mysterious. The case of Garland’s interest in oratory is illustrative of the ways in which his beliefs in synthetic philosophy and scientific progress informed his ideas about art and expression. Upon arriving in Boston, Garland fell under the influence of one Moses True Brown, the founder of the Boston School of Oratory, who sought to develop a system of oratory and expression on scientific grounds. In Roadside Meetings, Garland recalls that Brown “was just finishing a volume called ‘The Philosophy of Expression’ wherein he sought to define the physical or natural basis for every gesture and tone.”503 While seemingly quixotic, Brown’s project echoes the better known Delsarte system of acting which also sought to create a vocabulary of gestures, tones, and poses that reliably corresponded to and therefore expressed inner emotional states, and which was already widely popular in the United States by 1884. But while Delsarte poses had already become conventional and affected, Brown attempted to recreate an expressive vocabulary based not on habit or received ideas but on “the laws of

503 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 13.
evolution.” Brown was “not a mystic” but a rationalist, a scientist in the manner of Spencer, Darwin, or Fiske.504

Inspired by Brown’s example, Garland too attempted to create a written system that could reliably transcribe elements of acting or oratory that had hitherto been beyond the reach of language. Taking as his subject the famous actor Edwin Booth, Garland developed a system of words and symbols that could take account of the dimensions of Booth’s acting that so impressed him – his tone of voice, his gestures, even the movements of his eyes – and for which no adequately expressive system of transcription existed. Rather than effusing over Booth’s ineffable talent, as so many critics of the time did, Garland sought rather to develop a general science in which not only Booth’s expressive talent but all expressive talent could be generalized and systematized. Writing to Booth himself in 1886, Garland lamented that “the matter of expression has...been for the most part in the hands of ‘professors of Elocution’ till Darwin in 1872 [in presumably The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals] put it on a universal basis; and Spencer, [Alexander] Bain[,] [Paolo] Mantegazza and many others have pushed it into the region of science and into the splendid domain of causes.”505

As in the synthetic philosophy of Herbert Spencer, no features of the world were beyond the reach of scientific appropriation or conceptualization, and the proof of such a “universal basis” for expression in biology or psychology would demonstrate the natural progress of the human organism in coming to a more complete consciousness of itself. It

504 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 14.
would also furnish the groundwork for a more completely expressive language. While his own project may have seemed as quixotic as Brown’s, Garland in fact received an adulatory response from Booth, expressing appreciation and gratitude for Garland’s “mention of those seldom noticed effects of tone, eye, and gesture.” Booth was satisfied “to know that such delicate lights and shades are appreciated and not wasted, as I often feared they were, than in loudest applause bestowed on the balder effects of one’s art work.”

Garland’s interest in Véron, Taine, and George also demonstrates a progressive faith in totalizing or synthetic systems of meaning that attempt to resolve superficial or phenomenal differences by finding the common purposes or forms – ‘the splendid domain of causes’ – that undergird them. But Garland’s interest in oratory also betrays an implicit skepticism about the existence of just such a domain, and a nervousness about the violence of narrowly purposive systems of meaning in which, to use Booth’s terms, “delicate lights and shades” are converted into “balder effects.” When Garland writes to Booth that “voice and action can not be written, they are only indicated, and upon the degree of their expressiveness are…authors ranked,” he not only expresses a fascination with the subtle, non-linguistic dimensions of enunciated or performed speech, but also casts doubt on the ability of written language itself to ever adequately convey the full meaning of an utterance or situation.

508 Garland to Booth, Selected Letters, 12.
As such, we might understand Garland’s intense interest in oratory and his relative lack of interest in prose fiction as evidence that Garland took prose fiction to be insufficiently expressive. In other words, his professed desire to reduce the apparently ineffable or inexpressible dimensions of performed speech to a standardized written index in fact betrays Garland’s envy over the ability of performed speech to express meaningful dimensions of human experience that exceed language’s narrowly purposive or semantic functions. If, according to the language of the Delsarte system, “man is divided into life, body, and soul, where vocal sound (i.e. tones, not words) expresses life, words express mind, and movement expresses soul,” written prose capable of expressing only mind would seem a rather hopelessly denuded medium.\(^{509}\)

I propose that it is in terms of the expressive possibilities of its medium that we can best understand Garland’s other early passion: painting. Like acting and oratory, Garland was drawn to painting – particularly Impressionist painting – for the ways in which it immediately expressed non-linguistic dimensions of meaning, a sensuous fullness not available by means of the written word. Garland’s acute understanding of Impressionist painting is of more than passing interest to the scholar hoping to understand his critical and fictional work, as well as the status of local color writing in the late nineteenth century more broadly. In the first place, understanding the prominence of painting in Garland’s early career helps us to better understand the relative paucity of literary models in his memoirs, letters, and other writings and to understand the degree to which Garland’s literary writing was modeled on the methods and values of painting. Indeed, Garland’s own struggles to create a new “local color” school of prose writing –

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\(^{509}\) Quoted in Newlin, *Hamlin Garland: A Life*, 68.
fictional or otherwise – was both licensed and mediated by Impressionist painting to a larger extent than by existing literary works. Garland’s earliest examples of artistic success are painters, not writers, and he largely understands his own local color method in terms of the theory and practice of painting rather than in terms of fiction writing.

One of these models of success was John Joseph Enneking, whom Garland met in Boston in the early 1880s and who introduced him to the world of painting. In *Roadside Meetings*, Garland frames his first significant encounter with painting as nothing less than an initiation. Meeting Enneking in his studio for the first time, Garland recalls that, “The hour I spent with him that afternoon made many changes in my thinking. He took me into a strange new world, a world wherein men were wholly concerned with harmony of color and grace of line. For the first time in my life, I heard the language of the studio and breathed the odor of paint.” Garland’s description of his experience is attuned to what it has become fashionable to call the affective dimensions of his surroundings – not the words but the *sound* of the language of the studio, not the colors but the *odors* of paint – suggesting that his interest in painting was initially motivated by its ability to express dimensions of experience beneath or beyond the reach of conceptualizing language.

This attunement to the affective dimensions of painting suggests, in other words, that Garland’s initial admiration for Enneking and for painting itself was predicated on its entirely *aesthetic* view of the world. The world that a painter beheld was a world not conceived of in terms of solid objects but in terms of “harmony of color and grace of line.” Enneking’s own interests as a painter lay in expressing through paint those qualities

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that exceed or escape purposive meaning – “tone, depth, mystery”511 – just the qualities of performed speech in the work of Edwin Booth that Garland admired – and, perhaps paradoxically, sought to codify, systematize, and rationalize. Despite obvious differences in terms of their medium, both painting and oratory share an enviable expressiveness not immediately available to written prose, and an ability to convey or present dimensions of the word that exceed conceptualization – even as Garland’s evolutionary-progressive method attempted to conceptualize them.

While Garland was involved with the world of theater and rhetoric, he was at least as involved in the world of painters and studios. At the same time as Garland’s association with the Boston School of Oratory and his early lectures on drama, acting, and literature, he was also becoming acquainted with the artists associated with the newly founded Cowles Art School and various other studios and institutions in and around Boston. While Enneking was an older figure from the days of William Morris Hunt (who had died drowning in 1879) and the Barbizon School, whose own work was stylistically transitional, Garland soon came into contact with a younger set of painters who unreservedly embraced the new Impressionist painting from France that was just beginning to be seen on the western side of the Atlantic. These painters were among the first Americans to work in that style, and included Dennis Miller Bunker, Robert Vonnoh, and Lilla Cabot Perry.

The novelty of the Impressionist style can hardly be overstated (particularly because Impressionist colorist technique made it especially difficult to reproduce meaningfully in mass-produced black and white prints). Garland recounts in *Roadside

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Meetings seeing some of the first Impressionist canvases by American artists brought to the United States in Perry’s studio. A group of pictures by the American painter John Leslie Breck, which Perry has just brought back from France in 1889, shocked Garland “each with its flare of primitive colors – reds, blues, and yellows, presenting ‘Impressionism,’ the latest word from Paris.”

Garland quickly developed a keen understanding of Impressionist technique informed by discussions with painters themselves, particularly Bunker, who taught at the Cowles School and was extremely influential for a younger generation of American Impressionists, despite his early death at the age of twenty-nine in 1890. “I became a regular caller at studios and joined in their discussions,” Garland recounts. “I entered into the technical problems which engaged painters and sympathized with their resentments.”

What were these resentments? Garland recounts that Bunker’s own shift from a more traditionally academic style, learned at the École des Beaux-Arts with Jean-Léon Gérôme, to the brighter, looser manner of Impressionism in the late 1880s was representative of a broader “struggle” facing American artists who were trying to “chang[e] from ‘the school of mud’ to the school of open air.” That Garland called this transition a “struggle” is a revealing choice of words. Understanding the revolutionary force of the new painting, Garland soon became an active partisan of what he called “the campaign for Monet, Sisley, Pizarro, and other of the European painters who had sternly

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512 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 245-246. The first Impressionist canvases by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and others were exhibited in Boston in 1883 and in New York in 1886. See Erica E. Hirshler, Dennis Miller Bunker: American Impressionist (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 57-59.
513 Garland, Roadside Meetings, 30.
banished black and brown from their palettes.”\textsuperscript{515} These “stern” new painters Garland likened to “a camp of…young revolutionaries…at war with ‘the bitumen school’ who had studied in Germany and Holland.”\textsuperscript{516} The “school of mud” or the “bitumen school” were both disparaging terms for the so-called Munich school, whose canvases were characterized by an dark and exaggerated chiaroscuro. As his language suggests, Garland conceived of painters like Bunker and other young Impressionist painters as waging a war of revolution against the forces of aesthetic conservatism, and who sought to make nature itself, rather than existing works of art, the standards against which a painting or other representation would be judged.\textsuperscript{517}

Garland was not alone in thinking that Impressionist style and technique represented a radical overturning of established hierarchies that could be easily made to align with an evolutionary-progressive politics. Kathleen Pyne in \textit{Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America} (1996) argues that “Despite the oft-voiced rhetoric of ‘art for art’s sake,’ the function of the visual arts in this period was implicitly acknowledged by artists and critics alike as one of assisting the evolutionary progress of American society.”\textsuperscript{518} On the one hand, Impressionism’s flatness, loose or “lazy” brushwork, and high-keyed palette were widely ridiculed and even feared. Just as Henry James questioned the irreverent cynicism of

\textsuperscript{515} Garland, \textit{Roadside Meetings}, 31.
\textsuperscript{516} Garland, \textit{Roadside Meetings}, 32.
\textsuperscript{517} Otto Stark, the Indiana painter whom Garland championed, wrote in 1895 that the Munich School as practiced by painters such as William Merritt Chase, Frank Duveneck, and Walter Shirlaw was not so much a conservative force as it was the first step of the “revolution”: “the Munich movement...[was] only a round in the ladder of an upward movement in art” that led inevitably to Impressionism (“The Evolution of Impressionism,” \textit{Modern Art} 3, no. 2 [Spring, 1895], 53, 54).
Impressionist painters and their literary counterparts, Pyne writes that “Americans trying to protect their religious investments from the incursions of Darwinian science could and did perceive Monet’s impressionism as a dreaded spectre of positivism and agnosticism.” On the other hand, Pyne continues, others of a younger generation or a more radical bent felt that “impressionism could also be useful to those dedicated to Comte’s Religion of Humanity, particularly to those committed to a politics that prescribed the development of cultural forms suited to the needs of a nonelitist, egalitarian society.” Garland was just such a person, and so Impressionist painting seemed a natural artistic analogue to his radically Georgist and Populist political views.

Garland’s appreciation of Impressionism was not simply based on its shocking newness and power to épater les bourgeois, but on a conviction that Impressionist technique was a more “evolved” method of painting derived from a revised and progressive understanding of the nature of light and color. The Impressionists, writes Garland, “claim[ed] that all the effects of nature could be obtained by the use of red, blue, and yellow pigment, a claim which rested on the scientific constitution of light.” In this sense, Garland’s understanding of Impressionist painting aligned nicely not only with his Georgist politics, but with his faith in the evolutionary-progressive thinking of Spencer,

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Darwin, Taine, and the like. Indeed, Garland himself claims that it was reading Herbert Spencer that prepared his “acceptance of the blue and purple shadows of impressionism,” an acceptance that “was singular in that it was scientific, for in a chapter on Architecture by Herbert Spencer I had happened upon a description of blue shadows on a marble building, and a discussion of their probable cause.” The blue and purple shadows of Impressionism, so frequently mocked, were not arbitrarily expressive stylistic touches, but real phenomena to which the human eye had become blinded by the received, conceptual understanding that shadows are a neutral hue.

An understanding of the scientific bases of Impressionist technique was most immediately available to Garland from Eugène Véron’s *Esthetics* (1878, English translation 1879), a volume which he recounts reading assiduously and from which he in fact derived the term “veritism.” In the *Esthetics*, Véron describes in detail the nature of light and color through discussions of Goethe, Young, Helmholtz, and Chevreul and defines true color as an “optical mixture” that occurs dynamically in the eye rather than statically in the pigments on the canvas, an insight that of course motivated the formal renovations of Monet, Sisley, Pizarro and others. To view the world like an

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524 Originally published in French as *L'Esthétique : origine des arts, le goût et le génie, définition de l'art et de l'esthétique...* (Paris, C. Reinwald et Cie, 1878). Garland would have known this text from its English translation.

Impressionist was to view it with both the eyes of the artist and the eyes of the scientist. As we have seen in the case of Howells, it was a critical commonplace in the late nineteenth century to understand realism as primarily “scientific” and analytic, rather than “artistic” and expressive. But the Impressionist painter, according to Spencer’s synthetic philosophy or Véron’s aesthetic philosophy, was both scientist and artist at once. Putting one’s vision and representation of the world in line with modern science meant seeing the world not scientifically or artistically, but “truly.”

Véron’s *Esthetics* systemically describes this fusion, and attempts to demonstrate that all the arts, despite their different media, share the same psychological root in a desire for vital expression. Art, according to Véron, “is nothing but the spontaneous expression of certain conceptions of things,” a significantly vague formulation that easily licenses comparisons between apparently dissimilar media and genres. The emphasis on expression was certainly attractive to Garland, as was Véron’s progressive ethos. Like Spencer, and indeed much like Hegel in his own *Aesthetics*, Véron claims that vital art progresses historically towards greater immediacy and personal expressiveness. The first stage of art is “academic,” in which an artist copies from preexisting models; the second is realistic, in which the artist copies exactly what he sees; and the third is the method of impressionism in which representation is based in an artist’s personal vision. Impressionist art is remarkable mainly for its vitality: next to art in the Impressionist mode, academic art is lifeless, like “the frames in which entomologists fix their unfortunate beetles and butterflies with pins through their bodies. The figures of these masters of drawing bear each in its heart an invisible pin which long since has destroyed

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their life.” For Véron, decadence in art is marked not by departure from classic forms, but by attending to classic forms too closely: decadence is a feature of the staid academicism of the Munich School or the École des Beaux-Arts in which “art ceases to be the sincere and spontaneous expression of the general sentiments.” Impressionist – or verist – art, on the other hand, is the immediate expression of an artist’s individual impressions without reference to preexisting models. It is both impressive (and thus “realist”) and expressive (and thus “artistic”) in the same stroke.

Impressionist painting then served Garland as a vital model for a progressive, modern art that was both democratic in method and local in its sources and subjects, and because of its insistence on a strenuously personal vision, it was also capable of appealing to a wide audience who lacked the refined sensibility and art historical knowledge that had previously been used to police the boundaries of aesthetic high culture. In creating and cultivating an audience for Impressionism, particularly in the West, Garland was an active and instrumental force. It has been acknowledged but unexamined the intense degree to which Garland in the 1890s was involved not just in arguing for new Impressionist painters in works of criticism such as Crumbling Idols (1894), but in building institutions that would financially support them. Importantly, Garland served as President of the board of the Central Art Association of America, founded in Chicago in 1894. That same year, the CAA, in partnership with the Art Institution of Chicago, hosted an exhibition of American Impressionist painting featuring work by Boston and Northeast based artists such as E. C. Tarbell, Frank Weston Benson, Robert Vonnoh, and Theodore Robinson, as well as Western painters such as T. C.

528 Véron, Esthetics, 254.  
529 Véron, Esthetics, xiv.
Steele. The catalog of the exhibition was written by Garland himself, and features an extensive preface that lays out the Association’s curatorial rationale. *Impressions on Impressionism: Being a Discussion of the American Art Exhibition at the Art Institute, Chicago* (1894) takes the form of an extensive dialogue among an anonymous “critical triumvirate”: a sculptor (Lorado Taft, with whom Garland co-founded the Association – Garland also married his sister, Zulime), a “conservative painter” (Charles Francis Browne, who was from Boston but who moved to Chicago and became a supporter of the new painting, though his own work retained much of the older, Barbizon-like style), and a novelist (Garland himself). While framed as a dramatic discussion between three figures working in three separate media, Garland evidently wrote the entire dialogue himself, which offers throughout a humorous but incisive understanding of Impressionist technique and advocates strongly for the new painting, particularly as practiced by Western artists.

At the beginning of their “tour” of the exhibition, the novelist stops the triumvirate before a “canal picture” by T. C. Steele (probably “Along the Canal” [1894]). The novelist calls it “good clear painting” and notes with approval that “Steele is a western man. […] He has never done more direct and natural work.”530 That Garland identifies Steele’s painting as “natural” demonstrates the influence of Véron’s progressive aesthetic philosophy. “How can a man paint, really paint, what he doesn’t

530 *Impressions on Impressionism: Being a Discussion of the American Art Exhibition at the Art Institute, Chicago* (Chicago: Printed for the Central Art Association, 1894), 3. Held by the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art. As the adjectives that Garland uses to describe Steele’s painting suggests, Garland tends to feel that Impressionist painting can restore to art not only its vitality, but its virility. Pyne argues that Garland neatly distinguishes what “he termed the effete and effeminate mode of the Barbizon landscapes that dominated the market in the 1870s and 1880s” from “the health and virility he perceived in the impressionist mode” (*Art and the Higher Life*, 240).
“feel?” asks the conservative painter, eliciting a parenthetical cry of “Bravo” from the novelist.  

That modern painters, particularly Western ones such as Steele, are “naturally” seeing and feeling for themselves, rather than imitating pre-existing models, corroborates Garland’s assessment that American art is reaching a new evolutionary stage of its development. In language that evokes both Véron and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the novelist concludes their tour of the exhibition by claiming that, “We can’t go on doing imitations and taking notes abroad. What pleases me about the Exposition is that while the principle of impressionism is almost everywhere it is finding individual expression.” Having moved from Véron’s first stage of copying to the second stage of natural mimesis, Garland is enthusiastic that American Impressionists have already achieved the third stage of individual expressiveness.

In this respect, Garland directly addresses one of the most common critiques of Impressionist painting, one that we have seen in Howells’s Coast of Bohemia, published in 1893 (a novel which Garland probably read): that while it purported to offer an immediate, “objective” way of seeing reality without reference to preexisting aesthetic models, Impressionism was in fact a “foreign” import with distinct stylistic markers (purple shadows, loose brushwork) that for some had already by the 1890s come to seem like an affectation. Garland is aware of this contradiction, and notes with satisfaction that while earlier American Impressionists may have initially imitated the styles of Monet or Renoir and painted French scenes in Brittany or Giverny, they were now coming to develop individual manners of painting based on the principles of Impressionism, not the style of Impressionism. “Henry and Herter, and Steele, and Tarbell, and Vonnoh, and

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531 Impressions on Impressionism, 12.
532 Ibid., 23.
Robinson all have a different touch – they are gaining mastery of an individual technique. This shows we’re pulling out of the imitative stage,” writes Garland, again using the terminology of Véron. “There are very few pictures here with Monet’s brush-stroke imitated in them. The next step is to do interesting American themes and do it naturally.” The development from copying to mimesis to individual expressiveness is for Garland, as for Véron, emphatically progressive and historical. “We never will return to the dead black shadow, nor to the affected grouping of the old,” Garland concludes. “Meanwhile the videttes of art will push on to other unconquered territory.” This final image recalls Garland’s description of Bunker and others as a “camp of revolutionaries” or a military vanguard (a “vidette” is a scout or fore-runner) conquering new territory and presumably readying it for more permanent settlement.

Garland supported the progressive development and expansion of American painting by actively promoting Western painters who painted Western subjects. With the CAA Garland was also involved in putting on an important exhibit of Indiana painters of the so-called “Hoosier Group” of Steele, Richard Gruelle, William Forsyth, J. Ottis Adams, and Otto Stark that was instrumental to the development of Western regionalist painting. The CAA also published a magazine, Arts for America, whose self-professed purpose was, as the magazine’s somewhat supercilious motto states, “the promotion and dispersing of good art among the people.” The promotion and dispersion of “good art” – meaning apparently both aesthetically and socially “good” – focused on painting,

\[533\] Ibid.
\[534\] Ibid., 24.
drawing, and the fine arts as well as crafts and design, with a particular attention to the roles and uses of these arts in public education.\footnote{See Newlin, \textit{Hamlin Garland: A Life}, 202-204.}

“Glimpses of a radiant world”: \textit{Crumbling Idols}, Impressionism, and Literary Form

It is not necessarily surprising that Garland, as a man with interests ranging from theater and oratory to philosophy and natural science, should be so professionally involved with foundations and magazines that exhibited and advocated for new painting. What is maybe more surprising is that Garland was \textit{not} closely involved with any journals or institutions promoting literary writing. As such, rather than looking at the absence of writings about fiction merely as merely peculiar or unaccountable, we might rather look at the presence of writing about painting as a lens for thinking about fiction. Indeed, aspects of Garland’s own fictional work become more comprehensible when we understand them through the lens of Impressionist painting. With this in mind we can read Garland’s interesting and extensive essay on Impressionism in \textit{Crumbling Idols} (1894), an essay which is apparently drawn from several lectures which he gave through the CAA, as an exploration not just of Impressionist painting but of Garland’s theory of local color writing. Indeed, \textit{Crumbling Idols} gives considerable prominence to Impressionist painting, linking it in an essential way to the local color movement, which was more obviously the theme of the collection of essays as a whole.

Indeed, Impressionist painting was the most obvious formal demonstration of the principles of “local color” in art, and it therefore stood for Garland as a model for his own
literary ideals in theory and in practice. After all, Véron’s definition of impressionist art is not specific to any particular genre or medium and names not so much a particular style but a particular relation between an artist and the world he or she purports to represent. In his essay on the topic in *Crumbling Idols*, Garland echoes many of the defenses he made of Impressionist painting in his exhibition catalogue for the CAA, and which were apparently necessary for an American audience recently scandalized by the Impressionist paintings at the Chicago World’s Columbia Exhibition barely a year prior.

Anticipating the critique that Impressionism is a “mere vogue” – just the latest Paris fashion – Garland supports the new painting in the language of Spencer, Véron, and Darwin. This vocabulary also significantly links the unpalatable stylistic novelty of Impressionist technique to the kind of technological and scientific progressivism which was the ground note of the Columbia Exhibition itself: Impressionism “is evolutionary, if not destructive, in the eyes of the old school painters…. To the younger men it assumes almost as much importance as the law of gravity.”  

Impressionists are “veritists in the best sense of the word. They are referring constantly to nature.” By calling Impressionists “veritists,” Garland plays down the merely stylistic aspects of the new painting and emphasizes its structural, methodological, and philosophical novelty. The crucial differences between the “old hat” school of painting and the Impressionists are not simply stylistic – color keys, brushstrokes, and the like. Rather, Impressionist pictures are single unified impressions as would be seen by an actual human eye, and not “cooked-up” pictures or “mosaics” which combine elements in a

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537 Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, 121-122.
538 Ibid., 123.
pictorial manner lacking correspondence to any actual experience of sight.\textsuperscript{539}

Impressionist painting, in other words, was not just a new style characterized by higher-keyed colors and the oft-ridiculed purple shadows. It was the revolutionary discovery of a means of human expression that was closer to the laws of nature.

The formal unity of an Impressionist canvas – that it was a single unified impression or composition rather than a “cooked-up” mosaic that could be disassembled without sacrificing its overall effect – also greatly informs Garland’s theories of literature. Like an Impressionist canvas, Garland writes that literary works cease to be vital when they are not unified impressions. This quality he calls “literalism:”

“Literalism, the book that can be quoted in bits, is like a picture that can be cut into pieces. It lacks unity. The higher art would seem to be the art that perceives and states the relations of things, giving atmosphere and relative values as they appeal to the sight.”\textsuperscript{540}

Garland’s call for a literature of relation and atmosphere perhaps sounds more like the critical writing of, say, Henry James (discussed in the previous chapter) than the war cry of a tough-minded revolutionary.

But it is here that Garland’s understanding of literary impressionism becomes clearest, and in which our perception of Garland as a literary impressionist becomes most justified. Just as Impressionist canvases were relatively small and presented compositions unified by dint of representing a single momentary appearance, so literary impressionist works of fiction would be relatively short, with unified impressions “being worked out faithfully on separate canvases, each work of art complete in itself.”\textsuperscript{541} The reader is

\textsuperscript{539} Ibid., 126, 124.
\textsuperscript{540} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{541} Ibid.
reminded here of Brunetière’s description of Daudet’s novel Les rois en exil, in which each episode within the novel was a sort of tableau or canvas that was “complete in itself.” Garland’s hypothetical impressionist novel goes beyond even the formal unity of discrete episodes, and approaches the singularity of the short story or the sketch. Just as Impressionist paintings sacrificed the panoramic narratives of history painting, so modern writers will “abandon[] their swiftly running love-stories for studies of character.” The careening narrative of romance will be replaced by the painterly stasis of picture, an exchange that will revolutionize the form of the novel itself. “Because the novels of the past were long, involved, given to discussion and comment upon the action,” continues Garland, “so the novel of the future will be shorter and simpler and less obvious in its method. It will put its lessons into general effect rather than into epigrams. Discussions will be in the relations of its characters, not on quotable lines or paragraphs. Like impressionism in painting, it will subordinate parts to the whole.” It is this structural novelty of impressionist art and not just the particularities of its style or its deliberately modern and local subject, that makes it a compelling model for modern literature. Modern, progressive novels will become less like epics and more like sketches – momentary, limited in scope and scale, attuned to sensuous particularities, loosely and freshly written, and composed around unified perspectives.

Nonetheless, the specific stylistic dimensions of Impressionist painting – its sketch-like brushstrokes, primary colors, and high-keyed palette – also suggested to Garland a particular vision of the world that could be transposed into literary form. Impressionist seeing was more than a parochial discovery limited to the medium of

542 Ibid., 49.
543 Ibid., 50-51.
painting; it drastically revolutionized Garland’s own experience of vision and created opportunities for experiments in prose writing. Having come to see the world as an Impressionist sees it (seeing purple, rather than neutral-hued shadows, for instance), Garland expresses a transformation in personal vision that reads almost like an account of mystical experience:

I came to catch through the corners of my eyes sudden glimpses of a radiant world which vanished as magically as it came. On my horse I caught glimpses of this marvelous land of color as I galloped across some bridge. In this world stone-walls were no longer cold gray, they were warm purple, deepening as the sun westered. And so the landscape grew radiant year by year, until at last no painter’s impression surpassed my world in beauty.544

There is an almost gnostic quality to Garland’s account, as though by seeing Impressionist painting he had been initiated into some cult of mysteries: the prosaic “cold gray” veil of appearances is pulled back to reveal the “warm purple” reality behind. Indeed, Garland’s transformation of personal vision reveals a radiant world whose brilliance outpaces even the ability of Impressionist painting to represent it: “As I write this,” Garland continues,

I have just come in from a bee-hunt over Wisconsin hills, amid splendors which would make Monet seem low-keyed. Only Enneking and some few others of the American artists, and some of the Norwegians have touched the degree of brilliancy and sparkle of color which was in the world to-day. Amid bright orange foliage, the trunks of beeches glowed with steel-blue shadows on their eastern side. Sumach flamed with marvelous brilliancy among deep cool green grasses and low plants untouched by frost. Everywhere amid the red and orange and crimson were lilac and steel-blue shadows, giving depth and vigor and buoyancy which Corot never saw (or never painted), - a world which Inness does not represent. Enneking comes nearer, but even he tones unconsciously the sparkle of these colors.545

544 Ibid., 129.
545 Ibid., 130.
Significantly, Garland selects Enneking, the painter who had first initiated him into the world of painting by letting him hear the language of the studio and breathe the odor of paint, as the only artist who could come closest to representing the brilliant reality of this radiant new world. Barbizon or Tonalist painters like Corot and Inness, too attuned to subtlety and gradation, certainly don’t approach its drastic contrasts of light and color. And while it may have seemed to some critics in the 1890s that the radical colors of the Impressionists were impossibly high-keyed and therefore stylized or affected views of nature, Garland suggests that Impressionist representation is not high-keyed *enough* to represent reality accurately. Monet, Enneking, and even Garland’s beloved Norwegians fall short.

Impressionist painting revealed for Garland not so much a method of aestheticizing the world as a means of seeing the truly aesthetic nature of the world that had been rendered colorless, dull, or prosaic by habit and experience.\(^{546}\) It also suggested an opportunity for attempts to render *in prose* the brilliancy and radiance that could not be rendered in paint. While purportedly an ekphrastic description of the Wisconsin hills as they would be seen by the eyes of a painter, Garland’s own self-confessed failure to adequately represent that scene as a painter would see it itself constitutes a sort of experimental word-painting, a kind of impressionist tableau. Garland’s verbal palette of

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\(^{546}\) While Garland apparently first encountered the idea of purple shadows from Herbert Spencer, he writes that he first came to train himself to see it by inverting his usual view of the world: “By turning my head top-side down, I came to see that shadows falling upon yellow sand were violet, and the shadows of vivid sunlight falling on the white of a macadamized street were blue, like the shadows on snows” (*Crumbling Idols*, 129). One is inevitably reminded of Emerson’s similar experience in *Nature*: “Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!” (*Nature*, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte [New York: Library of America, 1983], 34).
colors functions much like the high-contrast palette of an Impressionist: three times the “hot” colors of red, orange, crimson and the “cool” colors of green, lilac, steel-blue are placed “amid” or “among” the other, a verbal transcription of a painterly technique that does indeed create the “depth, vigor, and buoyancy” Garland claims for the scene he presents and helps to create what Garland elsewhere calls “a peculiar vibratory quality to sky and earth which is unknown to the old method.”

As we will see shortly, this type of word-painting was an appealingly vivid genre of writing transposed from Impressionist painting that Garland would both practice on its own in experimental prose pieces like “Western Landscapes” (1893) and which he would adapt to narrative purposes in the stories of Main-Travelled Roads (1891).

We have already seen two ways, structural and stylistic, in which Garland attempted to transpose the values, logic, and techniques of painterly impressionism from the canvas to the page. But Impressionist painting was more than just a toolkit of techniques that the aspiring literary artist could use. Rather, it was both an analogue for what Garland meant by “local color” writing and an essential model for its achievement. One of the central appeals of Impressionist painting for Garland was its participation in the overturning of the traditional hierarchy of genres, in which history and religious painting stood far above landscape and genre painting. Impressionism’s plein air techniques and immediate individual vision inverted that hierarchy, making “cooked up” studio-produced historical paintings appear stilted or artificial, and revealing in landscape and genre scenes which had previously been disparaged a new freshness and vitality which came to be identified with “art” as such. Landscape art, which had previously been

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547 Garland, Crumbling Idols, 127.
of little interest or importance, and genre painting (the painting of scenes of domestic or street life usually featuring humorous or sentimental situations) took on a new seriousness when interpreted by the brush of the Impressionist because, not in spite of, their “local” qualities, rather than their universal or general qualities.

“Art, to be vital,” writes Garland, “must be local in its subject; its universal appeal must be in its working out, – in the way it is done. Dependence upon the English or French groups is alike fatal to fresh, individual art.” For the Impressionist or “veritist,” imitation is indeed suicide. For Garland, the very idea of doing an American landscape in the French style is not only bad cultural politics – it is logically incoherent and could not possibly produce a work of any value. Attention to local subjects and settings is motivated by more than mere pride of place. Rather, the representation of local qualities and conditions is an essential – really the essential – quality of any realist representation, the quality that certifies a given representation as art and distinguishes it from merely generic representations. A painter must not copy a Dutch landscape not simply because it would be derivative, but because it would be inaccurate.

The Impressionist’s heightened attention to the infinite subtleties of light and atmosphere produce an infinite particularity of place. “The atmosphere and coloring of Russia is not the atmosphere of Holland,” writes Garland. “The atmosphere of Norway is much clearer and the colors more vivid than in England. One school therefore cannot copy or be based upon the other without loss. Each painter should paint his own surroundings, with nature for his teacher, rather than some Dutch master, painting the

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548 Ibid., 131.
never-ending mists and rains of sea-level.”

One cannot do a Norwegian scene in the style of the Dutch masters without losing a vitally essential quality that can only be expressed by immediate individual vision. One cannot just transport one’s palette from scene to scene. All compelling representations are always already “local” in their style and form. “Local color” is the rule because color is local.

In this way, Garland’s apparently banal designation as a “local color” writer can be seen as both exceedingly accurate and glowingly adulatory. While critics such as Eric Sundquist have suggested that the “local color” designation diminished regional writers against their more cosmopolitan counterparts such as James and Howells who were more likely to be called “realists,” a closer understanding of Garland’s definition of the term suggests instead that the “local color” designation was anything but pejorative. Instead, it was representative of a shift in aesthetic values in which the representation of “local color” became the mark of a given representation’s claim to the status of work of art. Read through the lens of Impressionist aesthetics, the term “local color” names not a minority variety of realism but the means by which a realist representation would become more than “merely” imitative. For Garland, local color had “to mean something more than a forced study of the picturesque scenery of a State.”

The “local color” of a representation is not simply in the subject or scene being depicted, but is baked into that.

549 Ibid. Garland’s discussion here appears to be largely derived from his reading of Hippolyte Taine, particularly The Philosophy of Art in the Netherlands, trans. John Durand (New York: Leypoldt and Holt, 1871). See especially pp. 69-77. While a claim for geographical and aesthetic distinctness, Taine also suggests that the humid atmosphere of the Netherlands makes it comparable to Venice, which quality leads to the predominance of colorist art in both places (compare with my earlier discussion of Henry James’s letter to John La Farge about the Venetian atmosphere and its relation to that of Newport). I think it is extremely likely that Garland would have read this particular volume.

550 Garland, Crumbling Idols, 64.
representation’s style and form as an irreducible and singular “impressionistic” work of art.

*Impressionism, “Genre” Writing, and the Art of Local Color*

The aesthetic values of Impressionist painting offered Garland a model for the ways in which a revolutionary new art could reevaluate the generic expectations that had curtailed its expressive possibilities. Just as Impressionist painting overturned assumptions about the meaning and value of landscape and genre painting, so too could “local color” writing. In particular, I suggest that Impressionist painting’s relationship with *genre painting* is analogous to the relationship between Garland’s renovated “local color” art and what we might call *genre writing*, the disparaged category in which local color writing had hitherto been relegated. When Impressionist painting turned to representing everyday scenes of domestic, rural, or urban life, it disrupted the generic expectation that such depictions were less important or less “artistic” than depictions of historical, mythological, or religious subjects. Rather, the general expectation until the Impressionist turn in the 1870s and 1880s was that works of genre painting would be humoristic (say, Carl Spitzweg), sentimental (say, David Wilkie), moralistic (say, Augustus Egg), documentary (say, William Powell Frith), or some combination of these characteristics. While the overturning of these generic expectations was initiated by Courbet, Millet and others as early as 1850, the formal revolution of Impressionist painting and its gradual acceptance over the last quarter of the nineteenth century secured
the “high art” status of what had hitherto been disparaged as genre painting by making scenes of daily life the natural object of Impressionist vision.

In this way Impressionism offered a model for a “local color” writing to disrupt the generic expectations of what we might call “genre writing”: that it be humoristic (say, Bret Harte), sentimental (say, Harriet Beecher Stowe), moralistic (say, Rose Terry Cooke), or documentary (say, Rebecca Harding Davis), or some combination of these characteristics. Indeed, the Impressionist model offered the literary writer a means of representing genre scenes in an “artistic” way, overturning traditional assumptions about the status of such scenes by representing them with the immediacy and vitality of individual vision. The representational logic of Impressionism made genre scenes the natural subject of its particular mode of vision, and offered a way out of the predictable aesthetic conservatism that opposed the lighter category of genre writing to the universal verities of classics or romances.

Indeed, Garland’s defense of the local novel is founded on his rejection of the assumption that the “proper” subject for literary art was some form of ahistorical “human nature” that lay beneath what Brunetiére called the “undulating and multiple surface of things.” Garland’s own writing makes clear that aesthetic conservatives such as Brunetiére are woefully misguided in their appreciation of ahistorical essentials and ignore the real interest of classical works. “As a matter of fact,” Garland writes,

the minute differentiations of literature which the conservative calls its non-essentials, are really its essentials. Vitality and growth are in these ‘non-essentials.’ It is the subtle coloring individuality gives which vitalizes landscape art, and so it is the subtle differences in the interpretation of life which each age gives that vitalizes its literature and makes it its own.\footnote{Ibid., 75.}

\footnote{Ibid., 75.}
Here Garland echoes the aesthetic logic of Impressionism, which had overturned the conservative hierarchy of values to put landscape, genre, or still life painting above history painting, and uses it for his own literary purposes. In like manner, Garland overturns Brunetière’s conservative hierarchy of literary genres that valued the eternal or transhistorical qualities of human life over and above its apparently ephemeral particularities. “Vitality” is located not in eternal verities but in historically and culturally situated differences which are the “color” and therefore the life of a work of art. “The vital in Homer,” writes Garland, “lies, after all, in his local color, not in his abstractions.” Garland’s claim that Homer is essentially a local color writer is a direct repudiation of a conservative aesthetic dispensation that directly mirrors the Impressionist’s repudiation of history painting and a powerful claim for a local color writing attuned to subtlety, detail, and particularity of place. It is Garland’s revision of the value of epic that makes the modern local novel “the heir apparent to the kingdom of poesy” and it is the indigeneity, not the universality, of the Norwegian and Russian novelists that put them “at the very summit of modern novel writing.”

It is through the lens of Impressionism and its overturning of generic hierarchies that we can best understand Garland’s earliest experiments in literary prose. Garland recounts the inspiration for his first attempt at such writing in Roadside Meetings:

One evening in November while at work in my attic in the home of Dr. Cross just at dusk, I heard the ring of a scoop shovel in the alley under my window (it was the truckman unloading a ton of coal) and this sound, combined with the moan of the wind in the elm trees over the roof, put me back into the gloom of an autumn

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552 Ibid., 57.
553 Ibid., 69, 58.
sunset on an Iowa farm. Instantly I was shoveling corn from the wagon box into the crib at the close of a day’s husking in a broad, bleak field.\textsuperscript{554}

Garland’s inspiration arrives in the form of what would have been understood in the late nineteenth century as a unified \textit{impression}. It arises not from a desire to tell a story, to present a series of recognizable character types, or to describe a particular place, but from a synthetic, sensuous, and irreducibly affective experience. Indeed, a reader might be reminded here that Garland’s account recalls various similar episodes of involuntary memory in Proust’s \textit{Les Temps retrouvé} (1927) that inspire that author’s own literary enterprise: the slip on an uneven paving stone, the starchiness of a napkin, and, almost uncannily here, the ring of a spoon against a plate. In both cases, the position of the author is that of the passive transcriber: Garland, like Proust, is “put back,” thrust into the position of recording impressions as they appear to him, rather than actively generating a story or plot.

The result of Garland’s experience was not a seven volume novel but what he called a “sketch” or “word-picture”: “I began at once an article descriptive of Western corn-husking, in the belief that no such word-picture had ever been made.”\textsuperscript{555} The article, out of print since its original publication in the magazine \textit{The American} in January 1888 (Vol. 7, No. 3), is titled “The Huskin’” and is the first part of a series called “Boy Life on the Prairie.”\textsuperscript{556} Garland is aware that his sketch of prairie life will have to contend with a

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\textsuperscript{554} Garland, \textit{Roadside Meetings}, 37. Garland also recounts the experience in slightly different terms in \textit{A Son of the Middle Border}, 351. \\
\textsuperscript{555} Garland, \textit{Roadside Meetings}, 38. \\
\textsuperscript{556} Garland writes in \textit{A Son of the Middle Border} that this sketch was entitled “The Western Corn Husking” and that it was sent to the \textit{New American Magazine} under the editorship of William Wyckoff (351). Garland apparently misremembers the name of the magazine, which was \textit{The American}, formerly the \textit{Brooklyn Magazine} which began publication in 1884 and which had apparently ceased publication by 1889.
\end{flushright}
crowded literary marketplace in which such scenes have become the stuff of sentimental
cliché, and he therefore begins the sketch by distinguishing his own representation from
conventional representations of the same subject:

Poets and other individuals have adequately set forth the “corn-huskin’” of olden
time, and in prose or rhyme have told us about the gathering in the old barn, of the
merry lads and the red-cheeked lasses who blushed the rosier when the red ear of
corn was found; of the candles set in hollow “punkins;” of the dough-nuts and the
cider, and all the rest of the old-fashioned paraphernalia, which is getting slightly
conventional to the Eastern mind, and wholly so to the Western.  

It in unclear exactly what prose or poetic representations Garland has in mind, but this is
exactly to the point: such representations had long since become generic.

Perhaps Garland has in mind a poem by Benjamin F. Taylor titled “In the Barn”
published in Scribner’s Monthly in September, 1874. Taylor would have been a good
example of the kind of sentimental, nostalgic, and humoristic “local color” writing that
Garland dismisses: his publications include titles such as Old-Time Pictures, Songs of
Yesterday, and Between the Gates, a travelogue of a journey across the West. “In the
Barn,” is written in predictable ballad couplets, and describes a rural corn-husking bee in
what must already in 1874 have seemed felt like tired sentimentality:

As they stripped the husks with rustling fold
From eight-rowed corn as yellow as gold,
By the candle-light in pumpkin bowls,
And the gleams that showed fantastic holes
[...]
By the rarer light in girlish eyes
As dark as wells, or as blue as skies.
I hear the laugh when the ear is red,
I see the blush with the forfeit paid,
The cedar cakes with the ancient twist,
The cider cup that the girls have kissed.  

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558 Scribner’s Monthly 8, no. 5, (September 1874), 583-584.
In Taylor’s poem, the “old-fashioned paraphernalia” of pumpkin candles, cider cups, and blushing maidens are laid out with predictable regularity, roughly one per line, as though they were elements of a simplistic and clearly delineated illustration. Indeed, the poem is accompanied by an illustration titled “I hear the laugh when the ear is red” that humorously depicts the scene in question. Garland’s generic description of traditional depictions of corn huskings also appears to echo a series of prints by Winslow Homer published in *Harper’s Weekly* in November 13, 1858. One engraving in particular – “Husking the Corn in New England” – is a spirited melodramatic genre scene that presents a husking bee as a surprisingly lascivious and chaotic opportunity for romantic encounters between young men and women: amid a vigorous sea of couples (all suggestively shucking corn cobs in what now seems to be an obvious double entendre) three women fight over a “merry lad” holding the red ear of corn while a fourth looks on jealously.\(^{559}\)

When read in the context of contemporary representations such as these, it is clear that Garland understood such representations as expressions of a recognizable genre – a genre limited by the expressive horizons of genre painting or what I have been calling genre writing. The *Scribner’s* illustration and Homer’s engravings all deploy compositions and character types that were obviously drawn from genre works, particularly those of Dutch Old Masters such as Adriaen van Ostade or Jan Steen. These genre pictures of lusty peasant life demonstrate similarly crowded compositions of rural interior spaces and show figures low to the ground, in exaggeratedly grotesque, comical poses. These tableaux present rural labor and laborers in a humorous manner satisfying to

\(^{559}\) This entire series is available online through the Boston Public Library: http://www.bpl.org/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/winslow-homer/all-works/
the prejudices of an urban bourgeois viewer, since they present rural life and its customs as both amusing and harmless, while presenting rustic figures as both essentially social and basely animal, and therefore unworthy of the bourgeois form of individual portraiture.⁵⁶⁰

In place of these charming and nostalgic genre representations, Garland aims to exceed and overturn the expressive limitations to which corn-husking as a recognizable genre scene was subject, both by representing the brutality and physical difficulty of modern mechanical corn husking and by invoking the visual styles of modern Impressionist painting. Pyne writes that “For Garland, impressionism shattered the early nineteenth-century tradition that pictured the American landscape in terms of an aristocratic pastoral ideal, and, as such, it provided a painterly parallel for his own short stories.”⁵⁶¹ Indeed, Impressionism provided more than a parallel, but a concrete stylistic means by which that pastoral ideal could be subverted. By adopting the structure and style of Impressionist pictures, Garland found a means for overturning conventional representations that both pictured the American rural landscape more realistically and strove for a degree of artistic quality hitherto unavailable to it.

⁵⁶⁰ See e.g. Colin B. Bailey, Philip Conisbee, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, *The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting*, ed. Colin B. Bailey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), especially 4, 18-21. See also Robert Muchembled, “The order of gestures: a social history of sensibilities under the Ancien Régime in France” in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 129-151. Muchembled writes that genre paintings and prints “probably served more to educate the elite who bought these books and paintings than to genuinely change the attitudes of the peasants or the poorer townsfolk. This line of development, which for lack of a better term we may call ‘bourgeois’, is different from a rigid imitation of superior models which we find more often among courtiers or the aristocracy” (142). Muchembled writes about the French bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century, but the same attitude can be generally applied to American elites in the nineteenth century.

Garland’s own sketch begins with a vivid visual description that demonstrates a painterly sensibility, rather than a merely illustrative one: fields of corn are “dry and yellow” and “the vast plain is wrapt in a shimmering robe of mist; when the sun rises red as wine in cloudless skies each day, its splendor veiled by the smoky air.”562 Garland’s attention to atmospheric details suggests a painterly sensibility attentive to dimensions of sensuous appearance unavailable to genre representations, and moves his tableaux outside the genre’s characteristically crowded social interiors, a tendency that persists throughout the sketch. As the weather changes, Garland writes that “gray, jagged masses of cloud swept down” and “the cranes, no longer soaring in a warm, sensuous air, drove straight into the south, sprawling, low-hung on the wind, or lost to sight above the flying clouds,” a depiction that implies a situated single observer rather than an omniscient picture without an obvious point of view, or a stage-like proscenium that characterizes the illustration by Homer.563 Introducing deliberately detailed descriptions of landscape writing both serves to corroborate the reality of the landscape and to render the harshness of actual mechanized corn-husking more ironically brutal.

Throughout the sketch Garland both recognizes and disrupt the generic expectations of both genre painting and genre writing, using these conventional models as an ironic counterpoint to his own “word-picture.” Recounting the pleasures of returning to the house after a morning of work in the cold, Garland’s sentimental picture of domestic comfort – “O, steaming turkey! O, roaring fire! The wind lost its terrors as we say beside these inestimable comforts” – is immediately interrupted by his own duties as a “realist:” “there was another side to this picture also, which the realist cannot leave

563 Ibid., 301.
out. The turkey and the fire served to show us how very cold we had been." This other side of the picture cannily plays on the grotesque bodies of genre scenes of rural labor by demonstrating the ways in which mechanized labor in fact rendered the body literally grotesque. Upon entering the heat of the house, “our fingers swelled to twice their natural size and their worn tips grew more and more painful, and our backs grew stiff as though we were ninety. Our boots, which we had incautiously pulled off to warm our feet, we could not pull on again.”

Garland’s picture of swollen, crooked, or distended bodies, as well as his own self-professed position as “realist,” instead calls to mind the paintings of Jean-François Millet, who in many ways stood as a model for Garland – the comparison between the two was popular even in Garland’s own time. Like Garland, Millet invoked the visual language of genre painting – grotesque bodies often shown stooped or low to the ground – but revolutionized its meaning. While genre pictures showed stooped bodies in order to naturalize peasants as gens de la terre, paintings such as The Gleaners (1857) or Man with a Hoe (1860-1862) show that such grotesquerie was rather the accumulated disfigurement of years of relentless and habitual labor. Like Millet, Garland invokes genre scenes of labor to ironically impress the mechanicity of its modern form and the destruction it wreaks on the body.

In “The Huskin’” hands become a particular site and register of this destructiveness. Garland writes that the cold weather and repetitive labor made the

564 Ibid., 302.
565 Ibid.
566 See for instance: Charles E. Hurd, “Hamlin Garland’s Work,” The Writer 5, no. 1 (October, 1891): “And the bits of description, which come into his stories like accidental lights in a painting, are oftentimes as perfect as a picture by Millet, and as full of color” (207-208).
laborers’ hands “chapped and sore,” and therefore obliged the laborers to wear “‘husking gloves,’ which are adorned with steel plates and hooks for tearing the husks off the ear.”

That corn-huskers are required to supplement their own hands with mechanical prostheses disrupts the generically sentimental or restorative picture of rural labor. Indeed, while the conventional pictures of corn-husking bees against which Garland writes tend to feature scenes of dances or other forms of non-productive bodily movement, Garland’s own sketch plays up the urgency and repetition of labor in its modern mechanical form: “To husk eighty or a hundred bushels of corn each day, one must make every movement count.”

The toll on laboring hands is clear: “The wrists get tired; the fingers, worn to the quick at their tips, required ‘cots.’ As the fall went on, the gloves wore out at the fingers, and, being wet through in the days when it rained or when the frost was thick, they dried hard as boards and cracked.”

“The Huskin’” is the earliest example of Garland’s attempts at literary writing that demonstrates an engagement with the visual arts, but while Garland calls it a “word-picture” it would be difficult to claim that it fully represents an attempt at literary impressionism. It was only in the early 1890s with his chairmanship of the Central Art Association and his lectures on Impressionism that Garland came to develop a style of writing that more directly transposed a painterly Impressionist technique onto the written page.

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568 Ibid.
569 Ibid. Perhaps Garland’s attention to hands is an unconscious synecdoche for bodies as a whole, “hands” being a stand-in for “farm-hands.” Garland’s pictures of distended and distorted bodies invariably calls to mind the visual styles of what would later become Western Regionalist painting, a movement that also revolutionized the meaning of the grotesquerie body by making it an index of physical strength and emotional ebullience. Garland’s writing also calls to mind the grotesque hands and bodies powerfully evoked by another Midwestern writer, Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).
page. Like the vividly colored descriptive passages from the “Impressionism” chapter in *Crumbling Idols*, Garland’s “Western Landscapes,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1893, represent an attempt to do in prose what painters did on the canvas.

“Western Landscapes” has attracted little critical attention other than a footnote in an article from 1964 on Garland’s “Chicago Studies,” which scholar James B. Stronks calls “an uncharacteristic excursion into fanciful impressionism and elaborately figurative language,” which he claims is written under the influence of Stephen Crane, whom Garland had recently met. Stronks writes, was “a sheaf of fragile, polychromatic fragments” that was apparently just “competent enough” for publication in the august *Atlantic*.

In fact, the *Atlantic* in 1893 was an ideal publisher for exactly this sort of self-consciously artistic writing and it is significant that “Western Landscapes” was Garland’s only publication in that magazine. It marks an attempt by Garland to represent a Western subject in a manner that would appeal to Eastern elites who were increasingly interested in both Impressionist painting and in the sort of Aesthetic prose-poems that were becoming increasingly fashionable. Stronks’s characterization of the sketches as “fragile” would also of course have been in direct opposition to Garland’s own feeling the new movement of Impressionism was more durable and vital, indeed more “masculine,” than previous aesthetic regimes, and this association with more “feminine”

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571 Stronks, “A Realist Experiments with Impressionism,” 43.
572 On the *Atlantic* and artistic writing in the literary marketplace see Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 152-153, and Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, passim.
Aesthetic writing would certainly have been a troublesome tension.\footnote{Pyne, \textit{Art and the Higher Life}, 240-241.} But while it did not characterize all or even most of his literary writing, Impressionism for Garland was by no means a fanciful excursion but an abiding and long-lasting commitment. Thus, while not quite the meteor that Stronks suggests, “Western Landscapes” is indeed unique in that it represents a \textit{sustained} attempt at word-painting.

If the sketch “The Huskin’” represents Garland’s attempt to encounter and overturn the generic expectations of genre pictures or genre writing, “Western Landscapes” is Garland’s attempt to encounter and overturn the generic expectations of landscape writing. Landscape was a popular “local color” subject for journalists and other writers of the late nineteenth century, and like local color genre writing it came with particular generic expectations. The horizon of those expectations had to an important degree been set by the popular success of William Cullen Bryant’s monumental \textit{Picturesque America} (1872-1874), a two-volume collection of landscape writing and landscape illustrations by prominent artists and writers and was, as its subtitle claims, “A Delineation by Pen and Pencil of the Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, Forests, Water-falls, Shores, Caños, Valleys, Cities, and other Picturesque Features of our Country.” “Delineation by pen and pencil” is an accurate description of the kind of writing and illustration to be found in \textit{Picturesque America}: it \textit{delineates} rather than expresses in color. Its descriptions of scenery and landscape tend to present permanent features of topographical or geological interest rather than to present the colors or effects of light on those features. Its illustrations, done by artists working after the Hudson River style, are not primarily painterly in their approach (as indeed they must be since they were...
naturally black and white prints). The interest of *Picturesque America*, in other words, is primarily in the content being presented rather than in the form in which it is presented.

Garland’s attempt at landscape writing is quite different. The word-pictures of “Western Landscapes” are anything but delineations. In fact, Garland explicitly repudiates the “delineations” of Bryant’s *Picturesque America*, writing in *Crumbling Idols* that Impressionist painters “are not delineating a scene; they are painting a personal impression of a scene, which is vastly different.”

The sketches of “Western Landscapes” are painterly in their approach, attentive to color rather than line, and rather than representing well-known topographical or geological features in picturesque attitudes and perspectives, they expressively present a more generalized landscape typical of the region in question.

Garland’s first sketch in the collection, “Arizona,” may stand for the collection as a whole:

The clouds soared above the red and green and violet walls in mild majesty. The distant cliffs grew to deep blue, the shadows darkly purple. The plain became lilac, soft as air could dim and subdue it. The peaks that loomed high in the far-off sky were violet. Sand, sand, - everywhere sand. Gray sand, dove-gray sand, lilac in distance, shimmering in the hot, dry air. Every slightest weed, or rock, or squat low cedar threw a vivid violet shadow; the whole plain was radiant with color, and hot with unsuaged [sic] sun-rays.

As in Garland’s vivid description of the Wisconsin hills in *Crumbling Idols*, this word-picture of the Arizona desert demonstrates drastically juxtaposed untoned hues – “red and green and violet” – while the observation that the “plain became lilac, soft as air could dim and subdue it” approximates in words the painterly technique of aerial perspective in

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574 Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, 133.
which the color of distant objects or planes becomes bluer and less saturated. The sketch also makes free use of the purple shadow, a trope that was virtually a synecdoche for Impressionist painting in the 1890s and a deliberate gesture by Garland to ensure that this sketch, the first in the series of “landscapes,” would be instantly recognized as an attempt to approximate the effect of Impressionist painting in prose (the descriptive language of shimmering and radiance was also very much the grammar of Impressionist painting.)

Furthermore, the choppy or incomplete grammar of the sketches complements their pictorial quality: sentences very often lack verbs, or if they include verbs, they are verbs unique in their ability to be both dynamic and static at once, as when Garland writes, “The river ran a blue ribbon, laid between brick-red mud and flaming yellow gravel.” The one dynamic element in the sketch is a river, a body both ceaselessly active and unmoving. It runs, but is simultaneously a flat ribbon statically “laid between” two other masses of color. Not coincidentally, the composition is done in yellow, blue, and red – primary hues, the combination and juxtaposition of which was well-known as a distinctively Impressionist technique to approximate the dazzling brilliancy of full sunlight. In the final words of the tableau, Garland clarifies the radiance of these primary hues by invoking “the parching, absorbing light of the unclouded sun.”

The “Western Landscapes” represent a sustained attempt at word-painting in a genre – landscape painting – that was perhaps uniquely resistant to linguistic approximation, inasmuch as this genre is essentially non-dramatic or non-narrative. The “Western Landscapes,” as Stronks notes, “are mainly pictorial, being for the most part

576 Ibid., 805-806.
577 Ibid., 806.
unpeopled, without human interest or action.” While “The Huskin’” tends to be chronologically organized around the routine of a single day, the sketches of “Western Landscapes” feature no narrative whatsoever. They are, as Brunetière writes of Daudet, “complete in [themselves], isolated from the others as in a gallery by [their] frame.” Indeed, landscape painting as a genre is definitionally more or less devoid of human presence or human narrative, particularly inasmuch as the popularity of the genre in the nineteenth century was predicated on its rejection of the neoclassical assumption that landscape served primarily as a backdrop for the staging of historical, mythical, or religious subjects. Given their publication in the Atlantic, the “Western Landscapes” would have been understood as a self-consciously artistic attempt to reject the generic expectation that landscape writing be simply picturesque delineations whose interest was primarily touristic, and to make of landscape writing a self-contained literary art the virtues of which were practically identical to those of Impressionist painting, and which would therefore fulfill the requirement of a means of expression to be both realist and artistic at once.

_Narrative and the Problem of Impressionism: Main-Travelled Roads (1891)_

Reading Garland’s discussions of Impressionist painting in _Crumbling Idols_ and closely reading sketches such as “The Huskin’” and “Western Landscapes” helps us to understand the ways in which local color writing could reject its expressive limitations and become a literary art by approaching the condition of painting. It was Impressionist

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painting’s attention to “local color” and its rejection of plot and narrative that generated the vitality and immediacy of its representations, and it thus served as a compelling model for the manifold ways in which literary art could approach local subjects and enjoy the same repute. Garland was clearly compelled by the Impressionist revolution in vision and representation, as he makes clear in his effusions in *Crumbling Idols*, and also may have intended to continue working more in the line of the word-paintings of “Western Landscapes.” Stronks notes that Garland went so far as to write a letter to his publisher in 1894 that he had “nearly ready a book to be called ‘Western Landscapes.’” (like those in Atlantic) on which you can lavish all your bookmaking skill.”

Garland’s suggestion that a full volume of “Western Landscapes” also be handsomely bound makes it even more evident that he envisioned the collection of sketches as an Aesthetic objet d’art.

Of course, no such volume was published. While Garland may have been able to recall that in the late 1880s he “had no intention at that time of becoming a fictionist,” it was as a writer of novels and collections of short stories that he made his career. How do we account for this transformation? Why would Garland, who had such an intense interest in other media, choose the novel as his preferred art? It would be easy to interpret the unevenness of Garland’s career and his continued publication of more or less conventional or even melodramatic novels – really romances – as a capitulation to the literary marketplace, which in the 1890s still preferred novels like Du Maurier’s *Trilby* to either more serious Howellsian realism or more self-consciously artistic writing such as

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579 Stronks, 43 n. 18. The letter is to Herbert S. Stone (Jan. 18, 1894). This letter can be found in John T. Flanagan, “Hamlin Garland Writes to His Chicago Publisher,” *American Literature* 23, no. 4 (Jan. 1952), 452.

580 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 351.
“Western Landscapes.” In other words, while by the turn of the century Impressionist painting had succeeded to a large extent in revolutionizing the palettes of countless artists and changing the tastes of the art market, the attempt by novelists and other prose writers to effect a similar revolution in prose was by no means so successful.

Why not? Perhaps the reason why attempts to create an audience for painterly “fine” art writing mostly failed is less arbitrarily historical and more the consequence of word-painting’s obvious disruption of the pleasures of narrative itself. Gotthold Lessing had a point: language is a medium primarily adapted to representing motion, action, and events unfolding in time. If one wanted to enjoy the vivid sensory immediacy of colors, shapes, and tactile surfaces, why would one read a novel instead of look at a painting? “Paint[ing] with words,” – the transposition of one medium into another – is, as Ferdinand Brunetière writes, “possible metaphorically” but “it is a particularly damaging business to language to want to realize that metaphor.” The vivid Impressionist effects of “Western Landscapes” push prose writing beyond its natural limits. Perhaps it is not in the constitution of language to sustain Impressionist word-painting beyond a few small sketches, let alone to the extent of an entire novel. Garland’s literary experiments were failed experiments – though in their failure they demonstrate the degree to which literary expression depends on its narrative dimensions to sustain interest and attention.

Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to say that Garland’s fiction represents a complete rejection of his Impressionist experiments. Rather, much of Garland’s most successful work represents a dramatization of Impressionist technique through narrative form. It is in the nature of narrative or novelistic form as an essentially dialogic structure to resist unmediated description, and it therefore tends to resist exactly the kind of
immediate Impressionist representation that “Western Landscapes” attempts to achieve. But Garland succeeds at incorporating techniques from Impressionist painting into narrative structures by making Impressionist seeing a meaningful dramatic element. Impressionist seeing is made a narrative element insofar as it is rendered not an immediate dimension of literary style but the mediated vision of a particular literary character. That certain characters – characters who represent distinct social and psychological types – see like Impressionists and fail to understand the moral consequences of that impressionist view of the world on human relationships suggests the limits of Garland’s belief in the ability of art to lead to the progressive refinement of human life, even as it also announces its possibility.

Written just at the beginning of Garland’s serious engagements with Impressionist painting, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) features numerous passages of impressionistic description. The first story of the collection, “A Branch Road,” begins with a word-painting the language of which will by now be familiar:

> Above the level belt of timber to the east a vast dome of pale undazzled gold was rising, silently and swiftly. Jays called in the thickets where the maples flamed amid the green oaks, with irregular splashes of red and orange. The grass was crisp with frost under the feet, the road smooth and gray-white in color, the air indescribably sweet, resonant, and stimulating.\(^{581}\)

Garland’s description again evokes the vivid palette of an Impressionist: the flaming “irregular splashes of red and orange” of the maples are set off by complementary “green oaks,” while its road receding into the level horizon of sunrise is a clear approximation of landscape composition. Another description several paragraphs later confirms the obvious Impressionist style of the tableau: “And the east bloomed broader. The dome of

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gold grew brighter, the faint clouds here and there flamed with a flush of red. The frost began to glisten with a reflected color” (MTR 14). Again, the language of blooming, flaming, flushing, and glistening clearly expresses a verbal approximation of Impressionist style similar to the word-painting of “Western Landscapes” or *Crumbling Idols*.

But these richly descriptive passages are not really opportunities for Garland the author to paint rural landscapes with vivid colors. Rather, they are clearly situated as the free and indirect perception of the story’s protagonist, Will Hannan, a young man returned from school at seminary to help with the wheat harvest. Will’s aesthetic view of the rural landscape and his ebullient mood are quickly interrupted as he runs into one Ed Kinney who is also going to help with the wheat threshing. They exchange a cursory greeting:

“Hello, Will!”
“Hello, Ed!”
“Going down to help Dingman thresh?”
“Yes,” replied Will shortly. It was easy to see he didn’t welcome company.
“So’m I. Who’s goin’ to do your threshin’ – Dave McTurg?”
“Yes, I guess so. Haven’t spoken to anybody yet” (MTR 14).

Ed’s crude and slangy language, written in dialect, establishes him immediately as one who has not gone off to seminary, and the almost ludicrously uncouth names Dingman and McTurg establish the local society as woefully unrefined and insensitive to the aesthetic effusions in which Will had just lost himself and in which he would prefer to continue alone. Arriving at the fields, Will again views the tableau aesthetically: “The pale red sun was shooting through the leaves…. The interest, picturesqueness of it all got hold of Will Hannan, accustomed to it as he was” (MTR 15). Even the tobacco-chewing
Ed Kinney is beatified by the radiance of the vision: “The sun, lighting him where he stood, made his fork handle gleam like dull gold” (MTR 15).

Nevertheless, Will’s picturesque view is at odds with the activities of the other laborers, who laugh and wrestle, and communicate in “cheery words, jests, and snatches of song” (MTR 15). Will’s highly visual and painterly impression of the scene – with its high culture associations – stands in stark contrast to the means of expression enjoyed by the locals, whose lusty enjoyment mirrors the generic forms typically associated with the local color genre: laughter, “cheery words,” and “jests” are familiar *topoi* of popular humoristic representations, while their “snatches of song” evoke the ballad form that was supposed to be the typical or organic expression of folk song (and the form in which poems like Taylor’s “In the Barn” were written). Against the crude physicality and low-culture expression of his fellows, the static, painterly, and highly aestheticizing perception of Will Hannan stands out in high relief.

But as in “The Huskin’,” the realities of mechanized labor disrupt any understanding of wheat threshing as restorative or therapeutic, giving the lie to the expressive folk forms and physical energy associated with the local farmers. While Will’s initial vision of the men on the threshing machine both ventriloquizes genre representations – the “scene” was “one of the jolliest and most sociable of the western farm” – and attempts to aestheticize the scene by picturing “the beautiful yellow straw entering the cylinder” and “the clear yellow-brown wheat pulsing out at the side,” the mechanical clamor of the machine interrupts with incessant and inarticulate violence: “Boo-oo-oo-oom, Boo-woo-woo-oom-oom-ow-owm, yarr-yarr! The whirling cylinder boomed, roared, and snarled as it rose in speed” (MTR 16). By the end of the day Will’s
participation in the repetitive and brutal labor of wheat threshing has scrubbed it of its poetical associations. Will’s body “ached with fatigue” and, as in “The Huskin’,” his body has grown grossly distended: “The sinews of his wrist pained him so, they seemed swollen to twice their natural size” (MTR 25). While he had initially “enjoyed the smooth roll of his great muscles” and “the sense of power he felt in his hands,” by sun-down “he had a weird feeling of being suddenly deaf, and his legs were so numb that he could hardly feel the earth. He stumbled away like a man paralyzed” (MTR 16, 25). Paralyzed – or anaesthetized – the repetitive mechanical labor to which his body has been subject causing him to lose the refined, aesthetic perspective with which he cheerily began the day.

Will’s desire to work incessantly to the point of physical exhaustion is driven in part by the necessity of the labor, but to a greater degree it is driven by his desire to prove himself as strongly masculine as the other laborers: “He wanted them to understand that he could do as much pitching as any of them and read Caesar’s Commentaries besides” (MTR 25). Having gone away to seminary, Will has both come to recognize a world of aesthetic refinements and satisfactions beyond the purely physical world of his fellow workmen and also developed an anxiety that he has lost bodily power. While not a painter or an artist, Will’s intellectual and social refinement as well as his separation from the life of purely physical appetites are registered textually in his appreciation of natural and physical beauty. But while Will’s appreciation of natural and physical beauty registers his superiority to his social surroundings, it also registers his insecurity at no longer being a part of it.
Will’s aesthetic appreciation of the world and his impulse to frame and distance himself from that world produces a mixture of disdain and jealousy: disdain that his aesthetic pleasures are more developed, and jealousy that these pleasures are insufficiently embodied. Will’s genteel disdain for the uncouth habits of his fellow laborers, to whom he feels both superior and inferior, is developed in a passage recounting their dinnertime meal. Will views the laboring men as a tableau of grotesques both bestial and mechanical in their rapacious appetites: “Potatoes were seized, cut in halves, sopped in gravy, and taken one, two! Corn cakes went into great jaws like coal into a steam engine. Knives in the right hand cut and scooped gravy up” (MTR 19). The passive construction of Garland’s sentences heightens the depersonalization of the laborers in Will’s eyes, and highlights Will’s own alienation, which causes him to adopt “a reserved and almost haughty air toward his fellow workmen” (MTR 19).

Will’s insecurity is particularly evident in his relationship with Agnes, the farmer’s daughter, whom he has been courting successfully despite the advances of his rival, Ed. While Will and Agnes have apparently “arrived at a tacit understanding of mutual love,” Will only expresses that affection in cautious “glance[s]…toward the house” (MTR 17). Rather than imagining Agnes as a physical body that he might enjoy sexually, Will sublimates and projects his desires for Agnes onto the natural world: “his thoughts were on the future – the rustle of the oak tree nearby…on the sky, where great fleets of clouds were sailing on the rising wind, like merchantmen to some land of love and plenty” (MTR 17). Will’s “desire” is almost pathetically vague and chaste, a numinous bodiless romance rather than an active sexual passion. Even when he does see her, his appreciation is that of an aesthete rather than a lover: “She looked so bright and
charming in her snowy apron and her boy’s straw hat tipped jauntily over one pink ear…the dapples of light and shade fell on the bright face of the merry girl” (MTR 24). Agnes’s appearance – her snowy apron, her boy’s straw hat – is a picture of lamblike purity. Indeed, it is a picture of purity – bright, charming, and neatly composed – and particularly attentive to the play of light and shade on her surface.

While Will tends to passively look on and compose elements in his field of vision into picturesque tableaux, Ed is a man of action, notable for possessing “a certain rakish grace in dancing and a dashing skill in handling a team which made him a dangerous rival” (MTR 17). Ed’s deft physical confidence stands in sharp contrast to Will’s bodilessness and is a source of jealousy and resentment. When Agnes offers Will tea at dinner, an offer that Will rebuffs out of embarrassment, she offers Ed “another piece of pie” (MTR 20). Agnes’s recognition that Ed has an appetite for pie (of all things!) stands in clear contrast to Will’s lack of appetite even for tea (a beverage with decidedly genteel associations), and causes Will to further reject Agnes’s good will.

This rejection further increases Ed’s confidence. After dinner, Will catches “a glimpse of Ed Kinney at the well, pumping a pail of water for Agnes, who stood beside him, the sun on her beautiful yellow hair. She was laughing at something Ed was saying as he slowly moved the handle up and down” (MTR 22-23). The sexual overtones of Ed’s slowly moving pump handle are obvious. More interesting is that despite his horror and jealousy, Will still admits that the tableau makes “a beautiful picture” (MTR 23). His refinement makes even a scene that ought to be a source of jealousy (and which in fact echoes the topoi of comic genre pictures) an occasion for aesthetic appreciation. Unable to act on his jealousy or express his desires, Will further rebuffs Agnes and soon returns
home, hoping to rekindle their romance at next week’s county fair. However, a carriage accident on the way prevents him from arriving in time, and when he finally arrives Agnes has apparently gone off with Ed. Rather than actively pursuing her, Will writes Agnes a hasty letter telling her that she and Ed deserve each other, then “bowed his head and wept like a girl” (MTR 31).

The second half of the story takes place upon Will’s return to the town from the Southwest after a period of seven years. During this period Will has become rich, and observes that much has changed. But while the town may have grown drastically in the intervening years, and while he may have become wealthy, Will’s view of the world has changed not at all. As at the beginning of the story, Will’s impression of the landscape is still that of the Impressionist aesthete: “The landscape was at its fairest and liberalest, with its seas of corn deep green and moving with a mournful rustle, in sharp contrast to its flashing blades; its gleaming fields of barley, and its wheat already mottled with soft gold in the midst of its pea-green” (MTR 32). While Will looks “ hungrily upon the scene” he still has no real appetite (MTR 32). Instead, he hangs idly at the fence observing the landscape “thinking of a vast number of things, mostly vague, flitting things” and appreciating the natural world in explicitly painterly terms: “Red lilies starred the grass with fire, and goldenrod and chicory grew everywhere; purple and orange and yellow-green the prevailing tints” (MTR 33-34). If anything, the vivid unmixed hues of Will’s vision suggest that his view of the landscape has only grown more high-keyed, more overtly “Impressionist” in style.

Will soon learns from Ed’s nephew that Ed has married Agnes and that the two now have a child. But “Aunt Agg” has been sick. Hoping that Agnes’s face will still
“have that old-time peachy bloom, her mouth that peculiar beautiful curve,” Will’s first response upon seeing her is shock and dismay upon finding that she has lost her color: “The blue of her eyes seemed dimmed and faded by weeping, and the old-time scarlet of her lips had been washed away. The sinews of her neck showed painfully when she turned her head, and her trembling hands were worn, discolored and lumpy at the joints” (MTR 39, 40). Their house too has “hardly a touch of pleasant color” (MTR 41). It is Agnes’s colorlessness and the colorless despair of their lives and surroundings that most upsets Will. His horror is the horror of the aesthete who finds that a picture once colorful and beautiful has turned dim and ugly with time. Agnes’s hands too, as in “The Huskin’,” serve as an index of the brutality and inhumanity of the repetitively brutal labor of rural life, their physical distension and distortion made more grotesque by their pallor and discoloration.

Will’s desperate frustration with Agnes’s loss of color leads to the story’s incredible denouement. Will learns that on the day of the county fair, Agnes went off not just with Ed but with a group of other farmers, and that she waited three years to hear from Will, who had petulantly run West. Agnes has resigned herself to her fate, but the “infinite, dull despair and resignation in her voice” precipitates in Will a sudden change of character. Thinking of “how bright and handsome Ed used to be” his gaze and voice suddenly turn “resolute and imperious” and he suggests that they run off to Europe together to start a new life (MTR 48). After some melodrama, Agnes assents. Even as Will cringingly remembers that she now has a baby, he doesn’t change his mind, and the two leave the colorless house where “the sun shone on the dazzling, rustling wheat, the
fathomless sky blue, as a sea, bent above them – and the world lay before them” (MTR 53).

How do we interpret and assess this melodramatic ending? It is tempting to say that “A Branch Road” would be a more successful story if it had a more Chekhovian ending – that is, if Will’s recognition that Agnes really had a baby – and a husband – caused him to see his offer as pathetically and impotently romantic, thus leading the reader to understand Agnes’s initial resignation when she told Will that “it can’t be helped now” (MTR 48). Indeed, this is how the following story in the collection, “Up the Coulee,” which is in many ways a companion piece to “A Branch Road,” concludes. There, a successful young actor and aesthete, Howard McLane, returned home to the Middle West from Boston after ten years, recognizes the tragedy of his brother Grant’s life on the farm, and wonders why Grant should “sit there in wet and grimy clothing mending a broken trace, while he enjoyed all the light and civilization of the age” (MTR 95). Howard offers him five thousand dollars to come East with him, but Grant declines, and the story ends on a note of brutal fatalism: “I’m too old to take a new start. I’m a dead failure. I’ve come to the conclusion that life’s a failure for ninety-nine percent of us. You can’t help me now. It’s too late” (MTR 97). The ending of “A Branch Road,” in contrast, feels like an unbelievable deus ex machina: it is as if The Scarlet Letter ended with Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl making it to Europe after all.

While it may seem that Will’s impetuous transformation is radically out of character, a close reading shows us that the conclusion is far more ambivalent. Indeed, Will’s sudden resolution is not precipitated by passion for Agnes but again by envy – or perhaps by a kind of triangular desire – for Ed. It is only after remembering “how bright
and handsome Ed used to be” and recognizing that “it was no wonder that [Agnes] married him” that Will makes his sudden offer (MTR 48). In other words, it is a desire for Ed’s body, rather than Agnes’s, that sparks Will’s change in character, revealing that this change is not so much a real transformation as an imitation: to act like Ed is only to act like Ed. Indeed, Will’s desire for Agnes has almost nothing to do with Agnes as she currently is before him. Rather, “there was no passion of an ignoble sort, only a passion of pity and remorse, and a sweet, tender, reminiscent love. He did not love the woman before him so much as the girl whose ghost she was – the woman whose promise she was” (MTR 49). The reader, I think, is meant to read Will’s “desire” ironically: it is the same hopelessly chaste non-desire he felt for her appearance seven years prior when he saw her only as a composed screen of light and color, as an image or eidolon.

As Agnes contemplates Will’s offer she looks at her “thin red wrists, her gaunt and knotted hands” and bursts into tears, full of regret: “‘I ain’t fit to go with you now! Oh, why couldn’t we have married then?’” (MTR 50). But while Agnes sees the discrepancy between the past and the present and can mourn for lost time, Will can see her only as she was: “She was seeing herself as she was then, and so was he; but it deepened his resolution. How beautiful she used to be! He seemed to see her there as if she stood in perpetual sunlight, with a warm sheen in her hair and dimples in her cheeks” (MTR 50). Agnes too comes to reject the present in favor of the romantic past and the romantic future: “She was not moved by passion. Flesh had ceased to stir her; but there was vast power in the new and thrilling words her deliverer spoke. He seemed to open a door for her, and through it turrets shone and great ships crossed on dim blue seas” (MTR 51). Agnes then comes to share Will’s romantic vision of the future from seven years
before, but it is clear that the desire is purely the effect of “thrilling words” rather than physical passions, and Will’s promise for the future feels as insubstantial as the undulating and shimmering world – an Impressionist tableau – into which they emerge. The story’s Miltonic conclusion – that “the world lay before them” – is simultaneously hopeful and deflating: it suggests new possibilities, but also that they have been cast out from the Eden of youthful remembrance, and now face a lifetime of hard realities.

“A Branch Road” is a narrative in which Impressionist seeing has become meaningfully dramatized rather than a dimension of literary style, in which an aesthetic way of seeing the world is dialogically interrogated and assessed. While Will’s way of seeing the world is alluringly beautiful and appears to offer freedom from the harshness of his material circumstances, its refinements come at the price of disembodiment. His passivity and aloofness stand in contrast to the active virility of his rival, and while his tendency to observe the world aesthetically appears to offer liberation from the body’s crudity, it also denies him its satisfactions. Indeed, as an “Impressionist” Will converts real bodies into flattened pictorial compositions, as when Agnes is seen as merely a play of shadow and light. Like Brunetière’s literary impressionist, Will “stop[s] at appearances…on the undulating and multiple surface of things,” but he cannot penetrate them.

In this way, the evocation of Impressionist technique in “A Branch Road” in fact registers ambivalence about that technique’s meanings and consequences. While Impressionism appeared to offer a model for the ways in which “local color” writing could transcend the limitations of both its subject and its genre, the difficulty of sustaining it in a dialogic fictional narrative offers an implicit critique of its limitations
and also clarifies the limitations of the progressive refinement that Impressionism purported to achieve. “A Branch Road,” in other words, offers an implicit rebuke to Garland’s professed belief in the ability of art to refine the human body and expand its expressive possibilities. While in his critical writings Garland could champion Impressionism as a vigorous and revolutionary manner of vision, its limitations become evident when it is approached in narrative form. Because Will’s Impressionist vision registers as impotent when placed in the context of its actual relational consequences, it casts doubt on Kathleen Pyne’s claim that Garland saw in “the impressionist mode” only “health and virility,” and linked Impressionist art uncritically to a progressive politics, as Andrew Lawson claims, “by virtue of individual expression.” But even the figure of the apparently “masculine” Impressionist artist is effete when placed next to the brute physicality of the Wisconsin farmer.

At the same time, it was just such brute physicality that Garland’s political and aesthetic project hoped to refine away. Like Will Hannan or Howard McLane, upon returning to Wisconsin from Boston in the late 1880s Garland saw in the backwardness of his former life an opportunity for moral and social improvement, an improvement that was linked in an essential way to aesthetic progress. Garland saw with fresh eyes the brutalization that the difficulty of rural life imposed on his former countrymen, a brutalization which was again most obvious in their distended and deformed hands: “The hard, crooked finger, which they laid in my palm completed the sorrowful impression.

583 Lawson, *Downwardly Mobile*, 117.
which their faces had made upon me. A twinge of pain went through my heart as I looked into their dim eyes and studied their heavy knuckles.”

Seeing these hands leads Garland to think of the other hands he has seen and other things that hands can do: “I thought of the hand of Edwin Booth, of the flowerlike palm of Helena Modjeska, of the subtle touch of [the painter George] Inness, and I said, ‘Is it not time that the human hand ceased to be primarily a bludgeon for hammering a bare living out of the earth?’” The aesthetic refinement of actors Booth and Modjeska and the subtle tonalities of Inness are attuned to precisely the nuances of expression that elude or are in excess of a narrowly utilitarian view of the human body. At the same time, as “A Branch Road” demonstrates, those aesthetic refinements also run the risk of making the body insufficiently attentive to itself or to the bodies of others. Perhaps we can only say by way of conclusion that Garland’s passionate and vexed explorations of literary and artistic form cause us as readers to take greater care of this tense and ambivalent relationship. And by understanding the complexity and moral risk of that relationship between the obstinate reality of bodies and their beautiful appearance – and the inability of art to reconcile them – we can better understand the words of the painter Millet on the fundamental ambivalence of his own art that, like Garland’s, sought to represent both the beauty and the ugliness of rural life. The quotation was one of Garland’s favorites:

I see very well the aureole of the dandelions, and the sun also, far down there behind the hills, flinging his glory upon the clouds. But not alone that—I see in the plains the smoke of the tired horses at the plough, or, on a stony-hearted spot of ground, a back-broken man trying to raise himself upright for a moment to breathe. The tragedy is surrounded by glories—that is no invention of mine (MTR 90-91).

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584 Garland, *Son of the Middle Border*, 307.  
585 Ibid.
Sarah Orne Jewett and the Problem of the Local Color Novel

A canvas has neither beginning nor end. But I ask, what would a novel or generally any work of speech or of the pen be that did not begin or end?

- Ferdinand Brunetièrè, *L’impressionisme dans le roman* (1879)\(^{586}\)

They used to be as long as yardsticks, they are now as long as spools, and they will soon be the size of old-fashioned peppermints, and have neither beginning nor end, but shape and flavor may still be left them, and a kind public may still accept when there is nothing else.

- Sarah Orne Jewett to Annie Fields (12 Oct. 1890)\(^{587}\)

Sarah Orne Jewett often claimed to have no talent for writing plots, which in many ways is an interesting problem for a writer of novels and short stories to have. In a letter to Horace Scudder in July 1873, shortly after her first stories had been published in *The Atlantic Monthly* and as she was already garnering praise from editor William Dean Howells among others, Jewett confessed that her initial success was rather remarkable given her inability as a writer to do more than sketch, an inability that made further success in the literary marketplace an uncertain prospect. While clearly admiring, Scudder suggested to Jewett that further success required developing her sketches into a “long story,” a transformation that Jewett was reticent to effect. “In the first place,” she

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\(^{586}\) “Une toile ne comporte ni commencement ni fin. Mais je demande ce que serait un roman, et générelelement une oeuvre de la parole ou de la plume qui ne commencerait ni ne finerait?” (458; translation mine).

wrote, “I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations. It seems to me that I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there never is any play!” Jewett’s hypothetical “story” is a scene without a drama, a sort of tableau vivant: a situation with potential, rather than kinetic energy. It presents the visual, rather than the verbal elements of a scene. It is the scene as scenery: the furniture, the characters, even the audience are all richly described, but no action sets them in motion. One can well imagine the disappointment of an audience invited to a play without a play, and because the expectation exists that these richly described elements must at some point spring into action, Jewett imagines their continued stasis as a sort of artistic failure, a failure that risks disqualifying her from the literary vocation she desires. “What shall be done with such a girl?” she laments. “For I wish to keep on writing, and to do the very best I can.”

One would expect that Jewett would struggle to find an audience in a literary marketplace in which a well-crafted and satisfying plot was the touchstone of literary and financial success. But in fact Jewett achieved remarkable critical, if not popular, success, which eventually allowed her to grow more defiantly confident in her own peculiar literary style. While she had published several collections of stories as well as at least two volumes that could reasonably be called novels in the intervening years, by 1890 Jewett could write to her close friend and domestic partner Annie Fields that rather than expanding into long stories as Scudder had urged, she finds her sketches contracting even further. “They used to be as large as yardsticks,” she writes, “they are now as long as

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spools, and they will soon be the size of old-fashioned peppermints, and have neither
beginning nor end, but shape and flavor may still be left them, and a kind public may still
accept when there is nothing else." While Jewett’s tone is somewhat self-deprecating,
the process from yardstick to spool to peppermint suggests not diminishment but
concentration. What the sketch lacks in size, scope, or textual complexity it makes up for
by its unified “shape and flavor.” Compared to the loose weave of a spool of yarn or the
standardized and spatially distant intervals of a yardstick, the highly concentrated spice of
a peppermint candy seems especially piquant. While a spool of yarn must be “played out”
inch by inch, a peppermint can be ingested all at once. Indeed, the image suggests not so
much ingestion and digestion as transubstantiation, dissolution on the tongue: it is edible
but not exactly eaten. While a yardstick is strictly utilitarian and primarily useful for
measuring other objects, a peppermint serves no practical purpose beyond its own
concentrated and singular flavor, and while a yardstick proceeds from one end to the
other in measured and standard intervals, a peppermint – presumably a circular one – has
“neither beginning nor end.” Peppermints may be small, but Jewett expresses a modest
confidence that they will be “accepted by a kind public” as a sort of gesture of
hospitality: a modest and indulgent acceptance of an equally modest offering.

It is clear enough that Jewett’s opposition of yardsticks and peppermints is
analogous to the opposition between lengthy, dramatically plotted works of prose fiction
with a beginning, middle, and end, and brief sketches of scenery, furnishings, or
characters in which “there never is any play” and in which there is “neither beginning nor
end.” In other words, Jewett expresses the tension between narrative and description, and

589 Sarah Orne Jewett to Annie Fields, 12 October 1890, in *Letters*, ed. Fields, 81.
thus announces a central problem of literary form. This tension may be expressed in more contemporary structuralist terms by Gérard Genette, who writes in *Figures of Literary Discourse* (1982) that, “Description might be conceived independently of narration, but in fact it is never found in a so to speak free state; narrative cannot exist without description, but this dependence does not prevent it from constantly playing the major role. Description is quite naturally *ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave.” As Jewett writes that her sketches’ lack of plot will have to be “filled out” by scenic description, Genette confirms that narrative – story, *récit*, plot, fabula – is structurally central to literary expression. Jewett’s confession to Scudder that her “story would have no plot” is literally a contradiction, a nonsensical negation of the meaning of story itself. For Genette, even richly descriptive novels or stories do not invert the hierarchy of narrative and description: “There are narrative genres, such as the epic, the tale, the novella, the novel, in which description can occupy a very large place, even in terms of sheer quantity the larger place, without ceasing to be, by its very vocation, a mere auxiliary of the narrative. On the other hand,” Genette continues, “there are no descriptive genres, and one finds it difficult to imagine…a work in which narrative would serve as an auxiliary to description.”

I think that Jewett was interested in imagining just such a genre in which narrative would serve as an auxiliary to description, and that her attempt to invert this hierarchy was to a large degree licensed and effected through analogy with painting. As we saw in the case of Hamlin Garland, it is perhaps surprising that Jewett should have felt that she “wished to keep on writing” given her apparent disinclination to craft dramatic or plot-

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driven narratives. But of course painting is an expressive art that would be available to one who wished merely to describe rather than to construct plots, to furnish a stage and pose the actors without giving them any lines or movements. When Genette writes that “there are no descriptive genres,” he is referring to literary genres. But in the visual arts it is much easier to imagine pure description, or rather pure depiction. Indeed, depiction is the rule rather than the exception, particularly as the revolutionary inversion of the painterly hierarchy of genres in the late nineteenth century overturned assumptions about the meaning and value of landscape, genre, and still life painting, making these genres more important than the representation of historical, mythical, or religious subjects in which the narrative, characters, or moral meaning of the picture were of primary importance.

In other words, the tension Jewett identifies between narrative and description is not just a personal idiosyncrasy, nor is it simply a transhistorical problem of literary structure as Genette describes. Rather, Jewett’s difficulty navigating between these competing impulses was a crucial aesthetic problem of the late nineteenth century with a particular history, vocabulary, and legacy. This tension between dramatic narrative and static description, I suggest, can be understood through discussions of painting and its transposition into literature in this historical and intellectual context. That the values, structures, and generic expectations of painting could be transposed into literature was of increasing interest for artists and critics of the period, and was also a subject of anxiety. Critic Ferdinand Brunetière, as we have seen, was particularly eloquent about the problems such a transposition posed for literary art, and sought in response to hold literature to Lessing’s classical or neo-classical standards that recognize the essentially
temporal or sequential nature of language itself, and of narrative in particular: that it have a beginning, middle, and end.\textsuperscript{591} The fundamental distinction between literature and painting is that literature – or any work of language – takes place in \textit{time}, while painting takes place in \textit{space}. Any sensible utterance, whether it is as short as a sentence or as long as a novel, has a beginning, a middle, and an end, whereas a painting “has neither beginning nor end,” since it is essentially spatial. For Brunetière, the fact that literary art would adopt a spatial form is perplexing in the extreme: “what would a novel or generally any work of speech or of the pen be that did not begin or end?”\textsuperscript{592}

Showing that Jewett’s sketches – which according to the author herself “have neither beginning nor end” – are “painterly” in specific and significant ways will be the work of this chapter. I will show over the course of the following pages Jewett’s own complex relationship to painting, particularly watercolor painting, both in concept and in practice, and will demonstrate the ways in which this relationship informed the

\textsuperscript{591} Whether or not Jewett herself read Brunetière and was familiar with his particular brand of academic conservatism is uncertain, but I think likely. Jewett read French and would likely have read the \textit{Revue des deux mondes}, of which Brunetière was editor. Furthermore, both Jewett and Brunetière were close with journalist Marie Thérèse Blanc. When Brunetière toured the United States in 1897 he travelled with Mme. Blanc, who would also visit Jewett, though Jewett and Brunetière do not appear to have been introduced. See: \textit{Sarah Orne Jewett Letters}, ed. Cary, 104.

\textsuperscript{592} Brunetière’s critique of spatial form participates in a complex constellation of aesthetic issues circulating in the late nineteenth century, which is too vast to address here. It is worth remarking, however, that music – and operatic music in particular – faced a similar problem in the figure of Richard Wagner, whose intense musical chromaticism, radical attention to tone color and orchestration, and extraordinarily inventive revision of musical form (his “unendliche Melodie”) represented a revolutionary break with classical operatic form. Giuseppi Verdi, who both reviled and admired Wagner and was ambivalent about the musical revolution that he effected, nonetheless wrote in 1893 that he recognized that “a modern melody [is] one of those beautiful ones that has neither beginning nor end, and remains suspended in the air like Mohammed's tomb” (Cesari and Luzio, \textit{I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi}, 633 quoted in Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, \textit{A History of Opera} [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012], 393). See also Jameson, \textit{The Antinomies of Realism}, 39-41.
development of her own literary art. I will also show that such a correspondence between Jewett’s literary art and the art of painting is not simply my own critical approximation, but was in fact a common way of understanding, appreciating, or critiquing Jewett’s work among her contemporaries. Understanding Jewett by way of painting in its nineteenth century idiom, I claim, helps us to understand the specific ways in which Jewett, like Hamlin Garland, sought to transform “local color” or regionalist writing from a genre defined by its increasingly clichéd humoristic or sentimental narratives into a distinctive literary art by means of foregrounding its descriptive possibilities. While in 1873 Jewett saw her inability to produce plots as a potentially disqualifying hindrance, given the dominant popularity of humoristic or sentimental narrative in the literary marketplace, by 1890 the tastes of that marketplace may have changed sufficiently for Jewett to attain a niche popularity under a new aesthetic dispensation in which the “sketch” began to be understood as literary high art. In other words, what was a problem in 1873 could in particular ways be understood by 1890 as positively propitious. The literary marketplace caught up to Jewett’s own inclinations, at least in relatively mandarin publications such as the *Atlantic*, and it was to a large extent through Jewett’s resolute artistry that she created the standards of taste by which she could be understood and appreciated.

Understanding Jewett’s painterly manner can also help us to explain the uneven nature of her career, how she could write both such extraordinarily compressed and painterly sketches such as those of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) as well as more sweeping and traditionally melodramatic narratives such as *The Tory Lover* (1901). While painting functioned as an analogue for her own artistic practice, Jewett also used the figure of the painter as a means of exploring the limits of that practice. In the last part
of this chapter I will read Jewett’s critically forgotten novel *A Marsh Island* (1885) in order to show Jewett’s engagement with an ambivalent and self-critical version of the aesthetic, in which painterly “description” no longer exceeds or resists narrative’s teleological demands, but rather falls short of its potentials.

*Writing like Painting: Description and the Form of the Sketch*

How exactly can we say that Jewett’s sketches are *like* paintings? That Jewett’s writing is like painting has been frequently suggested from Jewett’s own time to the present, but the comparison, while interesting, generally remains undeveloped, inchoate, or “impressionistic.” Robin Macgowan writes, for instance, that, “Jewett’s style in *Pointed Firs* is, primarily, a pictorial one, closely allied to the ‘American’ impressionism of her Maine contemporary, Winslow Homer.” By “closely allied,” Macgowan means that there exists a sympathy of style or tone rather than a concrete connection between the two. Like Homer, Jewett “employ[s] a limited palette” and “work[s] in a subdued tonality”: “hers is a style dealing in outlines and clean contours, an impressionism that proceeds by a kind of almost random spotlighting, picking out clumps, patches of color, the dark masses, say, of the pointed firs, and then assembling these into the long, gracefully rambling sentences which are the hallmarks of her style.” The difficulties and risks of discussing Jewett’s writing in terms of painting are obvious in Macgowan’s

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594 Macgowan, “Pastoral and the Art of Landscape,” 235.
comparison which, while intuitively suggestive, is vague at best and equivocal at worst.  

More recently, Paula Blanchard concludes the preface to her 1994 biography of Jewett with a rhapsody on the “mood” suggested by Jewett’s work, “a mood that is perhaps more familiar to us through the work of artists than through literature.” Blanchard compares Jewett’s writing to Luminist painting with it’s “small, deceptively modest landscapes and seascapes” that “emanate a silent tranquility,” as well as to the work of John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer, James Whistler, Childe Hassam and Jean-François Millet. That Jewett’s prose could suggest so many distinct painterly styles diminishes the significance of the comparison, and while suggestive, Blanchard only allows herself to explore these comparisons in the book’s preface, thus quarantining them from more substantive connections. While apparently an appropriate analogue for understanding and appreciating the most essential dimensions of Jewett’s style, painting, as Blanchard treats it, makes a scant appearance through the rest of her biography aside from a few references to Jewett and her circle’s interest in Millet and the Arts and Crafts movement.

Even more recently, Laurie Shannon has suggested that Jewett’s writing could be compared to the intimisme of painters Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard. While not explicitly commenting on the pictorial qualities of Jewett’s prose, Shannon suggests that the intimiste fusion of “ordinary settings and images” and “Symbolist evocation of

\[595\] Barton L. St. Armand develops and expands upon Macgowan’s comparison in an essay “Jewett and Marin: The Inner Vision,” *Colby College Quarterly* 9, no. 12 (December, 1972), 632-643. St. Armand suggests that the watercolors of John Marin, not the oils of Homer, are the “right and proper analogies to Jewett’s art” (p. 634).

spiritual vibrancy” is a useful analogue for Jewett’s own style. The connection between Jewett and *les intimistes*, however, is “not a causal relation but a modal one.” Shannon’s is an interesting and enjoyable suggestion, but the nature of this “modal” relation is both tenuous and open-ended; it begins to recall somewhat the Wildean impressionistic criticism of the sort that *les Nabis* likely would have preferred themselves. If one wanted to discuss “modal” relations, one might reasonably compare Jewett to any sort of painting one wished: Giorgio Morandi’s still lifes, the quiet interiors of Vilhelm Hammershøi or Peter Ilsted, the spare luminosity of Fairfield Porter’s Maine landscapes, Andrew Wyeth’s “Helga” paintings, and so forth. These are enjoyable and beautiful comparisons, but they don’t tell us much about Jewett and her world.

Nonetheless, the fact that Jewett seems to invite such comparisons seems significant. Perhaps critics feel the need to make recourse to comparisons with painting because Jewett’s work resists the application of a critical vocabulary more appropriate to strongly narrative or dramatic works. Put differently, perhaps some critics feel that Jewett is “like” painting because she is not like fiction, and because the form of her novels, stories, and sketches is consequently elusive. In fact, while it has been common to comment on the painterly qualities of Jewett’s style or form, it has also been common to suggest that Jewett lacks form at all, and that her complete resistance to narrative form is a significant dimension of her literary art. This is the assessment of Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse in *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003) who write that “regionalist fiction consists primarily of short sketches and

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the individual sketch constitutes its essential form.”598 For Fetterley and Pryse, the term sketch “conveys the open-endedness, fragmentary nature, and indeterminacy [they] see as essential characteristics of regionalist fiction,” and because regionalist writing has a “relative lack of interest in plot…it creates a context within which beginnings, middles, and ends are relatively unimportant.”599

But in Fetterley and Pryse’s assessment, regionalist writing such as Jewett’s is more than apathetic about traditional plot-driven narrative forms. Rather, “regionalist fiction [is] in a certain sense antipathetic to form.” They continue: “Indeed, we might almost say that regionalist fiction rejects form since it recognizes that form tends to equate with structures designed by persons in power to tell their stories. As we try to talk about form in regionalist fiction, then, we find ourselves facing the difficulty of how to talk about form in texts that seem to be formless.”600 The work of Fetterley and Pryse’s book is to recover and develop the means by which this apparent “formlessness” might be approached and understood as a particular feature of women’s writing. Their reading of Jewett’s story “A White Heron” deftly demonstrates the ways in which Jewett conspicuously overturns the expectations of traditional romantic plots (embodied in the story’s ur-text, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The Pearl of Orr’s Island) and thereby “measure[s] the extent of the intervention required for Jewett to turn her story out of the path set in motion by ‘boy meets girl,’ out of the force field of plot, and into a different way.”601 For Fetterley and Pryse, in other words, all plotted narratives to some degree recapitulate the structure of romance (romance in the broadest sense of the term as a

598 Fetterley and Pryse, Writing Out of Place, 169.
599 Ibid., 173.
600 Ibid.
601 Ibid., 176.
work of narrative fiction in prose with a beginning, middle, and end, not just in the narrow sense of a “romantic” story). The fragmentary anti-form of the sketch resists the coercive demands of the romance by its inconclusiveness and its resistance to both narrative problems and climactic resolutions. In this sense, Fetterley and Pryse write that the “cultural work of regionalism” – which is feminist work – “requires this form.”

In a similar vein, Josephine Donovan contends that Jewett’s resistance to plot can be understood as her attempt to recover “an essentially feminine literary mode expressing a contextual, inductive sensitivity, one that ‘gives in’ to the events in question, rather than imposing upon them an artificial, prefabricated ‘plot.’” Drawing on feminist scholar Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi’s claim that “being confined to the domestic sphere and charged with the repetitive labor of housework created a sense of time that was markedly different than the characteristically Western (and masculine) linear, historical time of the quest – the basis for traditional story,” Donovan suggests that Jewett’s sketches represent ‘the ‘timeless’ time of cyclic ritual…the sacredness of space, of time frozen into stasis.”

The apparent “formlessness” of Jewett’s sketches is in fact an attempt to represent this non-sequential or non-progressive experience, which because of its unique non-narrative modality implies a flattening of linear time into non-linear space. From the perspective of plot-driven narrative, the cyclical time of woman’s experience appears merely static, when in fact from an immanent perspective that experience is extremely dynamic and in

602 Fetterley and Pryse, Writing Out of Place, 177.
constant motion. I will comment more on how this feminist spatialization of time can be understood through the genre of the pastoral later in this chapter.

The interpretations of both Fetterley and Pryse and Donovan help us to understand the ways in which Jewett’s unique aesthetic form indicates or expresses resistance to traditional narrative form, and provides a means of mapping a particular gender politics onto this distinction. This feminist paradigm also helps to explicate the gendered subtext of Genette’s claim that in literary genres description ever remains “ancilla” to narrative. In Hegelian terms, Genette’s structuralist paradigm sees narrative as the underlying form or master that both dictates and requires the material and labor of its slave, description. Description is narrative’s *material*, and also its *mater* (as Mary is the “ancilla Domini” [Luke 1:38]): the “body” of literary expression whose fullness and power must be subjected to the dominance of narrative teleology. Narrative without description approaches pure form, or pure *formula*, as we literally see in the case of the early formalist narratology: it is absolute story divested of any local particularity. Description without narrative, in contrast, approaches absolute sensuous particularity without the structure of any story, an immediate and timeless present that can be taken in all at once. Pure narrative, in other words, is like Jewett’s yardstick, while pure description is like Jewett’s peppermint. The liberation of description, the handmaid or slave, from its narrative master is the assertion of a radically feminist poetics, and the task of the feminist critic is the creation of an aesthetic frame of judgment in which the achievements of this new form can be understood and assessed.

The formal analyses of Fetterley and Pryse and Donovan are compelling and useful, but to some degree they overstate the novelty of their own insights, or at least
ignore the degree to which critics of Jewett’s own time were also aware of the novelty of Jewett’s sketch-like form and perplexed by how to address it. Indeed, the insistence on the explicitly feminist dimensions of Jewett’s “formlessness” or “timelessness” can obscure other dimensions of her writing. Rather, reading Jewett in terms of painting can help us to better understand how she herself conceived of her own literary art and also help us to better understand her contemporary reception. While Fetterley and Pryse suggest that Jewett’s sketches were antipathetic to form, many contemporary critics of the period understood Jewett to be highly attentive to form, albeit form of a very different kind. If “time frozen into stasis” is the “time” – or the non-time – of the feminine domestic world, it is also the situation of painting. Many contemporary critics commented on Jewett’s lack of plot and were quick to understand that this lack of plot left room for a surfeit of description, which they tended to represent by analogy with painting.

Since her first published long works, critics have generally agreed that much of Jewett’s most representative writing, whatever it may be, is not predominantly dependent upon plot. One reviewer writes of Jewett’s *A Country Doctor* (1884) that it contains “no passion, no ‘plot’ or other special narrative construction.” A critic writing for the *Athenaeum* that same month concurs that Jewett “does not yet know how to set about writing a novel. The plot does not fairly start till near the middle of the book.” This critic is more disdainful of Jewett’s plotlessness: *A Country Doctor* is guilty of “the very grave

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605 *Overland Monthly* 4 (August 1884), 222. For many of the references to contemporary critical reviews of Jewett’s novels and stories I am indebted to Terry Heller’s remarkably useful, comprehensive, and well-managed online database, “The Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project” [http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/sj/sj-index.htm].
vice of elaborate description in details which are of no consequence to the story.”

Horace Scudder, to whom Jewett had earlier confessed her inability to write plots, is naturally more understanding, and is one of her best ambassadors, though he too feels the need to justify and explain Jewett’s unaccountable generic novelty. While the reviewer for the *Athenaeum* saw *A Country Doctor* as an insufficient novel, Scudder writes that we ought rather “to compare it with her previous stories than with other peoples’ novels.” *A Country Doctor*, rather, might be said to be “an extended short story,” which, though as long as a novel, is “as simple and the real action as brief as if the author had undertaken to present a study of life within the compass of an ordinary single-number story.” Jewett’s gift, Scudder writes, is for “miniature-painting, but [an artist] will paint miniatures all the better for occasionally trying his hand at a life-size picture.”

Scudder is among the earliest critics to liken Jewett’s writing to painting, though he is certainly not the last. Indeed, it is remarkable the degree to which contemporary reviewers of Jewett’s sketches, stories, and novels understood her writing in terms of painting: as landscapes, as watercolors, as “pen-pictures,” or as “word paintings.” Failing to account for her stories in terms of plot or narrative, these reviewers resort to treating them as pictures. Indeed, it might almost be said to be a cliché of Jewett criticism that reviewers find little to say about her works, or even suggest that her stories and sketches would be better had they been real watercolors, since this seemed to be a more natural or appropriate medium that would potentially have obviated some of the “dullness” upon which critics often comment and which perhaps still forms an impediment to her appreciation by modern readers.

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606 “Novels of the Week,” *The Athenaeum* 2966 (August 30, 1884), 272.
607 Horace Scudder, “Recent Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly* 54 (September 1884), 418.
Such is the criticism of one critic writing for *The Critic* magazine in 1885 of Jewett’s novel *A Marsh Island*, about which much more will be said later. Admiring the “inimitable…description” of Jewett’s salt marsh landscapes, this reviewer writes, “So keen and bright and true are these pen-sketches, that if they had been left as landscape painting they would have seemed not only exquisite but spirited.” However, the “effort to mingle with [these descriptions]…something of a story of life and human nature, has resulted in a drowsy effect upon the reader.” Much as Jewett herself worried that she was capable of setting beautifully staged scenes without any action or plot to set these *tableaux* in motion, so this critic concurs that, “The *mise en scène* is perfect, but the people are dull.”608

Other critics agree that Jewett’s foregrounding of the descriptive possibilities of her sketches make her writing uniquely capable of presenting vivid, visual *tableaux*, much in the way that Joseph Conrad would later write that the task of the writer was “before all, to make you see.”609 One critic writes for example that in *A Marsh Island* Jewett “paints the New England prospect to the eye” and aligns the novel’s painterly character with both its simplicity and its artistry: “Nothing could be simpler than the motive of this story; hardly anything could be finer than the art with which it is handled.”610 For this critic, simplicity of motive and fineness of handling appear to stand in an inverse relation to one another: without the hindrance of a clunky plot, both the artist’s style and her descriptive talent are rendered more immediately visible.

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608 “Miss Jewett’s ‘A Marsh Island,’” *The Critic* 4, no. 4 (August 1885), 64.
Another critic also highlights Jewett’s descriptive abilities, writing that the “description of the old farm in the midst of dreary stretches of saltmarsh…is charmingly natural and vivid” and that one can even “see the ponderous scow, leaving the whitened patch of grass where it has lain all spring.” For this critic, Jewett’s emphasis on the visual makes her writing explicitly painterly: “the whole book…is an exquisite water-color, with no heavy daubs of fiery tint not depths of black; just fair, sweet, transparent colors, laid on with the daintiest of brushes.” As this critic’s description makes evident, the “fair, sweet” and “dainty” manner of Jewett’s “painting” is clearly feminine, a characterization often made of watercolor as a medium (on which more later). While likening Jewett’s prose to watercolor painting is perhaps unduly or unfairly “feminizing,” it also draws on a discourse in the nineteenth century in which watercolor was not less but more vivid than oil painting. Its bright, unmixed tones and light washes were seen as both more delicate and more vivid than oil painting, which until the large-scale adoption of Impressionist style in the 1890s was often perceived as muddy and dim. A critic writes retrospectively in 1897, for instance, that, “If artist may be compared with artist, Miss Jewett may be described as a water-colorist; her sketches resting for their value not upon dramatic qualities or strong color, but upon their pure tone and singleness of effort.”

The same critic writing for *The Literary World* in 1885 felt that Jewett’s strength was not the crafting of a carefully plotted large-scale narrative, and wrote instead that Jewett “takes a small canvas, selects a modest theme, plies her brush with truthfulness and pains, and produces as a result a picture which, though not a great one, is an excellent

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one, and delights the spectator by its purity, refinement, and fidelity to nature and life.” It is telling that this critic, like many others, understands Jewett’s style in terms of painting rather than literary composition, and even likens her method to that of a painter rather than a writer (using canvas and brush rather than pen and paper, and who works in terms of “themes,” rather than stories). 613 Indeed, for this critic Jewett’s painterly manner affords her a purity of representation that would be otherwise hindered by the imposition of an artificial plot: the painterly manner lends itself to a striking “fidelity to nature and life.” Yet another critic writing in 1885 similarly explains the lack of “story” in Jewett’s prose through comparison to painting, while also explaining that hers are “not regularly constructed novels with plot and machinery” but rather “transcripts of bits of life.” What these sketches lack in depth – “they do not pretend to go as deeply into human nature” – they make up for with their vivid picturing: “They are like a painter’s outdoor studies,” this critic continues. “The idyl [sic] is Miss Jewett’s line, and tragedies and dramas are not to be sought among her quiet and fragrant fields.” 614

This confusion – whether Jewett is a painter or a writer – suggests as well a confusion of genres – a confusion that still stands in the way of modern critics who want to assess and understand Jewett’s remarkably unique writing. One perceptive critic writes that in A Marsh Island “there is a combination of the art of the poet, the painter, and the story-teller…. It is at once an idyl [sic], a romance, and a cabinet of exquisite genre word-pictures.” 615 This uneasy combination of genres and media is in fact more perplexing than it may seem. Indeed, we might say, pace Fetterley and Pryse, that the

614 “Summer Novels,” Overland Monthly 5 (June 1885), 663.
idyll and the romance have competing narrative impulses: that of the romance towards resolution, and that of the idyll towards irresolution and perpetuation. Additionally, the characterization of the novel as a “cabinet of exquisite genre word-pictures” presents us with a vision of the novel that echoes Ferdinand Brunetière’s characterization of the novels of Alphonse Daudet in which “each separate tableau is complete in itself, isolated from others, as in a gallery, by its border, by its frame, by a large space of blank wall.”

Each scene of Jewett’s “novel” is likewise a tableau (in this case a genre picture) complete in itself and capable of isolation from other such scenes. These competing impulses – that of the romance towards resolution, the idyll towards irresolution, and the picture towards complete stasis – form the drama of A Marsh Island, which will be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

“Very fast and without much plan”: Watercolor Painting in Context

The interpretation of Jewett’s “word-pictures” through the lens of watercolor painting is not just an impressionistic critical approximation, nor is it necessarily patronizing or belittling. Rather these comparisons describe a substantive connection worth exploring in detail, and a connection that is certainly licensed by the fact that Jewett herself was a practiced artist in that medium. Indeed, she not infrequently made recourse to the same analogy between writing and watercolor painting. While archival details are relatively scant, it is certain that Jewett studied watercolor painting and pen

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616 “Chaque scène alors devient un tableau, chaque épisode une toile suspendue sous les yeux du lecteur. Chaque tableau d’ailleurs est complet en lui-même, isolé des autres, comme dans une galerie, par sa bordure, par son cadre, par un large pan de mur vide” (452-453 – translation mine).
and ink sketching between 1868 and 1869 while living in Cincinnati with her uncle John Perry.\textsuperscript{617} In his collection of Jewett’s letters Richard Cary writes in a footnote to a letter from 1891 to painter and friend Agnes Bartlett Brown that, “As a young girl Miss Jewett dreamed of a career in art. She turned out numerous pen and ink drawings, and kept her hand in desultorily at watercolors and oils until late in life.”\textsuperscript{618}

While Cary’s claim for Jewett’s early “dream[] of a career in art” is perhaps unsupportable from archival materials or extant writings, it is clear enough that Jewett did continue to practice these arts throughout her life, and maintained an abiding interest in them. In a letter from 1892 on the occasion of a trip to Bermuda, for instance, Jewett writes that, “I take with me the munitions of war, oil paints, pastel, and even water colours, for who shall say of what complexion the emotions of Bermuda will be?”\textsuperscript{619} The ease with which Jewett constructs this list confirms both a proficiency in various painterly media as well as a certain flexibility of expression in which different media have different representational strengths relative to the subject or scene to be depicted. It

\textsuperscript{617} See Robert L. Gale, \textit{A Sarah Orne Jewett Companion} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 229. See also Elizabeth Silverthorpe, \textit{Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer’s Life} (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1993): “While in Cincinnati Sarah took art and dancing lessons and enjoyed visiting art galleries, attending concerts, and going to the theater” (48-49). Jewett’s diaries from that period frequently recount her making copies of pictures in pen and ink and in watercolor and going to galleries, though there are few specifics. Entries from February 26, 1869 and March 15, 1869, for instance, note that Jewett “Painted in the morning,” while an entry from February 23, 1869 notes, “It rained. I drew in the morning. A dog’s head + a very good copy in pen and ink of Beatrice Cenci.” [Houghton Library: Series: III. bMS Am 1743.26: Diaries, financial agreements, and miscellany. (4) [Diary.] A.MS.s.; [v.p.] 1 Jan - 31 Dec 1869. 66s. (128p.)]


\textsuperscript{619} Sarah Orne Jewett to Sarah Wyman Whitman, March 24, 1892, \textit{Letters of Sarah Wyman Whitman} (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1907), 74-75.
also demonstrates a subtle understanding that these different media are capable of producing or capturing different “complexions” of “emotion.” That oil paints, pastels, and watercolors would each be appropriate to different emotional complexions or states of feeling suggests a canny and sophisticated understanding of painterly means that subtends an understanding of Jewett as a relatively well-developed amateur artist.

While she practiced painting and drawing herself, Jewett was also close friends with many painters and artists throughout her life and participated in the thriving art world associated with the more conservative movements of the Boston school of the 1880s and 1890s. Jewett was especially close friends with artists such as Rose Lamb and Sarah Wyman Whitman (who also designed many of her book covers), both of whom had, like William and Henry James, studied under William Morris Hunt, the central figure of the Boston school who had himself studied with Millet and the Barbizon painters in France. Through her close association with Annie Fields and her circle of Boston literary elite, Jewett was also introduced to that circle’s associations with a cosmopolitan world of painters and artists. For instance, in a letter to close friend Louisa “Loulie” Dressel, herself a connoisseur of painting, Jewett writes of Fields’s association with John Singer Sargent who she “enjoy[s]…very much”: “It is such an interesting

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620 Letters from Jewett to Whitman from 1892 recount the author’s stay in Barbizon. Blanchard notes that, “Sarah and her friends were familiar with Millet’s paintings” and that “in 1883-86 Jewett and the others collaborated in staging a series of photographs in the Millet style: local models, or sometimes Miss Baker, would dress up in period costume and Coleman would photograph them at everyday rural tasks” (Sarah Orne Jewett, 225-226). Millet’s direct influence can be seen in a passage in “A Dunnet Shepherdess” where Jewett writes: I found myself possessed of a surprising interest in the shepherdess, who stood far away in the hill pasture with her great flock, like a figure of Millet’s high against the sky (“A Dunnet Shepheress,” Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories, ed. Michael Davitt Bell [New York: Library of America, 1994], 522).
world to me, the picture world,” she writes. While there is not much direct evidence from letters and other writings, the easiness and interest with which Jewett discusses painting and her close friendships with practicing professional painters present a picture of a woman with more than a working knowledge of the methods and techniques of various kinds of painting and other associated arts.

While it is certainly important to understand Jewett as working in a situation in which aesthetic problems of both painting and writing overlapped, more to the point here are the ways in which Jewett herself not infrequently referred to her own problems and successes as a writer by reference to painting. In the same early letter to Horace Scudder from July 13, 1873 in which she bemoaned her inability to craft literary plots, Jewett writes that the success of her early “sketches” is identical to the success of her early watercolor paintings. It is worth quoting here in full:

Those first stories of mine were written with as little thought and care as one could possibly give and write them at all. Lately I have chosen my words and revised as well as I knew how; though I always write impulsively – very fast and without much plan. And, strange to say, this same fault shows itself in my painting, for the more I worked over pictures the stiffer and more hopeless they grew. I have one or two little marine views I scratched off to use up paint and they are bright and real and have an individuality – just as the ‘Cannon Dresses’ did. That is the dearest and best thing I have ever written. ‘The Shore House,’ which Mr. Howells has, reminds me of it and comes next. I wrote it in the same way and I think it has the same reality.

The problem expressed in Jewett’s letter is the problem of the sketch itself: whether or not it represents a “finished” work. Jewett’s natural method of writing is that of the

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622 A letter to Horace Scudder from December 18, 1890, for instance, recounts: “I wish very much that you could print in the Atlantic a paper that I heard Mrs. [Sarah Wyman] Whitman read on ‘Colour’ the other evening” (Sarah Orne Jewett Letters, ed. Cary, 69). The paper in question was apparently not published, but it suggests Jewett’s intimate interest in questions of painterly aesthetics and technique.
sketch artist: she writes “impulsively – very fast and without much plan.” However, what these sketches may lack in finish or complexity, they make up for by their vitality, spontaneity, and freshness: they are, Jewett must admit, “the best thing[s] I have ever written.” Spontaneous sketches such as “The Girl with the Cannon Dresses” (published in *Riverside Magazine* in August 1870) and “The Shore House” (published in *The Atlantic* in September of 1873) may be carelessly written, but it is in just such carelessness that they can be said to have a “reality” which a more carefully composed story would lack. Exactly the same situation affects Jewett’s watercolor sketches: “one or two little marine views” are “bright and real and have an individuality” while more finished pictures that have been “worked over” appear to her “stiff” and relatively lifeless, even when these pictures are “scratched off to use up paint.” The means by which Jewett assesses her painting and her writing is identical: in both cases the “reality” of a sketch is equivalent to the degree to which the representation is a spontaneous and immediate production without much “working over,” even as this characteristic appears to diminish a given work to the status of the unfinished, the “little,” or the “scratched off,” thereby disqualifying it as sufficiently finished and “artistic.”

As I have earlier described in detail, however, the aesthetic values of spontaneity, vitality, sketchiness, and lack of finish were rapidly gaining traction in circles of European (and eventually American) painting in the 1870s and 1880s. Important to note

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624 It is very possible that the “little marine views” to which Jewett refers are two or three small watercolors in the Harvard archives: Series: MS Am 1743.26 III. Diaries, financial agreements, and miscellany. pf (12) containing “131 pencil, charcoal and water color drawings.” seq. 165, 166, and 168. The sketches, like many other sketches in the collection, are unsigned and of uncertain provenance which makes their attribution to Jewett questionable. It would be of great value to be able to determine their authorship with certainty.
in terms of this discussion are the ways in which watercolors in particular came to the fore in American art circles as a medium particularly well-suited to these new values. Watercolors were the preferred medium, as we have seen, of the American Pre-Raphaelites: “The American Pre-Raphaelites loved watercolor,” writes Kathleen A. Foster. “Their special affection for this medium sets them apart from the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose members only occasionally worked in watercolor.”

Inspired by Ruskin, who was instrumental in renovating the reputation of watercolors, the American Pre-Raphaelites prized clear-seeing, immediacy, spontaneity, and often worked *en plein air*. Its aesthetic qualities aside, while the technical constraints of oil paints proved a challenge for the open-air naturalist-cum-painter, the trim easels, small paint cases, lightweight paper, and quick drying-time of watercolor made it an attractive alternative for the painter in search of rural or sylvan subjects. Pre-Raphaelites also tended to value studies rather than “finished” or overly composed works of art, a value that set them in opposition to the predominant artistic tastes of the time, and watercolors were again a natural medium for this manner of expression: the bright, high-keyed, and highly detailed watercolors, often studies of nature, were directly opposed to the more low-toned, highly composed, and often narrative works of the more popular Düsseldorf school or so-called “school of mud” – the Munich School – maligned by Hamlin Garland and others.

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626 For more detail on Ruskin’s direct influence, including the widespread popularity of *The Elements of Drawing*, see: Foster, “The Pre-Raphaelite Medium,” 87.
While the American Pre-Raphaelites enjoyed limited success in the 1860s, their championing of watercolor painting led to long-lasting and wide-spread popularity of that medium throughout the 1870s and 1880s. The American Society of Painters in Water Colors (known today as the American Watercolor Society) was founded in New York in 1866 and while it was partly inspired and motivated by American Pre-Raphaelite sensibilities its mission aimed less at Ruskinian representation of nature than at restoring watercolors to their rightful place alongside oil paints as a unique medium with unique aesthetic effects and a rich artistic history. The Society itself was keenly aware of the poor repute in which watercolor painting was held relative to oil painting, as they make clear in a pamphlet published in 1868: “No artist pretends that it can ever take the place of oil painting.” Still, the statement continues, “the masters of water color…maintain, with some reason, that for certain luminous qualities, for purity of tint and tone, for delicate gradation especially in skies and distance, their favorite style of painting has decided advantages over oil.”

These unique aesthetic qualities of watercolor painting are described in detail by one Henry S. Mackintosh in a lengthy defense of the medium in the *Atlantic Monthly* in

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627 William H. Gerdts writes, “The Pre-Raphaelites also devoted considerable technical attention to independent watercolors and drawings, not only to preparatory studies for more ambitious oil paintings. This shift in emphasis was especially innovative in America, and it became most evident in the formation of the American Society of Painters in Watercolors in 1866. This was a very conscious action at the acme of Pre-Raphaelite activity among American artists, and American Pre-Raphaelites contributed strongly to the Society’s first show at the National Academy of Design in winter 1867-68” “[Through a Glass Brightly: The American Pre-Raphaelites and Their Still Lifes and Nature Studies,” *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1985), 41].

December 1874, a defense which is it not unlikely Jewett herself read. Like the American Society of Painters in Water Colors, Mackintosh remarks on watercolor’s “luminosity…liquidity and transparency,” as well as its “prismatic brilliancy,” and in its “brilliance and freshness” that watercolor exceeds the capabilities of oil painting.\footnote{Henry S. Mackintosh, “Water-color Painting: An Essay Read Before the Boston Art Club,” \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} 34, no. 206 (December 1874), 695.}

Mackintosh, however, hopes to recuperate the reputation of watercolor not only through competition with oil painting, but by tracing out its separate art historical lineage. While the American Pre-Raphaelites may have contributed to an understanding of watercolor as an irreverently “modern” mode of painting, Mackintosh defends the medium on the grounds of its antiquity (indeed its ubiquity before the baroque decadence after Raphael): “Water-colors,” he writes, “were used by the Egyptians, the Hindoos, the Chinese, the Assyrians, and the Etruscans, long before the birth of Christ.”\footnote{Mackintosh, “Water-color Painting,” 696.}

Of primary interest for Mackintosh is that watercolor was the medium of Renaissance fresco, and that before the rise of oil painting watercolors enjoyed a reputation now equivalent to that of oil painting in the modern age. Mackintosh recounts that Michelangelo himself once remarked that, “oil painting was fit only for women and for the luxurious and idle” while Vasari “has rightly called fresco ‘the most manly of all modes of painting’.”\footnote{Mackintosh, “Water-color Painting,” 696, 698.} Coupled with Renaissance fresco, Mackintosh also defends watercolor on the grounds of its use in medieval illuminated manuscripts and miniatures. In both cases, Mackintosh’s defense is decidedly Pre-Raphaelite in spirit: a return to watercolor is a return to a more naïve and austere mode of expression before the sentimental decadence of oil paints. The relative purity of the medium affords “new and
untrodden paths” for American artists to work in a medium relatively unsullied by historical associations (his choice of phrasing also inevitably recalls The New Path, the name of the journal of the Pre-Raphaelite Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, a decade after the journal ceased publication.)

Nonetheless, despite the efforts of writers like Mackintosh to recuperate its reputation, watercolor largely retained its associations as a “feminine” or amateur medium over and against more “masculine” or professional oil painting, and protestations to the contrary did little to change its reputation as a medium for practice and study rather than for making “finished” works of art. While oil painting still dominated most schools of art in the period, Fabri writes that, “Girls’ schools always included watercolor in the curriculum.” Indeed, that the American Society of Painters in Water Color was among the first artistic societies to admit women did little to help this reputation, and indeed constituted an impediment to the medium’s widespread acceptance. In 1873, one critic could still write that watercolors “have been looked upon as pretty fancy work, fit for girls and amateurs, and the terms washy and weak have almost universally been applied to them.” Watercolor painting, despite its increasing popularity, remained a decidedly “minor” medium associated largely with women and amateur artists despite shifts in taste and aesthetic values, a reputation that the medium still largely retains today.

634 Lloyd Goodrich, American Watercolor and Winslow Homer, (The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1943), 21, quoted in Fabri, History of the American Watercolor Society, 8.
But the “minorness” of this medium can help to corroborate and situate a common critical understanding of Jewett’s own deliberate “minorness” as a writer, and the comparison between Jewett’s sketches or “word-pictures” and watercolor painting is an analogy that would appear to strengthen this characterization for better or for worse.635 But reading Mackintosh’s essay can help to resituate and recuperate watercolor painting and revise our understanding that comparisons between Jewett and watercolors were necessarily belittling or patronizing. Rather, I go into such detail about the reception of watercolor painting in the 1870s in order to put Jewett’s own statements about her own watercolor painting and its relation to her writing in a thicker artistic context. As we can see, the characteristics that critics see in Jewett’s prose – its translucency, its brilliance, its purity of color, its vividness, its naturalness – are indeed the same kinds of words that were used to positively describe watercolor pictures at a time when such a revaluation of the medium was an open question discussed in forums like The Atlantic, in which Jewett also published.

By a like turn, Jewett’s discussion with Scudder in which “minor” sketches (defined by their descriptive qualities) are compared against “major” novels (defined by their narrative qualities) is mirrored in her own description of her “minor” watercolor sketches relative to “major” oil paintings on canvas. The technical particularities of watercolor as a medium are a suitable analogue for Jewett’s prose style not only because of its desirable aesthetic qualities but because of the manner of its execution: watercolor was an appealing medium because of the quickness with which an painting could be

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635 Jewett’s “minorness” has been often discussed. See for instance: Louis A. Renza, “A White Heron” and the Question of Minor Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). Unlike Renza, I aim to better situate this aesthetic “minorness” in its (art) historical moment.
conceived and executed. Watercolors, unlike oil paints, dry almost instantaneously which fundamentally alters the means in which the artist works with them. Watercolor admits of no working over. Each stroke is absolutely indelible: a piece of paper cannot be scraped as a canvas can. In this way, Jewett conceived of her own writing practice in analogy with watercolor painting: her impulsiveness and spontaneity as a writer are positively licensed by her experience with the technical apparatus of painting. A similarly substantive connection between watercolor and prose writing might be found in Mackintosh’s discussion of medieval manuscripts: unlike oil painting, which required separate materials, watercolor and writing – image and text – as in the case of illuminated manuscripts, could overlap and play off one another and were executable in the same medium. The distance between watercolor, pen and ink drawing, and writing as artistic practices is much smaller than the distance between oil painting and writing. This elasticity of medium allows for a more flexible approach to artistic production that informs the ways in which Jewett conceived of her status as a creative and experimental artist.

“Story-writing is always experimental”: Literary Spontaneity and the Sketch Form

Jewett deliberately aligns the spontaneity and vitality of watercolor painting with *literary* experimentation, a quality that she finds particularly abundant in the writing of the French and Russians, whom she often recommends and seeks to emulate. In an 1896 letter to her friend Rose Lamb, who was a professional painter, Jewett explicitly links the radically novel style of French writers with the spontaneously experimental mode of
watercolor painting: “If something comes into a writer’s or a painter’s mind the only thing is to try it, to see what one can do with it, and give it a chance to show if it has real value. Story-writing is always experimental, just as a water-color sketch is, and that something which does itself is the vitality of it.”

If in her 1873 letter to Scudder, Jewett was ambivalent or uncertain about the value of her method of spontaneity, by 1896 Jewett seems much more confident associating this spontaneity of method with artistic success and “vitality.” While her manner of “scratching off” paintings and stories had earlier left her doubtful about her status as an artist, Jewett would later understand this practice as the kernel of her own experimental art of fiction.

Jewett’s claim for her own radically experimental writing comes in the context of her recommendation to Lamb of several French writers with whom she now evidently wishes to associate herself: in this letter Jewett recommends Maupassant and Daudet as two “experimental” writers with whom she apparently shares an affinity.

Indeed, the two stories of Daudet’s that Jewett explicitly recommends to Lamb, “La Chèvre de M. Sequin [sic]” and “La Mule de Pape” are both from Daudet’s *Lettres de mon moulin* (1869), a regionalist collection or “album” of stories organized around the narrator’s stay in his windmill in Provence. *Lettres de mon moulin* is perhaps the closest formal analogue to works like *Deephaven* or *The Country of the Pointed Firs*: a work of “local color” writing about a provincial setting attractive to urban readers that mixes diverse genres of writing, from the lighthearted or humoristic tales such as “La Mule de Pape” to

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637 It is worth noting that alongside Maupassant and Daudet, Jewett also recommends stories by Anne Thackeray Ritchie and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. It is important to note that by “experimental” Jewett does not use the term in the sense that may then have been then been in circulation in French circles, that is, in Zola’s sense of the “roman expérimental,” current from around 1880.
richly descriptive, sensuous, and impressionistic word-paintings such as “Les Oranges.” *Lettres de mon moulin* is “experimental” in its generic incongruity as well as in its status as a precursor to and inspiration for more concertedly descriptive prose that would characterize avant-garde French impressionistic writing of subsequent decades.

There is a strong connection between the “experimental” nature of watercolor painting and the “experimental” nature of French literature of the sort Jewett recommends. Just as Jewett’s own watercolor sketches that she “scratched off to use up paint” have a particular brightness, reality, and individuality, so a story in order to have similar qualities should also be “scratched off.” In this way, we can say that Jewett expresses a connection between spontaneity and *artistry*. While we may be accustomed to thinking of Flaubert, to name the most famous example, and his disciple Maupassant as inveterate *overworkers* of their prose (Flaubert’s famously fastidious search for *le mot juste*), for Jewett the French are distinguished primarily by their fresh spontaneity, by their resemblance to qualities of painting that Jewett also admired.638

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638 It is interesting to connect Jewett’s admiration for an aesthetic of spontaneity not only with the watercolor sensibility of the American Pre-Raphaelites and the word-pictures of modern French fiction, but also with a spiritist belief in automaticism, a popular and much-discussed topic in the sorts of circles in which Jewett participated. Stories such as “Miss Tempy’s Watchers” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1888) and episodes from both *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, feature elements or features of telepathic communication or extradimensional influences. It is interesting to connect these fringe beliefs to which Jewett at least partly subscribed with her writerly (and painterly) practice. In a letter to Annie Fields from 1889, Jewett writes: “What a wonderful kind of chemistry it is that evolves all the details of a story and writes them presently in one flash of time! For two weeks I have been noticing a certain string of things and having hints of character, etc. and day before yesterday the plan of the story comes into my mind, and in half an hour I have put all the little words and ways into their places and can read it off the myself like print. Who does it? For I grow more and more sure that I don’t!” (*Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Fields, 51-52). For more on Jewett and spiritualism, see John J. Kucich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in*
That Jewett expressed an affinity for French and Russian writers has been long acknowledged by critics, and was certainly acknowledged by Jewett herself. Jewett was fond of announcing her purported French ancestry, and used this ancestry as a frame for her own fiction (it is this “French ancestry,” in fact, that informs Jewett’s profession to Fields that she writes peppermints rather than yardsticks, and “makes her nibble all round her stories like a mouse.”) F. O. Matthiessen recounts Jewett’s adoration for both Tolstoy and Flaubert, and writes that, “From the day she discovered them she kept a slip of paper pinned on her secretary in the upper hall, inscribed with two of Flaubert’s sentences: ‘Ecrire la vie ordinaire comme on écrit l’histoire,’ and ‘C’est ne pas de faire rire, ni de faire pleurer, ni de vous mettre à fureur, mais d’agir à la façon de la nature, c’est à dire de faire rêver.’” Granville Hicks, writing in The Great Tradition (1933), notes that in addition to English writers like “Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Donne and Herbert” Jewett was strongly influenced by “the French and Russians also, Tolstoy and Turgenev, Zola, Daudet, Maupassant, Bourget, and Flaubert.”

While there is limited archival evidence that would describe in detail Jewett’s relation to these writers, there are a few suggestive traces. In addition to the

*Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2004), 91-117.


640 Francis Otto Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 66-67. That is, “Write ordinary life as you would write history” and “[The highest thing in art] is not to make one laugh, nor to make one cry, nor to make you angry, but to act in the manner of nature: that is, to make one dream.” On the influence of Tolstoy, see Randall Huff, “Sarah Orne Jewett’s Tolstoyan Stories,” *The International Fiction Review* 19, no. 1 (1992), 23-27. Huff’s discussion is somewhat limited but suggestive of further research.

recommendations of Maupassant and Daudet, Jewett, in a letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman from 1895, writes out a passage by Paul Bourget from an address given on the occasion of his admission to the Académie française, an address which “touch[es] one’s heart very much”: “Tant il est vrai que le principe de la création intellectuelle comme de toutes les autres reside dans le don magnanime et irraisonné de soi-même, dans l’élan attendri vers les autres, dans le chaleur de l’enthousiasme, et que le génie le l’artiste est comme toutes les grandes choses du monde: un acte de foi et d’amour.”642 Jewett’s interest in Bourget’s election to the Académie suggests that she recognized the significance of the reception of an inveterate aesthete – indeed a literary “impressionist” renowned for his sensuous word painting – into the official circles of the French literary establishment. Like the Flaubert quotation pinned to her secretary, the quotation from Bourget’s address makes a wide claim for the significance of literature as an art: writing, in order to be considered art, is exceptionally personal.

Of even greater interest than Bourget is Jewett’s literary association and friendship with Marie-Thérèse Blanc, who wrote under the penname Thérèse Bentzon and who had reviewed Jewett’s novel A Country Doctor, along with other works and stories, in 1885.643 Like many other reviewers of that book, Bentzon, echoing Ferdinand Brunetière’s description of Daudet, wrote that A Country Doctor was “not a novel,” but

642 Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Fields, 115-116. That is, “it is true that the principle of intellectual creation, as of all others, lies in the magnanimous and unreasoning gift of the self, in the tender impulse towards others, in the warmth of enthusiasm, and that the genius of the artist is like all the great things of the world: an act of faith and of love” (my translation). For the complete speech see: “Discours prononcés dans la séance publique tenue par l’académie française pour la réception de M. Paul Bourget,” June 13, 1895 (Paris: L’Institut de France, Rue Jacob, 1895).
rather “a very interesting gallery of portraits and landscapes, a magic lantern with multiple pictures of singular newness.” Bentzon also discusses Jewett at some length in an essay for the *Revue des deux Mondes* from September 15, 1887, titled “Le Naturalisme aux États-Unis - La Bibliothèque du plein air,” a review which greatly expands on and shifts the definition of “naturalism” to include writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Lowell, John Burroughs, and many other “nature” writers. Bentzon puts Jewett in company with these “naturalists,” writing that she is part of a “groupe des grands peintres de paysage ideal,” and remarking of “A White Heron,” “Dans cette idylle de quelques pages, miss Jewett montre des qualités de peintre et de poète.” Bentzon’s identification of Jewett as a “landscape painter” aligns her both with trends in modern painting – including watercolor painting – as well as with trends in modern French writing that valued the pictorial and descriptive possibilities of prose writing over its more traditional narrative function. It was a judgment that Bentzon was certainly qualified to make: Bentzon was deeply engaged with the contemporary literary world in Paris in her capacity as a writer and reviewer for the *Revue des deux Mondes*, of which the more aesthetically conservative Ferdinand Brunetière was soon to become editor, and with whom she travelled to the United States in 1897.

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The formal and temperamental similarities between Jewett and Ivan Turgenev are equally suggestive, though equally difficult to support from archival and biographical material. A review article by one May Stranathan published in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1915 recounts an anecdote by none other than Willa Cather in which that author relates that, “[Jewett’s] work was said to bear a marked similarity to that of Turgenev, the Russian author, and Miss Cather told how William Dean Howells, when the books of Turgenev began to appear, gave Miss Jewett a volume, saying, ‘Here is an author who writes just like you do.’” It is unclear what volume Cather refers to, but a strong possibility would be Turgenev’s *Zapisky Oхотника* (1852), variously translated in English as *Sketches from A Hunter’s Album* or *A Sportsman’s Sketches*, a volume which also formally echoes Jewett’s “albums” such as *Deephaven* in terms of its generic diversity and which, like *Lettres de mon moulin*, combines “local color” dialect storytelling with vivid word-painting. Indeed, *Zapisky Oхотника*, which is structured around the central conceit of a gentleman hunter’s perambulations through the Russian countryside, even more closely mirrors the structure of loose quasi-novels such as *A Country Doctor*, in which the itinerant career of the central protagonist affords an opportunity to describe diverse settings and characters, and to engage in vivid word-painting of landscapes, portraits, and domestic interiors without the pressure of subordinating descriptions to an overarching romantic plot.

By invoking Daudet, Maupassant, Flaubert, Bourget, Bentzon, Tolstoy, and Turgenev I hope to suggest a lens for looking at Jewett’s “local color” writing that more France, leaving Madame Blanc here to visit with Miss Jewett and other American friends” [Sarah Orne Jewett Letters, ed. Cary, 104].

accurately situates it in the cosmopolitan literary world in which it participated. Jewett, I am suggesting, was not as “provincial” as her characterization as a regionalist or “local color” writer would have us suppose, and it is by understanding her unique literary art in the context of these cosmopolitan movements that new interpretations of her own prose become available to us. Interpretations of Jewett have often been limited by their parochialism: both the parochialism of critics of Jewett’s time who too often saw her as a somewhat amateurish female writer who chose a limited subject because of a limited experience of life, and by the parochialism of more contemporary critics who may be constrained by the disciplinary boundaries of the professional study of American literature. By calling her a “regionalist,” critics both contemporary and of Jewett’s own time may fail to see the ways in which regionalist word-painting was for Jewett a distinctly cosmopolitan endeavor with a relatively replete set of conceptual, generic, and aesthetic tools at its disposal which a writer could deploy at her will.

The Limits of the American Local Color Sketch

The sketch is one of these aesthetic tools, and a more complete understanding of Jewett’s art of fiction requires seeing this form in a wider and more cosmopolitan context. Discussions both contemporary and of the nineteenth century have often misunderstood Jewett’s sketches by looking at them solely through the lens of her American antecedents. As I have already sketched out in my discussion of Hamlin Garland, the sketch has long been understood as a uniquely American form going back to
the earliest writing of the republic and indeed even earlier. I have suggested that this tradition can be broken into several distinct genres or tendencies – the humoristic and the sentimental sketch, as well as the travel sketch – and that these generic expectations often served as impediments against the recognition of local color or regionalist writing as a literary art, as well as against the identification of local color writing with modern realism. But the ways in which French and Russian writers transformed the sketch into a literary art by means of foregrounding its descriptive and pictorial possibilities offer us a means for revaluating Jewett’s own sketches and for better understanding the ways in which Jewett, in her letter to Garland, sought to make regionalist or local color writing “as artistic…as our foreign neighbors,” even as American reading publics established the generic horizons of expectation over and against which a regionalist literary fiction would have to become legible.

While critics of both past and present have often leagued Jewett with other American regionalist writers, particularly woman regionalists, I am suggesting that the generic diversity and rich word-painting of albums such as Lettres de mon moulin and Zapisky Oxotnika are a more suitable analogue for “album” works such as Deephaven and The Country of the Pointed Firs, as well as for loose narratives such as A Country Doctor and even the Betty Leicester collections (1890, 1899), in addition to her other stories and sketches. Interpreting these works through this lens helps us to see the ways in which Jewett’s writing pushes against the generic limitations of the American sketch tradition, particularly as it was defined by woman regionalists. While Jewett was clearly

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648 See Buell, New England Literary Culture, 294.
influenced by this tradition, its tendency towards humoristic and sentimental cliché would have to be revised before local color writing could register as a literary art.

One can get a sense of how formidable these impediments were by looking at some of the travel writing from the period, often published in magazines in which Jewett herself published and with which Jewett’s own writing might have been implicitly compared. An especially pertinent example of this sort of writing is an essay published in *Harper’s Monthly* in 1882 by one Sarah Clark titled “A Summer in York.” Clark’s “local color” travel essay is typical of the genre in several ways, and is also of particular interest for this discussion inasmuch as it purports to represent a place in Maine – York – just one town over from Jewett’s own hometown of South Berwick. Towns like York were quickly becoming attractive summer destinations for the wealthier citizens of Boston and travel essays like Clark’s served both as advertisements for such places and as lenses mediating the experience of urban visitors to make such towns appear especially quaint, appealing, or picturesque: indeed, the essay begins by calling its subject “the quaint old sea-port of York.” We might call this genre of writing *loco-descriptive*: Clark’s essay is a sort of tour of York guiding the reader through the sights – beaches, meadows, lighthouses – that make York distinctive and which would attract urban visitors, and both describing these sights in rich, picturesque imagery while paying special attention to their topographical or geographical locations in such a way as to describe the means by which visitors might themselves access them.


Clark’s description of Eastern Point is exemplary: “Eastern Point,” Clark writes, “is a stretch of land a mile or two in length, lying between the Long and Short Sands. In some parts it is undulating and very picturesque, broken by groves and clumps of low willow-trees, within whose shade graze sheep and lambs.” Clark’s description of the “picturesque” Point invokes classically pastoral imagery of groves, willows, sheep, and lambs, while also describing its physical and topographical location relative to other features of the area in a way that highlights its accessibility; the description thus functions as both a practical guide to the would-be visitor as well as a lens casting features of landscape within a recognizable topos of the picturesque. This description, along with many others in the essay, is accompanied by a picturesquely Romantic illustration of the craggy Point on a clouded moonlit night, complete with sailing ships and strollers in the foreground. While Clark’s essay often features richly descriptive word-picturing, it is also clear that these word-pictures are in the service of advertisement rather than unmotivated aesthetic depiction. Clark writes, for instance:

As the sunset deepens, the salt-meadows are clad in a golden green moss, each dry blade and bramble on the wind-swept hill gleams like a javelin, the red flowers burn in crimson flames, the cranberry swamp, too, is on fire, and the bridge in the distance looks as if it led to paradise. If love is a questioning of the soul of God, now there are many, many questions to be asked and answered! While richly sensuous and strongly visual, the reader may detect a note of archness in Clark’s word-painting, which begins in simple description but quickly topples into an almost self-deprecatingly romantic effusion. Indeed, the humoristic note is sounded in the next paragraph, where Clark continues: “Although Nature is so lavish of her charms on York, there is a most delightful vacuum in the way of shops, libraries and indeed of

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651 Ibid., 491.
652 Ibid., 490.
almost all city incumbrances [sic]. Shopping may be pursued, but under severe
difficulties.” Clark’s juxtaposition of the ecstasies of paradise with the banalities of
shopping deflates the high status of her scenic depiction, rendering it instead a
commodity that one might purchase in York and bring back to Boston in lieu of a more
tangible souvenir.

The people, like the landscapes, in Clark’s essay are similarly “picturesque.”
Sketches of individuals, such as an aged sea captain named “Cap’n Jo” who would rather
smoke a pipe than watch a sunset and who has travelled to “‘Yewrup,’ ‘Chiny’ and
‘Injy’” are hastily delineated caricatures of recognizably humoristic “Yankee” types. Other characters are similarly picturesque: one Dame Dorcas, the oldest woman in town,
is prized for her “quaint speech and kindly voice, her strange tales of the olden time.”
Dame Dorcas, like the beaches and lighthouses of York, is an attraction: “it would be
worth while to make a trip to York if only to see her for a few hours.” Unlike similar
characters in Jewett’s own writings – Captain Littlepage and Almira Todd in The Country
of the Pointed Firs come immediately to mind – Cap’n Jo and Dame Dorcas are treated
only hastily and given voice only in paraphrase or excerpt, with particular attention paid
to their “quaint” manner of speaking in dialect. Overall, Clark’s essay is anecdotal rather
than artistic: it is fragmentary and sketch-like, but this sketchiness is more the result of its
being composed of notes jotted down for the purposes of remembrance rather than of
distinct impressions valuable for their freshness, vitality, and accuracy. In other words, it

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653 Ibid.
654 Ibid., 493.
655 Ibid.
656 Ibid.
is the sketch pressed into the service of a chamber of commerce rather than the service of art.

We can see then how travel writing of the late nineteenth century both furnished an occasion and a readership for local color writing while also dramatically hindering the reception of local color writing as a literary art. In addition to the sentimental, humoristic, or commercial dimensions of travel writing, the romantic or sentimental regionalist novel also presented difficult impediments for the creation of a local color literary fiction even as they created an audience receptive to its colorful settings and characters. I have already mentioned how Fetterley and Pryse have demonstrated, for instance, the ways in which even while Jewett was inspired by its regional setting, the inevitability of the romantic plot of Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* was an obstacle over and against which Jewett had to create her own anti-romance “A White Heron,” which, Fetterley and Pryse write, “can be read in part as Jewett’s response to Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, her analysis of the constraints that the form of the novel placed upon Stowe’s ability to develop her material and her theorizing of what might be done with that material in the form of the sketch.”  

657 Novels such as *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* take advantage of the relatively remote and rural regional setting to establish, as Hawthorne writes of the romance in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, “a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel,”  

658 while also using the scaffolding of romantic plot as a frame in which to introduce conventional local color character and scenery sketches.

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657 Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*, 176.
One need not look much beyond the first few pages of *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* to see these techniques at play. Stowe immediately sets the scene on a highway removed from ordinary travel – a trope of romance – but also denotes the location of the highway with great specificity – a trope of local color writing: “On the road to the Kennebec, below the town of Bath, in the State of Maine, might have been seen, on a certain autumnal afternoon, a one-horse wagon, in which two persons were sitting.”

The combination of local color particularity and “certainty” with romantic generality and vagueness is marked out from the very outset: the “certain” autumnal afternoon is at once specific and unspecific, an ambiguity that is heightened by Stowe’s winkingly vague statement that such a couple “might have been seen,” which endows them with a self-consciously fictitious atmosphere and situates them relative to an impersonal and disembodiedly omniscient narrator distinct from the more ground-level reportage of local color sketching.

One of the couple is “an old man [Zepheniah Pennel], with the peculiarly hard but expressive physiognomy which characterizes the seafaring population of the New England shores,” a portrait that marks him as a typical if subsequently somewhat cartoonish “Yankee” character; the other, a young woman (Naomi, his daughter), is described both generically and romantically as one of “those fragile wild-flowers which in April cast their fluttering shadows from the mossy crevices of old New England.

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659 In the preface to the 1893 edition of *Deephaven*, Jewett writes that the early chapters of *Pearl* were especially transformative for her vision of local color writing, writing that they “gave the young author...to see with new eyes” (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1893), pp. 3-4.

Their travel affords Stowe an opportunity to describe “the scenery of the road” in rich and specific detail, and they arrive quickly at “a point of elevated land” which prospect affords Stowe an opportunity for a panoramic loco-descriptive word-picture that invokes familiar *topoi* of the picturesque:

There might be seen in the distance the blue Kennebec sweeping out toward the ocean through its picturesque rocky shores, docked with cedars and other dusky evergreens, which were illuminated by the orange and flame-colored trees of Indian summer. Here and there scarlet creepers swung long trailing garlands over the faces of the dark rock, and fringes of goldenrod above swayed with the brisk blowing wind that was driving the blue waters seaward, in face of the up-coming ocean tide,—a conflict which caused them to rise in great foam-crested waves.

Stowe’s description, picturesque as it is, stands in an uneasy relation to the event that is about to unfold and to which this beautiful proscenium is an ironic counterpoint: as the couple regard this appealing seascape framed by autumn foliage, a sailing ship enters the scene, is baffled by the strong winds, and is wrecked in a narrow channel. The two have been watching for the arrival of Naomi’s husband, James Lincoln, who was aboard the wrecked ship and who subsequently drowns in the following chapter; his death provokes Naomi, who was pregnant, to go into labor after which she also promptly dies. Naomi’s death is presented in a typically sentimental manner: “And as she spoke, there passed over her face the sharp frost of the last winter; but even as it passed there broke out a smile, as if a flower had been thrown down from Paradise, and she said,—‘Not my will, but thy will,’ and so was gone.” These deaths are the precipitating events of the rest of the romantic plot in which the protagonist, Mara, the daughter of the deceased parents

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661 Ibid., 1-2.
662 Ibid., 2-3.
663 Ibid., 8.
and the eponymous “pearl” of the island, experiences an unrequited love for Moses Pennel, also saved from a (different) shipwreck and whom the family adopts.

The romantic topoi of shipwrecks, islands, and orphans of unknown parentage are familiar enough from classics of the romance genre such as *The Tempest* or *Daphnis and Chloe*, and the reader perhaps is led to expect a similarly romantic conclusion. But the marriage of Mara and Moses never comes off, and the deaths of her parents ultimately foreshadow and frame Mara’s own early, and sentimentally tragic, death. Perhaps distressed by the unsuitably close brother-sister relationship between them, the novel, and it might be said Mara herself, selects death over marriage: “If we lived together in the commonplace toils of life, you would see only a poor threadbare wife. I might have lost what little charm I ever had for you; but I feel that if I die, this will not be. There is something sacred and beautiful in death.” The story can only be turned out of the deep rut of the marriage plot by Mara’s death, a similarly “romantic” or sentimental ending, which is figured in the novel as itself a type of spiritual marriage. Thus in Stowe, the “local color” techniques of scenic description, genre scene depiction, and character study are subordinated to the demands of romantic narrative plotting.

We can see then how Fetterley and Pryse would understand the sentimental romance of *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, even for all its “local color” features, as a “constraint” on transmuting such writing into a literary art. “A White Heron” invokes many of the same topoi as *Pearl*, such as its rustic Maine setting, but emphatically denies the generic conventions of sentimental romantic plotting even as its premise establishes this expectation. The minimal “plot” of the story is well known and easily summarized:

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664 Ibid., 434.
Sylvia, a young girl living alone with her grandmother in a distant rural area, encounters a young hunter from the city, who asks to be put up for the night. The hunter says that he is in search of a white heron to add to his collection of trophies; having become enamored of the hunter, Sylvia sets out to find the heron’s nest. Climbing a tall pine tree, Sylvia discovers the nest but decides to keep her knowledge of it a secret, knowing that divulging her secret would result in the heron’s death. The story ends with Sylvia’s decision to withhold her knowledge from the hunter, and the consequences of her decision are never written.

“A White Heron” then is the consummate allegory of unmotivated aesthetic experience set against the socializing demands of romantic plot. Sylvia’s refusal to betray the whereabouts of the heron to the attractive young hunter and collector (he is described ironically as an “ornithologist”) who would shoot and kill it, thereby turning a living creature into a trophy or object of knowledge, is also a renunciation of the narrative structure of the romance in which Sylvia’s betrayal would initiate her into the world of adult demands – sex, marriage, death – and would subordinate her personal delight in the beauty of the white heron to a social and epistemological order in which that delight and that beauty are objectified, typified, and destroyed.

The young hunter, it might be said, is representative not just of the world of these demands and of the ways in which the romance structure of narrative construes them, but also of the consuming vision of regionalist travel writing in which local details of rural settings are typified, romanticized, and consumed: the hunter, sitting around after his dinner, “listened eagerly to the old woman’s quaint talk,” a sly bit of free indirect speech that marks him out as an urbanite whose understanding of the rural setting in
which he currently finds himself is mediated by picturesque expectations of the sort set out by Sarah Clark in her “quaint” *Harper’s* essay.\(^{665}\) Especially poignant is the fact that he – like the reader perhaps – has apparently forgotten the “old woman’s” name (it is Mrs. Tilley) and remains blithely and selfishly ignorant of the sympathetic story Mrs. Tilley tells during dinner: “The guest did not notice this hint of family sorrows in his eager interest in something else” – to wit, birds.\(^{666}\)

Unlike the perfunctory, pedantic, and ornithological manner in which the hunter tells Sylvia of “the birds and what they knew and where they lived and what they did with themselves,”\(^ {667}\) the revelatory moment in which the heron reveals itself from Sylvia’s transcendent perch high atop the pine tree is presented in the manner of a vividly described landscape: “Westward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages, truly it was a vast and awesome world.”\(^ {668}\) The “vast and awesome” scenic panorama that Sylvia witnesses, unlike the more traditionally picturesque view in *Pearl*, is neither a proscenium nor a stage setting for a narrative event (the shipwreck), but a composed landscape *tableau* unto itself, even while Sylvia, like the reader, expects otherwise: “At last the sun came up bewilderingly bright. Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away. Where was the

\(^{666}\) Ibid., 673.
\(^{667}\) Ibid., 674.
\(^{668}\) Ibid., 677.
white heron's nest in the sea of green branches, and was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?"\(^{669}\)

The answer to this second question – whether this was her reward – is “yes.” While Sylvia does glimpse the white heron and learn the location of its nest, this information is never divulged to the hunter, making this scenic moment of transcendence an end in itself. By renouncing the utility or “reward” of her quest (in addition to his affection, the young hunter has crassly offered Sylvie ten dollars for information leading him to the white heron), the story ends on a note of irresolution. The rhetorical question with which the story concludes, “Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, – who can tell?” is also an answer: no one can tell, least of all the teller of the story.\(^{670}\) The story renounces anything so conclusive as a marriage or a death, and thus remains radically open and, it might be said, radically amoral: Sylvia’s aesthetic experience is autotelic, and valuable only in and for itself.\(^{671}\) While in a more traditional romance such as Pearl, description serves the narration (Genette’s ancilla), in “A White Heron” the story serves the description by culminating not in a climax in which Sylvia “gives it away” (her secret or herself), but in which she keeps it to and for herself: “No, she must keep silence!”\(^{672}\) Sylvia’s silence is an emphatic rejection of narrative resolution and a renunciation of the demand that her moment of ecstatic transport, presented as a

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\(^{669}\) Ibid.

\(^{670}\) Ibid., 679.

\(^{671}\) The radical openness and irresolution of the story’s climax subtly echoes, I think, the conclusion of Milton’s Paradise Lost: “Then Sylvia, well satisfied, makes her perilous way down again” suggests Book XII, Lines 624-625 and 648-649: “So spake our Mother Eve, and Adam heard / Well pleased, but answered not…. They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way” (New York: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 316-317.

\(^{672}\) Jewett, “A White Heron,” 679.
vivid and colorful panoramic tableau, be made socially, narratively, or morally meaningful.

“A White Heron” may be an unabashedly inconclusive sketch, but to what degree can we understand this inconclusiveness as a typical feature of Jewett’s prose? By eschewing the structure and other formal demands of the romance to “wind up” with a moral, Jewett’s “minor” sketch deploys painterly description to present a climactic moment of aesthetic rapture that serves no narrative function – or rather that serves as a counter-moral overturning the expected climax of a traditionally romantic plot. But the expectation of moral resolution in sentimental romantic novels such as The Pearl of Orr’s Island was not solely the demand of the novel as a strongly narrative form. Rather, even the relatively more flexible sketch by and large developed in an American context in which the demands of moral resolution were still acutely felt.

But the French and Russian authors Jewett preferred suggested a strategy for evading those moral demands. The French tradition of avant-garde word-picturing, on the other hand, tends towards the depiction of socially determined, rather than allegorical, characters, and therefore towards the amoral. Narrative resolution is of less importance than a certain formal composition. French realist literature, it might be said, has always been this way, even before the rise of explicitly aestheticist writing that made word-painting the centerpiece of its style and structure. Even as early as Balzac characters do not represent ideas. They are themselves. Lucien Chardon from Illusions perdues (1837-1843) is not a figure of striving and self-deception; he strives and is self-deceived. Felix Grandet from Eugénie Grandet (1833) is not a figure of greed; he is greedy. Even cartoonishly villainous figures like Vautrin from Père Goriot (1834) and elsewhere are
too thickly characterized and socially situated to be representative of an idea. They may be social types, but never archetypes, in the manner of, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Perhaps Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856) is the most clarifying and significant site for examining the resistance of French realism to significant allegory, a resistance that Flaubert announces near the outset of the novel by way of Charles Bovary’s extraordinary hat. Jonathan Culler has famously written of the way in which Flaubert’s excessive description both invites and baffles the reader’s search for allegorical or “symbolic” meaning: “The cap, one might say, is, in its excessiveness, a parody of a symbolic object, in that by throwing down a challenge it calls into play interpretive operations that are inadequate to the task it appears to set.”

Flaubert’s description of this ludicrously incongruous hat of parts begins with the announcement that it was “une de ces coiffures,” as though such extraordinary hats could be found in abundance, when the subsequent description makes the hat not only utterly unique but in fact difficult or even impossible to describe. The hat’s dense surfeit of descriptive details invites the reader to literally imagine it, while at the same time exceeding the imagination’s ability to literally reconstruct it, making M. Bovary’s hat an emblem of resistance to realist depiction itself.

674 “C’était une de ces coiffures d’ordre composite, où l’on retrouve les éléments du bonnet à poil, du chapka, du chapeau rond, de la casquette de loutre et du bonnet de coton, une de ces pauvres choses, enfin, dont la laideur muette a des profondeurs d’expression comme le visage d’un imbécile. Ovoïde et renflée de baleines, elle commençait par trois boudins circulaires; puis s’alternaient, séparés par une bande rouge, des losanges de velours et de poils de lapin; venait ensuite une façon de sac qui se terminait par un polygone cartonné, couvert d’une broderie en soutache compliquée, et d’où pendait, au bout d’un long cordon trop mince, un petit croisillon de fils d’or, en manière de gland. Elle était neuve; la visière brillait” (quoted in Culler, Flaubert, 91).
At the same time, the chaos of possible signifiers makes the hat an emblem of resistance to allegorical interpretation: what meaning could such a composite emblem possibly have other than to signify the risibility of Charles Bovary himself, or the risibility of his status as a bourgeois newcomer donning a laughably confused pastiche of traditional symbols of cultural, clerical, or political authority? The hat then stands at the outset of the novel as an invitation and a resistance to both allegorical and realist interpretation, prompting what Culler calls a crisis of “faith in the intelligibility of the world” resulting in “linguistic despair.” But the impossibility of interpretation ultimately affirms Flaubert’s authority as the absolute arbiter of the novel’s aesthetic world, a realm situated outside the demands of ordinary narrative in which the reader’s requirement that the novel be morally meaningful is subordinated to the author’s requirement that the novel be aesthetically coherent.

Of course, that the amorality of the aesthetic could be easily mistaken for immorality is all too evident in the case of Madame Bovary (the novel was famously the occasion for an actual legal case). We might say that the death of Emma Bovary is “moral” inasmuch as it purports to make a claim about moral behavior, even if Flaubert himself would be disdainful of this pretense. It is, after all, in understanding her own life as a romance that Emma refuses to content herself with Charles and her dismal life in Yonville, embarking on two affairs, the consequences of which result in her suicide, the

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675 Culler, Flaubert, 93.
676 Henry James makes a similar observation in an 1876 review. “I remember thinking,” James writes, “the first time I read it, in the heat of my admiration for its power, that it would make the most useful of Sunday-school tracts.” “Practically,” he continues, “M. Flaubert is a potent moralist; whether, when he wrote his book, he was so theoretically is a matter best known to himself” (“Charles de Bernard and Gustave Flaubert,” in Literary Criticism II: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces [New York: Library of America, 1984], 169).
decline and subsequent death of Charles, and the servitude of their daughter Berthe. Such anyway is Jewett’s own interpretation of the novel, an interpretation that is immensely illuminating in understanding Jewett’s belief in the “moral” function of literary art.

Indeed, in a letter to Annie Fields from 1890, the same letter in which she made the comparison between her own stories and peppermint candies, Jewett admits that she had spent the night before reading *Madame Bovary*, which reading has precipitated the peppermint candy comparison in the first place. It is, indeed, her self-professed “French ancestry” that “makes her nibble all round her stories like a mouse.”677 But Jewett’s high opinion of the novel has surprisingly little to do with its formal perfection, and much to do with the novel’s moral situation.678 Jewett writes:

But the very great pathos of the book to me, is not the sin of her, but the thought, all the time, if she could have had a little brightness and prettiness of taste in the dull doctor, if she could have taken what there was in that dull little village! She is a lesson to dwellers in country towns, who drift out of relation to their surroundings, not only social, but the very companionships of nature, unknown to them.679

Rather than discussing Flaubert’s celebrated style, Jewett considers the case of Emma Bovary to be “a lesson” to readers to take more pleasure in places like Yonville and not to be deceived by unrealistic romantic fictions. Read in this manner, Jewett’s insistence


678 In other letters, Jewett is more explicit about the formal qualities of French literature that make it a desirable model for her own realism, paramount of which are the ways in which the context of French literature has available a richer stock of social types and cultural allusions. In a letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman, Jewett commends her interlocutor for appreciating her stories even without such a frame of reference: “You bring something to the reading of a story [probably “Martha’s Lady”] that the story would go very lame without; but it is those unwritable things that the story holds in its heart if it has any! that make the true soul of it, and these must be understood and yet how many a story ‘goes lame’ for lack of that understanding! In France there is such a ‘code,’ such recognitions, such richness of allusions, but here we confuse our scaffoldings with our buildings, and – and so!” (In *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Fields, 112).

that her settings, characters, and situations be “dull” (towns like Dunnet and Dulham) can be interpreted as a conscious decision to figure her own fictions as a sort of moral training ground. Every character we come across is, as it were, a potential Madame Bovary, and Jewett’s works themselves are addressed to an audience of potential Emmas. Local color writing of the sort that finds “brightness and prettiness” in apparently dull situations and settings is a sort of moral prophylactic. Unlike Flaubert, who contemptuously satirizes the inhabitants of Yonville in order to reinforce the distance between the author’s own aesthetic refinement of style and expression and the callous turpitude of its fictional citizens, Jewett’s own fictional practice purports to bridge the gap between art and life, providing an imitable means by which provincial inhabitants might aestheticize their own existences and relations to their selves, to others, and to their environment, to salubrious effect. Had Emma Bovary read *Deephaven* at her convent school rather than romantic novels, things might have ended differently.

For Jewett, the descriptive possibilities of local color writing articulate a moral function for literature, but in a manner very different than that of the romance narrative, which does its moral work by virtue of its plot. Jewett was indeed fond of discussing the value of her local color writing in terms of its social, and therefore ethical, function: it got people from both the country and the city, and from disparate parts of the nation, acquainted with one another. Such a claim corroborates assessments by Stephanie Foote and Richard Brodhead that Jewett’s regionalism does the “cultural work” required of a society still healing from the deep social and racial divisions of civil war, and undergoing a rapid and unprecedented process of economic industrialization and cultural homogenization. In the preface to the second 1893 edition of *Deephaven*, Jewett
explicitly writes that, “There is a noble saying of Plato that the best thing that can be done for the people of a state is to make them acquainted with one another.” 680 But what are the means by which this acquaintanceship is to be effected and mediated, if this acquaintanceship constitutes the “moral” of local color writing?

The “moral” of local color writing is directly related to the genre’s descriptive work, and is thus related by analogy to painting itself. In a letter to Mary E. Mulholland from January 23, 1899, Jewett describes this moral function by explicitly comparing local color writing to painting:

And then the people in books are apt to make us understand ‘real’ people better, and to know why they do things, and so we learn sympathy and patience and enthusiasm for those we live with, and can try to help them in what they are doing, instead of being half suspicious and finding fault. It is just the same way that a beautiful landscape picture makes us quicker to see the same things in a landscape, to look for rich clouds and trees, and see their beauty. 681

Jewett’s claim that reading literature can make us better people may seem predictable or pat, but the precise analogy with landscape painting helps to render the terms by which this “understanding” occurs with greater precision and interest. The model for literary empathy is not the imaginative encounter with difference or otherness, but the painterly means by which the phenomena of ordinary life are rendered with distinctness and detail. It is through a Ruskinian training of the eye that an observer becomes more perceptive of local detail and nuance, and it is this habit of perception that subtends or corresponds to similar ethical habits in literary reading and writing. Literary ethics are “aesthetic” in this

680 “Preface,” Deephaven (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1893), 3. Here Jewett also writes explicitly that her earliest fictions were an attempt to overcome the caricatures of Yankee life inherited from humoristic representations. The author, Jewett writes in the third person, “may have had the unconscious desire to make some sort of explanation to those who still expected to find the caricatured Yankee of fiction, striped trousers, bell-crowned hat, and all, driving his steady horses along the shady roads” (3).

sense because they are habits of perception ($\alpha\iota\sigma\theta\iota\sigma\varsigma$), and the refinement and education of perception is primarily effected through developing a painterly sensibility. This painterly sensibility is primary because it purports to be relatively immediate and takes the world “as it is,” rather than as we might like it to be, or as we might have come to assume it is through reading fictional representations of it, romantic or otherwise.

At the same time, while this painterly sensibility increases the possibilities of perception, it risks creating an observer capable only of perception. The acceptance of the world “as it is” implies the world’s inflexibility, and has the potential to render action in the world undesirable or even impossible. While Jewett’s regionalist fiction purported to effect the “acquantainceship” of country and city, the nature of that relationship remains muddy: will it be a romantic marriage of equals in which both sides are irrevocably changed, or a distant friendship in which both sides observe the other disinterestedly, or with only an “aesthetic” interest in the other? These are the questions that animate *A Marsh Island*, a novel that dramatizes the conflict between the country and the city on the level of its narrative form by dramatizing two opposing generic impulses: the tendency of the word-picture towards pure description and the tendency of the romance towards pure narrative. The drama of the characters is equally the drama of narrative form, and as we will see, the failure to form more than an “acquaintanceship” has large implications for our understanding of the meaning of the reception of local color writing as both a literary art and an ethical office.
Jewett’s novel *A Marsh Island*, published serially in *The Atlantic Monthly* from January to June in 1885 and published in book form by the Riverside Press that same year, dramatizes the conflicting generic expectations of novel and sketch, as well as the conflict between the narrative and anti-narrative impulses of romance, pastoral, and word-picture: as a contemporary reviewer for *Harper’s* wrote in 1885, “There is a combination of the art of the poet, the painter, and the story-teller in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Marsh Island*. It is at once an idyl [sic], a romance, and a cabinet of exquisite genre word-pictures.” This reviewer’s observation is remarkably insightful and worthy of close scrutiny. Indeed, *A Marsh Island* is more than a site of diverse generic combination: it is the site of generic conflict, and the idyll, or pastoral, is the genre in which the competing impulses of romance and word-picture contend. The tendency of the romance towards pure narrative without description pulls in one direction, while the tendency of the word-picture towards pure description without narrative pulls in the other.

*A Marsh Island* is worthy of critical attention in that it actively interrogates these competing genres both on the level of its form and structure, as well as through the dramatic interplay of its characters. The drama of the novel is the drama of literary form: the conflict between richly descriptive word-picturing and the plot-driven romance is embodied through the conflict of the characters themselves. The novel thus stands as a uniquely interesting site to examine the competing narrative and anti-narrative impulses that inform Jewett’s other work, from “albums” such as *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

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to plot-driven romances such as *The Tory Lover*. Like the marshland in which the novel is set, *A Marsh Island* is a sort of literary estuary in which two or more distinct environmental systems collide and merge. It is an uneasy confluence, but one with a distinct ecosystem of its own. It is thus a rich territory for exploring the varied generic influences that inform Jewett’s other novels and sketches.

Such a conflict of genres has perplexed critics since the novel’s publication, and when the novel has attracted any attention, critics have generally suggested that it is not Jewett’s best work. The novel’s contest of genres is generally read not as an interesting and formally experimental success, but as an aesthetic failure: the novel “fails” because it is neither an album of sketches nor a work of romance, and therefore falls between two sets of criteria by which we might categorize and assess it. Biographer Paula Blanchard, for instance, while giving the novel only a passing mention, writes in *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work* (1994) that the novel is most comprehensible to us as a romance, though a failed one. The characters’ “lack of ardor is…ludicrous” and “the novel fails even as a potboiler romance.”683 Certainly Blanchard’s assessment that the novel is a failed romance is in an important sense correct, but what she fails to see are the ways in which *A Marsh Island* actively and self-consciously constructs this failure. The novel’s failed romance is *definitive* both at the level of plot and at the level of the novel’s conflict of genres. If the novel is a failure, it is an *interesting* one: a failure *about* failure and about the competing demands of literary form.

683 Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Work*, 165-166. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Silverthorne in *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer’s Life*, concurs with a 1936 assessment of the novel that “it is a prose poem of the earth and water, but it is not a great novel” (123).
Among the many critical biographies of Jewett, Margaret Roman’s *Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender* (1992) is the only treatment that gives *A Marsh Island* more than a passing look. Roman does not condemn the novel as an artistic failure, but claims instead that the novel presents a compelling, if unflattering, portrait of the failure of the appropriative masculine artist. For Roman, *A Marsh Island* is an “utterly ironic” satire of its protagonist, Dick Dale, a dilettantish and “purely egocentric” painter who, “unable to shape his own life…desires to shape a woman’s instead.”^684^ But Roman’s portrait of Dale as a “condescending[]” and egocentric “grasping material[ist]” is perhaps dictated more by Roman’s own critical interest in representing Jewett as a feminist writer than the actual tone of the novel allows. Dale is not the object of censorious authorial condemnation, but of sympathetic, if ironical, critique informed more by the author’s own uncomfortably close identification with him than by any sense that Dale is deserving of our unmitigated scorn. Where Roman writes that Dale “condescendingly” compares the love interest, Doris, to “a French peasant,”^685^ we must remember that in “A Dunnet Shepherdess” Jewett gives exactly such a comparison to a *female* narrator, and one linked implicitly with the author herself: “I found myself possessed of a surprising interest in the shepherdess, who stood far away in the hill pasture with her great flock, like a figure of Millet's, high against the sky.”^686^ If Dale’s appropriative and aestheticizing impulse is subject to critique, such an impulse cannot be identified solely with forms of traditional masculinity, or with the “masculine” artistic gaze. Indeed, Dale’s failure is that he is *insufficiently* masculine: he

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^685^ Roman, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, 78.
is presented throughout the novel as effete, passive, and altogether “feminine.” As the character Mrs. Owen says of Dale at the conclusion of the novel, “it always seemed more like having a girl about than a man.”\textsuperscript{687} Other than Roman’s biography, the only other extended critical study of \textit{A Marsh Island} can be found in environmental historian John R. Stilgoe’s book \textit{Alongshore} (1994), which situates and contextualizes the novel in a thick political and social history of nineteenth century salt marsh farming. While Stilgoe’s treatment is extremely useful for the thoroughness and detail of its research, as well as for its acute analysis of the place of marsh landscapes in nineteenth century painting and photography, it is largely inattentive to the questions of literary form that so animate and motivate the novel.

Given the relative dearth of critical treatments of \textit{A Marsh Island}, we will have to look at contemporary reviews in order to better understand how the work has been received and understood. I have already cited many of these reviews in my earlier discussion of Jewett’s painterly form, and critics of \textit{A Marsh Island} frequently lamented the novel’s unsatisfying romantic plot, though many were also warmly admiring of the novel’s vivid word painting, and did not really regard the novel’s lack of story to be much of an obstacle to enjoying it. Horace Scudder was one such critic and, unsurprisingly given his close correspondence with Jewett, Scudder is attentive to the author’s anxiety about her inability to craft plots, therefore justifying the success of the novel on the grounds of its painterly and descriptive characteristics. What the novel lacks in plot, it makes up for in “charm,” a charm that “is so pervasive, and so independent of the strict argument of the story, that those who enjoy it most are not especially impelled

\textsuperscript{687} Sarah Orne Jewett, \textit{A Marsh Island} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 285. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “ML.”
to discuss it. It does not invite criticism any more than it deprecates close scrutiny.” Scudder’s use of the archaic term “argument,” as well as his qualification that such an argument be “strict,” implies his view that narrative plot is both coercive and anachronistic, while his claim that the novel’s picturesque charm is “independent” suggests that Jewett’s novel demands more modern, liberal, or sophisticated forms of aesthetic appreciation.688

*A Marsh Island*, rather, stands on its own, indifferent to criticism, and coercing no discussion – in some ways it is as silent as a landscape painting. For Scudder, the interest of the novel is not in the dramas of the characters. Rather, the characters merely decorate the scene as figures in a landscape: “it is not these figures by themselves upon which our attention is fixed; they but form a part of that succession of interiors and out-door scenes with pass before the eye in the pages in this book.” At first glance, Scudder’s claim that the reader’s attention is not “fixed” by the novel’s characters appears to corroborate an understanding of the painterly dimensions of *A Marsh Island* as relatively free of the coercive demands of romantic plot. But here Scudder also betrays that while not forcefully coerced, readers of *A Marsh Island* are not exactly independent in the sense that they are free to act. Rather, Jewett’s scenes “pass before the eye,” implying that the reader of the novel stands in a passive relation to its many vivid depictions and descriptions.689

The “charm” of the novel’s descriptive style thus places the reader in a situation analogous to the “charm” that Dick Dale himself feels when viewing the same landscapes and *tableaux*, a charm to which he willingly but idly submits. Scudder writes, “What was

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688 Horace Scudder, “Jewett’s *A Marsh Island*,” *Atlantic Monthly* 56 (October 1885), 561.
689 Ibid.
the charm that Richard Dale found in the marsh island itself, where he was so willing a prisoner? Simply that which springs from a landscape, broad, unaccented, lying under a summer day, breathing the fragrance of grass and wild roses.” In this way, Scudder implies a close overlap between Dale’s passive aesthetic appreciation of the situation in which he finds himself, and the appreciation that the reader him or herself takes in reading Jewett’s descriptions of the same. Dale’s intradiegetic sketches map onto Jewett’s own landscape and genre sketches, which constitute the novel itself. As Scudder writes, “The sketches which [Dale] brought away were studies in this quiet nature; they were figurative of A Marsh Island itself, which is an episode in water-color.”

Scudder’s review, and the many reviews of *A Marsh Island* that foreground its descriptive and painterly qualities, are illuminating for us inasmuch as they tend to read the novel much as its “protagonist,” Dick Dale, would like to read it: as an “episode in watercolor.” But in this sense, these reviews, though admiring, are in an important way mistaken: they mistake the novel’s passages of vivid landscape and genre depiction for an immediate feature of Jewett’s “artistic” style, when they are in fact a mediated view of the novel’s world presented in a free and indirect manner through the consciousness of Dale, who is himself literally attempting to create an “episode in watercolor.” These descriptions are elements of novelistic discourse, not unmediated characteristics of narrative style. *A Marsh Island* is interesting because it dramatizes the genre of the sketch or word-picture. The novel appears to be “an episode in watercolor,” but is in fact a dialogic space in which the subjects, precepts, and consequences of such episodes are explored, scrutinized, and subjected to critique.

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690 Ibid.
That the vividly descriptive word-pictures that reviewers were so quick to praise are in fact presented through the consciousness of the novel’s protagonist is made evident from the novel’s first chapter. The novel begins by introducing Dick Dale not from his own point of view, but from the point of view of anonymous passersby who see Dale “hard at work before a slender easel near the wayside” of a road in Sussex County, a fictional version of Essex County in northeast Massachusetts (MI 3).\(^{691}\) To the inhabitants of the area, the scenery that Dale regards is “in no way remarkable. They saw a familiar row of willows and a foreground of pasture, broken here and there by gray rocks, while beyond a tide river the marshes seemed to stretch away to the end of the world” (MI 3). The description that Jewett furnishes is lightly described and distinct to its locality (tide rivers, marshes), but also marks out the setting with reliable \textit{topoi} of the picturesque and the pastoral (willows, pasture, and rocks). The novelty of the scenery that Dale paints is immediately diminished by the anonymous onlookers: “Almost everybody who drove along would have confidently directed the stranger to a better specimen of the natural beauties of the town, yet he seemed unsuspicious of his mistake, and painted busily” (MI 3-4). The reader perhaps expects the dubiousness of the townspeople to be evidence of their rustic philistinism or of their dull habituation to the their own environment, the real beauty of which can only be revealed by incessant labor of the heroic artist – Dick Dale, 

\(^{691}\) In a letter from March 1, 1888, Jewett confirms the identity of Sussex County with Essex County and elaborates some of her motivations in setting the novel in that place: “The scene of \textit{A Marsh Island} is somewhere within the borders of the town of Essex but even I have never succeeded in finding the exact place! Choate Island suggested the island itself, but I never went there until a year ago – long after the story was finished. It was seeing it in the distance of perhaps earlier still noticing an ‘island farm’ near Rowley from a car window on the Eastern Railroad that gave me my first hint of the book” (\textit{Sarah Orne Jewett Letters}, ed. Cary, 59).
local color artist *extraordinaire*, recently arrived from Boston who will give Sussex County to the world.

But Jewett’s observation that Dale “painted busily” is immediately shown to be highly ironic. Dale paints only in fits and starts, strolling here and there, and even loafing on the grass beneath a tree: “One would have said that such enthusiastic interest in his pursuit was exceptional rather than common with him” (MI 4). Dale’s interest in the landscape he is painting wavers, and his attention is soon diverted to “a slender birch-tree which stood in the left foreground” in which “there was a touch of uncommon color.” Dale takes a twig of the birch and “rustle[s] it,” but the tree quickly returns to its former stillness. While intrigued, Dale’s attraction to the birch is an idle one. “A boy might have bent it,” Jewett writes, “and cut and trimmed it with his jack-knife, for an afternoon’s fishing.” But Dale is no such boy. Rather, “the artist reached out and for a moment held the stem, which had lately put on its first white dress; then he let it spring away from him” (MI 4). His attention is soon drawn again to the landscape he had recently ignored, a landscape the beauty of which he now sees with new eyes: “The moorland-like hills were beginning to grow purple, and a lovely light had gathered into the country which lay between him and the western sky” (MI 5). Such a description of the purpling hills is doubtless an instance of the kind of vivid word-painting that reviewers admired in *A Marsh Island*, but it is obvious here that this view of the marshland is Dale’s own, and is thus colored by our understanding of Dale’s lackadaisical and fitful artistic practice.

Indeed, Dale’s encounter with the birch is more than incidental, but signifies his status as an idle observer and aesthete with little practical ability and little desire to actively engage with the world before him. Dale’s paintbrush is here set in opposition to a
boy’s jack-knife, an implement that directly and, so to speak, permanently encounters a natural object in the world in order to take possession of it. We might remember here that a jack-knife also figures as a token of appropriative male desire in “A White Heron.” There the young hunter gives Sylvie his jack-knife which she finds “a great treasure.” But it is also an emblem of the violence of sexual penetration more frequently described in that story by the hunter’s rifle that silences birds and makes their “pretty feathers stained and wet with blood.”692 Just as the hunter’s bullets and jack-knives threaten the pure white feathers of the heron, so the birch branch that had “lately put on its first white dress” risks a similar despoliation. Dale’s paintbrush, on the other hand, works only at a distance. It works to possess images rather than objects. Dale’s interest in the birch is for its beauty – its color – rather than for its utility, but for this reason, it exceeds his grasp. He “let[s] it spring away from him.”

Surely the significance of the distinction between paintbrush and jack-knife is obvious enough, but I draw out the comparison at length here because this scene is a succinct prelude that introduces the themes that will be developed as the novel progresses. Dale’s appreciation of the birch and his inability or lack of desire to possess it neatly prefigure his relationship with Doris Owen, the female protagonist and would-be love interest of the novel’s “romantic” plot. That Dale admires the tree for its “color,” holds it, then “let[s] it spring away from him” exactly mirrors the way in which he admires Doris, makes vague overtures of a romantic relationship, but releases her at the season’s end as he returns to Boston. Just as Dale admires the tree for its aesthetic, rather than its useful qualities (as fishing rod), so he admires Doris for her “color” and her

diffuse beauty, rather than for the ways in which she might “serve” him as a romantic partner or wife. Dale, we learn later in the novel, “had always liked to watch her, and had enjoyed her charming outlines and her coloring, in the same way that he made the most of the looks and behavior of one of the old willows. Doris was a woman, and the willow was a tree; but that had not made any difference in his feeling except one of degree” (MI 118-119). Dale’s painterly appreciation of his environment has the effect of reducing and flattening substantial differences, making everything an object of the same aesthetic pleasure: the appreciation of woman and tree, for the artist, is identical since both are prized only for their aesthetic qualities.

In this way, we can see Dale’s equation of person and tree as an inversion and a critique of one of Jewett’s most characteristic and provocative suggestions explored in many of her other works: her peculiar belief in hylozoism, the belief that all matter is in a sense alive. Jewett elaborates on this suggestion at length in her sketch “A Winter Drive,” where she writes that, “There was an old doctrine called Hylozoism, which appeals to my far from Pagan sympathies, the theory of the soul of the world, of a life residing in nature, and that all matter lives; the doctrine that life and matter are inseparable.” In this sketch, Jewett’s discussion of hylozoism is precipitated by her impression that trees have “strongly marked individual characters” and that they bear “a strange likeness to the characteristics of human beings.” Jewett goes on to wonder whether there is any credibility in “the old stories of the hamadryads,” that is, wood-nymphs, a sort of etiological myth that explains and clarifies this dim impression that trees and humans are

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694 Ibid.
fundamentally similar, but because the trees “were too much like people, the true nature and life of a tree could never be exactly personified.” In *A Marsh Island*, however, Jewett examines the other side of this equivalence: if hylozoism holds that trees are like individual people, then it stands to reason that people may be uncomfortably like trees. If in “A Winter Drive” trees might become human in the manner of nymphs, the underlying threat of *A Marsh Island* is that humans might become trees in the manner of another classical myth: that of Daphne, whose metamorphosis into the laurel rescues her from the sexual predations of Apollo at the expense of her body, her voice, and her humanity.

In *A Marsh Island*, however, the threat is not that Doris is pursued too vigorously, but that she is not pursued vigorously enough: that the romantic marriage plot that develops over the course of the novel will not reach a satisfactory conclusion. In other words, it is Dale’s desexualized painterly gaze, rather than his penetrative and appropriative male gaze, that threatens to turn Doris into a sort of aestheticized element of nature. Doris’s transformation into a tree by Dale’s brush is not a rescue from sexual threat, but a sort of substitution effected by Dale’s lack of sexual energy, or indeed by his perception that it is Doris, rather than Dale himself, who represents a sexual threat. Like Sylvie in “A White Heron,” Doris is a sort of *genius loci*, a spirited and independent girl with an intimate and deeply physical connection with the life and environment in which she lives and of which she is a sort of representative or embodiment. While Sylvie, as her name suggests, is a sort of dryad or forest nymph with an intimate knowledge of birds and trees, Doris, as *her* name suggests, is a sort of Oceanid or sea nymph who possesses an intimate knowledge of the tidal marshes that she inhabits.

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695 Ibid., 170.
Doris’s deft ability to navigate the marshes marks her out in the novel as both uniquely independent and capable, and also a figure of sexual threat because of her proximity to and identification with a hazardous and uncertain natural environment. As Stilgoe writes, in the nineteenth century imaginary, salt marshes of the sort presented by Jewett were “a half-land, half-water near-wilderness that many men found daunting, that most women knew as places where women wet their walking boots, then their skirts and petticoats.” That the “half-land, half-water” space of marshland characterized by its mucky or semi-porous terrain, its wending channels, its regular ebb and flow influenced by lunar cycles is a figure of feminine sexuality is too obvious to require much discussion, and Doris’s identification with the marshes thus marks her as a character whose femininity is potentially threatening and unpredictable – at least for Dale. Dale’s desire to see Doris as a tree then can be seen as a defensive gesture, a response to the sexual threat posed by her female body and an attempt to makes its boundaries secure, concrete, and stable: as Dale says to Doris, “There is something mysterious about the marshes to me” (MI 179). We can say then that Dale, pace Roman’s analysis, is one who does indeed seek to “shape” Doris’s life, but shapes it as a landscape architect would seek to drain a marsh. If the classical figure of the appropriative masculine gaze is Pygmalion whose desire for his work of art is so strong that it becomes penetrable flesh, Dale’s artistic gaze effects an opposite transformation: it converts Doris’s penetrable and

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697 Stilgoe discusses how the history of salt marsh farming in the Northeast from the earliest English settlements was often characterized by the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries on a terrain that seemed to defy boundaries themselves. See *Alongshore*, 109-123.
lifelike flesh to the impenetrable and inert matter of bark and wood, or reduces it to a superficial screen of beautiful but bodiless colors.

In these ways, we can read *A Marsh Island* as a precursor and a counterpoint to “A White Heron.” In both, a young man from the city comes to a rural area hoping to acquire something to take back – the heron for the young man in “A White Heron” and watercolor sketches for Dick Dale – and in both cases they end up staying with a local family which they each tend to see as charmingly rustic, “quaint,” or picturesque. While in “A White Heron” the young hunter’s overtures of affection toward Sylvie are more imagined or implied than literally proffered, in *A Marsh Island* the match between Doris and Dale is quite practicable, and its suitability is a frequent subject of discussion by characters in the novel. Indeed, such a match would effect not just a romantic marriage between Dale and Doris, but a figurative cultural “marriage” between town and country, between the “fine” arts of Boston (painting) and the practical “arts” of Sussex (salt hay farming). If Sylvie’s refusal to disclose the location of the heron makes “A White Heron” an allegory for the sovereignty of the aesthetic over and against the violent and coercive demands of the plot-driven romance, in *A Marsh Island* the reader instead comes to expect and anticipate a pastoral romance that will effect a happy marriage between two characters that the reader presumes also represent two dimensions of Jewett’s own artistic persona: the girl from the provinces with her vigor and vitality, and the genteel urbanite with his cultural cachet.

The pastoral romance of the novel then seems to promise to create the kind of “artistic” local color writing that Jewett herself explicitly desires: an art of fiction both local and cosmopolitan, rural and urban, feminine and masculine, and so forth. If Roman
wants us to see Doris as a surrogate figure for Jewett herself because of her independence and her intimate knowledge of and affection for her own local landscape, then we must also see Dick Dale’s desire to transform that landscape into art as both counterpoint and counterpart to Doris’s own experience of her environment. While Dale is initially an outsider who views the landscape through clichéd lenses of the picturesque, the experiences and relationships he forms over the course of the season seem to offer the opportunity of transforming his vision of the marsh island into one that is both sensitively local and artistic at once. At the same time, his potential marriage also seems to offer Doris an opportunity to escape from the decaying and declining salt hay farm in which her talents and potentials are wasted. Indeed, salt hay farming was in the 1880s a figure for just such a declining cottage industry. As Stilgoe writes, “By 1885…an air of poverty and failed promise hung over the marshes like an autumn mist. […] Age suffuses the novel, and antiquity rules Jewett’s description of haying.”698 The promise of a romantic marriage between Dale and Doris thus figures as both a Reconstruction-era allegory for the reconciliation of a culturally deracinated but economically productive urban modernity and an economically decaying but culturally authentic rural community, as well as an aesthetically vital fusion of fine art and homely craft that would effect the apotheosis of local color writing and certify it as a major literary art.

The expected pastoral romance takes shape as Dick Dale, the dilettantish watercolorist from a privileged Boston Brahmin family, is on a summer painting excursion to the marshes, and decides to board one evening at a local farmhouse belonging to the Owens, a relatively affluent family of salt hay farmers. The Owens are

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benevolent in their hospitality, and offer Dale the use of one of the house’s bedrooms that formerly belonged to the Owens’ late son, Israel, who was killed in the Civil War and whose portrait and sword still hang in the chamber, making it a sort of shrine. Dale is struck both by the beauty of their daughter Doris, and by the beauty of the landscape from his chamber window, and seeks any excuse to extend his stay: he finds such a pretext by spraining his ankle (it was already weakened from a previous injury, he explains), necessitating an extended convalescence with the Owen family during which he paints sporadically, goes on occasional excursions with Doris and others, and generally “enjoy[s] life in idleness” (MI 65).

But Dale’s life of idleness is in sharp distinction to the busy labor of the salt hay harvest that goes on around him. This life of rural labor is embodied in the figure of Dan Lester, “a model of health and vigor” (MI 85), who works in the hay meadows and is also the town blacksmith. Dan is a frequent caller at the Owens’ (he was close friends with the late Israel), but his visits, it is usually suggested, are made mostly with Doris in mind. With Dan in the picture, Jewett introduces the expectation that the plot of the novel will be a romantic contest between painter and blacksmith, between fine art and rustic labor, between town and country, between the man of fine sensibility and the man of action, with Doris the maiden serving as the romance’s “prize.”

That Dale and Dan appear to be representative or allegorical figures embodying a particular moral and social dilemma perhaps calls to mind an analogy with the allegorical manner of Hawthorne. In particular A Marsh Island suggests a comparison with Hawthorne’s story “The Artist of the Beautiful,” the drama of which is also a contest between fine artist and blacksmith for the hand of a beautiful young woman. Jewett
appears to have had “The Artist of the Beautiful” in the back of her mind when drafting *A Marsh Island*. Several of the character names in Hawthorne’s tale are recycled and adapted: Dan Lester in *A Marsh Island* mirrors Robert Danforth, who is also a blacksmith, while Doris Owen mirrors Annie Hovenden, the daughter of Peter Hovenden, an elderly watchmaker. The Owen name is perhaps suggested by “Hovenden,” but is also transposed from the name of the protagonist of that story: Owen Warland, the ingenious watchmaker and eponymous “Artist” whose miraculous mechanical butterfly is crushed into oblivion in the tale’s denouement by the child of Annie and Danforth. However, the complete dissimilarity between the names of Dick Dale and Owen Warland suggests a remarkable difference between the two artists: Owen Warland’s decisive and bellicose name suggests strength and activity, a characterization borne out by his status as a successful craftsman and creator – an artist but also an artisan, and a Promethean hero able to reproduce life itself in mechanical form. While Warland loses both Annie and the miraculous butterfly, the knowledge of his artistic achievement is satisfaction enough.

Dale, on the other hand, suggests not the active demiurgic powers of Warland, but the passive and observant nature of another figure from Hawthorne: Miles Coverdale, the “hero” of *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Like Coverdale, Dale is an inveterate idler and observer more comfortable watching from a distance than engaging directly. Also like Coverdale, who falls ill immediately upon arriving at Blithedale, so Dale suffers a weak ankle requiring his convalescence: both characters enjoy their maladies as opportunities for idleness and leisure. Just as Coverdale sees his season at Blithedale as a retreat from the modern world, so Dale conceives of his stay at the marsh island as a rural idyll, and both share a lackadaisically blithe attitude towards their environment. That Dale’s name
suggests Coverdale rather than Warland implies his unsuitability to the romantic contest at hand, and characterizes him as an aesthete rather than an artist, a figure from pastoral rather than romance. And just as *Blithedale* implies a love triangle between Zenobia (a spirited, independent woman like Doris), Hollingsworth (a man of action like Dan Lester), and Coverdale only to disrupt that expectation by Coverdale’s final perplexing admission that he loved the ethereal and bodiless Priscilla all along; so *A Marsh Island* establishes a romantic problem only to frustrate our expectations for its outcome. The problem is a non-problem, and the heroic action is finally taken by neither Dale nor Dan, but by Doris herself.

Dick Dale then, as his name suggests (think of Keats’s “dales of Arcady”), is a pastoral character who has the good luck of finding himself in a pastoral situation, though the novel consistently presents opportunities in which Dale could overcome his pastoral idleness and become instead a figure from romance. Jewett consistently highlights the ironic distance between Dale’s lack of romantic motivation and the generic expectation that he forsake his indolent pleasures and act decisively to engage with the novel’s implicitly romantic plot. One of the clearest ways in which Jewett develops this distance is by frequently referring to Dale as a “knight” or a “hero,” an ironic appellation established from the very outset of the novel. Describing Dale as affable and well-liked by his fellow painters and companions, Jewett writes that, “His nature was attractive, and everywhere admirers, and even friends, flocked to the standard of this curly-haired and cheerful knight, while one castle gate after another opened before him as he went his way through life” (MI 7-8).
But Jewett’s characterization of Dale as a fortunate and conquering knight (one able to penetrate castle after castle) stands in contrast to the rest of her description, which makes clear that Dale in fact lacks the knight’s questing temperament: rather, “our hero felt an impatience for the great motive power of his life to take possession of him” (MI 8). Dale is not a character motivated by his own desires, but rather “believed he was waiting orders.” His is a passive stance towards life that characterizes him in the eyes of his friends as “a girlish fellow” (MI 8): “Since advancement and glory are the reward of one’s definite effort, young Dale was as far as ever from possessing them” (MI 9). Dale is anything but Roman’s appropriative and “grasping” egotist, and is far from ambitious or possessive in both art and in romance. “This,” Jewett writes, “was not a very purposeful young man: those who were growing old already among his comrades might laugh or scold him for his apparent neglect of life’s great opportunities, but nobody could accuse him of not making the most of the days as they came” (MI 24).

Dale lives in a pastoral time frame – one of days and seasons (think Hesiod’s *Works and Days* or Virgil’s *Georgics* and *Eclogues*) – rather in than the time frame of the romance – “life’s great opportunities.” Let us remember here Josephine Donovan’s claim in “Sarah Orne Jewett’s Critical Theory: Notes Towards a Feminine Literary Mode” that “the traditional female experience…created a sense of time that was markedly different that the characteristically Western (and masculine) linear, historical time of quest – the basis for traditional ‘story.’” The female experience, Donovan explains, is “a mode of waiting. It is not progressive, or oriented toward events happening sequentially or

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climactically, as in the traditional masculine story plot.” Reading Dale’s passivity and lack of ambition alongside Donovan’s theory, we can see that Dale’s characterization as “girlish” or feminine is no mere insult but an apt description of his sense of time and stance towards the world.

In the same vein, reading Donovan’s theory of Jewett’s feminine literary mode through the lens of Jewett’s presentation of Dale can help us to see the ways in which Jewett’s “feminine” literary mode is not only the time of “traditional feminine experience” but also the time (or non-time) of pastoral. True it is that “the feminine experience most essentially becomes that of the sacredness of space, of time frozen into stasis,” but “time frozen into stasis” is also an accurate description of both painting – Dale’s own art – and the pastoral mode of writing. Jewett’s treatment of this supposedly feminine mode through a male character in a literary form – the novel – that generates the demand for “the linear, historical time of quest” subtends an interpretation of A Marsh Island as a critical discussion of both the romance and the pastoral and as an exploration of the limitations of the pastoral mode and the descriptive manner of writing that is most characteristic of the fictional productions for which Jewett is most renowned.

The stasis of the pastoral mode is fundamentally ambivalent, an ambivalence that is constitutive of the genre from classical antiquity and that is neatly encapsulated in Keats’s pastoral “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17-20). In Keats’s ode, the price of the permanence of the beloved is non-consummation: the beloved becomes an image

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700 Ibid., 218-219.
rather than a body, and aesthetic bliss is purchased at the expense of physical bliss. The same is true of *A Marsh Island*: while the pastoral mode affords opportunities for vivid pictorial description and appreciation of the beauty of the natural world, when read alongside the relentless drive of the romance, its stillness and repose can become frustratingly stagnant.

Nowhere is the tension between vivid word picturing and romantic plotting clearer than in the way in which both Dale and Doris navigate the region’s marshes. The fourteenth chapter of the novel recounts Dale’s solo excursion on the marshes for a day’s pleasure, without even the pretext of his paints. Dale borrows Doris’s boat and “drifted seaward with the ebbing tide along the winding highways of the marshes, changing his point of view just fast enough, and idly watching the clouds and the landscape in his slow progress” (MI 169). Dale doesn’t ply the oar but “drifts.” Carried by the tides, Dale doesn’t seek a linear course to a destination but floats wherever the non-linear “winding highways” of the marshes take him. As such, he seeks not to actively frame a point of view that might make for a compelling subject, but watches passively as the clouds and landscape create a variety of ever shifting tableaux: “The country was brilliant with autumn tints, and often the glimpses of it were charming to his eyes…the black mud at the sides…made a pleasant framing” (MI 169). Dale watches the grasses and the dragonflies, the minnows and the crabs (all of which are described in vivid pictorial detail) without any particular concern or interest, and soon “this leisurely navigator” (MI 170) becomes stranded by the tide upon an island embarrassingly close to the main island he had just departed. Dale goes ashore and sits in the shade: “the small beech-trees that grew near made the light purple and soft that fell on the frayed whitish carpeting of their
last year’s leaves,” a vividly descriptive word picture of just the sort that contemporary critics of the novel singled out for praise (MI 171). Dale is in a rural idyll: “presently he grew drowsy, and turned over to put his arm under his head; and there he lay, sound asleep, at his lazy length, – a fair, untroubled knight, one would say” (MI 171). Again, the appellation of Dale as a “knight” is in ironic juxtaposition to what the reader has just read: the description of an idle, passive drifter drowsing in the noontime shade is the picture of a shepherd or a faun, not a valiant knight.

Dale’s nap is soon interrupted, however, by Doris herself, who has just been wandering the orchards and fields in perplexity over her romantic dilemma and decided to walk to the island in search of beech-nuts. That Doris walks to the island is no miracle: because of the low tide, Doris easily crosses over from the main island on foot. This feat both demonstrates Doris’s expert capability in understanding and navigating the challenging and inscrutable terrain, as well as her determination and strength of will: Doris cuts a straight path while Dale meanders, and she is able to overcome the vicissitudes of her environment, while Dale is at their mercy. Dale is caught by surprise, and astounded that Doris could reach the island by foot: he encourages Doris to wait with him, and comments on the strangeness of their chance encounter: “‘Sometimes I think there are all sorts of powers and forces doing what they please with us, for good or bad reasons of their own’” (MI 180). Dale’s idle drifting, while apparently pleasant, is here revealed to be dangerously close to a sort of resigned fatalism. Their conversation soon wanes in an expectation that Dale will say something of his feelings for or designs towards Doris, but Dale can say nothing. They soon leave the island by boat: Doris rows, to Dale’s embarrassment. Meanwhile, he reflects on his possible marriage: “Did fate
mean to graft him to this strong old growth, and was the irresistible sap from that centre of life already making its way through his veins?” (MI 184).

The answer is apparently no: upon returning to the main island, Doris offers to go collect peaches for Dale’s lunch, but the implied invitation to follow her to the orchard is evidently quite resistible indeed:

Dick could not follow her, but for some minutes he stood still. What a picture for a man to paint! What a woman for a man to love! Ah, if Doris had looked over her shoulder in that minute! But the white dress was lost among the shady apple-trees, Dick sighed, and well he might; the enchantress had passed by, and her spell had passed with her (MI 186).

Imagining Doris both as a picture to paint and as a woman to love diminishes the significance of either desire. Once Doris has left his immediate field of vision, Dale’s apparently intense emotions also vanish. More enraptured by Doris’s image than her person, once she disappears into the orchard, the “spell” of her charm is gone (MI 186). Just as Dale enjoys the landscape passing him by as he drifts down the marshes but doesn’t seek to capture any particular view, so with his appreciation of Doris. When she is gone the most affection he can muster is a sigh.²⁷⁰¹

We can see then the ways in which Dale’s lack of ambition in both painting and in love are explicitly linked: Dale’s status as an idler is confirmed by his artistic status as a

²⁷⁰¹ A very similar encounter between Doris and Dale occurs in the novel’s sixth chapter. Dale takes a walk across the marshes in search of a suitable subject to paint, and his perception of the marsh environment soon takes on the qualities of vivid and richly detailed word painting: “The marshes looked as if the land had been raveled out into the sea, for the tide creeks and inlets were brimful of water, and some gulls were flashing their wings in the sunlight…. The far-away dunes of white sand were bewildering to look at, and their shadows were purple even at that distance” (MI 67). In his reverie, Dale “felt like a leaf that drifts down a slow stream; he grew serenely contented in his delight” (MI 67). Dale’s “drift” is interrupted by Doris approaching with two horses. The horses are startled and Dale, in his attempt to calm them, sprains his already weak ankle, while Doris handily recovers the situation. While Dale lays on the ground, “The conquered horses stood still now, at the girl’s command” (MI 68).
dilettante. It is important that Dale is a watercolor painter, and has little practical desire to be anything else. At the beginning of the novel, Dale is described as having “A respectable gift for water-color painting and an admirable ambition to excel in the use of oil colors” (MI 8). But despite his “admirable ambition,” we later learn that “Since his student days in France [Dale] had done the lightest possible work at his profession” (MI 110). Dale’s desire to excel at oils is limited by his independent wealth, which obviates his need to produce finished works that would satisfy the demands of the marketplace. As such, rather than “belong[ing] to a circle of workers” Dale continues “drifting on as a well-known figure in general society” (MI 111). Watercolor sketches are aligned in this sense with “drift,” while oil paintings – which are more “finished,” not to mention more economically valuable – are aligned with “work.” Aesthetically too watercolors are an appropriate medium for Dale: luminous and colorful, like Dale’s own verbal effusions of the marshland, watercolors are also, we might say, “wishy-washy”: the medium of “drift” rather than the deliberate stroke of oil paint. Despite late nineteenth century critical attempts to resuscitate its reputation, watercolor remains the amateur art, a medium still associated with women in opposition to the more overtly masculine “work” of oil paint.

The association of watercolor sketching with “women’s work” is made explicit in A Marsh Island through the figure of Dale’s “studio”: a room above the farm’s carriage house that was formerly used by “the women of the family…to do their spinning” (MI 113). The room is now absent of looms and wheels, but it retains its former name throughout the novel, a frequent reminder of Dale’s effeminacy and a suggestion that his painting is “woman’s work.” At the same time, the location of Dale’s studio in a former spinning room also hints that Dale’s art of sketching is even beneath the useful “woman’s
work” of spinning and weaving, even disparaged as that work may be relative to physical farm labor. The substitution of painting studio for spinning room highlights the metaphorical significance of Dale’s “static” and non-narrative art. In opposition to the quiet solitude of Dale’s studio, the former spinning room “must have been almost a festival, as the wool-wheels and flax-wheels whirred and merry voices chattered together” (MI 113). The dynamism of the former spinning room is a vision of vital community, a site both of spinning yarn and spinning yarns, so to speak. The traditional associations of narrative with spinning and weaving are obvious: that Dale’s solitary sketching takes place in such a site highlights the distinction between the deracinated and static medium of pictures and the organic and dynamic folk art of storytelling.

Dale’s “fine” but static watercolor sketches are the art of the dilettante, and while vividly descriptive, they stand in opposition to more dynamic crafts associated with “real” work. One such “craft” worth remarking on is the ponderous gundalow that the salt hay farmers use to transport their threshing. Mr. Owen’s gundalow is a “stupid-looking square hay-boat” that leaks considerably, but in which its owner has great confidence (MI 80). Mr. Owen explains, “Lester’s bo’ts are pretty much all afloat in the ma’shes now, while those that have been made since are mostly split or rotten. He put good stuff into ‘em, and they carry well, a good load and well set, if they be square-nosed”’ (MI 81). The Lester in question is Dan Lester’s father, a shipwright and blacksmith like his son, and Owen’s own model is described not unironically as “Lester’s masterpiece” (MI 83).

There is perhaps a suggestion here that while Dale’s sketches are represented verbally through Dale’s vividly descriptive tableaux of the marsh landscape, Lester’s craft – leaky but serviceable – is emblematic of plot driven narrative itself. The trope of
marine craft representing the “craft” of fiction is a cliché as old as literature itself, and one could do worse than choose the image of the durable if clunky gundalow as a representation of Jewett’s ambivalent views towards narrative, a connection strengthened by the craft’s association with both masculine physical labor and masculine sexual possession: the threshers on the craft don’t just mow the hay, but one of them even “reache[s] out and cut[s] two or three cattails with his great jack-knife…and then stuck it in a small auger hole in the stern” (MI 83).

That Dan’s father is the creator of this “masterpiece” strengthens the connection between the useful labor of plot and masculine sexual power. Dan is consistently associated with conveyances and vehicles throughout the novel (he arrives to collect Doris for a ride in his carriage, works to caulk and seal ships, and in the novel’s dramatic climax threatens to disrupt the expected marriage plot by shipping on a schooner for a fishing trip to the Grand Banks), and his vocation as a blacksmith makes him a figure of both sexual virility and productive manual labor. Dan is also initially referred to (perhaps ironically) as Doris’s “cavalier” (MI 33, 46), and it is revealed provocatively that he has “a suggestion of French blood in his remote ancestry” (MI 90). Dan, it is also revealed, owns “a handsome property in the West” (MI 262), a possession that makes him a particularly eligible partner: while the salt hay farms of Sussex county are in a state of decay and decline, Dan’s western land is an emblem of economic promise and regeneration. While Dale also offers the promise of wealth, his is old money. Dale’s orientation is towards the east (Boston, Europe), while Dan’s is towards the as-yet untapped resources of the American west.
That Dale’s watercolor sketches, colorful though they may be, lack aesthetic vitality is confirmed throughout the novel by frequent suggestions that Dale’s view of the marshlands and the local culture of Sussex county is that of the urban tourist rather than the local insider. Like Sarah Clark’s “A Summer at York,” Dale’s descriptions of the local scene are often framed and colored by conventions of the picturesque. Dale’s view from his spinning room studio, for instance, looks out “at apple-trees and a glimpse of blue water. Opposite he saw the back of the old farmhouse, with its quaint joiner-work half hidden by a woodbine flecked with red; beyond that, past the great willows, was the barren range of hills, already purple in the afternoon light” (MI 113-114). Dale’s view of the farmhouse as “quaint” demonstrates that even as the window offers an immediate view of the local scene, his own vision is already highly mediated by conventional representations that make these scenes of rural life merely “quaint.” Later, during his trip with Doris to the town center of Sussex, Dale notes that, “He had not remembered how picturesque and delightful the quaint town was. The high-houses of sea-captains, the pride and circumstance of meeting-houses, the business of ship-building, and the almost Venetian privilege of water-ways won his heart completely” (MI 134-135). The subsequent description of the town is again vividly and sensuously described, but framed as it is by Dale’s admission that such a scene is both “quaint” and “picturesque,” the word-picture loses some of its vitality and immediacy.

Dale’s comparison of the town’s waterways with Venetian canals heightens the reader’s suspicion that Dale imposes on the scene more than meets the eye; indeed, Jewett confirms this suspicion some pages later through a brief episode in which Mrs. Owen discovers in Dale’s bedroom a book on Venice that Dale has lately been reading
(MI 154). Dale’s view of the local citizens is also mediated by conventional expectations of local color travel writing: during the trip to Sussex Dale relishes the “quaint speech” (MI 130) that he overhears, and at a Sunday supper at the Owen’s, Dale professes that “He liked the quaint talk and picturesque expression of the elder people, and had more than once wished that he were a writer, and could profit by the specimens of a fast-disappearing dialect” (MI 193). That Dale sees even people with whom he ought to have a more intimate relation as merely picturesque “specimens” greatly diminishes the possibility that Dale could become part of the family and establish a vital union with the rural environment that he purports to represent. He is a “local color” artist in the worst sense.  

That Dale could marry Doris and join the Owens as a sort of surrogate son constitutes much of the tension of the novel, but it is a tension consistently played-off by Dale’s blithe attitude towards his surroundings and his persistent inability to change. The possibility that Dale might grow out of his dilettantish ways is figured most vividly through the absent presence of the late Israel Owen, Doris’s brother killed in the Civil War, whose room Dale inhabits and whom Dale is suggested to physically resemble (MI 38-39, 227). The picture of Israel stands as a visual emblem of both similarity and difference: their apparent similarity of features suggests that Dale could naturally become a sort of surrogate son to the Owens, but this similarity of mien only heightens their

702 Other examples of Dale’s “picturesque” vision of the marsh island abound. Seeing the farmhouse for the first time, Dale exclaims that, “There was not a more picturesque bit of country in America!” (MI 12) and upon Dale’s arrival inside, Jewett writes that, “[Dale] had become somewhat familiar with such rural interiors in England and France, but the homelike quality of this, the picturesque grouping and good coloring, were a great surprise and satisfaction” (MI 59).
difference of character. Israel’s saber (like the men’s jack-knives) is a vivid reminder of his real heroism, against which Dale’s brushes seem pathetic in comparison.

Dale plies his own brush in order to make his own portrait of Israel—which could also be a sort of self-portrait in which Dale artistically explores and attempts to synthesize their similarities—but it is apparently a dallying attempt, and by the end of the novel it is clear that Dale understands little of how he could approach his subject. Regarding his sketch of Israel, Dale can offer nothing but platitudes about his death: “‘It is a glorious thing to die for one’s country’” he remarks quietly, to which Temperance, the housekeeper, responds “‘That’s what everybody s’posed they must remark…but I called it a darned shame, and I always shall’” (MI 263). Dale’s bland citation of an antique cliché demonstrates a lack of sincere feeling, and confirms the reader’s suspicion that Dale has changed little or not at all from the novel’s outset, and certainly remains incapable of the heroic and decisive actions of which Israel Owen remains an emblem.

Another missed opportunity for personal growth presents itself to Dale through the surprising arrival of his aunt, Mrs. Winchester, and her companion, Mrs. Farley, an episode that takes up the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth chapters of the novel. Like Dale, Mrs. Winchester and Mrs. Farley are also touring Sussex County and have arrived at the Owens’ looking for some way to fix their broken down carriage. Mrs. Winchester is a ludicrous caricature of Brahmin gentility, a figure more appropriate in a farce than in either a romance or a pastoral. Her arrival at the marsh island threatens to disrupt both Dale’s season of idleness and the expected outcome of the romantic plot: shocked to find Dale in such surroundings, Mrs. Winchester demands that Dale return with them to Boston immediately. Mrs. Winchester and Mrs. Farley function as an exaggerated case of
Dale’s own touristic view of Sussex: Mrs. Farley finds the farm “charming” (MI 219) and Mrs. Winchester concurs that “It was all very picturesque” (MI 220). Mrs. Winchester enthuses about the local scenery, – “Was there ever anything so charming and full of color!” (MI 226) – crudely suggests that Dale sketch for her a portrait of Mr. Owen, and offends the maid Temperance, whom she mistakenly calls Charity, by offering her money (MI 227). The vulgarity of Mrs. Winchester’s outsider view of Sussex and the marsh island creates an uncomfortably ironic juxtaposition with Dale’s own relatively more intimate view of the same, and thus furnishes the occasion for Dale to reject his aunt’s offer to return and revise his own relationship with his surroundings and his hosts by taking them more seriously. Indeed, Dale does initially reject his aunt’s suggestion that he return, telling her that his experience has had, or promises to have, a salutary effect on his moral life: “You have to be put into an honest place like that to know anything of yourself. You can’t think how tired and sick I am of the kind of life I have somehow drifted into” (MI 230) – by which he means his life as a dilettantish Brahmin with little ambition or professional direction.

But characters in pastoral do not change as they do in a novel. While his experiences at the marsh island and his relationship with Doris appear to offer opportunities for moral development and conviction, Dale remains unable or unwilling to do anything but drift as a lover and as an artist. Though apparently inspired by Doris’s beauty, Dale never even attempts her portrait, though he often promises to do so. Unable to approach Doris’s image, Dale is equally indecisive about his interest in her hand in marriage, and as the season wanes his pretense for staying at the farm gradually disappears. Dale wishes rather that he “behaved like a man, and not, as now, like a silly
woman. It was difficult even to announce his determination to go back to town the next week, and this distressed knight strayed about the familiar places of the farm as if he were bidding them farewell” (MI 207). Again, the description of Dale as a knight is highly ironic. No valiant action is in store: Dale’s sluggish non-overtures of romance towards Doris are totally ineffectual, and by the end of the novel Dale’s carefree idleness has congealed into fatalism: “He must go away soon, and leave Doris to her true lover” (MI 206). Dale’s accepts Dan as Doris’s “true” lover without much agony, realizing he was not up to task of competing for her. Able only to sketch, by the novel’s conclusion Dale realizes that,

his old knowledge of her seemed now as the enthusiasm and eagerness of a first sketch does to the dignity and fine assertion of a finished picture. One could say easily that Doris and Dan Lester were destined for each other, and console one’s self by thinking there was never any chance to win. Alas for those who let the golden moment pass, – who let the gate of opportunity be shut in their faces, while they wait before it trying to muster favoring conditions, or argument and authority, like an army with banners to escort them through (MI 284-285).

Here is a final statement of Dale’s moral failure. Jewett deliberately aligns Dale’s failure as an artist with his failure as a lover, and breaks the frame of narration in order to offer an explicit authorial comment and mark out this moment as particularly significant and conclusive. Dale’s recognition of Doris as a “finished picture” exceeds his representational abilities as a sketch artist; a more ambitious painter in oils might have had better luck. While at the outset of the novel, Dale seemed a knight-errant capable to penetrating castle after castle, here the gate has been shut in his face.

The “golden moment” has indeed passed, but as a pastoral character Dale has hitherto been unable to recognize it: the temporality of the pastoral is not one of moments or events but of episodes and seasons. Dale’s summer was not a golden moment but
rather a sort of golden age (in the Hesiodic or Arcadian sense), and one that must inevitably decline and fall. When the season is over, so too is the pastoral. The form of the novel when seen from Dale’s point of view expresses this episodic version of life. Events take place, but do not accumulate. The pastoral is a situation in which nothing ever really happens. The season over, Dale returns to town with his sketches, which he soon shows to his artist friend Bradish. Bradish greets him jocularly as “my melancholy Jaques,” an ironical gesture that figures as a nod to the pastoral romance that has failed to take place (here compared to *As You Like It*) and which marks Dale as ludicrously out of place in such a scene. Dale, reviewing his sketches, confirms that while not so melancholy as Jaques, he was indeed out of place there, and that the episode that we have just read was a period outside of time: “I feel like Rip Van Winkle,” he admits. “I felt all the time like an accident, an ephemeral sort of existence; but I believe we are all a sort of two-stalked vegetable, with a power of locomotion that ought not to be too severely taxed” (MI 289). Dale’s vegetative view of life has changed not at all: as he could not discern the difference between Doris and a birch tree, so he concludes the novel conceiving of himself as more plant than animal, as incapable of decisive action or romance as a radish.

The decisive action of the novel is taken neither by Dale nor even by Dan, as apparently active as he is, but by Doris herself. In the climax of the novel, Dan, in frustration with his stalled romance and jealous of Doris’s apparent affection for Dale, has shipped on a schooner for a trip to the Grand Banks, a trip that threatens to derail the expected outcome of the marriage plot between he and Doris. Faced with the threat of Dan’s exile, Doris realizes the strength of her feelings for him and runs across the frozen
marshes in the middle of the night to get to him before he leaves the next morning. Doris’s adventure confirms her status as the true heroine of the story, and the description of Doris’s flight is certainly the stuff of romance: the heightened emotion and dramatic action recall any number of scenes from romantic literature, though it perhaps most closely echoes Eliza’s flight across the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a scene that was virtually a Reconstruction-era set-piece of melodrama. Doris and Dan’s agreement to marry finally fulfills the novel’s marriage plot, and they return home triumphant: it is “the great event” (MI 282).

But as we might expect, Dale, apparently the loser of the contest, is not particularly discontented. In fact, “there was a certain sort of relief in finding that there was no serious decision to be made after all, and that he had been mistaken in his consciousness of an uncommon responsibility and need of action” (MI 282). In opposition to the decisive and willful action taken by Doris, Dale’s decisions are made for him: by others, by the weather, by the season. Thus Dale’s pastoral runs in parallel to Dan and Doris’s romance, but never really penetrates it. As a watercolorist and a sketcher, an idler and an aesthete, his is an essentially static vision of life, beautiful perhaps in its painterly appreciation of life, but ultimately stagnant and fruitless: a cold pastoral, to borrow Keats’s words.

But we must remember that Jewett herself identifies with Dale – at least to a degree. It was Jewett herself, after all, who lamented her inability to do more than sketch, who was herself a watercolor painter, who prized description over romantic plot and short “peppermint-shaped” stories over long and clunky novels, who worried about her own status as both a native of the country and a cosmopolitan city-dweller, and so on and so
forth. In *A Marsh Island* then Jewett uses Dale as a surrogate in order to subject her own “inability to do more than sketch” to a ruthless self-critique. It is a sort of aesthetic thought experiment in which Jewett submits her own preferred aesthetic mode – the anti-romance – to the test of the romance. In terms of the novel, painterly word-picturing of the type that Dale embodies no longer exceeds the vulgar demands of plot, but rather fails to achieve the romance’s satisfying – if dangerous – possibilities.

Dale’s personal failure is also the failure of the pastoral mode. Unable to sway the narrative from its expected outcome of a marriage between Dan and Doris, Dale’s personal failure of will – his fatalism, his dilettantism, his idleness – is also representative of the failure of an art that does no more than sketch. While a successful marriage between Dale and Doris would have represented a marriage of the word picture and plot-driven narrative through the mode of the pastoral, the failure of this marriage demonstrates either the insufficiency of the word-picture sketch as a form to achieve a kind of aesthetic mastery in its own right (as Jewett had initially feared in her letter to Scudder), or the fundamental incompatibility of the word-picture and the plot-driven romance to fuse into a coherent and satisfying aesthetic whole. Description remains the *ancilla* to narrative’s mastery.

How then do we assess its failure? Clearly, as the contemporary reviews make clear, many readers were able to read the passages of word-picturing and local color description uncritically and enjoy them in their own right. However, it is obvious that such an understanding of the novel is a significant misreading. Jewett, it seems, would not write such a book again. A failed pastoral romance, *A Marsh Island* is the tombstone of an attempt to reconcile the demands of narrative and the demands of description, the
demands of the verbal and those of the visual. Subsequent productions, besides the stand-alone and collected stories and sketches, are either vivid word pictures structured by the loosest of narratives, such as the pastoral *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, or tightly plotted romances such as *The Tory Lover*. Perhaps it is significant that one of the first stories Jewett would write after *A Marsh Island* was “A White Heron,” an allegory about the victory of the aesthetic over and against the demands of romantic plot. But such a victory is achieved only at the cost of silence, as “A White Heron” vividly depicts: Sylvie is a “still unravish'd bride of quietness,” a “foster-child of silence and slow time, / Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.”
Coda: Henry James in the Basement of Modernism

Let us hold painting by the hand a moment longer, for though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds changing, the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes that bask beneath lovers, twisted woods that people walk in when they quarrel—novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? And he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it. It must be done with one word, or with one word in skilful contrast with another.

- Virginia Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (1934)\(^703\)

On or about December 1912, Henry James visited the historic Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London, and was disturbed by what he saw. For London, the show was almost uproariously modern. It featured only a few canvases by the older and somewhat more palatable Cézanne to serve as a bridge to the past (by 1912 Cézanne had become tentatively fashionable, though only two years earlier a portrait of the artist’s wife had caused one consternated gentleman to burst into such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that he had to be escorted from the gallery.)\(^704\) The rest of the exhibition showcased daring canvases by *enfants terribles* such as Picasso, Braque, Vlaminck, Derain, and Van Dongen, among other English and Russian painters whose ominous presence seemed to be deliberate evidence that the insanity from France was spreading. An entire room was devoted to the “wild beast” Matisse, whose *Blue Nude*

(1907) was to be burned in effigy by scandalized students of the Art Institute of Chicago when the New York Armory Show of 1913 travelled there later that same year.\textsuperscript{705}

James was stumped. Virginia Woolf, in her biography of the show’s impresario, Roger Fry, recalls that Fry, seeing his “old friend” in evident perplexity, took James “down to the basement where, among the packing cases and the brown paper,” James, “would express ‘in convoluted sentences the disturbed hesitations which Matisse and Picasso aroused in him.’” Fry poured him a cup of tea, and “[did] his best to convey to the great novelist what he meant by saying that Cézanne and Flaubert were, in a manner of speaking, after the same thing.”\textsuperscript{706} Given what we know about James’s coolness towards Flaubert, Fry’s reassurances can hardly have provided much comfort.

It is a brief anecdote, but it feels charged with epochal significance: the changing of the guard from the Victorian to the Modern, the old Master stammering away in vague, convoluted sentences at last banished to the basement to make room in the galleries upstairs for the next generation of brash Young Turks. It also perplexes us because it seems to be such a drastic failure of taste, much like James’s dismissal of Impressionist painting in 1876. How could a figure of such titanic sensibility fail to admire what so many of us today admire so well? More unaccountable still is James’s apparent failure to recognize that he himself was a keystone in the bridge from old to new, that Picasso and Matisse were fulfilling the vision for which James’s radical experiments in perspective had broken ground. In announcing that Cézanne and Flaubert were “after the same


\textsuperscript{706} Woolf, \textit{Roger Fry: A Biography}, 180.
thing,” isn’t Fry really implying that Cézanne and Flaubert and James were all after the same thing, that James himself was an important predecessor and a part of the same historical trajectory from a realist to a modernist aesthetic?

The characterization of James as a modernist Master has become a critical commonplace, but whether he was or was not, Woolf’s anecdote does little to suggest that she and her circle believed it. Rather than claiming James as an important precursor, Woolf in fact suggests that James was merely a representative Victorian or Edwardian novelist, a characterization implicit in her description of the scene at the exhibition where “among the daily press of unknown people there would appear now and then an old friend – Arnold Bennett for instance, or Henry James.” Given James’s baffled response to the show, Woolf’s retrospective pairing of the two novelists feels more than coincidental, and is particularly unfortunate given the well-known criticisms in which Woolf had basted Arnold Bennett in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923). The figure of Bennett served Woolf in much the same way as Walter Besant served James in his own famous essay from 1884: as an emblem of an immature, doctrinaire, and unserious manner of story-telling that prevented the novelist from claiming his or her rightful mantle as artist.

That Woolf recalls Bennett in the context of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition surely calls to mind her famously vatic announcement in that same essay that

707 See Peter Brooks, Henry James Goes to Paris, 1-4. Brooks begins his book with this anecdote and cites it as evidence that “James by 1912 was himself considered by the artistic elite – what better representatives of that than Woolf and Fry? – to be an exemplar of the movement from Victorianism to modernism, in fact the person younger generations looked to, and now called the Master, because he led the way into a new kind of fiction” (1).

708 Woolf, Roger Fry: A Biography, 180.
“on or about December 1910 human character changed,” a date that coincides neatly with the influential First Post-Impressionist Exhibition (“Manet and the Post-Impressionists”), an event also organized by Fry and reviewed by Woolf.\textsuperscript{709} As the target of her critique, Woolf’s obvious suggestion is that Bennett’s ideas about human character, and his corresponding beliefs about how to represent it, had \textit{not} changed.\textsuperscript{710} In this context then, Woolf’s anecdote in her biography of Fry, with its somewhat pathetic image of a spluttering James drinking tea in a basement amid packing cases and wrapping paper, certainly lacks reverence for his modernist mastery. Indeed, it implies instead that while human character may have changed, James’s character (and his artistic tastes) were, like Bennett, ineluctably stuck in the past. James, who would die just a few years later, is given a glimpse of the revolutionary new movement but can make no sense of it. If he was the Moses of modernism, his was a Pisgah view of the Promised Land.

Woolf’s attitude towards James was decidedly ambivalent. While she wrote admiringly in 1920 that throughout his body of work James demonstrated an “enormous, sustained, increasing, and overwhelming love of life,” Woolf also likened James’s posthumously published work \textit{The Sense of the Past} (1917) to “the laborious striking of whole boxfuls [sic] of damp matches,” and wrote to Lytton Strachey in 1915 that “I read, and can’t find anything but faintly tinged rose water, urbane and sleek, but vulgar, and as pale as Walter Lamb. Is there really any sense in it? I admit I can’t be bothered to snuff it.”

\textsuperscript{710} See Torgovnick, \textit{The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel}, 63-64. See also Jonathan R. Quick, “Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Post-Impressionism,” \textit{The Massachusetts Review} 26, no. 4 (Winter 1985), 547-570, especially 547-548.
out his meaning when it’s very obscure.” While she called *The Wings of the Dove* “very remarkable” (to Roger Fry, no less), the book also made her feel “vaguely annoyed by the feeling that – well, that I am in a museum. It is all deserted.” In 1922, Woolf took the occasion to criticize Percy Lubbock’s memoir *Earlham* for being written in the obsequious manner of “the defunct Henry James, until what with the mildew and the mould and the tone and the mellowness and the setting sun – the rooks cawing and so on and so on, nothing approaching bone or blood is left.” And echoing other early twentieth century criticisms that saw James as an emblem of deracinated gentility, Woolf wrote that “Henry James had neither roots nor soil; he was of the tribe of wanderers and aliens; a winged visitant, ceaselessly circling and seeking, unattached, uncommitted, ranging hither and thither at his own free will, and only at length precariously settling and delicately inserting his proboscis in the thickset lusty blossoms of the old garden beds.”

Bloodless, boneless, rootless, damp, moldy, and deserted as an abandoned manor house. This is hardly the enthusiasm of a devoted acolyte. To our retrospective critical eye Woolf’s ambivalence about James might seem to merely register her anxiety of influence, but it also marks a determined shift in literary aesthetics. While James had licensed the novel’s status as a fine art by way of comparison with painting and wrote that the purpose of the novelist was to “represent life” in an analogous manner, he

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713 *Letters II*, 478.
714 Ibid., 601.
himself seems to have failed at the task. Woolf would surely agree that the task of the
novelist was to “represent life,” but she would also surely differ with James about what
exactly that elusive thing called “life” in fact was – and consequently about how a thing
so determinedly numinous could be “represented” in the first place. For Woolf, James
had the target, but missed the mark. For all his trying, he did not get at “life,” as Woolf’s
litany of criticisms makes clear. His proboscis was too delicate. His damp matches failed
to ignite.

What – why – how – did James miss? A clue might be found again in Woolf’s
criticisms of Arnold Bennett, who, like James, Woolf admits was not in any sense a poor
or careless writer, despite his shortcomings. Indeed, Bennett was a solid “workman” who
“can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for
the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in.”
But Bennett’s craft has failed to catch the thing it sought: “Life escapes.” So too with
James. The well-made novel with all its architectural design and solid masonry, its
furnished rooms and winding halls decorated with their many comprehensive portraits
and pictures of life – this complex edifice has not become the seat for the elusive thing
meant to live within it, the thing that Woolf is after and doesn’t quite know what to call:
“Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off,
or on.”

For Woolf, the elusive “life” that James’s literary experiments tried to catch but
missed seems to be linked in an essential way to his failure to appreciate the kind of life

716 Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1925-
717 Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 159.
that was on display upstairs at the Grafton Gallery, for it was largely by comparison with
these painters that Woolf herself hit on her own ingenious device for picturing reality.
Like James, Woolf had a fertile and complex relation with writing’s “sister art.” Like
James, her older sibling from a young age took to painting – but unlike William, Vanessa
Bell stuck with it. “How I wish I were a painter!” Woolf wrote to her sister in 1938.
“Everything complete and entire, firm as marble and ravishing as a rainbow.”719 Woolf
was amazed by the painter’s ability to create a thing so solid and absolute, so patently and
undeniably present. On the other hand, “words,” Woolf elsewhere wrote, “are an impure
medium; better far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint.”720 For both Henry
and Virginia, the painter is the natural heir to the kingdom of art, and the painter’s ability
to present life in its sensuous immediacy and repleteness is an expression of the older
sibling’s primacy and strength – and consequently a source of envy. Writing is the
younger sibling’s art, the trick by which the second-born Jacob dupes and displaces the
more virile, if less intelligent Esau.

Virginia Woolf’s trick was to upend the realist injunction to picture reality and to
reimagine what it would mean for the written word to present a picture of life. In her
essay on the painter Walter Sickert, Woolf writes enviously of the painter’s self-evident
ability to “picture” reality – to show portraits and landscapes and the moon rising in all
their detail and color – and laments that “to describe a scene must be the worst way to
show it.” Description is tiresome. It calls attention to what words cannot do, to the power

Nicolson and Joanna Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 235-
236. See also Chantal Lacourarie, “Painting and Writing: A Symbiotic Relation in
Virginia Woolf’s Works,” Interdisciplinary Literary Studies 3, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 66-
81.
that language does not have, to the ways in which a sketch or a story or a novel is not like a painting. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf writes that the Edwardian directive to describe “the fabric of things” sets the writer off on the wrong foot. “How shall I begin to describe this woman’s character?” Woolf asks her Edwardian predecessors, to which they reply “Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of the shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe— —” But here Woolf cuts the Edwardian short. This is no way to capture that elusive thing called “life” (embodied here in the figure of the elusive, ordinary Mrs. Brown): “if I began describing the cancer and the calico,” writes Woolf, “my Mrs. Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever.”

But here Woolf hits on a singular invention, that instead of engaging in laborious, enumerative description, the writer might “with one word, or with one word in skilful contrast with another,” miraculously succeed in creating a picture. To the phantom Edwardian she protests that “one line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description.” Rather than slowly, meticulously crafting an image of life, Woolf’s Adamic, incantatory mot juste conjures “life itself” into being.

It was those same Post-Impressionist paintings upstairs at the Grafton Gallery that served Woolf as a model for this new art of fiction. Just as Cézanne had come to understand that paintings must first and foremost be paintings and not simply naturalistic

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721 Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 112.
723 Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 108.
representations, so too the writer could come to understand that the essence of literary art lay in unlocking the expressive power of words themselves, and in so doing rejecting the narrowly mimetic function of words as mere signs standing in for things in the world. As Deborah Schnitzler writes, “Coincident with Post-Impressionism’s increasing awareness of painting as painting, Modernist writers free their medium from the representational role which had been imposed by inherited mimetic conventions”\textsuperscript{724} – conventions which Roger Fry elsewhere condemns as only capable of producing “curiosities, or ingenious toys” that could hardly be “taken seriously by grown-up people.”\textsuperscript{725} By rejecting realism’s injunction to picture reality, the modernist novel could imagine what it would mean to paint with words in an entirely new way.

Likewise, Post-Impressionism furnished a model for literary writing capable both of picturing “life itself” while also maintaining structural or compositional coherence, since it was Cézanne’s – and Roger Fry’s – understanding that the Impressionist technique, while giving painting a radical new vitality, had in consequence sacrificed the significance of pictorial form.\textsuperscript{726} Likewise, the modernist novel’s status as a work of art depended less on its reference to external reality and more on the novel’s own linguistic unity – in much the same way that Flaubert imagined a “book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style.” In this sense, pace

\textsuperscript{724} Deborah Schnitzer, \textit{The Pictorial in Modernist Fiction from Stephen Crane to Ernest Hemingway} (UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1988), 91.
Fry, we can understand that Cézanne and Flaubert and Woolf – not James – were, in a manner of speaking, after the same thing.

The image of the tea-drinking, stammering James spinning out sentence after sentence after sentence after sentence is in sharp contrast to Woolf’s one word. But Woolf’s insistence that the novelist must seek to reproduce “life itself” rather than its image must recall us to James’s warning in “The Lesson of Balzac” that the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century – Balzac, Scott, Thackeray, Dickens – were “exclusively lovers of the image of life” who largely ignored “the lyrical element” – and recall us as well to the cautionary example of George Meredith who incongruously hitched curried, prancing ponies to the curricle of his prose. While Woolf’s novels may have succeeded at last in gaining the kingdom of art, they have perhaps lost that prosaic element of representation that was, for James, the novel’s reason for being.

One of course does not have to choose between James and Woolf, or even to feel that such a choice has any great consequence or meaning. And yet the distinction between the two writers might still be felt to be a significant one. We still live in a time in which realism, as Howells put it over a hundred years ago, remains a comparatively dead cult with its statues cut down, and few perhaps would wish ardently for its revival. We might even be inclined to feel that the modernist revolution that Woolf helped to effect was a glorious one, one that liberated language from its burdensome duty of representation and enabled the novel to find its true expressive purpose.

But we should also remember that for everything that has been gained by this, certain things have also been lost, and that there might linger in the straightforward directive for the novelist to truthfully represent reality through the descriptive and
denotative use of language a certain kind of prosaic commonsense, the loss of which might well make one remorseful. Writing over fifty years ago, Lionel Trilling wondered too why realism, “the form of art that makes its effects by the accumulation of the details of literal reality, is now in poor repute among us.” Trilling felt that the appetite for reality had been replaced with “a preference for the abstract and conceptual,” and that the vitality of individual creative expression had come to trump the straightforward representation of the plain and ordinary world. Trilling was writing at the height of the Cold War when realism was associated strongly with socialism’s worst excesses and when the “abstract and conceptual” characteristics of modernism, in consequence, were strongly associated with cultural and political freedom. But a lot has changed since then, and perhaps we too might be prepared to reevaluate this form of art in a time when imaginative individual expression can sometimes seem to be not so much a liberation as a burdensome obligation whose redemptive potential is often deceptive and easily coopted by powers with no real interest in human freedom, a time when the belief in the creative, constituting powers of the individual imagination and the power of language to create its own realities might well be viewed with suspicion.

In this sense we might recall Trilling’s claim that while we often tend to associate realism with the fallen, banal world of adults – a world of prevarications, burdensome duties, and bad faith compromises – in opposition to which stands the liberatory, creative ebullience of the child, who is a natural artist, the opposite set of associations may in fact be closer to the case. Rather, Trilling reminds us, children are not always essentially creative artists but are often “passionately pedantic literalists,” who naturally take

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728 Ibid.
pleasure, as Aristotle observed in the *Poetics*, in curiously observing the world and in attempting to represent and reproduce it.\(^{729}\) In this way too the child does not develop his or her personal identity in opposition to the social world, but in conversation with it, in a deliberative dialectic in which the self both transforms and is transformed by its demands. In positing the reality of the social world, a belief in the possibilities of realism returns our energies to the pleasures of the social, the actual, and the literal. “It is not the gay chintz ball designed for the infant eye and grasp that delights,” the child, writes Trilling, “but rather the apple or the orange – its function, its use, its being valued by the family give him his pleasure; and as he grows older his pedantry of literalism will increase, and he will soon scorn the adult world for the metaphysical vagaries of its absurd conduct – until he himself is seduced by them.”\(^{730}\) Against such seductions the literalist might recall our attention to the sensuous, complex, and manifold world before us and help restore to language its ability to refer pragmatically, if not “objectively,” to the world of external facts and social meanings in a way that might furnish a common ground for both personal expressiveness and social amity that one might well consider desirable.

\(^{729}\) Ibid.
\(^{730}\) Ibid.


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