

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

HENRY JAMES: IMAGINING IMAGINATION

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I. *Seats and Cages*

HENRY JAMES constantly imagines imagination. His essays, memoirs, travel-books, tales and novels construct inquiries into its habits. Like most artists before him and many after, he loves to imagine the liveliness of imagination. Homer invents the incorrigible pseudo-autobiographies of Odysseus; Mark Twain and James Joyce revise Homer's lies for their wanderers; Virgil creates the unspeakable pang of Aeneas's speaking memory; Shakespeare charms audience, Venetian senate, and Desdemona with the natural magic of Othello's travel-tales. Like these ancestors James catches imagination flying high, beating strenuous wings.

Wings need to beat, and sometimes flag. In Samuel Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*, title and text read as an imperative for imagination to imagine the dead, an imperative for imagination to imagine its own death, and an imperative for imagination to go on imagining after it is dead. James too imagines dying, death, and the dead: he imagines the dead going on imagining after death, and he imagines people imagining the dead imagining after death. He dramatizes, too, the little deaths of imagination's diminutions, decays and defeats. Artists are sometimes expert on the subject of creativity, its efforts, flights and falls: they are, after all, expert within experience, pressing at its limits, beating its bounds.

James explicitly discussed the work of imagination in his Prefaces to the *New York Edition* of tales and novels, which created modern criticism of fiction. He uses a remarkable critical discourse, interrogative, imagistic and narrative. One of the stories James the critic likes to tell is the story of specific

inspiration. He does not plumb personal motive or autobiographical source but fixes suggestive moments, anecdotes and images, identifying the 'seeds' or 'germs' round which imaginative work coheres, crystallizes and grows. Everyone knows James's habit of checking the flow of promising anecdote so that the seed should be kept from premature germination, and buried, while still seed, in its proper dark. Losses for table-talk were gains for art.

The Prefaces are layerings, interanimations of memory and invention. The tales and novels draw on physical sources for their scenes and symbols, and use them as matrices for metaphor. After the novelist, who is also reader and critic, rereads and rewrites his work these images enter and colour his critical language. A massive old house in Tuscany is changed into several substantial symbolic dwellings in *The Portrait of a Lady*, which in turn spawn images in the Preface, for a theory of fiction and an analysis of the book. Sources in James are serpentine, with tail in mouth. One circulation is traced with great care in the Preface to *Owen Wingrave*. James's loving recall of old times and old causalities takes him back to a summer day in Kensington Gardens, when one of his tragic figures is born: Owen is peace-loving heir to destructive patriarchy, a slight but telling figure in the unwritten literary history of masculine liberation. The 'seed' of the story is a figure in a chair:

It comes back to me of *Owen Wingrave*, for example, simply that one summer afternoon many years ago, on a penny chair . . . in Kensington Gardens, I must . . . have been able to equip him even with details not involved or not mentioned in the story. Would that adequate intensity *all* have sprung from the fact that while I sat there in the immense mild summer rustle and the ever so softened London hum a young man should have taken his place on another chair within my limit of contemplation, a tall quiet slim studious young man, of admirable type, and settled to a book with immediate gravity? Did the young man, then, on the spot just *become* Owen Wingrave, establishing by the mere magic of type the situation, creating at a stroke all the implications and filling out all the picture? That he would have been capable of it is all that I can say—unless it be, otherwise put, that I should have been capable of letting him; though there hovers the happy alternative that Owen Wingrave, nebulous and fluid, may only, at the touch, have found *himself* in this gentleman; found, that is, a figure and a habit, a form, a face, a fate, the interesting aspect presented and the dreadful doom recorded . . . my poor little point is only that at the beginning of my session in the penny chair the seedless fable hadn't a claim to make or an excuse to give, and that, at the very

next thing, the pennyworth still partly unconsumed, it was fairly bristling with pretexts. 'Dramatise it, dramatise it!'

So he meditates, wondering if the idea rushed to embrace the congenial image or if the fertile image engendered the idea. The 'infatuated author' ponders the matter of inspirations. What is breathed out, and what breathed into? What may be made of contemplating a figure in a chair? The chair belongs to a series of chairs in the fiction. They sometimes cost a penny, are sometimes free, sometimes in Paris, sometimes in London, sometimes in gardens, sometimes in parks: they are seats of imagination for many characters—Maggie and Adam Verver, Milly Theale, Strether, the heroines of *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*, and many more.

James is interested in the physical conditions of contemplation and inspiration. Like Beckett's paralytics and travellers, Dylan Thomas's hunchback in the park and Alan Sillitoe's long-distance runner, James's characters suffer their imaginative crisis either when very still or when energetically moving. As James contemplates the chair, he contemplates contemplation. He gives us the seed to compare with the plant. He imputes to the stranger in the chair a snatched freedom, a holiday from tragic necessity, and creates a character. In the story, Kensington Gardens is kept and Owen's Sandhurst crammer placed in a house near by. The unknown book read with gravity becomes a volume of Goethe's poems read by the grave Wingrave: it is German because he has been studying it for the army, poetry because he is enjoying a brief respite and refreshment. Tall and slim, he is in good physical condition, his body in training for war; 'excellent' type suggests traditions of family and class which destroy him. The novelist made the most of his pennyworth of occupation, and his story of the figure in the chair—which I have crudely filled in—dramatizes a double act of converting the opaque and the other into the known and the developed. The slim grave young man in the chair remains, like a fossil or a fragment in a collage, within the story. James imagined his imaginative destruction, and recalling it, contemplated his own imaginative making.

In the story Owen's inner life is not specified, but implied in his resistance and collapse. He is destroyed, like other seers in James, and in his beloved Ibsen, by being imaginative enough to see ghosts, and ghosts which are unnerving, like Shakespeare's uncanny figures, because they represent destructive forces and ideas. James endows his characters with a capacity to create ghosts, and to be deformed by them and what they represent.

James shows the other side of fear, in wonder. The word 'wonder' or 'wonderment' is used in the Prefaces to define many characters, beginning with the girl telegraphist, in the story *In the Cage*. Her seat of wonder had its origin, James tells us, in his visits to the local post-office, where he began to wonder about the telegraphers' access to 'a range of experience otherwise quite closed to them'. If this smacks of 'condescension, the story does not, but tenderly records a growing romantic imaginative involvement in an alien social and psychological experience. The heroine seated in her cage first reads telegrams, then observes the sender, then intuits, fantasizes, briefly participates, and finally returns to another kind of cage. Through his character, the novelist draws attention to his own love of gazing at surfaces, imagining depths, creating insides for outsides, insides which grow pasts and presents. He observes type, and particularizes it and its habitat. There is social observation, but artistic interest, too, in this seat of wonder, the cage, a cell with a view. It forms his resonant conceit for the post-office counter with its small space and bars or wires. He says

The range of wonderment attributed . . . to the young woman . . . differs little in essence from the speculative thread on which the pearls of Maisie's experience . . . are mostly strung. She wonders . . . very much as Morgan Moreen (*The Pupil*) wonders; and they all wonder . . . very much after the fashion of . . . Hyacinth of *The Princess Casamassima*.

Suggesting that his 'central spirit . . . is, for verisimilitude, I grant, too ardent a focus of divination', he insists that without this 'excess the phenomena detailed would have lacked their principle of cohesion'. 'The action of the drama', he says is 'simply the girl's "subjective" adventure—that of her quite definitely winged intelligence', and 'the solution, depends on her winged wit'.

II. *Frames and Thresholds*

His remarks on the girl in the cage may encourage us to see her as an artist-surrogate, as his imaginative characters have often been seen, Strether in *The Ambassadors* and the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, for instance. The interpretation is irresistible, but to make it exclusive is to privilege the aesthetic or artistic imagination in a way that James the critic sometimes does, but James the novelist does not. He of course draws on creative experience when he

dramatizes imagination, but the modes of his drama are comprehensive and generous. They recognize that creativity blooms in many soils. He imagines the fear and wonder of people whose very restrictions—social or psychic—fan feeling into narrative or dramatic speculation, and into imagistic cultivation. The invisible barrier between James and the stranger in the park is like the barrier between the post-office clerk and her frantic clients, or the barrier between Maisie's innocence and the goings-on of neighbouring experience. James is impelled to imagine a past and a present for the figure in the chair; Maisie is forced to push imagination beyond the boundaries of age and understanding; the telegraphist is urged by the curt messages pushed through her bars, to come out of her cage. Characters and conditions represent the artist's life, but the drama is too particularized to be thought of as mere signifying shell for significant interior. James represents imagination in figures which do not separate into signifier and signified: the artist's imagination is in his figures, but so is the non-artist's—and more immediately to hand. James is not patronizing when he says, in this Preface, that he is engaged by 'almost any mind'. This is not one story and one story only.

He puts artists in his fictions, but they occupy the centre of only one long novel, *The Tragic Muse*. (The centre of *Roderick Hudson* is not Roderick.) He thought of making Strether, in *The Ambassadors*, a novelist, but decided to make him a mere editor. His demotion is striking. James dramatizes the common generativeness of memory, anticipation, fantasy, lies, truth-telling, reachings out to otherness. The energy and power of Odysseus, Aeneas, Huck Finn, Strether, Bloom, and Malone are shaped by writers but located in the 'ordinary' day-time and night-time world—'ordinary' if we impute superior extraordinariness to artists, and forget that truth is reputedly stranger than fiction. Isabel Archer, like Odysseus, that earlier archer, feels the hurt of hearing your own life turned into story, by your own telling or other people's. Like Aeneas, that earlier explorer of dark territories (geographical and amorous), she is discomforted by memory's revisions. Strether, temperamentally so different from Odysseus and Huck Finn, is, like them, a culpable fantasist, and like them, forced to admit a lie in the affair. Odysseus is rebuked by Athene for going on lying even when he is home and dry in Ithaca. Huck is also caught out in 'hocus' by a woman, Judith Loftus, who constructs a mantrap out of a needle and thread, and two lumps of lead, one to throw at a rat and the other to catch in a skirt.

Strether catches himself out in over-construction when the impressionist idyll in the French countryside turns out to be less vague, happy, and composed than his unpurchased painting by Lambinet or his own interpretation of the figures in the boat as 'two very happy persons' out for a row. James shows the moral and immoral life of fantasy, the pleasures, profits, perils and pains of being a 'man of imagination', as he calls the rash Strether. He uses the same phrase for his story-telling self, in *Notes of a Son and Brother*,¹ where the tentativeness of fiction-making memory is assimilated to the tentativeness of self-conscious fiction-making autobiographer. James's subjects include the artist, and imaginative men and women who are not artists.

James imagines the classical features of imagination—its struggle to realize, to idealize, to adjust ideal and idea to the sense of an intransigent world outside the self. He sees the tendency to fuse, choose, combine, unify, and the need to halt, revise, diffuse, and decreate. His major characters do all these things and these things make what he calls 'histories' of imagination. In the histories, precision is crucial. He slows down to particularize imaginative experience, minutely specifying its actions: for instance, the generation of story and image, in specific conditions; the difficult relation—collaborative, or uncooperative—between the play of personal imagination and facts and fictions beyond the person. James sees the impulse and the problems in imagining otherness: it takes love and hard labour, and the results are usually—perhaps always?—unverifiable. The analysis of imaginative work with what Auden praises in 'At the grave of Henry James' as mastery of 'nuance and scruple', lies at the heart of James's inquiry, through forms of fiction, into creative mind.

Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, is the first important character in fiction to have read George Eliot. The traditional cultural syllabus (always included by Jane Austen and George Eliot) tells us that Isabel has been excluded 'from none of the privileges of the world she lived in' and has had 'abundant opportunity for dancing, plenty of new dresses, the London *Spectator*, the latest publications, the music of Gounod, the poetry of Browning, the prose of George Eliot'. As Madame Merle informs her, not unreliably, the self is composed not only of the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, and the company we keep, but also the books we read. Isabel shares certain illusions with her predecessors in George Eliot, but they have not read *The Mill on*

¹ Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (Macmillan, London, 1914).

the Floss and *Middlemarch*. Dorothea Brooke, like Isabel, imagines hardship, but none of George Eliot's heroines imagine, as Isabel does, a pattern of development. She has been taught by books to prepare for life as a progressive experience, the pattern of *Bildungsroman*. Her imagination prepares her for pain, but vaguely, and not for the horror of collapse, the loss of energy.

The novel contains two balanced scenes of inner action, in which James imagines her contemplating, with painfully particularized imagination, the destruction of meanings. In the first she is in her drawing-room, sitting very still. It is a scene of imaginative recall, stimulated by the well known episode in which she sees her conventional husband sitting while a woman stands. The action of memory draws on the matrix of house, rooms, and windows. But the imagery destabilizes objects, place, and time. The mind's scenery has a quality of solid hallucination. There is a constant shifting of perspective; flow is interrupted, there is uncertainty and toil, but there are moments of precipitation, when feelings are imaged with sensuous clarity:

... when ... he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, *then* she had seen where she really was. She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. (Chapter 42)²

In this passage the house becomes metaphor; Osmond's villa has expanded to 'the mansion', then the mansion shrinks to the enclosed space within four walls. (This is a cage with no view.) The figure of the man shrinks too. Isabel has reflected that she took the 'part for the whole' when imagining her husband; now she images the whole as a part, and his mind becomes a grimacing spectre, like Peter Quint looking down in *The Turn of the Screw*. Mobility of images figures her distress, but also her sense of where she is. The objects in her drawing-room merge with the metaphors in her mind so that they too become eloquent. The candles brought at the beginning and burnt down, like the fire, by the end of the scene, give substance to the imaged lights put out, one by one, by Gilbert in the horrid fantastic

² References to James's novels are to the *New York Edition* (Macmillan, London, 1907-9).

reconstructive allegory, and the actual light and dark, heat and cold take on metaphorical transparency because of the stress on inner action. As always, James makes solid and specific the place where the imagination sets to work, and the inner action gains solidity from the neighbourhood of sensuous, physically felt, sources of metaphor.

The other scene for her inner drama is set in motion, but also enclosed. It too allows her to be still. The cage moves, and so does its view. Isabel is in a train, travelling from Florence to Charing Cross, having understood all that has been done to her. Like Tolstoy imagining Anna Karenina, and Dickens imagining *Dombey*, James thoroughly imagines the passenger and the train. Isabel's drawing-room, deserted by society, but saturated in social symbolism, was apt for a stillness which contrasted with feverish, wild activity of mind. The train's enclosure, the passenger's passiveness, the constant motion, and the kaleidoscopic, rushing, half-glimpsed images outside the window are appropriate too. Again, outside and inside coexist and cooperate. The imagery of passage is vague, alien, fragmentary, and rapid. What is bright outside the train is rejected as unsuitable symbolic material, but the sights outside the window are stimuli for negations. They are framed but scarcely seen:

... her mind had been given up to vagueness ... She performed the journey with sightless eyes and took little pleasure in the countries she traversed, decked out though they were in the richest freshness of spring. Her thoughts followed their course through other countries—strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of season, but only, as it seemed, a perpetual dreariness of winter ... Disconnected visions passed ... and sudden dull gleams of memory, of expectation. (Chapter 53)

James uses his powers to imagine imaginative failure: her imagination still ticks on, spasmodically and faintly. It is the same imagination we saw at work in the drawing-room, more depressed and baffled, but still making efforts. This reverie is marked by disconnected imagery: a game of cards, an unspecified 'architectural vastness', 'one of those Etruscan figures couched upon the receptacle of their ashes'. The images are not coherent, and the fragmentation is clearly signalled: 'The past and future came and went at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which rose and fell by a logic of their own'. The mind struggles to make sense of its own phantasmagoria. The figure on the tomb—whose stillness expresses her in more ways

than one—is echoed in a later image, as she thinks—for she thinks—she is too ‘valuable’ to be destroyed, then argues—for she argues—that ‘history is full of the destruction of precious things’. At last she gives up: ‘the middle years wrapped her about again and the grey curtain of her indifference closed her in’. James analyses progressive patterns but disordered and weakened ones too; creativity is brilliantly created at a low ebb.

Isabel’s inner action, in these scenes, interacts with physical setting, but that setting does not interrupt her reveries. In *The Golden Bowl* James makes interaction of inner drama and physical environment perform differently, in another species of imaginative problem. Maggie Verver is also seated for a crisis, in her drawing-room, but the significance of place is singular. She has seated herself actively and imaginatively, to signal to Amerigo, her husband—who will not expect to find her there—that she is no longer passive and unimaginative about their marriage. She cannot use speech, because she is not yet sure what she would say: words would be precise and dangerous. So a tacit language is used, of territorial signals and symbols.

Objects are made into metaphors throughout the novel, as in the action of the golden bowl. Outside becomes inside and moves outside again. The bowl is significant as a social property, part of a drama of donation, converted into a source of complex metaphor, treated as social object again when Maggie buys it, transformed to a tangible symbol when Fanny smashes it, Amerigo recognizes it, and Maggie puts the three pieces together, and finally reconverted to metaphor,—‘the golden bowl as it was to have been’. The characters repeat the author’s symbolic handling of things, and invent a flexible non-verbal language, where signs are objects.

In *The Crop*, by Flannery O’Connor, a writer whose materials are very different from James’s but who was an admirer of his concentration, the central character is a writer. She is first shown writing her story, then the narrative shifts, and she abruptly becomes one of its characters, exchanging sterility for fertility, in harvest and childbirth, and ‘living’ a long period of married life until someone in the writing world suddenly speaks to her and she moves back startled, with the startled reader, to the world in which she is constructing a world on her typewriter. This story makes a crude, strong model of the shift from outer to inner world, showing the engrossments and strength of fantasy.

What James gives is an equally startling, less fantastic, representation of the movement from one plane of action to

another. In Chapter 25, Maggie waits in her drawing-room, using territorial shift and re-inventing routine to show, not say, that things have changed. James writes an intense inner reverie, in which he imagines her state of preliminary vagueness, a fumbling amongst uncertainties and attempts at formulation. Isabel was shown as imaginatively exhausted; Maggie as growing imaginative enough to take on the burden of narrative point-of-view in the novel's second book, *The Princess*. She is just becoming aware that her life is being managed and manipulated and James lets her frame the situation provisionally, in poetic hypothesis. She begins with the image of a tower, 'some strange tall tower of ivory', then as imagination finds finer precision through error and trial, the image shifts, 'or perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned . . . It is a physically eloquent image, designed to show an alien occupation of 'the garden of her life', an enforced action (she has to walk round and round it), restriction (it takes up space) and impenetrability, (it has no door). When she knocks, 'she could scarce have said whether for admission or for what' there is, after a pause, a response 'as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within; a sound sufficiently suggesting that her approach had been noted'. James creates a generative stream of imagery, here and in the following pages, so that we are for a long time entirely engrossed by Maggie's imaginative life. The image of the doorless pagoda is—much later in the slowly progressive associative stream—succeeded by a door that does open. Maggie thinks of intuitions, intimations, and observations that have seemed vaguely significant and in need of further scrutiny, but which had been shelved, or in James's animated version of that dead metaphor, thrown together 'like a roomful of confused objects, never as yet "sorted"'. The image grows from simile to metaphor, expanding into a larger habitat: 'like a roomful' becomes a room, acquiring a corridor outside and a door. A theatre for action is created and image becomes micro-narrative, with imaginative Maggie as imaginary character, sometimes passing the door without opening it, sometimes turning the key to 'throw in a fresh contribution'. The scene becomes more complicated, as the objects grow animated—'it was as if they found their place . . . They knew . . . where to go'. But it is only 'as if'. She is gazing with the inner eye at her image gazing at the heap of things through the imagined open door, when we abruptly change register:

the sight of the mass of vain things . . . made her in fact, with a vague gasp, turn away, and what had further determined this was the final sharp extinction of the inward scene by the outward. The quite different door had opened and her husband was there.

James not only shows how the external world is converted into interiority, he insists that imagination is not isolated but has to open and shut real doors as well as imaginary ones. This juxtaposition shocks the reader by shocking the character. For reader and character there is a stair missed in the dark. Maggie turns, as she has to keep turning from this moment till the end of the novel, to imagine her dealings with the hitherto unimagined world, where other people are imagining too. So she experiences the frightening shift from subject to object.

Maggie's imaginative reverie has to take in and work in the public world. The feverish activity of inner life is shown dynamically and sensuously, with gestures, motion, sets and properties, and with a shock (like that in the O'Connor story) we move from metaphor to what we provisionally call 'reality'. We are also reminded that the 'real' drawing-room door is also only a figment and figure in a novel. The shift of planes makes a comparison in which fictionality is accentuated. One imaginative construction exists within another: in a way the involuted coexistence makes the figures seem more 'real', in another way it declares artifice.

The imagination has to deal with the exteriority and interiority of other imaginations. Maggie initiates and carries out an imaginative communication with her husband: what she imagines him to be, and what she helps him to re-imagine as her self, are made authentic, and embrace. Beyond them are her father and his wife, who has been her husband's mistress; Maggie tries, and needs, to imagine both, and to imagine how they imagine her. Brilliantly and uncomfortably, the novel shows her attempts to imagine what Charlotte—her rival—imagines her to be, and to perform accordingly, pretending to be unimaginative, so that relationships may be sustained but re-formed. On one crucial occasion she is sitting on a bench and Maggie brings her the first volume of a book of which she has mistakenly brought the second:

... when she had let Maggie approach sufficiently closer to lay, untouched, the tribute in question on a bench and take up obligingly its superfluous mate: when she had done these things she sat down in another place, more or less visibly in possession of her part. Our young woman was to have passed, in all her adventure, no stranger moment;

for she not only now saw her companion fairly agree to take her then for the poor little person she was finding it so easy to appear, but fell, in a secret, responsive ecstasy, to wondering if there were not some supreme abjection with which she might be inspired. Vague, but increasingly brighter, this possibility glimmered on her. It at last hung there adequately plain to Charlotte that she had presented herself once more to (as they said) grovel; and that, truly, made the stage large. It had absolutely, within the time, taken on the dazzling merit of being large for each of them alike. (Chapter 39)

On this seat, she imagines her father imagining for her, as she for him, but because they must not tell each other the whole story, she can only impute to him something like her own motive, knowledge, inventiveness, penetration, and imagination as she reads his silences and his surfaces.

On another crucial occasion she rises 'with decision':

Her father kept his place, and it was as if she had got over first and were pausing for her consort to follow. If they were all right, they were all right; yet he seemed to hesitate and wait for some word beyond. His eyes met her own, suggestively, and it was only after she had contented herself with simply smiling at him, smiling ever so fixedly, that he spoke, for the remaining importance of it from the bench; where he leaned back, raising his face to her, his legs thrust out a trifle wearily and his hands grasping either side of the seat. They had beaten against the wind, and she was still fresh; they had beaten against the wind, and he, as at the best the more battered vessel, perhaps just vaguely drooped. But the effect of their silence was that she appeared to beckon him on, and he might have been fairly alongside of her when, at the end of another minute, he found their word. (Chapter 37)

and

'Because I sacrifice you.'

'But to what in the world?'

At this it hung before her that she should have had as never yet her opportunity to say, and it held her for a minute as in a vice, her impression of his now, with his strained smile, which touched her to deepest depths, sounding her in his secret unrest. This was the moment, in the whole process of their mutual vigilance, in which it decidedly *most* hung by a hair that their thin wall might be pierced by the lightest wrong touch. It shook between them, this transparency, with their very breath; it was an exquisite tissue, but stretched on a frame, and would give way the next instant if either so much as breathed too hard. She held her breath, for she knew by his eyes, the light at the heart of which he couldn't blind, that he was, by his intention, making sure—sure whether or no her certainty was like his. The intensity of his dependence on it at that moment—this itself was what absolutely convinced

her so that, as if perched up before him on her vertiginous point and in the very glare of his observation, she balanced for thirty seconds, she almost rocked: she might have been for the time, in all her conscious person, the very form of the equilibrium they were, in their different ways, equally trying to save. (ibid.)

The novel creates what we have come to call subtext, and its imminence is so strongly present to the reader's imagination through the characters' imaginations that a potential alternative action is implied, in which Adam plays something like Maggie's part. A permutation is proposed, to our imagination. We too are forced to penetrate surfaces, infer inner actions, and vary subject-object relationships.

Maggie and Adam cannot be sure if they correctly imagine each other's imaginative constructions: James shows tremendous effort, a pushing at verges and boundaries, but marks the limits. Effort is tantalizingly dramatized in another ghost-story, the unfinished *The Sense of the Past*,³ where James shows a young American, Ralph Pendrel, desperate to imagine the English past, vividly, immediately, and in full particularity. He is what James calls, in *The American Scene*,⁴ a story-seeker. He is also one of those imaginative enough to see ghosts, and the ghost he sees or projects is his own dead ancestral English double. James shows anglophiliac creative fervour trembling on the verge of penetrating the past as Ralph explores the old house he has inherited. He slowly proceeds through three rooms to an inner room, where he finds a portrait. He is checked, like Maggie at the doorless pagoda, because the figure in the painting thwarts expectation and discovery: 'The gentleman . . . had turned his back'. Presented with a portrait of a back view, Ralph ponders possible reasons for this strange position. Spinning his 'fine thread', shifting from 'this' to 'that hypothesis', he ends with an extravagant fancy that the painted man has turned his back '*within* the picture', and does so habitually, though only 'when one's step drew near'; 'when one wasn't there the figure looked as figures in portraits inveterately look . . .'. James's story—one of those mysteries, like *Edwin Drood*, the more mysterious for being unfinished—presents the powers and feats of the character's imagination, which is said to take a 'monstrous jump' and conceive 'a prodigy'. The monstrous jump creates the course of a monstrous action. Ralph's train of creative speculation ends in a

³ Henry James, *The Sense of the Past* (W. Collins, London, 1917).

⁴ Henry James, *The American Scene* (Chapman & Hall, London, 1907).

question that the lack of disclosure inevitably prompts—if the figure can turn its back, will a time come when it will show its face? Like the dreamy speculations of Alice just before she goes through the looking-glass, or the first story told by K in *The Castle*, the character's fantasy within the story aptly and strangely becomes the creative fiat or imperative. Character imagines, and author lets it happen. The effort to see the ghost's face is compounded by making the painting into a threshold and a door, like Alice's looking-glass. The ghost can turn round, and the next step is to cross the boundary separating art and nature, death and life. The hidden and the turned face, and the uncanny traffic between past and present, are more than ghosts and ghost-seers. The ghost and the seer are charged with message and meaning. This is a story about the effort to imagine history and to re-invent the past. It is also an example of James's interest in turned backs, and the challenge they offer to curiosity and wonder. The back view incites the seer to inquiry and effort. In *Notes of a Son and Brother* James describes a painting by William Hunt, which he especially liked, a 'large canvas of [a] girl with her back presented'. In the 1983 Sarah Tryphena Phillips lecture Richard Ellmann compared James's and Wilde's reviews of Watts's painting of *Love and Death*, and it is James who points out that Death—struggling to cross a threshold—has its back turned. Isabel Archer first sees Madame Merle's back, in an apt first view of such an enigmatic figure, whose secrets Isabel is not to discover till long after she turns her face. And it takes the whole novel for Isabel truly to see the back of her, through imaginative guesswork, gossip, and disclosure, until she takes herself off to America, tacitly echoing Wilde's joke about bad Americans going to America when they die.

III. *Fictions and Figures*

Through Ralph's register of consciousness James shapes his ghost-story, using the frame and form of his hero's obsessive historic sense. Like the girl in the cage, Ralph is a medium. Paintings, like cages and doors, are images of entrance, threshold, and boundary. Isabel Archer did not want to see the 'real' place beyond the bolted door in the old house in Albany, with its sidelights covered in green paper, 'a place which became to the child's imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror'. She too, makes a special selection as she creates her fictions, and must discover that the imagination is not

free to choose between delight and terror. These men and women of imagination people James's inquiry into acts of mind. They also act as sensitive registers in his narratives, means of sieving and shaping experience. Each is a variable in the inquiry into imagination. James does not entirely dispense with the omniscient narrator, who stands back a little from his central characters, but the storyteller's moral and psychological observations are laconic, and his lack of disclosure (especially in *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and the late novels) has encouraged imaginative critical disagreements. As James uses the story-seekers he makes it clear that they are unreliable, struggling, and partial, so impart to the novels a sense of relativity, an admission of fiction. His recognition of the provisional and individual bias of imagination is touchingly and sharply shown in his autobiographies. It is explicitly discussed in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, where he tells how he had long wanted to write the history of a story-teller's imagination, but always laid the attempt aside, until he had to struggle with the miscellany of recall for the autobiographies and came to realize that the man of imagination was himself and this his moment:

He had been with me all the while, and only too obscurely and intimately . . . I had in a word to draw him forth from within rather than meet him in the world before me, the more convenient sphere of the objective, and to make him objective, in short, had to turn nothing less than myself inside out. What was *I* thus, within and essentially, what had I ever been and could I ever be but a man of imagination at the active pitch?

. . . It is of course for my reader to say whether or no what I have done *has* meant defeat; yet even if this should be his judgment I fall back on the interest, at the worst, of certain sorts of failure. I shall have brought up from the deep many things probably not to have been arrived at for the benefit of these pages without my particular attempt.

He gives the example of his narratives of the Civil War, 'the drama of the War' at which his was only a 'visionary assistance', and where the self-abnegation of the narrator emphasizes not only the civilian's longing and compassion for his friends in action, but forms a creatively modest and reticent medium in which imaginative caring is a presence in absence:

I am sure I thought more things under that head, with the fine visionary ache, than I thought in all other connections together; for the simple reason that one had to *ask* leave (in the other connections)—of one's own spirit . . . whereas one but took it, with both hands free, for one's sense of the bigger cause.

This defence of a decorous absence draws attention to the art of the *Autobiographies*. Unlike the novels and tales, they are rambling, anecdotal, and miscellaneous, filled with other people's letters, almost 'large loose baggy monsters'. The storyteller has turned himself inside out, and subordinated personal history, or rather, narrated it through other people's stories, which always testify to his 'visionary ache'. One personal emphasis admitted to these experimentally self-subordinating memoirs is explicit self-designation of form and point of view. Here autobiography makes room for the self-conscious autobiographer, but also de-centres him, radically undermining authority, claims to authenticity, closure and completeness. James revised and enlarged the genre of biography (anticipating Sartre) as he transformed literary criticism. The transformation blurs distinctions between autobiography and biography, as well as the distinction between biography and fiction. He makes both criticism and autobiography more self-aware, and more openly speculative. In each genre, the reflexive element, that so-called distinctive mark of modernist dislocation and self-centredness, makes room for the story of imagination, and the figure of a man of imagination.

There are figures on seats, in cages, paintings, and sculptured tombs. *The Figure in the Carpet* is James's most teasing figuration of reader and writer, author and character. He loves the rich fluidity of the word 'figure', which occurs in all his writings, and the figure in the carpet even crops up as a homely in-joke in *The American Scene* where he likens bright little apples scattered in the orchard grass to 'figures in a carpet'. More grandly, in *A Small Boy and Others*,⁵ he uses the term 'figurative faculty' for imagination. Hugh Vereker, the author in *The Figure in the Carpet*, dares the obtuse critic to pluck out the heart of his mystery. The figure in the carpet is a central image, though not the only one, for the storyteller's 'exquisite secret'. The image is initiated by the narrator-critic, straining to discover the secret which is designed never to be discovered by him. The image is echoed by other characters, who unriddle the figure but do not tell him the answer, approved by the ironic Vereker, and endorsed by Henry James in his title. The figure in the carpet is a perfectly expansive member of the company of Jamesian figures. After its first restricted appearance, it grows, moving from character to

⁵ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (Macmillan, London, 1913).

character to reveal its conceptual elasticity. 'Figure' teems with connotation, figuring outline, salience, conceit, convention, character, pattern, and imaginative essay. Its elusiveness is apt in a story of eloquent absence, which forms a riddle for the reader, and for the readers inside the story; it is apt, too, in a story about the *effort* to find the heart of an artist's matter and manner. The secret is hard for some to find, but for the narrator-critic and the reader of the whole story, impossible, for different reasons: the reader in the story fails, lacking imagination, the reader *of* the story should give up, using sufficient imagination, neither too little nor too much. The harder we try to solve the puzzle, the more determinedly it dissolves. The narrator-critic asks the novelist, Vereker, if the secret concerns 'style or thought, form or feeling', and is craftily answered—is the heart in his body form or feeling? He deserves to be snubbed, for Vereker has only just told him: 'The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation' of the 'exquisite scheme'. Ardent diviners have felt the hazel-twig twitch over this deep source, but it is a trap baited for critics, and James's revenge on the reviewers. I will only offer the 'figure' as a simple example of James's generative imagery, and guardedly propose that his inquiry into imagination is *a*, if not *the*, figure in the carpet.