

Winter 2013

# Isabel Archer's "Delicious Pain": Charting Lacanian Desire in The Portrait of a Lady

Phyllis E. VanSlyck

*CUNY LaGuardia Community College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/lg\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/lg_pubs)

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

VanSlyck, Phyllis E., "Isabel Archer's "Delicious Pain": Charting Lacanian Desire in The Portrait of a Lady" (2013). *CUNY Academic Works*.

[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/lg\\_pubs/73](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/lg_pubs/73)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the LaGuardia Community College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

**Isabel Archer's "Delicious Pain":  
Charting Lacanian Desire in  
*The Portrait of a Lady***

That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level.

—Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique*

I cannot escape my fate . . . I can't escape unhappiness . . .

—Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

I

In an early chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James's narrator, in an effort to illuminate the reader about Isabel Archer's character, offers a gentle but somewhat ominous warning: "Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded" (James, 1995, p. 54).<sup>1</sup> By the end of the novel it seems that James's heroine has been granted her wish: Isabel finds herself imprisoned in a "house of suffocation" where there is "neither light nor air" (p. 360). Yet Isabel's motive for returning to Gilbert Osmond, despite her knowledge of his betrayal, begs for an explanation that neither Isabel nor James offers us. Jonathan Freedman has called the ending of *The Portrait* "an interpretive mystery . . . one of the most famous cruxes in American literature" (1994, p. 78), and, more recently, J. Hillis Miller has argued that "the basis of decision is hidden," that we cannot determine Isabel's motive (2005, p. 16).<sup>2</sup> James himself made the following observation about the ending of *The Portrait*:

The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished—that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation—that I have left her *en l'air*.—This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity— it groups together. It is complete in itself—and the rest may be taken up or not, later. (1947, p. 18)<sup>3</sup>

Despite the coherence James claims for his earliest masterpiece, with regard to Isabel's final decision and "the end of her situation," he does leave us, as he puts it, *en l'air*; so perhaps it is time to step back from the question of why Isabel returns to Osmond in order to pose a broader one. What exactly does James's heroine want? Or, as Renata Salecl asks in her discussion of "Love Between Desire and Drive," "What is the nature of desire in a love relationship . . . what makes the loving subject see the other as the object of love?" (1998, p. 46). Before we can consider these pivotal questions that define the central action of *The Portrait of a Lady*, let us review James's reflections on Isabel Archer in his 1908 preface to the New York Edition. Observing that "millions of presumptuous girls, intelligent or not intelligent, daily affront their destiny," he asks "what is it open to their destiny to *be*, at the most, that we should make an ado about it?" (1995, p. 9). James argues that the writer must find the most appropriate "difficulty" for his heroine and the "most beautiful incentive," and notes, tellingly, that this difficulty or incentive must be found "in the young woman's own consciousness" (pp. 10–11). Unlike Catherine Sloper of *Washington Square*, who presumes almost nothing, who lacks the capacity to engage us with her intelligence, and whose strength lies solely in her consistency and stubbornness—all possible reasons for James's dismissal of that text as unworthy of inclusion in the New York Edition—Isabel Archer engages us because she pursues her destiny with idealism and integrity, and it is precisely her best qualities—her intelligence, her generosity, her passion, and especially her innocent belief in her right and capacity to compose an independent self—that lead her to her fate.

James also observes in his preface that, for each of his characters, he seeks "the complications they would be most

likely to *produce* and to feel” (p. 5, emphasis added). How might we understand the situation in which Isabel finds herself, given the extent to which she helps to “produce” the kind of “complications” that reverse and even destroy her most idealistic, and seemingly positive, intentions? I would like to offer a reading of Isabel’s choices, a perverse reading, if you will, but one which matches James’s heroine’s own perversion, her consistent turning away from, even against, the very postulates she claims to live by. Isabel’s discovery of love through the ideal image of herself she finds mirrored in Gilbert Osmond’s gaze leads to a reversal of her most noble impulses. Her choice of a suitor also points to something that would seem the opposite of desire, but which is, in fact, its foundation. In choosing Gilbert Osmond, Isabel seeks to experience, however unconsciously, what Jacques Lacan defines as *jouissance*, or “painful pleasure” (1986/1992, p. 185).<sup>4</sup> This is the pleasure that arises when the individual goes beyond what is bearable, testing the limits of desire, seeking an object, and a self, that can never be found.<sup>5</sup> Although she insists on her ability to achieve psychological and social freedom, to stand apart from what James refers to as her “envelope of circumstances” (1995, p. 175), Isabel’s behavior suggests that she is drawn, instead, to those situations that will test the boundaries of that “self” and reveal its impossibility. Isabel thus fulfills James’s effort to transform “the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl, to [endow her] with the high attributes of a Subject,” but not exactly in the way James may have intended (pp. 8–9).

In her quest for completion, for that object which will perfectly reflect her ideal self, and in her choice of an “other” who mirrors this ideal—but also, significantly, its dark interior, the void at the center of identity—Isabel confronts her own alienated, ambiguous and in-coherent self, what Jacques Lacan calls the split subject (1977, p. 128).<sup>6</sup> Isabel’s choices throughout the novel reveal her unconscious fascination with what lies beyond the pleasure principle, and she tacitly embraces the death drive as she confronts the irrevocable “lack” which constitutes the human condition (Lacan, 1981, p. 214).<sup>7</sup> Her final decision, however, also offers her an ontological escape from Osmond’s (and perhaps James’s own) formalist control of her identity. Choosing to remain with someone who will render her desire

impossible forces Isabel to experience the paradoxical "splitting" that exposes her shattered subjectivity. Her active role in the destruction of her ideal of coherence and autonomy, including her final decision to return to Osmond rather than "to save what [she] can of her life" (p. 633), defines her, *avant la lettre*, as a post-humanist subject.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues that in the end what we seek is not pleasure but the pain that connects us with our unacknowledged but inevitable tendency towards dissolution: "If we may assume as an experience admitting of no exception that everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say 'The goal of all life is death'" (1920, p. 38). Shifting the interpretation of the death drive from the biological to the ontological realm, Lacan argues that the individual struggles not to return to a state of equilibrium (as Freud suggests) but, rather, the opposite: to maintain a state of permanent longing for an impossible object of desire. In support of his position, Lacan claims that Freud, too, recognizes the way desire is sustained by impossibility: "Freud strongly indicates that what in the end gives the . . . apparatus of the ego its real support, its consistency, is that it is sustained within by this lost object." Because love actually develops, and is supported, through this longing, Lacan explains, "*jouissance* is introduced into the dimension of the subject's being" (2007, p. 50). Put simply, "the death drive is the name given to that constant desire in the subject to break through the pleasure principle towards the Thing; it is that which the subject can never assume, integrate, subjectivize" (Evans, 1996, p. 92). Lacan's reworking of the Freudian death drive as a quest for the lost object that can never be found offers insight into the true nature of Isabel's desire.

Early clues to the ambiguous nature of Isabel's quest are suggested once again by James's narrator, who reminds the reader just how contradictory her ideas about her emerging identity are. She insists on her independence from social constraints; she longs "to move in a realm of light, of natural wisdom" (p. 56), yet she cares deeply about what others think of her. Her belief that "her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce"

(p. 54), anticipating William James's "ideal social self . . . a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest possible judging companion" (James, 1890, p. 315), is at odds with Isabel's determination *not* to be bound by social codes: "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one'" (p. 175). James's heroine's insistence on her autonomy—to her Aunt Lydia, to her cousin, Ralph, and to her deceptive mentor, Serena Merle—and her desire to be free of others' control, is undermined, long before Gilbert Osmond appears on the scene, by a conflict between her private ideal of selfhood and her desire to be pleasing to the eye of an unnamed but definitive other. Despite her alleged program of Emersonian self-realization, Isabel seeks acceptance by those who reflect back to her an ideal self-image she has already (though only vaguely) imagined.

For Lacan, the quest for an ideal self is precisely what sets desire in motion, but the impossible desire we define as love strikes us only when "the object coincides with [the] hero's fundamental [self] image" (1998, p. 142). The other must mirror back to the subject a fulfilling portrait that she has already, in a sense, composed: "The subject sees his being in a reflection in relation to the other, that is to say in relation to the *ich-ideal*" (1988, p. 125). Borrowing two terms from Freud, the "ideal ego" and the "ego ideal," Lacan explains that the positioning of the self in relation to desire is directly related to the formation of subjectivity. The ideal ego is an imaginary projection that creates the illusion of unity, the illusion of a self (precisely the illusion Isabel is at pains to defend): "The human being only sees his form materialized, whole, the mirage of himself, outside of himself" (1998, p. 140). The ego ideal, in turn, is "the place in the symbolic order from which the subject observes himself or herself in the way he or she would like to be seen" (Salecl, 1998, p. 11).<sup>8</sup>

Henry James's pervasive use of portraiture in this novel, beginning with Isabel's self-idealization and including her portraits of her antagonists, may be related to the Lacanian notion of the ego ideal, for James's fascination with the distilling, dramatizing, but also dangerous function of such compos-

ing reveals the way framing a subject traps the viewer. In this context, James's methodology anticipates Lacan's ideas about the function of the gaze and the mirror stage: the perceiver's composed object, of self or other, fills his or her consciousness with an illusion, a misrecognition (Lacan, 1977, p. 6). The key to the connection between Lacan's description of the ego ideal and Isabel's quest is the alienation that the fantasy produces: this imaginary space is "where the alienated relation of self to its own image is created and maintained" (Klages, 2006, p. 80). What Isabel creates, or attempts to create, in her own self-idealization and her idealization of Osmond, is an illusion of a self, as well as an illusion of mastery. Predictably, in the course of her journey, Isabel discovers a profound gap between her desire and its realization.

Despite her repeated professions of independence to her aunt Touchett, her cousin Ralph, and to Madame Merle, Isabel's thinking quickly reveals a paradox: the extent to which the controlling fantasy of an ideal self or "ego ideal" dominates her effort to follow her desire and secure a love object. In his discussion of love, transference, and desire at the end of *Four Fundamental Concepts*, Lacan tells a brief story that perfectly captures James's heroine's stance in relation to love early in the novel:

Not long ago a little girl said to me sweetly that it was about time somebody began to look after her so that she might seem lovable to herself. In saying this, she provided the innocent admission of the mainspring that comes into play in the first stage of the transference. The subject has a relation with his analyst the centre of which is . . . the privileged signifier known as the ego ideal, in so far as from there he will feel himself both satisfactory and loved. (1981, p. 257)

Like the "little girl" of Lacan's story, Isabel is seeking someone who will make her feel "both satisfactory and loved." While her early suitors, Goodwood and Warburton, may seem to offer this kind of love, it is Gilbert Osmond who provides the necessary transference. Isabel immediately recognizes in her suitor

the narcissistic image that forms the substance of her ideal self. Osmond seems to exhibit the exact qualities that define her own aesthetic quest. He tells her that “one ought to make one’s life a work of art” (p. 237), effectively mirroring, to Isabel, her own early desire to be “one of the best . . . [to] be conscious of a fine organization” (pp. 53–54). James’s heroine finds herself deeply attracted to the controlled and refined aesthetic image Osmond presents to her because she tacitly recognizes her own ego ideal in his (calculated) self-representation. She responds to Osmond, in other words, as the object that sets desire in motion, what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (1998, p. 77).<sup>9</sup> As Salecl explains, we love this object “because of the perfection that we have striven to reach for our own ego” (1996, p. 187). Yet what is important here is that Isabel’s concept of herself now depends on “her misidentification with the image of another” (Klages, 2006, p. 81).

Another important reason that Osmond performs this function, when Isabel’s other suitors do not, is that Goodwood and Warburton literally overwhelm Isabel with the *presence* of their desire; Osmond offers, precisely, its absence. It is absence, emptiness, lack, therefore, that defines the real nature of Isabel’s desire: she seeks the object that can never be attained—something that will postpone, rather than grant, her satisfaction. For Lacan, this deferral, or failure, is precisely what defines the love relationship: “love . . . is in fact that which constitutes a remainder in desire, namely, its cause, and sustains desire through its lack of satisfaction (insatisfaction) and even its impossibility” (1998, p. 6).<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the early chapters of the novel, Isabel repeatedly articulates a consistent interest in the kind of painful pleasure described by Lacan: she seeks a kind of knowledge that can be found only in situations that she herself defines as unhappy. Of the space Isabel occupies in her Albany home, the narrator comments, “she might have had the whole house to choose from, and the room she had selected was the most depressed of its scenes” (p. 33). When she tells her Aunt Lydia of her feelings about her family home (“A great many people have died here; the place has been full of life”), Mrs. Touchett responds with a Sophoclean irony that foreshadows Isabel’s fate:

"You should go to Florence if you like houses in which things have happened—especially deaths" (pp. 35–36).

Yet Isabel ignores her aunt's warning and persists in selecting "places where the vague lamplight expired," insisting that she must confront "the unpleasant" which has "been too absent from her knowledge" (p. 39). She responds to Gardencourt's "well ordered privacy . . . where the tread was muffled by the earth itself, and . . . all friction dropped out of contact and all shrillness out of talk" in a way that anticipates the subtle control that will soon attract her to Osmond (p. 57). It is not surprising, therefore, that Isabel's initial appreciation of Osmond's Florentine villa, with its carefully manicured garden, is consistent with her earlier sympathy for other subdued environments and her strong preference for a controlled aesthetic frame, hinting at a fear of real intimacy, or perhaps a tacit awareness of its impossibility.<sup>11</sup>

Osmond, predictably, is the first to understand Isabel's desire: he recognizes her quest for an ego ideal and mirrors back to her exactly what she imagines for herself. Setting forth an appreciative portrait over an intimate connection, he tells Isabel, "For me you'll always be the most important woman in the world." Isabel, in turn, sees herself reflected in his mind: she "looked at herself in this character, looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace." The satisfaction she experiences through Osmond's mirroring of her ideal self—his words "gratify her desire to think well of herself"—further clarifies her attraction to someone who, in the narrator's and reader's eye, is clearly her least appealing suitor (p. 264). Osmond grasps the narcissistic nature of Isabel's self-image and builds upon it, while she in turn works, at least initially, to become the image that Osmond has composed for her.

In this circular exchange, Osmond teaches Isabel about the structure of desire—showing her that while on one level it is our private fantasy, that fantasy is stimulated, brought into being, through an intimate connection between something we have already imagined for ourselves and something which is recognized and offered to us by another. This connection, a kind of symbolic exchange, "unleashes [a] fatal attachment," and according to Lacan, "that's what love is. It's one's own ego

that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (1988, p. 142). We see the "unleashing" of Isabel's "fatal attachment" in her silent, appreciative composition of her suitor, framed by his villa and the Florentine hills, when she visits him for the first time. It is a gentle yet ominous image, one in which, as James's narrator tellingly observes, her "imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting":

She had carried away an image from her visit to his hilltop which her subsequent knowledge of him did nothing to efface and which put on for her a particular harmony with other supposed and divine things, histories within histories: the image of a quiet, clever, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d'Arno . . . The picture had no flourishes, but she liked its lowness of tone and the atmosphere of summer twilight that pervaded it. It spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly . . . of a lonely studious life in a lovely land; of an old sorrow that sometimes ached today; of a feeling of pride that . . . had an element of nobleness . . . (p. 237)

This somber mood of a "lonely studious life" that already contains "an old sorrow" clashes eerily with the vibrant energy Isabel has brought to earlier conceptions of her identity. Her attraction to this subdued, controlled atmosphere can only be understood in relation to loss. This "picture" of Osmond as "quiet, clever, sensitive," someone whose "lowness of tone" fills her with purpose, confirms the way Isabel will constitute and sustain her desire, not through an expansive freedom but through what she construes as a "noble" personal restraint. Because she admires his "cultivated" "care for beauty and perfection," she projects into his character "a feeling of pride" that she believes she can share, for it has "an element of nobleness." But if Isabel imagines a future stretched before them "in the disposed vistas . . . of a formal Italian garden," the picture's "atmosphere of summer twilight" offers a hint that she has also glimpsed the serpent (p. 237). Between the controlled boundary

of the garden and the fading light, the shadow of repression, not freedom, asserts itself. Even Osmond's domicile, the Palazzo Roccanera's "incommunicative character," with its "heavy lids, but no eyes," its face that offers a "mask," ominously announces the negative space awaiting James's heroine (p. 195). It is significant that Isabel identifies these qualities before stepping over the threshold and marrying Osmond.

The independent ideal Isabel claims for herself in the novel's opening is connected in an almost fatal way to what would seem to be its opposite: the desire of another, and through that other, desire's inherent impossibility. Osmond's function as an impossible object of desire, Lacan's *objet petit a*, emerges through Isabel's observation of his rigid, aesthetically shaped environment, a metonymy for his own deeply controlling nature.<sup>12</sup> Information warning Isabel against Osmond forms the basis of her attraction, betraying her implicit quest for *jouissance*.

In order to meet Osmond's desire, to become loveable to him, Isabel must sacrifice the surface ideal of independent self-realization she presents to her aunt Touchett, to her cousin Ralph, and even to Serena Merle, and she seems eager to make this sacrifice. Almost immediately after meeting Osmond, Isabel abandons her dream of an independent life, letting him know just how unimportant her autonomy really is to her: "I'm rather ashamed of my plans; I make a new one every day" (p. 227). Instead, she begins to reshape her desire to match what she perceives Osmond wants her to be. All too quickly, Isabel adopts Pansy's "sympathetic docility" (p. 237) and waits, "with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed" (p. 223). Under the spell of Osmond's claim that one should make one's life a work of art, Isabel anticipates, and begins to practice, the suppression of movement and energy her suitor will demand. As she sits in the Gallery of the Roman Capitol, resting her eyes on the "beautiful blank faces" of the antique marbles, "listening . . . to their eternal silence," she aligns her subjectivity with their "deep stillness" (pp. 257-258). The Greek sculptures offer a peaceful living death that matches an unacknowledged desire for cessation: "their noble quietude . . . as with a high door closed for the ceremony, slowly drops on the spirit the large white mantle of peace" (p. 257).

As Isabel studies her suitor, it becomes increasingly evident that his psychological unavailability—the way he will invoke *loss*—is the real basis of his appeal. She notes, for example, that Osmond generates an anxiety, and even a paralysis, in her: “His utterance was the vibration of glass, and if she had put out her finger she might have changed the pitch and spoiled the concert” (p. 213). Examining his “overdrawn, retouched” features, Isabel sees that he is “fastidious,” “critical,” “probably irritable” (p. 224). What attracts her is not his largeness of vision, his freedom or spontaneity, but rather his many signs of “strong conviction” (p. 237). Consider, for example, Isabel’s assessment of the way Osmond’s views are unlikely to change: “He uttered his ideas as if . . . he were used to them and had lived with them; old polished knobs and heads and handles . . . that could be fitted if necessary to new walking sticks . . .” (p. 238). Her own ideas are certainly about to be re-fitted to those of Osmond, and it is important to note that her suitor’s coldness and control do not *emerge* for Isabel. These qualities are present in her earliest assessments. Osmond’s character conforms not only to an aesthetic she naively cherishes but also to a more complicated ontological need to confront the limit of her desire, to experience *jouissance*.<sup>13</sup>

A nostalgia for what is already lost, disguised as aesthetic idealism, informs Isabel’s responses as she continues to compose herself so as to match her suitor’s vision of life as a work of art. Just before Osmond proposes, Isabel contemplates the fact that she is leaving Rome, and the thought makes her feel “a pang” that “touched the source of tears” (p. 262). In the original 1881 edition of *The Portrait*, James’s narrator is more explicit: Isabel’s heart throbs with a kind of “delicious pain” (James, 1997, p. 334). When Osmond confesses he is in love with her, Isabel again feels a pang, but one that “suggest[s] . . . the slipping of a fine bolt—backward, forward, she couldn’t have said which.” Though he stands there “beautiful and generous” in her eyes, he is invested “with the golden air of early autumn” (p. 263). Isabel has already identified the consistent darkening of the atmosphere that Osmond engenders and the prison-like space she is about to enter: “there was a last vague space it couldn’t cross—a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter

twilight. But she was to cross it yet" (p. 265). "Summer twilight" has become "winter twilight" even before the marriage takes place, and Isabel acknowledges that she is moving into a world whose dimensions are "uncertain," even "treacherous." But she continues to embrace the absence that is Osmond because, as Lacan would say, "what she has already affirmed herself to be takes on an outward form" (1986/1992, p. 280).

Her suitor perfectly embodies the ontological emptiness at the heart of her desire. Osmond's aesthetic, material, and sensual values are strangely conflated ("The finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known had become her property . . ." [p. 358]), but possession, for Isabel, is not an act that enables intimacy but, rather, one that enforces aesthetic distance. As William Veeder has suggested, "Osmond is for Isabel the quintessence of absence, the essential nullity" (1990, p. 111). The absence that occupies the center of desire and the way the object of desire is connected to the Freudian death drive is insightfully described by Slavoj Žižek: "The object is attainable only by way of an incessant postponement . . . It is here that sublimation sets in—the sublimation in the Lacanian sense of the elevation of an object into the dignity of the Thing" (1994, p. 96). Osmond has been elevated to the "dignity of the Thing"; that is, he becomes "the black hole around which desire is organized" (p. 96).<sup>14</sup> Isabel's choice is an inevitable step in her movement towards the death drive. It is a choice that will lead her to a confrontation with her permanently incomplete and divided self.

## II

A number of philosophical readings of *The Portrait* in the last two decades suggest that, for James, an essentialist notion of the self, of its coherence, was both problematic and fascinating. Such readings lay the foundation for my argument here that James is implicitly critiquing the traditional humanist notion of a coherent self and anticipating, in his portrait of Isabel, a post-structuralist definition of the shattered subject. Dana Ringuette argues that James's "subject is dispersed within

a matrix of relations without the comforting backdrop of a conventional autonomous Cartesian 'self' (1990, p. 120), and Priscilla Walton suggests that James's characters demonstrate what Althusser calls the "ambiguity of the subject" (1992, p. 96). Julie Rivkin traces James's characters' "discovery that behind representation there is no firm ground, no singular, easily communicable and knowable presence of truth" (1996, p. 80), and John Carlos Rowe observes that "the fractured, alienated self may well be James's topic in most of his novels and tales" (1998, p. 14).

Readings that contest the coherence of the subject in James are supported, from another angle, by psychoanalytic critics who confirm the way Isabel's quest for self-realization is consistently undermined by her deliberate submission to Osmond's will and thus to self-negation. For Alfred Habegger, Isabel submits to a "dominating master" believing that, in this way, she can replace a "lost father" (1990, p. 53). Beth Sharon Ash argues that "Isabel's desire to establish a potentially autonomous ego becomes an urgent, though unknowing, response to the absent mother" and that Osmond is the "maternal husband" who "becomes the bad mother all over again" (1990, p. 144). But such readings rely upon evidence that lies outside James's text, and neither these nor the philosophical studies of James's characters' subjectivity referenced above examine the connection to desire and to *jouissance* undertaken here.

Ann-Marie Priest takes the self-annihilation theme implicit in a discussion of the death drive in a direction somewhat relevant to this reading, claiming that several of James's heroines, including Isabel, enact a "secularized version of the medieval mystical narrative of abjection and transformation." She argues that through the "breaking and bruising" of the self, James's characters experience something akin to the mystic's "exquisite agony of self-emptying" (2001, pp. 164, 177). But Isabel confronts something beyond, and quite contrary to, a fulfilling abjection—and mystical transformation of her character is not evident. Instead, anticipating the insight of protagonists in James's late works such as John Marcher of *The Beast in the Jungle* and Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl*, Isabel experiences the moment when the object of desire reveals itself as

emptiness, as lack. This moment, in James, as in classical literature, is reserved for the very brave, for the individual who is willing to confront the limit, the impossibility, of her desire. To understand the real nature of the self—something Isabel can encounter only by entering what Lacan calls “the space between two deaths”—she must, in a sense, die (1986/1992, p. 248). The narcissistic fantasy and its persistent failure are both essential components of desire. With willful consistency, Isabel pursues her fate, seeking that moment in experience that will reveal “the presence of death” (Lacan, 1981, p. 257), the death of the very subject she is composing: her “self.” James’s insistence on the composer’s failure to secure the knowledge or wholeness she seeks reveals the deep connection between the danger of an idealizing aestheticism and Lacan’s argument that such misrecognitions, however necessary, ultimately reveal the permanent incompleteness of the self.

Midway through the novel, Isabel reflects on the “wondrous vision” she initially had of Gilbert Osmond: a vision “fed through charmed senses and oh such a stirred fancy!” (p. 357). Lacan asks, “How can the dream, the bearer of the subject’s desire produce that which makes the trauma emerge?” (1981, p. 55). This is the paradoxical question that Isabel explores in her midnight vigil. James shows us his heroine “motionlessly seeing,” reviewing her journey and her decisions, from her initial infatuation with Osmond to the world that now encloses her in “a dark narrow alley with a dead wall at the end” (p. 356). When James’s heroine reflects that Osmond has “deliberately, almost malignantly . . . put the lights out one by one,” she understands that he has withdrawn his appreciation of her ego ideal: “She knew of no wrong he had done . . . she simply believed he hated her” (p. 356). But Isabel also sees that Osmond’s hatred is a result of *her* rejection of the way *he* wants to be seen: “It was her scorn of his assumptions, it was this that made him draw himself up . . . that she should turn the hot light of her disdain upon his own conception of things—this was a danger he had not allowed for” (p. 362). The “fatal attachment” which linked Isabel to Osmond and Osmond to Isabel, constructed around a mutual commitment to their respective self-images (which each saw mirrored in the gaze of the other), has been

undone: “they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side a declaration of the deception suffered” (p. 356). When it is clear that Osmond no longer mirrors back to her the ideal Isabel has been fashioning, for herself but also to please her suitor, her image of *him* also collapses. Isabel thus discovers that her chosen *object*, that impossible object of desire, is “the object which cannot be swallowed . . . It remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier” (Žižek, 1999, p. 270). “Nothing was a pleasure to her now . . . There was an everlasting weight on her heart—there was a livid light on everything” (p. 363). Like John Marcher’s “beast” in *The Beast in the Jungle*, perhaps the most powerful representation of impossible desire in all of James, Osmond’s rejection will force Isabel to experience the “splitting” that engenders the paradoxical birth of her (shattered) subjectivity.

To many readers, Isabel’s painful struggle to understand Osmond’s disaffection offers a poignant moment of recognition: James’s heroine seems to move from blindness to insight, holding up to the light her original impressions of her husband and comparing them to her new—and darker—knowledge. If she has chosen her fate, according to such readings, she has done so honorably, the way a tragic protagonist is blinded by her own best qualities—her naïve, hopeful trust in another and her overconfidence in her judgment. But Isabel takes unusual responsibility for her role in defining Osmond, acknowledging that her suitor “was not changed; he had not disguised himself” (p. 357). She concedes that she has been aware of “the realms of restriction and depression” that constitute Osmond’s nature from the beginning (p. 356). Given her early insights about her suitor, and her consistent preference for the space of melancholy, of darkness, one wonders about the perverse pleasure this scene finally offers James’s heroine. In a sense, it is the moment she has been waiting for. As her narrator explains, “Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure” (p. 356). The “exquisite instrument” that is Osmond’s mind is well known to her, and the “house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” is one that she has chosen (pp. 359–360).

Just before Isabel's painful examination of Osmond's character during her reflective vigil, a scene that adumbrates her own painful suppression of her identity as she has worked to please her husband, James offers his readers a visual representation of Isabel, her official "portrait" as Osmond's wife, one that articulates the death-in-life quality that seems to permeate her new identity. Ralph's response to the portrait Osmond seems to have succeeded in creating is a painful echo of his own initial tendency to frame his cousin when she first arrives at Garden-court: "Suddenly, I receive a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall . . ." (p. 63). Missing the ironic echo of his own impulses, including his decision to endow his cousin with money so that he can witness what she will make of her life, Ralph is horrified at the way Isabel has become someone else's representation: she wears a mask that "completely cover[s] her face. There [is] something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this [is] not an expression . . . it [is] a representation" (p. 330). Ralph registers the way Isabel's noble ideals have been both realized and ironized: "Slender still, but lovelier than before, she had gained no great maturity of aspect; yet there was an amplitude and a brilliancy in her personal arrangements that gave a touch of insolence to her beauty . . . The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something" (p. 331).

To Ralph, and to some critics, James's heroine has simply been "appropriated by Osmond's mind," but, in fact, this portrait is consonant with Isabel's own aesthetic ideals (Kasten, 1984, p. 61). The "amplitude," "brilliancy," even, to a degree, the "insolence" (p. 331) of Isabel's character are already suggested in her earliest fantasies about herself, her desire to be a controlled, aesthetically complete, representation. Long before the appearance of Osmond she muses: "one should be one of the best, should be conscious of a fine organisation" (pp. 53-54). Isabel has become a portrait that not only Osmond but she herself, and even Ralph, have helped to compose: she is "better worth looking at than most works of art" (p. 50), as her cousin describes her at the outset. But she is also "the fine lady who . . . will always wear a mask" (p. 330). On one level, this portrait is the logical culmination of Isabel's quest, her induction into Osmond's world, her placement within the aesthetic frame she

has chosen. Yet, as Jonathan Freedman has suggested, Isabel is not wholly contained by the “insidious” “process of aestheticization” that grips Osmond; a “resonant ambiguity” remains that grants her an “interpretative mystery” (1994, p. 68).

Ralph’s silent confrontation with Isabel’s mature self-portrait, and the “resonant ambiguity” of James’s heroine, despite her seeming entrapment by Osmond, invites us to consider the complex meaning of portraiture in this novel. How might James’s ideas about portraiture and, more broadly, his extensive and varied use of art in his works, be connected to our discussion of loss, emptiness and pleasurable pain, that is, to Lacanian *jouissance*? To explore these questions, we need to take a step back from *The Portrait of a Lady* and examine earlier and later texts in which a work of art functions as an ambiguous object of desire, one that, with uncanny consistency, leads the Jamesian protagonist through a range of emotions, from self-blinding seduction to an embrace of the death drive, and an acceptance of mortality, of the shattered subject.

### III

In an essay entitled “Venice,” originally written in 1882 and later anthologized in *Italian Hours*, James is struck by a painting of Tintoretto’s entitled “Pallas Chasing Away Mars”: “a young woman of noble appearance is administering a gentle push to a fine young man in armour, as if to tell him to keep his distance.” He describes “the gentleness of this push . . . the charming way in which she puts out her arm . . . and rests her young hand, its rosy fingers parted, on his dark breastplate” (James, 1988, p. 30). Pallas Athene’s stance echoes that of Isabel Archer, whose deep intelligence and independence are in conflict with her desire. In Tintoretto’s painting, as James reads it, Athene’s gesture epitomizes desire in its moment of suspended ambivalence: her push is “gentle”; her “rosy fingers” touch Mars’s breast. Tintoretto’s Athene mirrors Isabel’s confused emotions towards her suitors.

James’s heroine’s affinity for sad places is similarly anticipated in his early travel literature. In 1873, in an essay entitled “Roman Rides,” also later anthologized in *Italian Hours*, James

writes of the Roman Campagna in a way that foreshadows Isabel's sad visit there towards the end of her journey. He takes deep delight in the "typical 'Italian landscape' of old-fashioned art. It was so bright and yet so sad, so still and yet so charged . . . with the murmur of an extinguished life" (1988, p. 106). A few pages later, in the same essay, James "confess[es]" that the pleasure he takes in the somber sadness of the scene "shows a note of perversity" (p. 114). Frequently in his travel writing, James relishes the discovery of landscapes that "dispose themselves into pictures" (p. 115), not merely for their beauty but because they are filled with a history of what has been lost, ruins that contain a dark core, a melancholy story.

Already in James's early fiction, works of art, from sculptures to portraits, silently reveal the poignant truth of impossible desire, its connection to mortality. In several early tales, where a work of art, literally or figuratively, plays a major role, there is already a dangerous flirtation with death, even death in life. In "The Madonna of the Future" and "The Last of the Valerii," an imagined painting and a literal sculpture lure the main character into a state that anticipates madness, even death. The work of art chosen by the character is negated: ridiculed, or, literally, buried. The artist in "The Madonna of the Future" chooses death over a life that has destroyed his illusion of the Madonna (James, 1873/1962c). The young Italian nobleman in "The Last of the Valerii" is eager to sacrifice his marriage, and possibly his life, in his worship of the statue of Venus (James, 1874/1962a). Although he relinquishes his desire at the command of his wife who insists that the statue be buried, he retains a hand of the sculpture, which remains (hidden) in plain sight, in his private cabinet.

Euphemia de Mauves in "Madame de Mauves," an 1874 tale that probes the deferred desire that will shape the plot of *The Ambassadors*, has a pure but frozen rigidity that is a source of admiration for her innocent suitor Longmore, who, like Isabel in her idealization of Osmond, sees in Euphemia's coldness "an extraordinary charm" (1874/1962b, p. 145). Her unattainability evokes in Longmore "a kind of aching impotence" (p. 173) that anticipates Isabel's pleasurable pain in her early encounters with Osmond.

From early stories to the novels of the major phase, we see that James situates the art object, real or imagined, at the crux of desire and loss, a loss that reflects Lacanian “lack,” exposing not only his characters’ illusions but also their shattered subjectivity. Like Isabel, James’s late protagonists discover that the aesthetic dimension brings with it tragic knowledge, knowledge of their permanent incompleteness, their mortality. As they attempt to capture and still the lives around them, they are trapped by their own designs, recognizing, finally, that the aesthetic frame grants permanence only in death. Milly Theale, in *The Wings of the Dove*, initially apprehends her mortality as she gazes at the Bronzino Lord Mark takes her to see. She understands why the portrait reminds him of her: it is the face of the young woman, “almost livid in hue” and “unaccompanied by a joy.” Most important, she is “dead, dead, dead” (James, 1978, p. 137). Early in the novel, Milly has already discovered “the great common anxiety,” the “grim breathing space” that surrounds her like a gentle coffin (p. 153). But when Sir Luke Strett, “the great doctor,” indicates that she will soon die, Milly discovers that her new knowledge is “like an absolute possession, a new resource altogether”; her destiny “something [already] done up in the softest silk and tucked away under the arm of memory” (p. 143). Milly acknowledges her death in life more explicitly than Isabel, recognizing the power of her portrait to grant permanence but only in the memory of those who remain: “I shall never be better than this,” she tells Lord Mark, as they gaze together at the Bronzino (p. 137). After her death, Milly Theale becomes Densher’s “maimed child,” his “priceless pearl” (p. 398), living forever within the frame of the portrait, the beautiful Bronzino she encounters in Book I, as she takes her place in Densher’s memory.

Perhaps James’s most complex example of the way portraits conceal, only to betray, the absence of life, the void at the center of identity, is explored in *The Golden Bowl*. In the opening chapters, Maggie Verver purposefully inducts Prince Amerigo into her gallery, imagining the perfection he will bring to her life and marriage as a *morçeau de musée* (James, 1985, p. 43), only to discover an imaginary “pagoda” in her garden that denies her entrance. The pagoda represents the hidden desire

of Charlotte and Amerigo, a Lacanian "stain" that defies Maggie's ambitious efforts to control the design of her marriage. It is only by consigning Charlotte and Amerigo to the status of "a pair of effigies . . . on one of the platforms of Madame Tussaud" at the end of the novel that Maggie reclaims her status as composer, but the work of art she has designed is devoid of life (p. 574). Ironically, however, Amerigo, who seems to embody the idea of the living dead, finally existing only within Maggie's collection, signals in the subtlety of his gaze the Lacanian Thing (*Das Ding*) that escapes his wife's design—it is *his* gaze that dominates the ending, hers that buries itself in his breast "in pity and dread" (p. 580). At the end of both *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*, James's protagonists are situated both within and outside the frame they have composed, in the space Lacan would call "between two deaths" (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 270). Precisely because they are "outside or beyond all hope" (p. 270), they can interrogate their own designs.

Isabel Archer, too, while seeming to remain within her portrait, in the end transcends the representation she has helped to compose. We know, especially after her midnight vigil, that her portrait contains a remainder, something that escapes the frame. The question of that remainder haunts the final chapters of the novel. A piece of the Lacanian Real—metonymy for the original, albeit unknowable, Isabel before her induction into Osmond's symbolic world—continues to haunt the reader.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

As James's novel comes to a close, late portraits—of Osmond, of Isabel, of Merle—expose the profound emptiness at the heart of everyone's design, whether innocent or strategic, and the powerful truth that this emptiness reveals: the failure of representation, of the coherence of the subject. Following the portrait of Isabel as observed by Ralph and the revised portrait of Osmond reviewed by Isabel during her midnight vigil, James offers us a final, explosive portrait of Serena Merle, one that enables Isabel to confront her mentor's betrayal and witness the disintegration of the mask. Just after the Countess Gemini

has told her of Merle's duplicity and of her role in Isabel's marriage, she meets Merle unexpectedly at Pansy's convent: "Madame Merle was already so present to her vision that her appearance in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move" (p. 456). In this moment, Isabel recognizes Merle's awareness that the truth of her relationship to Osmond and Pansy is out: Isabel observes a "sudden break in [Merle's] voice, a lapse in her continuity, which was in itself a complete drama . . . Isabel saw it all as distinctly as if it had been reflected in a large clear glass . . . Madame Merle had lost her pluck and saw before her the phantom of exposure" (p. 458). We see, through Isabel's eyes, the shattered "self" of Serena Merle, a dark counterpoint to Isabel's own failure to create a coherent aesthetic self.

We have traced Isabel's induction into the frame of the picture, her consistent pattern of choosing negatively, her attraction to the "extraordinary charm" of late afternoon with its "masses of purple shadow" (p. 226), her explicit preference for dark spaces, for mystery, for "slightly treacherous" landscapes (p. 265), for the "beautiful blank faces" of Greek sculptures and their "noble quietude" (p. 257), her attraction to a life whose "lowness of tone" (p. 237) anticipates the negation of her early spirited impulses. In the final chapters of the novel Isabel enters another frame, one where she immerses herself in her pain. Just before her trip to England to see her dying cousin, Isabel takes a drive into the Roman countryside and contemplates "the ruin of her happiness" (p. 430). The landscape before her offers her a "companionship in endurance," a space where she can "drop her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places" (p. 431). What she sees perfectly mirrors James's own discovery of the melancholy Roman landscape in his early travel writing. She gazes "through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene," feeling a kinship with the "motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes" (p. 431). The landscape before her is a fully realized, ironic reprise of Isabel's early idealistic projection of life with Osmond, an image suffused, we recall, with the twilight "of an old sorrow that sometimes ached today" (p. 237). Her nostalgic immersion in this moment is an act of mourning for the loss of her idealized images—of those she

has loved and of her own ideal self. Yet her feeling of "kinship" with this scene and her recognition that the sadness is somehow "splendid" testifies poignantly to the painful pleasure her new condition has wrought. The selfhood Isabel now seeks is neither the freedom of spirit she avows nor the self-destruction that seems imminent at the novel's close. Rather, she chooses the "delightful sadness," described by Denis de Rougemont, a life in which "suffering and understanding are deeply connected; death and self-awareness are in league" (1983, p. 51).

Following this sorrowful, contemplative moment in which Isabel seems to accept her fate, she makes her way to London to be with her dying cousin, Ralph. The journey, which she undertakes (like Oedipus) "with sightless eyes" (p. 465), is a subtle symbolic enactment of her own death: "to cease utterly," she muses, "to give it all up and not know anything more—this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank" (p. 465). In her final meeting with her cousin on his deathbed, Isabel strips herself of her mask and reveals her pain to him: it is the only genuine, and explicit, moment of intimacy in the novel. With Ralph dying in her arms, Isabel murmurs, "In such hours as this, what have we to do with pain? That's not the deepest thing; there's something deeper" (p. 478). This "deeper" feeling is, in part, the love Isabel finally confesses to her cousin, a very different kind of love from the painful pleasure we have been examining, something closer to *karitas* than *eros*, yet she is already connecting the death of Ralph to her own forthcoming imprisonment and dissolution. During her journey to see him, she recalls the silent marble statues she had identified with in the Roman gallery before her commitment to Osmond. Anticipating her own entombment, she imagines herself to be like one of "those Etruscan figures couched upon the receptacle of their ashes" (p. 465). At the height of her multiplied recognitions of betrayal and loss, Isabel confronts the painful knowledge of her failed experiment as an artist, as a composer of her own destiny.

Her touching final moment with Ralph before his death is followed by a contrasting scene of forced intimacy with her first suitor, Caspar Goodwood, who comes to Gardencourt to offer her an escape from Osmond and the prison she is about to re-enter. The scene between them is psychologically complex

and fraught with contradiction. Isabel admits she is drawn to him: “she had wanted help and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent.” But with her next thought, she recognizes her deeper connection to the death drive: “to let him take her into his arms would be the next best thing to her dying” (p. 489). Goodwood, like Osmond, threatens to erase her being, precisely through his overpowering love. Anticipating his embrace, she recognizes “that she had never been loved before” and “this belief, for a moment was a kind of rapture in which she felt herself sink and sink” (pp. 488–489). Their encounter is captured in a single sentence in the 1881 edition of *The Portrait*: “His kiss was like a flash of lightning; when it was dark again, she was free” (James, 1881/1997, p. 634). In the 1908 edition, Isabel’s response is extraordinarily visceral, emphasizing the physical and psychic pain Goodwood inflicts. She experiences his embrace as a gothic nightmare. When he seizes her, she feels “each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence” (p. 489). His desire is “something potent, acrid and strange”; it “force[s] open her set teeth” (p. 488). The violation is not only sexual; it is ontological. Goodwood seems, literally, to break open, dissolve, the boundaries of Isabel’s self: “The world had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters” (p. 489).

What are we to make of James’s heroine’s refusal of Goodwood and the contradictory emotions that she feels? Her rejection of him cannot be reduced, as he suggests, to a conflict between her desire and what “people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world” (p. 488). Isabel’s blunt American suitor’s arguments are somehow beside the point; she barely hears them. The truth is, he does not represent, has never represented, Isabel’s desire, and his embrace is a willful and one-sided “act of possession” she cannot bear. His final attempt to seize Isabel has the opposite effect: “She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path” (p. 490). Goodwood does not offer a freer choice, but rather a more literal kind of possession, absent, to be sure, Osmond’s passive aggressive manipulation. But why does Isabel, in the end, choose the negation that is Osmond?<sup>16</sup>

Michael Gorra, in his profoundly thoughtful *Portrait of a Novel*, offers a context for Isabel's decision, arguing that her choice both echoes and anticipates an insight characteristic of the American novel from Hawthorne to Fitzgerald—that of innocence lost and accepted, the recognition “that America itself has had no separate or special creation . . . no exemption from history itself” (2012, p. 278). Thus when Goodwood tells Isabel, “the world's all before us—and the world's very big” (p. 489), his words, according to Gorra, “are themselves an echo . . . [They] summon up the ending of *Paradise Lost*, when after tasting the apple and being thrust from the garden, Adam and Eve must step forth into the fallen world before them. This is the world in which Isabel knows she must live: a world of constraint and necessity, in which her possibilities are limited by her past” (Gorra, 2012, p. 326). If we grant Gorra's claim that Isabel's decision suggests a recognition of “constraint” and “necessity,” we should also observe that such a recognition is characteristic of the tragic heroine's fatal encounter with her destiny, pointing, once again, to the Lacanian path we have been tracing here, the path of *jouissance*. In fact, Lacan's own analysis of Antigone's character perfectly describes the trajectory of Isabel Archer: “She pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire” (1986/1992, p. 282).

But something equally important and specific to Isabel's character occurs in the climactic confrontation with Goodwood. She cannot accept his offer of an escape because such a resolution is completely inconsistent with everything she has struggled to understand and to become—it does not match her self-portrait. True, like her successors, Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* and Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, Isabel is forced to acknowledge the failure of her project, her attempt to shape a perfect portrait of a partner, a relationship, and an aesthetically satisfying, though conventional, humanist self. Her position at the end of the novel is more consistent with her fellow prisoners than is usually granted. Anticipating Maggie's hollow triumph when she encloses Amerigo in her portrait of her marriage and sends Charlotte into exile, only to find herself imprisoned in the rigid aesthetic structure she has designed,

Isabel's stance also foreshadows Milly Theale's transcendent but equally hollow triumph in death as the memory of her love imprints itself on Densher's consciousness through her unread letter. But also like Maggie and Millie, Isabel actively confronts her fears—of life, of suffering, of death in life. Her final choices reveal her acceptance of *jouissance*, of mortality.

As she frees herself from Goodwood's embrace, she once again anticipates her own death, thinking of "those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink" (p. 489). When she finds herself immersed in the "mighty sea" that now surrounds her (p. 489), Isabel experiences what Ellie Ragland, following Lacan, calls "the hole constituted in the compact space we call being" (1996, p. 193). Glimpsing the anamorphic blot that undermines all desire, she chooses her "very straight path" back to Rome, and to Osmond (p. 490).

Yet if the heroine of *The Portrait* seems more wholly alone than her successors, without a hint of residual or redemptive love on the part of Osmond (in contrast to the more complex emotional renderings of Densher and Amerigo), James does not leave us with a sense of a diminished, resigned, or despairing Isabel. In rejecting Goodwood and returning to Osmond, we may say that Isabel "persists in dissatisfaction" and, in doing so, she preserves an "authentic," "empty" "place of enjoyment" (Zupančič, 2000, p. 240)—the space of *jouissance*.<sup>17</sup> It may seem not only perverse but cruel to impose such a reading on a character whose apparent failure of insight seems meant to invoke more "tender" and "expectant" emotions that James's narrator suggests we adopt early in the novel (p. 54), for as de Rougemont wryly asks, "Who would dare to admit that . . . what [one] longs for with all one's being is the annihilation of . . . being?" (1983, p. 49). Nonetheless, Isabel returns to Osmond, as Sigi Jottkand suggests, for "her own destiny in death, her essential negativity" (2005, p. 28). Why? Because her encounter with the limit of desire is the necessary step for "access" to "realization" of herself—that is, realization of her permanent in-coherence (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 300). In other words, this is precisely the moment that the subject comes into being, in this encounter with its fragmentation: "Life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place

of that limit where [it] is already lost, where [one] is already on the other side" (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 280).

Throughout James's major novels and tales, objects of "art," idealized progeny of his characters, are undermined at the height of their powers; in their place is a gap, an opening, an abyss that is the real subject of his fiction. In the depths of that abyss, we see the structure of desire, its relation to the quest for an ideal, complete, autonomous self. In James, this ideal is consistently betrayed, exposing the truth of each protagonist's shattered and permanently incomplete self. Despite *The Portrait's* painful conclusion, suggesting Isabel's literal imprisonment, James's heroine is, paradoxically, liberated. When Isabel flees Goodwood she is neither diminished nor resigned, and the ending of the novel, far from being its least satisfactory aspect, is from a post-humanist perspective its most satisfying. Her decision to return to Osmond illuminates her Sophoclean "splendour,"<sup>18</sup> her radical refusal of the conventional humanist position longed for by some of James's contemporary readers, which would return her to a world where Goodwood or Warburton would truly grind her "in the very mill of the conventional" (p. 478), demanding that she live the illusion of a coherent self, in a safe but empty shell. Returning to Osmond, Isabel defines herself against the wholeness and autonomy she has consciously sought—in a space where she will experience her in-coherence. As Žižek explains, "Far from standing for the simple opposite of life—that is, for a tendency towards self-obliteration—the fundamental paradox of the psychoanalytic notion of the death drive [of *jouissance*] is that it is the Freudian name for immortality" (1999, p. 261). Like Antigone, even though she is entombed and believed dead, Isabel lives splendidly in pleasurable pain, a shattered, yet (self) valorized, subject.

### Notes

1. All references to the text are from the Norton Critical Edition (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), unless otherwise noted. The Norton Critical Edition is based on the 1908 New York Edition.
2. Miller explores a variety of possibilities for Isabel's decision but concludes that "the novel does not tell the reader enough to confirm a reading. It leaves the reader unable to understand Isabel's decisions and therefore unable, if the reader does

- not import something from outside the text, to pass judgment on her decision as good or bad" (2005, p. 743).
3. Despite James's partial concession to his contemporary critics, it is worth noting that in his substantial revision of the original 1881 edition in 1908, he deliberately removed any ambiguity about Isabel's decision to return to Osmond, and, in this sense, he has not left his heroine *en l'air*. See Bazzanella (1969) for a thorough discussion of James's revision of the novel's ending.
  4. "Who is there who in the name of pleasure doesn't start to weaken when the first half-serious step is taken toward *jouissance*?" (Lacan, 1992, p. 185). Referencing Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan observes, "This is where the function of the lost object originates in Freudian discourse . . . it is explicitly around masochism . . . conceived only in the dimension of the search for this ruinous *jouissance*, that Freud's entire text revolves" (Lacan, 2007, p. 46).
  5. According to Ellie Ragland, the quest for the object of desire always involves, on some tacit level, an awareness of the impossibility of an original coherence (and connection to the mother): "The loss of this imagined continuity . . . places loss squarely at the center of all language and all human relations" (1996, p. 195).
  6. "Freud . . . wrote *Das Ich und das Es* in order to maintain this fundamental distinction between the true subject of the unconscious and the ego" (Lacan, 1977, p. 128). Dylan Evans clarifies: "The subject can never be anything other than divided, split, alienated from himself" (1996, p. 192); for Freud and for Lacan, this "split" identifies the distinction between the conscious and unconscious: "the split denotes the impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness; the subject will never know himself completely" (Evans, 1996, p. 192).
  7. For Lacan, it is "lack" which causes desire to arise. The first object of lack is one's own loss, "the phantasy of one's death, of one's disappearance" (Lacan, 1981, p. 214). But lack continues to create "the link between the desire of the subject and the desire of the Other" (p. 215).
  8. Interestingly, William James, anticipating Lacan's formulation, provides a straightforward account of this notion of love as defined by the other: "The most peculiar social self which one is apt to have is in the mind of the person one is in love with . . . To his own consciousness he *is* not, so long as this particular social self fails to get recognition, and when it is recognized his contentment passes all bounds" (James, 1890, p. 294).
  9. The *objet petit a* is "the cause of desire" and the "object around which the drive turns" (Lacan, 1981, p. 243); it is "at the level of the desire of the Other that the subject's desire is constituted" (p. 235). Referencing Freud's chapter on "Hypnosis and the State of Being in Love," Lacan also connects the *a* to the ego ideal: Freud "designates what he calls the object—in which you must recognize what I call the *a*—the ego and the ego ideal" (p. 272).
  10. In developing the notion of *jouissance*, Lacan is drawing on Freud's classic formulation regarding the structure of love: "Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of the libido to its heights; and in all periods of history, wherever natural barriers in the way of satisfaction have not sufficed, mankind has erected conventional ones in order to be able to enjoy love" (1912, p. 187).
  11. Veeder notes that Isabel's "lifelong dilemma" (perhaps like that of James himself) is "how to love, and yet maintain enough distance to escape the exposure inevitable with intimacy; how to remain in life, but not of it" (1990, p. 118).
  12. "Lacan defines the *objet petit a* as 'a symbol of the lack' (Lacan, 1981, p. 103). He associates the *objet petit a* with the term *agalma* (a Greek term meaning a glory, an ornament, an offering to the gods, or a little statue of a god) which he extracts from Plato's *Symposium*. Just as the *agalma* is a precious object hidden inside a relatively worthless box, so the *objet petit a* is the object of desire which we seek in the other" (Evans, 1996, p. 125).
  13. As Lacan explains, "This entropy, this point of loss, is the sole point, the sole regular point at which we have access to the nature of *jouissance*" (2007, pp. 50-51).

14. "The Thing," or *Das Ding*, for Lacan, is, in relation to *jouissance*, the lost object which we constantly seek, "the object of incestuous desire, the mother" (Evans, 1996, p. 205). The subject circles around it without ever attaining it, yet it remains the cause of desire. From 1963 on, Lacan replaces this term with *objet petit a* as the symbol of our unattainable desire (p. 205).
15. The "real," for Lacan, is that which is outside language, that which "resists symbolization absolutely" (1988, p. 66). It is fundamentally related to the pleasure principle (and stands in opposition to the reality principle) because it makes us aware of its existence through trauma, through its inaccessibility: "it is essentially the missed encounter" (Lacan, 1981, p. 55).
16. Osmond tells Isabel, "I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing!" (p. 446). As the primary condition of an ethical stance, Lacan asks the question, "Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?" (1986/1992, p. 314). Osmond's final insistence on Isabel's fidelity to her act (of marrying him) supports a Lacanian reading of his function: he has pushed Isabel to a consistency which is logical and even (perversely) ethical: he demands that she be true to her choice—regardless of its content. However painful it may seem, Isabel remains true to her original desire.
17. James's heroine's "fidelity" to this "lost enjoyment," to apply Alenka Zupančič's reading of Lacan, reveals a "'heroism of the lack' . . . an attitude through which the individual 'persists' in 'unsatisfaction' and 'desire preserves the authentic place of enjoyment, *even if it remains empty*'" (2000, p. 240).
18. See Lacan's analysis of Antigone, as an illustration of the death instinct: "Antigone reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire. . . . It is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendor . . . This terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us" (1986/1992, p. 281). "She pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire" (p. 282).

## References

- Ash, B.S. (1990). Frail vessels and vast designs: A psychoanalytic portrait of Isabel Archer. In J. Porte (Ed.), *New essays on The portrait of a lady* (pp. 123–162). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bazzanella, D. (1969). The conclusion to *The portrait of a lady* re-examined. *American Literature*, 41(1), 55–63.
- Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Freedman, J. (1994). Aestheticism and *The portrait of a lady*. In R.B. Yeazell (Ed.), *Henry James: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 60–78). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Freud, S. (1912). The tendency to debasement in the sphere of love. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 11, pp. 7–64). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 18, pp. 1–64). London: Hogarth Press.
- Gorra, M. (2012). *Portrait of a novel: Henry James and the making of an American masterpiece*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Habegger, A. (1990). The fatherless heroine and the filial son: Deep background for *The portrait of a lady*. In J. Porte (Ed.), *New essays on The Portrait of a lady* (pp. 49–94). London: Cambridge University Press.
- James, H. (1934). *The art of the novel: Critical prefaces*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
- James, H. (1947). *The notebooks of Henry James*. F.O. Matthiessen & K.B. Murdock (Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- James, H. (1874/1962a). The last of the Valerii. In *The madonna of the future, and other early stories* (pp. 223–253). New York: New American Library.
- James, H. (1874/1962b). Madame de Mauves. In L. Edel (Ed.), *The complete tales of Henry James* (Vol. 3, pp. 61–106). Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- James, H. (1873/1962c). The madonna of the future. In *The madonna of the future, and other early stories* (pp. 185–222). New York: New American Library.

- James, H. (1978). *The wings of the dove* (based on the 1908 New York edition). New York: W. W. Norton.
- James, H. (1985). *The golden bowl* (based on the 1908 New York Edition). London: Penguin.
- James, H. (1986). *The ambassadors* (based on the 1908 New York Edition). London: Penguin.
- James, H. (1988). *Henry James on Italy: Selections from Italian hours*. New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- James, H. (1995). *The portrait of a lady: An authoritative text, Henry James and the novel, reviews and criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., based on the 1908 New York Edition). R. D. Bamberg (Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton.
- James, H. (1997). *The portrait of a lady* (based on original text published 1881). Köln: Könnemann.
- James, H. (2012). *The beast in the jungle*. London: Urban Romantics.
- James, W. (1890). The consciousness of self. In *The principles of psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 291–401). New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Jottkand, S. (2005). *Acting beautifully: Henry James and the ethical aesthetic*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Kasten, C. (1984). *Imagination and desire in the novels of Henry James*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Klages, M. (2006). *Literary theory: A guide for the perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A selection*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1981). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XI: The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*. J.-A. Miller (Ed.). (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's papers on technique 1953–54*. J.-A. Miller (Ed.). (J. Forrester, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1986/1992). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*. J.-A. Miller (Ed.). (D. Porter, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1998). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge, encore 1972–1973*. J.-A. Miller (Ed.). (B. Fink, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2007). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVI: The other side of psychoanalysis*. J.-A. Miller (Ed.). (R. Grigg, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Miller, J.H. (2005). What is a kiss? Isabel's moments of decision. *Critical Inquiry*, 31(3), 722–746.
- Priest, A.M. (2001). "A secret responsive ecstasy": James and the pleasure of the object. *The Henry James Review*, 22(2), 163–179.
- Ragland, E. (1996). An overview of the real with examples from Seminar I. In R. Feldstein, B. Fink, & M. Jaanus (Eds.), *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's return to Freud* (pp. 192–211). Albany: State University of New York.
- Ringuette, D.J. (1990). The self-forming subject: Henry James's pragmatic revision. *Mosaic*, 23(1), 115–130.
- Rivkin, J. (1996). *False positions: The representational logics of Henry James's fiction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- de Rougemont, D. (1983). *Love in the western world* (rev. ed.). (M. Belgion, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rowe, J.C. (1998). *The other Henry James*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Salecl, R. (1996). I can't love you unless I give you up. In R. Salecl & S. Žižek (Eds.), *Gaze and voice as love objects* (pp. 179–207). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Salecl, R. (1998). Love between desire and drive. In *(Per)versions of love and hate* (pp. 34–58). New York: Verso.
- Veeder, W. (1990). The portrait of a lack. In J. Porte (Ed.), *New essays on The portrait of a lady* (pp. 95–122). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walton, P.L. (1992). *The disruption of the feminine in Henry James*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Žižek, S. (1994). *The metastases of enjoyment: Six essays on woman and causality*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (1997). *The plague of fantasies*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (1999). Death and the maiden. In E. Wright & E. Wright (Eds.), *The Žižek reader* (pp. 206–222). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zupančič, A. (2000). *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*. London: Verso.