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## THE CAPTURED SELF: PROBLEMS OF PORTRAITURE IN HENRY JAMES'S "THE REAL THING"

**ABSTRACT:** Henry James's "The Real Thing" is a tale about an artist who aspires to become a portrait painter and is frustrated by the tensions between mimesis and interpretation. Exploring the challenges of portraiture, the story sheds light on James's ambition to reveal the psychology of his characters and capture their private and hidden essence; and on James's belief that artistic sensibility is informed by experience and memory.

Henry James's "The Real Thing" (1892), set in a studio, whose characters are artists, models, publishers, and readers, may be interpreted as a tale about art, writing, power, class, representation, realism, identity, and/or money. All of these themes appear elsewhere in James's works, urging scholars to place the story in a larger context of James's writings about fiction and art. Any consideration of the story begins with acknowledgment of James's notebook entry of 22 February 1891 and his preface to volume 18 of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, published in 1909. In both sources, James wrote that the germ of the story was a bit of gossip related to him by George Du Maurier, about a couple who once hobnobbed with the wealthy, but were now poor and trying to earn money as models. James transformed this idea into a tale whose central character, and narrator, is an illustrator hoping for a big commission from a publishing house about to bring out a commemorative, multi-volume edition of a famous writer's work, much as Scribner's would do for James more than a decade after "The Real Thing" was published. Although the illustrator hopes for this commission—both for the money it would earn him and for the boost to his reputation—he more ardently yearns for fame and fortune from another kind of art: portrait painting.

The narrator, struggling to define himself as an artist, sees portraiture as a worthy goal. Despite making an artist dependent upon wealthy clients for his income, portraiture did have a reputable status in late nineteenth century art. As James wrote in an essay praising John Singer Sargent, "There is no greater work of art than a great portrait—a truth to be constantly taken to heart by a painter holding in his hands the weapon that Mr. Sargent wields". A portrait's greatness, according to James, resulted as much from the artist's technical skills as his psychological adroitness: "the quality in light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, enlarges and humanizes the technical problem" (*The Painter's Eye* 227). As the narrator is aware, portraiture involves formidable challenges: to render a recognisable likeness of the subject; to flatter the subject's own view of himself or herself; and, most significantly, to reveal, or capture, the subject's essence.

In art historical and philosophical writings about portraiture, ‘reveal’ and ‘capture’ are often used synonymously. Both terms imply that an individual’s physical features—the shape of the face, contour of the cheekbones, slope of the nose—may be rendered accurately, but that rendering does not necessarily result in an artistic portrait. Artistry requires insight to convey the subject’s air, attitude, spark, energy: attributes of the subject’s inner self. “What is a portrait?” Henri Matisse once asked. “Is it not an interpretation of the human sensibility of the person represented?” (qtd. in Chipp 138). Portraiture, then, assumes that however an individual may appear superficially may not reflect what is private and hidden. To ‘reveal’ this inner self, the artist needs to strip away some impediment to intimacy; to ‘capture’ this inner self, the artist needs to be attuned to, and perhaps even to incite, the subject’s emanations. Both terms suggest that the artist must be more than merely a skilled draftsman; both terms imply the artist’s aggression against the subject: the weapon, as James put it, that John Singer Sargent so deftly wielded. Capturing a likeness, art historian Joanne Woodall notes, is a “sacrificial metaphor” implying that self-sacrifice is “the price of personal representation” (22).

That sacrifice is a price paid by the subject and also by the artist. The narrator of “The Real Thing” realises that portraiture will test his artistic talents, and this prospect plants a seed of anxiety that grows after he meets the Monarchs. When they arrive at his studio, he concludes from their dress and demeanor that they are a wealthy couple who want to have their portraits painted. He soon learns, however, that they have fallen on hard times, and instead of paying for portraits, they offer themselves as models for his magazine and book illustrations. For images of aristocratic men and women, they believe they are the ‘real thing’.

When the artist tries to draw them, however, he becomes frustrated and dissatisfied. His frustration points to an inherent competition between sitter and painter in the production of any portrait (see Michal Ginsburg 165-76; Moshe Ron “The Art of the Portrait” 222-237). The Monarchs resist transformation, and the narrator blames them for his artistic problem. They are amateurs, he says: that is, they are dilettantes at modeling and, unlike his other models—the cockney Miss Churm, the itinerant young Italian Oronte, and an unnamed boy with big feet—they cannot assume roles other than the one role they have perfected that has enabled them to fit in with a wealthy circle. By presenting themselves as ‘the real thing’ they challenge the artist’s mimetic skills while deflating his power to interpret them; no interpretation is necessary if all he has to do to represent upper-class individuals is to render the details of their appearance.

The narrator’s response to his encounter with the Monarchs raises questions about the relationship between artist and subject. Is the narrator’s failure caused by the Monarchs’ unyielding pretense? Do they refuse to allow him to penetrate the masks they have assumed? Or is the failure caused by the artist’s limitations: his failure of imagination, of empathy, of experience, of insight? These questions haunt not only this story, but James’s work as a whole. As Ginsburg notes, portraits and portrait artists recur in James’s short fiction (165-66).

"The Real Thing", after all, reflects James's aesthetic theories: his distinction between romance and realism, his ambition that his 'portraits' reveal the psychology of his characters rather than focus on their physical presence. "The Real Thing", as Tzvetan Todorov, Michael Swan, Catherine Vieilledent, and George Monteiro have argued, is about the inadequacy of mimetic art; it is a testimonial to the significance of the artist's—and writer's—imagination. Certainly James's interest in writing about artists, in "The Real Thing" and in other tales and novels, speaks to his belief that writing and graphic art reflect the particular temperament, as he put it, of the creator. This temperament is especially visible in portraits. As Michal Ginsburg notes, "As a likeness, the portrait represents a real person in the real world, but it also reveals, and to the same extent, the painter's art. The artist's imprint... is as visible as the portrait's subject, and the experience of viewing a portrait consists in our recognizing in it both the sitter and painter" (166). Artists and writers develop a sensitivity to impressions, and these impressions shape the artistic imagination. Writing from experience, for James, means writing with acute sensitivity to both the present moment and the writer's past. He wrote in "The Art of Fiction" that

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations (*Tales of Henry James* 382).

In a tale about an artist's experience of making art, such a passage seems potentially helpful to our interpretation. But instead of the word *experience* we find a different word highlighted for us as the narrator's final utterance. At the end of his interaction with the Monarchs, the narrator discloses that he has given the couple some money so they will go away and leave him alone. He has been awarded the commission that he coveted, but nevertheless, an artist friend comments that involvement with the Monarchs has done "a permanent harm, got me into a second-rate trick". And the narrator comments, "If it be true I am content to have paid the price—for the memory" (*Tales of Henry James* 210). Given the repetition in James's essays of the words *experience* and *impressions*, these final words of "The Real Thing" seem curious. Yet I think the word *memory* has a special meaning for James. What good, after all, would this memory serve for the artist? Why is memory crucial to his professional development? And what, precisely, is the exchange to which the illustrator refers when he mentions "the price" of the memory: is it the sum of money that he gave to the Monarchs to make them leave him alone; or is it the "second-rate trick" that the illustrator's friend Jack Hawley determines is the "permanent harm" the Monarchs have inflicted upon the illustrator's art? To consider these questions, let's look at James's connection to art, even beyond his references in "The Art of Fiction", to which a number of critics (e.g. Richard Hocks, Sam Whitsitt) refer.

### THE VALUE OF MEMORY

We know that the narrator aspired to paint portraits, a form of art with which James was intimately familiar. Before he turned to writing, the teen-aged James studied in the same studio where his brother William was intent on pursuing the vocation of art. Henry, like William, was, for some months at least, an artist, taught by a prominent portrait painter, William Morris Hunt. Both James brothers saw firsthand the relationship of portrait painting to other forms of art and the need for artists to cultivate a market. Both came to know what sitters demanded, both attempted portraits of their own—Henry even modeled for his friend and fellow student John La Farge—and both underwent a constant assessment of their talents. Hunt judged his students' ability to represent and interpret reality in a way that would be aesthetically pleasing and meet the expectations of potential collectors; he was, therefore, preparing them to compete in the marketplace.

In 1858, when James was 15, and again in 1860, after the James family returned to Newport, Henry, like William, felt the “irresistible contagion” of William Hunt. Hunt had recently returned to America from France, where he had studied with Thomas Couture and, even more significantly for Hunt, with Jean Francois Millet. Hunt's rural genre paintings of the late 1850s show Millet's indelible influence in subject matter and style, and Hunt was disappointed by reviews that ranged from negative to tepid, and by small sales. Realising that portraiture might be more lucrative, Hunt sought and won a coveted commission to paint a portrait of Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Lemuel Shaw. On the basis of favorable reviews of that work, Hunt received more commissions, including a portrait of retiring Harvard President James Walker, and four prominent women: Mrs. Samuel Grey Ward, Mrs. Joseph Randolph Coolidge, Mrs. Robert C. Winthrop Jr., and Mrs. Robert Shaw Sturgis.

In Newport, Hunt hoped to create both a school and salon that emulated his European experiences. He proved to be a talented and assertive teacher. “My own early impressions of Hunt”, Maud Howe Elliott wrote, “recall a dazzling personality. He was a brilliant, polished man of the world, and at the same time a sensitive, passionate, generous artist, a rare combination” (qtd. in Shannon 45). Hunt would soon move to Boston, where he was closer to the men and women who sat for portraits, and where his studio drew many aspiring artists. In Newport, he was not overwhelmed with pupils: James remembers his brother and John La Farge; Theodora Watson remembers studying with the three young men; and Henry's cousins Kitty Temple and Gus Barker modeled. Henry was given a chance to copy sculptures and paintings, as well as to sketch portraits. “The clearness of the whole passage for me”, Henry wrote in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, “the clearest impression, above all, of the vivid and whimsical master, an inspirer, during a period that began a little later on, of numberless devotions and loyalties, is what this fond memory of my permitted contact and endeavor still has to give me” (*Autobiography* 284). Henry had a sense, he said, that the situation “hummed with promise”; that he stood “at the threshold of a world” (285). In short, he had a sense that he could become an artist. The promise of art, for Henry, was the project of transforming his perceptions into aesthetic objects: a project, of course, that he would take on as his life's work as a writer.

Hunt's teaching was documented by one of his later students, Helen M. Knowlton, who took notes of his comments on the backs of canvases and scraps of paper. These comments were published as a sort of commonplace book, revealing the ideas that Hunt offered repeatedly. Knowlton's record helps us to recreate the instruction that James received in Newport, suggesting ways to understand the narrator's view of the creative process, and especially the connection between memory and art that figures in "The Real Thing". Although Hunt urged his students to pay careful attention to nature, he cautioned them to distinguish between what they saw and what they knew. "When a bird flies through the air you see *no feathers!*" he told them. "You are to draw *not reality, but the appearance of reality!*" (qtd. in Knowlton 3; see also Winner 13-15, 51-52, 108-111). "The thing, and the appearance of the thing, are two different affairs," Hunt said. "If you are looking with the eye you are taking down facts; and a million of them won't make a conundrum" (qtd. in Knowlton 81). We hear this idea reiterated by James's narrator, who admits "an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure" (*Tales of Henry James* 195). Faithfulness to reproducing reality could impede creativity, so Hunt urged students to draw from memory. "The value of memory-sketches lies in the fact that *so much is forgotten!* ... Imagination comes in after we have had experience" (qtd. in Knowlton 10). Imagination transforms a *thing* into a *picture* that represents the artist's impression of a thing. "Do things from memory," Hunt advised, "because in that way you remember only the *picture*. No matter what you do, but make the thing look like a picture" (qtd. in Knowlton 63-64). Just as an artist necessarily paints a sunset or a galloping horse after it has passed, he can bring that acuteness of memory to drawing or painting figures. "You soften the fibre of your memory by fastening yourself too closely to your work and your model", Hunt said (qtd. in Knowlton 65). Wrestling oneself from the tyranny of the thing, or the model, gives the artist freedom to convey impressions. "It isn't what you *see*, but what you *feel*, that will make your work interesting", Hunt insisted. "You can look at a thing and *see* it, but that's nothing. You can look at something which may give you an emotion. That's *feeling!*" (qtd. in Knowlton 146). The real thing in art, according to Hunt, was not a work that documented the model, but a work that conveyed the artist's feeling, impression, and vision.

Hunt was a dedicated teacher, patient with Henry, and unfailingly kind. He reminded Henry of Don Quixote: a "simple and imaginative" man with a reverence for "the seen bit or caught moment, and the general unsayability, in comparison of anything else" (*Autobiography* 286). But Henry also observed from Hunt another facet of the artist's life:

the grim truth of the merciless manner in which a living and hurrying public educates itself, making and devouring in a day reputations and values which represent something of the belief in it that it has had in *them*, but at the memory of which we wince, almost to horror, as at the legend of victims who have been buried alive (*Autobiography* 287).

Hunt was trying to make a living as an artist, and he brought into his studio, perhaps despite himself, the tensions of the marketplace.

As important as Hunt was for Henry at the time, the more significant figure during this period was John La Farge, the artist who made Henry indelibly aware of the connection between art and memory. “The case was”, James wrote later, “that La Farge swam into our ingenuous ken as the figure of figures, and that such an agent, on a stage so unpeopled and before a scene so unpainted, became salient and vivid almost in spite of itself” (*Autobiography* 289). At 25 in 1860, La Farge was closer in age to the Jameses than Hunt, and he seemed mysteriously sophisticated, notably cosmopolitan, and admirably arrogant. Like Hunt, La Farge had studied with Couture in Paris, an experience that further fueled his determination to be an artist. But unlike the Jameses, whose father disdained a career in art for his sons, La Farge was fatherless; his father, too, had not approved of his desire to become an artist, but his father recently had died, leaving him a legacy that afforded him the freedom to do whatever he wanted. Brilliant, self-possessed, tall, and handsome, La Farge seemed to Henry the most enviable of men.

La Farge was a reader, like the Jameses, and he could talk about Balzac and Merimée as easily as Courbet and Tintoretto. Unlike Hunt, who saw the visual arts as superior to and essentially different from writing, La Farge, according to James, believed “the arts were after all essentially one” (*Autobiography* 294). Apparently, Hunt discouraged Henry from pursuing a career as an artist—James recalled “an admonition so sharply conveyed”—but La Farge responded with encouragement: “even with canvas and brush whisked out of my grasp, I still needn’t feel disinherited. That was the luxury of the friend and senior with a literary side—that if there were futilities that he didn’t bring home to me he nevertheless opened more windows than he closed” (*Autobiography* 294). La Farge, it seems, underscored for James that “the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process... is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other” (*Tales of Henry James*, 377). As La Farge recalled it, James had “the painter’s eye... the literary man did not so much see a thing as think about it” (qtd. in Cortissoz 117).

In February 1891, just four days before James made his notebook entry of Du Maurier’s anecdote, James recalled his friendship with La Farge in a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson. La Farge and Henry Adams were visiting with Stevenson in the South Pacific, an event that James thought was “passing strange”. La Farge, James wrote to Stevenson, “is one of the two or three men now living whom (outside of my brotherhood), I have known longest since before the age of puberty. He was very remarkable then... a strange and complicated product” (*Henry James Letters* 337). Later, in December, La Farge stopped to see James in London before he returned to New York, where he would become an instructor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By 1891, La Farge’s work had been exhibited in eight shows, and he had completed commissions for murals and stained glass windows in Trinity Church, Boston; Memorial Hall, Harvard University; the Brick Presbyterian Church, New York; the homes of

William Henry Vanderbilt, Cyrus Field, and J. Pierpont Morgan; and scores of other sites. His transition from painting to stained glass resulted in his becoming one of the most important and sought-after artists of his time.

More explicitly than Hunt, La Farge insisted on the connection of memory to creativity and to identity. For La Farge, memories constructed one's identity and therefore directed each individual to focus attention on one thing or another. Each artist, La Farge believed, "has summed up in himself the memories of his apprenticeship, the acquired memories of others, and his own" (69). Those memories made it impossible for an artist to copy or transcribe

the real reality of the things that you look at... If you ever know how to paint somewhat well, and pass beyond the position of the student who has not yet learned to use his hands as an expression of the memories of his brain, you will always give to nature, that is to say, what is outside of you, the character of the lens through which you see it—which is yourself (La Farge 75).

The difference between a writer and a person who uses language, the difference between an artist and a person who makes marks with paints depends on the richness of memories. "The artist", La Farge wrote, "is he who... effects an intellectual connection with nature outside him; has accumulated memories of sight rarer than the common, and memories of their connections; and is open to new memories placed so suddenly with older ones that they look like first apprehensions and reachings-out" (145). In James's "The Real Thing", the narrator yearns, more than anything, to be the real thing: a real artist. In attaining that goal, he needs to contend with other real things: the intellectual, psychological, and physical identities of his sitters. Portraiture is a place where the sitter's and the artist's desires and aspirations meet, meld, or struggle for dominance.

#### THE SOUL IN IT

A sitter for a portrait, like an actor on a stage, commonly assumes a role, idealised, perhaps, or aestheticised. The role is a product of the sitter's imagination. As Roland Barthes remarked about his own demeanor when being photographed, "I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (109). This transformation is an effort both to resist capture by the artist and to insure that the resulting image will be a 'likeness' conforming to the sitter's own expectations. The portraitist, then, is challenged to penetrate the pose, to capture the subject's 'air': as Barthes put it, "a kind of intractable supplement of identity... the luminous shadow which accompanies the body" (109-110). Contemporary portraitist Garth Herrick, profiled by M. Stephen Doherty, explained his method of discovering that ineffable air, a discovery essential, he believed, to painting a successful portrait:

I don't try to pose them one way or another. I just get them into a conversation and wait until they stand or sit in a way that their body language says who they are. Inevitably, they will shift their weight around, lean back in the chair,

put their hands in their lap, grab the arm of the chair, or do something that seems totally appropriate for them as individuals. I may ask them to move into a different room of the house, wear different clothing, or stand outside under natural light; and all the while we are talking I shoot photographs from a variety of angles. They forget about the camera and act as they would normally (qtd. in Doherty).

Those photographs then inform Herrick's paintings. What Herrick aims for is, as Van Gogh once wrote, "portraiture with the thoughts, the soul of the model in it" (qtd. in Chipp 35).

The narrator's immediate reaction to the Monarchs, however, suggests that his portrait of them—if they had been real sitters—would not have met Herrick's or Van Gogh's criteria for success. "[I]n the pictorial sense", he admits, "I had immediately *seen* them. I had seized their type—I had already settled what I would do with it. Something that wouldn't absolutely have pleased them, I afterwards reflected" (*Tales of Henry James* 191). Representing a sitter as a "type" precluded the kind of insight and empathy that portraitists must bring to the task. The portraitist needs to be responsive to each sitter's subtle differences, but the narrator, instead, insists on categorising the Monarchs as stereotypes to whom he condescends, and as types that dictate a certain representation.

If the artist feels sympathy for the couple because they are poor, that sympathy does not extend to his taking a real interest in them or their lives. Rather, he spins a story about them that justifies his condescension. He does not reveal whether that story is based on his own experience—his personal observations and interactions—or from illustrations created by artists like himself for magazines, illustrations reflecting the public's assumptions rather than the artist's impressions. "I could see the sunny drawing-rooms, sprinkled with periodicals she didn't read, in which Mrs. Monarch had continuously sat; I could see the wet shrubberies in which she had walked, equipped to admiration for either exercise", the narrator thinks. "I could see the rich covers the Major had helped to shoot and the wonderful garments in which, late at night, he repaired to the smoking-room to talk about them" (*Tales of Henry James* 194). This is a life that the artist denigrates, where the Monarchs dress the part of aristocrats and assume the leisure and luxury of a class that is out of reach for the artist himself.

Yet once the Monarchs begin to sit for the narrator's illustrations, in effect, they become subjects for portraits, and they might well have served to give the narrator an exercise in creating a marketable piece of work. They tell him that they have often been photographed, a revelation that further convinces him of their superficiality, and inappropriateness as models, because he believes that photographs capture nothing but surface details. Indeed, some of his drawings of them seem nothing more than photographic. In other illustrations, he draws them as large, stiff figures, out of proportion, suggesting that he feels intimidated—as Moshe Ron puts it, belittled—by his subjects ("A Reading" 208). The narrator's unintended enlargement of their figures implies that the Monarchs have exerted power over him in the

struggle between sitter and artist: the sitter, to project the image he or she insists is a true reflection; the artist, to interpret the sitter's personality and capture the inner being.

Although he blames the Monarchs for his failures, although his friend Jack Hawley agrees that no one could portray such stupid people artistically, in fact, it seems that the fault lies with the artist himself. He is frustrated because the Monarchs cannot appear as anyone but themselves, and yet he admits that he cannot paint them as anything other than the roles they perform. Mrs. Monarch cannot look like a Russian princess—that, the illustrator believes, is her fault—but, in the illustrator's hands, she cannot look like Mrs. Monarch either.

According to La Farge, all artists, no matter how faithfully they think they are rendering reality, are in fact expressing themselves. The artist's identity results from an accumulation of memories: of looking at other works of art; of drawing, painting, and copying works of art by esteemed artists; of close observation; of paying attention to personal experiences. "It might be said that the sight of the moment", La Farge wrote, "is merely a theme upon which we embroider the memories of former likings, former aspirations, former habits, images that we have cared for, and through which we indicate to others our training, our race, the entire educated part of our nature" (182). What James's illustrator apparently lacked were memories sufficient to make him a great artist. We know that although Mrs. Monarch evidently had met a Russian princess, the artist had not; no personal observation influenced his rendering of Miss Churm as a princess. We know that he had never traveled to Italy, and perhaps he had not traveled much at all. His friend Hawley had just returned from a trip out of England "to get a fresh eye"; the illustrator could not remember where Hawley went, or perhaps, out of jealousy, refused to remember. There is no evidence that the illustrator had made any such trip himself. He is literate—he uses a French phrase and refers to Dante; he is poor—he refers to his slender stock of crockery. Most important, he is frustrated as an artist, and he blames his vulnerability on publishers, the public, and, in the end, the Monarchs. Paying them "for the memory" seems a gesture of hopefulness: if he can accumulate memories, then he can become the artist he aspires to become.

James's vulnerability in the marketplace was intensified during his work as a playwright, which he hoped would earn him both admirers and more money than he earned from writing fiction and essays. At the same time that James wrote "The Real Thing", he was involved in staging his novel *The American*, at the request of Edward Compton, whose company mounted plays that toured the provinces. In a sense, this experience felt like a mirror image of the narrator's experience in the short story: first there was a work of art, James's play; then actors were chosen to play the roles he wrote—to make his words the reality that was represented to an audience. The process was fraught with tension.

Beginning in November 1890, James had been immersed in rehearsals for a production in Portsmouth, to be followed by Southport, and then a run on a London stage. "It consumes much time & infinite 'nerve power'", he wrote to William, "especially if taken as seriously (all & only for the dream of gold—MUCH gold) as I take it, immersing myself in it practically up

to the eyes, & really *doing* it myself, to the smallest detail". Those details included coaching the star "with truly psychical intensity, *acting*, intonating everything *for* him & showing him simply *how!*" (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 155). How, that is, to inhabit the role that James had created.

With respectful but lukewarm reviews in the provinces, James was trembling with anticipation about a Southport opening on January 3 1891, which was to be attended by the drama critic William Archer. He felt, he reported to William, that the "omens & auspices are good", but he was increasingly disappointed by the acting: "The play will owe nothing whatever to brilliancy of interpretation, & the mounting is of the meagrest—it will all, if the thing isn't damned, be a success of intrinsic vitality" (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 163). Intrinsic vitality, for James, meant the quality of James's writing: the characters he created for the actors to interpret.

Archer agreed that some of the acting was weak, and predicted the play would be more successful in the provinces than in London; still, he wrote a positive review, and buoyed James's spirits immensely. He did not, however, quell James's anxiety. This anxiety, as Leon Edel noted in his introduction to a collection of James's plays, was palpable in his other works written at the time. "If the overt material [of the plays] did not go into his other stories, the emotions arising from his play-writing did. A reader examining the stories, unaware of James's activities during these years, would discover in them evidence of his personal fears and anxieties, and an ever-deepening sense of frustration" (57).

By early February 1891, James was "in the fever of dramatic production," he told his brother, "very sanely & practically trying to make up for my late start & all the years during which I have *not* dramatically produced, & further, to get well ahead with the 'demand' which I—& others *for* me—judge (still very sanely & sensibly,) to be *certain* to be made upon me from the moment I have a *London*, as distinguished from a provincial, success" (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 167). James, then, at the time he wrote "The Real Thing", was in the same position as both the Monarchs and the narrator of his tale: he was an amateur trying to become a professional dramatist; and he was on trial, himself, to earn public praise and, as he told William, MUCH gold. Moreover, like his narrator, he depended on others for his success: in James's case, on the actors and actresses who needed to interpret—to capture, as it were—the roles he wrote.

When *The American* opened in London on 26 September 1891, James's anxiety was intense, not least because among his friends in the audience that night were George Du Maurier, the conveyer of the anecdote that inspired "The Real Thing", and John Singer Sargent. Just as his narrator sees his future determined by his success at illustrating a multi-volume set of fiction, James saw his future determined by his staging of *The American*.

Reviews were mixed. Critics cited the garish costumes—chosen and supervised by James himself—weak acting in some roles, and unconvincing American accents. The London

correspondent for the *New York Times* called it a “mass of bold melodrama”, and other reviewers thought the dialogue did not ring true. Some criticised the performance of Elizabeth Robins, whom James had hand picked to play his central character, Claire de Cintre, as hysterical.

James refused to take the blame for the play’s weaknesses: London was still empty, he explained to William in October, and four of the actors were bad—“which is probably too terrible a number for any play to carry”. Still, “every night the thing *appears* to succeed admirably, afresh—it is listened to with an absolute *tension* of stillness & interest... Claire is better & Compton continues excellent” (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 189). When the Prince of Wales attended a performance in late October, James hoped that the publicity would spur ticket sales. As performances limped on, James rewrote the ending, and with each intervention felt renewed hope. “Whatever *shall* happen, I am utterly launched in the drama, resolutely & deeply committed to it, & shall go at it tooth & nail. The American”, he told William, “has distinctly done me good” (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 193).

When the play closed on December 3, after seventy performances, James, like the narrator of “The Real Thing”, decided that the experience was valuable: “I have had success with the fastidious”, he wrote to William, “and anything else I do will be greatly attended to. Moreover the production of a piece is an education—a technical one—I have had a revelation & I am enlightened”. He earned nothing, but he gained, he said, “a ton of resolution and insight” (qtd. in Skrupskelis and Berkeley 197). In his Notebooks, he echoed the narrator of “The Real Thing”: he went back to his work, he wrote, “with a treasure of experience, of wisdom, of acquired material, of (it seems to me) seasoned fortitude and augmented capacity. Purchased by disgusts enough, it is at any rate a boon that now I hold it, I feel I wouldn’t I oughtn’t to have missed. Ah”, he added, “the terrible law of the artist—the law of fructification, of fertilization, the law by which everything is grist to his mill—the law, in short, of the acceptance of all experience, of *all* suffering, of *all* life, of all suggestion and sensation and illumination... To keep at it, this and this alone can be my only lesson from *anything*” (*Complete Notebooks* 61). The staging of *The American*, then, was worth the price of failure, for the memory that would inform James’s future work: his ability to engage in the complex challenges of portraiture.

James retreated from writing plays, and his late fiction is notable for obfuscations that made his prose difficult and his portraits prismatic. He focused on his characters’ internal reality, their psychology, as if rendering surface details denied, rather than revealed, real identity. He wrote, too, as if defiant of his readers’ project of interpretation: to follow a Jamesian sentence in a novel like *The Golden Bowl* (1904) or *The Sacred Fount* (1901) is to enter into a kind of mind meld with the author; James captivates. James captures.



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