

RETHINKING THINGS IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE SPOILS OF POYNTON*

A Thesis

by

NAOYUKI NOZAKI

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

Rethinking Things in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*.

(May 2012)

Naoyuki Nozaki, B.A., Chuo University; M.A., Chuo University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. David McWhirter

The main objectives of this thesis are to examine the relations between people and things in American novelist Henry James's 1897 novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, and thus to deepen our understanding of James's engagement with material culture. Critics have tended to frame James's works in general in terms of his detachment from economic and material reality; and criticisms on the novel in particular have seen it as exemplifying the alleged detachment, interpreting the things accumulated by a female collector at Poynton, as something illusory and unsubstantial, such as a form of commodity fetishism, a Freudian fetish, or a Lacanian signifier. Contrary to the conventional view, however, this thesis argues that James, in this novel about a struggle between a mother and her son over a house and its furnishings, represents and explores physical and affective relationships between the characters and things. James, focusing on the characters' sense experience, attempts to criticize the phallogentric power of his own culture that not only excludes women from the legal right of possession but also undervalues female domestic work in spite of its support for the culture. Drawing our attention to the senses that have traditionally been thought "lower" and "feminine," and

thus refusing the taxonomization and hierarchization of the senses, James expands the category of aesthetic experience. This thesis argues that in the novel, by adopting as his primary mode of writing immediate sense experience prior to philosophical abstraction, James makes clear the latent implication between cultural repudiation of the feminine and the material, on the one hand, and the political and institutionalized exclusion of women by patriarchal property law, on the other. Criticism that ignores the material urgency and presence in the novel will further replicate that patriarchal power structure.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will examine the relations between people and things in American novelist Henry James's 1897 novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, and thus endeavor to deepen our understanding of James's engagement with material culture. The story originated from "a small and ugly matter," a Jamesian "germ," that James came to know at a dinner party in 1893, the legal case between a young Scottish man, who inherited his parents' "rich old house" at his father's death, and his mother who took valuable things from the house. Although she "had *loved* her home, her husband's home and hers," with "a knowledge and adoration of artistic beauty, the tastes, the habits of a collector," the mother was "*deposed*" from it by "the ugly English custom" of primogeniture (*Notebooks* 79; emphasis original). In this novel about a struggle between a mother and her son over a house and its furnishings, James explores the connection between material, spatial, and psychological aspects of domestic interior. Critics, however, have tended to ignore the complexity, identifying the mother's aristocratic taste with James's own, and thus emphasizing James's alleged detachment from economic and social reality. In his important essay of 1983, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," Jean-Christophe Agnew argued that James's texts demonstrate "acquisitive cognition," which he identified as "the characteristic

This thesis follows the style of the *MLA Style Manual*.

perspective” of consumer society, that is, an “appropriative view of social meanings as fungible ‘things’” (67). James’s writings, according to Agnew, produce and reproduce a “consuming vision’s merciless power to detach not only itself, but its objects ... alienating them ... from their conventional associations and context and accumulating them as resources, as capital” (97). Agnew’s essay was groundbreaking in challenging the traditional view that James responded to the developing consumer culture with the attitude of detachment or revulsion, and in drawing critics’ attention to the implication of his writing and that culture. Agnew, however, redefined James’s writing as a form of commodity fetishism as theorized by Karl Marx, another form of alienation from material reality. In James’s texts, Agnew suggests, things become “a consumer culture’s symbolic representations ‘disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered’--to use Henry James’s words--from the specific and immediate needs of material life” (72).

Recent development in cultural theory and literary studies on the relation between subjectivity and material culture, however, offers us the possibility, or the necessity, to understand James’s engagement with it from a different perspective. De Grazia, Quilligan and Stallybrass suggest that the binary between subject and object has not challenged but still preserved in cultural theory; in that theory, “to treat a subject like an object is to reify, objectify,” on the one hand, and “to treat an object like a subject is to idolize, to fetishize,” on the other (3). Similarly, sociological analyses, from Thorstein Veblen’s classic conceptualization of “conspicuous consumption” to Pierre Bourdieu’s investigation of taste as a process of distinction, have framed the relation between people and their things in terms of economic and symbolic

importance; however, the function of accumulated things is not always limited to signifying our relative wealth or social status. As Gaston Bachelard formulated in his classic exploration of the concept of home, the connection between objects of an interior and a dweller embodies not simply a symbolic experience but a “passionate liaison,” a bodily and affective bond (15). The subject’s experience of the material world cannot be abstracted and generalized into a symbolic meaning; on the contrary, as James framed the relation of the mother to her home in terms of “*love*,” the affective and physical dimensions of everyday life should be valued as such.

Indeed, criticism on the novel has tended to consider the things accumulated in Poynton by Mrs. Gereth, a superb female collector, as something illusory and unsubstantial, such as a form of commodity fetishism, a Freudian fetish, or a Lacanian signifier.¹ Mrs. Gereth’s practice of collecting and home decoration in Poynton is, however, a more comprehensive and multifaceted activity than it has been thought, and cannot be reduced into a single logic. *The Spoils*, contrary to the view that in James’s texts material reality is obscured and abstracted, portrays domestic spaces in which female characters’ bodies and things are in a close and intimate proximity, and thus make a physical as well as symbolic connection; in James’s imagination, beautifully arrayed things in the home are conceived as providing for women physical and emotional nourishment, that is, “the specific and immediate needs of material life” that Agnew considered obscured from James’s texts. For James, as Terry Eagleton notes that “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body,” the sense of “taste” cannot be purely civilized, metaphorized into a model for fine discrimination of the qualities of

the object of appreciation, but must remain a part of biological apparatus (13). James, by particularizing and dilating his characters' sense experience, re-endorses the bodily basis of the aesthetic, its connection to the concrete, minute, and quotidian experiences of daily life. The novel indeed records the historical moment in which the creativity of female production and consumption was obscured and neglected by the patriarchal power structure as exemplified by "the ugly English custom" of primogeniture. The vitality of Poynton is gradually--and in the end completely--lost to culture's ideological, alienating force; criticism that ignores the material urgency and presence in the novel will further replicate that power structure. I will argue, on the contrary, that in the novel, by adopting as his primary mode of writing immediate sense experience prior to philosophical abstraction, James opens the possibilities for critical reconsideration of his own culture.

CHAPTER II
WATERBATH

The Spoils of Poynton features a woman collector Mrs. Adela Gereth as one of the protagonists. Mrs. Gereth is a middle-aged widow who takes residence at a large country house at Poynton, in which she has been building the splendid collection of decorative art for a life time. On the death of her husband, however, she is forced to renounce the house and her collection to her apparently tasteless son, Owen, and retire to a small dowry at Ricks, in which her husband's maiden-aunt had lived until her death. The situation is made worse by the fact that Owen chooses to get married with Mona Brigstock, a woman who lacks in aesthetic sensibility and is incapable of appreciating the collection. Mrs. Gereth desperately strives to prevent them from inheriting and managing the collection. Mrs. Gereth's struggle to save the collection involves Fleda Vetch--the novel's central consciousness--a young woman of humble resources but excellent aesthetic sensibility. Mrs. Gereth finds Fleda's taste and selects her as the proper custodian of the collection. Hoping that Owen will marry her rather than Mona, Mrs. Gereth depends on, and manipulates, Fleda as an arbiter of the family battle. Owen sees Fleda as someone who advises him to do the right thing, and in the course of time, falls in love with her. The plot of the novel revolves around the developing intimacy between Mrs. Gereth and Fleda. The two women meet for the first time at Waterbath, the Brigstocks' family home.

The Brigstocks at Waterbath, a new middle-class family, threaten Mrs. Gereth's sanctuary-like interior with the reality of the outside world. The contrast between Waterbath and Poynton is manifested by their entirely different interior decorations. While the things collected in Poynton are crafted antiques gathered across Europe and take the shape of the ideal space for the bourgeoisie, the Brigstocks' house at Waterbath is composed of mass-produced commodities purchased in the department store. After a sleepless night at Waterbath, Mrs. Gereth is eager to escape the house. Mrs. Gereth has been "kept awake for hours by the wall paper," which is the epitome of the "imbecilities of decoration, the esthetic misery of the big commodious house" (35). The "imbecile" decoration seems to Mrs. Gereth incongruous even with nature outside the house: "The flowers at Waterbath would probably go wrong in colour and the nightingales sing out of tune" (35). Mrs. Gereth harshly denigrates the things that the Brigstocks collect and keep in their house: "They had smothered [their house] with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunchy draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind. They had gone wildly astray over carpets and curtains" (37). The things that the Brigstocks keep in their house are characterized by their lack of authenticity and sophistication. Although the abundance of things may attest the family's plentiful financial resources, the Brigstocks' choice of furnishings only manifests their indifference to, or inability to discern, the aesthetic qualities of things. Because of their cultural immaturity, Mrs. Gereth contemptuously and discriminatively sees the Brigstocks' things as choices for "maid-servants" and the

“blind.” To make things worse, the Brigstocks have a bad habit of varnishing everything in the house, which Fleda imagines as their “amusement ... on rainy days”: “The worst horror was the acres of varnish, something advertised and smelly, with which everything was smeared” (38). The things they keep are themselves ugly and inauthentic, but their inclination to “paper over” the walls or “varnish” the things is even uglier than the things themselves. For Mrs. Gereth and Fleda an interior literalizes the dwellers’ interiority. Mrs. Gereth’s harsh observation of the house culminates in the following passage:

It was an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted. In the arrangement of their home some other principle, remarkably active, but uncanny and obscure, had operated instead, with consequences depressing to behold, consequences that took the form of a universal futility. (37)

As Mrs. Gereth alleges, the Brigstocks lack “the principle of taste,” according to which the dweller is supposed to organize and harmonize things in the interior. When he writes that “the principle of taste” has been omitted from the Brigstocks’ “composition,” James must be conscious of the analogy between aesthetic sensibility and its signifying function. As Katherine C. Grier explains, domestic furnishings can be understood as rhetorical statements expressing what the dweller is; furthermore, because the use of objects as “a structured form of communication” is “real” in the sense that objects are material and available for ownership, we can understand “a

process of gaining knowledge, fluency, and ease in their manipulation as a process of gaining competence in communication” (15-16). The use of objects as “a structured form of communication” is, Grier goes on to explain, “analogous more to spoken language than to literacy, more to speech than to text,” in that they are highly repetitive and imprecise; just as they are competent as speakers, the users of this language can be seen as being “more or less successful in the act of communicating through their manipulation”: (15-16).² The things at Waterbath do not compose any meaningful phrase or sentence that would tell of the dwellers to an audience and to the dwellers themselves. Along with the hideous furnishings and strange “gimcracks” the Brigstocks’ house is “perversely full of souvenirs of places even more ugly than itself and of things it would have been a pious duty to forget” (37). The meanings generated by the things at Waterbath lie only in their quantity, and thus, reproducibility; therefore, the things at Waterbath are fit only to “forget,” and result in “universal futility.” As these passages suggest, however, at Waterbath “some other principle” is active to the degree that Mrs. Gererth’s aristocratic sensibility is threatened. Mrs. Gererth’s bewilderment may be similar to that of contemporary professional interior decorators. Critics of parlor furnishings in the Victorian Age were, according to Grier, troubled when consumption of furnishings was seen as serving the rhetorical ends; as the commercialization of society advanced and attractive domestic furnishings became available to new groups of people, it became highly difficult to guarantee correspondence between “what a person ‘said’ he was through the ‘language’ of his possessions and what he really was” (15). It might be certain that the Brigstock’s

furniture does not confuse the traditional standards for furnishing, but the possibility for them to emulate Mrs. Gereth's aristocratic taste, and more ominously, the fact that they do not appear to emulate any form of furnishing is threatening to Mrs. Gereth. Finding in Mona's room a souvenir from "some centennial or other Exhibition," Mrs. Gereth and Fleda "shudder" at it (37). The Exhibition, a newly emerged and flourishing cultural institution in the Victorian era, is a signal of the democratization and commercialization of society, which enabled a wide range of people to enjoy domestic collecting and home decoration. The Exhibition, one of the landmark achievements of the consumer revolution, exemplifies the shift in men's relation to things. The Brigstocks' interior decoration and its antipode, that of Poynton, can be understood in the context of commodity culture and the commercialization of society in the nineteenth century.

The origin of commodity culture in Britain is located in the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century; more precisely, the Great Exhibition of 1851 can be seen as the first significant demonstration of a new way of displaying market goods or commodities, which is termed "spectacle." The Exhibition was a national and international event, in which delegations from thirty-two nations from all over the world were brought in a single structure, the Crystal Palace, which occupied fourteen acres in Hyde Park, London. The building contained an assembly of manufactured articles and the largest display of commodities that had ever been brought together. Spectacle, Thomas Richards argues, legitimates the capitalist system by representing commodities as something more than mere "monetary or material value"; investing

commodities with “aura,” spectacle transforms the consumption of commodities into a form of cultural activity (4). As Richards depends on Marx in formulating the concept of spectacle, this process of transformation parallels the fetishization of the commodity. Richards explains that in the Crystal Palace, displayed with special effects made by spotlights and glass, the commodity appeared as “autonomous and untouchable”; the illuminated display, calculated to bring people as close as possible to things without allowing them to touch, asserted and reinforced the inviolability of the object (32). The inviolability of the commodity was furthered by obscuring its historical origin; although each article was accompanied by the little cards that told where and when it was invented, the size of the cards made them too small to be read: “The Exhibition made it extremely difficult to pinpoint the origins of individual objects. Instead the space of Exhibition revised the past by making it wholly present.... By encapsulating the past in the glossy shell of the present, the Exhibition both commemorated the past and annihilated it” (60-61). In the “semiotics of commodity spectacle” defined by Richards, the main function of the transformation of the commodity into a cultural form is to detach manufactured objects from their specific conditions of production, and instead, to present them as autonomous objects for everyone (58).³ According to Richards, the main mechanism and manifestation of commodity culture is advertising, and late Victorian advertisers successfully “synthesized” the new spectacular mode for representation (60).⁴

The spectacle of commodity culture became more conspicuous in the first Paris Exposition of 1855, four years after the Great Exhibition in London. Hippolyte Taine

commented, “All of Europe has been on the move to see commodities” at the Exposition (Bowlby 1). The Paris Exposition was an epitome of emergent commodity culture in nineteenth century Europe, in so far as beginning with this Exposition products for purchase were actually displayed and there appeared the practice of putting price tags on items. Moreover, after the Exposition, consumer products gradually moved to center stage in public display, displacing machines and tools for production. This shift indicates the tendency for an interest in public display to replace the pedagogical purpose of the exhibitions, the purpose of showing developments in the fields of science and technology with that of selling the commodity.

In the same period, while the exhibitions provided a temporary space for public entertainment, department stores appeared in bourgeois economic and social life as constantly stirring and forming consumers’ desire. The Bon Marché was the world’s first department store, opening in Paris in 1852, the year after the Great Exhibition in London. Le Printemps appeared in 1860. Following the exhibitions, department stores made possible the expanses of large display windows by utilizing glass and lighting technology. The public display of the Crystal Palace finally developed into the shop window, creating a new form of visual pleasure while dissatisfying it at the same time. William Leach argues that “glass democratized desire even as it dedemocratized access to goods”; the glass was a “symbol of the merchant’s unilateral power in a capitalist society to refuse goods to anyone in need, to close off access without being condemned as cruel and immoral” (63). That is, the shop window symbolizes the fetishization of the commodity. According to Marx, in free-market societies, the natural, qualitative

side of the commodity is usurped by exchange value, which highlights the mysterious, quantitative side of it: “So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it,” but when the exchange-value emerges, the commodity “changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness” (*Capital* 163).⁵ Together with rapidly developed advertising technologies, the rise of department stores marked the ascendancy of the symbolic value over the materiality and sensuousness of the object. “From now on,” Rachel Bowlby remarks, “it is not so much the object itself--what function it serves--which matters, as its novelty or attractiveness, how it stands out from other objects for sale” (2). In a similar vein, Bill Brown, explaining the shift in advertisements both in Britain and the U.S. around the turn of the nineteenth century, argues that in modern advertisement technology the physical object is less important than the abstraction of significance: “Agencies were advertising not objects but impression, not products but style, not value but cultural capital” (“Advertisement” 15).⁶ Categorized, displayed, and catalogued in advertisement, proliferated commodities are increasingly stripped of their value in their intrinsic usefulness and begin to function as mere images, or signs; the commodity is appreciated not only according to its originality and physical utility but also according to its relative position in the network of commodities.

The late nineteenth century vogue of domestic collecting and decoration of the house, around which the novel focuses, flourished at a national level. Just as the French Revolution promoted the dissemination of aristocratic and church art, and royal cabinets relinquished their holdings to museums, civic museums yielded to the homes. The industrial revolution made it possible for the middle class to afford luxuries that

included domestic collecting and interior decoration. Although collecting had been practiced in older ages and in various ways, the charms and benefits of collecting were publicized in an unprecedented way in the nineteenth century. As Barbara Black argues, the vogue of domestic collecting and home decoration was, partly, prominent evidence of the Victorian investment in the value of the home, and its moral foundation was supported by Victoria and Albert's campaign to improve the public's lives by way of sophistication of taste; if industrial work was conceived of as challenging human dignity, with their civilizing effects, domestic collecting and the beautified home could reaffirm it (76). While Victorian museums took the central part in cultivating the public's taste with their display of imperial collections, for the same purpose they promoted domestic collecting by encouraging the visitors to take home part of the museum. In his *Travels in South Kensington* written in 1882, Moncure Daniel Conway, an American abolitionist and utilitarian, noted the South Kensington Museum's selection of art for sale as well as its various and venerable collection: "For three or four pounds any museum or private collector may obtain perfect copies of ancient shields, salt-cellars, tankards, tazzas.... Franchi's copper-bronze copies at £30 are nearly as good as the originals, which were considered cheap at the £300 paid by the museums" (85). Indeed, museum guidebooks were filled with advertisements that described various goods both manufactured and imported, and thus intensified the public's desire to own replicas of what they had seen in the museum. Black argues that the alliance of museum, department store and factory made possible the dream that Henry Cole, the manager of the Great Exhibition of 1851, cherished in making the

Crystal Palace a permanent edifice: a dream of enabling “the many to have what the few always have” (72). In this “age of mechanical reproduction,” as Benjamin termed it, mass production turned works of art into commodities, or made them indistinguishable from commodities; while the museum’s moral and educative influence was highlighted, the museum, in cooperation with the department store and the factory, promoted the commodification of culture.

The Brigstocks’ house at Waterbath and its furnishings manifest that they belong to a new group of people who have begun enjoying domestic collecting and home decoration due to the commercialization of society and the “democratization of desire.” Although they participate in the cultural vogue of home decoration, and have a great interest in furniture as Mrs. Gereth does, their selection of things shows that they are newcomers, and their capacity for decoration is quite immature. James presents their things not as unified and expressive of rhetorical statements but as accumulated discretely and therefore lacking any aesthetic coherence through Mrs. Gereth’s observation. James’s descriptive bluntness may be pertinent in representing the crudeness of the interior. Richards defines “the transformation of the commodity into language” as one of main foundations of a “semiotics of commodity spectacle”; according to him, the official catalogue of the Great Exhibition itself is one of the clear manifestations of this transformation (58). The catalogue was “a kind of rhetorical handbook to the new speech,” and “the grammar of this reified speech” was characterized by an “extreme simplicity of syntax”; in it, “language appears to revert to its primitive use as a form of inventory. Coordination replaces subordination.

Quantification replaces qualification” (63).⁷ In the inventory, each commodity does not form any causal relation with different types of commodities, not to mention the relation with its producer. The things at Waterbath are similar to those on the inventory in that they do not indicate their relation to each other or to the possessors’ history.

The inventory of commodities effaces the material qualities of things. This analogy is furthered when the Brigstocks come to Poynton and encounter the things that Mrs. Gereth has collected. Mrs. Brigstock does not appear to have any interest in the uniqueness of individual things, let alone the principle that organizes them.

[Mrs. Brigstock] ... broke out universally, pronounced everything “most striking,” and was visibly happy that Owen’s captor should be so far on the way to strike: but she jarred upon Mrs. Gereth by her formula of admiration, which was that anything she looked at was “in the style” of something else. This was to show how much she had seen, but it only showed she had seen nothing; everything at Poynton was in the style of Poynton. (51)

Although she applauds the things at Poynton, Mrs. Brigstock evaluates them not in themselves, that is, for their unique qualities, but by reducing them to a standardized model or a pattern, that is, “style.” The Brigstocks’ concerns for the furnishings are not aesthetically motivated; for Mrs. Brigstock, the qualitative side of objects is not only unintelligible but also insignificant, and her amusement in Poynton results from finding correspondences between the things and their stylistically specifiable attributes. It is a magazine, with its taxonomization and categorization of crafted things, that

provides Mrs. Brigstock with the standards for evaluation of them. Mrs. Brigstock brings to Poynton “the first number” of a “lady’s magazine,” a “trophy of her journey” (51). According to Jonathan Freedman, the new mass-circulation magazine that appeared in the late 1880’s and early 1890’s employed and thus popularized “the rhetoric of consumption”; “the rhetoric of consumption,” deploying the “cultural” and the “aesthetic” as advertising slogans, glorified, and virtually effaced, the act of consumption by placing “the mundane acquisitive choices” in “the nonmaterial realm of transcendent value designated by the aesthetic” (108-09). In this process, according to Freedman, the knowledge of British aesthetic culture established by Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and William Morris and his Arts and Crafts Movement was no longer viewed as “a process or an activity,” but rather it was conceived as “something that can be bought” (109).⁸ Mrs. Brigstock’s amusement “jarred upon” Mrs. Gereth because of her commodifying gaze; she taxonomizes Mrs. Gereth’s things into fixed, marketable types. From Mrs. Gereth’s point of view, Mona, too, is “brutally ignorant” (50). Mona herself recognizes that “something ... was expected of her that she couldn’t give,” and “[Mona’s] ignorance was,” Fleda discovers, “obscurely active” (50). For Mrs. Gereth, however, Mona’s eventual marriage to Owen and possession of Poynton will only prove that her interest in the things is motivated just by her willingness to retaliate for the insult; Mona travels with Owen right after their marriage, leaving the things with servants: “[Mona’s traveling] was a piece of calculated insolence--a stroke odiously directed at showing whom it might concern that now she had Poynton fast she was perfectly indifferent to living

there” (208). Mona is no longer concerned with the things and their aesthetic and material qualities that she could appreciate in her daily life in Poynton. Her indifference is made explicit in her plan to furnish Poynton with a “billiard room” and a “winter garden,” or “conservatory,” which she unfolds to Fleda during her first visit to Poynton (55). Fleda pictures in her mind “the thing--something glazed and piped, on iron pillars, with untidy plants and cane sofas; a shiny excrescence on the noble face of Poynton” (55). The image that Fleda conceives coincides with the structure of the Crystal Palace: It was made of iron pillars and glass; and more ominously, Joseph Paxton, the designer of the Crystal Palace, had been a botanist and architect of greenhouses for the Duke of Devonshire (Richards 18). Fleda’s image of a garden foreshadows the possible commodification and spectacularization of Poynton, in which things only function as signs, while their aesthetic, sensuous, and material qualities are abstracted out. For Mrs. Gereth, the Brigstocks symbolize the modern commercial world, loom as a threat to reduce her things into, and circulate them as, mere fungible commodities.

CHAPTER III

POYNTON

If we frame the conflict between Mrs. Gereth and the Brigstocks simply as the aesthete's resistance to the homogenizing power of commodity culture, however, we are likely to rehearse "the rhetoric of consumption." That is, Mrs. Gereth's practice of collecting is indeed an act of consumption, and what Mrs. Gereth finds "uncanny" at Waterbath might be a certain similarity between her practice of collecting things and that of the Brigstocks. Simply sanctifying her refinement of aesthetic sensibility will lead us to ignore the historically specific context in which she is situated, and keep intact the conventional and conservative equation of the aesthetic with the transcendental and universal. We should note that Mrs. Gereth's sophisticated and aristocratic taste is not culturally "given" but is made possible by socially and economically specific determinants. Theorists including Terry Eagleton and Pierre Bourdieu argue that tastes are class tastes and that the legitimate taste of a society can be identified with the taste of its dominant class. The culture of those who rule is the most distinguished, and becomes a class signal that shapes the individual's everyday practice, and in doing so, maintains class domination. Cultural capital as well as economic capital works in the class structure system. In particular, Bourdieu provides the notion of "habitus" as "embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history"; this "accumulated capital" gives our actions the sense of "autonomy," while it reproduces the social relations from which it results (*Logic* 56).

The novel may thus be accused of fetishization or mystification in so far as it presents characters' tastes and collections as detached from social and economical foundations. Indeed, several critics have criticized the novel for this reason. For instance, Fotios Sarris points out that both Mrs. Gereth's and the Brigstocks' economic resources are not made explicit, and then argues, employing Terry Eagleton's terms, that "both James and his characters remain 'finely oblivious' of the material, economic base of consciousness" (57). More problematically, James resorts to nature in accounting for the sophisticated and aristocratic tastes of the poor companion, Fleda Vetch. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Fleda is a girl who takes a "third-class compartment," and whose home does not "have at all good things," Fleda discerns "the marks" that only the "clever [are] meant to know" by "direct inspiration" (192, 143, 126). Similarly, Fleda is "a hungry girl whose sensibility was almost as great as her opportunities for comparison had been small. The museums had done something for her, but nature had done more" (48). Brown points out a "politics of taste" in these explications of Fleda's sensibility: "This impossible account of the role of nature, not nurture, in the education of cultural semiotics has the effect of naturalizing--that is, of universalizing--what reads like the novel's own discrimination, its own judgment (*Sense* 145).

Yet, even if it is obvious that economic and social relationships are translated into the form of aesthetic comprehension, the subjective, bodily experience of the aesthetic cannot be contained by the logic of social construction of tastes in particular, and by any political program in general. While recognizing that the aesthetic cannot be defined as "a privileged, autonomous, and apolitical locus of putatively absolute,

universal, or even transcendent values,” Pamela Matthews and David McWhirter note: “The stress on ideology--aesthetic experience, it turns out, isn’t a view from nowhere--has proven less helpful in providing a viable language for explaining aesthetic pleasure and for understanding what happens at the moment when a specifically situated subject experiences beauty” (xv).⁹ Susan Stewart maintains in a similar manner that “Aesthetic activity viewed in the light of ideological ends erases the free activity of pleasure and knowledge that the aesthetic brings to human life” (40). As these critics, while recognizing aesthetic experience is not pure but implicated in the political realm, stress, no cultural logic can completely contain the minute and concrete details of the subject’s bodily experience of the object world. From this perspective, we should see the act of consumption as a more comprehensive and multifaceted activity than is conventionally thought. The term “consumption” is likely to overgeneralize individuals’ deployment of what they “consume.” Furthermore, although the practice of consumption is structured by relations of social and economic power, the subject’s lived experience of relation with the object is not completely determined by his/her social position and affiliation. Although the vitality of Poynton is gradually--and in the end completely--lost to culture’s ideological, alienating forces, in the novel James tries to imagine a space where the subject is invited to participate in an essentially dynamic, physical interaction with the object.¹⁰ James tries, in other words, to remind us that aesthetics is a form of cognition achieved through taste, touch, smell, hearing, seeing, that is, the whole corporeal sensorium. The sense organs are located at the bodily surface, and mediate boundaries between inner and outer, need and desire, and biology

and culture. The senses encounter the world prior to language, logic and meaning. Of course the senses are not pure, but mediated by cultural codes. As Susan Buck-Morss suggests, however, the senses remain a part of biological apparatus because their immediate aim is to serve instinctual needs of warmth, nourishment, safety and sociability; therefore, the sensuous realm maintains “an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication” (6). James’s appeal to nature, then, is not the mystification of social relations that enable the refined sensitivity; rather, it can be interpreted as his attempt to expand the category of aesthetic experience, and to critically reflect on the ideological constraint that has defined the experience as such. James, by taking the characters’ sense experience as his major writing modality, conveys material presences to the novel’s surface; in doing so, he opens the possibility of critiquing culture’s abstracting, alienating forces.

Poynton does not appear to be a space suitable for aesthetic contemplation, but rather its beautifully arrayed rare things come to the viewer as a massive material presence; due to its immediacy the viewer cannot maintain the distance needed for observation. In other words, the viewer’s whole body is implicated in the act of appreciation of the interior. After three months waiting, Fleda finally arrives, with Mrs. Gereth, at Poynton, where “the palpitating girl [has] the full revelation” (47).¹¹ Mrs. Gereth asks Fleda about the visual impact of the interior:

“*Now* do you know how I feel?” Mrs. Gereth asked when in the wondrous hall, three minutes after their arrival, her pretty associate dropped on a seat with a soft gasp and a roll of dilated eyes. The answer came clearly enough,

and in the rapture of that first walk through the house Fleda too a prodigious span. She perfectly understood how Mrs. Gereth felt--she had understood but meagrely before; and the two women embraced with tears over the tightening of their bond--tears which on the younger one's part were the natural and usual sign of her submission to perfect beauty. (47; emphasis original)

Although Fleda has “had time to learn” about Poynton from Mrs. Gereth prior to her visit, the impact of the interior transcends her former knowledge of it; in comparison with the material presence, the knowledge is a only “meagre” help for “understanding” the “perfect beauty” of Poynton. “The full revelation” creates an almost sublime, physical shock effect, so Fleda cannot remain self-possessed. Fleda responds to the impact of the sight not in words but in a series of physical reactions, that is, “dropping on a seat,” “a soft gasp,” “a roll of dilated eyes,” and “tears.” These bodily reactions, instead of verbal articulation, “clearly” convey her answer to Mrs. Gereth’s question, that is, “her submission to perfect beauty.” As her encounter with Poynton is defined as the “initiation,” Fleda is transformed or cultivated in Poynton; but the cultivation comes not through the deepening of knowledge about the historically rare things collected by Mrs. Gereth, but through the bodily influence emanating from them.

As shown in Fleda’s first encounter, Mrs. Gereth has a remarkable capacity to generate a certain orchestrated effect that immediately entralls the viewer. This effect is similar to that of the shop window that symbolizes commodity fetishism.¹² Mrs. Gereth’s practice of collecting and home decoration, however, resists being defined as

a form of Marxian fetishism in crucial ways. Although the viewer cannot perceive at first glance because of the dazzling, mesmeric visual effect, what makes Poynton such a splendid space is nothing less than Mrs. Gereth's physical labor; the relation between Mrs. Gereth and her things is understood in terms not of detachment but of attachment. The collection at Poynton always manifests Mrs. Gereth's laborious history. In the period of twenty-six years, Mrs. Gereth "had waited for [the things], worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them" (43). As Daniel Miller sees consumption as a possible form of human labor, James presents Mrs. Gereth's practice of collecting as a series of activities consisting of selecting, searching, buying, situating, caring, and loving. According to Miller, the consumer is, by definition, always confronted by the abstracting force of money; but on purchase, the specificity of the particular item emerges; this is only "the start of a long and complex process" by which he/she works upon the thing purchased and recontextualizes it, until "it is often no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract and becomes its negation, something which could not be bought" (190). Miller goes further to suggest that consumption as labor may be defined as what "translates the objects from an alienable to an inalienable condition," that is, "from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations" (190). In Miller's formulation, consumption is essential to the dialectical process of externalization of self into objects and the reabsorption of those objects into self-image.¹³ Mrs. Gereth's years of collecting and decorating the interior exemplify

Miller's delineation of a consumption as human self-realization in a superb way. First of all, the things at Poynton are embodied human history, or more precisely, Mrs. Gereth's personal history. For Mrs. Gereth, the value of each thing is inseparable from the way that the thing embodies a singular narrative of discovery and acquisition. Each of her things has "the personal name," but the name does not designate its historical origin or stylistic attributes; instead, the name was given after "their distinctive sign or story" (82). The name of one thing, "the Maltese cross," a uniquely conspicuous thing among Mrs. Gereth's collection, exemplifies how Mrs. Gereth names them, and therefore how she conceives of them:

That description, though technically incorrect, had always been applied to a small but marvelous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period, the existence and precious accessibility of which she had heard of at Malta, years before, by an odd and romantic chance--a clue followed through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at last unearthed. (82)

As the story of "the Maltese cross" clearly shows Mrs. Gereth's tenacity and talent for the acquisition of art treasures, its naming suggests that Mrs. Gereth values the cross not merely for its rarity and exquisiteness; on the contrary, the singularity of it is predicated on its function of evoking her life history backed up by her talent. This highlights the reason why Mrs. Brigstock "jarred upon" Mrs. Gereth by her "formula of admiration," that is, to compare things to specimens. Mrs. Gereth cannot tolerate the formula because it ignores not only the material quality of things but also the history

embodied by them. Mrs. Gereth sees the memories of her laborious history arising out of the sensuousness of the things:

It looked, to begin with, through some effect of season and light, larger than ever, immense, and it brimmed over as with the hush of sorrow, which was in turn all charged with memories. Everything was in the air--each history of each find, each circumstance of each capture. Mrs. Gereth had drawn back every curtain and removed every cover; she prolonged the vistas, opened wide the whole house, gave it an appearance of awaiting a royal visit. The shimmer of wrought substances spent itself in the brightness; the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance in which the poor woman saw in solution all her old loves and patiences, all her old tricks and triumphs. (71)

The “wrought substances” in the house at Poynton reflect Mrs. Gereth’s personal history of laborious days devoted to acquisition and care of the things, and guarantee her distinguished aesthetic mastery; out of the intermingling of the things’ fine material qualities and the collector’s rare talent “aura” arises. Aura, for Benjamin, is essentially an experience of distance, and “the essentially distant is the inapproachable” (189). Contrary to Benjamin’s delineation of aura, however, in this scene, aura signifies the atmosphere of a close, intimate relationship between the viewer and the things. Unlike in the case of commodity fetishism, too, the aura here manifests the things’ connection to human life.

Mrs. Gereth does not appear simply as a mere consumer/collector, but her extraordinary capability of selection and arrangement elevates her as an artistic figure. Mrs. Gereth is proud that Poynton as a whole is comparable with a work of art; she tells Fleda that there was to start “the exquisite old house itself, early Jacobean, supreme in every part” (41). For Mrs. Gereth, the house was a “provocation,” an “inspiration,” and finally a “matchless canvas for the picture”; and after years of her efforts, Mrs. Gereth has turned the house into a work of art, “a single splendid object,” to which “nothing in England [is] really comparable” (43, 41). After arriving at Poynton, Fleda notices that in Poynton, “There were not many pictures--panels and the stuffs were themselves the picture; and in all the great wainscoted house there was not an inch of pasted paper” (48). Mrs. Gereth’s rigorous effort of arrangement--contextualization, as it were--has placed the individual things where they should be. The things make an aesthetic coherence that does not need the aid of paper, so that the surface of the house itself is a complete, grand picture whose surface is smooth and coherent to such an extent that foreground and background are not distinct: “There were places much grander and richer but no such complete work of art, nothing that would appeal so to those really informed” (41). Fleda admits: “What Mrs. Gereth had achieved was indeed an exquisite work” (47). Naturally, such an exquisite work takes on the producer’s signature: “In such an art of the treasure-hunter, in selection and comparison refined to that point, there was an element of creation, of personality” (47). In this highly sophisticated arrangement, as Fleda observes, Mrs. Gereth’s collecting is

equal to a “creation”; in her acts of searching for, selecting, and juxtaposing things, the house as a work of art takes on the producer’s “personality.”

The producer’s “personality” and the evidence of “creation” are not only evident in the surface coherence of the interior but also materially built into the individual things through the concrete labor expended to sustain their beauty, and the enjoyment of stroking over their surfaces. The novel repeatedly portrays the sense of touch, by which the characters identify the material qualities of things, and in turn, find their own identity. Mrs. Gereth ardently states to Fleda: “There isn’t one of them I don’t know and love--yes, as one remembers and cherishes the happiest moments of one’s life. Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another. They’re living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand. There’s a care they want, there’s a sympathy that draws out their beauty” (53). The things’ “livingness” here does not parallel the mystification of the commodity resulting from the alienation of man from the production process; rather, as Mrs. Gereth’s even sensual expression suggests, it designates the things’ immediate and dense “sensuousness,” just as the word “care” refers to physical maintenance as well as psychological attention. Mrs. Gereth despises the Brigstocks’ habit of varnishing because of, as well as its embellishing effect, its preventive effect against this possible interaction that would enhance crafted objects’ ever-changing qualities. In his *Hints on Household Taste*, Charles Eastlake, a contemporary home decorator, comments that varnishing is “destructive of all artistic effect in its appearance, because the surface of wood thus lacquered can never change its colour, or acquire that rich hue which is one

of the chief charms of old cabinet work” (84). The dweller’s touch enhances the aesthetic charm inherent in crafted objects. As Thomas J. Otten details, contemporary manuals of home decoration put emphasis on the handmade object’s tactile properties: “The handmade object simultaneously embodies the physical actions of its maker and the physical characteristics of its user; it reaches backward and forward, forming a physical link between the hand of the artisan and the hand of the connoisseur” (42-43). Mrs. Gereth’s signature as a producer/artist that Fleda recognizes is thus an embodied, palpable history. Mrs. Gereth’s hands have left subtle traces on the surface of the things in a series of activities including caressing and caring. Her hands, in turn, have memorized the shape of the things altogether with their own traces. The history of interaction between the subject and the object is materialized and localized both on the surface of the object and on that of the subject’s body. Fleda’s “initiation” refers to her participation in this process of the interaction between the human body and the object; Mrs. Gereth allows Fleda to participate in the process because of their shared taste: “Mrs. Gereth left her guest to finger fondly of the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed, to sit with Venetian velvets just held in a loving palm, to hang over cases of enamels and pass and repass the cabinets” (48). It is conspicuous that Fleda’s mode of comprehension of the object is primarily immediate and tactile; her bodily organs--not only her hands but also her limbs--operate the mode of description. Her hands identify not the “style” and name of the things, but the things’ qualitative, material “composition”--brasses, velvets, enamels and wood. Fleda’s hands try to locate the former owner’s trace in her caressing the object, and in doing so, she also

leaves her fingerprints on it. Subsequently, Fleda is involved in a series of motions that the things invite Fleda to take--stroking, sitting, leaning and passing; and it is in these bodily relations to them that Fleda comprehends the things and participates in the ongoing history-making. Fleda engages in the physical process of enriching the texture of the surface of the interior with fresh hues, weaving another history into the texture created by the successors.

When he writes that “the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted” “from [the Brigstocks’] composition,” James must be aware that interiors are comparable to rhetorical statements, and that rhetorical statements of interiors are materially written through the interaction between the dweller’s body and objects, gradually and slightly transforming composition of both the body and objects. As her comprehension of the interior of Poynton demonstrates, Fleda reads the well-composed interior through her bodily interaction with the things, encouraged by its smooth surface to slide over it; Fleda’s hands are attuned to, and give imperceptible changes to, the things’ composition, that is, their material qualities; in turn, through touch and changing motions, Fleda’s bodily constitution is re-organized. In the novel, James’s writing is composed of all of these physical and affective processes. Poynton embodies James’s endeavor to realize the gradual and continuous process of representation. James’s avoidance of enumeration of the things at Poynton is one of the manifestations of this ambitious and difficult effort. In Poynton the things are hardly enumerated, while the novel introduces particularized things elsewhere as well as at Waterbath; for example, Fleda’s father’s “shabby” things in his house at West Kensington are

particularized: “old brandy-flasks and match-boxes, old calendars and hand-books, intermixed with an assortment of penwipers and ash-trays, a harvest gathered in from penny bazaars” (131). Contrary to a place like Fleda’s father’s house, where the things are collected without assortment, the things of Poynton are arranged successfully, but in an original way. There is no inventory in Poynton, because the things are not categorized according to their stylistic characteristics, so any categorization based on taxonomy is useless. While the grammar that rules or reduces the language consisting of an inventory is characterized by its “extreme simplicity of syntax,” the organizing principle for the arrangement of the things at Poynton is as complex as the producer’s life history. The syntactic construction of the interior of Poynton is ruled not only by “coordination” but also by “subordination”; that is, each thing is linked to one another not only spatially but also temporally--narratively, as it were. The interior emerges as the network of meaningful relationships that is organized according to the producer’s life history, which must be intertwined with other histories of family members and friends. It also can be said that the network organizes the producer’s life history at the same time as the producer organizes it. These stories are materially left on the surface on which the previous owners have left theirs. For James, Fleda’s body is the means of representing the gradual and continuous process of composition of the interior.

The following passage exemplifies Fleda’s reading of the texture of the interior through a series of bodily actions, which in turn demonstrates the mode of writing that James adopts in the novel in order to represent the material complexity of an interior. As Susan Stewart argues, an attempt to describe experience with the concrete should

be caught in “an infinitely self-effacing gesture of inadequacy,” because spatial experience with things cannot simply be reduced into a logical understanding but crosses boundaries between different modes of cognition, between visual and tactile understanding and language (*Longing* 52).¹⁴ To the contrary, Fleda’s passage is characterized by its blissfulness. Fleda has never known “a greater happiness” than the week passed in this “initiation” (47):

Wandering through clear chambers where the general effect made preferences almost as impossible as if they had been shocks, pausing at open doors where vistas were long and bland, she would, even hadn’t she already known, have discovered for herself that Poynton was the record of a life. It was written in great syllables of color and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists. It was all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest. For England you looked out of old windows--it was England that was the wide embrace. (47-48)

Fleda’s reading of the interior is not restricted to that conducted by her hands; her cognition process entails all of the senses, and more importantly, does not presuppose a taxonomy and hierarchy of them. The dominant cultural tradition of Europe has tended to consider vision and hearing higher, on the one hand, and touch, smell and taste lower, on the other. According to Stewart, in the hierarchy originally proposed by Aristotle, vision and hearing are in the leading place because they are linked with “philosophical contemplation and abstraction,” while taste, touch, and smell are disqualified from philosophical and aesthetic interest because of their immediacy,

incapacity of contributing to interpretations of the world (*Fate* 21). Furthermore, importantly, the concepts of masculine and feminine are also at work in the hierarchy of the senses. As Caroline Korsmeyer suggests, while “higher” senses are ideologically aligned with the masculine values of rationality, cognition, objectivity, “lower” senses are associated with the feminine values of emotion, subjectivity and the body (87). Refusing to depend on the traditional taxonomy and hierarchy of the senses, James invokes not only vision and hearing but also the senses that has been thought lower, and thus feminine, as a means of representation; in other words, in foregrounding the lower and feminine senses’ cognitive capacity, James tries to return sensuousness and pleasure to linguistic representation.¹⁵ As Fleda travels through the different rooms without purpose, Poynton emerges as “the general effect” that makes “preferences almost ... impossible,” because her entire body is involved in the atmosphere of the room that is emanating from the intimately united things. Fleda feels the sight of the interior to be “bland” because the interior surface of the house allows her vision to travel smoothly. Fleda comprehends the objects as “syllables of colors and form,” a harmonious series of figures and hues; and “the tongues of other countries” implies that Fleda intuitively grasps the beauty of the objects prior to the logical understanding of it, without knowledge of the determined value of them in her own culture. “The hands of rare artists” emphasizes, as we have seen, that Fleda comprehends the interior through the sense of touch as the primal means of her cognition. Through the entire passage Fleda ultimately perceives the historical depth and spatial breadth of the surface of the interior--“all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest.” Fleda’s

reading of the interior is similar to a reading practice that Susan Stewart, in her synaesthetic reading of the lyric tradition, delineates as a corporeal experience; in the attempt to present the physical sense of language, Stewart compares the forms of poetry with handicrafts: “In handicrafts that are two-sided, such as embroidery and rug making, there is often a front for viewing and a back that shows evidence of touching and making. Whether we are thinking of paintings on canvas or the reliefs on sarcophagi, all visual forms, including the visual forms of poetry, have as well a tactile dimension that comes into play even if it is repressed” (*Fate* 162). Poynton--the house itself is composed of various handicrafts--is a space to be read as a handicraft that retains the tactile traces of labor across time and space. What Stewart proceeds to argue is relevant in this light: “The early mutuality of the mother’s nipple and the child’s mouth is the paradigm for the reciprocity found in all tactile experiences” (*Fate* 162-63).¹⁶ Embroidery is one of the metaphors gendered as feminine in James’s writing; Fleda’s blissful initiation is thus described as the process in which the “hungry” girl, who, “with her mother dead [hasn’t] so much even as a home,” finds the motherly nourishment from which she has been alienated for a long time. By employing as the mode of writing the “lower” and “feminine” senses that bind the past and the present, here and somewhere, one’s experience and that of others, and sign and signified, James gives shape to Poynton, instead of enumerating the things or abstracting it into a philosophical idea.¹⁷

Poynton is, however, more precarious than it first appears, and Fleda’s blissful one-week experience is only a utopian moment. As we have seen, Poynton is

characterized by the proximity between the subject's body and the object, and described as potentially providing elemental nourishment with the heroine who has had scarce material and affective resources. Yet, the proximity gradually loses its fine balance, and the viewer's healthy appreciation is not maintained. Mrs. Gereth is too close to the spoils to treat them as what they are; in her imagination, the spoils are supposed to signify only what she thinks about herself. Mrs. Gereth's arrangement through her hands certainly has a unifying but abstracting force that melts the rich and solid material history into "the air," in a different way than Fleda's body is involved in "the general effect" emanating from the things. When she comes to Poynton, Mona recognizes that the house involves a certain malfunction, "an air almost of indecency"; the house is "forced upon her" as "a subject for effusiveness," so that "the house [becomes] uncanny to her by the very appeal in its name" (51). The "indecent" air Mona perceives might refer to the hermetic, narcissistic, ever self-referential atmosphere that can be inherent in its "completeness" or "perfect beauty." In this sense, Fleda's observation that "Poynton was the record of a life" may attest something quiescent in Poynton as Poynton is not "a life" itself. As Fleda observes, "all France and Italy with their ages" do not remain vivified but "are composed to rest." While Fleda's touch reads on the surface the history of previous generations' labor--points of origin, as it were, Mrs. Gereth's touch always refers back to her own labor. Mrs. Gereth, through her rigorous efforts of arrangement of the things, seeks to monumentalize Poynton as "the record of [her] life," silencing the traces of others' lives. Mrs. Gereth's bodily interaction with the things, which has made her inseparable

from them, is more ambiguous than Fleda's because it functions both as physical labor to sustain Poynton's beauty, on the one hand, and as an even sensual adherence to the things whose intense pretentiousness stifles its audience, as Fleda has made her "submission" to its massive visual power on arrival. Mrs. Gereth's adherence, or adhesion, to the things is what has induced critics to read her touch as manifesting her fetishism or her desire for distinction.¹⁸ More crucially, it has allowed critics to frame the novel in terms of the cultural logic of traditional aesthetics, and thus to ignore, in spite of their attention to the novel's focus on the sense of touch, the novel's critique of the patriarchal power structure through its refusal of the hierachization of the senses.¹⁹ It is certainly difficult to distinguish Fleda's submissive allegiance to Mrs. Gereth from her own alternative perspective against the beautifying but petrifying effect of Mrs. Gereth's arrangement, because both of them are operating in the realm of Fleda's body, to the same degree that Mrs. Gereth understands her relationship to the things at the level of her body; similarly, Mrs. Gereth's adherence to the things is indeed coextensive with her tenacious effort to sustain their beauty. These complications, in which subjective and objective modes of experience are intertwined, are the risk James has to take in adopting sensory perception as his mode of writing; in other words, his attempt to critically reconsider his culture's constraint inevitably involves such complication because it must be attentive to the sensuous realm in which, to use Buck-Morss's words, "an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace" resists "cultural domestication." James's mode of writing in the novel refuses to depend on culturally

established categories in order to understand minute, concrete and quotidian details of daily life that will tell the workings of cultural constraint.

Fleda's bodily mode of appreciation is, indeed, a form of her resistance to the unifying but homogenizing power that Mrs. Gereth embodies. By reading in detail in the texture of the interior surface of Poynton the material traces of previous generations, traces even older than Mrs. Gereth's, and by weaving her own into theirs, Fleda seeks to revivify Poynton, to make Poynton a space of ever-developing embroidery, challenging Mrs. Gereth's petrifying arrangement. As Fleda's reading experience suggests, the vitality and beauty of Poynton are derived not solely from its austere and magnificent exemplariness but also from its vivid idiosyncrasy, that is, from the producer's ongoing, concrete, everyday interaction with and through the things. Grier's analysis of interiors as rhetorical statements is relevant on this point. Although the proliferation of commodities made it possible to furnish the interior in various ways, Grier maintains, "ordinary consumers" sought to study "ideal" statements found in places like "hotel parlors" and "the 'model' interiors at world's fairs," and to follow cues in a variety of "printed sources including novels, magazines, and by the 1890's, mail-order catalogues"; it was possible to add "nuances" to a "statement about one's personal and cultural values" through the act of choosing, but "the rooms [ordinary consumers] made 'paraphrased' the parlor ideal more or less exactly" (14, 16-17).²⁰ If it's only a place of refined beauty that embodies the cultural ideal, Poynton is just a "model"; it could be easily copied or it could be a mere copy of some other "model." From this perspective, we can see the possibility that Mrs.

Brigstock's "formula" more or less appropriately categorizes Poynton into a specifiable type; therefore, it "jarred upon" Mrs. Gereth. Although Fleda observes that "everything at Poynton was in the style of Poynton," Poynton cannot be culturally sanctioned if it's only uniquely "Poynton." Poynton indeed must be a monument if it is a culturally authoritative space. Mrs. Gereth's rigorous arrangement, however, while beautifying the interior and making it a canonical space, deprives Poynton of its vitality. Fleda's weaving is thus an attempt to add "nuances" to completed Poynton, reactivating the internal, productive conflict of its exemplariness--what I call masculine monumentality--and its idiosyncrasy--feminine textuality, as it were. Thus, Poynton potentially exemplifies and embodies the Jamesian "house of fiction," which is James's imaginative space for writing (*Art* 48). McWhirter argues: "The Jamesian 'house of fiction' is both 'a literary monument' and a domestic, which is to say culturally feminized, space. ... James typically identifies the real fascination of his art with those processes he sees as feminine: the protection of the fictional seed or '*idée-mère*'" ("House" 129).²¹ While Mrs. Gereth's arrangement establishes a culturally sanctioned, canonical space of "perfect beauty," it inevitably petrifies the space. Fleda seeks to revivify the petrified space, weaving multiple stories with each other.

We will return to this productive conflict inherent in James's writing, but before that we need to examine why Mrs. Gereth strives to give closure to Poynton through her arrangement; otherwise we might ascribe Mrs. Gereth's obsessive effort to her personal disposition and fail to capture the novel's political critique. Mrs. Gereth's unifying but petrifying effort is motivated by her exclusion from the cultural field by

the patriarchal power structure; but critics have tended to ignore the power that excludes her, or even worse, been complicit in it. James's attention to the sensuous realm allows us to see the power structure that operates at the level of our bodies.

CHAPTER IV

RICKS

As we have seen, James resists the alienating force of the commodity form by conveying the things' sensuous qualities to the novel's surface through the means of characters' sense experience with them. In this attempt, the enumeration of the things is avoided because the classificatory system in *Poynton* is, unlike a commercial inventory, the dweller's life history. Among critics who notice the lack of the enumeration of the things at *Poynton*, Brown argues that the novel is James's departure from the traditional representational practice of realism. According to Brown, James left behind a Balzacian realism characterized by its enumerative depiction of things, instead keeping pace with contemporary decorating discourse. In response to "the unprecedented proliferation of things" in the 1890's, Brown explains, interior decorators emphasized the spiritualization of things, advocating that "the physical must be transformed into ... something ... metaphysical" (*Sense* 148). Brown recognizes that in the novel James describes objects by means of the "enlistment of nonvisual senses," which "collapse the distance that visual recognition entails" (*Sense* 149); however, Brown finally emphasizes "the absence of the spoils" from the novel, abruptly equating the novel's "visual register" with its overall "descriptive register" (*Sense* 149). For Brown, the fire in the final scene "literalizes" the absence; "the novel's chief narratological device" of "withholding things" ultimately motivates the fire in the final scene "as an act (or a mark) of purification" in which any specific objects are lost to

flame (*Sense* 149, 150). In a similar vein, Eric Savoy maintains that in the novel James adopts a form of “synecdochic representation” that enables him not only to convey “the beautifully ordered array of things behind the specified thing,” but also to confer “a sublime status on mute objects” (274). This representational strategy, according to Savoy, resonates with Mrs. Gereth’s fetishistic collection--in the Freudian sense--which is summarized as a “regressive, compensatory defense against lack and castration,” because both of them “gesture to an elusive, entirely imaginary, and unspecifiable wholeness,” and inevitably involve a “marked occlusion of its proper indexical function” and the loss of “solidity of specification” (273-74). This analogy provides a ground for Savoy’s central and generalized thesis that “the occulted significance of the Lacanian thing can point only to other, related things in the subject’s protracted quest for completeness, wholeness, integrity that coalesces over the void at the core of this economy” (269). Critics like Brown and Savoy, while convincingly exploring James’s mode of representing things, still undercut the material presence of the things and the material urgency in the novel by emphasizing the post-structuralist notion of a fundamental gap between signifier and signified, or language and reality, and thus, the impossibility of representing things. Arguing against such a school of criticism, Victoria Coulson succinctly points out that “the Marxist association of things with vacancy is merely relocated by [their theory] from the commodity fetish to the linguistic sign. For [critics such as Brown and Savoy], language is a Freudian fetish, a fantasy system constituted by irremediable lack” (323).²² The philosophical or literary theory, according to its own agenda, tends in its

closure to repudiate and abstract the physical substance of experience on which the theory is predicated.²³ Readings like Brown's and Savoy's, in their attempt to explain James's representational strategy fundamentally in semiological terms, ignore the widowed mother's and the motherless girl's furious and painful protest against the expropriation of the mothering space, in which they barely absorb physical and affective nourishment; in other words, transforming the character's emotional and physical "lack" into a linguistic and philosophical question, Brown and Savoy not only delimit the novel's profound political critique of a culture that deprives a certain group of people of fundamental sustenance, but also replicate the oppressive and abstracting force of the culture. Naomi Schor's critique of what she calls the tradition of "idealist" aesthetics allows us to see the implication between the tradition of philosophy and aesthetics on the one hand, and the patriarchal power structure on the other. Schor, focusing instead on the aesthetics of the "detail," criticizes the idealist tradition for its exclusion of women, the ornament, and the decorative:

To focus ... on the *detail as negativity* is to become aware ... of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of special life presided over by women.... The detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine. (4; emphasis original)²³

While it is true, as I have argued, that no ideology can completely contain the minute and concrete details of daily lives, Schor argues that the construct of idealist aesthetics maintains its coherence at the expense of the material, the quotidian, and their philosophical and historical correlative, the female. The novel demonstrates this process of exclusion, or abstraction of the material substrate of culture. As Brown aptly points out, “[Mrs. Gereth] has performed the decorating feat of the day,” that is, the “spiritualization” of proliferated things (*Sense* 148); however, although Brown endorses the beautifying effect of spiritualization, as its idealist tone indicates, “the decorating feat of the day” does not stand for Mrs. Gereth’s painful situation; rather, it is what marginalizes her. As Mrs. Gereth is finally excluded from the space by the custom of primogeniture in spite of her labor expended to create an ideal space, Mrs. Gereth’s obsessive effort of constructing Poynton as a monument of her life is motivated by the patriarchal power that threatens to force her out. James, by drawing our attention to the repudiated material substrate, criticizes “the decorative discourse of the day,” which excluded women and concealed female labor from the cultural space. Contrary to critics’ philosophical abstraction, the narrative development moves toward a “valorization of the minute, the partial, and the marginal,” which Schor sees as an “essential aspect of ... dismantling of Idealist metaphysics” that “looms so large on the agenda of modernity” (Schor 3-4).

Mrs. Gereth’s practice of collecting and arranging the interior parallels the contemporary redefinition, or more precisely, professionalization and masculinization, of home decoration. Professionalized home decoration was defined clearly in

opposition to the conventional image of the home that is associated with the feminine. One of the ideological constructs dominant throughout the nineteenth century, the doctrine of “separate spheres,” needs to be mentioned here to make clear the traditional form of home decoration. Under the influence of the domestic ideology, women’s role in society was defined as moral defender and their nature was associated with the concept of home. While women’s social position was elevated, women were confined to the home and excluded from the public sphere. In the developing consumer society of the mid-nineteenth century, however, women took on a new role in addition to that of the domestic angel who was supposed to establish and maintain domestic welfare; women were considered, and valued as, symbols of conspicuous consumption; woman’s decoration of her body and her home proved her household’s affluence, which in turn proved her responsible maintenance of it. By the 1870’s, although the ideology of separate spheres still kept them in their homes, middle-class women became able to enjoy more leisure time; domestic duties did not require as much time as before due to the help of servants and ready-made merchandise. For women, collecting and making objects for their home and family became a new pleasurable job in their assigned domain. They worked to beautify the home by, for example, covering existing furniture with hand-made textiles or filling the domestic space with bric-a-brac. In the 1870’s, however, this work was considered neither a form of art nor one of the “crafts.” As Talia Schaffer explains, William Morris, the advocate of the Arts and Crafts Movement, praised the exotic and ancient everyday crafts, while neglecting the popularity of women’s decorative art in his own period (75). Although it did not attain

a culturally honorable status, the women's craft tradition flourished because it satisfied several needs. The activity of domestic decoration enabled women to use their own time productively, to display their domestic virtue in laboring for their home and family, and to exercise their imagination. These merits were, according to Schaffer, expressive of Victorian women's suppressed wish to be productive members of the Victorian economy (77). Disseminated through women's magazines, the idea of home decoration took part in the fashion system; backed up by both the innate fragility of homemade objects and the shifting requirements of the fashion industry, women could continually enjoy producing new objects in their leisure time.

In the 1870s, however, male aesthetes more decisively began to advance into the presumed women's sphere, and to redefine domestic production and collection with their knowledge, supposing that the home could be a relevant subject for their scholarly discipline. Schaffer explains that "the male aesthetes turned the home into an extension of the market economy and the museum, the male-identified public sphere with which they were already familiar" (78). In this process, homemade crafts were gradually displaced from the center stage of domestic collection by financially and aesthetically valuable objects. Charles Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, a manual on household decoration first published in 1868 for middle-class and upper-middle-class readers, ushered in the shift in the style of Victorian home decoration. In *Hints*, Eastlake, an influential late-Victorian male designer who was influenced by, and popularized, Morris's notions of decorative arts in the Arts and Crafts style, disparaged the corruption of taste by fashion and the desire to consume inferior goods and

imitative decoration. While inveighing against “those qualities of mere elaboration and finish that were independent of thought and manual labor,” he encouraged consumption of objects in the sincere Gothic style (108). Eastlake’s book was itself meant to give readers “hints” about what to buy and where to buy, but by associating his own preferences with antiquarianism, he sought to compensate for the corruption of consumption.

Eastlake sought to articulate the figure of the professional decorator against the background of “materfamilias,” who was responsible for furnishing home but without taste (11). Eastlake advised women to get rid of their miscellaneous household objects and to replace them with tasteful objects whose aesthetic worth was guaranteed by knowledgeable experts.²⁶ Eastlake emphasized the positive effect of collecting art at home on the refinement of the entire household:

The smallest example of rare old porcelain, of ivory carving, of ancient metalwork, of enamels, of Venetian glass, of anything which illustrates good design and skillful workmanship, should be acquired whenever possible, and treasured with greatest care. It is impossible to overrate the influence which such objects may have in educating the eye to appreciate what really constitutes good arts. (137)

Eastlake’s emphasis on venerable workmanship and old art objects’ educative effect on the dweller’s taste was, on the other hand, always paired with the denigration of household crafts, “knick-knacks,” and “genteel’ or ‘lady-like” patterns (10):

The silly knickknacks which too frequently crowd a drawing-room table, cheffonier, or mantelpiece are banished from [a library or study]. The ormolu and compo-gilt decoration which prevails upstairs is voted ... out of place on the ground-floor; and those stern arbiters of taste even go so far as to recommend a Turkey carpet or a sober pattern "Brussels" instead of the tangled maze of flowers and ribbons which we have to tread on elsewhere. (128)

It is notable in this passage that Eastlake did not equate the dividing line between the private and the public with the traditional distinction between the inside and the outside of a house; instead, he located it within the house. He divided the house into two distinct gendered realms, the female upstairs and the male downstairs, and assigned to them a different set of collections. In this delineation of the ideal parlor, domestic crafts and decoration that had been carried out by women were undervalued, or even worse, excluded; accordingly, the home was transformed from a sentimental and affectionate retreat into a private museum of antiquarian art objects that were designed to display the family's economic and cultural wealth rather than to function as a private haven for family members. As Black argues, professionally articulated tasteful houses "disprove sentimental notions of Victorian domesticity, showing that the Victorians themselves broke down firm distinctions between the domestic and political realms. ... [the model of the tasteful house] made the home neither easily woman's sphere nor child's haven" (78).

By transforming the home from a private and affective sanctuary into a semi-public and disciplined space, Eastlake was able to document the need for professional experts in the household.²⁵ Male aesthetes like Eastlake sought to establish antiquarian connoisseurship in the field of domestic decoration by opposing it to the middle-class consumerist ethos, which they aligned with the amateur and therefore with the feminine. As Freedman argues, however, aestheticism was itself structured by conflicting tensions inherent in itself, that is, the tendencies of its commodification of artistic items and its anti-commodity ideology. Schaffer argues, ironically, that Eastlake's and William Morris's effort to bring back artistic and authentic craft "often merely popularized a new set of commodities" (81). Similarly, Christina Crosby suggests that Eastlake was himself incorporated with the consumer culture; his name became prevalent among middle-class consumers, when to redecorate a house was to have it "Eastlaked" (113). While the Victorian popularization of home decoration arose out of the dynamic conflict and alliance between industrialization and aestheticism, the realm supposed to be feminine might be exploited to conceal the multiple implications of aestheticism and consumer culture; Eastlake's antiquarianism was an expression of aversion for modernity itself, and he always ascribed the modern form of mass production and consumption to women and their space. Eastlake asserted that "modern manufacture received the greatest aid from science at a period precisely when the arts of design had sunk into their lowest degradation," and called this "degradation" a "*mésalliance*" (106; emphasis original). In this metaphor, pre-industrial art objects are gendered as male on the one hand, and corrupted modern commodities as female, on

the other. The error resulting from this degradation was, according to Eastlake, that in Victorian houses, “bad ornament was multiplied into vicious elaboration” (106). In reforming taste, *Hints* not only articulated the need for male experts, but also formed the category of “women,” associating the feminine with the corruption of consumption, unredeemed commodification, and the multitude of details resisting sublimation. As Crosby suggests, “Victorian sexual categorization and the extension of commodity culture makes explicit and embodies what remains implicit in aesthetics since Kant, the linking of the feminine and ‘women’ with profane, material detail and the articulation of man with the transcendent sublimations of art” (113). Male professional decorators were of course under the influence of the dominant tradition of idealist aesthetics, and excluded actual women from the realm of domestic production while elevating it as a male profession.

If we put the novel in the historical context in which male aesthetes were advancing into the women’s sphere of home, we may see that Mrs. Gereth’s act of home decoration resembles the male-gendered, professionalized model of it; her distaste for the Brigstocks’ home decoration with modern commodities is also an expression of her denigration of female decoration, which is aligned with a fashion sensibility. As the fact that she commenced to collect crafted objects around the time period in which Eastlake published his manual--late 1860s--might indicate, Mrs. Gereth’s collecting practice is characterized with its disregard for female labor in general and female domestic crafts in particular, in favor of antiquarianism and veneration for workmanship. In a similar vein, that Mrs. Gereth considers only worth

“forgetting” the Brigstocks’ collection of miscellaneous knick-knacks and gimcracks parallels Eastlake’s contempt for them because of their transience and lack of history. Mrs. Gereth’s things are rich in the historical depth that past craftsmen inscribed into their products. Her judgment of a person depends only on whether the person has an appreciative eye: “Mrs. Gereth had really no perception of anybody’s nature--had only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid? To be clever meant to know the ‘marks’” (126). The profession of the new interior designers was predicated on their ability to detect the imperceptible signs of age. This criteria was, Schaffer explains, established under the influence of John Ruskin’s emphasis on true antiquity instead of mid-Victorian furniture and clothes; connoisseurs sought to prove their professionalism by their ability to scrutinize for the minute signs the surface of the object that guarantee its difference from a machine made reproduction (81). Schaffer argues that, ironically, in longing for authentic handicrafts, the male aesthetes dismissed their mothers’ and wives’ hand-made embroideries and often ended up with spurious fragments of old tapestry (81). As male professional decorators recommended, Mrs. Gereth disregards female collecting and domestic crafts; her exclusion of them from Poynton, however, ultimately withers the house.

As we have seen, the house at Poynton does not contain any female handicrafts, while the texture of the interior surface is itself a handicraft: as Fleda does, the viewer can weave her own traces into the texture of the interior surface through her physical reading of the others’ imperceptible traces. Fleda literally takes on the role of embroiderer, too; getting a hint from the interior of Poynton, Fleda is in the process of

making an embroidery for her sister Maggie's wedding: Fleda, "in view of [her sister's] nuptial," "[has] almost finished, as a present, a wonderful piece of embroidery suggested, and precisely at Poynton, by an old Spanish altar-cloth" (73). In contrast to Fleda weaving, Mrs. Gereth appears as cutting inextricable threads of life/history; Fleda protests against Mrs. Gereth who cannot understand her son Owen's fairness and calls him a mere "blockhead": "'You simplify far too much. You always did and you always will. The tangle of life is much more intricate than you've ever, I think, felt it to be. You slash into it,' cried Fleda, 'with a great pair of shears'" (186). Mrs. Gereth, moreover, confronted by the impending threat of being expropriated of the house by the custom of primogeniture, a symbol of the patriarchal power structure, abandons her task of weaving threads into the interior surface and begins to complete or close the interior; and now she only seeks to monumentalize, or consummate, the house at Poynton. Consequently, Poynton is transformed into a static and infertile space:

Poynton ... had been an impossible place for producing; no art more active than a Buddhistic contemplation could lift its head there. It had stripped its mistress clean of all feeble accomplishments; she sometimes unrolled, her needles and silks, her gold and silver folded in it, a big, brave, flowery square of ancient unfinished 'work'; but her hand had sooner been imbrued with blood than with ink or with water-color. (133)

It is questionable whether Fleda, who in her one-week stay at Poynton experiences "happiness" she has never felt, considers Poynton essentially and originally static and infertile. Rather, Fleda's impression comes from Mrs. Gereth's authoritarian and

aggressive taste that weighs on the viewer's freer appreciation. When Fleda freely wandered through the corridors at Poynton, Mrs. Gereth was outside the house; and Fleda remembers later at Ricks that Mrs. Gereth was staring at her with the face of "confession and defiance," when she first arrived at Poynton (80). Although she gradually unravels Mrs. Gereth's tense arrangement of the interior with her touch during her stay, Fleda has kept undisclosed, unexpressed, her own reading of the interior, still overwhelmed by the visual shock effect on arrival at Poynton that Mrs. Gereth's absolute taste created. "Perfect beauty" is, however, the end of production. The collection that is too "perfectly wrought" by a single authoritarian point of view loses its openness and eliminates any room for a new object.

When she first visits the house at Ricks, which Mr. Gereth's maiden-aunt had lived in until her death and which is being prepared for Mrs. Gereth after her retirement from Poynton, Mrs. Gereth is disgusted at the sight of the interior. The house is a more distinctly feminine sphere than the house at Waterbath, and Fleda eventually listens to the dead maiden-aunt's "voice" that is retained in the house. Mrs. Gereth believes, even before she looks at the rooms, that the interior at Ricks is structured by principles that have "much in common with the principles of Waterbath" (64). These principles are, for Mrs. Gereth, virtually the lack of any principles. In a similar manner, in the introduction to *Hints*, Eastlake contemptibly declares that "materfamilia" were, in spite of their conviction that "they 'know what they like,'" not capable of furnishing houses "in accordance with any established principles of art" (15). Fleda observes that the house itself is "practically a shallow box" (68). Although

the maiden-aunt's house is different from the "big commodious house" at Waterbath in size, the "shallowness" indicates that it is not an appropriate place for a collection that male aesthetes would legitimate, and that the collection accrued here does not retain historical and aesthetic dignity but consists of knick-knacks and is decorated in an aesthetically immature way. The house is certainly characterized by its inauthenticity and imitation as well as cheapness. Mrs. Gereth loathes the view from the sash windows, through which she sees "four iron pots on pedestals, painted white and containing ugly geraniums, ranged on the edge of a gravel path and doing their best to give it the air of a terrace" (67-68). For all that it is located in "the deepest depths of Essex and three miles from a small station," the house is meant to "contrive to look ... suburban" (67-68). Moreover, "the junction of the walls and ceiling" is "guiltless of curve or cornice and marked merely by the little band of crimson paper glued round the top of the other paper, a turbid grey sprigged with silver flowers"; This decoration was "rather new and fresh; and there was in the centre of the ceiling a big square beam papered over in white" (68). In spite of these failed imitations and commodified decorations, however, Fleda observes that "the place was crowded with objects of which the aggregation somehow made a thinness and the futility a grace; things that told her they had been gathered as slowly and as lovingly as the golden flowers of the other house" (68). This house retains the dweller's history, too. Fleda feels:

The more she looked about the surer she felt of the character of the maiden-aunt, the sense of whose dim presence urged her to pacification: the maiden-aunt had been a dear; she should have adored the maiden-aunt. The

poor lady had passed shyly, yet with some bruises, through life; had been sensitive and ignorant and exquisite: that too was a sort of origin, a sort of atmosphere for relics and rarities, though different from the sorts most prized at Poynton. (68-69)

It is unarguable that the commodities that compose the interior of the house are not financially and aesthetically valuable; even worse, they are designed to conceal their cheapness. And yet, they reflect the “origin,” the dweller’s personal history, as surely as the interior of Poynton does; the maiden-aunt’s somehow miserable but tender life appears as “some bruises” left on her things. As Mrs. Gereth has remarked to Fleda, “one of the deepest mysteries of life was the way that--given certain natures--hideous objects could be loved” (69). In Waterbath, the interior is full of commodities that only function as signs or references; the materiality of things is evacuated. In Ricks, to the contrary, the things take on a history through a long span of emotional and physical attention of the dweller, as in the case in Poynton. This feminine interior provides ease with Fleda; at the same time, she has an expectation of reconciliation. Thus, Fleda seeks to have Mrs. Gereth notice the maiden-aunt’s care for her things, in the expectation that Mrs. Gereth would value the maiden aunt’s affection for things, by “repeat[ing] to [Mrs. Gereth] more than once the indulgent fancy about the maiden aunt” (69). Fleda’s “fancy” seems, however, rather feeble. For Mrs. Gereth “it wasn’t a question of love at present for these; it was only a question of some practical patience” (69). While she is conscious of her own “old loves and patiences” even to an excessive

degree, Mrs. Gereth neglects the “mark” of “love.” When Mrs. Gereth evacuates an affective dimension from her experience with things, Poynton starts to wither.

Poynton’s malfunction comes from the effacement of female labor from the house. For Eastlake, Schaffer explains, antiques embody “the myth of continuous history,” a “symbolic genealogy” of previous owners who have labored to care for the object, in which the labor lends the object “emotional value” as well as monetary value (81). In this novel, we need to emphasize, the history of generations of owners is not “myth” but is substantialized as material investment layered on the surface of things; the point of origin is not necessarily equal to ownership. In the realm of “symbolic genealogy,” ownership does matter; but in the sensuous and material realm, it does not; the surface of a thing must retain not exclusively the owner’s labor, but also any trace of labor. Mrs. Gereth is virtually positioned in the generations of men who took care of the things; however, she does not qualify as an heir because of her sex. In spite of her labor of sustaining the beauty of the things, and consequently, the genealogy of ownership, Mrs. Gereth’s name is effaced from, or is not in the first place registered on, official and legal history. Mrs. Gereth is caught in what Bourdieu calls “the economy of symbolic goods.” The domain of symbolic exchanges, the relations of production and reproduction of symbolic capital, that is, “genealogical statuses” and “the names of lineage,” is maintained by “the logic of social construction of the relations of kinship and marriage alliance” (*Masculine* 43). In this economy, women are denied as subjects of the exchange, and reduced to “the status of objects, or rather, of *symbolic instruments* of male politics”; the “familiar, continuous, ordinary, repetitive and

monotonous” female work as represented by “gestation and child bearing” is effaced in favor of the male work of the “*discontinuous* and *extraordinary* intervention into the course of life” (*Masculine* 43, 46; emphasis original). Women are forced to be “complicit” in this economy through “symbolic violence,” a subtle, invisible mode of domination operating in everyday interaction; because “the negative virtues” like “self-denial, resignation and silence” are inculcated in their bodies as part of habitus, women are predisposed to accept their position in this economy as their own choice, without recognizing the forced nature of their complicity in it (49). Mrs. Gereth resists this effacement, but her resistance takes the form of the very symbolic exchange that has dominated and marginalized herself in her attempt to marry Owen to Fleda and thus to perpetuate Poynton as the record of her life. Mrs. Gereth’s resistance appears to be a manifestation of her forced complicity in the symbolic exchanges rather than a revolutionary act.

In the same way that female crafts were abjected from the model parlor by male professionals, Mrs. Gereth is about to be expropriated of the house. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sarris interprets Mrs. Gereth’s “phallic” actions, including “tramp[ing] upon the claims of others in order to assert her own,” as an effort to “inscribe the mother’s name--the name of Adela Gereth--upon Poynton,” from which she has been excluded by “the Name-of-the-Father, the signature of his will under the British law of primogeniture” (72, 69).²⁷ In the face of the threat of being deprived of her collection, Mrs. Gereth cries to Owen: “The best things here, as you know, are the things your father and I collected, things all that we worked for and waited for and

suffered for.... [T]here are things in the house that we almost starved for! They were our religion, they were our life, they were *us*! And now they're only *me*" (53).

Motivated by the exclusion and effacement of herself and her labor from the symbolic genealogy, Mrs. Gereth obsessively strives to inscribe her signature of authorship/ownership on the things through her arrangement of them, and requires others to read it but in a correct way. This is what Mona perceives at Poynton, an exclusive yet demanding "air." Poynton now functions only to "express the conceptions to which it owed its origin," and the primary conception to which Poynton owes its origin is nothing less than Mrs. Gereth herself (49). Mrs. Gereth represses the multiple prior origins, including the makers of the things, the former owners of them, Mr. Gereth, and Owen. In so far as she articulates the conception correctly, Fleda can be acknowledged as a part of Poynton. Adding to the former statement, Mrs. Gereth tries to arrange Fleda into a suitable "position": "... except that they're also *you*, thank God, a little, you dear!' she continued, suddenly inflicting on Fleda a kiss intended by every sign to knock her into position" (53; emphasis original). Mrs. Gereth demands that Fleda "save [the things] for [her]" (54). Mrs. Gereth seeks to manipulate Fleda in the same way that marginalizes her; Mrs. Gereth takes up the male form of symbolic exchange through tactical marriage in order to perpetuate her name in Poynton, seeing Fleda as a symbolic instrument. In this strategy, however, the sensuousness of the things is subordinated to legal questions, from which Mrs. Gereth has sought to redeem them. Mrs. Gereth is now abstracting the things from the realm of the sensuousness to the symbolic one. The perfection, consummation of Poynton is achieved only through

abstraction, in which meaningful parts are forced to serve an ideological end; however, just as Eastlake's formulation of standards for home decoration was easily commodified, so aesthetic perfection, or ideal beauty, is vulnerable to the power of commodification.

Mrs. Gereth relocates the things at Poynton to Ricks; in other words, she seeks to reproduce Poynton at Ricks. With Owen's compromise, Mrs. Gereth selects the things to carry with her to her retirement at Ricks, but because of Poynton's unity, the selection is impossible: "The great embarrassment was still immutably there, the odiousness of sacrificing the exquisite things one wouldn't take to the exquisite things one would. This immediately made the things one wouldn't the very things one ought to, and Mrs. Gereth said, condemned one, in the whole business, to an eternal vicious circle" (70). The selection is to "[compare] incomparables" to her, the mother of Poynton. As the term "business" suggests, however, Mrs. Gereth's aesthetic pursuit is gradually yielding to practical concern. Indeed, after transporting a significant part of the things to Ricks, Fleda observes that "[Mrs. Gereth's] elation, it was true, was not so much from what she had done as from the way she had done it" (83). The things are arranged against the new background but not embedded in it. While at Poynton the enumeration is useless because of its unity, at Ricks one can, or is encouraged to, enumerate the things: "[Fleda] only, from where she stood in the room, called out, one after another, as if she had had a list before her, the items that in the great house had been scattered and that now, if they had a fault, were too much like a minuet danced on a hearth-rug" (82). For Fleda, who knows them "by every inch of their

surface and every charm of their character,” the sensuousness of the things is still intense, but the image of the floating things--as if they were dancing “a minuet”--clearly suggests that the things are subjected to alienation (82). Against her intention, Fleda’s enumeration, the “uttered knowledge ... struck her hostess as so much free approval”: “Mrs. Gereth was never indifferent to approval” (82). Mrs. Gereth herself has proved the transportability and separability of her things, and she gains the sense of “approval” not by aura that the unified things generate or the sensuousness of them, but by their enumeration, that is, not by “what” she has done but “the way” she transports such a number of things; at Ricks, quantification replaces qualification. Similarly, the possession of things is transformed into the means of self-presentation. Mrs. Gereth excitedly states: ““By calculating, by choosing my time, I *was* quiet and I *was* quick. I manoeuvred, prepared my ground; then at the last I rushed!”” (82). At Ricks, it becomes obvious that what is to be “a subject for effusiveness” is not the things themselves but herself.

Just as Mrs. Gereth was “kept awake for hours by the wall paper” at Waterbath, Fleda sees an ominous vision in her bedroom: “In the watches of the night she saw Poynton dishonoured; she had cherished it as a happy whole, she reasoned, and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs. To lie there in the stillness was partly to listen for some soft low plaint from them” (85). Fleda still admires Mrs. Gereth’s “genius for composition,” but now definitely in a hesitating manner: “she could say to herself that no girl in England ... went to rest with so picked a guard” (85). Fleda apparently recognizes, or laments, the destruction of a “happy

whole.” The things do not generate aura any more; instead, they only voice the sound of silent protest, a protest against Mrs. Gereth’s suppression of them, or the prior origins that the things bear. Indeed, Mrs. Gereth sees her own mutilation where Fleda feels that the things take on subjectivity; she considers her ejection from Poynton “the amputation, as she called it, had performed. Her leg had come off--she had now begun to stump along with the lovely wooden substitute; she would stump for life” (79). For Mrs. Gereth, the unity of Poynton only shows the totality of selfhood. In this psychological working, however, Poynton is abstracted into projections of Mrs. Gereth’s psychological conditions. The affective and physical bond between Mrs. Gereth and the things is severed by the transportation. Stewart argues that “when objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by collection, such an extension is inverted, serving to subsume the environment to a scenario of the personal. The ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the “self,” the articulation of the collector’s own “identity” (*Longing* 162). Mrs. Gereth and her things are in bodily harmony at Poynton although the harmony is partly achieved by her strenuous arrangement. Stewart proceeds to say, “ironically and by extension,” “the fetishist’s impulse toward accumulation and privacy,” while giving “integrity to the self,” serves to “overload the self with signification.” In order to make her point clear, Stewart quotes James Bunn’s comments on collecting: “Although the chance removal of a cultural token cauterizes its source, it also overwhelms unintentionally the semiological substructure of its host” (*Longing* 162-163). Because they are liberated,

or driven out, from Mrs. Gereth's arrangement at Poynton, the things claim their original significance, as they surprise Fleda by their glaring presence. At the same time, the liberation puts them into a new context. The things have become heavy with their legal, social, cultural and economic significance. Mrs. Gereth, while gaining the illusory sense of self-integrity, cannot bear the things' overwhelming significances. Fleda is "appalled" at the image of Mrs. Gereth "hunching up a back like Atlas under his globe" (80). Mrs. Gereth mistakes her physical lack for a symbolic one, necessity for desire, because of her forced complicity in the symbolic economy, as critics have done.

The spiritualization or purification of things that Brown emphasizes, from an historical point of view, implicitly functions to endorse the exclusion of women and the neglect of female labor, an exclusion that underpins the cultural and symbolic realm. The reason why critics conventionally have not focused on that political implication of the novel is because they have not fully appreciated Fleda Vetch, whose appreciative power is well-attuned not only to aesthetic refinement but also to the minute and latent traces of the quotidian labor that enables that refinement.²⁸

Depending on the dichotomy that James posits in the Preface to the novel between art and life, and aligning Mrs. Gereth with art, Brown argues: "[Although she is] morally vacuous,"

[Mrs. Gereth] nonetheless represents much of the aesthetic achievement that James himself sought when he described life, on the one hand, as 'all inclusion and confusion,' and art, on the other, as 'all discrimination and

selection.’ In other words, in the act of representing Mrs. Gereth’s decorating acuity, he manifests what would become Cather’s dictum that scenes must be presented by ‘suggestion rather than enumeration.’ (*Sense* 148)

While it is unarguable that the novel praises a certain genius in the authorial figure of Mrs. Gereth, and that its aesthetic achievement is partly predicated on representing her decorating ingenuity, the novel’s central consciousness is that of Fleda Vetch, and the driving force of the novel is located in her appreciative power: “The progress and march of my tale became that of her understanding” (*Art* 128). That is, the novel has two different, even contradictory but productive loci of writing, even if Fleda’s agency is rather inconspicuous. James’s art and life are in conflict with each other, but at the same time they are inseparable, too. These two impulses in James can be aligned with what McWhirter calls “the author” and “the writer,” respectively; McWhirter explains:

On the one hand, James wants, as a *writer*, ... to allow his texts to develop freely, without a priori restrictions, in any and all directions that the process of writing might lead”; on the other hand, as the *author*, he feels the need to contain the improvisatory, potentially infinite expansiveness of his own writing, to control the ‘explosive principle’ of his fictional ‘germs’ within a limited and limiting narrative frame or design. (“House” 124; emphasis original)

These two impulses are portrayed in James’s New York Edition prefaces as a gendered conflict. According to McWhirter, the “writer,” associated with the feminine images of

“weaving and embroidery,” and of “housewifery, mothering, and nursing,” functions to “[protect] the free expansion of the text”; the “author,” associated with the figures of “business, architecture, government, war, and law,” functions as “paternal mastery” (“House” 129). As Brown too readily suggests, James, in the Prefaces, in establishing and making conspicuous his authorial labor, apparently favors the operation of an austere and disciplinary art against wasteful, disorderly life. If we take into account the gender implication inherent in James’s contradictory impulses that McWhirter outlines, however, the dichotomy, and hierarchy, between art and life needs to be examined in order to understand James’s texts in general, and *Spoils* in particular. As we’ve seen, in *Spoils*, while Mrs. Gereth, as an arbiter of taste, succeeds in establishing the ideal house of Poynton, her austere aesthetic principle that marginalizes feminine household labor finally forces herself out of the house. Does James’s art, in favor of the establishment of its authority, after all marginalize the feminine and the quotidian?

The New York Edition Preface to *Roderick Hudson* is relevant in order to answer this question. In this Preface, James frankly manifests his fear of “developments” that he felt at the moment of creation of *Roderick*, “the ache of fear ... of being unduly tempted and led on by ‘developments’” (*Art* 4). As a trained artist, however, James recognizes that developments “are of the very essence of the novelist’s process, and it is by their aid, fundamentally, that his idea takes form and lives” (*Art* 5). Developments are threatening to the artist because of their overwhelmingly ever-expanding tendency, but James recognizes that the essence of a creation lies not in his original conception but in the developing process itself. This recognition leads him to

his famous passage: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy” (*Art 5*; emphasis original). For the artist, “the continuity of things” is “the whole matter,” that is, not an antithesis of his art but the ground for it; however threatening it is, without it he cannot realize his idea. James’s materialist philosophy for art becomes more substantialized with the metaphor of an “embroidery canvas”:

A young embroider of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. The development of the flower, of the figure, involved thus an immense counting of holes and a careful selection among them. (*Art 5*)

The artist, while threatened by “the vast expanse of the surface,” with a number of “little holes” and his own spreading “flowers and figures,” seeks to give shape to his own idea. Schor comments on the fear of details that can be easily found in the history of art: “What is most threatening about the detail: its tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background” (20). James’s embroidery canvas foregrounds the fear of detail, but at the same time, James portrays the artist who does not contain but weaves an artifact, making the fear an “aid” for his

own drives. The young embroiderer is certainly threatened by the minute and limitless holes that compel his figure to spread over them beyond his control, and thus to blur the distinction between its center and periphery; in the weaving process the artist is forced to abandon the prior conception of his figure that he had articulated a moment before. Yet at the same time, James recognizes that after “developments,” he paradoxically reaches his original concept. In spite of the splendid foreground, the background attests to the artist’s laborious and meandering progress that underpins it. The artist, through the masculine acts of “counting” and “selection,” seeks to keep control over his spreading figure and its ground, but the acts of counting and selecting are themselves being performed without a telos; the artist is engaging in the fearful but pleasurable process of creation in which he perpetually, by every stitch of his needle, renews his knowledge and vision of his art according to the material qualities of the surface of the canvas; in the process, he cannot maintain the hierarchy of center and periphery, of accessory and principal, and of foreground and background. James’s “embroidery canvas” cannot be understood as a mere metaphor; on the contrary, it gives shape to his creative process not as static contemplation but as a threatening, but free and pleasurable, activity of his hands. James’s embodied philosophy of “the continuity of things” is conceptualized against the solid material background of an “embroidery canvas”; more precisely, the imagery manifests that the background labor defines the foreground of the philosophy. James’s philosophy is inseparable from the minute, concrete, and continuous feminine domestic work, and thus cannot be

abstracted into a “dictum.” James’s embroidery canvas realizes that art and life are not mutually exclusive, but rather, mutually perpetuating.

James’s dynamic, materialist philosophy of “the continuity of things” illuminates his effort to restore to the novel’s surface the physical interaction between the characters’ bodies and things. Driven by the image of Mrs. Gereth bearing the weight of the things as well as by the visions of the things suffering, Fleda shifts her attitude toward Mrs. Gereth from submissive allegiance to more subtle manipulation, although she cannot carry out her undertakings in a successful way because of her inexperience and love for Owen. Fleda, however, restores the things to Poynton, even though her motivation is highly ambiguous. It is her ethical devotion to people and the spoils that restrains Fleda from accepting Owen’s love and thus from taking possession of them, and that makes Mrs. Gereth give them up. At the same time, Fleda’s ethical devotion is equal to her fear of taking possession of, and being possessed by, others. The fearful vision of Mrs. Gereth suffering from the things’ weight signals, on the one hand, Fleda’s morality for others, and on the other, her hesitation in taking responsibility, or bearing the weight of it. Fleda is embarrassed when she learns that Mrs. Gereth thinks that Fleda is “so loyally on [her] side”: “It had come indeed to a question of ‘sides,’ Fleda thought” (81). Because of an inextricable mix of her moral integrity, love for Owen, and fear of her own passion and desire for the things and social identity, Fleda is not willing to take possession of anything. Fleda’s moral conduct is the refusal of, *and* the recoil from, fulfilling, and being an instrument for, any, even her own, ends. Fleda’s freedom from any ends, however, ultimately

compensates for her inexperience and hesitation. James describes Fleda as “the free spirit” in the Preface, and her freedom enables her appreciation (*Art* 129-30). Fleda remains free from any ends in favor of, to use Stewart’s words, “the free activity of pleasure and knowledge that the aesthetic brings to human life.” Unlike Mrs. Gereth, who has finally lost her affectionate and physical bond with the spoils, and abstracted the bond into a symbolic one, Fleda’s appreciation of things always has its root in her own body. Anticipating Owen and Mona’s marriage, Fleda recognizes that she has achieved an “equilibrium” because of her success in reconstituting the “splendour of Poynton”:

She could have drawn up a catalogue from memory. Thus again she lived with [the spoils], and she thought of them without a question of any personal right. ... They were nobody’s at all--too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reducible to anything so narrow. It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the strange peace that had descended like a charm.

(194)

“The strange peace” called “equilibrium” comes to Fleda completely as a physical sense. Just because she has allowed the spoils to recover their wholeness by renouncing the possibility of owning them, paradoxically, the spoils have “crept back” to her:

It was the beauty she was most touched by that ... she had lost. ... But the loss was a gain to memory and love. ... She greeted them with open arms;

she thought of them hour after hour; they made a company with which solitude was warm and a picture that, at this crisis, overlaid poor Maggie's scant mahogany. It was really her obliterated passion that had revived.
(193)

Just as Poynton welcomed her with "the wide embrace," Fleda welcomes the returned spoils with "open arms"; Fleda's memory is not insubstantial or illusory, but physically inscribed. As we have seen, her sense experience at Poynton allowed her body to register the impressions of the interior of Poynton, and to interiorize them, transforming her physical composition. When the question was of possession and ownership, Fleda's memory was "obliterated"; however, when she acted in favor of "the beauty," her "passion" "revived." This sequence of Fleda's loss and recovery of sense experience parallels Marx's delineation of the alienation of the senses caused by private property. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx comments on the displacement of our senses onto a single drive to possess: "In place of *all* these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses--the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world" (73; emphasis original). James's depiction of Fleda's aesthetic experience is even similar to Marxian aesthetics. Eagleton explains that "Marx is most profoundly 'aesthetic' in his belief that the exercise of human senses, powers and capacities is an absolute end in itself, without need of utilitarian justification; but the unfolding of this sensuous richness for its own sake can be achieved, paradoxically, only through the

rigorously instrumental practice of overthrowing bourgeois social relations” (202). Fleda’s recovery of the spoils cannot be framed in purely moral terms, or in terms of the idealist tradition of aesthetics. Fleda’s capacity for appreciation derives from her senses, and her aesthetic pleasure comes from the sensuous, use-value of objects. The “strange peace” or the “equilibrium” that Fleda restores can be seen as a physiological one. Stewart, right after explaining that the mother/child relation is the paradigm for the reciprocity in all tactile experiences, notes that the newborn infant requires tactile experiences for maintenances of internal equilibrium, in order to compensate for “its undeveloped, inadequate capacity for homeostasis” (*Fate* 361). Fleda, through her sensory experience at the mothering space of Poynton, became capable of homeostasis; it is the very “happiness” that she feels at Poynton. Fleda, however, in the process of being involved in the family battle for possession, has lost the capability. Fleda finally recovers her bodily power by her “profoundly ‘aesthetic’” act, the act of relinquishing the chance for possession in favor of free, pleasurable and sensuous appreciation.

The novel’s final relocation to Ricks portrays the characters’ recovery of sensory and perceptual power. Mrs. Gereth, now dispossessed, takes residence at Ricks. Mrs. Gereth does not think that she can create an auratic environment without the spoils. Mrs. Gereth writes to Fleda that she has already renounced “action,” and the relationship she can make with the others is only one based on a shared (dis)taste (200). Mrs. Gereth imagines the interior of Ricks as a complete negative image of that of Poynton. The aesthetic effects that Mrs. Gereth creates at Ricks, however, transcend Fleda’s anticipation and the recognition of Mrs. Gereth herself; the interior of Ricks is

not a negative image of that of Poynton, but a complete alternative to it, although the memory of Poynton is conjured up and projected on it. Fleda's reaction parallels that at Poynton point by point: "Fleda's arrival took the form of a surprise very nearly as violent as that of the other time. The elements were different, but the effect, like the other, arrested her on the threshold: she stood there stupefied and delighted at the magic of a passion of which such a picture represented the low-water mark" (201). "The other time" refers not to the first visit to Ricks, but to the one to Poynton. Fleda's plan to tell her "fancy" as she did on the first visit to Ricks is not necessary because its aesthetic effect is as splendid as that at Poynton. Perceiving "the vivid presence of the artist's idea," Fleda "broke out before she even sat down" (202): "'Where on earth did you put your hand on such beautiful things?'" (202). Brown finds in this scene the culmination of the novel's spiritualization of things, or its agenda of "design over detail" (*Sense* 148). The materiality of the individual things is, however, approved by Fleda's question about their origins ("where on earth did you put your hand on such beautiful things?"). Evoking the sense of touch, Fleda's question foregrounds the material presence of the things. Instead of romanticizing the maiden-aunt and her things, Fleda's experience with the interior promotes her to "[break] out" immediately, in contrast to her experience at Poynton where she "dropped on a seat," submitting to the sublime and aggressive visual effects orchestrated by Mrs. Gereth's arrangement. As Peter Betjemann argues, on this final visit to Ricks, "the words emerge simultaneously with the sight of the things. ... For the first time in the novel, language and objects appear synchronous" (221). Fleda's sense impressions are transformed into

expression neither suppressed nor reserved: “Fleda was as feverishly jubilant now as she had of old been anxious and mute” (202). Through the materialization of impression into expression, Fleda begins a collective enterprise of mutual recognition with Mrs. Gereth. Fleda tells Mrs. Gereth that she has unconsciously listened to the maiden-aunt’s voice, “so gentle, so human, so feminine--a faint faraway voice with the little quaver of a heart-break,” through her manipulation of the things; furthermore, she says to Mrs. Gereth that “the arrangement and effect of everything ... shows, even if mechanically and disdainfully exercised, your admirable, your infallible hand. It’s your extraordinary genius; you make things ‘compose’ in spite of yourself” (202). Mrs. Gereth has, like Fleda, registered the impression of the interior of Poynton, and interiorized the spoils into her body; Mrs. Gereth’s memory localized on her hands allows her to “compose” the things almost independently of her will. Fleda calls the impression from the composition “the poetry of ... something sensibly *gone*” (203; emphasis original). “Something sensibly *gone*” is literally the spoils, which are legally missed, but physically weaved in their bodily surface. Critics have tended to interpret the “something” as the physically accumulated cultural capital.³⁰ Yet, the process that Mrs. Gereth and Fleda are engaging in via “something sensibly *gone*” is too materially dense to be abstracted into a symbolic meaning; furthermore, the process cannot be framed in the logic of distinction. Through the exchange of embodied messages, Fleda and Mrs. Gereth are engaging in the ongoing and mutual process of recognition. Mrs. Gereth composes the interior with her bodily localized and accumulated memory; Fleda, in turn, interprets the composition and materializes it again through the vocal

organ. In this process, the things serve to express taste not only as a means of distinction, but also as a means of inclusion, reconnecting Fleda and Mrs. Gereth to each other. They find in each other's expression through the things and their bodies what they have lost and retained simultaneously. The house at Ricks is occupied by two wretched women, but the interior of Ricks cannot be defined as a feminine space in the conventional sense. Fleda defines the impression of the interior with the terms associated with loss: "If there were more there would be too many to convey the impression in which half the beauty resides--the impression somehow of something dreamed and missed, something reduced, relinquished, resigned" (203). We are likely to interpret the impression generated from this interior as a signal of "the [feminine] negative virtues of self-denial, resignation and silence," to use Bourdieu's words. Indeed, John Carlos Rowe argues that "What is expressed in Mrs. Gereth's composition at Ricks is just [the] sense of loss and sacrifice, the objective correlative for feminine powerlessness and community of sympathy and mourning" (102). The impression of the interior that Fleda seeks to capture is indeed proximate to the feminine virtue that Rowe identifies as its meaning; however, as Fleda cannot exactly capture, what the interior expresses is too fragmented, continuous, brief, and slippery to be defined just as feminine virtue. The flexibility of "something sensibly *gone*" pleases Fleda and Mrs. Gereth, and quite unlike a powerless feminine figure, Fleda "ingeniously and triumphantly" voices:

"Ah, there's something here that will never be in the inventory!"

“Does it happen to be in your power to give it a name?” Mrs. Gereth’s face showed the dim dawn of an amusement at finding herself seated at the feet of her pupil.

“I can give it a dozen. It’s a kind of fourth dimension. It’s a presence, a perfume, a touch. It’s a soul, a story, a life. There’s ever so much more here than you and I. We’re in fact just three!” (203)

The impression associated with loss now becomes “a presence, a perfume, a touch.” In a word, the impression is sensuous; it is too sensuous to be abstracted into a theoretical and philosophical logic. Even if this space can be called feminine, the feminine here is not a negative image of the masculine; rather, it designates its alterity. At the margin of the domain of symbolic exchanges, Fleda and Mrs. Gereth finally find the satisfaction for their instinctual needs. Their relationship is based on a shared taste, but it has its root in their bodies; the relation is not symbolic but physical. The companionship that they start again is, in this sense, a radical one. Identifying “sociability” as one of the instinctual needs, Buck-Morss argues that “the mistake is to presume that today’s societies are accurate expressions of this biological instinct” (6). Mrs. Gereth unconsciously “seated at the feet of her pupil,” as, at Poynton, Fleda was involved in a series of motions that the things’ shape and surface qualities invited her to take. Mrs. Gereth and Fleda comprehends each other as substantial entities, and through the physical process of responding to their bodily motions and expressions, they are developing a relation that cannot be abstracted into a single logic but “stops nowhere.” Their relationship is ever transforming according to their feeling and desire in this

space without constraint. Of course, the soothingness of the space of Ricks is predicated on its location on the margin of the public and cultural sphere, and thus the utopian relation between the motherless daughter and the widowed woman might not be stable. The political feebleness that critics have pointed out in James's depiction of the space of Ricks, however, does not attest his political indifference but his awareness of it. As in a Marxist view of aesthetics, the "unfolding of [the] sensuous richness for its own sake" can be achieved only through the "instrumental practice" of political revolution. As he notes in the preface to the novel, James recognizes "the fatal futility of Fact" that his art emulates (*Art* 122). While depicting the process in which the political force of his culture marginalizes two females, in the novel James finally imagines an alternative space, in which they freely and pleasurably valorize "the minute, the partial, and the marginal"; in doing so, James seeks to explode the master social narrative, in which two females are institutionally excluded from the right of possession.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, I have examined the relations between people and things in Henry James's 1897 novel *The Spoils of Poynton*. Against critics who have tended to frame James's works in terms of his detachment from economic and social reality, I have endeavored to show James's deep understanding of material culture, focusing mainly on his representation of characters' experience with things. Contrary to the view that in James's texts material reality is obscured and abstracted, in the novel, James portrays affective and physical relationships between the female characters and things. James, by representing the characters' sense experience in detail, attempts to criticize the patriarchal power structure that undervalues female domestic work and alienates women from the cultural field.

In the first section, I examined James's view of late nineteenth-century consumer culture by exploring his representation of the Brigstocks' domestic interior at Waterbath. The Brigstocks symbolize the commercialization of society. As The Great Exhibition of 1851 exemplified, a new way of displaying market goods or commodities, which Thomas Richards calls spectacle, transformed the relation between people and things. Spectacle, by representing commodities as something more than mere "monetary or material value," transforms the consumption of commodities into a form of cultural activity, and thus legitimates the capitalist system. Mrs. Gereth

has a distaste for the Brigstocks not only because they cannot appreciate her things, but also because they symbolize the alienating force of capitalist society.

In the second section, I explored the interior of Poynton. Contrary to Waterbath, the interior of Poynton is beautifully arranged, and Mrs. Gereth's capacity for splendid home decoration elevates her as an artistic figure. The interior of Poynton manifests its connection to human labor, and its aesthetic effect comes to the viewer as a massive material presence. In portraying the characters' sensory perception in detail, James represents the sensuous, material qualities of the things at Poynton. Drawing our attention to the senses that have traditionally been thought "lower" and "feminine," James expands the category of aesthetic experience, on the one hand, and refuses the taxonomization and hierarchization of the senses. Fleda, in spite of Mrs. Gereth's arrangement and elimination of former origins, through her entire body, seeks to read them on the surface of the interior. Fleda, attempting to weave her physical trace into the prior origins, seeks to revivify Poynton that has been petrified by Mrs. Gereth's splendid yet purposive arrangement.

In the final section, I proceeded to examine the novel's political critique. Philosophical and literary theory has tended to ignore James's bodily mode of writing; because according to its own theoretical agenda, in its closure it tends to repudiate and abstract the physical substance of experience on which it is predicated. Following Naomi Schor's argument about the implication between the tradition of philosophy and aesthetics on the one hand, and the patriarchal power structure on the other, I pointed out that James's attention to sensory perception can be seen as his endeavor to critique

the idealist tradition of aesthetics that maintains its coherence at the expense of the material, the quotidian and the feminine. Mrs. Gereth's practice of collecting and arranging the interior parallels the contemporary professionalization and masculinization of home decoration. Exploring Charles Eastlake's *Hints on the Household Taste*, I argued that its masculine logic undervalues female domestic production and consumption. Motivated by her exclusion from the cultural field by the patriarchal power structure, Mrs. Gereth abstracts the spoils into a symbolic meaning. Contrary to Mrs. Gereth, Fleda, by remaining free from any instrumental ends, ultimately reinstates the spoils in Poynton, and in turn, recovers a physicalized memory of them. James, drawing our attention to the characters' sense experience with things, critically reflects on the ideological constraint that has defined aesthetic experience as transcendent and universal by ignoring bodily valences of sensibility. James, by adopting the characters' sense experience as his major writing modality, opens the possibility of critiquing culture's abstracting, alienating forces.

NOTES

1 See Sarris; Wynne; and Savoy.

2 Grier suggests that the form of communication through objects is “repetitive” because furniture communicates a relatively constricted range of ideas (15). Grier argues that the “communicative skills” of users of this language of objects were demonstrated by people ranging from “new consumer” just learning the basic elements of furnishing to “professional interpreters,” interior decorators (16).

3 Richards defines the “semiotics of commodity spectacle” as having six major foundations: “the establishment of an autonomous iconography for the manufactured object; the use of commemoration to place objects in history; the invention of a democratic ideology for consumerism; the transformation of the commodity into language; the figuration of a consuming subject; and the invention of the myth of the abundant society” (58-59). Lara Kriegel, however, challenges Richards’s interpretation that The Great Exhibition displaced labor. She contends, instead, that in its glorification of the machine, The Great Exhibition did not neglect the artisan’s craft, and that makers, not just the products, were applauded in the exhibition.

4 In his concluding chapter, however, Richards warns that we should be cautious about seeing the new spectacular mode for representation as hegemonic throughout the Victorian era: “Late-Victorian advertisers created a dominant form of specifically capitalist representation that, powerful though it was, left other forms of representation intact. In fact its very dominance implied the existence of alternative forms of representation such as survived within the working class as well as in literary circles and among the avant-garde” (255-56).

5 Marx compares the commodity to a religious fetish, seeing both as “the products of the human brain that appear as autonomous figures endowed with life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (*Capital* 165).

6 Brown argues that according to this shift in advertising’s representational strategies, *The Spoils* focuses on the impression that a character as a “system for registering the effectiveness of physical objects” entertains, rather than on things themselves (“Advertising” 11).

7 The catalogue itself admits that “my manner of speaking is extremely terse” (Richards 63).

8 Mainly arguing about the American reworking of British Aestheticism, Freedman shows that critiques of commodity culture were themselves commodified and consumed.

9 Matthews and McWhirter summarize the bifurcated critical attitudes towards aesthetics in commenting on Adorno: “Adorno anticipates our current confusion about the place of aesthetics--our desire, on the one hand, to recover the specificity of a variant of experience that might be called aesthetic; our suspicion, on the other hand, of the aesthetic’s claim to autonomy and disinterestedness” (xvii).

10 Tamara L. Follini sees the interior of the museum as exemplifying such a dynamic space: “In James’s fiction, a museum’s interior ... may be taken as an emblem of a poetics of spatial cognition, a structure wherein processes of understanding are both stimulated by, and assume the shape of, material presence” (236).

11 As Cecile Mazzuco-Than argues, vibration is another form of the “germs,” minute particles, that are caught in James’s consciousness and are what possibly become inspiration to him; at the same time, some of the characters are themselves vibrating, and the “throbbing subject” signals, in James’s words in *The Princess Casamassima*, “the power to be finely aware,” to feel intensely (62).

12 Miranda El-Rayess’s study focuses on James’s exploration of consumer culture in terms of his representation of the shop window. According to her, “Uniquely emblematic of the structures, strategies, spectacle and allure of a fast-developing commodity culture, this framed display is repeatedly employed by James to explore concerns such as artistic consciousness, class identity, aspiration, narrative and epistemological desire, and literary form” (127).

13 For Miller, like production, consumption provides with us the chance for self-realization and recognition by others. Miller suggests, however, that in the complex societies of late capitalism consumption may involve more personal ways of human self-realization than production does.

14 In an essay on the cultural phenomenon of the “miniature,” Stewart comments on the difficulty of verbal description of the concrete object: “When language attempts to describe the concrete, it is caught in an infinitely self-effacing gesture of an inadequacy, a gesture which speaks to the gaps between our modes of

cognition--those gaps between the sensual, the visual, and the linguistic.” Thus these attempts to describe the miniature threaten an infinity of detail that becomes translated into an infinity of verbality. Language describing the miniature always displays the inadequacy of the verbal” (*Longing* 152). What James devises here can be seen as an alternative to the descriptive effort that Stewart describes in this passage.

15 Victoria Coulson’s explanation of a series of perceptions in Fleda’s experience described in this passage is itself poetic, and thus emulating the complexities and nuances of the passage. Coulson comments that “Through Poynton, James redefines the aesthetic as the synaesthetic, rethinking language as a medium of polysensory communication . . . Poynton is an holistic environment of experiential continuity; when visuality is invoked, it is always part of a sensory spectrum of experience that projects the reader’s body as a sensorium” (328).

16 Coulson succinctly defines Poynton not only as a motherly space but also as a figure of the child: “For Fleda and for Mrs. Gereth, Poynton is both mother and child, both the baby about to be torn from the “ach[ing] . . . breast” of its creator and the parent to whom Fleda imagines “clinging” for protection” (324).

17 Bachelard, too, suggests that the dwelling space provides “continuity” and “integratedness” (6-7).

18 Paul B. Armstrong argues that “it is herself she touches in touching [the things] and herself who returns her touch” (194).

19 Depending on the traditional understanding of aesthetic experience, Simone Francescato argues that “[Mrs. Gereth’s identification with her things], characterized by the object’s total dependence on their owner, is very similar to what Simmel refers to by *sensual enjoyment*, and is linked to [her] replacement of the sense of sight, traditionally associated to aesthetic activity, with the sense of touch as primary means for appreciation” (146; emphasis original). On the other hand, Otten does not distinguish Mrs. Gereth’s obsessive touch from Fleda’s seemingly neutral one. Otten’s attention to the sense of touch in the novel is careful and historically grounded; however, he cannot take into account the fact that the sense of touch inevitably reflects the subject’s desire because he limits himself to the “superficial reading.”

20 Otten similarly points out that the commended uniqueness of the individual in home decoration manuals was actually “tinged with the irony” that characterizes “any mass-market discourse of individuality”: the manuals, while rejecting uniformity, presupposed the ideal type of uniqueness. In the manuals,

“individuals slide ... from being construed as a matter of uniqueness to a matter of being like other people who are individuals,” and individuality transforms into “the class of individuals” (49).

21 Similarly, Mazucco-Than explains that as is made explicit in New York Edition Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, in James’s writing the dominant gendered metaphors are central: “embroidery and nurturing,” on the one hand, and “architecture and business,” on the other (51). In one of her most direct formulations, Mazucco-Than argues that “[Jamesian] work of art is less the product of integration or assimilation than of the tension between masculine and feminine characteristics that depend on each other for their own definition” (17).

22 Coulson suggests that “James’s attention to bodily experience makes possible a political critique of cultures in which certain bodies are effaced” (330).

23 On this point, in a similar way, Diana Fuss suggests: “If architectural historians treat the domestic interior more literally than figuratively, ignoring the metaphorical in favor of the functional, literary critics, for their part, tend to treat the domestic interior as pure figuration. Literature scholars typically view houses as metaphors for something else, and rarely as important constructs in their own right” (3).

24 Coulson grounds her argument on this quotation, too (326).

25 Otten similarly explains that in the contemporary effort to delineate “patterns” needed to establish the ideal home, the debut issue of one decorating magazine begins by suggesting to readers “not what they need but what they need to get rid of” (44).

26 Freedman argues that “aestheticism’s valorizing of aesthetic connoisseurship led to the creation of the profession, both within the academy and without, of the art expert, the person whose job is it was to search out and authenticate great works of art for clients and to advise those clients as to which art they should and should not purchase” (54).

27 Sarris sees, however, Mrs. Gereth’s, and therefore James’s, claim as “politically feeble,” because “it fails to rectify or even address the radical socioeconomic conditions underpinning female ‘secondary Castration’” (71). Similarly, John Carlos Rowe argues that the novel falls short of “inflam[ing] the hearts of Fleda and Mrs. Gereth” (104).

28 Among the recent criticisms of the novel, for example, Wynne, seeing Fleda as one of “the dependent, vulnerable heroines of nineteenth-century fiction,”

undervalues her critical function in the novel. In a similar vein, seeing Mrs. Gereth as a figure of the New Woman, Wynne neglects the latent but powerful patriarchal power structure that Mrs. Gereth cannot attack because of her forced complicity in it, and undercuts James's attempt at political critique of the patriarchal system of property transmission.

29 We cannot see Marx's political agenda as James's, but they share the view of sensory perception as the ground for aesthetic experience.

30 See Brown, *Sense* p148. Otten, p52.

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