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插畫家的肖像：〈真品〉的美學與倫理

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摘　要

批評家一向認為亨利・詹姆士的〈真品〉闡揚創作者如何超越真實而創造藝術。少部分的批評家則注意到故事的道德主題，即悲憫的胸懷才能造就偉大的藝術。然而這兩種創作法則在故事中卻互相抵觸。

本文認為〈真品〉的藝術家敘述者其實是詹姆士的負面教材。小說家藉由評比攝影、插畫與肖像三種視覺藝術，譏刺敘述者無法超脫浪漫的理想主義進入創意的寫實主義。攝影被視為缺乏創意與深度，而插畫卻力求捕捉特定類型之共通特質，唯有肖像兼顧了形似與神似。不同的美學目的更影響了藝術家與模特兒之間的倫理。敘述者做為插畫家，只將職業模特兒當作道具；唯因他夢想成為肖像畫家，才能同情落魄求職的紳士淑女。可惜他欠缺觀察力與包容心，終究未能將人生的真實轉化為藝術的真實。

關鍵詞：亨利．詹姆士、〈真品〉、肖像畫、美學、倫理

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The Portrait of the Illustrator: Reconciling the Esthetic and the Ethical in “The Real Thing”

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Abstract

Henry James’ “The Real Thing” has traditionally been read as a lesson in art: namely, that art is a transformation rather than a copy of reality. A few critics have also commented on the moral theme of the story: that human compassion makes a better artist. The two readings, however, conflict with each other, because the artist in the story is forced to turn his back on his non-professional models to maintain his artistic integrity, while conceding that his art suffers “a permanent harm.”

This paper argues that the artist-narrator of the story actually fails the test to pass from romantic idealism to creative realism, which would have reconciled the esthetic with the ethical. The three art forms in the story—photography, illustration and portraiture—reflect James’ appraisal of the creative process. Photography, as literary realism, lacks both creativity and depth. Illustration, meanwhile, though the narrator stresses imagination, seeks generalizations at the expense of individuality. Only portraiture achieves both verisimilitude and character. The differences in esthetic purposes affect the ethical relation between the artist and his subject. The illustrator-narrator rarely treats his professional models as more than props on a stage. His ambition to become a portraitist, on the other hand, leads him to sympathize with the Monarchs. Yet his lack of the penetrating eye and of an impartial understanding

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suggests that he finally falls short of his aspirations. James’ tale thus teaches, by a negative example, not so much how to transcend life to achieve the real thing in art, but how to transform the real thing in life into the real thing in art.

Keywords: Henry James, “The Real Thing”, portrait painting, esthetics, ethics

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The Portrait of the Illustrator: Reconciling the Esthetic and the Ethical in "The Real Thing"

Li, Hsin-ying

Henry James' "The Real Thing" has traditionally been read as a lesson in representational art: after futile employment of an impoverished genteel couple as models, the reading goes, the artist/narrator of the tale comes to realize that the real thing in art is a transformation rather than a literal copying of reality. Indeed James himself explains in his *Prefaces*: "The question thus thrown up by [the Major and his wife] was of whether their not having to make believe *would* in fact serve them, and above all serve their interpreter as well as the borrowed graces of the comparatively sordid professionals who had had, for dear life, to *know how* (which was to have learnt how) to do something" (283-84). Later critics basically adhere to or respond to this reading, with an eye on the possible ironic treatment and cultural implications of the above moral. M. D. Uroff examines the self-delusion of the artist and the Monarchs and calls the short story "an object lesson in perceptual hazards" (41), while Pauline Lester further explores the comical elements in the narrator's struggle for artistic maturity. More recently, Kris Lackey comments on the class conflict underlying the narrator's pursuit of esthetic control, as Priscilla L. Walton reconsiders art and creativity from a feminist perspective. Moshe Ron and Susan Bazargan, on the other hand, bring a postmodern awareness to the master's discussion of "reality," and Peter Rawlings regards the tale's commitment to imaginative reproduction as James' resistance to mass production and easy

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consumption.

Not so many critics have expounded what Earle Labor calls the moral theme of the tale, though—a reading that considers James' short story a lesson in human relations. The narrator gains not only esthetic insight, this reading says, but an ethical apprehension of human compassion: his painful dismissal of the Monarchs at the end of the story has made him a better man though a lesser artist. James' sympathetic treatment of the luckless couple and the artist's final tearful confession indeed seem to support this moral as well, so that David Toor, for instance, recognizes "a depth in the Major" (35) and believes the couple become scapegoats of an incompetent artist, while Pauline Lester also notes that "the Monarchs, as aging lovers, are calculated to attract the audience's sympathy" (37).

The problem, however, is that these two readings, the esthetic and the ethical, proffer conflicting lessons in the actual telling of the story. Much as the narrator sympathizes with the Monarchs, his art cannot accommodate his humanistic concerns. He must send them away because his charity interferes with his creativity—he cannot bear to have them do menial work in his studio, so he dismisses them to face possible starvation. The implication here seems to be that moral awareness does not and cannot always translate into action in art, or for that matter in most human contexts. Virginia Llewellyn Smith implies as much, in her discussion of the dilemma between art and the "world," when she says, "The lesson of 'The Real Thing' is that the rigorous standards of art, the basis of the painter's security, of his integrity and self-respect, can't always cope in the context of life" (224). Yet what then is the worth of moral insight in the creative process? Earle Labor's answer, as would probably come first to most readers' minds, is that the artist's moral gain enables him to achieve true greatness. We expect the narrator's moral growth to introduce a mature phase in his career. In truth, however, he finally suffers what his critic friend Jack Hawley describes as "a permanent harm," a diversion "into false ways."[1] Does this then suggest that an ethical perspective does harm to an artist? The ending of the story even throws doubt on the original esthetic reading, because the narrator's renewed confidence in creative imagination is supposed to restore order to his studio

1 James, "The Real Thing" 215. All subsequent references are hereafter given parenthetically.

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and his prospects, but his encounter with the Monarchs has veered him permanently away from his proven methods of imaginative mimesis, without inspiring a new methodology that effectively adopts his finer understanding of the human condition.

"The Real Thing" is actually then a tale of an artist who fails to reconcile the esthetic with the ethical, the visionary with the real, to pass from romantic idealism on to creative realism, which James discusses through different art forms: photography, illustration, and portrait painting. These art forms, so the story shows, differ in their demands on the artist's creative faculties and his sympathetic engagement with his subject. The superficial verisimilitude of photography lacks imagination and the human touch, while the narrator's illustrations err in their total disregard of social reality. The successful portrait that captures both physical likeness and inner nature corresponds better to James' idea of great art. The story deals not so much with what the real thing in art is, seeing that the narrator fails to become a commendable artist, but rather with what to do artistically with the real thing in life. A sensitive and profound understanding of this reality, which requires both imagination and heart, helps the artist produce works that are true to the complexities of life, in whichever sense of the word "real." This model in visual art holds true for novel writing as well, the eminence of which in letters James compares to that of portraiture in painting.

The hierarchy of art forms implied in the story indicates James appraisal of the creative process. The Monarchs, we are told, have enjoyed great success as models for *carte-de-visite* photographers selling celebrity portraits like modern picture postcards. The narrator, on the other hand, though considering himself a serious worker in black-and white, regards his illustrations as his pot-boilers and aspires to make his fame and fortune through portrait painting: "I couldn't get the honours, to say nothing of the emoluments, of a great painter of portraits out of my head," he confesses (189). He further criticizes Mrs. Monarch, despite her photogenic charms, for looking "singularly like a bad illustration" (191) and for making his drawing look "like a photograph or a copy of a photograph" (201). James, before his New York edition, shared similar views on the standings of these genres, which explains why, in an early review, he draws an analogy between Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and

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Velázquez's portraits, and between the latest fashionable novel and Matthew Brady's daguerreotype (*Literary Criticism* 946). His 1888 instruction to the illustrator Joseph Pennell, who was providing pictures for his essay "London," also specifies that the images "ought to be freely and fancifully drawn; *not* with neat, photographic 'views'" (*Letters* 3: 218). As for illustration, the art enthusiast seems to have made few comments other than in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, where he jealously disparages this parasitic art for its redundant service to realistic literary works. In praise of John Singer Sargent, meanwhile, James holds that "[there] is no greater work of art than a great portrait" ("Sargent" 227).

Photography, the art form of which the Monarchs suit best as models, represents in the story literal realism. It can accurately capture Mrs. Monarch's merits as "the Beautiful Statue"—the smartness of her figure, the smallness of her waist, the orthodox crook of her elbow, the conventional angle at which she holds her head, the mathematical neatness of her back hair, and the tension of her tight stays—while allowing for her lack of expression.[2] This seemingly lack of creativity and depth give it an even more dubious claim to art than illustration—a rather common 19th-century view which the narrator conveniently echoes to elevate his own profession. Indeed, the controversy over art vs. photography flared up almost immediately following the invention of the daguerreotype. Charles Baudelaire, despising photography as a product of industry, labeled it as "the servant of sciences and arts—but the very humble servant" (113), while Honoré Daumier ridiculed Félix Nadar in an illustration for finally "raising photography to the height of art" by taking the first aerial photographs on a hot air balloon.[3] The major censure was that photography, being a shallow copy of reality, lacked what Baudelaire called the "spiritual momentum" of imagination. Understandably, a psychological realist like James would feel no less disdainful than the romantic Baudelaire did, if not more so, toward photography's external mimesis. His distaste for "that hideous inexpressiveness of the mechanical document" ("Picture" 142) certainly echoes the Frenchman's censure.

2 James here alludes to the earliest photography that required strong light and long exposure, when in fact the wet collodion process had shortened exposure to 2 to 20 seconds in 1851, and by 1878 gelatine dry plates made possible instantaneous photographs with exposures of a fraction of a second. See, for instance, Gernsheim 16.

3 See Daumier's illustration in Gernsheim 58.

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James' narrator thus emphatically contrasts his working habits with the Monarchs' suitability for photography to conform illustration, at least his own kind, to the ideals of high art. Too many photo sessions have made Mrs. Monarch "insurmountably stiff," so he says, while the artist himself prefers to place his costumed models in suggestive poses and let his imagination take flight, finally producing drawings which totally recreate the *tableaux vivants* before him. The narrator's self-image as an inspired artist who transcends the limitations of his subject matter characterizes him as a romantic, which, through association with established ideals of the creative process, places him above the literal realism of photographers. His method of creating illustrations in fact resembles history painting—the narrative paintings of classical and religious subjects, which was the leading painterly form in the eighteenth century, with portrait painting coming second, as Lawrence I. Lipking notes in *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-century England*. Though the status of both forms had declined precipitously after mid-nineteenth century due to social, economical and political changes, the narrator's advocacy of past prestige would be, if less avant-garde, also less controversial.[4] Photography, on the other hand, did not begin to claim, until a decade after the writing of this tale, the status of fine art through the development of pictorialism, which enhanced the pictorial elements in prints to create the look of paintings or drawings.[5] Coincidentally, photography's conformity to the artistic conventions of a recognized art form by downplaying the mechanical attributes of its medium parallels the narrator's attempts to establish his artistic authenticity by minimizing the technical routine of his profession.

4 Painters began to take more interest in depictions of contemporary history, daily life, landscape and still life after mid-century. Claude Rivet of the story, who only painted landscape, for instance, would have echoed the Romanticist's interest in Nature, while Miss Churm and Oronte would have been excellent subjects for genre painting and Realism. The narrator's ideas of painting are thus in fact somewhat outdated, by which James might have meant to undermine his artistic credibility. However, the achievements of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), whom the narrator might emulate, show that portrait painting was still a respectable and profitable artistic pursuit at the turn of the century, though future generations would know him as the last great literal portrait painter, and he would abandon portraiture around 1906 to work primarily in watercolor.

5 See Nadel's study of Alvin Langdon Coburn's photo frontispieces to the New York Edition.

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Yet for all the creativity of the narrator's treatment of the subject, this same 19th-century stress on imagination would nevertheless question the illustrator's independence and originality. In fact, one branch of illustration, the earliest news illustrations, was susceptible to the same attacks on photography for their journalistic realism. Book illustrators, meanwhile, as mere embellishers of novels, seemed to common prejudice to depend on writers for themes and types. The later failing of Hablot Knight Browne, Charles Dicken's principal illustrator, for instance, is often attributed to the belief that "[his] imagination, which had become increasingly dependent on the kind of external stimulus Dickens had provided so well, was not roused by other authors" (Cohen 121-22). Indeed, although earlier illustrators such as the immensely popular William Hogarth had dominated his collaborations with writers, illustrators became secondary to writers ever since Dickens.[6] The need to present himself as an artist in his own right perhaps explains why the narrator goes so far as to claim that he composes pictures for the stories in *The Cheapside* "without the exasperation of reading them" (196), and why he claims that, while "the rarest of the novelists" gives him a lead, he is "left to do [his] work" with "a margin for interpretation" (207) in the deluxe edition project.

Despite the artist's emphasis on ingenuity, the narrator's account of his literary taste and creative process brings into question illustration's nature as representational art. The narrator's stress on imagination and creativity, on suggestion and reinvention, recapitulates the traditional notion, dating as far back as Aristotle, that the artist is a creator rather than an imitator. Yet what indeed does our narrator create? Most critics, mindful of the title of the story and its several reappearances in the text, maintain that the artist creates a representation of reality, however they may interpret that reality. But what "real thing" exactly are the illustrations supposed to refer to? One referent would seem to be an "objective reality," the socio-historical context of the narrator's era. As the text offers no complaints on this account, James seems to allow us to presume that the illustrations adhere to the general impression of what society and society people were like in those days. Other referents would be the books commissioned to the illustrator and his models.

6 See Cohen 5, and her chapters on George Cruikshank and Robert Seymour.

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The competition between these two sources of imagination create the artist's dilemma, however, causing him to lament, "When I drew the Monarchs I couldn't anyhow get away from them—get into the character I wanted to represent" (206). Yet this dilemma actually comes from his confusion of illustration with portrait painting—no doubt the result of his private aspirations—since the former should be anchored to the novel while the latter must remain true to the sitter.

A quick look at the two genres shows that portrait painting and illustration stress different aspects of the creative process and even different artistic talents and personal gifts. Portraiture in particular demands the rendering of a physical likeness of the sitter. A faithful likeness includes, aside from outward appearance, the capturing of the inner spirit. The successful portrait painter therefore needs to possess a keen perception of the particular qualities of human character and mind. In comparison, the illustrator does not wish the identity of his model to be detectable in his picture. The drawn figure, rather than reminding the viewer of a certain individual, should suggest a type. Gordon Aymar's method of achieving physical likeness in his portraits may help shed light on the different goals between the two artistic practices. Aymar, a professional portrait painter, claims to establish the individuality of his sitters by marking their deviation from the ideal Greek head, "which combined the perfections of nature gathered from many individuals" (57). Whereas the portrait painter accentuates idiosyncrasies in his subject, the illustrator, not unlike the classical sculptors, tries to efface such particularities and generalize, i.e. create a "type." The popular 19th-century illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, for instance, so successfully captured the essence of the American Girl with pen and ink that several fashionable ladies who volunteered to pose for him all claimed themselves to be "the original Gibson Girl."[7]

The narrator's imaginative reinvention does not then necessarily serve portraiture better than photography's superficial mimesis. Even Jean-Baptiste Ingres avowed that "It is to this exactitude [of photography] that I would like to attain. It is admirable—but one must not say so" (qtd. in Gernsheim 34). Little

7 See Downey's biography of Gibson in *Portrait of an Era as Drawn by C. D. Gibson*.

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surprise, then, that the narrator should be jealous of portrait photographs.[8] The Monarchs, moreover, despite their lack of means, likely represent the tastes of his potential patrons. Their idea of paintings as kin to photographs, as well as their great satisfaction in "the drawings you make from us [that] look exactly like us" (206), suggests that his liberal interpretation might not always please his sitters. If his customers judge portraits by the verisimilitude of features and the exactness of details, photography has an obvious advantage. However, the court painter Alfred Chalon perhaps hit upon the *raison d'être* of his profession when he replied to young Queen Victoria's question as to whether he feared the new developments in photographic technology: "Ah non, Madame! Photographie can't flattère" (qtd. in Gernsheim 34). The painter might not always have to "improve" on his subject, but, within the context of this story, he should excel in interpreting the personality of his sitter and in breathing life and character into his portrait—the latter of which might require the narrator's professed kind of creativity, although his practice in illustration has marred his abilities for the former.

Indeed the narrator's eye for type, as an illustrator, conflicts with his perception of individuality, as a would-be portrait painter. The point shows most obviously in his disparate treatment of his models and his would-be sitters. The narrator seems to indicate his artistic inclination when he professes that

> I adored variety and range, I cherished human accidents, the illustrative note; I wanted to characterise closely, and the thing in the world that I most hated was the danger of being ridden by a type. … I held that everything was to be sacrificed sooner than character. When [some of my friends] claimed that the obsessional form could easily *be* character I retorted, perhaps superficially, "Whose?" It couldn't be everybody's—it might end in being nobody's. (202)

8 Not only did photography threaten the livelihood of portrait painters, but it would furthermore dominate book illustration by the end of the nineteenth century. It had the advantage of providing timely and pertinent pictures, besides eliminating both the illustrator and the engraver and thus cutting the cost of illustration considerably for the publisher. See, for instance, Mott's *A History of American Magazines 1885-1905*. The narrator as illustrator and would-be portrait painter is therefore doubly threatened by photography.

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In truth, however, if a portrait painter need only scrutinize his sitters for variety and range, an illustrator must nonetheless fall back upon his imagination to invent a diversity of "types" with "character," because his models could, at best, be one or the other, but very rarely both. In his capacity as illustrator, though, our narrator seems to prefer models who are neither. His professional models can be everybody and anybody, exactly because they are nobody. "[T]he value of such a model as Miss Churm reside[s] precisely in the fact that she ha[s] no positive stamp" (202), he argues, while Oronte has "in a wonderful degree the *sentiment de la pose*" (206). His method of transforming his models with the "alchemy of art" makes him a romantic and idealist who sees his subjects not as they are but as they should be—in his composition. Miss Churm can be a Russian princess or a shepherdess, because in his mind's eyes he never sees her as a freckled cockney who cannot spell.

From an ethical point of view, the narrator merely looks upon his models as mannequins in costumes, but rarely as people with their own feelings or troubles. He draws his illustrations by arranging them as properties on a stage, and his models are lost in his drawings "as the dead who go to heaven are lost" (207). In other words, he kills them off imaginatively to transform them into his characters. To maintain the magical touch of this violent reincarnation, though, the artist needs to block out his awareness of his models' connections with the world beyond his canvas. Thus the few personal details of Miss Churm that the narrator ever dwells upon, aside from her talent of representing a wide range of characters, are mainly her means of transportation, her education and pronunciation, her drinking, and a bit of family information (a cockney with seven sisters). About Oronte we are only told his nationality and his adventure to England. It is not even as though the narrator discovers an "inner nobility" or other psychological richness in the pair. He pays little heed to Miss Churm's class sensitivity when she takes offense at serving tea to Mrs. Monarch, while all of Oronte's attitudes and expressions only strike him as picturesque. His relation with them is strictly professional, even in regard to his perception of them. He can see them in character only by not seeing them in life; their identities are not psychologically registered, so he can create new ones for them with each assignment.

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His perception of the Monarchs, in comparison, is closer to portrait sitters. For one thing, they demand him to see them for what they are—impoverished satellites of the fashionable world, yet nevertheless a gentleman and a lady in manners, values and lifestyle. They present before him their peculiar distress, they encourage him to study their features, and the husband tries to be sociable. The artist, meanwhile, greets them with an eye for their distinctive traits when he first mistakes them for patrons, and later begins to take a personal interest in them after he learns about their awkward situation. He mentally sketches their history, their present plight, their living conditions, even their wardrobe and their marital ties, in addition to taking note of their personalities, their literary tastes, their unexpressed opinions of his practices, and their attitude towards his other models. Furthermore, he is mindful of their dependence on him, their judgments on his artistic choices, and their wounded pride. In short, they become real people to him, with emotions and thoughts and fixed identities—so that he refrains from asking the Major to dress up as a footman, and finally cannot bear to see them empty his slops.

The artistic consequence of this human recognition, however, is that the narrator cannot adapt the Monarchs for use in his illustrations. He complains of his inability to "get away from them" and "get into the character" of the novels, meanwhile lamenting that Mrs. Monarch comes out as "the real thing, but always the same thing" (201). Ironically, he can imagine them, but he cannot reimagine them; he can see through them, but he cannot see pass them. The couple indeed lack Miss Churm's talent for imitation and Oronte's suggestive charm, but, more importantly, his awareness of their authenticity prevents him from manipulating them creatively. Richard Hocks rightly observes that the Monarchs' "very inappropriateness for his illustrations is at once bound up with his own aspirations for portraiture, character, [and] individuality" (128). Simply put, his employment of the Monarchs produces not illustrations but portraits—drawings which, according to the narrator, look like photographs or copies of photographs, and which, by the narrator's standards, are thus inferior portraits.

One of the lessons the aspiring artist learns from his encounter with the Monarchs is what he lacks as a portrait painter. For all his avowed interest in individuality, he is no analyst of character. From his very first sight of them he

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claims to have immediately seized their "type": "I had already settled what I would do with it. Something that wouldn't absolutely have pleased them, I afterwards reflected" (189). This unfavorable type no doubt reflects his prejudice against the upper class—a rather ironic stance for a portrait painter, considering that he regards them as his main subjects and target patrons. Indeed, even though he cares to muse about the Monarchs' background, his supposition of their form and trappings, their country-house visits, their "deep intellectual repose" (193), all conform to stereotype, as Kris Lackey observes. The text seems to offer no evidence that this stereotyping might misrepresent them, but the narrator goes no deeper than this shallow reading of his subjects. His drawings also focus on the exterior—the Major's trousers, his wife's back hair, and her lines and figure. It is true that the couple discourage the reproduction of their faces, which register their identity and their private life, but the narrator also prefers sketching Mrs. Monarch in "positions in which the face [is] somewhat averted or blurred; she abound[s] in ladylike back views and *profils perdus*" he explains (203). His hasty conclusion that Mrs. Monarch's expressionless face represents an intellectual and emotional blank prevents him from probing her psychological depth. He sees her as a lady and always the same lady because in his mind's eye he studies her once, but not very carefully, and forms his opinion once and for all. Not incidentally, the narrator's "innate preference for the represented subject over the real one," because one is sure of appearances while authenticity is a profitless question (194), bespeaks a tendency to focus too much on superficiality, at the risk of seeing only what the subject is willing or able to disclose.

For James, the penetrating eye and an impartial understanding make the portrait painter, and he especially stresses the latter in his discussion of portraiture:

> the highest result is achieved when to this element of quick perception a certain faculty of brooding reflection is added. I use this name for want of a better, and I mean the quality in the light of which the artist sees deeply into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, enlarges and humanizes the technical problem. ("Sargent" 228)

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Though he grants that not all subjects belong to the "pictorial type," his advice to Mrs. Mahlon Sands, who was sitting for Sargent, indicates that the artist has the responsibility to overcome this technical problem. "[The portrait is] *his* affair," he wrote her,

> yours is only to be as difficult for him as possible; and the more difficult you are the more the artist (worthy of the name), will be condemned to worry over you, repainting, revolutionizing, till he, in a rage of ambition and admiration, arrives at the thing that satisfies him and that enshrines and perpetuates you. (*Letters* 3: 456)

In other words, character is an enigma the worthy artist must strive to solve, from which effort "a picture of a knock-down insolence of talent and truth of characterization" such as Sargent's may arise.[9]

James is therefore discrediting the narrator's artistic competence when he endows Mrs. Monarch, for all her rigidity and reserve, with pictorial possibilities. When the artist misunderstands Mrs. Monarch's service to Miss Churm and she "quiet[s him] with a glance [he] shall never forget," he confesses that he "should like to have been able to paint *that*" (214). He begins to appreciate her acts as "the most heroic personal services" done with "noble humility," at the same time conceding that he has not the mastery to capture such emotional complexity on canvas. As Hawley suggests, "[a] studio is a place to learn to see" (211); ironically, the Monarchs teach the narrator to see his own artistic strengths and weaknesses, and to understand the limits of his methodology. The imaginative transformation of one's subject, which many critics take to be James' last word in creative art, can produce fine illustrations, which the narrator and also the author nevertheless hold as inferior art products. A sympathetic study of the subject, however, may create a great portrait, the highest possible achievement in art.

Seen in this light, James recommends not so much the transfiguration of an unseemly reality into purely imaginary and idealized types than the study of the world for what it is to capture the feel of this imperfect life. The narrator's awareness of these two creative methods and his unsuccessful conversion from one

9 See James' review of Sargent's *Mrs. Carl Meyer and Her Children*, quoted in Tintner 94.

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to the other are evident in what Hawley calls "the permanent harm" done to him. Most critics overlook this final comment by Hawley, some because they question Hawley's credentials as an arbiter of tastes, for instance Uroff, who dismisses this character as an unreliable observer. However, these critics also indirectly argue for his credibility, since we must trust his criticism of the "Monarch" illustrations if the narrator is to learn any esthetic lesson in the story. We therefore have no reason to suspect Hawley's final judgment of the narrator's artistic development, even if we may not agree with the reasons he gives. Hawley is, like the narrator earlier, "still—perhaps ignobly—satisfied" with professional models and the illustrations created from, or in spite of, them (194). The fact that he judges illustrations with no less severity than he would more "serious" branches of art indicates that he regards the narrator as a professional illustrator instead of an apprentice portraitist. His approval of the narrator's earlier drawings for *The Cheapside*, meanwhile, suggests that he appreciates idealized subjects, so that, dissatisfied with the narrator's representation of the Monarchs, he complains that "I don't like your *types*" (209, my italics). The tale's ironic treatment of this art critic, who paints badly himself and heartlessly rejects people for their social class, perhaps reflects James' criticism of Hawley's particular kind of taste in pictures and his ideas of the artist-subject relationship—the kind of taste and ideas the narrator comes to reexamine at the end of the story, thus incurring Hawley's disapproval.

In the very least, Hawley's comments indicate a doubtful change in the narrator's artistic style, which the latter concedes with earnest humility:[10] "If it be true I'm content to have paid the price—for the memory" (215). Artistically speaking, the memory is the lost portrait of Mrs. Monarch, what he knows he could have drawn and likely has attempted to draw since. Ethically speaking, the experience teaches him to look at his subjects with a new awareness. Hocks considers the fundamental implication of this "harmful" memory to be ironically a

10 Labor maintains that the narrator's concession is a "willingness to renounce his talent" and that "only through such an attitude may the artist achieve true greatness." Even so, the narrator has not achieved that greatness in his art yet, since Labor also argues earlier that his involvement in mankind "may have blurred his esthetic perspective" (475).

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gain in esthetics as well as ethics: " there is always character and meaning to be found in even the most unlikely circumstances, individuality and depth in even what appears the quintessential case of surface" (133). This lesson should, however, be applicable to not only the Monarchs but the lower-class models as well. Indeed the couple's interaction with his professional models calls the narrator's attention, for the first time, to the latter's inner life, as he notices Miss Churm and Oronte are "evidently rather mystified and awestruck" in the final scene (215). Sam Whitsitt similarly points out that Mrs. Monarch's gesture toward Miss Churm "begins to constitute a presence of Churm herself, an identity of the person, the effacement of whom is the basis of the artist's aesthetics" (311). This challenge to the artist's definition of art and self, Whitsitt believes, forces the artist to defer his identity as portraitist or illustrator; yet the potential of these professional models as portrait sitters must occur to him later on, especially as genre painting and Realism come into fashion. What Hawley finally criticizes for having too much character then probably dissatisfies the narrator because it does not have enough. Part of the problem is the art form of illustration itself, which suffers from specification, but part of it has to do with the artist, who fails to successfully combine, or to effectively separate, the two creative modes. This failure shows in the narrator's final dismissal of the Monarchs, since he still cannot find a way to employ the portrait sitters as models for his illustrations, yet their memory still haunts the work he does with professional models.

Whether or not the two creative processes can be, or should be, combined is a question the tale does not address, since it focuses rather on whether the narrator becomes a portrait painter or remains an illustrator. While admitting to his artistic ambition, the narrator poses a riddle to the reader: "whether because the aspiration was to lead to everything or to nothing I leave the reader to guess" (189); the aspiration seems to come to nothing, though, because the experience should be harmful only to an illustrator, and also because the narrator does not try to paint Mrs. Monarch during the last two weeks of the couple's employment, even though he realizes her pictorial possibilities. As such, the discharge of the Monarchs, what Bruce Henricksen attacks as "[turning] one's back on the ethical dimensions of one's actions" in the excuse of an esthetic principle (479), is actually then an artistic defeat

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as well. Were the narrator to become a portraitist, he might have resolved or at least confronted, on top of his creative dilemma, all his other interior conflicts, be it the socio-economic politics Henricksen discusses, or Pauline Lester's psychological complexes, or Kris Lackey's class issues—too much, perhaps, to ask of a less than idealized artist.

Yet "The Real Thing" is supposed to be "a *magnificent* lesson," as James wrote in his *Notebooks*, in art and also in other aspects of life, and James indeed proposes the portraitist as the ideal artist, who is a better man for being a better painter. This model in visual art is furthermore a model in all creative arts, as James' emphasis on the painter's sympathetic engagement with an authentic subject echoes his ideas on creative writing in "The Art of Fiction." In this essay, where James draws a fruitful analogy between painting and novel writing, he defines fiction as "a personal, a direct impression of life" (33). He then tells the story of Anne Thackeray, who wrote a tale about the French Protestant youth based upon a glimpse through an open door of some young Parisian Protestants at seat around a table. James goes on to praise the lady novelist for having the power "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern," in short, for her imaginative elaboration on the subject (35). Aside from the stress on imagination, though, it is important to note that the seed of the tale here is an impression of what the Monarchs would call "the real thing." The Jamesian advocacy of creative imagination therefore presupposes a novelist with a sensitive consciousness, i.e. an artist "on whom nothing is lost" (35), who casts his eagle eye on the world to "catch the color of life itself" (44). James likewise regards experience as the basis of creativity in his preface to *The American* when he writes:

> The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated. (*Art* 33-34)

For the romancer who, like the illustrator, cuts the cable, James cannot but feel a

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"rueful sense of [his] affront to verisimilitude" (37).

One can argue, of course, that the narrator also draws inspiration from past impressions of the upper crust, not only from the models in his studio. Even so, the narrator is guilty of not remaining true to his experience, since he suppresses his prejudices against his subject matter to produce romanticized drawings of ladies and gentlemen. The same holds true if one were to argue that the narrator expands on his knowledge of humanity and society in general, seeing that James presents him as an incompetent and not always compassionate observer. During the last sitting described in the tale, the narrator insists that "*this* [is] at least the ideal thing" (214)—idealization meaning the creative habits that make his illustrations as insincere as the fashionable novels of *The Cheapside*. Such novels become "a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds," which James opposes on the grounds that:

> Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous forces keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* arrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. It is not uncommon to hear an extraordinary assurance of remark in regard to this matter of rearranging, which is often spoken of as if it were the last word in art. ("Art" 39)

If the publisher of the deluxe edition indeed has better taste, the "permanent harm" done by the Monarchs possibly helped the narrator secure the remaining books. Likewise, James finds the saving grace of *The American*, an unintended romance, in "the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature [protagonist]" (*Art* 37).

It is perhaps then not incidental that James should call one of his early major works a "portrait" of a lady, and that he should stress in its preface "this enveloping air of the artist's humanity—which gives the last touch to the worth of the work" (*Art* 45). James advocates a similar ethical esthetics in "The Real Thing," as Labor suggests; yet, contrary to what Labor argues, James does so by offering the narrator

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as a negative example. The free play of this artist's imagination produces illustrations that lack moral integrity, while his insensitivity to psychological complexities limits his possible achievement as a portraitist. Henricksen, on the other hand, though he criticizes the ethical deficiency of the narrator due to the historical and economic factors underlying the artistic creativity in the story, yet supposes that James overtly discusses the complicity between art and power while the narrator falsely believes in artistic transcendence and the disinterestedness of the artist; the story ends, he maintains, in discrediting a depoliticized formalism that "minimizes the directly mimetic or realistic in artistic representation" (487) and the artist who is "blind to the real, social implications of his action" (480). My reading, however, supposes that the narrator realizes his limitations and that James still proposes, through his tribute to portraiture, an esthetic principle that favors an empathetic yet penetrating, verisimilar yet original representation of the subject matter, and that this principle encourages the artist to confront social realities and to treat them with sincerity. Such a reading furthermore resolves the conflict in earlier readings between James' presentation of a serious artistic lesson and his ironic treatment of the narrator. The master implements the ethical esthetics he advocates in his ironic yet sympathetic rendering of the Monarchs and of the narrator. As Hocks and Whitsitt suggest, the story itself is the loss portrait of the Monarchs restored to its full dimensions. Regardless of whether James alone creates the picture, as Hocks observes, or Whitsitt's split narrator does it, this study is clearly based on a different esthetic than that of the narrator's illustrations—one that can transform the real thing in life into the real thing in art.

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