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SERVANTS, AESTHETICISM, AND “THE DOMINANCE OF FORM”

BY ANDREW GOLDSTONE

I.

“He represents the dominance of form”: one can imagine applying this sentence to any number of prominent literary modernists, since modernism, in a familiar if problematic account, both prizes formal concerns above extra-aesthetic ones and creates representations in which artistic forms and pursuits have pride of place.¹ Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, uses the sentence in a stage direction in *An Ideal Husband*—to describe a dandy’s butler:

PHIPPS, the butler, is arranging some newspapers on the writing-table. The distinction of PHIPPS is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form.²

Elsewhere, Wilde placed form at the center of his aestheticist theory of art; in “The Critic as Artist,” his spokesperson says that “the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion,” and that “Form is everything. It is the secret of life.”³ The stage direction, however, in using the manservant to reformulate that recognizably protomodernist aesthetic position, troubles the dogma of form. It suggests two competing explanations for the form-upholding inaccessibility of the butler’s “intellectual or emotional life”: “impassivity” is part of the butler’s duty, his status as human furniture, but Wilde’s wit also registers the deliberate artifice that has made the butler into a comic type, “the Ideal Butler.” The thrust of the joke, therefore, is that the exigencies of dramatic composition coincide with the demands imposed by social hierarchy. In this conjunction, the witty artifice starts to seem less like innocent play and more like the suppression of human individuality by the realities of labor. Even within the drawing-room scene of Wilde’s paradoxical cleverness, of an aestheticist celebration of stylized “mask[s] with

manner[s]” and aristocratic leisure, the figure of the domestic worker begins to make apparent an uneasy relationship between aestheticist style and social inequality.

This essay proposes that the labor of domestic social subordinates reveals the complicity between a dominant aesthetic form and social domination in the work of aesthetes from Wilde to Henry James and beyond. If their works elevate the ideal of an autonomous art, they also make clear that autonomous form always carries troubling social entanglements along with it. As I will show, this understanding of aesthetics stems in part from the nature of the institution of domestic service in Europe in this period. And though I will focus here on Wilde and James, I will suggest the broad scope of this pattern by briefly demonstrating a similar treatment of service in two signal works of French aestheticism, Villiers’s *Axël* and Huysmans’s *À rebours*. Furthermore, my interpretation of these texts within a dual context—the transnational literary phenomenon of aestheticism and the pervasive social fact of domestic service—is meant to raise questions about modernism as well as about the *fin de siècle*, particularly with the inclusion of the late James, so important as a transitional figure and aesthetic model for British and American modernists.⁴ Reading the predecessor generation from an avowedly modernist perspective, I reconsider our conventional understanding that these works furnish the pattern for the elevation, in many of the classic texts of high modernism, of the ideal of art’s autonomy. Paying attention to the real-world and fictional relationships of aesthetes and domestic workers can allow us to reconceive autonomy doctrine, both before and after the turn of the century, as something more than a naïve and snobbish attempt to banish the worlds of work and material striving by means of literary technique. Rather, the use of servant characters shows, dialectically, how the attempt to affirm the dominance of aesthetic form can be the means to an awareness of literature’s participation in the systems of social hierarchy and labor exploitation.⁵

Indeed, aestheticism and service echo together in international high modernism. One thinks immediately of Marcel Proust’s Françoise, handmaiden to his narrator’s development as a writer from his childhood until long after all of his other influences are dead; even in the triumphant exposition of the theory of art and memory at the end of *Le temps retrouvé*, the narrator fantasizes improbably that the aged Françoise, blind and semi-illiterate, will be on hand to form his book by gluing into order his scattered “*paperoles*,” the scraps on which Marcel (like the real Proust) makes additions and changes to

his novels.⁶ Or recall that on the first page of *Mrs. Dalloway* it is to her maid Lucy that Virginia Woolf's protagonist says she will buy the flowers herself, initiating her "plunge" into London sensations.⁷ Or consider Stephen Dedalus's proclamation, in the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, that his "symbol of Irish art" is "the cracked lookingglass of a servant": domestic service is associated both with the artist's form-making work and with the cracking of the artwork's mimetic means.⁸ Stephen's phrase is, however, adapted from Wilde's anti-realist dialogue "The Decay of Lying"—one more indication that in thinking about the aesthetics of modernism in relation to labor and social subordination, we should turn back to the aesthetes.⁹ For their work offered to their successors not an uncritical affirmation of art for art's sake within a sheltered world of leisure but a demonstration that the search for an autonomous art necessarily gestures to the realities of class and labor it tries to exclude.

The dialectical emergence of this awareness of social truth can be seen by considering the butler in *An Ideal Husband* a little further. Phipps arrives at the beginning of the third act of Wilde's comedy of manners, just after the curtain has fallen on a scene in which Sir Robert Chiltern accuses his wife of ruining his life. The melodramatic climax of that scene threatens to undermine the comedic lightness of the play; by changing the scene to the home of the dandyish Lord Goring, "the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought," the third act restores the good-humored, superficial tone.¹⁰ The butler ensures this stylistic triumph by playing the perfect straight man to Lord Goring's witticisms: "To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance," says Goring; "Yes, my lord," replies Phipps.¹¹ Who better than the butler to be straight man, for, as Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (first published in 1861) ordained, "The footman should tread lightly in moving round, and, if possible, should bear in mind, if there is a wit or humorist of the party, whose good things keep the table in a roar, they are not expected to reach his ears."¹²

The sober acquiescence of the butler in his master's joke is, however, a kind of insubordination; far from offering a free appreciation of paradoxical wit, the servant slyly indicates that he has no choice but to play along.¹³ This response, of course, only heightens Lord Goring's ironic narcissism, but it does so by depriving that narcissism of its charming innocence. Even as the joke evokes laughter, it invites speculation about the potentially insubordinate humanity lying behind the "mask with a manner." And—this is the core of my argument—the signal of Phipps's unknowable depths is also the signal of his condition

of servitude, his labor: “Yes, *my lord*.” For the butler, his formal function of upholding the comic machinery and his job of upholding the decorum of aristocratic life are identical. It is because the privileging of form and the privileging of the master coincide that the former is revealed to be not merely an aesthetic choice but a social one as well. That double determination challenges the dominance of form by giving that dominance social content.

Alex Woloch has drawn a similar link between formal function and social position in his comparative study of minor characters in the nineteenth-century realist novel, *The One vs. the Many*. There he advances the provocative thesis that “in terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*.”¹⁴ Woloch compares the dehumanizing effects of the specialization of labor in bourgeois society to the flattening effects of characterization on minor characters; because they “perform a function for someone else,” their identity is reduced to that function. But whereas Woloch is concerned with the complications in the aesthetic of realism created by the non-realism of the flat character, I am emphasizing the challenge to aestheticism of the potential realism of minor characters like servants.¹⁵ Stylized and conventional, characters like Phipps fit neatly into the world of art for art’s sake, in just the same way as a perfectly impassive butler fits in among the other elegant furnishings of an aristocratic drawing room. If, however, the character makes us aware of social truths intruding into the magic circle of art, he comes to stand for the unpleasant material and human social reality—the unwanted content—that he is meant to keep out.

Wilde forces us to realize that Phipps represents the dominance of form *for a living*. In adverting us to this truth, Wilde’s description of the butler points toward a dialectical conception of form as constituted by the very elements of social life that threaten to disrupt and exceed it—and it suggests that even a frippery like Wilde’s play is not merely a fantasy of inconsequential, mannered, narcissistic playfulness with no acknowledgment of the immense aristocratic privilege and social inequality on which the realization of the fantasy rests. It is not quite the case that, as Jeff Nunokawa claims in *Tame Passions of Wilde*, “The compulsion to labor could hardly be further removed from the society of conspicuous leisure that is the only one to show up on Wilde’s map”; the occluded labor of the servant, because of its aesthetic significance, surreptitiously steals a central place on Wilde’s map.¹⁶ In *An Ideal Husband*, the confessedly elitist preoccupation with

manner comprehends a knowledge of what it tries to hide or exclude, even as it continues to attempt to maintain its formal hold over that troubling social content.

I will return to Wilde shortly, but it is worth turning briefly to the *locus classicus* of domestic service in European aestheticism: the French writer Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's long drama *Axël* (published in part in 1872, in full 1885–1886; partially revised at Villiers's death in 1889). Villiers's play culminates in the hero's rejection of religion, worldly wealth, and love in favor of a suicide which celebrates imagination above all other things. Axël d'Auërsperg's speech imploring his lover, Sara de Maupers, to die with him rather than live out their dreams of travel, power, and romantic ecstasy includes a notorious reference to his domestics:

Why realize them [our dreams]? . . . they are so beautiful! . . . All the realities, what would they be tomorrow, compared with the mirages we have just lived? . . . To agree to live after that would be but a sacrilege against ourselves. Live? Our servants will do that for us.¹⁷

The climax of *Axël* forms the cornerstone of Edmund Wilson's classic account of modernism in French and in English, *Axel's Castle* (1931). For Wilson, Axël's rejection of the world is typical of aestheticism and its descendant in modernism (which Wilson calls "Symbolism"); he regards the preference for fantasy over reality with suspicion, describing it as dangerously "indifferen[t]" to and "detached" from society.¹⁸ Arraigning Axël for his lack of social conscience, Wilson says: "It will easily be seen that this super-dreamer of Villiers's is the type of all the heroes of the Symbolists, of our day as well as of his."¹⁹

Wilson is not being wholly unfair in choosing Villiers's rather absurd late-romantic performance as representative; in the 1890s, after his death, Villiers became an icon for the French symbolists.²⁰ That iconic status certainly crossed the channel; Joyce puts an allusion to Axël's famous line into the mouth of the Irish aesthete George Russell in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses*.²¹ Indeed, Axël is, in his aristocratic disdain for worldly goods and his preference for fantasy over reality, the ideal practitioner of aestheticism. For Wilson, such a stance makes him a harbinger of the solipsism of post-symbolist modernism's "experimentation in the field of literature alone."²² Yet Villiers's play makes Axël's dismissal of life as for the servants more than reflexive snobbery; it indicates just how essential servants are to the formation of the aesthetic dream. The earlier acts of the play idealize Axël's life in the middle of the Black Forest, infinitely removed from

venal bourgeois modernity, sustained by his familial ties to his servants, an operatic cast of loyal armstrongs and pages depicted at great length. One of the signs of Axël's nobility is the blessing he gives to his page Ukko's wedding on the day of his own death. Indeed, that wedding takes place in the last pages of the play, forming the backdrop to the protagonists' *Liebestod*. Villiers's staging of his conclusion makes clear that Axël's triumphant withdrawal from life only acquires meaning in the context of the people he pays to continue to live it.

The aestheticism of *Axël* still requires servants for both support and contradiction: support, by their labor, of its aristocratic disdain for the material realities of life; contradiction, by their living that life, of their master's denial of terrestrial existence. Their appearances represent the ground of ordinariness, what the final sentence of *Axël* calls "the hum of Life," against which their masters' actions stand out.²³ It is the paradox of their service to the work, therefore, that as much as they function to exclude the everyday, they are the trace of that exclusion; just as servants literally keep the doors of their masters' houses, so too they contain within their own small roles the ways of the pressing, non-aesthetic, non-aristocratic world.

The liminal status of literary servants in the works I am discussing also stems in part from the realities of domestic service in the period. Paradoxically, those realities make servant characters particularly well suited to the representation of "the dominance of form" over any social realism. It might seem that the more flattened and stylized the servant characters are, the less realistic the depiction of contemporary service must be. Nonetheless, such resistance to current reality is related to the historical status of domestic service. In a society marked by industrialization and economic rationalization, service has a residual, archaic aspect; the paternalistic relationship imagined between the master or mistress and the servant contrasts with the contractual situation of the industrial proletariat and its managers.²⁴ Isolated in individual middle- or upper-class homes, servants were unlike other members of the working class in their working conditions, their compensation (lower cash wages being to some degree balanced by room and board as well as livery in some cases), and the fact that their labor neither produced nor sold any tangible good; and, though domestic service was still a very widespread occupation in England, France, and America in the 1890s and 1900s, the servant workforce had already slowed its rate of growth, and it shrank rapidly from the First World War onward.²⁵

Similarly, the reality of the servant's entire subordination to the master—the all-consuming hours of work, the confinement to the

domestic world of the house, the dependence on the house's kitchen for food (if board-wages were not given)—makes a suggestive parallel to the servant character's subordination to the formal structure of the fiction, and a suggestive contrast to the comparative independence and self-assertion of other groups of laborers.²⁶ John Robinson, giving "A Butler's View of Men-Service" in 1892, wrote that "when a man enters service he sacrifices all freedom. Any preconceived notions he may have of living his life in a particular way must be thrown to the winds."²⁷ Earlier in the century, a footman named William Tayler wrote in his diary that "the life of a gentleman's servant is something like that of a bird shut up in a cage. The bird is well housed and well fed but is deprived of liberty."²⁸ Furthermore, like the bird in the cage, servants have an ornamental, semiotic function as much as they have a practical one. Particularly in the case of the menservants—butlers, valets, and footmen—who feature in most of my examples, servants are signs of the wealth and elevated social position of their masters. Male domestics were considered a luxury for nineteenth-century middle-class families, to be hired only in addition to housemaids, nursemaids, and cooks.²⁹ Indeed, Thorstein Veblen remarks in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that "it is this aptitude and acquired skill in the formal manifestation of the servile relation that constitutes the chief element of utility in our highly paid servants."³⁰ That even real servants belong to the order of signs for the servant-owning classes renders yet stronger their association with literary concerns of form and style; at the same time, this aspect of service taints the aesthetic interest in the deployment of signs with the real social fact of domestic laborers' bondage.

Bruce Robbins discusses the significance of the semiotic character of service for Victorian literature in his book *The Servant's Hand*. As Robbins argues, the stylization of servant characters happens all the more readily because the depiction of servants turns easily to a long history of literary convention. "Much has changed between Homer and Virginia Woolf," writes Robbins, "but the literary servant has not undergone proportional changes."³¹ Considering the classical and dramatic precedents for servants, Robbins says, "In the novel, they are borrowed from all of these sources. A sort of permanent residue, always already anachronistic, they seem inseparable from precedent, convention, self-conscious literariness."³² Such "self-conscious literariness" suits the pursuit of art for art's sake nicely. Aestheticism laid great stress on the transformation of material reality into literary form; as Oscar Wilde writes in "The Decay of Lying":

Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions. . . . As a method Realism is a complete failure.³³

Servants serve art best, according to Wilde, when that art poses itself against realism—or, to put it another way, when it begins to make its way into modernism. Robbins makes the same point, asserting that servant figures represent a “continuity” between realism and modernism.³⁴ But Robbins, concentrating as he does on the Victorian period, does not take up the possible consequences for a self-consciously form-dominated art of the ambivalent signification of servants. If, as Robbins says, “the presence of servants signifies the absence of the people,” then the integration of servants into form means that form itself, in subordinating “Life and Nature,” also points up real social subordination.³⁵

II. *DORIAN GRAY*: THE TRUTH OF MASKS WITH MANNERS

Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses the ambiguous nature of servant characters to complicate its already ambivalent celebration of the beauties of form. Like *Axël*, although without Villiers's unvarying solemnity, *Dorian Gray* directs our attention and sympathy towards characters who reject the ordinary world of work in favor of the pursuit of pleasure and artistic beauty. “They are the elect,” says Wilde's Preface, “to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty,” and the novel's long catalogues of elegant objects seem to invite the readers to join the elect.³⁶ Of course, the novel's Gothic dénouement seems to overturn such theories by killing off its artist, Basil Hallward, as well as its amoral pleasure-seeker, Dorian Gray. Richard Ellmann calls the book a “critique of aestheticism.”³⁷ Yet despite its horror-story conclusion, Wilde's novel treats the theme of the dominance of form with something more than ethical revulsion, disclaiming “ethical sympathies” in the Preface as “an unpardonable mannerism of style” (*D*, 167). Most importantly, the quasi-aristocratic tone of Wilde's text itself implicates him as a proponent, against bourgeois norms, of art for art's sake. Regenia Gagnier has made the crucial observation that *Dorian Gray* excludes the middle class from representation; she writes, “In exclusively representing the part of society that he did—idle aristocrats and romantic artists—Wilde offended an ethic of industry and productivity. He seemed to expose himself as a presumptuous social climber who penetrated aristocratic circles with offensive ease.”³⁸ Yet

servants are not excluded from the novel; and attending to the work of servants in *Dorian Gray* can illuminate the aesthete's problematic social position through his concern for the beauties of form.³⁹

Wilde's novel is strangely full of incidental appearances by minor servant characters, from the butler who announces Dorian Gray in the first chapter to the servants who discover his body in the last. In a transition quite analogous to the one that introduces Phipps in *An Ideal Husband*, the beginning of the book's eighth chapter shows Dorian waking up the day after he has had his quarrel with Sibyl Vane and seen the first change in his portrait:

It was long past noon when he awoke. His valet had crept several times on tiptoe into the room to see if he was stirring, and had wondered what made his young master sleep so late. Finally his bell sounded, and Victor came softly in with a cup of tea, and a pile of letters, on a small tray of old Sèvres china, and drew back the olive-satin curtains, with their shimmering blue lining, that hung in front of the three tall windows. (*D*, 248)

Carrying the aesthete's collection of delicate things, Victor the valet introduces an interlude of lightly superficial relief from the melodrama of Dorian's confrontation with his conscience. Victor's own flat characterization contributes to that lightness; he is no more than the caricatural—or Ideal—French valet when he says to his master, “Monsieur has well slept this morning” (*D*, 248). Simply by occupying the scene-setting position at the start of the chapter, Victor negotiates for the book its characteristic alternation between a picture of high-society aesthetes wittily appreciating their exquisite possessions and a Gothic narrative of moral corruption.

Victor's contribution to the book's tonal doubleness corresponds to the feelings he evokes in his master. Even for Dorian, he holds the threat of the picture at bay: “He almost dreaded his valet leaving the room. He knew that when he was alone he would have to examine the portrait” (*D*, 249). Yet the valet's allegiance to the superficial, form-dominated society-scene half of the book is not as unambiguous as it may seem. The narrative gives us even more reason to suppose that Dorian's valet is not just a “mask with a manner” than *An Ideal Husband* did about Phipps. When the narrative shows us Dorian sleeping, it slips briefly, via indirect discourse, into the servant's own perspective: “His valet . . . had wondered what made his young master sleep so late.” That glimpse of the valet's inner life suddenly becomes all too real to Dorian when the guilty man worries that Victor has discovered the

secret of the portrait. The tenth chapter begins with Dorian's fearful contemplation of what the servant's servility may conceal:

When his servant entered, he looked at him steadfastly, and wondered if he had thought of peering behind the screen. The man was quite impassive, and waited for his orders. Dorian lit a cigarette, and walked over to the glass and glanced into it. He could see the reflection of Victor's face perfectly. It was like a placid mask of servility. There was nothing to be afraid of, there. Yet he thought it best to be on his guard. (*D*, 268)

The valet's perfect fulfillment of his role—he is the very “mask with a manner,” a “placid mask of servility”—no longer reassures Dorian. In his tortured conscience, he realizes that a mask is a surface that may hide anything underneath. As Wilde says in his Preface, “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril” (*D*, 168).

It is as though the idea of Victor “peering behind the screen” gives rise to Dorian's own wish to peer behind Victor's screen, to see more than “the reflection of Victor's face” in the mirror. Dorian thinks, “It was a horrible thing to have a spy in one's house. He had heard of rich men who had been blackmailed all their lives by some servant who had read a letter” (*D*, 273).⁴⁰ The servant still represents the dominance of form for Dorian, but that dominance is no longer a reassuring sign of the varied pleasures of beautiful things and sparkling wit; instead, the mirror, in showing Dorian not his own lovely reflection but the potentially deceptive surface of his servant's face, reveals to him that the mask of form conceals a world of terrifying, unknown content.⁴¹

Except that it does not. Of course, no reader of *Dorian Gray* ever takes Dorian's paranoia about his valet seriously; we know that the butler didn't do it. Dorian's true enemy is his own conscience. And, indeed, Victor soon disappears from the novel, displaced by Dorian's fear of Basil Hallward and of James Vane, which, along with Dorian's aesthetic pastimes, occupies much of the rest of the book. We find out in the course of Basil's fateful visit with Dorian that Victor “married Lady Radley's maid, and has established her in Paris as an English dressmaker” (*D*, 292). Dorian realizes that the valet's menace was illusory; Victor lives out a parodic version of a conventional marriage-plot, achieving a comforting, upwardly-mobile social outcome. Yet even this happy outcome is a reminder that there was a drama of class alongside the drama of conscience, one urgent enough to call for this narratively superfluous resolution.

Wilde's interest in such a class drama is not merely hypothetical; his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" explicitly links the problem of social hierarchy and class to that of art for art's sake. "All authority," he writes, "is quite degrading."⁴² Indeed, his utopian vision in that essay adumbrates a world in which aesthetic pursuits might be set free from the taint of exercising or being the victim of coercive social power. Service in particular, under the more damning name of "slavery," appears at the essay's conclusion as both essential and in contradiction to Wilde's "Individualism," of which art is "the most intense mode"⁴³:

The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony. It will be what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realize completely, because they had slaves, and fed them; it will be what the Renaissance sought for, but could not realize completely, except in Art, because they had slaves, and starved them. It will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection.⁴⁴

Wilde's idea of the modern slave includes all the poor, of course, and his socialism, like so many others', makes much more of the industrial proletariat than of domestic servants. Yet Wilde's essay, like Dorian's strange aside to Basil about his old valet, still implies that the fate of aesthetic pursuits and the fate of people like Victor are fundamentally, dangerously entangled.

Just how threatening that entanglement might be is, inevitably, illustrated by the history of Wilde's disgrace. The class anxieties summoned up by Wilde's glances at the servant class in his works are the same anxieties exploited by his adversaries at the time of his 1895 prosecution of the Marquess of Queensberry for libel; they made heavy weather of Wilde's liaisons with various young lower-class men.⁴⁵ The Marquess of Queensberry's lawyer emphasized the contrast between the aristocratic pretensions of Wilde's art and the social class of his lovers:

His books were written by an artist for artists; his words were not for Philistines or illiterates. Contrast that with the way in which Mr. Wilde chose his companions! He took up with Charles Parker, a gentleman's servant, whose brother was a gentleman's servant; with young Alphonse Conway, who sold papers on the pier at Worthing; and with Scarfe, also a gentleman's servant. Then his excuse was no longer that he was dwelling in regions of art but that he had such a noble, such a democratic soul (Laughter.), that he drew no social distinctions.⁴⁶

This attack forms the reverse image of Wilde's attempt in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" to reconcile "dwelling in regions of art" and his "democratic soul"; like the essay, Wilde's trial shows how volatile the linkage between aestheticism and the serving class could be, how uncomfortably they sit together in bourgeois society—even as Wilde's own erotic life illustrates just how those working-class people in the living room could attract the aesthete's gaze.⁴⁷

The linkage between service and aestheticism draws even the most incidental serving person in *Dorian Gray* into the knot of interrelated formal function and social allegory. Most striking of all is the nameless servant of Lord Henry's Aunt Agatha who brings to an end one of the novel's society scenes. Lord Henry has been telling his aunt's guests that "the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes":

He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox . . . He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing . . . At last, liveried in the costume of the age, Reality entered the room in the shape of a servant to tell the Duchess that her carriage was waiting. (*D*, 204–5)⁴⁸

It might seem that the quip "Reality entered the room in the shape of a servant" means exactly the opposite of "He represents the dominance of form." The servant cuts off Lord Henry's treatment of a foolish, paradoxical idea to remind the Duchess of everyday business, undercutting the dominance of the conversation by the aesthete's verbal style. Yet just as the Duchess's business turns out to be trivial, a meeting with her husband at his club, so the idea of "Reality" as a liveried servant reduces it to parody. The satirically inflated expression implies that the supposedly real life to which the servant calls the Duchess is hardly less "fantastic, irresponsible" than Lord Henry's iridescent fancies. In fact, then, the servant Reality has a dual implication, formal and social, like the stage direction about Phipps in *An Ideal Husband*. On the one hand, the "Reality" upheld by that servant is not an empirical reality, even a satiric one representative of "the age," but a matter of novelistic form, the construction of the chapter: a butler and a footman had bowed Lord Henry into the scene at Lady Agatha's, and now the servant representing "Reality" brings the inconclusive, wandering, paradoxical wit of Lord Henry to a coda.⁴⁹ On the other hand, to make a member of the working class, no matter how costumed, the representative of "Reality" glances at a grittier, "realer" reality than either the formal

closure of a book chapter or the pastimes of aristocrats—the reality of the servant’s confined, unfree life, perhaps even of the limitations of working-class life more generally. Even if servants’ job is to hide that grit, to wear at all times their masks of impassivity and servility, Wilde cannot resist offhand, semi-serious hints that something does lie behind the mask after all.

Yet such ironies are not unique to Wilde’s own aestheticism. Indeed, one of Wilde’s sources for Dorian Gray’s decadence emphasizes the paradoxes of domestic service even more strongly: the French decadent writer Joris-Karl Huysmans’s bible of aestheticism, *À rebours*. That this should be the case would perhaps surprise Dorian Gray, who is so corrupted by the “yellow book” (*D*, 274), which Wilde described as derived from Huysmans’s novel during his libel trial.⁵⁰ Indeed, *À rebours* can appear to be a manual of how to live without any other people; Huysmans’s hero Jean des Esseintes, seeming to anticipate Lord Goring’s dictum “Other people are quite dreadful,” adopts a willed exile where he holds intercourse only with objects of beauty suited to his taste.⁵¹

And yet the novel does specify how Des Esseintes sustains his day-to-day life—with the employment of two old servants. The aristocrat does his utmost to make his servants as inconspicuous and as purely functional as possible, enjoining them to total silence, communicating with them only by ringing their bell, and outfitting them with felt slippers so that he never has to hear their footsteps. Nonetheless, they maintain for him a link to the world outside the house at Fontenay, to the reality from which he is in flight, and not only because they do the shopping. When Des Esseintes develops sensory hallucinations, it is his servant who verifies that they are hallucinatory; the servant’s declaration leads to the abolition of any doubt that the illusion—which, in other circumstances, might be the very sensation Des Esseintes is seeking—is only a disguise for mental disease. Even for the arch-decadent Huysmans, the servant grounds a realistic perspective external to that of the delusional aesthete.

This perspective can overlap with that of the narrative itself. In a brief apparent respite from his illness, Des Esseintes formulates a plan to travel to London. But instead of telling us this directly, the narrative briefly assumes the servants’ point of view: “One afternoon, the bell rang with brief calls, and Des Esseintes ordered that his bags were to be packed for a long journey.”⁵² It is the servants, not the master, who hear the bell ring for them. Only after a near-slapstick scene of hurried packing do we return to Des Esseintes and learn, retrospectively,

that the idea of traveling to London was precipitated by a reading of Dickens. As when *Dorian Gray* shows Victor looking at his sleeping master, Huysmans's narrative, in making use of the servants' perspective, shows that they *have* a perspective, that the book is not wholly absorbed in the master's aesthetic solipsism.

In fact, the servant becomes an icon of the hero's exhaustion. At the end of the novel, when Des Esseintes has abandoned his experiment in exile and is returning to Paris, the final sign of his defeat is the door closing, in the penultimate paragraph, "behind the manservant, who disappeared carrying a bundle of books."⁵³ This self-referential symbol—Des Esseintes's books are carried away as Huysmans's book ends—catches up the servant once more. Just as previously the servants had been necessary to Des Esseintes's aesthetic enterprise, now they are instrumental to its closure. Their implication in that self-reference makes it so, as another self-referential symbol shows. At the moment which sets off the final crisis of Des Esseintes's illness, when he thinks he is recovering, he turns to his servant: "He felt in fuller possession of his faculties and asked his man to hand him a mirror. After a single glance it slipped from his hands. He scarcely knew himself."⁵⁴ The most isolated of heroes requires his servant in order to look at himself in the mirror, and the result is disaster, the very disaster feared by Dorian Gray when he thinks of his valet: the servant's presence intensifies the master's consciousness that the two images of himself disagree horribly.⁵⁵ The impassivity of the servants, the silence that he has required of them, suddenly turns out to be a trap; instead of protecting Des Esseintes's wholeness from the incursions of others, it has allowed him to become alienated from himself without ever noticing.

Four decades before Stephen Dedalus's "symbol of Irish art," the servant appears at the cracks in Des Esseintes's mirror. The servant bears that critical symbolic weight because he represents his master's failure to achieve autonomy, his reliance open a dependent other, from the outset. The service Des Esseintes's nameless domestics finally perform is, like that of servants in Wilde, one of unstable demarcation. They separate Des Esseintes from society so that he may attempt to attain isolation; but, as contacts with, embodiments of, the failure of his isolation, they also form his connection to society. They hold society out, but—though Des Esseintes attempts to disguise it—they themselves are society let in.

III. HENRY JAMES: THE SUBTLETY OF SERVICE

Like *À rebours*, Henry James's late novel *The Ambassadors* (published in 1903) shapes itself around the aesthetic pursuits and fantasies of a solitary man. Taking as its subject the transforming effect of French aesthetic delights and perils, *The Ambassadors* is in fact James's most aestheticist creation.⁵⁶ More than James's other works, even more than the other monuments of James's late style, *The Ambassadors* occupies a crucial juncture in the history of aesthetic autonomy, offering to subsequent modernist writing a prototypical combination of conspicuously heightened formal effects and a central thematic concern with aesthetic experience itself. In *Professions of Taste*, Jonathan Freedman describes *The Ambassadors* as "perhaps the greatest single example of the new aestheticism James built on the ruins of the old"—although I prefer to emphasize the continuity of aestheticism over the putative contrast between old and new.⁵⁷

Already in the period of modernism itself, E. M. Forster asserted the novel's aestheticism, the dominance of its formal patterning over other concerns, in discussing it under the heading of "Pattern" in *Aspects of the Novel*:

We shall see in [*The Ambassadors*] pattern triumphant, and we shall also be able to see the sacrifices an author must make if he wants his pattern and nothing else to triumph . . . Everything is planned, everything fits: none of the minor characters are just decorative . . . they elaborate on the main theme, they work. The final effect is pre-arranged, dawns gradually on the reader, and is completely successful when it comes. Details of the intrigue may be forgotten, but the symmetry created is enduring.⁵⁸

Forster goes on to condemn James for slighting "most of human life," but Forster's own explicit connection between the dominance of form ("pattern triumphant") and the labor and subservience of minor characters ("they work" rather than being "decorative") suggests, against Forster's primary meaning, that the triumph of pattern may include an awareness of the work of subordinates.⁵⁹ And, in fact, James's aestheticism does have its servants, as Wilde's has its butlers and Huysmans's its domestics; and, as with those earlier authors, James's technique exhibits the importance of these household laborers.⁶⁰ Thus, if James's novel serves as an essential model for later modernist concerns with experimental literary technique and singular aesthetic experience, it takes its cue from the oblique social consciousness as well as the themes of its predecessors.

Freedman has argued that James “transform[ed] the volatile and unstable example of aestheticism into that more austere form of aestheticism we call modernism.”⁶¹ Freedman traces in detail the connections between James and Wilde, but whereas he describes the contrast between Strether’s “aesthete’s path” in Paris and Wildean aestheticism as that between “the further enlargement of a ruefully enlightened consciousness” and “the transitory fulfillments of a sensual desire,” I will argue that no such sharp distinction finally exists; Wilde can be rueful and James sensual, too.⁶² More broadly, despite all the differences from Villiers, Wilde, and Huysmans implied by James’s idiosyncratic manner, his American origins, his long prior career as a novelist, and his concern in *The Ambassadors* with the businesslike, buttoned-up world of Woollett, Massachusetts, James’s treatment of servants in his late novel resembles those other writers’ closely. This resemblance implies that James shares in their elevation of form and in their understanding of form’s social situatedness. While Freedman’s consideration of Jamesian professionalized aestheticism’s relation to the market complements my attempt here to see aestheticism in relation to domestic labor, my reading of domestic labor grants to modernism as well as to aestheticism a complexity which Freedman attributes only to the earlier movement.

Precisely because surface appearances and transient impressions are so important to Strether’s Parisian experience, servants can open up an avenue for inferences about social structure. In other works by James, servants do not necessarily have such an unexpected function; they may contribute to plot devices—like *The American’s* Mrs. Bread, the retired housekeeper who knows the Bellegardes’ compromising secret—or they may be part of the décor, as in *The Wings of the Dove*, when Milly Theale, at Maud Lowder’s for the first time, categorizes “the attitude of the servants” alongside “the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers” in her excited vision of London society.⁶³ In *The Ambassadors*, though, as in Wilde and Huysmans, aestheticism catches up even the incidental servants. One such appears at the end of the scene between Strether and Madame de Vionnet in which they confront the problems raised by the arrival of the POCOcks. Strether is trying to take his leave:

Her face, with what he had by this time grasped, told him more than her words; whether something had come into it, or whether he only read clearer, her whole story—what at least he then took for such—reached out to him from it. With the initiative she now attributed to Chad it all

made a sense, and this sense—a light, a lead, was what had abruptly risen before him. He wanted, once more, to get off with these things; which was at last made easy, a servant having, for his assistance, on hearing voices in the hall, just come forward. All that Strether made out was, while the man opened the door and impersonally waited, summed up in his last word. “I don’t think, you know, Chad will tell me anything.”⁶⁴

The narrative self-consciously brings in a servant to “make easy” Strether’s escape. The servant waits “impersonally” because his sole purpose is to fulfill a narrative function; by ending the scene, “the man” instigates one of those delays in the explanation of meanings which are so characteristic of the novel, what Ian Watt calls the “delayed specification of referents.”⁶⁵ This delay forms part of the novel’s aestheticism; it permits the narrative to linger over impressions rather than conclusions, vagueness rather than sharp specificity.⁶⁶ But the servant also brings to the surface the aristocracy of Madame de Vionnet’s manner—the good form that is so essential to her evasions, the riches and the social hierarchy that justify the mysteriousness in which Strether revels. The chapter-ending moment therefore creates an analogy—quite reminiscent of Wilde’s description of the Ideal Butler—between the way in which the aristocrat uses an “impersonal” servant as one more element of enchanting decoration in her beautiful apartments, one more component of that ease which so charms Strether, and the way in which the novel makes use of that same “impersonal,” flatly minor character of the servant to round off its forms.

Indeed, this appearance of the servant evokes the chill Strether feels when Madame de Vionnet reveals that she has arranged a marriage for her daughter: “It was—through something ancient and cold in it—what he would have called the real thing” (A, 364). Like the arranged upper-class marriage, domestic service belongs to an older order of institutions, one to which American bourgeois individualism and belief in the freedom of choice are quite alien. Jeanne de Vionnet’s lack of self-determination is, like that of the servant, marked by class. Unlike Jeanne, however, the servant has a special relationship to Jamesian form, in the closing of the chapter. That relationship in turn taints the writer’s formal procedure with the same suspicion of coercion and corruption that hovers over Madame de Vionnet’s aristocratic social aesthetic.

This Wildean use of domestics becomes even more marked in the treatment of the novel’s only named servant character. Chad Newsome’s valet is called Baptiste. He makes his first appearance when

Strether, visiting Chad after his confrontation with Mrs. Pocock, finds the young man absent:

Chad's servant had by this time answered for his reappearance . . . Strether spent an hour in waiting for him—an hour full of strange suggestions, persuasions, recognitions; one of those that he was to recall, at the end of his adventure, as the particular handful that most had counted. The mellowest lamplight and the easiest chair had been placed at his disposal by Baptiste, subtlest of servants; the novel, half-uncut, the novel lemon-coloured and tender, with the ivory knife athwart it like the dagger in a *contadina's* hair, had been pushed within the soft circle—a circle which, for some reason, affected Strether as softer still after the same Baptiste had remarked that in the absence of a further need of anything by Monsieur he would betake himself to bed. (A, 425)

Baptiste is Phippsian in his duties to good form, and, as Phipps is the “Ideal Butler,” Baptiste is the “subtlest of servants.” But he is more than a minor comic touch; he is the presiding spirit of one of the hours “that most had counted” for Strether—and, implicitly, for the novel itself. That hour consists predominantly in fleeting impressions (“strange suggestions”) and the pleasures of a novel whose sensuousness (“lemon-coloured and tender”) even Des Esseintes or Dorian Gray would relish. Baptiste adds the *coup de grâce* by effacing himself, allowing Strether the illusion of a solitary encounter with beautiful things and charming thoughts, just as the passive construction of “had been pushed” occludes the agency of the valet. The “soft circle” of lamplight becomes a kind of geometrical image for the completeness and closure of aesthetic reverie; in fact, James uses the image of the circle of light for that of the autonomous literary work in his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the narrative makes us aware that the satisfactions of closure are the product of the valet's work, his maintenance of the boundary of Strether's space.

This scene may seem, then, to resemble the novel's prominent moments of ruptured aestheticism, in which Strether, mesmerized by an aesthetic impression, is suddenly interrupted by his human, social interests: the encounter with Madame de Vionnet in Notre Dame, the appearance of the lovers on the river at the book's climax. Like those crucial turns in the “pattern triumphant” of the novel's plot, this description of Strether's hour in Chad's apartment poses a threat to an aestheticism of impressions; but, precisely because Chad's valet is not important to the plot or significant to Strether's social life, that threat

is not one of rupture. Instead, the aesthetic episode only becomes lovelier, “softer still,” for Baptiste’s service—forcing us to include that servile relation within the realm of the aesthetic, with a discomfort that the style of the passage makes us feel. James reproduces in compact form the dynamic of Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* and his inescapable domestics.⁶⁸

The Dorian Gray-like unease which Baptiste can provoke should remind us, then, that this moment recalls nothing so much as the corruption of Dorian by the “yellow book.”⁶⁹ Even in celebrating the ethereal pleasures of Jamesian consciousness, the narrative ironically registers with Baptiste’s stylish exit just how much “Monsieur” continues to have many “further needs”—needs which will not be satisfied in the subsequent meeting with Chad, or anywhere else in the book. Pricking the “soft circle” with the paper-knife, Baptiste disrupts Strether’s self-enclosure and adds a trace of menace to the atmosphere, a menace ironically noted when he is later described as preparing a supper of “light cold clever French things” for Chad (A, 497). As Strether waits for Chad, his fleeting, light, clever, impressions—his “relish quite . . . like a pang” (A, 426)—cover over a cold emptiness of which Baptiste, in perfecting those impressions for Strether, only gives another reminder.⁷⁰

The moment of aestheticist exaltation, then, is both reinforced and compromised by the presence of a servant’s labor. By a converse process, the disintegration of Strether’s aesthetic Parisian idyll calls forth the image of a domestic servant. The day after Strether has surprised Chad and Madame de Vionnet in the countryside, she asks him to see her; he finds her “afraid for her life,” and she bursts into tears. He can hardly comfort her when she says her despair is “no matter” (A, 483):

He could n’t say it was *not* no matter; for he was serving her to the end, he now knew, anyway—quite as if what he thought of her had nothing to do with it. It was actually moreover as if . . . he could think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented, and the possibilities she betrayed. She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man. The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant would n’t; the weakness of which wisdom too, the dishonour of which judgement, seemed but to sink her lower. (A, 483)

Now that Strether is fully aware that Madame de Vionnet's relationship with Chad is sexual, she is no longer a spirit of aesthetic purity for him; he sees her "giving up all attempt at a manner" (A, 483), her passion disrupting the personal style Strether so admires. He imagines this stylistic rupture in terms of the loss of class position, the revelation that the Countess is "vulgarly troubled." Yet Strether's thought processes hold a contradiction: even as he inwardly regrets her likeness to a "maidservant," he finds himself "serving her to the end." In the imagery of Strether's meditation, then, service stands both for the breakdown of manner by vulgar human entanglements *and* for his continued devotion to the perfect manner of this "finest and subtlest" aristocrat. The phrase "serving her to the end" looks ominously to the end of her liaison with Chad, the end of Strether's journey, and the end of the novel—one final association between service and (disappointed) aesthetic closure.

"The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant would n't": Strether's last revelation is that Madame de Vionnet bears, like him, the burden of self-consciousness. Crude as the class prejudice of Strether's formulation may appear, it is an essential component of aesthetic self-reflection: only by both treating servants as little more than domestic decoration and regarding them as tainted by vulgar reality can the narrative reveal the social impurities inherent in form. The social insight attained through the attention to form, discomfiting though it might be, does not translate into a full-blown critique of service. Neither, however, does it fall into a wholehearted celebration of the beauties of the social order. Mark Seltzer has argued, in an important Foucauldian reading of James's work, that there is a "criminal continuity" between James's fictional technique and the techniques of political power. Though such a continuity may exist, I am claiming that, in bringing to light the class domination within the "dominance of form," Jamesian style does not give itself wholly over to what Seltzer calls "the ruse of power."⁷¹ Instead, though with some ambivalence, James makes available a potentially subversive understanding of the workings of class in tandem with the workings of aesthetics.

The historical and aesthetic development in the direction of modernism raises the stakes of this potential subversion. Wilde, like his French predecessors Villiers and Huysmans, makes the aesthete a grotesque figure, subject to bodily and psychological corruption and decay, removed by his very extremity from any direct analogy to the artist himself. This obvious and quasi-moralizing technique, ostentatiously placing the pursuit of aesthetic autonomy in quotation marks,

masks the subtler—and more thoroughgoing—undermining action in which servants call attention to the oppressions of form. Strether's renunciation of the Parisian life is more ambiguous: insofar as he leaves the scene in order to have gained nothing more for himself than "wonderful impressions," as Maria Gostrey calls them (A, 512), he affirms rather than denies the saving autonomy of the aesthetic. The asceticism of this "new" aestheticism (as Freedman calls it) redirects the search for the privileged artistic realm from the decadent lifestyle to the Jamesian late style itself, the wonderful impressions made available by the delayed specification of referents and the pleasurable cognitive puzzles created by James's intense pressure on the English-language systems of pronominal reference, verbal mood, and syntactic subordination. The local linguistic puzzles of *The Ambassadors*, in bewildering us, transform us into so many Strethers sitting alone in the lamplight turning over our perceptions—waited on by James himself, intruding narratively only in the most self-effacing ways, writing preface after preface assuring us that the objects before us are creations of pure technique. Despite the flamboyance of the *fin-de-siècle* writers, James has even more to lose from the compromising of autonomy than they do: his form itself depends on the autonomy ideal, for it is identified with "the process of vision" that, James says in the preface to his novel, "is the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything" (A, 34). Yet this intense attention to form, far from obliterating the social world, only augments the latter-day aesthete's worried reflection on his or her social situation.

IV. AESTHETICIST SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Dorian Gray's opinion is that "the canons of good society, are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it" (D, 287). Conversely, in the works I have discussed, aestheticism finds that the forms of art must be the same as those of social organization. When it contemplates its servants, aestheticism everywhere combines the satisfaction of Dorian here—his affirmation of the triumph of the aesthetic—with his uneasy self-consciousness elsewhere of sordid truths. That combination of attitudes points towards the possibility of moving beyond stylistic idealism without falling wholly into its disillusioned opposite. My examples have been chosen to show how, in protomodernist narrative, aesthetic form might retain its primacy, at the price of a shift—signaled, in their treatment of servants, by the works themselves—in the meaning of form, from abstract, geometric purity to a compromisingly social signifier.

Simultaneously needed within and excluded from the aesthete's self-enclosure, servants define form by being, or acting as, that which form restricts or denies. Aestheticizing narratives repeatedly use them at moments of self-reflection, just because they help establish the aestheticist dominance of form; yet those narratives never forswear their class attitudes, continuing to regard servants as vulgar, ignorant workers, often relegating them to minor status or flat characterization in order to use them as part of an alluring aesthetic form. Despite the critical and even satiric distance Wilde, Huysmans, and James establish from their protagonists and their upper-crust milieu, their work implicates itself in social hierarchy and its injustices.⁷² None of them really hid from this implication, though Wilde is, at least at the moment of his utopian fantasy in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," particularly candid:

At present, in consequence of the existence of private property, a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them and gives them pleasure. These are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture. . . . Upon the other hand, there are a great many people who, having no private property of their own, and being always on the brink of sheer starvation, are compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them, and to which they are forced by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want. These are the poor, and amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization, or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy of life.⁷³

I have been arguing, however, that by using servant characters in *Dorian Gray* and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde, like Huysmans in *À rebours* and James in *The Ambassadors*, goes beyond such an explicit statement, towards the discovery that aesthetic form is itself constituted out of and reveals this social mechanism of subjugation.⁷⁴

Yet Wilde makes clear that he values the individual aesthetic achievement even as he condemns the system in which it is possible for some but not all, and he is hardly inclined to see that system overthrown at any cost to himself. Even the fervor of "The Soul of Man" can envision systemic change only by means of the total mechanization of industrial labor. Servants themselves, of course, are not even on the horizon of Wilde's social program—but they are, precisely, on the horizon of his fictions. Indeed, in each of the works I have analyzed, servants mediate an especially rapid connection between self-examination and

self-undermining: whether they are Wilde's slyly insubordinate domestics, Villiers's unromantically un suicidal pages, Huysmans's solitude-shattering servants, or James's all-too-conspicuously perfect valets—or, indeed, Proust's beloved and desperately necessary Françoise—servants challenge the aesthetic even as they serve it. Yet in speaking of “self-undermining” I do not mean to argue that the aestheticist and modernist pursuit of autonomy is merely flawed or ideologically blinded, even if the concept of “the dominance of form” does have elements of distortion and self-deception. My analysis rather suggests that we credit the aesthetes, *fin-de-siècle* and modernist, with an unexpectedly keen social insight about their own practice. Their fictions of aesthetic autonomy, far from mystifying form as transparent, thematize form at their own social margins, beginning to face the social problems formal mastery entails—starting with the problem of holding mastery over other human beings—even if those social problems cannot be resolved from within the artwork itself.

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NOTES

¹The phrase in fact crops up in the English translation of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, a seminal theory of modernism: “Since the middle of the nineteenth century . . . the form-content dialectic has increasingly shifted in favor of form. The content of the work of art, its ‘statement,’ recedes ever more as compared with its formal aspect, which defines itself as the aesthetic in the narrower sense. From the point of view of production aesthetics, this dominance of form in art since about the middle of the nineteenth century can be understood as command over means; from the point of view of reception aesthetics, as a tendency toward the sensitizing of the recipient” (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984], 19–20).

²Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, in *Plays of Oscar Wilde*, intro. John Lahr (New York: Vintage, 1988), 291.

³Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Intentions*, in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling (London: Penguin, 2001), 269–70.

⁴In his study of the American modernist novel, Mark McGurl speaks of “the Jamesian modernist tradition” (*The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001], 7).

⁵There has been considerable scholarly interest both in the aestheticist and modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy and in the (actual and represented) subtleties of the two movements' class affiliations. Elsewhere in this essay, I discuss important readings of aestheticism along such lines by Regenia Gagnier, Jonathan Freedman, and Jeff Nunokawa. For the case of modernism, Pierre Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art* furnishes a compelling, non-reductive sociological and theoretical account of the emergence of French aestheticism and modernism, together with the emergence of the professional artist and intellectual classes; see Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996). For a

nanced placement of American modernism within the subdivisions of the emergent professional-managerial class, see McGurl, 1–29. Lawrence Rainey’s influential *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998) makes specific the elitist side of modernism’s social relations in a historically pointed critique of the idea of art’s autonomy. And Victoria Rosner, in a recent work setting British modernism in the context of architecture and interior design, has pursued what she calls—in a dialectical formulation akin to mine—“a material genealogy of some of literary modernism’s apparently autonomous elements” (*Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005], 2).

⁶ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al., 4 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–1989), 4:611. “These ‘paperies,’ as Françoise called the pages of my writing, it was my habit to stick together with paste, and sometimes in this process they became torn. If necessary, couldn’t Françoise help me to consolidate them just as she stitched patches on to the worn parts of her dresses or as, on the kitchen window, while waiting for the glazier as I was waiting for the printer, she used to paste a piece of newspaper where a pane of glass had been broken?” (Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, *Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright, 6 vol. [London: Chatto and Windus, 1992], 433; translation modified to reflect the grammar of the original).

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1925), 3. For a survey of service in the life and work of Virginia Woolf, see Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Fig Tree, 2007). Light’s attention to the experience of servants and their relations to their Bloomsbury employers in real life complements my argument about literary fictions, which treats those literary servants whose character is largely determined by convention and form.

⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986), 6.

⁹ “I can quite understand your objection to art being treated as a mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass” (Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *Intentions*, 179).

¹⁰ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 291.

¹¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 292.

¹² Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, new ed. (London: Ward, Lock, 1880), page 1007, section 2317.

¹³ This insubordinate potential of the perfect performance of a role has also been important in queer theory’s understanding of what it means to cite a gender norm. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 232. Butler’s discussion also usefully recalls the limits to the subversive potential of this kind of performance, for butlers as for queer subjects.

¹⁴ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 27.

¹⁵ Despite this contrast in emphasis, I do mean to extend to the *fin de siècle* and modernism Woloch’s basic theoretical argument that “narratives themselves allow and solicit us to construct a story—a distributed pattern of attention—that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse” (41).

¹⁶ Nunokawa, *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 95. Though I dissent from Nunokawa’s description of Wilde’s social vision here, I share his interpretation of Wilde’s works as socially pointed in their partly critical, partly acquiescent relation to the norms of capitalist society.

¹⁷ Philippe Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Axel*, trans. June Guicharnaud (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 182–83; the first ellipsis is in the original, and the rest mark my abridgements. “A quoi bon les réaliser [les rêves]? . . . Ils sont si beaux! . . . Toutes les réalités, demain, que seraient-elles, en comparaison des mirages que nous venons de vivre? . . . Accepter, désormais, de vivre, ne serait plus qu'un sacrilège envers nous-mêmes. Vivre? les serviteurs feront cela pour nous” (Villiers, *Axel*, ed. Pierre Mariel [Paris: Courrier du Livre, 1969], 248–49). I retain Villiers's decadent and wholly superfluous *tréma* on his hero's name.

¹⁸ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 211.

¹⁹ Wilson, 210.

²⁰ Speaking for the symbolists in 1896, Remy de Gourmont said of Villiers: “He is always among us and in us, by his work and the influence of his work, which the best writers and artists of the present moment undergo, and with joy” (*Le livre des masques* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1963], 58 [translation mine]).

²¹ See Joyce, 155.

²² Wilson, 211.

²³ Villiers, *Axel*, 190. “Le bourdonnement de la Vie” (*Axel*, 257).

²⁴ This contrast was perhaps more marked in employers' ideas about servants than in actual fact. Theresa McBride argues that in reality “the paternalistic tradition was weaker in England than in France. The English middle classes by the middle of the nineteenth century were much closer than the French to accepting a contractual relationship between masters and servants like that of employers and employees. English mistresses had been introduced through women's magazines and the increasing activity of women's organisations to the idea that servants should be treated like other workers” (*The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820–1920* [London: Croom Helm, 1976], 32).

²⁵ See McBride, 111. The parallel decline in live-in service in America occurred somewhat later, in the 1920s, and was complicated by the demographics of race and immigration; see David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 44–94.

²⁶ See McBride, 9. In an earlier phase of the institution of service, servants came from, and returned to, (lower-) middle-class backgrounds, but by the late nineteenth century, service was an unambiguously working-class, low-status occupation. For an account of the changing status of service, see Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999), 64–67.

²⁷ John Robinson, “A Butler's View of Men-Service,” *Nineteenth Century* 31.184 (June 1892): 927.

²⁸ William Tayler, *The Diary of William Tayler, Footman, 1837*, ed. Dorothy Wise (London: St. Marylebone Society, 1962), 62.

²⁹ Reading domestic economy manuals from the second half of the nineteenth century, John Burnett writes: “It seems certain that menservants were increasingly regarded as status symbols confined to clearly ‘successful’ business and professional men. A manservant was now almost invariably associated with ownership of a coach and horses, and ‘carriage folk’ constituted a clearly-defined stratum of the middle or upper classes” (Introduction to part 2, “Domestic Servants,” in *Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working-class People, 1820–1920*, ed. Burnett [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974], 144). It is important to keep in mind that service was predominantly a women's occupation by this period; for a summary of historians' views on the increas-

ing “feminization” of service over time, see Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 36–43.

³⁰ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 56.

³¹ Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), x.

³² Robbins, 34.

³³ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” 191.

³⁴ Robbins, 160.

³⁵ Robbins, 27.

³⁶ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, vol. 3 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 167. I follow the text of the 1891 (book-publication) version. All references to this text are hereafter abbreviated *D* and cited parenthetically by page number.

³⁷ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 99.

³⁸ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 65. Gagnier goes on to claim that “*Dorian Gray's* decadence lay in its distance from and rejection of middle-class life. This, not stylistics, is how decadence in British literature should be understood” (65). I would suggest, however, that stylistics is an integral part of Wilde's social stance, and, conversely, that decadent style gives us unexpectedly nuanced hints about its practitioner's class situation.

³⁹ Such a shift in our interpretive focus can get us beyond attempts to discern *Dorian Gray's* moral. Ellmann shows the difficulties of such an attempt when he must finally attribute the novel's ambivalent endorsements of aestheticism merely to Wilde's “carelessness, impatience, or whim” (*Oscar Wilde*, 318). The contradictions of *Dorian Gray* have deeper causes than personal vicissitude; they are rooted in the social dependencies of the aesthete.

⁴⁰ That “no man is a hero to his valet” is of course a commonplace of the culture of domestic service; Mrs. Beeton, discussing “Attendants on the Person,” quotes that proverb and goes on to stress the importance for such servants of “polite manners, modest demeanour, and a respectful reserve” at such length that one feels palpably the anxiety caused by the proximity of personal servants to their masters (1016, §2360).

⁴¹ Rosner has made a parallel observation about the frame-maker, Mr. Hubbard, upon whom Dorian calls to carry his portrait up to his attic: like a servant, Hubbard is someone “whose job it is to mediate between the two realms [of art and life].” For this very reason, as Rosner says, he poses a threat to the autonomy of art from life, even as his work is devoted to the literal, material support of that autonomy (55).

⁴² Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in *The Soul of Man*, 138.

⁴³ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 142.

⁴⁴ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 160. Wilde in his socialist-aestheticist individualism anticipates by a hundred years the concluding utopian vision of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*: “Socializing the means of production and consumption would be the condition of an aestheticism unbound, not its overcoming” (*Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993], 340). The convergence of Wilde's and Guillory's critiques of the nexus of aesthetics and social status indicates once more how much of such a critique is immanent in aestheticist practice itself.

⁴⁵ Gagnier treats this aspect of the trial in *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 146–47.

⁴⁶ *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, ed. H. Montgomery Hyde (London: William Hodge, 1948), 166.

⁴⁷ As Gagnier points out, Wilde's class transgression is all the more offensive in that his aristocratic mannerisms were mostly pretension. Wilde's own background and upbringing was, according to Ellmann, "resolutely middle-class," even if his father, a physician, was knighted (*Oscar Wilde*, 10). No matter what his seeming pretensions and aspirations, then, Wilde should by no means be regarded as unproblematically an ally of the upper classes or a residual social order.

⁴⁸ The chapter in which this passage appears was added by Wilde for the 1891 book publication of *Dorian Gray*. Like many of Wilde's substantial additions to the 1890 magazine version, this episode is superfluous to the advancement of the main plot; its contribution is atmospheric, a display of Lord Henry's—and Wilde's—style for its own sake. My argument is meant to show that the appearance of a servant figure is not incidental to the significance of such decorative moments and the literary "dominance of form" towards which they gesture. For a discussion of the differences between Wilde's two texts of his novel, see Joseph Bristow's two introductions to the Oxford critical edition I have been citing (*D*, xi–lxviii).

⁴⁹ See Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 200.

⁵⁰ *Trials*, 130. Ellmann describes Wilde's reaction to Huysmans's novel, published at the same time as Wilde's own marriage: "He said to the *Morning News*, 'This book of Huysmans is one of the best I have ever seen.' . . . Wilde drank of it as a chaser after the love potions of matrimony" (*Oscar Wilde*, 252–53).

⁵¹ Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 292. Victor Brombert discusses the self-sequestration of the aesthete in *À rebours* in "Huysmans: The Prison House of Decadence," chapter 9 in *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 149–70.

⁵² Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 130; translation modified to reflect the grammar of the original. "Une après-midi, les timbres sonnèrent des appels brefs, et des Esseintes prescrivit qu'on lui apprêtât ses malles, pour un long voyage" (Huysmans, *À rebours*, ed. Marc Fumaroli [Paris: Gallimard, 1977], 231).

⁵³ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 219. "Sur le domestique qui emportait des paquets de livres" (Huysmans, *À rebours*, 349).

⁵⁴ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 206. "Il se posséda mieux et demanda au domestique de lui présenter une glace; elle lui glissa aussitôt des mains; il se reconnaissait à peine" (Huysmans, *À rebours*, 330).

⁵⁵ It seems likely to me that this scene in Huysmans's novel lies behind Wilde's attribution of a "somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors" to the hero of *Dorian's* yellow book (*D*, 276), even though this detail is sometimes cited as a difference between Wilde's and Huysmans's novels. See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 317, and Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 395n. The theme of the troubled specularly of the master-servant relation is common to both.

⁵⁶ In his essay on "The Jamesian Lie," Leo Bersani argues for the importance of aestheticism for Henry James. Bersani writes that James's is a "richly superficial art" in which a concern with social surfaces merges with the elevation of the value of surface beauty and style ("The Jamesian Lie," chapter 5 in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1976], 132). For a recent exposition of the alternate view that James's principal concerns are ethical, see Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); Pippin discusses *The Ambassadors* in chapter 6, 147–70.

⁵⁷ Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 192.

⁵⁸ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 104–5.

⁵⁹ Forster, 109.

⁶⁰ More abstractly, one of the novel's largest themes is the idea of working for someone; Strether's compromised ambassadorship for Mrs. Newsome is the most prominent example among many. I want, however, to keep my focus on the brief appearances of actual domestic servants, people whose entire work—and entire livelihood—consists in their service, and whose class membership places them well outside of James's usual social purview.

⁶¹ Freedman, xvii.

⁶² Freedman, 169. For the special relationship between *The Ambassadors* and *Dorian Gray*, in which James's *The Tragic Muse* figures as well, see Freedman, 168.

⁶³ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. John Bayley (London: Penguin, 1986), 149. As for Mrs. Bread, her connection to the Gothic turn of James's early novel should not be conflated with the menacing character of Dorian Gray's valet. Aestheticism is threatened not by the age-old problem of the domestic intimate who knows the household secrets but by the distinctive problems created by attempting to live out art's autonomy.

⁶⁴ James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Harry Levin (London: Penguin, 2003), 365–66. All references to this text are hereafter abbreviated *A* and cited parenthetically by page number.

⁶⁵ Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication," *Essays in Criticism* 10.3 (1960): 255.

⁶⁶ Thus I refuse the contrast implied by Ellmann in his statement that "deferral was for James what instant satisfaction was for Pater"; on the contrary, deferral in James is instant—aesthetic—satisfaction (Ellmann, "James Amongst the Aesthetes," in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, ed. John R. Bradley [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999], 28).

⁶⁷ "The circle of the work itself" (James, *Wings*, 41).

⁶⁸ This dialectical reversal, therefore, is a kind of literalization of Hegel's dialectic of master and servant in the *Phenomenology*. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 111–19. The master's apparent position of autonomous self-consciousness is overturned by his dependence on another, whose consciousness acquires an authority of its own. Hegel writes, "The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman. This, it is true, appears at first *outside* of itself and not as the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is" (117). Yet what in Hegel is seemingly only allegory becomes an explicit reflection on the artist's social position in James as in Wilde, Villiers, and Huysmans.

⁶⁹ The note of danger added by the dagger-like ivory knife echoes, faintly, the "poisonous[ness]" of the yellow book; the darkness of the hour of reading is the same (Dorian reads by the "wan light" of "one solitary star"); and Baptiste's exit reverses the interruption of Dorian's entrenchment by his (French!) valet's reminders "of the lateness of the hour" (*D*, 274–75).

⁷⁰ For a consideration of this menacing aspect of domestic servants in James's "The Jolly Corner," see Brian McCuskey, "Not at Home: Servants, Scholars, and the Uncanny," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 421–36. McCuskey's discussion of the importance of the repression

of class distinctions to the psychoanalytic notion of the uncanny complements my own consideration of the use of class hierarchies for the elevation of aesthetic form.

⁷¹ Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), 24, 147.

⁷² William Empson, in his 1935 essay arguing for the impossibility of proletarian literature, makes a similar connection between the aesthetic distance of the writer from his or her society and the bourgeois's melancholy acceptance of social stratification as (supposedly) ineradicable. I suggest that the highly self-conscious formal procedures of writers like Wilde and James make manifest this complicity when they confront the figure of the servant. See Empson, "Proletarian Literature," in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1974), 3–23.

⁷³ Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," 129.

⁷⁴ Amanda Anderson, in her work on Victorian detachment, has also argued for an ethical significance to Wildean aesthetics; for Anderson, Wilde has a "tendency to make interracial or international expansiveness, rather than interclass understanding, the site of ethical development. This allows him to speak disparagingly of philanthropy, reform, and realism, without entirely abandoning the ethical sphere" (*The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001], 151). I am suggesting, however, that Wilde's aesthetics carries out a subtle ethical reflection on class relations as well.