A Superficial Reading of Henry James

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CHAPTER SIX

ADULTEROUS MATTER

I would like to begin with two working principles of James’s late fiction that together prove enormously generative even as they seem, from a strictly logical viewpoint, only barely reconcilable. The first is that these narratives are centered, with enough obsessiveness to make one suppose that James had fully recognized and embraced his master-metaphor, on the act of adultery; the second is that these narratives so complicate their claims to reference—their own allegations that their grip on a reliably solid world outside themselves is firm—that to ask about the reality of, say, *The Turn of the Screw*’s fornicating ghosts, is, fundamentally, to mistake the nature of the text being read. To put this dual claim more succinctly, the late fiction centers on and effaces the adulterous body, posits that body as both a central and an absent truth. One way this tension appears within the late fiction is as an impulse to “trace” bodies, to locate them within a set of spatial coordinates: “People are always traceable . . . when tracings are required,” Colonel Bob Assingham remarks of the presumed tryst of Charlotte and Amerigo (24:134). *The Turn of the Screw*’s governess “trace[s]” little Flora to her rendezvous with Miss Jessel by the lake and triumphantly concludes that the ghost “was there, so I was justified; she was there, so I was neither cruel nor mad” (12:270, 278). The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* considers himself “on the track of a law”—a principle of interpersonal relations that would explain how adulterous lovers transform each other—as he traces these lovers through the meanderings of a country-house weekend. All of these epistemological adventures arrive at an adulterous body, an equivocal figure that will not settle into a stable ontology; they end with ghosts (*The Turn of the Screw*), perpetually transforming bodies (*The Sacred Fount*), and a woman who, defined as a turning figure, frustrates efforts to “definitely plac[e] her,” to define her (*The Golden Bowl*) (23:53–54). The condition of having a body should entail the con-
dition of having a spatial location, but that more or less necessary truth seems one the late novels deny; they consistently characterize the body along the lines of what William Dean Howells, in his collection of stories about spiritualism, called “questionable shapes,” figures that carry with them a sense of physicality that nevertheless cannot be held in physical place.²

If we move from the narrative patterns of the late fiction to those texts’ moments of description, we find this sense of illocality borne out by the pronounced lack of a whole body, as characters are represented by a single part, a few strands of hair (like Chad Newsome’s gray streaks in *The Ambassadors*) or one accessory (Miss Barrace’s tortoise-shell glasses in the same novel) or a single prop (the narrator’s cigarettes in *The Sacred Fount*). At an early point in *The Ambassadors*, Strether dwells at great length on the ribbon, the “broad red velvet band with an antique jewel—he was rather complacently sure it was antique—attached to it in front,” which Maria Gostrey wears round her neck (21:50). At this point in the novel, this ribbon is the only part of Maria the reader can “see” clearly, save for a passing glimpse of her dress, which is “cut down . . . in respect to shoulders and bosom.” Hence this ribbon almost floats free of the body it accessorizes, a body that is very nearly absent from the passage’s representation of Maria. An appurtenance by definition appertains to some more significant entity, but here in late James, the entities to which such ornaments refer are largely missing, practically invisible as the passage stays resolutely focused on this “added” “value” and leaves only dimly adumbrated the body it adds its value to (21:50, 51). At least for this moment, then, the way the text renders reference problematic and the way it represents the accessory coincide.

This ribbon loosens referential moorings in another way as it becomes a sign of adultery. It is, after all, a red ribbon, one that inevitably points back not only to Hester Prynne’s scarlet *A* but also to the “cherry-coloured ribbon” that seems so incriminating a piece of evidence in the faux-adultery plot of Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and, more generally, to the taste for ornament that for Flaubert’s adulterous Emma Bovary seems inseparable from a taste for extramarital liaisons.³ The ribbon is one of what *The Ambassadors* will later call Maria’s “promiscuities,” a term with which the novel pulls together indiscriminate social relations with a discriminatingly chosen collection of frills and bibelots, relations and bibelots that, taken together, define the mode of women like Maria Gostrey and Madame de Vionnet. A flexible accessory that can be tied and untied, the ribbon associates itself with the body of the adulteress, which is often explicitly defined as “flexible” in James’s late fiction and so reflects in physical form the looseness with which that character regards binding ties (23:47; 10:320). Further, by having an intimate dinner with a woman who is not
Mrs. Newsome, his presumed fiancée, Strether is committing something he considers akin to adultery, an effect heightened by the contrast of Maria’s ribbon to the austere ruff Mrs. Newsome wears instead, by Strether’s inhalation of the “vague sweetness” of Maria’s perfume, and by Strether’s realization that “never before—no, literally never—had a lady dined with him at a public place before going to the play” (21:50, 52).

I want to bring to a close these readings of Jamesian matter by arguing that in James’s late fiction, a suppressed account of adultery reappears as an account of the material world. At its simplest, this argument will be that the late Jamesian object takes on the characteristics of bodies that have come unstuck from their social moorings and floated into illicit unions: the objects of the last novels are both “slippery” and “sticky,” like Lionel Croy’s repulsive sofa at the opening of The Wings of the Dove; they are full of “duplicity,” overly capable of flexible redoubling, like the proper things that serve as cover for the adulterous Selina in A London Life; they are “promiscuous properties,” like the ornaments and relics that furnish Madame de Vionnet’s apartment in The Ambassadors (19:3; 10:292; 21:244). With these promiscuously ambulant, amorphous, sticky yet slippery objects, James endows the slippage of reference with material properties; the missing accounts of sexual liaisons work their way into the novel’s representations of the concrete world as the material things of these novels paradoxically objectify the condition of groundlessness.

More generally and more complexly, this chapter will argue that the instability of the late Jamesian text equals and is accomplished through an instability of the body. What is radical about the late fictions is that they evolve a materialism without reference, a concrete materiality that will not fix itself to its bodily referent; persons come to be defined through material processes that won’t sit still, figures that turn perpetually. As in the representation of Maria’s ribbon, the superficial ornament does not necessarily refer to any substantial integrity; the ribbon functions as the focal point of a passage that only barely gestures toward a body held within its knot. In this sense, James’s late style functions at the point where synecdochic logic begins to break down as it elaborates a part at the expense of a whole that is ostentatiously absent.

James’s term for this nonreferential matter is “promiscuous properties,” a phrase that first of all reflects the typical understanding of adultery as a threat to the orderly inheritance of the estate, a concern that finds its way into and shapes the plots of all the late novels as the Verver fortune, the Newsome family factory, and Millie’s “thumping bank account” seem in danger of becoming floating inheritances or of being falsely assigned. Further, the phrase “promiscuous properties” carries this sense of adulterous, wayward matter into the domain of perception and, ultimately,
ontology; it suggests that the qualities of material things become detached from the things they’re proper to. They thus have the capacity to mix with and meld together consciousnesses as textures, sheens, glazes, lights, and smells seem to exist in the late Jamesian text without the need to stay situated within an object. In his book on Baudelaire, Sartre observes that the smell of bodies was for Baudelaire a way of possessing the body of another—“the smell of a body is the body itself”—but it is also the possession of a body “with the flesh removed, a vaporized body which has remained completely itself but which has become a volatile spirit.” Such scents, Sartre concludes, are “at once bodies and, as it were, the negation of the body.”5 In *The Ambassadors*, James conveys a very similar conception of decorporealized embodiment through the sense of smell, as in the “soft fragrance” Maria exudes in Strether’s pretheatre dinner with her, or in the “charming scent” that, Strether explains to Waymarsh, made him linger in Chad’s flat: “I don’t know what to call it . . . It’s a detail, but it’s as if there were something—something very good—to sniff” (21:50, 105). Both are presumably scenes of adultery (as the contrast between Maria and Mrs. Newsome underscores in the first, and as Waymarsh’s question about whether Chad “live[s] there with a woman” underscores in the second); in both, the adulterous relation that is not quite visible but only presumed is reenacted at the level of the senses, reenacted as a tiny sensory plot that operates in a zone between the emphatically physical body and its vaporization into what Sartre calls “volatile spirit.”

James is at his most materialist, then, at the point where matter can’t be held to or contained within the objects and bodies to which it rightfully belongs. In saying that James is at his most materialist at this point, I mean to underscore the way in which the extreme focus on consciousness in the late novels is conceived according to a bodily model: the small sensory plots that compose so much of the late Jamesian text account for and count as consciousness, even as they mold themselves after a larger, largely absent plot about adulterous bodies, a plot that is wholly inferential, never spoken, only assumed and disowned. *The Sacred Fount*, the novel that prefaces the major phase, is James’s full-length study of this displacement and dispersal of the adulterous body into the realm of the intellect, for in hypothesizing that one lover siphons off the wit and intelligence of another, the novel places at its center a metaphor that displaces bodily matter even as that metaphor is impossible to understand without imagining it in bodily terms: it is hard to think of exchange without thinking of substance, and hard to think of persons exchanging something without thinking of either objects or, in this case, the bodily fluids swapped in sexual union.

The connections drawn in late James among adultery, matter and property, and consciousness are ones at least latently present from the origins of
modern British philosophy; an exploration of the relations and metaphor-
ic resemblances among some key concepts in Locke’s thought will clarify
how adultery, mixed matter, and thinking verge on each other’s domains
and employ each other as examples. In *The Second Treatise of Government*,
Locke famously defines property as whatever man has “remove[d] out of
the State” of nature, “mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something
that is his own.” Locke’s theory of property relies on the concept of mix-
ing, a concept that in turn is based on the inalienability of what the body
has incorporated, physiologically made part of itself. Developing his defi-
nition through the example of harvesting acorns, Locke argues that the
acorns become one’s own as soon as one picks them up. But the whole
example is prefaced by an assertion of the fact that whoever “is nourished
by the Acorns he pickt up under an Oak . . . has certainly appropriated
them to himself. No Body can deny but the nourishment is his.” Similarly,
Locke earlier in the same chapter observes that “The Fruit, or Venison,
which nourishes the wild *Indian...* must be his,” must become “a part of
him,” before it can fulfill its function. This theory of property, which
finds its inarguable base in bodily fact, cannot be wholly disentangled
from Locke’s theory of cognition; indeed, owning and knowing will
remain entangled in Anglo-American philosophy for hundreds of years
(they remain emphatically so for William James, for instance). Hence the
mind in Lockean epistemology is imagined in similar terms, as a “Store-
house” “furnished” with objects of knowledge, a “stock” of “materials,”
“plain *Ideas*” it can grasp. Possessive individualism becomes a model for
cognition not only because the Lockean mind knows by acquiring, but
also because it forms a “Collection” out of the material it acquires, a col-
collection it keeps in a “Store-house”; both the contents of the mind and its
nature as a container are thus shaped after things that epitomize owner-
ship. The very idiom with which Locke characterizes thinking—“mixed,”
“flow,” “properties,” and “figures”—reflects a model of bodily appropria-
tion; thinking in Locke is the mixing of cognitive labor with the world,
and that account implicitly carries with it and derives much of its intuitive
appeal from the mixing of bodies and substances.
Perhaps this commitment is why, in explaining the nature of “mixed
Modes” or abstract ideas, Locke gives as one example the “*Idea of
Adultery*,” for adultery inheres in an improper mixture of bodies that
reflects the type of thinking Locke is trying to explain at the same time
that it only exists between bodies and so is irreducible to substance. As a
complex (as opposed to simple) idea, adultery is for Locke empirically
wayward, almost licentious, resistant to referential precision; in forming
such ideas, “the Mind takes a liberty not to follow the Existence of Things
exactly.” Such ideas are formed without comparison to “the real Existence
of Things,” are not verified and perhaps not even verifiable through an examination of “Nature” (429). Hence adultery emerges in the Essay as both wholly embodied and wholly abstract: wholly embodied because it obliquely reflects the Lockean devotion to mixed matter and because it is a name for something bodies do, and wholly abstract because it names no one substance and is left unsubjected to ocular proof.

This chain of overlapping metaphors in Locke’s philosophy usefully highlights the structure imagined for consciousness in late James. It brings forward, first of all, the image of the mind as a storeroom, a cabinet, closet, or gallery, in which James’s protagonists lodge their perceptions, their “accumulations,” as The Golden Bowl puts it, of the hints and dark glimmers of an adultery plot unraveling around them (24:14). In What Maisie Knew, this “collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable” is housed in a “dim closet” with “high drawers,” a “receptacle” in which stray remarks of Maisie’s promiscuous parents are “tumbled” together (11:12). In The Golden Bowl, this space is figured as “a roomful of confused objects, never as yet ‘sorted,’” a “confusion” or “heap” of things Maggie knows she doesn’t know, a closet that is her own version of Amerigo’s “cabinet” containing all the things he knows intimately well (24:14; 23:46). In The Sacred Fount, this space is a “little gallery,” “a small collection,” “a museum” of adulterous couplings (29). A long and voluminous tradition of commentary centered on consciousness in late James has often obscured the principle that these passages make striking: consciousness in these fictions becomes thinkable, representable, susceptible to being given a structure through adultery. Adultery makes consciousness graphic, and the material properties of adulterous bodies, which I have argued always give off on the world of things, are what make the process of thinking in late James seem substantial, concrete, replete with tangible acquisitions. Consciousness only acquires the minimum degree of opacity necessary for representation when it is adulterated.

But if James falls in line with Locke’s account of the mind as a storehouse, he also perceives the instability of the matter he places there: in the passages quoted above, material instabilities convey epistemological ones as James’s prose hovers between construing matter as significance and matter as concrete substance that slides away from its signifiers. As in Locke’s Essay, adultery in late James is a coupling of bodies that fails to inhere in any substance and so uncouples words from their referents. Hence the figure of the storehouse is in these fictions emphatically materialist and referentially troubled at the same time. In The Golden Bowl, the “confused objects” Maggie accumulates make up a “mass of vain things, congruous, incongruous,” a “heap” (24:14–15). Evidence of promiscuity is itself promiscuously intermingled, “never as yet ‘sorted.’” Like a mass of secondhand goods, cognitive property
is here so jumbled that things appear to slide away from their names even as they take on momentary “affinit[ies]” with each other; they are hence “congruous” and “incongruous,” slipping away from referents while sometimes sticking to each other in new and alarming combinations (24:14, 15). In *Maisie*, such objects of knowledge are a “tumbled” “assortment” of things “to which meanings were attachable,” a phrase that casts the relation between signifier and signified into a materialist idiom even as that relation is undone by the very copiousness of this jumble of matter (11:12). In *The Sacred Fount*, the narrator thinks of his own mind as a “museum” that contains embodied questions: he thinks of his collection of transformed adulterers as “the museum of those who put to me with such intensity the question of what had happened to them” (29). They are materialized aporias, then, turning figures that are simultaneously understood as solid bodies and ungraspable flow.

The image of the cogito as storehouse oscillates in another important way as James’s names for it shift between characterizing it as a private “closet” and a public “museum” and so shift between thinking of it as a place where goods are consumed in solitude and a place where goods are publicly displayed but never used up. These images are nearly interchangeable for James, as they are for much of the prehistory of the museum, in which private cabinets serve as quasi-public signs of status and in which civic museums originate in the collection of an individual. The Ververs’ career as collectors is a study in this shifting boundary between private goods and public treasures as they travel with their “smaller pieces” that they “arrange” in their hotel rooms (to make these transiently private commercial spaces “less ugly,” Maggie says), store their larger pieces in “warehouses, vaults, banks, safes, wonderful secret places” on the Continent, and plan a municipal museum for American City (23:13). Maggie’s mental “closet” carries with it, then, a sense of ambivalent movement between the deeply subjective and the openly shared: consciousness in late James is construed in terms of a figure that very nearly forms a continuous surface between highly private spaces and places of public access. Indeed, the sense in the late novels that consciousness can be externalized depends in large part for its sense, its comprehensibility, on the material practices I have been highlighting, the practices of collection and display.

These indeterminacies in the storehouse metaphor—between public and private, between the materially sticky and the referentially slippery, between embodiment as something graspable and as ontologically fluid—replicate the scene of adultery. For in the late fiction, the art gallery becomes for James the locus of the adulterous couple, and the processes by which bodies give off on each other and objets d’art give off on bodies become fused. The museum, the headquarters of high culture, becomes a
space of promiscuous properties; James's last fictional account of what I will call the matter of culture lies in this recurrent association of illicit or barely licit sex with the highly valorized, nearly officially sanctioned practice of museum-going. By the word “culture,” I mean both the narrower sense of personal cultivation through exposure to works of art and the broader sense of all a society's forms, objects, and attitudes; my argument is that in his gallery scenes, James is concerned with the material blurring or blending of these senses and that gallery-going, with its combination of static of works of art and directionless, even random movement of spectators, epitomizes his sense of daily life as the endless equivocation between persons and things. As I have already briefly sketched, the figure of the gallery is furthermore the image that blurs the difference between the Jamesian investment in consciousness and the Jamesian investment in embodiment which, I have argued throughout this book, underwrites and is itself overwritten by James's epistemological and psychological interests. In the homology between the mind figured as storehouse and the gallery figured as the scene of promiscuity, the distinction between the cognitive flexibility of which James's protagonists are so capable and the bodily flexibility of which his adulteresses are so capable dissolves.

In a bracing footnote in *Capital*, Marx defines “the only materialist” historiography as one that uncovers how abstractions and apotheoses arise from “the earthly kernel,” “the actual, given relations of life.” The history of technology is what produces “every particular organization of society,” even when that social form seems most abstracted from the machines, the concrete arrangements of tools and laborers, that have made it. While my goal is more modest than those of Marx's philosophy of history, I am going to begin my reading of James's adulterous matter in the same spirit by claiming that the abstractions of the late fiction originate in a highly particular moment and a specific turning body in a novel of the late 1880s, *A London Life*.

Squarely centered on—and ultimately decentered by—adultery, *A London Life* announces itself early on as a novel about the “duplicity” of objects, of houses and decor, of the interior architecture of upper-class England (10:292). James's American heroine, Laura Wing, sees the settings characteristic of English country life as producing the gentry and holding in place the persons it has made. “English things” have the “bright durable sociable air” of “being meant for daily life, for long periods, for uses of high decorum”; they tell a “story” of stasis, “of a comfortable, liberal, deeply domestic effect, addressed to eternities of possession” (10:271, 291). The estate that Laura's sister Selina has married seems like “immutabl[e] 'property’” (the quotation marks in the text suggest not just the iteration of the idiom as a constantly invoked description, but also the term's potential
undoing) (10:270). Lady Davenant, the aged friend of the family dowager, personifies this sense of “symbolic security” conveyed by the knickknacks characteristic of the upper-class drawing room; seeing her seated amidst “chintz and water-colour,” Laura has a momentary glimpse of how comforting it would be to “jump all the middle dangers of life,” pass through the awkward hazards of courtship and desire, and arrive “at the end safely, sensibly, with a cap and gloves and formulas and phrases” (10:283). The image of security in this novel, its very picture—Lady Davenant is both “full of life” and more like a “fine portrait than . . . a living person”—is that of a woman nestled among her things, her habitual accessories that are so thoroughly established that it’s not clear whether they’re her own innovations or ones inherited from her forbears (10:272).

As this nearly impossible image of the living but static portrait suggests, what stabilizes the social order in A London Life is a most precarious ontology. While the early pages of the novel manage to bring a diagrammatic neatness to their vision of upper-class culture, every one of the figures they advance hovers on the edge of logical impossibility, carries with it the germ of its own disintegration. The static “story” told by the accoutrements of country life is barely a story. The watercolors and chintz, which image security, seem too amorphous or flimsy to serve as things that could anchor a social structure, even symbolically. Property is by definition not “immutable,” but alienable. More precisely, the relation between persons and the objects that should hold those persons in place is a hazardous one, prone to detachment and to new and promiscuous combinations: bodies in A London Life tend to come unglued from the concrete things that might stabilize them and to mix indiscriminately with alien matter. The text explicitly names these slippages as a problem of reference: thinking of the “stable-stamped composition” of her randy brother-in-law Lionel and of the “fine things,” like “the sweet old wainscoted parlour,” that surrounded his upbringing, Laura wonders, “what visible reference was there” in the former to the latter? (10:291). Such settings, Laura concludes, convey a “sense of . . . curious duplicity (in the literal meaning of the word)”; they project a tone of “peace and deco- rum,” while the real “spirit” that “prevail[s]” is “contentious and impure” (10:292). By the “literal meaning” of “duplicity,” Laura appears to mean the figurative one: while the more usual sense is “deceitfulness,” the literal sense is merely “the state or quality of being numerically or physically double” (OED). Duplicity is itself doubled between the sense of a cunningly false front and the sense of physical doubling; the loss of referential hold yields a text where the literal and the figurative keep turning, keep exchanging places. For perhaps Laura does mean the literal here in the sense of the doubled bodies of the adulterous couple, the beast with
two backs, the “monstrous” creations generated when the hold objects have on persons gives way (10:321).

Uncontainable within any single figure, this duplicity is nonetheless exemplified by the body of the adulterous woman, in this case Laura’s sister, Selina, for whom trips to Parisian dressmakers serve as minimal cover for trysts with her lover, Captain Crispin. From the beginning, the text cannot decide whether Selina is a “foreign element” that has poisoned the estate, introducing desires that cannot be held in place, or whether somehow the estate has corrupted her American innocence. While Selina and her “doings” seem to Laura wholly “discordant” with the values materialized by Mellows, the country house, there is still a suspicion—one clearly unrationaled—that at Mellows Selina “had found her occasion, all the influences that had so transformed her” (10:271–2). The adulterous woman cannot quite be relegated to some social margin here because she exemplifies and exaggerates both the text’s model of culture and the weak point of that model: Selina’s “flexibilit[y]” and acquisitiveness, her ability to accept so readily “the mark of her couturière,” are both ideal and deviant (10:320). In other words, the same material processes that produce a person designated as “wife” or “mother” are the ones that threaten to undo that designation. A London Life tends to understand persons as generated and perfected by the objects from which they must somehow remain distinguishable. To use the text’s own characteristic figure for this difficult position, persons must be portraits framed by their material circumstances, but only framed by them, not mixed with or adulterated by them. Even so, objects are the “frame” that has “made” persons into ideal “picture[s],” into “the perfection of human culture” (10:292). And as the texts and episodes discussed in chapter 4 indicated, frames can be points of traffic instead of rigid boundaries.

It is not surprising, then, that the frame of reference will be definitively broken in a museum scene, a scene that merges the disorienting confusion of person and thing with the adulterous disruption of marriage. Museums are almost by definition places for objects that have floated free of their contexts, come unstuck from their referents, and merged into new combinations; perhaps that is why James habitually associates them with sexual desire and thinks of them as likely settings for relatively chaste courting (Strether, having married young, had “missed the time natural in Boston for taking girls to the Museum” in The Ambassadors), or for more random and less licensed encounters (Kate and Densher meet at a gallery opening in The Wings of the Dove) (21:52). In A London Life, this association of the museum with the collapse of context is at its strongest, for the museum in question is the weird assemblage of architectural models, classical busts and fragments, funerary urns, mirrors, landscapes, portraits, a
human skeleton, a model of Stonehenge, and an Egyptian sarcophagus, crafted by the architect Sir John Soane (1753–1837) in the building adjoining his house in Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London.

Recent studies of the cultural poetics of museums place strong emphasis on the rationalized narratives museums make out of their objects, and on the ways that objects wrenched out of original context are systematically classified into an artificial and hegemonic unity. In his disciplinary critique *Rethinking Art History*, Donald Preziosi writes that “everything takes place in the museum in some eternal contemporaneity; all diachrony, all difference, all multivocality is enframed in synchronicity.” The museum “orchestrates . . . contradiction into a single visible field” and “situates all objects within . . . spaces that evoke and elicit a proper viewing stance and distance.” This description is largely what the Soane Museum is not, nor is it the way nineteenth-century museum-goers experienced what they saw. Indeed, James almost directly answers this understanding of the museum as hegemonic in his description of the Soane collection as one of “heterogeneous objects,” a “queer” collation of “thing[s] you couldn’t find anywhere else” (10:356–57). Further, Soane was far more a connoisseur of spatial disorientation than a classificatory thinker, and his principles of composition owed at least as much to the sensibility governing the Gothic novel as it did to a Palladian ideal of order. An early admirer of Piranesi’s etchings, Soane recreated their visual disorientations—their confusion of surface and depth—in his chambers, particularly in the basement area known as the Crypt, where the climax of James’s novel takes place.

Everything about Laura’s journey down into the Crypt defies rationalization: she is going there with Mr. Wendover, a man she has picked up at one of her sister’s receptions and so a man who, for all his seeming innocuousness, is also associated with Selina’s adulterous household; the city appears a great “labyrinth” through which one must “thread” one’s way; the Museum itself, although a public institution, is also “one of the most curious things in London and one of the least known” and seemingly empty of other visitors (10:355, 356). Along the way downstairs, Laura and Wendover inspect “the sarcophagi, the mummies, the idols,” and then admire Soane’s collection of Hogarths (Soane owned *The Rake’s Progress*), paintings redolent of the adulterous atmosphere Laura has come to the Museum to escape. The effect of the strange antiquities similarly intensifies the anxious-making “duplicity” of things in the earlier scenes at the country house: “there were uncanny unexpected objects Laura edged away from and would have preferred not to be in the room with,” phrasing that itself edges away from its objects and, in doing so, associates those objects with the kind of impure woman one ought not to visit or even name
except by such syntactic indirection (10:357). As a thunderstorm gathers its force (this scene pulls out every Gothic stop), the labyrinthine quality of the “dim irregular vaults” and “little narrow avenues” intensifies, as does the “ambiguous sinister look” of the fragments and figures, until the journey downward and inward ends where all journeys through a labyrinth do—with a discovery of the monstrous, perpetually turning figure:

“It’s very fearful—it looks like a cave of idols!” [Laura] said to her companion; and then she added, “Just look there: is that a person or a thing?” As she spoke they drew nearer the object of her reference—a figure half blocking a small vista of curiosities, a figure that answered her question by uttering a short shriek as they approached. The immediate cause of this cry was apparently a vivid flash of lightning, which penetrated into the room and cleared up both Laura’s face and that of the equivocal person. The girl recognised her sister, as Mrs. Lionel had unguardedly recognised hers. “Why, Selina!” broke from her lips before she had time to check the sound. At the same moment the figure turned quickly away, and then Laura saw it accompanied by another, a tall gentleman with a tawny beard that shone in the dusk. These wanderers retreated together—melted away as it were, disappearing in the gloom or in the labyrinth of wonders. (10:357–58)

At the center of the labyrinth in Ovid lurks the Minotaur, half-bull, half-human, a monstrosity born of the adulterous affair of Minos’s wife and hidden away in Daedalus’s spatially disorienting maze, a maze Daedalus constructed by “confusing the usual marks of direction, and leading the eye of the beholder astray by devious paths winding in different directions.” Spatial and sexual confusion are traditionally linked in this way, a tradition James follows as he locates his Hogarthian plot in a Piranesian setting, exploiting the varied properties of the Soane Museum by finding the thread between them. The turning figure, “the equivocal person,” here is momentarily indistinguishable from a thing and so is a hybrid creature, half one substance and half another, like the Minotaur. Already duplicitous, this figure is redoubled by the presence of her lover, a figure presumably intertwined with hers. Hence as an “object of reference,” the figure escapes Laura’s perceptual grasp and escapes the firm mooring of the marriage contract even as this groundlessness itself becomes an account of the material world. The equivocations of adultery and the equivocal relation between persons and things become indistinguishable in this passage set in Soane’s Crypt, a place which spatializes the loss of reference points, points by which the eye may orient itself. Consequently, the passage actually spatializes the Jamesian lie (Selina
has lied about what she is doing on this afternoon, saying that she will be visiting a friend who is ill) because it maps onto an architectural space the endlessly protean, ceaselessly malleable quality that James's liars bestow upon the world around them.\textsuperscript{16}

In this scene, then, James materializes the adulterous loss of reference that will be a hallmark of the late fiction; the last major novels are tales from this Crypt, narratives that unfold and disperse the disorientations of this episode in \textit{A London Life}. In this scene set in a collection, James gathers together the tropes of the late fiction, focuses within a narrow space the uncanny ontology that will characterize the novels of adultery. On their way down to the museum's basement, Laura and Wendover take time to inspect the “medals” and “pagodas,” images that will figure Amerigo and his adulterous liaison with Charlotte in \textit{The Golden Bowl}. The pagoda in the later novel would appear to be a fundamentally different sort of object than it is in \textit{A London Life} because it is a purely mental image, a metaphor with which Maggie pictures to herself her life's strangely mixed filial and marital attachments. But what is striking is how many of its material properties the pagoda retains as it is transformed into an object of cognition, a thing that exists only in the space of metaphor. For example, Maggie imagines the pagoda as creating an area around itself for her to “circulate[e]” in, “a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow,” a space that recreates on a purely metaphorical level the wavering dimensions of the museum in \textit{A London Life} (24:3–4). The pagoda of \textit{The Golden Bowl} is “impenetrable and inscrutable,” hence an object that excludes Maggie even as it appears as an object enclosed within her consciousness. An unrationalizable object, the pagoda is a structure shut up within Maggie that shuts her out. A material thing with a hard objectivity—it is described as “plated with hard bright porcelain”—the pagoda has an emphatically durable character, which makes it an odd choice for something that is so ontologically amorphous as a mental image. Finally, while readers practically always take this pagoda as an image for adultery, doing so means taking it as referring to nothing so much as a textual gap, a hole in the novel's account of relationships. For what is conceptually most difficult about images like this one in late James is that they have a lavish material specificity—the pagoda is “coloured and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells”—without the firm referential moorings that should accompany such a finely specified image. Even if we tacitly agree to fill in the epistemological gaps of the late fiction and take a figure like this one as an image for adulterous relations, we are still left with the image as a materially objective sign for the coming-loose of the marital frame of reference adultery represents.

As the trajectory of this pagoda from \textit{A London Life} to \textit{The Golden Bowl}...
implies, the materialism without reference generated in the Soane Museum is generalized in the late fiction; the slippages and adherences of the adulterous body can no longer be contained within a highly eccentric space like the Crypt. Rather, the unmoored matter and the uncanny dimensions of that episode in *A London Life* recreate themselves everywhere—in individual consciousnesses, in landscapes, in domestic interiors and public spaces—until the logic of inside and outside (and even just the logic of *in*) loosens and unravels. Spaces and contexts in the late James take on the properties of the ribbon, an appurtenance that intimates the presence of a body, is associated with adultery, and has no inside or outside. Or, to shift to a metaphor even more central to these decentering texts, all spaces in the late fiction become like the museum, a space that takes materialism as its very basis, yet that can only barely contain its material properties within any kind of context, a space constructed around the paradox of preserving objects while also making their qualities ambulatory.

These claims would probably hold loosely true of museums throughout history, but there are particular reasons for making them of museums as conceptualized in the years around 1900, reasons that lend historical depth to an understanding of James’s nonreferential materialism. Indeed, the matters of context and adulteration, the poetics of metamorphosis, and the functions of the “storehouse” are explicitly at issue in the first history of the museum, the Scottish historian David Murray’s three-volume *Museums, Their History and Their Use*, published in 1904. Murray’s work is part of a much larger effort to rationalize the curatorial profession and so to bring structure to the kind of cornucopian jumbles that collections like the Soane Museum represent; the Museums Association in Great Britain began holding an annual conference and publishing a monthly journal in the same years as Murray was writing his history. For Murray, the contemporary state of the museum is epitomized by a narrative of frustration he tells several times over in his preface. He goes to a city or town museum and asks for its handbook, only to be told that the proprietors “have lost all trace of [their] catalogue” (viii). Even the British Museum is not immune to this referential crisis: it “possesses far more works on museums in general than any other library . . . but it has not a complete collection of the works relating to itself” (viii–ix). The museum is a place where things have wandered away from their names and origins, a situation repeated in the physical disarray of the collections themselves, where “odds and ends,” things “presented to the museum simply because they are old,” “gifts by friends in foreign lands,” “birds, beasts, eggs, and fossil” are “huddled together in cabinets” (265). Murray’s vision of the disordered museum is itself practically a study in the poetics of adultery as the foreign, the decadent, and the bestial promiscuously jumble together into an intimate confusion.
In Murray's history, as in the work of more recent historians of the museum, such unstable matter is central to the museum's origins. Even Enlightenment collectors, Murray notes, were “too fond of monsters and other things strange and unusual,” too fond of curiosities and objects that had undergone inexplicable, marvelous transformations (195). Murray dwells at length on the seventeenth-century taste for petrified objects (especially body parts), on the fascination with water that could supposedly turn to stone, on the fixation on the story of Lot's wife, turned to a pillar of salt as she looked back at the lascivious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (194, 196). This prototype of the perpetually turning, adulterous and adulterated body lies at the center of Murray's history not so much because of any extraordinary historical influence she might bear, but because for him she embodies the problem of the museum as a collection of objects that must be held to a referential stability but which must also give up their properties and promiscuously mix with other minds and bodies.

For while the disorderly museum is anathema to a classificatory thinker like Murray, the properly structured museum is only barely more ontologically stable than the jumble it seems to replace. In Murray's account, museums are the exemplary cultural institution because their objects escape the vicissitudes of value and the ravages of time; museums are better than libraries because their “objects are not depreciated in value by being passed through the hands of casual visitors or made vehicles of disease, as often happens with books,” which are mistreated by “so-called reader[s] with foul clothes and filthy hands” (280). Yet museums must also be “open to all alike,” providing “recreation and instruction for all classes”; “familiarity with [the museum’s] models insensibly cultivates the taste and trains the eye” of the visitor (259, 270). Murray’s conception of the museum is structured around the paradoxical goals of simultaneously containing and disseminating culture, but as the modifier “insensibly” here implicitly acknowledges, he has difficulty explaining how to do both at the same time. Unlike many other commentators discussed earlier in this study, Murray does not even move to a construction of looking as touching here as the structure of the museum cuts off the affiliations between the visual and the tactile, which much of nineteenth-century thought had woven together. 19

But if Murray leaves a hole where his account of perception should appear, other museum theorists explained the acquisition of culture through metaphors of the porous, even the promiscuous, body. In Museum Ideals, Benjamin Ives Gilman, the secretary of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, wrote that “our enjoyment of a picture or a statue grows by contagion from that of a companion”; “any fruitful interest in fine art demands repeated contact with it.” 20 Gilman's metaphors here are
those of bodily contact, of bodies giving off on each other, of persons mingling with art and bearing fruit, or at least “fruitful interest.” His metaphors are, in other words, the figures of *The Sacred Fount* (1901), the novel in which James so exaggerates his metaphor of the turning, transforming body that bodies become almost too fluid to lend themselves to convincingly realistic representation, exaggerates his metaphor of the body that gives off so that lovers drain each other of vital fluids, and exaggerates his metaphor of the prostheticized body so that at times all we see of a character is a foot. All of these exaggerations yield a materialism without reference, an instability of matter that James conveys most often in this novel through the metaphor of the museum, which itself tends to spread promiscuously throughout the text.

Of all James’s fictions, *The Sacred Fount* may be the most difficult to materialize, the most resistant to the kinds of reading I have pursued in this book. It is also strangely and frankly dependent on the body it nearly fails to make a place for. Because this novel is so heavily invested in thinking, it would seem the body disappears; as Sharon Cameron observes, *The Sacred Fount*’s “subject is the narrator’s collusion with the thinking of other characters about still other characters—his attempt to make those to whom he confides his thoughts think as he does.” Cameron’s is the most logically rigorous rendition of the traditional approach to this novel; it is always taken as a comic meditation (sometimes also as a profound one) on interpretation, on the endlessness of what the hypothesizing intellect can do, or on the dangers of adopting too radically the observer’s role. It is never taken as a meditation on the body because its epistemological concerns seem wholly to have displaced ontological ones.

And yet this novel materializes thinking in such a radical way, renders so substantial the metaphors for cognition, that it calls for the materialist reading it seems just as radically to efface. “The sacred fount,” a figure in the text for vitality and intellect, perpetually hovers on the brink of physiological specificity; as I suggested earlier, it only makes sense if we imagine it as a vampiric or sexual union. Hence James embodies the “Fountains of Knowledge” with which Locke in the *Essay* characterizes the source of our ideas (104). Similarly, the novel’s fascination with intelligence as something that can flow makes literal William James’s metaphor of the stream of consciousness. It is as if in *The Sacred Fount* James set himself the goal of rereading the epistemological tradition as if it were a materialist one. Alternatively, it is as if he set for himself the experiment of testing his poetics of the appurtenanced body: in a novel that seems to establish a world of pure thought, set in a place only dimly adumbrated and centered on acts that seem totally intellectual, how might the body and its objects reintroduce themselves, force their way back in?
In a way, the question is slightly misleading because it almost answers itself: the epistemological tradition is already a materialist one, figuring itself in metaphors of the ownership of rarities (like Locke’s storehouse) and the rushing waters of thought. This is a tradition James wholly honors in *The Sacred Fount* and in the late fiction generally; it is also a tradition he wholly decenters. He honors it in moments where *The Sacred Fount’s* narrator conceives of his theories, his hypotheses about the sexual liaisons that have so depleted one half of each couple, as his property; he “guard[s] to the last grain of gold” his “precious sense of their loss, their disintegration and their doom” (189). Here the narrator imagines himself as a miser guarding his treasure; at other points he imagines himself as a collector who arranges perceptions in his mind as if they were the bric-à-brac that adorns a house, “a perfect palace of thought,” or paintings on the walls of a private gallery or “exhibition” (214, 130). The two couples who are the objects of his scrutiny become for him like “bronze groups” that accessorize either of the “two ends of a chimney-piece” (130).

With these figures, James falls in line with the tradition of construing things one knows as like precious things one owns; indeed, he very nearly literalizes that metaphor by making it one of the more finely tuned, carefully detailed elements in his text. (This is true of *The Golden Bowl’s* pagoda, as well.) But James embraces this metaphor only to decenter it: these objects the narrator collects have a material concreteness without any firm referential hold on something in the world, something known for which they serve as symbols. Indeed, for several reasons, it is hard to say what the narrator’s bronze groups and horde of gold are. While they should be purely metaphorical, they don’t stay firmly placed in the realm of the figurative because the narrator seems a Jamesian type who really does collect such things; it is hard to read his narrative without assimilating him to the category of sterile Jamesian dilettantes like Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* or Sanguinetti in “Rose-Agathe,” who displace the emotional life onto the material one. Yet this is one of those treacherous “translations into late James” that Ruth Bernard Yeazell warns of, one of those moments in which we almost unavoidably, but also quite wrong-headedly, fill in the blank spaces of the late fictions with our knowledge of what the earlier fictions typically do in such vacancies. For unlike earlier manifestations of this character-type, there is practically nothing to know the narrator by; his name, age, physical appearance, and family are all wholly absent. The “things” he “collects” have more ontological security than the narrator does—the bronze groups and the gold serve the same function as the objects that make Mrs. Gereth distinct in *The Spoils of Poynton*, for instance—but here, that security is a false one.

These objects of property convey a thick sense of materiality without
stable reference in another way because the perceptions they stand for may be false; the gold may be fool’s gold, in other words. *The Sacred Fount* ends with Mrs. Brissenden thoroughly routing the narrator’s theories, leaving his hypotheses a “heap of disfigured fragments,” or so it seems: the ending leaves the reader in a mild state of aporia over which lovers are feasting on each others’ intellect and beauty and a stronger state of aporia over whether this vampiric feasting is an actual phenomenon at all (214). Hence the figures that serve to crystallize knowledge take on a stronger sense of reality than what they serve as figures for; James gives primacy to the metaphorical texture of the epistemological tradition and then cuts the strands that tie those metaphors to things outside themselves.

More precisely stated, the metaphors for knowledge in *The Sacred Fount* are both referentially unstable and too close in nature to the objects of that knowledge; they match the world outside them too closely and hardly match it at all. On the one hand, these emphatically material objects are in no certain relation to the world outside themselves because the knowledge they symbolize may be wholly spurious. On the other hand, these objects are so close in kind to the world of objets d’art that they symbolize knowledge of—to the bibelots, galleries, and sculpture gardens of the great country estate that is the novels’ only setting—that they can hardly be symbols at all; they are so much a part of what they should symbolize that they cannot serve as abstractions, cannot make knowledge seem autonomous or distinct or self-sufficient. The bronze groups, the horde of gold, the interior gallery of paintings are all materially continuous with the world outside the narrator’s mind at the same time they are referentially disconnected from that world.

James stages these continuities and disconnections most explicitly in a long scene set in the great estate’s picture gallery. The narrator draws May Server into the gallery in order to watch her; he is convinced she has surrendered her intellect to some lover he cannot identify and he is bent on verifying his thesis. This particular gallery seems a very different place from the Crypt of the Soane Museum; it is ordered, light, and refined, not jumbled and dark. But it spatializes the promiscuous mixing of properties anyway, as its “high frescoed ceiling arch[es] over a floor so highly polished that it seem[s] to reflect the faded pastels set, in rococo borders, in the walls” (47). Everything here is in a state of reflection as material things exchange their properties in a setting that will, like the Crypt, serve as the scene of adulterous unions (albeit of more indeterminate couplings than in *A London Life*) and that in its own way will, also like the Crypt, make unclear whether “that is a person or a thing.”

As May enters the gallery, she becomes absorbed in its frescoed ceiling, and the narrator becomes absorbed in watching her absorption:
Mrs. Server, with her eyes raised to the painted dome, with response charmed almost to solemnity in her exquisite face, struck me at this moment, I had to concede, as more than ever a person to have a lover imputed. The place, save for its pictures of later date, a triumph of the florid decoration of two centuries ago, evidently met her special taste, and a kind of profane piety had dropped on her, drizzling down, in the cold light, in silver, in crystal, in faint, mixed delicacies of colour, almost as on a pilgrim at a shrine. I don’t know what it was in her—save, that is, the positive pitch of delicacy in her beauty—that made her, so impressed and presented, indescribably touching. She was like an awestruck child; she might have been herself—all Greuze tints, all pale pinks and blues and pearly whites and candid eyes—an old dead pastel under glass. (48)

May is here a likely adulteress because, this passage opens by saying, she is susceptible to mixing, aesthetically permeable. The “piety” she feels is a “profane” one, and the sexual flow of the novel’s title here becomes the flow of paint which has regained its liquid quality and dropped down on May, transforming her into a painted lady. She is both revitalized by the painting because it touches up her “pale pinks and blues” and petrified by it as she becomes “an old dead pastel under glass.” She is, then, both a crystallized figure, durable enough to figure as an object in a collection, yet perpetually in a state of flowing transformation.

The novel’s interests in adulterous and material exchanges become indistinguishable here as the narrator’s supposition that lovers have “rubbed off on each other” becomes a description of the relation between persons and things, as well (26). The gallery in this scene is a museum of equivocal figures, just as the narrator assembles his little “gallery—the small collection . . . the museum of those who put to me with such intensity the question of what had happened” to change them so (29). These two museums—one presumably inside the mind and one presumably outside it—they themselves mix and swap attributes even though their status as representations of each other is wholly undecidable: it is not clear how one would determine whether the figures the narrator mentally collects are reliable reflections of the characters he sees in the gallery. The collection, the storehouse, the image of achieved knowledge is literalized and redoubled in this scene; the metaphorical texture of the figure for cognitive acquisitions is thus exaggerated, even as its material properties keep undoing the possibility that the figure does, in fact, signal the attainment of some reliable knowledge.

The central painting in this gallery scene continues this development of a destabilizing materialism and embodied equivocation because it por-
trays a man with a mask but renders it undecidable which is the mask and which the real face. The figure’s own face is “pale, lean, livid,” and “whitened”; he holds in his hand

an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human. The object thus appears a complete mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and worn. (50–51)

Of all James’s turning figures surveyed in this book, this is one of the most unstable. Its instabilities, furthermore, serve as an icon for culture as The Sacred Fount conceives it, and as an icon for adultery. The dead face the figure wears is an image for the depleted half of each couple; the lively mask (if it is lively) serves as an image for the other half that has absorbed its lover’s vitality. Yet as the narrator and the other characters stare at the painting, their visions differ radically; the painting has the quality of an optical illusion susceptible of two readings that exclude each other. Thus May Server can only see the mask as an “awful grimace,” while the narrator sees it as “blooming and beautiful” (51). The narrator therefore entitles the painting The Mask of Life, while May calls it The Mask of Death. Like the wavering figures studied in the first and second chapters of this book, vitality itself is potentially lodged in an accessory, the “ambiguous work of art” that turns out to be a mask. The portrait here is itself an image of an economy between body and object, one that will not sit still. That the mask looks like May Server and the real face like Guy Brissenden, another of the depleted lovers, emphasizes the way that this portrait is practically unframeable, is both itself in motion and forges ambiguous and so mobile connections to those who view it.

This painting in The Sacred Fount points to the most famous ekphrastic moment in the late fiction, Strether’s encounter on the river with Chad and Madame de Vionnet, a scene in which a landscape by Émile Lambinet, glimpsed by Strether in a Boston gallery in his youth, comes startlingly and beautifully to life. Here I would like to turn to The Ambassadors, and to that scene in particular, to indicate more fully how the unstable ontology of adultery and its materialist slipping of reference become for James a cultural model, a way of grasping the unstable physicality of aesthetic experience. All along in this book, I have been seeking to explain the place James assigns the body and its objects by studying instances of what he sometimes calls “rubbing off on,” as in The Sacred Fount’s description of lovers as people who’ve “rubbed off on each other” (26). In the texts studied in
these chapters, these acts of abrasion, scoring, stroking, cutting, determining distinctions and grades, taking possession, or turning pages have always carried with them problems of containment. These texts have persistently located acculturation within a fluid interchange between the body and its objects, a fluidity they have often had to work very hard to oppose to more disorderly cultural realms, as in *The Spoils of Poynton*. At other moments, James has registered the pressure of objects as a deeply and disturbingly conservative cultural force, one that carries within itself the source of its own undoing, since the relation between person and thing always carries the potential to destabilize fixed identities; that is the way James figures the relation between bodies and objects in the country-house culture of *The Tragic Muse* and *A London Life*. Because James understands culture as so thoroughly a matter of mixed matter, made up of substances of different orders and generated by processes of endless reproduction, there is always the potential in his fictions for unpredictable combinations that cannot be held in place or attached to a stable referent.

This uncontainable instability is dramatized—even uneasily celebrated, if celebration can be uneasy—in those moments in the late fiction where James dissolves the fixity of material things and lets their properties liquefy. One of these moments comes in *The Ambassadors*, in one of the early Parisian scenes, where James reworks and undoes an aestheticist cliché:

[Strether’s] greatest uneasiness seemed to peep at him out of the imminent impression that almost any acceptance of Paris might give one’s authority away. It hung before him this morning, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.

(21:89)

The passage almost frankly reworks Pater’s mandate, in *The Renaissance*, to live a life of aesthetic entrancement: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” James reverses the order of Pater’s trope here, since he makes the jewel the more literal component of the metaphor and the melting flame the more figurative half, whereas Pater did just the opposite. Thrown in reverse, the metaphor exaggerates the protean nature of the self that was a hallmark of Pater’s thought: the image in James’s hands becomes almost counterintuitive, since jewels have a proverbial hardness that precludes melting. This loosening of properties from their objects happens in this passage under the sign of adultery: Babylon is a stock image of the sensual and licentious,
“the whore of Babylon” a catch phrase lurking behind this passage that thus faintly associates the fluidity of the scene with the kind of flexible woman we have encountered so often in James’s texts.

In the scene on the river, much later in the novel, Strether spends the day wandering around the landscape, which he experiences as if it were the Lambinet he did not buy years ago in the gallery in Tremont Street in Boston. The scene is one of “mixture” and of “liberties”: the remembered landscape mixes with the actual one, and this happens as Strether gives himself up to a randomly chosen destination and to a sort of vacation from the strain of his role as go-between and confidant (22:246, 248). Like the passage that imagines Paris as a Babylonian jewel, this scene is headed toward the image of the flexible female figure, a figure who will become real when Chad and Madame de Vionnet appear as the collation of brush strokes that complete the painting. But even before that moment, the scene is a licentious one because the setting’s material surfaces resist fixity. This is so first of all because of the ambiguities of landscape itself. In his aesthetic treatise *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), George Santayana writes that “the natural landscape is an indeterminate object; it almost always contains enough diversity to allow the eye a great liberty in selecting, emphasizing, and grouping its elements.” The natural landscape, Santayana concludes, is “promiscuous.”

This kind of promiscuity appears in *The Ambassadors* in Strether’s sense that the relations between these elements that make up this stretch of countryside are wholly ambiguous: the river is “flowing behind or before” the village; “one couldn’t say which” (22:252). While the scene seems to Strether as if contained by the “oblong gilt frame” that had contained Lambinet’s painting, this frame is one that “draw[s] itself out for him,” that stretches in order to match itself to wandering perceptions. Landscape is understood here as a setting that oscillates and wavers, a wavering that both Santayana and James capture in the language of adultery.

In its relation between the painting and the real thing, the episode destabilizes material surfaces in another way as well. Strether refers what he sees to the painting he did not buy, the painting he has lost sight of. Hence he sees this scene in terms dictated by a material referent that is missing. Further, the scene oscillates in Strether’s vision between the view of the French countryside before him and the view of that countryside as glimpsed in the Boston gallery: “it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet.” As he circulates around this patch of countryside, Strether feels the presence of the gallery’s maroon-colored walls, which had displayed Lambinet’s patch of “special-green vision” (22:246–47). Strether sees the scene before him in terms of the gallery, in terms of a place that traffics in cultural objects, that exists for the purpose of exchanging aesthetic properties.
The indeterminacy of landscape and the spectral presence of the gallery should prepare us for the famous moment which unfolds next, the appearance of Chad and Madame de Vionnet, lovers who, Strether realizes before he recognizes them, are “expert, familiar, frequent,” who know “how to do it” (22:256). These figures are figured as “figures,” as elements that “had been wanted in the picture.” Their physicality therefore hovers between a frank sense of embodiment and a sense that they are not all that real but more like the bodies in painting. These bodies are substantial ambiguities, figures both in the sense of trope and in the sense of the shape of real flesh, graphic both in the sense of representation and in the sense of an emphatic physicality that promises to obviate the need for representation’s mediating work. As the presence of the gallery, the painting, and the transformative powers of the Parisian setting suggest, James conceives of culture in terms of turning bodies like these, bodies that lead Strether, and James himself, to imagine “innumerable and wonderful things” (22:266).