

# The Problem of Completeness in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*

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**Abstract** James's essays on art and exhibitions written between the 1870s and the end of the century illustrate his attention to the composition of the art exhibition within the space of the gallery or museum. James's perception of art exhibit design and effect inform his representation of Mrs. Gareth's art collection and its setting in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). As James looked to art and the art exhibit for models to represent 'the workings of the novel', *The Spoils of Poynton* suggests the impossibility of artistic 'completeness' within the realistic aesthetic.

**Keywords** Henry James. Art exhibition. Gaze. Literary realism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Wholeness and the Aura of the Artwork. – 3 Art's Fetishisation and the Phantom Limb. – 4 James and the Art Exhibition. – 5 Desire and Artistic Unity.



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## 1 Introduction

Adeline Tintner notes Henry James's interest in art works as "rich and suggestive analogues for what he was trying to do in his prose", works which, in their "ingeniously put-together parts" serve as models for the "workings of the novel" (1986, 1, 4). James's essays on art and exhibitions written between the 1870s and the end of the century illustrate his focus on the composition of individual works, but these essays also reveal his attention to the composition of the art exhibition within the space of the gallery or museum. James's perception of art exhibit design and effect inform his representation of Mrs. Gereth's art collection and its setting in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). Specifically, he invokes art exhibitions' deteriorating integrity in his tale of the artistic completeness and eventual destruction of the art collection in *The Spoils of Poynton*. The novel's narrator explains that "[t]here were places much grander and richer [than Poynton], but there was no such complete work of art" (James 1897, 12). Moreover, when she first visits Poynton, Mrs. Gereth's friend, Fleda Vetch, is overwhelmed by the effect of Poynton's perfect composition, shedding tears "for the joy of admiration" (21). In amassing the treasures at Poynton, Mrs. Gereth has devoted her life to "completeness and perfection" (53), yet, when she carries the contents of the estate away to Ricks,<sup>1</sup> it is Fleda who most keenly feels the effects of the removal, which generates an amputation metaphor in the text. For Fleda, the removal of Poynton's treasures from the estate sets in motion both the dissipation of the aura of the collection and the shattering of the artistic illusion of Poynton's completeness. Considering Walter Benjamin's notion that the manipulation of images in film and photography reveals "entirely new structural formations of the subject" ([1936] 1968, 238), a negative effect of such new structural formations is revealed in Fleda's initial perception of the reconstituted spoils at Ricks as repulsive and meaningless. She concludes that she cannot "care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness" (James 1897, 83).

*The Spoils of Poynton* dramatises the ideological relation in literary realism between narrative and reality through Fleda Vetch's gaze. As a gazing subject, Fleda's desire for Poynton's completeness signifies a literal embodiment of realism's narrative drive towards complete representation. Of course, as James indicates in the novel's critical preface, his theory of literary realism qualifies the notion of completeness, privileging the "sublime economy of art" that takes

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<sup>1</sup> The widow's cottage where Fleda will live once Mrs. Gereth's son, Owen, and his intended wife, Mona Brigstock, take possession of Poynton.

the “splendid waste” of life, which is “all inclusion and confusion”, and creates art, “being all discrimination and selection” (1934, 120). While James’s notion of realism emphasises the careful selection of details from the welter of life, and thus suggests an aesthetic that stops short of a fully mimetic representation, he also privileges “a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive” ([1884] 1885, 75), with the aim of being “as complete as possible - to make as perfect a work” (85). In James’s hands, terms such as “typical”, “inclusive”, and “complete” paradoxically lead away from strict verisimilitude and gesture towards the quality and discrimination of the artist’s vision.

For Fleda, Poynton’s “completeness” depends on its integrity as a curated collection and does not necessarily depend on a fully mimetic relationship between reality and art. As Fleda observes Poynton’s treasures displaced and replaced, she manages the absence she experiences by “clothing” the reality of Poynton with the “flesh” of her gaze - to borrow Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms (1968, 131) - suggesting the selective and personal (ideological) nature of her viewpoint and resulting aesthetic vision. But neither her gaze nor the narrative that she has imposed on Poynton provide her access to the reality of Poynton that she eventually loses. Thus, the idea of “completeness” that plays out in *The Spoils of Poynton* demonstrates how a sensitive consciousness such as Fleda’s might lead the artist to experiences and representations that breakdown into indeterminacy and loss.

We might place Fleda’s encounter with seemingly irreconcilable visions of Poynton in the context of aestheticism. Jonathan Freedman explores James’s interest in the British aestheticism of Walter Pater and others, specifically, the ability to entertain “contradictory assertions without giving up either their contradictoriness or the wish somehow to unify them” while “articulating [...] skepticism over the value of any such potentially unifying force or vision” (1990, 6, 8). James immerses Fleda in the dilemma of dealing with contradictory resolutions to the problem of Poynton, and the novel’s conclusion suggests his skepticism about the possibility of a unifying vision emerging out of her aesthetic and philosophical quagmire. Indeed, as James looked to art and to the art exhibit for models to represent “the workings of the novel” (Tintner 1986, 4), the ending of *The Spoils of Poynton* suggests the impossibility of artistic ‘completeness’ within the realistic aesthetic. The novel both exemplifies James’s perceptions of the state of the art exhibit in the late 1890s and, utilising the notion of the exhibit’s increasing lack of integrity, his questioning of literary realism’s investment in verisimilitude. The novel finally aspires to what David Lodge terms a “condition of ambiguity” (1997, 6) in James’s later fiction, anticipating the self-conscious forms and narrative strategies of early twentieth-century modernist texts.

## 2 Wholeness and the Aura of the Artwork

The novel's conflict emerges when Adela Gereth learns that her son, Owen, in compliance with English inheritance laws, intends to retain all of the artistic treasures that she has accumulated at Poynton, the family estate, for his fiancée, Mona Brigstock. Poynton is characterised as the epitome of wholeness, artistically complete, self-contained, and even, like the notion of verisimilitude, and thus literary realism itself, self-referential; indeed, the narrator observes that "Poynton was in the style of Poynton" (James 1897, 28). Because Mrs. Gereth's whole life has been an "effort toward completeness and perfection" (53), rather than relinquish her carefully composed collection to the philistine sensibilities of Mona, she carries the contents of Poynton away to Ricks, the nearby widow's cottage where she will live once Owen and Mona take possession of Poynton. The novel's amputation metaphor first appears after Mrs. Gereth has transported the spoils to Ricks, where her separation from Poynton is described in terms of a lost limb: "Her leg had come off - she had now begun to stump along with the lovely wooden substitute". Once she is settled at Ricks, she invites her young friend, Fleda Vetch, whom Mrs. Gereth wishes Owen to marry, to come and admire "the beauty of her [debilitated] movement and the noise she made about the house" (74). Fleda takes the "amputation" much more seriously than Mrs. Gereth, and, when she arrives at Ricks, she is immediately struck with a vision of the empty Poynton: she imagines "the great gaps in the other house. [...] the faraway empty sockets, a scandal of nakedness in high, bare walls" (75-76). Responding to Fleda's exclamation that she had "brought away absolutely everything", Mrs. Gereth replies that she "only brought away what [she] required", which, Fleda observes, includes the "very best pieces [...] the individual gems" (77). While Fleda and Mrs. Gereth walk through the house, Fleda tries to imagine the few treasures that remain at Poynton. This effort renews the pain of the separation, and she finds that she cannot envision the "old combinations" of things, but can only imagine "gaps and scars", a "vacancy" that coalesces at moments into a vision of Owen's sad face because of her failure to prevent the despoiling of Poynton. During her first wakeful night as a guest at Ricks, Fleda contemplates Poynton's "dishonor" and realises that she had "cherished it as a happy whole, [...] and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs" (83).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Leon Edel links James's trope of amputation to several biographical sources: the early amputation of his father's leg, an old back injury James incurred in a Newport stable fire, and the traumatic artistic 'amputation' of his career as a playwright when *Guy Domville* received a devastating critical reception in 1895 (1985, 452). Of James's failure as a dramatist, David Lodge notes that his dalliance in drama provided him with a new "scenic method" that shifted the balance in his fiction between telling and

Considering Benjamin's notion of aura, the authentic presence of the spoils is not completely destroyed when they are moved to Ricks, since Mrs. Gereth, the artist of their selection and composition, remains with them. The spoils thus avoid total reification because the traces of Mrs. Gereth's artistic labour involved in producing Poynton are not rendered completely invisible. In addition, the removal of the artefacts coincides with Benjamin's notions regarding how art reproduction emancipates the art work from "its parasitical dependence on ritual" ([1936] 1968, 226). Benjamin distinguishes between the cult value and exhibition value of art. Ceremonial art objects designed for use in magical or religious ritual are valued for their existence rather than their exhibition value; freeing art from ritual increases its opportunity for exhibition (for example, it is easier to exhibit a work that can be moved from place to place than to exhibit a statue of a deity that must remain fixed within a temple). Once the exhibition value predominates, the gaze directed at the object also intensifies, for the item, now an exhibited 'art-object', serves an aesthetic function rather than a pragmatic one within a religious system. These notions of cult and exhibition value have two implications in James's novel, apparent, first, in the ritual aspect of the idea of Poynton, which is destroyed once the collection is moved; and, second, in the difference between Fleda's more surface-level and all-encompassing visual scrutiny of the artifacts of Poynton in their original context versus the more probing gaze that she directs at the items once they are detached from Poynton, a gaze resulting in her eventual fetishisation of the objects. The cult value of Poynton is pointedly demonstrated by Mrs. Gereth's declaration that the things in the house were her and her husband's "religion, they were our life, they were *us!*" and she suggests that now that Fleda has seen the spoils, she, too, is implicated in their fate (James 1897, 31). Later, considering Mrs. Gereth's reconstitution of Poynton at Ricks, Fleda feels that she, too, "was of the religion, and like any other of the passionately pious she could worship now even in the desert" (252). The cult value of the spoils, maintained to some extent by Mrs. Gereth's continuing presence with them, seems strong enough to allow Fleda to maintain her admiration for them even in their new setting. However, Fleda's gaze eventually reverts to a focus on exhibition value and the fetishisation of the spoils.

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showing "radically in favour of 'showing'" (1987, 2-3). For more on James's scenic method in the novel, see Leo Hoar (2018). The heightened emphasis on the scenic together with the trope of amputation underscores the novel's function as a study in the conventions of representation. James suggests an additional medical metaphor, related tangentially to the absent other of the phantom limb, when he notes in the novel's critical preface that the germ of the story, a tale about a woman's battle with her only son over furniture inherited by the son at his father's death, was like "the prick of inoculation; the whole of the virus, as I have called it, being infused by that single touch" (1996a, 121).

### 3 Art's Fetishisation and the Phantom Limb

Fleda's vision of the spoils becomes complicated by her romantic feelings for Owen. Her experience at Ricks indicates that Poynton (the phantom limb) is an absent and unrecoverable appendage to her relationship with Owen, and anticipates the ways in which the loss of both Poynton and Owen become conflated in her pain. When Fleda later learns that Owen has finally married Mona, her attempts to repress her emotional response to the loss of both Owen and Poynton increases her pain, and her longing for what she has lost leads to her fetishisation of Poynton and even anger at Mrs. Gereth. Indeed, despite the admiration that she and Mrs. Gereth share for the finely chosen and arranged items of Poynton, Fleda begins to resent Mrs. Gereth for imprisoning her in such a "torment of taste", and Fleda entertains the idea that she may hate her friend (84).

Fleda's torment is due, at least in part, to her finely tuned sensibilities. As James observes in his critical preface to the novel, "appreciation, even to that of the very whole, lives in Fleda", and she is the only character in the novel who "both sees and feels" (1934, 129), allowing her to be particularly sensitive to the spoils' integrity. Lee Clarke Mitchell notes that Fleda's heightened abilities allow her, like Isabel Archer, to "imbu[e] a roomful of furniture with consciousness that judges yet sympathizes" (2005, 31). Fleda imagines that the "chopped limbs" (James 1897, 83) of the estate's former splendour suffer, underscoring her commitment to the spoils as a whole collection and her visceral desire to make some sort of meaning of their fate. Indeed, Fleda's desire for the phantom limb of Poynton's former wholeness drives the narrative towards meaning and parallels the operations of representation - that is, desire (the sign) consists of a subject (the signifier, in this case, Fleda) seeking a relationship with a lost or absent object (the other, or signified, comprised both of Owen Gereth and the spoils). This desire is never satisfied because signification's bar of repression defers access to meaning and representation can never be fulfilled. Poynton's deferred restoration reveals realism's lost object, or 'phantom limb', to be complete representation, the transcendental signified, which, the novel suggests, is ultimately unattainable.

Medical explanations for phantom pain further illuminate Fleda's desire for complete representation. Phantom pain sufferers construct a "memory engram", meaning that cerebral structures form a schema of the pain receptors' experience of the damage that resulted in the loss of the limb (Bowser 1991, 59). Phantom pain can thus be seen as (1) wish-fulfilment stemming from denial of the phantom limb; (2) an attempt to deny the emotional response to the amputation; (3) an emotional response to the amputation of a body part possessing significance in the amputee's relationship with others; and (4) the

result of unresolved mourning for the limb, caused by the amputee's fantasies about the limb, and over-valuation of the amputated appendage (57). Research into the phenomenon also suggests that visual input affects phantom pain; using mirrors placed in a "virtual reality box", researchers have been able to resurrect the phantom limb visually, causing patients to experience sensory effects in the missing limb (Ramachandran, Rogers-Ramachandran 1996, 378-9). Through her gaze and her desire, Fleda generates similar patterns of pain and longing. Poynton, as an appendage to her and Owen's relationship, becomes a fetishised artefact of that relationship; her fascination with and over-valuation of Poynton's visual completeness leads to a seemingly endless mourning for its loss; and, finally, as she attempts to deny her emotional response to the loss of both Owen and Poynton through her detached participation in the battle over the spoils, she increases her pain. Only when Fleda confronts the charred ruins of Poynton at the novel's end, does she recognise the impossibility of her desire for completeness.

#### 4 James and the Art Exhibition

James's reviews of art and exhibitions written between the 1870s and the end of the century coincide with notions of completeness in the novel and illustrate his interest in the composition and effect of the art exhibition within specific spaces. In these reviews, James often comments on the exhibit's location, arrangement, and surroundings. For example, in an 1874 review of the Duke of Montpensier's exhibition at the Boston Athenaeum, James comments on the gallery-going experience, noting the manner and appearance of the spectators, and, most significantly, that the gem of the collection (a Murillo) is set off by a "magnificent margin of maroon-colored wall", while the next most impressive work, a Velasquez, is appropriately hung in a large and isolated space (1996a, 44). He is attuned to, and seems to approve of, the details of these design choices and the ways that they accentuate the features of each individual work. In an 1876 article for the *New York Tribune*, James describes his private viewing of two collections of French works, not yet on exhibition. He notes the comfortable room in which he lounges on an ottoman, "in a [Paris] establishment in which the effective presentation of works of art has itself been raised to a fine art", these particular pieces having been "plucked forth from an adjoining place of deposit and arrayed before me in skillful juxtaposition" (1996b, 151). James's admiration for the "well-chosen specimens" (156) underscores how he views Mrs. Gereth as an artist in her own right, as an arranger of effective presentations of art works at Poynton.

Reviewing less than worthy exhibitions, James notes that an 1878 London exhibition of Ruskin's collection of Turner drawings lacks

skilful arrangement: the drawings are “hung without method and without any reference to their chronological order. The room, which is small, is also densely crowded” (1996f, 271-72). Exhibit design also concerns him a month later when he writes, with some amusement, that a woman leaves the second summer exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery in London (which had acquired a reputation for being “peculiar”), remarking: “I expected the arrangement of the pictures would be more unusual”. While acknowledging the gallery’s reputation for the unusual, James insists that “[t]here is, it would seem, but one manner of arranging pictures at an exhibition, and to this time-honoured system the Grosvenor has rigidly adhered” (1996c, 274). James’s comment establishes the Grosvenor’s unique role in bridging the traditional and nontraditional gallery experience, but, more importantly, emphasises his conviction that there is a ‘correctness’ about exhibiting art works that requires expertise and skill.

James dramatises nuanced levels of such skill in the novel. Fleda recognises a certain lack of skilful juxtaposition at Ricks, at least insofar as she misses the “old combination” of things from Poynton (James 1897, 83). But the things are still arranged well, just not as they were at Poynton, implying Fleda’s inflexibility. Nevertheless, that she is able to make these fine distinctions also emphasises her artistic sensibilities, if not as expertly honed as Mrs. Gereth’s in terms of exhibition design, at least able to fully appreciate the beauty of a well-executed display. In his critical preface to the novel, James draws distinctions between Mrs. Gereth’s and Fleda’s capacities. Mrs. Gereth possesses the finely tuned skill of arrangement in pulling together Poynton’s masterful collection, but she is not “intelligent, [...] only clever”, James notes, while Fleda is “only intelligent, not distinctively able”. Given James’s idea that the “deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer” ([1884] 1885, 83), we might assume that Mrs. Gereth, as the artist responsible for Poynton’s grandeur, is of superior mind. Or, to put it another way, as James does in the critical preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, the many windows of the “house of fiction” has standing at each “a figure with a pair of eyes” representing a “unique instrument” and impression (1934b, 46), such as Mrs. Gereth. Yet this description might just as well evoke Fleda, whom we could represent as that watcher who “see[s] more”, while her neighbour, “watching the same show, [...] sees less” (46). Fleda recognises the authenticity of Poynton’s artistry and confirms the superiority of Mrs. Gereth’s skill through her admiration for her originality and “genius for composition” (James 1897, 83). Even at the end of the novel, when Mrs. Gereth has returned the items to Poynton and is living at Ricks with the furnishings of the previous occupant, a maiden aunt, Fleda admires the effect Mrs. Gereth has wrought through such meagre means. Fleda takes one look at the “few sticks” that Mrs. Gereth



has gathered together and is struck with the “vivid presence of the artist’s idea” (265). “You make things ‘compose’ in spite of yourself”, she exclaims (266).

In contrast to both Fleda and Mrs. Gereth, Mona Brigstock, who possesses the spoils in the end and thus “rides the crisis quite most triumphantly”, as James concludes, “is *all* will, without the smallest leak of force into taste or tenderness or vision, into any sense of shades or relations or proportions” (1934a, 131). James suggests that Mona prevails by being “able at any moment to bear the whole of her dead weight at once on any given inch of a resisting surface”, whilst Fleda “sees and feels but in acres and expanses and blue perspectives” and Mrs. Gereth, “while her imagination broods, drops half the stitches of the web she seeks to weave” (132). Mona’s success is jarring. Despite Mrs. Gereth’s artistic skill or Fleda’s aesthetic sensibility, neither character succeeds in achieving or ultimately possessing her vision of artistic completeness.<sup>3</sup> Mona’s triumph thus portends a challenge to the very tenets of the realist aesthetic. Indeed, Stephanie Foote concludes that “the more realist strategies of interpretation are brought to bear on [Mona], the more opaque she will seem because she does not signify her desires within realism’s psychological terms. Her very simplicity or flatness will baffle [readers] accustomed to reading deep interior lives”. Mona thus represents “anxiety about the status of a certain kind of realist reader” at the same “moment when James himself struggled to read and be read by a popular audience” (2006, 43).

James’s anxieties about the possible triumph of commercialism are apparent in his focus on the integrity of the spoils. Walter Isle notes the consumerist stakes of the novel insofar as Mrs. Gereth is aware that the meaning of art, especially at Poynton, is “interwoven with the terms of its possession” (1968, 114), which is why she is so keen to have Fleda become the heiress of the estate rather than Mona. James seems to gesture towards concerns about the growing power of consumerism in his 1877 art review, “The Picture Season in London”, where he comments that even if England is “not among the greatest artistic producers of the world, [it is] among the greatest consumers” (1996e, 246). James argues that “the taste for art in England” during the social season represents “a fashion, a need of luxury”, and, “in the absence of production, on what a scale the consumption has always gone on!” (249). The bulk of the review critiques the works in the London art exhibitions during the social season, but James sets his assessment within his general view of the consumerist nature of the

<sup>3</sup> See Lee Clark Mitchell (2005) for more on James’s interest in larger questions of possession in the novel and the ways in which material objects are imbued with consciousness. Peter Donohue argues that what is at stake in the novel is not “mere possession of objects, but rather the self as it attempts to possess” (1997, 41).

London season. He notes that for the “ten weeks” (244) of this “most solidly brilliant, the most richly suggestive, of all great social shows” (245), London’s gloom is replaced by “an enormous, opulent society expanding to the enjoyment of the privileges and responsibilities of wealth and power” in stark contrast to the “amiable coquetry” that characterises the Parisian social season (244). Yet he also views the “great multiplicity of exhibitions” (249) as a “result of that democratisation of all tastes and fashions which marks our glorious period” (250). James takes note of the English propensity to buy good art in large quantities, which means that the exhibitions contain works that are of high quality and are becoming more accessible (250). Indeed, he credits Burlington House with allowing artists to “communicate with the public more directly than under the academic dispensation [such as at the Royal Academy], and in which the more ‘peculiar’ [works] in especial may have a chance to get popular” (252). Of the Grosvenor Gallery, he suggests that the love of good art eclipses any crass commercial interest of the gallery owners (252) and the gallery is “very pretty and elegant” (253). Most important to this analysis, however, is that James situates his assessment within the hyper-consumerist setting of the London social season and its heightened consumption of culture, suggesting his attention to the conflict between aesthetic excellence and consumerist exigencies.

As the century draws to a close, this tension seems to grow more concerning for James, and he documents the increasing lack of artistic integrity in the art exhibitions and the generally more chaotic nature of exhibits, implying a falling off in public taste and aesthetic sensibilities. In a dismal review of London’s May 1897 exhibitions, again taking place during the high London social season and written after the publication of *The Spoils of Poynton* but no less useful in understanding its approach to the integrity of the art exhibit, he is particularly critical of the Academy’s exhibition, of which he asks: “What would become of any individual who should directly charge the British public with the vulgarity and ignorance that it is the effect of so many of the acres of canvas in question to nail upon it with a positive frenzy of the hammer?” His ire is directed at some of the individual pieces as well as the overall effect. Of exhibitions more generally, he opines that they are,

in truth, [...] more and more cruel, and are not more misleading in anything, doubtless, than just in making such an indictment appear so collective. Individual pieces make their finer appeal and seek their finer affinity: the misery is that they are lost in the general loudness and glare. One would like to pick them all out, to remove them, wounded and dying, from the choking battle smoke and carry them into the cool, dim hospital of isolation and independence. (1996d, 510)

Given James's awareness of the consumerist context of the social season and the increasingly chaotic nature of the exhibitions, his comments here suggest that the "general loudness and glare" to which he objects are constituted by not only the exhibition itself and its "acres" of vulgarly placed canvases but also the general commercialism of the age. He uses similar images and language to represent the destruction of Poynton and its spoils near the end of the novel, when Fleda witnesses Poynton's spoils in the smoke of the fire and wishes she had been able to "carry" some of the spoils off "into the cool, dim hospital of [...] independence" (1996d, 510). As the narrator tracks the increasing threats to the integrity of Poynton's art collection, the events leading up to this tragic denouement read like the trends in art exhibitions that James documents in his review essays.

James's interest in this loss of integrity is most pronounced towards the end of the novel. For most of the narrative, Fleda's visual perfectionism allows her to sustain a mental vision of Poynton's artistic completeness, even as it is shuttled between the estate and Ricks. Near the conclusion, however, she jeopardises her loyalty to Poynton's artistic integrity when, at Owen's invitation, she travels to Poynton to claim a keepsake "gem" from the estate. Benjamin's distinction between what he terms the "distracted" and "concentrated" gaze illuminates Fleda's changing relationship to the spoils. According to Benjamin, a person "who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it", whereas "the distracted mass absorbs the work of art" ([1936] 1968, 241). Fleda maintains a complex and conflicted relationship to these two ways of viewing art. Initially, she concentrates on Poynton as a complete work of art, and is thus absorbed by the idea of its wholeness. However, when she receives Owen's letter inviting her to come to Poynton and choose for herself "the gem of the collection" (James 1897, 208), she reacts with religious fervor, regarding herself as a "pilgrim" who might "go to a shrine" (278) and recalling her prior and similarly religious conviction that she could "worship" the spoils even in the "desert" of Ricks. At this point, her gaze changes from one of concentration on the overall vision of Poynton to one of distraction with a particular piece. She now absorbs the work as she mentally surveys the collection to pick out that one relic which will be "up to the height of her privilege". Indeed, though she still has "the whole place [...] in her eyes" (279), she compromises her ability to maintain an appreciative and concentrated gaze by fetishising the single keepsake she will choose and obsessing over what the offer of the gift might mean coming from Owen, in apparent disregard for how removing an item from the collection will affect Poynton's wholeness.

## 5 Desire and Artistic Unity

How does Fleda reach this point where she is willing to disrupt Poynton's artistic unity? Sandra Corse suggests that Fleda has simply fallen prey to the consumerism that naturally follows from the commodification of art and which has resulted from the movement of the spoils (1994, 123). In this reading, Fleda succumbs to the period's developing consumer gaze, which, as critics have suggested, aligns the novel with the notion of commodity fetishism.<sup>4</sup> The transactional relation of the Maltese cross to her romantic relationship with Owen also suggests a consumerist mentality. However, Fleda's changed attitude towards the spoils is importantly a function of desire. As I have suggested, Poynton becomes an "appendage" to her relationship with Owen, and her attachment to the Maltese cross, the item she decides to take from the collection, is mostly due to what she imagines her choice will symbolise about this relationship: it must be a small piece so she can keep it close to her and it must be one of the finest "because it was in the finest he saw his symbol" (279-80). Ultimately, she decides on the ornamental cross for the additional reason that Owen is the one who named it. The fact that Fleda is never quite sure what Owen means by his offer to take something from Poynton, and her attempts to convince herself that she would be "content to know nothing more than just what her having it would tell her" (280), reveals her overdetermined relationship to Poynton, her lingering passion for Owen, and the loss of her ability to making coherent meaning of her experiences, all of which become conflated in her pain over the "missing limb" of Poynton. Fleda's predicament again suggests resonances with British aestheticism – in Freedman's terms "a complicated vision, which seeks to explore the experience of fragmentation, loss, and disintegration without necessarily giving up the possibility of reuniting these shards" (1990, 8). Yet elements of romance in the novel, the anguish of taste and emotion that Fleda experiences, distract her from obtaining access to the completeness (and clarity) she desires, and wrap her in that "tangle of life", which she accuses Mrs. Gereth of simplifying "far too much" (240). Indeed, during the emotional intensity of Fleda's discussion with Owen about their relationship, she has to "still" herself in order to "come round again to the real and the thinkable" (201). Fleda might possess both the rarified sensibility and gift of seeing that James so prizes, but her increasing episodes of inner turmoil defer meaning and derail her journey to completeness. Thus, despite the more realistic view she takes of the "tangle of life" (versus Mrs. Gereth), a life of imaginative impression versus real action offers Fleda no truer access to meaning

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Armstrong 1983; Brown 2002; Savoy 2001; Sarris 1996.

than the torments of romantic sensibility against which realism reacts so violently. The text's indeterminacy calls into question Fleda's definitions of what constitutes, and indeed how one accesses, the real.

After making this decision to choose the Maltese cross, Fleda arrives at Poynton to find the house and everything in it burned to the ground. She is unable, as James later writes of the London exhibitions, to rescue the individual piece (the Maltese Cross) "wounded and dying, from the choking battle smoke and carry [it] into the cool, dim hospital of isolation and independence" (1996d, 510). James does not allow Fleda to claim her prize and disrupt Poynton's unity, but neither does he allow Poynton's completeness to survive the smoke and heat of the fire, suggesting that there really is "no such complete work of art" (James 1897, 12) as Poynton. The jarring mental picture of Poynton's charred ruins (when the station-master informs her that the estate has burned to the ground) awakens Fleda from her aesthetic reverie to a recognition of the real-life effects of her vision of Poynton, and the ramifications of her participation as an observer of the spoils are suddenly apparent. Fleda's repeated query "Poynton's gone?" (285) to the station-master gives us perhaps the best insight into the nature of Fleda's loss, and the nature of her path to healing. Her question reveals that Owen and the spoils are inextricably linked in her mind. When she arrives at the station and discovers that Poynton has burned, one of her first thoughts is for Owen's safety, and she inquires: "Have they [Owen and Mona] come back?" Then she ask about the spoils: "Were they saving the things?" (284). When the station-master answers no, Fleda says: "I must go there". No sooner does she articulate this desire, however, than she checks herself, for she suddenly "knew in what way she was affected [and] she felt herself give *everything* up" (285; emphasis added). She decides against going to Poynton, covers her face with her hands and says, "I'll go back" (286). Fleda does not need to go to Poynton to process the loss, but, as she has done through the novel, relies on her mental reflections to arrive, out of the "great acrid gust" of what she imagines to be Poynton's smoke (285), at a clear mental vision. Poynton has come to represent her desire for completeness, both aesthetically and romantically, and in order for the phantom pain to subside, Fleda must confront that mental image of its complete destruction (assisted by her previous intense visual engagement with the spoils). Fleda seems to come face to face with her own "self-indulgence" and "creative insufficiency", both features of James's criticism of British aestheticism, according to Freedman (1990, 135). Only when she processes Poynton's demise can she acknowledge this completeness as illusion, come to grips with the amputation, "give everything up", and "go back".

As Fleda considers the loss of the spoils to Mona, she is most touched by the "beauty [...] that, in tons, she had lost" and she thinks of the spoils "hour after hour" (252), and when she finally discovers

that Poynton has burned, her horror is due not to the fact that she will be unable to claim her keepsake, but to the fact that the “great house” and all it represents to her “is *lost*” (284; emphasis in the original). In the last lines of the novel, Fleda experiences in her mind “the raw bitterness of a hope that she might never again in life have to give up so much at such short notice” (285). By experiencing the pain of the absolute loss of Poynton she understands the price of her inability (or refusal) to act: her visual engagement with the illusion of Poynton’s completeness has cost her the physical reality of possessing it, and Owen, for herself. Fleda uses her gaze to facilitate her journey to completeness and meaning; however, in the process of merely gazing rather than acting she gains understanding, but loses the object(s) of her desire.<sup>5</sup> In perhaps the novel’s most direct critique of realist ideology, Fleda learns that clothing reality in the flesh of the gaze (similar to clothing reality in the flesh of realist narrative) does not necessarily provide access to real experience or lasting satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, we might also view Fleda’s predicament as the failure of humans’ capacity to provide coherent meaning through the sense of sight. Such a conundrum centres on the ineffability of the spoils themselves. Mrs. Gereth’s personal relationship with the antiques are that of the artisan, Peter Betjemann observes (2008, 211), but, in Bill Brown’s terms, “James’s *mise-en-scène* at Poynton is a matter of aura, not artifacts” (2002, 226). Indeed, Brown argues that while the museum and the realist novel both seem to demand visual engagement, *The Spoils of Poynton* does not operate in this way “because an adequate apprehension of Mrs. Gereth’s ‘effort toward completeness and perfection’ could never reside in a visual register”. The intense intimacy that Mrs. Gereth and Fleda establish “with the physical object world could not be rendered by the distancing sense of sight” (227). Fleda seems to understand this when she decides that she does not need to go look at Poynton burned to the ground. The narrative’s relationship to the visual register allows it to become, in Brown’s estimation, “the James novel that most patently challenges realism”, and the fire at the novel’s end thus can “be understood as the conflagration in which realism as such is consumed” (228).<sup>7</sup> The focus on the spoils becomes ironic because, while James notes in his

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Freedman contends that James’s engagement with British aestheticism allowed him to appreciate the notion of *aesthesis*, “the heightening or perfection of sense experience” (1990, 136). In Fleda’s case, however, the heightening of her visual acuity seems to lead away from rather than towards fulfillment.

<sup>6</sup> Here, we might be reminded of James’s insistence in “The Art of Fiction” that impressions can constitute experience, but he also admonishes the artist to “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” ([1884] 1885, 66).

<sup>7</sup> See Rhoads 2012 for another discussion of how the novel challenges realism and gestures towards modernism in its ironic revisions of the domestic plot.

critical preface that “the ‘things’ themselves would form the very centre” of the novel’s crisis (1996a, 123), in the end they are not, as other critics have pointed out, ever described in any detail (see Brown 2002, 225). Later in his preface, James admits that the real centre will be “the felt beauty and value” of the spoils (1996a, 126); they are “not directly articulate”, and, indeed, what would become of them is eventually “a comparatively vulgar issue”, for “[t]he passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would [...] set in motion, was what, as a painter, one had really wanted of them” (127). Both Brown and Eric Savoy note the novel’s emphasis on the power of “things” - of the spoils - beyond the things themselves (Brown 2002, 223) in “a more spiritually luminous *expansiveness* in which things point to an ineffable Thing” (Savoy 2001, 274). Yet the spiritual expansiveness of the spoils, which Fleda surely appreciates, is what ultimately prevents her from accessing real experience for herself.

*The Spoils of Poynton* thus aspires to the characteristics of James’ later fiction, which, according to Lodge, is broadly about “the impossibility of arriving at a single, simple version of the ‘truth’ about any human action or experience” (1987, 6). The novel’s purposeful indeterminacy serves our understanding of literary representation: because the narrative method requires readers to exert an interpretative effort equivalent, Lodge observes, to that of the main character (6), readers function concurrently as spectators and actors in this drama of representation, both observing and participating in its conventions. The novel illustrates how, as Michael Riffaterre observes, verisimilitude is “a system of representations that seems to reflect a reality external to the text only because it conforms to a grammar” (1990, xiii). The novel’s grammar of realism specifically anticipates the self-conscious forms and narrative strategies of early twentieth-century texts. Through their experiences with the novel’s indeterminacies, readers can move from recognising the conventional “grammar” of representation to understanding the ideological baggage accompanying aesthetic and historical categories. Indeed, the novel’s provocative reflections on completeness encourage us to recognise the limits and conventions of language and representation as revealed through literary realism.

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