

# HENRY JAMES AND QUEER MODERNITY

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## *Indiscreet anatomies and protogay aesthetes in Roderick Hudson and The Europeans*

Those [readers] who look for “and they lived together happily ever after” at the end of the last chapter of any of [Henry James’s] novelettes will be disappointed.

(Review of *Roderick Hudson*, *New York Herald*, 1875)

It is now common to advance Henry James’s first acknowledged novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), as also his first significant foray into the representation of different modes of masculinity and, indeed, of male homosexuality. Robert Drake has recently canonized this narrative of “sublimated desire” in *The Gay Canon* (1998), predicting that “the gay reader” (comfortably un-problematized) will discover in *Roderick Hudson* an unfulfilled “love story” between two young American men: the titular hero, an ill-fated would-be genius as a sculptor, and his wealthy patron, Rowland Mallet.<sup>1</sup> Offering a more theoretical account, Hugh Stevens stakes his claim that James was “already a *gay novelist*” in his early thirties (a literary not a biographical claim) on the ways in which *Roderick Hudson* begins “explor[ing] the workings of same-sex desire, and the difficulties of admitting such desires, within a cultural formation marked by homosexual prohibition,” albeit before the articulation of “the homosexual” as a pathologized, criminalized type in late Victorian science and jurisprudence.<sup>2</sup> According to Christopher Lane, the tutelary relation between Mallet and Roderick Hudson spills over into the “ambiguously erotic,” which must be “diffused by an aesthetic ideal” that rules out bodily intimacy even though it tacitly annexes a homophilic “tradition of mentorship”: only the protagonist’s death can terminate the “persistent homo/sexual metonymy” of James’s text.<sup>3</sup>

My own argument will be that one can indeed read what Stevens calls the “ghostly presence” of homosexuality in this early text, but that it is more useful to cultural analysis to concentrate on its ghostliness rather than on its presence.<sup>4</sup> To read *Roderick Hudson* as being “about” homosexual love and prohibition would be to read with the slightly cheating vision of

hindsight; one creates certain distortions of interpretation when one reads James (especially the James of the 1870s and early 1880s) through the screen of everything that has intervened, in the way of sexual discourse, between his historical moment and the present. This is not meant to preclude the value of constructive exercises in calculated anachronism – James as already a “gay” writer of a “gay” novel almost a century before Stonewall – but *Roderick Hudson* may be more productively interpreted as a cultural document by studying its contribution to and engagement with what would come to define “gayness.” As I shall also show, James’s later novels of the 1870s, the primary example being *The Europeans*, continue his engagement not only with the evolution of a particular subtype – the male homosexual (or protogay) aesthete increasingly stigmatized by, or alternately courting, epithets drawn from the vocabulary of “effeminacy” – but also with the authorial tools and resources necessary to communicate this difference to a selective audience, notably the mode of camp.

If in Foucault’s well-known phrase “the nineteenth-century homosexual became . . . a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy,” prose fiction participated heavily – with varying political implications – in the process of articulating a male homosexual “type” well into the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The shape of the face and the chest, the posture of shoulders, the relative pallor of skin; the mold of hands and fingers – their agitation, intimate proclivities, secretive habits; the look in the eyes, the contours and mobility of eyebrows, the freighted gaze or exchange of glances (“ocular commerce,” in James’s phrase); the flourishes of speech and gesture, the delicate timbre and seductive hum of the valvèd voice (as Whitman would have it); the flair for style and the penchant for sensual materialism, for ivory, velvet, jade, mahogany, or other items of imperial trade to caress, for gold, silver, or platinum to wear: these were only part of the growing repertoire of signifiers of homosexuality in Anglo-American literature from the 1890s through the 1920s (*TM* 22). Crucially, this narrative project of elaborating and representing the type was uneven and variously inflected rather than rapid and steady. By the same token, the association of this morphological-behavioral profile (or features thereof) with homosexuality accrued greater specificity and became less amorphous only gradually, so that the same or very similar details of character delineation could mean quite different things in the 1870s, then again in the 1890s, and then again after the First World War. Jamesian men such as Roderick Hudson and Felix Young (*The Europeans*) cannot properly be thought of as “gay,” at least not in the latter-day sense, despite the fact that they may possess some of the attributes we now count as potential signifiers of gayness. By the time one encounters the figure of

Hyacinth Robinson in James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), however, the textual information (especially in aggregate) that "his chest was narrow, his complexion pale," his hand "very delicate," and his "whole little person" theatrical and "slightly wasted" in appearance, prepares one to view the character as indeed a protogay "little gentleman," particularly when he is seen interacting with such virile types as Paul Muniment and Captain Godfrey Sholto.<sup>6</sup> The "proto" in this formulation (protogay) may strike some as fudging, particularly when one is being asked to recognize protogayness or protoqueerness circulating in literary materials before "queer" quite meant queer, but the prefix is vitally appropriate to the *process* of cultural and historical evolution that I wish to trace.

The signifiers of sexual difference in fictional characters were evolving for their authors as well as for readers. With effeminacy and sexual non-conformity simultaneously beckoning and threatening, James went out of his way to affirm that the Anglo-American audience he sought to cultivate "delight[ed] in . . . the masculine" and disapproved of fictional men who appeared to be (in a suggestive phrase) "the reverse of masculine" (1865; *LC* 1: 637). At the level of style, where the expression of gender and sexual valences was at once highly resonant and highly ambiguous, James encouraged his readers to disdain the "sickly and unmasculine tone" of overly elegant writing (1876; *LC* 2: 347), to stick with the traditional view that the "masculine hand" of authorship was superior to the feminine (1887; *LC* 1: 646), and to appreciate a type of prose that displayed "masculine firmness, [a] quiet force of . . . style" (1888; *LC* 2: 534).

This must be one of the great ironies of literary history when one reflects on James's subsequent career and reputation for precious prose. Already in the later part of the 1870s, where my account begins, American reviewers were noticing (and largely praising) James's "finished elegance of style," his "dainty and skillful hand" at exposition, and his "lavish cleverness [as] an almost incessantly witty writer" (*CR* 53; *CH* 58, 71). By the 1890s these terms of praise would begin to seem less than masculine and would be implicated in queerness: stylistically, there would be "too much brilliancy" in *The Tragic Muse*, reviewers then perceived, or too much of what Hemingway would later call "fairy" talk, as James came to resemble the very character, the aesthete Gabriel Nash, that he sought to keep some distance from (*CR* 222). By the end of the century the tables had been completely turned. Henry James, who as an outseting American author in 1876 had sharply criticized the "advocates of 'art for art'" sponsored by Baudelaire for excessive "fancy" and "embroider[y]" and for a correspondingly "vicious . . . crudity of [moral] sentiment" would be taken to task in 1902 on precisely the same

grounds, only with more serious implications for his character: “Mr. James, together with some of his European neighbors, in forcing his ‘art’ . . . to such a point of refinement . . . has demonstrated incontestably the radical fallacy of *l’art pour l’art*”; “there is nothing so prone to depravity as unrelieved speculation” (*LC* 2: 156–7, *CR* 384).<sup>7</sup>

This emerging pattern of protestation in favor of things “masculine” and *undepraved* (perhaps a form of protesting too much) must be understood in light of a broader shift in the inflection of terms such as *masculine* and *feminine* or their cognates. In the American context, one finds James in this early period (1879) commending his predecessor Nathaniel Hawthorne for “something plain and masculine and sensible” in his nature, which had infused the literary works most “redolent of the social system” in the antebellum United States (*LC* 1: 326, 321). Hawthorne himself had conceded, however, in a well-known passage of the “Custom-House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, that the very vocation of an author of romances or novels put him under suspicion of being an “idler” and a “degenerate fellow” in the view of post-Puritan culture, with its distinctly gendered hierarchy of more and less productive forms of labor.<sup>8</sup> Even James’s figure for Hawthorne’s extraordinary distinction – in the “modest nosegay” of literary talent that America could yet boast of, his blossom had the “rarest and sweetest fragrance” – constituted a type of compliment being gradually overtaken by the worry for “effeminacy” (*LC* 1: 320).

On the cusp of the 1880s, then, the movement was clearly underway to graft on to traditional discourse the association of idleness with aesthetical dandyism and that of degeneracy with both gender and sexual deviance. Even Walt Whitman, it should be noted, had chipped in with *Democratic Vistas* (1870), which called for a robustly native literature that eschewed both the subjects and the stylistics of the eastern seaboard establishment, dominated as it was by “dandies and ennuyees, dapper little gentlemen from abroad . . . with their thin sentiment of parlors, parasols, [and] piano-songs” not to mention their emasculated “whimpering and crying.”<sup>9</sup> Whitman’s linkage between effeminess and foreignness also shows how negotiations of American masculinity – both as a subject matter of creative writing and as a facet of an author’s personality – opened out on to an increasingly international scene, a process that *The Europeans* effectively dates from the time of James’s own childhood, in the 1840s. What Hawthorne and James mean by “degeneracy” or “idling” may still have looked back in the general direction of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, so to speak, but these interrelated terms more importantly looked ahead to a work such as Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1893; English translation 1895),

which definitively posited the “fatal law” (in Oscar Wilde’s words) that linked the artistic temperament with “sexual insanity” or homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in considering *Roderick Hudson*, it is imperative to gauge the apparent sexual significations of James’s text – especially the staging of Roderick’s masculinity, the motifs of Hellenistic aestheticism and Roman decadence, and the grim resolution of the plot – within the context of the novel’s cultural occasion and of James’s distinctive situation as a cosmopolitan American author who was still working out the knowledge that he himself had “the tendencies,” in E. M. Forster’s phrase for masculine desire.<sup>11</sup> As I will show, *Roderick Hudson* establishes a set of concerns for masculine potential, variety, and relationships that will inform James’s writings all the way to the so-called major phase, culminating (for my purposes) in *The Ambassadors* (1903).

On the surface, *Roderick Hudson* dramatizes the tension between the male artist’s need for “the things that feed the imagination” – which James already associated with Europe, the “undraped paganism” of Greco-Roman antiquity, and the “incomparable fineness” of sensual experience abroad – and the putative need of men (just as men) for “moral . . . sentimental security,” associated with the quintessential American matrix of married domesticity and commercial or professional industry, or in Roderick’s case, a prospective career in the law (*RH* 159, 258, 80, 53). The novel suggests that to a European or Europeanized perspective, New England must necessarily appear to be an unsuitable environment for *both* the artist and the man, a “horrible” void with virtually nothing to nourish his growth, or as the *femme fatale* Christina Light brutally summarizes: “No society, no pleasures, no beauty, no life” (*RH* 153). Thus Roderick Hudson, although inclined to a sort of Whitmanesque cheerleading on behalf of American art, readily appreciates Rome as the “complete contradiction” of Northampton, Massachusetts – not, coincidentally, Jonathan Edwards’ territory – and indulges in “a high aesthetic revel” (*RH* 79) that resembles James’s own intoxicated response to the Eternal City in 1869 (“At last – for the first time – I live! . . . I went reeling and moaning thro’ the streets, in a fever of enjoyment”; *L* 1: 160).

And yet, owing to James’s contrary investments, the repudiation of American austerity in *Roderick Hudson*, and of the corresponding institutional forms that work to constrain masculine expansion, inspires a compensatory plunge into European difference that ends in the hero’s destruction. Admittedly, James gives his handsome young sculptor a lovely death, but the current critical inclination is to ask whether Roderick’s demise is satisfactorily explained on the model of the post-Romantic *poète maudit* – as suggested in Roderick’s evocation of himself as a bundle of “nerves and



senses and imagination” beset by “a restless demon” in a “land of impossible beauty” – or whether there is a different story that must go untold in James’s courting of an Anglo-American audience that presupposed “the inevitable desire” to be inevitably heterosexual in nature (*RH* 336, 307, 55). Was a contemporary reader being unusually prescient in describing Rowland Mallet as playing the “fairy godmother” to Roderick’s short-lived Cinderella (*CR* 9)?

Several recent readings have claimed that James was consciously alluding to Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), with its embedded thematics (by way of Winckelmann) of Greek love centered on youthful male beauty, and that he was thereby “advertis[ing] with some explicitness” an underlying libidinal component in the novel’s male–male friendship or in the operation of the narrative gaze itself. On this view, specifically “erotic desires”<sup>12</sup> lie at the heart of Mallet’s loyal spectatorship as the sculptor’s career flourishes and then collapses, from his initial infatuation with Roderick’s statuette of the naked figure of “Thirst” (allegedly, “a token of male sexual awakening”<sup>13</sup>) to his final solitary vigil beside his friend’s dead body, which is broken but still flawless. Yet I find that the eroticism implied in Mallet’s cousin’s initial, fateful offer to “show [him] a pretty boy” (that is, Roderick’s statuette) is both undeniable and yet different in quality and social texture from what is now meant by homoeroticism (*RH* 33).

In the passage describing the statue, the pretty boy who symbolizes “Thirst” wears nothing but a “fillet of wild flowers” around his head; he guzzles from a gourd or “rustic cup”; his stance is “perfectly simple,” and in leaning backward to drink, he casually exposes himself to the viewer’s gaze. All of his concentration, from under “droop[ing]” eyelids, is reserved for the liquid he greedily consumes. The “absorbed” Rowland Mallet reflects that the sculptor of *Thirst* has aimed to represent the “beauty of natural movement” and nothing more, resulting in a figure that might have stepped out of Greek myth (Hylas, Narcissus, Paris, or Endymion). The statue moves Rowland, as have other works in the Louvre and the Vatican museums, to a renewed appreciation of the physical comeliness of humanity in its pristine state (*RH* 33–4).

Is this natural beauty, in this case embodied in a pastoral boy, of a sort calculated to arouse homoerotic admiration? In the first place, the meanings are contained or constrained by their very conventionality. Even the invocation of the attractive youth of Greek legend should not be overtouted as a signifier of homosexuality. Although the connotations of same-sex love are inescapable, they are also routinized and safely relegated to the distant mists

of antique mythology. Further, the figures that James (or Mallet) selects are more properly associated with sexual polymorphy: Hylas was carried off by nymphs, Paris is overdetermined by his Helen, Endymion was beloved by Selene, and Narcissus was involved either with himself or with his sister, but in any event James's allusion comes before Narcissus' appropriation by Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his poetry, as well as by Freud in his powerful theorizing of male homosexuality.<sup>14</sup>

Without question the statuette serves an important function in activating the novel's male-male bond, but there is little reason to assume that James's readers would have leapt at the passage (or that he could have expected them to leap at it) as a code of queerness. The homosexual-Hellenist version of Pater was barely in the system, so to speak, in American cultural perceptions of sculpture in the mid-1870s. Both James and his readers were still working from more antebellum premises where, presumably, one could practice, represent, and invite male-male gazing involving pretty naked boys with a more chaste, less reprobated eroticism in play (as in Hawthorne's depiction of the character of Donatello in *The Marble Faun*). Joy S. Kasson quotes period reviews to show that American sculptors of the nude (especially but not exclusively the female nude) drew high praise for their skill in making "the spiritual reign over the corporeal... the appeal to the soul entirely control the appeal to the senses," with the result that the only idea of nudity conveyed by their artwork was that which was "instinctive in every noble mind." Thus, as Kasson summarizes, American ideal sculpture of James's formative years gave viewers "an opportunity to gaze at a... nude body under morally sanctioned conditions."<sup>15</sup> To be sure, such framing and sanctioning constitutes a proof of the operations of an erotics in *need of* careful veiling and sanitizing, but there is no reason to conclude that James, in *Roderick Hudson*, is covertly staging the statuette of *Thirst* as a strong homoerotic challenge to audience sensibilities.

By the turn of the century, of course – as in the gentle narrative irony that plays over Lambert Strether's lurking suspicions of beauty in the midst of the visual feast of Paris – James would be taking a more strenuous line on "our English scruples" and on the qualms of "the Anglo-Saxon reader" for not admitting the absolute centrality of the "endless human body" in art (*LC* 2: 367, 539).<sup>16</sup> But the James of this early season sided more with the conventional voices quoted by Kasson, having come of age precisely at the juncture in cultural history in which, for instance, "short white aprons" or "fig leaves were discreetly applied to the genitals of Greek and Roman sculptures" in both American and European museums.<sup>17</sup> In 1873, writing in the *North American Review*, James comments liberally enough on

the French archetype of corporeal beauty, but suggests that (unlike Greek statuary) it includes the quality of gracefulness, which “impl[ies] that the subject [portrayed] is conscious” and makes “modesty immediately desirable and the absence of it vicious” (*LC* 2: 367). Indeed, this antebellum prejudice lingers even in James’s mature view, contemporaneous with *The Ambassadors*, that although art “essentially and logically” embraces the naked human form, a tasteful shrouding or muffling becomes “positive and necessary” whenever the represented body in question seems to be imbued with “romantic” energies.<sup>18</sup> It seems only consistent that in Roderick’s figure of the thirsty boy, the element of physical grace would be controlled even as it is expressed, with the added safeguard that the subject could not signify as consciously “romantic” by reason of his nonage, if not his rusticity (or so the consensual myth of James’s contemporaries would have had it). Again, if this naked sprite guzzling from his gourd resonates with homoeroticism, it is probably not because James consciously put it there, nor is it likely to have been construed as a slightly later gallery of observers would construe it. Rather, one witnesses in *Roderick Hudson* a “young” novelist feeling his way forward in an intricate dialogue, the terms of which were not original but rather culture-wide: the transition from codes of homosociality (which undoubtedly covered for instances of same-sex desire) to Pater-inflected significations of homosexuality as such.

If one acknowledges that *Roderick Hudson* (like James himself at this point) is not overtly “queer,” it pays to examine wherein the anticipatory cues to the receptive reader *do* lie, how relatively “intentional” they were, and how they struck readers in James’s own time. The first indication that something was a little queer, of course, was that the male characters did not fulfill the American ideal of bourgeois masculinity. Roderick Hudson himself was too vivid in ways that suggested an insufficient or compromised masculinity; his emotional extravagance betrayed him as “a man of inferior will,” especially “unmanly and unbearable” for going to pieces over Christina Light. American reviewers duly noted the gender deviance of his behavior, attributing his romantic failures to a lack of “true manliness,” conceived as the absence of that “virile force to which [the] feminine nature longs to render due submission.” The inclination to histrionics that James associates with artistic genius – or more aptly, with aestheticism of a morbid sort in a *near* genius – becomes all too evident when Roderick misfires as a suitor, alienating readerly sympathy with his unvirile collapse: “What woman could love such a weakling?” (*CR* 10, 5).

If reviewers judged Roderick’s passion to be somehow excessive, however, Rowland Mallet’s was deemed too meager. He was “tame and uninteresting

in [his] undeviating goodness," "exceedingly monotonous," and his attraction to Mary Garland a mere "suppressed affection" (*CR* 8, 11). In many respects, Mallet initiates the figure that one most commonly thinks of when the phrase "the Jamesian male" is used. A secret sharer or vicarious "observer" rather than an actively engaged "producer," Mallet prefers escaping to Europe, where "the burden of idleness is less heavy," instead of "work[ing] to get reconciled to America" (*RH* 68–9). Here it is worth interjecting that when James revised the novel in 1907, after the Wilde trials had fused aesthetical languor with homosexuality, Mallet's "burden" would become "both the burden and the *obloquy* of idleness"; relatedly, James later decided that the "pretty boy" depicted in Roderick's sculpture *Thirst* should be in fact "remarkably pretty," but these changes merely bear out the picture of an author who teased out the queernesses in his own early writing mainly in retrospect.<sup>19</sup> In the 1870s James was interested in exploring the more patent tension (whatever its subtexts in bodily desire) between "a native sense of beauty," such as Mallet's, and an uncongenial social and moral environment, such as New England (*RH* 234). As is the case with a surprising number of other New Englanders in James's oeuvre – Mary Garland herself; the Unitarian minister Babcock in *The American*, who is positively tortured by his "exquisite sense of beauty"; and Gertrude Wentworth in *The Europeans*, to name a few – Mallet's aestheticist bent relentlessly wars with the classic "moral passion" of American Puritanism, a contest that (as I have suggested) will find its fullest expression in Strether's losing battle with the relaxing atmosphere of Paris, where moral caveats seem utterly vanquished by the "visual sense" (*AM* 69; *RH* 157; *A* 126).

Mallet (like Strether later) is "solidly burdened with a conscience," yet he is also given to "expounding aesthetics" (in lieu of artistic creativity of his own), which makes for "an awkward mixture of moral and aesthetic curiosity"; although he strives to incorporate the "confident relish of pleasure" that distinguishes the *flâneur* as a social type whose "leisurely appearance" and visual habits, in Walter Benjamin's terms, were meant to lodge a "protest against . . . industriousness," his consciousness has been formed (or deformed) by the doctrines of utility and duty that are at the core of Protestant capitalism (*RH* 316, 235, 32).<sup>20</sup> Not too surprisingly, then, he seeks "a reflected usefulness" to his own life by promoting Roderick's education and development as an artist (*RH* 53). James is ambivalent toward Mallet's type of manhood or sensibility, criticizing his only "reflected" values, yet remaining sympathetic with the cultural origins of his self-damage. Meanwhile, James assigns the character *other* "reflections" that articulate essentially Jamesian positions: "Since one can't escape life it is

better to take it by the hand"; "All these things [of Rome] are impregnated with life"; "Oh, the exquisite virtue of circumstance . . . [that] beguiles us into testing unappreciated faculties!" (*RH* 229, 234). Mallet means well, but is constitutionally unable to live up to these standards, and James will give the type another more sympathetic trial in the figure of Lambert Strether.

James's portrayals of Roderick and Rowland, in other words, represent a phase in the cultural process of defining proper masculine conduct and emotional bearing, in courtship and in society in general, in preparation for more regulatory interventions that will link the aesthetical, theatrical "weakling" first with effeminacy and then with homosexuality. At the time, however, reviewers did not seem moved to search for larger reasons as to why James offered two "failed" masculinities – one disabled by his own alleged passion, the other "suppressing" his – or why their friendship becomes such a locus of intimacy. More broadly, why *did* James's novels seem determined to "disappoint" the (hetero)romantic reader almost as a matter of course? In accordance with my hypothesis that *Roderick Hudson* marks a very early dialogue between James as a gay author in the making and the discourse of gender and sexuality that would define gayness, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the critical reception is that it found James's story so unremarkable. The only exceptional voice belonged to James's later confidante, Grace Norton, but even her review did not venture beyond the passing comment that Mallet and Hudson forged an "anomalous relation" that not even the vaunted American trait of "pliability" could explain (*CR* 14). If disappointing to the reader who sought a plot revolving around the romantic trials of reasonably well-regulated men and women and ending in a fairy-tale marriage or two, the narrative and characters of *Roderick Hudson* nonetheless seemed familiar antetypes. Roderick, in particular, was the type of the "nervous nineteenth-century Apollo" (*CR* 24), neither his nervousness nor his physical beauty yet fully associated with gay signification.

These contemporary readers came by their complacency or confusion honestly, it must be said. Insistently, James's novel re-places its central, often turbulent masculine friendship in the context of what critics identified as the "perplexing little triangular arrangement" of which the third and mediating term is Mary Garland, a quietly forceful New Englander who becomes Roderick's intended and the secret object of Mallet's "bravely subdued" (read "tepid") romantic interest (*CR* 4; *CH* 36). Furthermore, when the men's relationship eventually ruptures, Roderick attributes his creative powers, as well as Mallet's restrictive "range of . . . vision," to their differing degrees of receptivity to female charms: "Women for you . . . mean

nothing. You have no imagination – no sensibility, nothing to be touched!” (RH 335). Roderick’s reproach contains an insight into his friend’s affective makeup that never gets developed (and which *must* die on the narrative vine), even as this outburst deflects the possible implications for Roderick’s own sexuality of what is called the “perfect exclusiveness of his emotions” (RH 288). Roderick’s interest in women is distant and highly aestheticized, either suspiciously foredoomed by the operation of “infernal coquetry” (as in the case of Christina Light) or suspiciously animated by Mallet’s presence as simultaneously a catalyst, a competitor, and an ulterior motive of Roderick’s affections, as in the two men’s romantic conduct with Mary Garland (RH 287). As he confesses to Rowland: “You . . . put me into such a ridiculous good-humour that I felt an extraordinary desire to tell some woman that I adored her” (RH 73). From the vantage point of today’s reader, this latter “triangular arrangement” seems less “perplexing,” fitting rather neatly into the paradigm of displaced same-sex attraction conceptualized in the work of Eve Sedgwick.

“I am so glad I’m a real man,” she shrieked. (Robert McAlmon, “Miss Knight,” 1925)

In the variant masculinity of its protagonist, *Roderick Hudson* introduced another protogay signifier – a penchant for theatricality, or what James called (even as he personally exhibited) “a great deal of manner” (TM 21) – that would increasingly be correlated with an aestheticist tendency in Victorian men and would become a defining feature in the gender profile of James’s queer-leaning characters (even in the case of Strether, with his “theatre within”). Partly attributed to Roderick’s Southern heritage, his love of artifice encompasses not only art-making (anticipating the Joycean “artificer”) and socioaesthetic revelry (that “deep relish for the artificial element in life” that New England culture could not satisfy), but also a flair for self-dramatization and for stagelike recreation of others: like “most men with a turn for the plastic arts,” the reader is told, Roderick is an “excellent mimic” (RH 79, 38). This feature anticipates the Wildean aesthete who ceaselessly *performs*, his gestural flourishes and general histrionics working in concert with a verbal facility – variously evoked as florid, witty, or paradoxical – that is a source of fascination, irritation, and sometimes fatigue to his audience. Though Wilde, notoriously “flamboyant,” would become the default figure for this supposed cue to sexual identity, his literary cousins are numerous, partly because, as Byrne Fone notes, the “outlandish and exotic” queer captivated the lens of straight society while other, less demonstrative gay men simply (and often tactically) eluded it (GL 629). Fone is speaking of

the limiting case of the drag queen, as in McAlmon's story "Miss Knight," thus emphasizing that the motives (or at least the imputed motives) for such exotic self-display and for the fictional overrepresentation of the high-visibility queer were complex and interactive. Just as Miss Knight's "shriek" (quoted above) against the damaging constructions and constrictions of the sex/gender system strives to break "the tension of ennui," so, too, does the voyeuristic slumming of McAlmon and his readers for whom s/he is the focal figure (*GL* 630). To speak more broadly, this representational practice and the audience it both inscribes and attracts depend upon the outrageous *élan* of modern sexual polymorphy to combat the *pervasive* mood of anxiety and boredom that is created, in large measure, precisely by the abjection or ghettoization of the abnormal.

Another complication here is that although theatricality promised to render male selfhood more labile and contingent, and thus to open up new possibilities of emotional response and social performance, it also aligned those men who were so gifted (or perhaps so cursed) with the so-called histrionic sex, women. For James, as for other male authors of the time, women were viewed as naturally adapted to acting, and in the present novel, the embodiment of this idea is Christina Light, who can never "forego doing the thing dramatically" (*RH* 205). This type of paramount "actress" will reappear in James in such varied guises as Baroness Eugenia Münster in *The Europeans*, Miriam Rooth in *The Tragic Muse*, and Madame de Vionnet, the enchantress of *The Ambassadors* ("polyglot as a little Jewess . . . [she had] made a clean sweep . . . of every 'part' . . . in the curtained costumed school repertory"; *A* 138). By the same token, as James later suggested, *any* association with acting, the "most self-exhibitional of trades," threatened to feminize men (in the worst sense) by making them "as vain and jealous and touchy" as women were by "nature" (*LL* 507). Roderick Hudson, in other words, already previews the male artist (or artist-type) who appropriates femininity as "emblematic of the modern," as Rita Felski says, inasmuch as femininity, refigured by commodity culture, increasingly "epitomiz[ed] artifice rather than authenticity," or the manly, sincere "voice of the heart."<sup>21</sup>

Roderick's own voice is also important here, though like his theatricality, neither is it yet the loaded social and literary signifier it would become, as it gradually accrued significance in the course of textual-historical development. When Mallet at first must be "contented . . . with listening to Roderick's voice," James not only teases the reader with Rowland's eagerness for a "good look" at Roderick's good looks, but he also suggests how far the quality of a voice can go in characterizing a speaker. Given this narrative ploy, it is no surprise that critics have lavished attention on the significance

of Roderick's "soft and not altogether masculine organ," which presumably sounds even less masculine in the presence of Mary Garland's "full grave voice" (*RH* 36, 55). Gregory Woods takes James's phrasing to mean that Roderick's "genitals lack manly puissance," overlooking the conventionality of such language; when Willa Cather, as late as the 1920s, refers to an operatic contralto's "really superb organ," it seems doubtful that her genitalia are being complimented (*EN* 990). At the same time, Woods helpfully notes that the description of Roderick's voice carries an "aesthetic connotation," for a gentle, quasifeminine musicality in speech would soon be taken as one of the telltale signs of male homosexuality.<sup>22</sup>

As Wayne Koestenbaum's work demonstrates, the voice stands in a richly ambivalent relation to embodiment, being at once profoundly corporeal – an "organ" in its own right to Whitman, James, and Cather; a collaboration of diaphragm, throat, vibrating chords, orbic-flexing mouth, and falsetto-making sinuses – and yet something that floats free of the body, venturing on the air, an agent of far-ranging emotions and physical reciprocations in the listener. In studying how a male homosexual "type" emerged, one can retrace the lineage of the seductive family voice of gayness that arguably began circulating in Anglo-American culture with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), whose speaker famously invites the beloved to loaf with him on the greensward and "loose the stop from your throat, // Only the lull I like."<sup>23</sup> It is not too much to say that Whitman's homoerotic "humming" resounds, to varying degrees, in the works and lives of all the authors treated in this study – as, for instance, in the "soft and musical" vocal "caress" conveyed by the queer pedagogue in Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" – and also throughout the period's literary production and social fabric more generally (*WO* 31). As Paul Robinson observes, when Whitman's British champion, J. A. Symonds, recounted a youthful infatuation with a chorus boy, a "quintessential epebe," he essentially claimed to have "fallen in love with Willie's voice."<sup>24</sup> Surely a note of Whitman can be heard, as well, in the "beautiful . . . low, musical voice" of Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, which awakens Dorian Gray to the knowledge of his suppressed passions (*DG* 41). To follow Koestenbaum, the accents of Whitman – America's "Ancient-of-Days opera queen" – cross over even into the register of Cather's fiction, in which potent divas with superb organs enchant and resurrect a "discarded" homosexuality, "restor[ing] queer embodiment" to their audiences.<sup>25</sup>

As one learns from Edith Wharton's memoirs, Henry James was among those who resonated – quite literally – to Whitman's vibrations: reading *Leaves* aloud, James's "rich and flexible voice . . . filled the hushed room like an organ adagio . . . crooning it in a mood of subdued ecstasy."<sup>26</sup> It is not



inconceivable that Gore Vidal relies on Wharton's testimonial (with its own subdued crooning) when fictionally reimagining James's "beautiful measured voice" and his equal facility for speaking "melodiously" in French.<sup>27</sup> But then, such testimonials abounded from many others who had known James personally. His major-phase typist, Mary Weld, recalled how James "dictated beautifully," declaiming in such a "melodious voice" that she imagined herself "accompanying a singer on the piano" (*LL* 353). Somerset Maugham, although frequently a detractor, claimed that nobody who had known James "in the flesh" could ever read his works "dispassionately," for James "got his voice into every line" with a charm that abundantly atoned for his sins of style or manner.<sup>28</sup>

Is James's voice to be understood, then, as a queer one, or as a marker of sexuality, either in playing its own airs – in prose and in life – or during his duet of sorts with Whitman for Wharton's benefit? Koestenbaum suggests that queer embodiment can be contingent, subsiding when the voice ceases, so is the James who "croons" along with Whitman only provisionally queer? More to the point of my effort to historicize Jamesian "gayness": how should one interpret the tonalities and sexual valences of other fictional men, besides Roderick Hudson, who are endowed with voices described as being not altogether masculine – the "soft, gay-sounding" voice of Felix Young (*The Europeans*) or the "mellifluous" speechifying of Gabriel Nash (*The Tragic Muse*) – or who are even celebrated for making the sweetest "music in the universe" to another man's ear, as Roderick's voice becomes for Rowland Mallet (*EU* 33, *TM* 21, *RH* 344)?

The chronological situation of *Roderick Hudson* is once again instrumental. Very shortly after its publication, as Mary Warner Blanchard shows, American medical journals would begin elaborating a clinical schema for picking out "male sexual perverts," not only by aspects of appearance and gesture but also by pitch and tenor of voice. Homosexual men allegedly betrayed themselves by speaking with an "intonation like a woman's," an "effeminacy of voice."<sup>29</sup> Among continental writers, Koestenbaum cites a letter in which Joris-Karl Huysmans writes to Marc-André Raffalovich (both of whom will appear again in this book) that "sodomy changes the voice, which becomes almost identical" among homosexuals, while the American author Earl Lind recalled that in the incipient "fairy" subculture of New York around 1890, "we women-men easily recognize[d] our own kind" by vocal cues, notably the imitative "warbling of a woman" (*GL* 627, 619).<sup>30</sup> As early as 1882 American journalists were already preparing for the later linkage, in the popular mind, between womanish warbling and queerness by reporting that Wilde, during his visit to the United States, spoke

“without one manly accent” as part of his “affected effeminacy.”<sup>31</sup> During the same period, even in Sherwood Anderson’s small-town Ohio, “soft feminine voices” (along with “mincing steps”) were seen as the hallmark of “sissies” – boys whom Anderson later perceived as younger versions of the transvestites who flirted with workmen on Chicago’s North Side in the 1890s (*SAM* 339). By the nineties, not only in Chicago but also in pockets of New York and other urban centers, gay men openly identified themselves by “the timbre of their voices” (among other “feminesque” traits; *GL* 625), while in special social clubs waiters of the “degenerate type” sang bawdy lyrics in “falsetto voices.” By the dawn of the Jazz Age simply “call[ing] in effeminate fashion,” on city streets, had become sufficient grounds for a man to be detained by the police.<sup>32</sup> As will be discussed further in chapter 6, it is even possible that Hemingway’s hypermasculinity and homophobia were motivated, in part, by a wish to counteract the message that some heard in his “soft, high-pitched voice.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus a comparatively minor detail of characterization, such as Roderick’s delicate vocal melodies, lies on the verge of major sexual significations. Though I would argue that there is no *imperative* homosexual “content” to James’s staging of Roderick – not only his voice, but his handsome face and striking attire and gesture – and no necessary miming of, or invitation to, the homoerotic gaze, one does find a kind of powerful prolepsis in action: this is the young male body that will very soon come to occupy the center of elite and middle-class homosexual discourse from Pater to J. R. Ackerley (see *GL* 379–86) to the American author Henry Blake Fuller (*Bertram Cope’s Year*, 1919). In other words, James’s handling of Roderick is at once prior to and already participatory – not consciously, but not accidentally, contributing to the movement in Anglo-American arts and letters that culminates (for convenience’s sake) in Carl Van Vechten’s quip in the early 1920s: “A thing of beauty is a boy forever.”<sup>34</sup>

One final instructive example of James’s cultural situation in 1875 is the late scene (also popular in queer readings) in which Rowland discovers Roderick sprawling upon a divan in his Roman apartment, almost as if he were posing for (or has been posed for) an allegorical portrait of Decadence. A brief review of the scene’s descriptive details helps. Whereas Rowland expects to find his sculptor-friend at his labors, Roderick lies “motionless” in a white dressing-gown, while the “moist sweet fragrance” of flowers suffuses the room. He looks “exceedingly pale,” but his eyes shine with “an extraordinary brilliancy,” his whole aspect resembling that of “a Buddhist in an intellectual swoon” (*RH* 265). James encourages the reader to associate Roderick’s strange fit of passion with disembodied ideality or “intellectual

beauty” in Shelley’s neoplatonic sense; with an ecstasy that is purely spiritual (specifically, Buddhist); and with lotus-eating both Homeric and Tennysonian – yet another gesture toward self-absence or otherworldliness. Perhaps Tennyson is the closest referent (“All things . . . ripen toward the grave”<sup>35</sup>) inasmuch as Roderick here assumes the position that he will also take in death, after he has “fallen from a great height” in the Alps, if not also in his artistic career (*RH* 348). Whereas this divan scene associates him with death-in-life (he has transcended “temporal matters”), the novel’s ending ironically tropes its staging of Roderick’s body: once again at the end, it will be Mallet who finds Roderick, or rather his prostrate corpse, “star[ing] upward open-eyed,” with a “strangely serene expression of life” on his face. By means of this parallel, the text suggests that even in the midst of his present paroxysm of happiness, Roderick already harbors some “hideous fracture,” his death prefigured as well by his pallor and the white shroud he wears in his tombl-like room (*RH* 265, 348).

Is that hideous fracture homosexuality? The young man’s posture and mood can certainly be assimilated, in a forward-looking way, to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In his narcotized, surfeited state – represented in a setting indebted to Orientalist fantasy – Roderick uncannily anticipates both Dorian and his seducer, Lord Henry. Wilde would mark the queer-ness of his young aristocrat precisely by invoking the iconography of the languid sensualist, stretched on a “divan of Persian saddle-bags,” smoking “opium-tainted cigarette[s]” amid the “heavy scent” of roses, while Dorian “bur[ies] his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume,” as a prelude to his transgressive adventures (*DG* 23–4, 44). Yet again, the remarkable textual correspondence needs to be viewed in light of significant differences in the literary representation of homosexuality between the political culture of the mid-1870s and that of the late 1880s. Although one can read Wilde out of James, so to speak – again, as part of a *culture-wide* elaboration of the languishing male figure and its subtext of sexual decadence – one cannot so easily read Wilde’s potent connotations back into the James of *Roderick Hudson*.

One notices, for instance, that Roderick’s passion is color-coded as a type of essential purity, and evidently he dies a virgin. Roderick’s white gown reminds the reader that he has worn a sort of shroud throughout the novel, from Mallet’s first vision of him “clad from head to foot” in white linen to the penultimate view of Roderick as an emaciated neurotic “clad always in white, roam[ing] about like ghost” through the “heavily perfumed air” of a Florentine villa (*RH* 37, 303). Roderick degenerates, to be sure, and his repose on the divan marks a stage in that process, yet the

white rose that figures sensual beauty in this scene betokens the phase of “rose-white boyhood” (as Lord Henry Wotton would say) rather than “rose-red youth” or “fiery-coloured” adulthood; if “sin,” such as same-sex love, constitutes “the only real colour-element . . . in modern life,” according to the argument in *Dorian Gray*, it does not yet seem to be a prominent part of James’s palette in 1875 (*DG* 42, 85, 53). In a way that will be significantly rehearsed especially in Willa Cather’s works, Roderick apparently lives and dies in “unspotted” innocence (*RH* 42).

Equally key, whatever the degree of erotic suggestiveness that informs this picture of decadence, the sexuality in play is decidedly heterosexuality, at least according to James’s cover story. Roderick ascribes his immobility on the sofa to paralyzing “joy” at the prospect of romantic success: he is “divinely happy” to think that he has won over Christina Light, and if he has “lock[ed] myself up as a dangerous character,” as he tells Mallet, the danger is that of scandalizing his mother and Mary Garland with the exultation of his conquest (*RH* 267). Finally, and most significantly, perhaps the least scandalized audience at the spectacle of Roderick’s lotus-eating degeneracy, whatever its sexual implications, was James’s average reader. For a young artist like Roderick, who epitomizes “detestable egotism” and emotional recklessness, “nothing more appropriately eccentric could be devised” than the very self-indulgent and melodramatic behavior that the novelist devises (*CH* 40, 37). The key point is that Roderick’s eccentricity *does* keep within the realm of propriety, owing partly to James’s heterosexualizing of motive, but partly to the circumstance that Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* (not to mention Fellini’s *Satyricon*) had yet to instruct audiences as to what else might be read into such a *tableau vivant*.

As Jonathan Freedman has noted, Roderick has “few descendants” in James’s fiction, and as I have been arguing, Roderick’s line dies out largely because the character proves a dead end (literally) in James’s attempt to portray a sympathetic male figure whose deepest passions run to art and yet who must be posed and advertised as equally motivated by heterosexual desire.<sup>36</sup> But I am also suggesting that *Roderick Hudson* looks forward to an array of Anglo-American texts energized by the dynamics of same-sex desire, and that James’s protagonist *necessarily* prefigured a male type – the young, beauty-intoxicated, ill-starred homosexual – that would be embellished by other authors who now belong to the pantheon of gay and lesbian literature, if also by writers who plotted the stereotype in homophobic ways. Inasmuch as this process of articulating a queer prototype involves so many other authors besides James (including not only Anglo-American writers but also Huysmans, James’s admired Pierre Loti, and others on the

Continent), the specific influence of *Roderick Hudson* on such creations as Dorian Gray or, say, the equally doomed Paul of Cather's "Paul's Case" should not be overstated. Yet given the close attention that both Wilde and Cather (among a host of others) paid to James's writing, it seems plausible that the image and the fate of Roderick Hudson subtly factored into these later productions.

Roderick's fate, of course, is death, because neither James *nor* his culture could imagine a narrative of homosexual love in which he might not only live, but also survive and thrive. In calling Roderick's death a suicide, Christopher Lane hints that the novel functions as a latent critique of a culture that systematically extinguishes such "anomalies" (Grace Norton's word).<sup>37</sup> If one reads Roderick's "inevitable slip" as a self-destruction *made* inevitable by an intolerant society in which the "inevitable desire" is hetero desire, *Roderick Hudson* can perhaps also be aligned with subsequent American works – such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Nella Larsen's *Passing* – in which other kinds of difference (across axes of gender and race, as well as sexuality) are similarly punished by ambiguous deaths in which the dominant culture itself seems to be the real villain (*RH* 349, 55). Given the moment in the evolution of homosexual discourse at which *Roderick Hudson* appeared – consider that Pater's challenge to masculine norms came barely a year before its composition – one might say that James's homophile inclinations drew him into the process that was constructing a nexus between a Europeanized (or Hellenized) aestheticism and masculine desire. One might further say that the stifled erotic implications of his text suggestively anticipate the broader cultural regulation of same-sex desire in the offing. Mallet's "indefinable attraction" to the "something tender and divine of unspotted, exuberant, confident youth" is precisely the preparatory *structure* of homosexual amity that will be filled out with sharper content in *The Ambassadors* and in Cather's many stagings of masculine tutelage (*RH* 42).

Particularly crucial to the dynamics of masculinity as represented in James's later works is the suggestion, in this early tragic affair, that a man of Mallet's "conservative instincts" could come to regard another man's voice (Roderick's unmasculine "organ") as making the sweetest of all earthly "music" – soon to be narrowed to a heterosexual cliché – and that even this "most rational of men" could feel the rupture of a lover's loss when the "beautiful fellow" who has "filled his life" and constituted "his occupation" perishes (*RH* 284, 344, 349). Significantly, Mary Garland soon duplicates Mallet's impassioned mourning. The reviewer who maintained that "Mallett [*sic*] might be a male Mary Garland, and Mary Garland a

female Rowland Mallett” meant only to fault James’s undifferentiated dialogue, yet the remark strikes a deeper chord than intended (*CR* 7). The distinction to be made is that Mallett can have no share in Mary’s “supreme” right to grieve publicly, and indeed in a fashion that unconsciously mimes sexual congress, as she “magnificent[ly]” flings her body on Roderick’s and emits a “loud tremendous cry.” By contrast, Mallett cannot publish his loss, but conveniently conducts his mourning in an isolated vigil of “seven long hours” beside Roderick’s corpse (*RH* 348–9).

In fact, James relies on the “triangular arrangement” among his principals to reroute the masculine desire that thus plays up with special poignancy into the channel of a safe and popularly palatable heterosexuality (*CR* 4). On these terms, the reader is encouraged to understand Mallett’s final pose (or self-posing) as the “most patient” of men as the posture of a suitor who may eventually win Mary’s hand (*RH* 350). To a later perspective, this patient inertia will look more like a relationship of what Robert Drake calls queer “companionability”<sup>38</sup> – a type of relationship recycled in James not only in “The Beast in the Jungle” (John Marcher–May Bartram) but also in *The Ambassadors* (Strether–Maria Gostrey) and “The Jolly Corner” (Spencer Brydon–Alice Staverton). But at the time of *Roderick Hudson*, readers focused their misgiving instead on James’s formulaic resort (as it seemed) to Roderick’s death as “a hackneyed expedient for getting rid of a troublesome hero.” Readers did not perceive that James had written himself into a corner, but rather that an ending “beautiful, powerful, tragical” would only have been more so if James had not anesthetized “Rowland’s anguish,” “repress[ing] any grief” on the part of the reader (*CH* 42, 37). There was no whiff of a suspicion that the motive for this authorial detachment might be a hesitation (however unconscious) about either the homosexual resonance or the heterosexual trajectory of the tale.

Does this demonstration serve to write homosexuality *out* of James’s first acknowledged novel – to degay or unqueer it, so to speak? On the contrary, my reading sees as potently proleptic the relationship between *Roderick Hudson* – its characterization, plotting, and delineation of romantic affiliations – and later seminal events in the cultural representation of homosexuality: literary works by Wilde and Cather, but also the international melodrama of Wilde’s personal punishment itself. *Roderick Hudson* is not “about” homosexuality so much as it is *about* to be about homosexuality; it is thus in the deepest sense a pre-text – a template waiting to be filled out with details both baneful and liberatory – that will gather in new meanings as part of a larger plot, both in the fiction and in the social worlds of late Victorian and modern Anglo-America. And it

is also (but *only*) in this broader historical sense that one is warranted in claiming *Roderick Hudson* as a “gay novel,” acknowledging the long and unpredictable afterlife of literary texts under the endless modernizings of culture.

James’s subsequent fiction of the 1870s continued to explore the problems of modern manhood and to demonstrate just how widely their accumulating meanings could vary, depending appreciably on the reader’s ability – and willingness – to follow up on muted narrative cues. As a transitional work in his movement toward the more complex and cogent writings of the next decade, *The American* (1877) does not warrant extensive consideration. But it does bear noting that James presented a protagonist, in Christopher Newman, pointedly unlike Roderick Hudson, indeed with the dubious distinction of embodying conventional gender performance for the American male, “fill[ing] out the national mould” with an “almost ideal completeness” by showing mettle in war, canniness and “good nature” in commercial dealings, and zeal (if not tremendous acumen) in the business of marrying. Newman was even a “physically . . . fine” specimen, albeit one that does not seem calculated to excite, or even particularly invite, the desiring gaze (*AM* 18). Moreover, as one perceptive reviewer noted, the novel seems to take a “malign delight” in criticizing, rather than celebrating, Newman’s attributes (*CR* 62). Both his “aesthetic headache” at the Louvre and his belief that “an undue solicitude for ‘culture’” amounts to a sort of “silly dawdling at the station” among “women, foreigners, and other unpractical persons” come across as virtually a preemptive parody of Hemingwayesque manliness (*AM* 17, 67).

For present purposes the most telling feature of *The American* is its rendering of Newman’s practical defeat by a family of the European aristocracy – his conspicuous failure to capture a trophy wife abroad – as an intensely physical and publicized suffering that seems in excess of any apparent dramatic requirements. As even some contemporaries noted, not only Newman but the very body of James’s text “break[s] down sadly,” becoming “lame and impotent” in the end (*AM* 394, 400). Along with readers such as Scott Derrick, that is, I view *The American* as “a distanced and ironic critique of [normative] manhood,” and yet also as a critique that James consistently distanced himself from in later commentary, leaving the text to speak for itself – and mainly indirectly – on behalf of unconventional masculinities like his own.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, it bears emphasis in passing that the novel performed an important space-clearing operation for James, in both personal and narrative terms. Newman and the gender style he embodied had to be strenuously cudged down in order to prepare for a figure that