

Michael Halliwell*

Henry James Goes to the Opera

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2017.008>

Abstract: Henry James uses operatic scenes and performance throughout his fiction, from early novels such as *The American* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, to later stories including “A London Life,” “Collaboration,” and “The Velvet Glove.” Embedded in many of these works is a fascination with the operatic prima donna as part of a strong performative element.

Key words: Opera, opera box, performance, the gaze, *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James

Henry James idzie do opery

Streszczenie: Opera pojawia się zarówno we wczesnych powieściach Henry’ego Jamesa, takich jak *Amerikanin* i *Portret damy*, jak i w opowiadaniach pochodzących z późniejszego okresu jego twórczości, na przykład w *A London Life*, *Collaboration* i *The Velvet Glove*. James traktuje operę, szczególnie zaś lożę operową, jako znaczące miejsce spotkań, a także jako motyw literacki. W Jamesowskich utworach można również zauważyć szczególną fascynację postacią primadonny.

Słowa kluczowe: Opera, loża, spektakl, spojrzenie, *Amerikanin*, *Portret damy*, Henry James

* Studied literature and music in Johannesburg and London. He sang over fifty major operatic roles throughout Europe, and combines a performing and academic career and is on the staff of the University of Sydney. He has published widely on literature and music: his books include *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James* (2005), and *National Identity in Contemporary Australian Opera* (2017). He is Vice President and Editorial Board member of the International Association for Word and Music Studies. E-mail: michael.halliwell@sydney.edu.au.

An achievement in art or in letters grows more interesting when we begin to perceive its connections [...]. [Works of art] become still more interesting as we note their coincidences and relations with other works, for then they begin to illustrate other talents and other characters as well: the plot thickens, the whole spectacle expands.¹

Henry James, that supreme and incisive social observer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, as a badge of pride described himself as ‘unmusical,’ and insisted that he went to the opera as a “non-musical auditor.”² Yet the opera house as a site of social, perhaps not always musical, activity, features prominently in much of his fiction. In the strata of society in which he grew up, music, and operatic performance in particular, played a significant role. James’s family were part of what has been called New York’s “inner circle,” and James intimately understood the cultural patterns and shifts of this society.³ In the opera he “discovered a social institution that illustrated both the social customs of the old guard and the consumption of the new wealth.”⁴

Going to the opera was an important part of the leisure activities of this society and James’ fiction as well as his letters and copious other writings make frequent reference to singers, operas and opera houses, as well as the social ritual of opera going. Music in general gradually assumed an increasing importance in James’ fiction, but it is often the spaces in which opera was performed which are of equal importance. While James frequently alludes to musicians in his autobiographical writings, they do not feature as prominently in his fiction. He does have an actress, Mirian Rooth, as the central character in the novel, *The Sacred Fount*, and there are many other allusions to stage performance. It is well known that James set his heart on a career as a playwright, and his failure in the theatre has been well documented, perhaps most memorably and poignantly in two novels: David Lodge’s *Author, Author*, and Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*.

What then, apart from absorbing some local colour, does the famously unmusical Henry James have to do with opera? James was certainly not unique in seeing the social activities surrounding the opera house as a microcosm of his society, and he resembled many late nineteenth-century novelists who used opera and vocal performance in some form in their fiction; the novel in English made much use of opera as a trope.⁵ There are two aspects to James’s use of opera: the first is the opera house, its spaces and particularly

¹ H. James, *Essays in London and Elsewhere*, New York 1893, pp. 151–152.

² A. Tintner, *The Cosmopolitan World of Henry James: An Intertextual Study*, Baton Rouge 1991, p. 282.

³ C. T. Skaggs, *Overtures of Opera in American Literature from Whitman to Wharton*, Baton Rouge: 2010, p. 95. As M. Bell (*Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship*, London 1966, p. 46) notes: “It was that ‘Old New York’ whose focus lay between Washington Square, where he had been born in 1843, and Twenty-third Street, a mile further uptown [...]. Boundaries social as well as geographic defined this polite nineteenth-century Manhattan, and gave it a ‘family-party smallness’ as James described it, in which everyone was connected with everyone else by family recognitions and habits of association inherited for several generations.”

⁴ C. Skaggs, op. cit., p. 98.

⁵ Perhaps not to the same extent as the French novel, where, as C. Newark (*Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust*, Cambridge 2011, p. 5) notes, opera scenes “are a reliable source of plot-energy: interweaving, at various levels, their stories with those of the works on stage; foregrounding the agency of characters who are themselves master-potters [...] or merely juxtaposing different velocities and trajectories through different kinds of time, measured and unmeasured. They signal narrative potential. They are, for these reasons as much for

the opera box as an important site of social interaction; this occurs relatively frequently in his early fiction, but he also gradually begins to integrate operatic performance thematically into his fiction as well. Ruth Solie notes that a scene in an opera box is a

marker of wealth and social distinction, and it is a place for visiting. It is also a place for seeing and being seen, its primary focus being the physical appearance of a female character who is carefully set off against a background that is discovered by “examining the house.” Of music there is only a vanishing trace.⁶

Of course, James’s opera scenes occur predominantly in European opera houses and his first major novelistic operatic scene is set in Paris. However, around the turn of the century James begins to incorporate opera and the human voice more subtly into his work where it assumes a wider thematic importance. As in much of the artistic output of the time, the figure of Wagner looms increasingly large. Peter Dyson argues that two aspects of opera interested James: “the first is the operatic prima donna, which he uses as figure for investigating the morality of artistically or histrionically shaped behaviour; the second is the nature of romance,” and here Wagner provided an analogue.⁷

Opera was a popular entertainment of the day, and James would attend musical performances as part of his role in society, remarking of one hostess who inflicted music on him: “her musical parties are rigidly musical and to me, therefore, rigidly boresome.”⁸ Yet, despite his protestations, James seems to have been susceptible to the power of music. He was fascinated by the French singer Pauline Viardot, partner of his friend, the Russian playwright, Ivan Turgenev. James describes her as “a most fascinating and interesting woman, as ugly as the eyes in the sides of her head [...] and yet also very handsome or at least, in the French sense, *trés belle*”; he found her musical evenings dull because “she herself sings so little [...]. But when Mme. Viardot does sing, it is superb. She sang last time a scene from Gluck’s

the straightforward purposes of realistic social representation, so common in the nineteenth-century French novel as to constituting something approaching a sub-genre all their own, that of the *soirée à l’Opéra*.”

⁶ R. Solie, “Fictions of the Opera Box,” in: *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, eds. D. Fischlin and R. Dellamora, New York 1997, p. 185. Fiction, as C. Newark (op. cit., pp. 11–12) notes, can also “preserve the texture and resonance of musico-dramatic information with unrivalled clarity. It can communicate with special depth the private connection between individual audience-members and legendary singers. Perhaps most important, it can reveal what resonated outside the theatre, not merely in musical settings such as salon and domestic performance, which may in any case have left traces in sheet-music sales figures, but in everyday conversation and even gesture, which have otherwise left no trace at all [...] opera in the novel is an important element of the meaning of nineteenth-century opera *tout court* [...]. If the rendering of operatic storyline, décor, costume and gesture provided great writers with plenty of material to manipulate in the service of novelistic plot, dialogue, characterisation and so on, it also seemed to compel them to make genuine attempts to communicate their understanding of the mysteriously unpredictable affect of dramatic music. In restaging famous works for their own ends, they were under pressure from an impressive verisimilitude that governed not only details of what was being represented on stage, through which they could appeal directly to their readers’ social habits, but, even more, representations of the enigmatic act of audience apprehension [...] the question of how, as well as what, the nineteenth-century opera goer *heard* would seem essential to our aesthetic and social-historical understanding of musical experience on the one hand, and of the representation of a uniquely rich social topic on the other: whether the hearer was ideal, professional, inattentive even – or fictional.”

⁷ P. Dyson, “Romance and the Prima Donna Image in the Fiction of Henry James,” *The Henry James Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 128.

⁸ B. Ivry, “Portrait of an Author,” *Opera News*, vol. 53, 5 (November 1988), p. 20.

Alcestis, which was the finest piece of musical declamation, of a grandly tragic sort, that I can conceive.”⁹

James had been exposed to performance of all kinds as a young boy, and some of these pivotal experiences made their way into his memoir, *A Small Boy and Others*. He appears to have been most impressed by the performances of excerpts from the novels of Dickens, many of which he describes in vivid detail. However, he also notes early memories of when “my elders went for opera,” and they would return home “sounding those rich old Italian names, Bosio and Badiali, Ronconi and Steffanone.”¹⁰ He describes a significant occasion when he heard possibly the most celebrated singer of the age, Adelina Patti. James was her age, eight, at the time:

I listened to that rarest of infant phenomena, Adelina Patti, poised in an armchair that had been pushed to the footlights and announcing her incomparable gift. She was about our own age, she was one of us, even though at the same time the most prodigious of fairies, of glittering fables.¹¹

He goes on to speak in some detail about his memory of an actual performance where both the theatrical as well as the auditory impression is apparent:

I am vague about the occasion, but the names, as for fine old confused reasons, plead alike to my pen – and paid a homage other than critical, I dare say, to the then slightly worn Henrietta Sontag, Countess Rossi, who struck us as supremely elegant in pink silk and white lace flounces [...]. I learned at that hour in any case what “acclamation” might mean, and have again before me the vast high-piled auditory thundering applause at the beautiful pink lady’s clear bird-notes; a thrilling, a tremendous experience.¹²

James, of course, would seek for ‘acclamation’ his whole life, both as a novelist and playwright, and ‘performance’ in a variety of forms is intrinsic to his fiction. Another experience of musical performance was a little more disconcerting for him, with some Freudian overtones. He recalls

the impression of a strange huddled hour in some smaller public place, some very minor hall, under dim lamps and again in my mother’s company, where we were so near the improvised platform that my nose was brushed by the petticoats of the distinguished amateur who sang “Casta Diva,” a very fine fair woman with a great heaving of bosom and flirt of crinoline, and that the ringletted Italian gentleman in black velvet and romantic voluminous cloak [...] had for me the effect, as I crouched gaping, of quite bellowing down my throat.¹³

The powerful theatricality of singing and opera is highlighted in a description of his attendance at a dancing school where the husband of the woman who ran it was a *comprimario* at the opera in Boston. The perhaps somewhat tawdry, but still undoubted glamour of the art form, is apparent in James’s memories:

⁹ Ibidem, p. 22.

¹⁰ H. James, *A Small Boy and Others*, London 1913, p. 119.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p. 120.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 120–121.

There hovered in the background a flushed, full-chested and tawnily short-bearded M. Dubreuill, who, as a singer of the heavy order, at the Opera, carried us off into larger things still [...] I could yet occasionally gape at the great bills beside the portal, in which M. Dubreuil always so serviceably came in at the bottom of the case [...] he had yet eminently, to my imagination, the richer, the “European” value; especially for instance when our air thrilled, in the sense that our attentive parents re-echoed, with the visit of the great Grisi, the great Mario [...]. Such was one’s strange sense for the connections of things that they drew out the halls of Ferrero till these too seemed fairly to resound with *Norma* and *Lucrezia Borgia*, as if opening straight upon the stage, and Europe, by the stroke, had come to us in such force that we had but to enjoy it on the spot.¹⁴

But James was vitally interested in the social interaction that the opera provided, much of which occurred in the intervals. Indeed, he described his favourite place in the world as the Piazza san Marco in Venice, which resembled “the lobby of the opera in the intervals of the performances”; it was also the cosmopolitan aspect of opera that interested him.¹⁵

During a visit to America in 1904, James was again struck by the centrality of the opera house in New York society, particularly female society, and the social weight it was forced to carry. The Opera, he says,

plays its part as the great vessel of social salvation, the comprehensive substitute for all other conceivable vessels; the *whole* social consciousness thus clambering into it, under stress, as the whole community crams into the other public receptacles [...]. The Opera [...] is worthy, musically and picturesquely, of its immense function; the effect of it is splendid, but one has none the less the oddest sense of hearing it, as an institution, groan and crack, positively almost split and crack, with the extra weight thrown upon it – the weight that in worlds otherwise arranged is artfully scattered, distributed over all the ground. In default of a court-function our ladies of the tiaras and court-trains might have gone on to the opera-function, these occasions offering the only approach to the implication of the tiara known, so to speak, to the American law [...]. In New York this symbol has, by an arduous extension of its virtue, to produce the occasion.¹⁶

The number of works of fiction that contain opera scenes and the variety of ways in which opera is employed in his work is testimony the importance of opera as a social phenomenon in James’s world. The opera box is a unique place where

in novels as in life, the opera box was singled out as one of a very few appropriate sites of heterosocial interaction for the offspring of the wealthy and respectable [...] paradoxically both private and public – private in that access to it is strictly controlled, but nonetheless in public view – it functions as a glorious jewel-box to set off its prize. At the same time it is a sort of luxuriously upholstered trap; many a girl ... must have experienced the opera box as a cul-de-sac.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 252–253.

¹⁵ A. Tintner, op. cit., p. 306.

¹⁶ H. James, *The American Scene*, Bloomington 1968, pp. 164–165.

¹⁷ R. Solie, op. cit., p. 197. A. Tintner (op cit., p. 283) argues that when James “brought an opera actively into a novel or a story, he was attracted by the spectacle of the opera house itself as well as by the music that was played. In addition, the plot of the opera was always an essential analogue to his plot, for James’s mind worked by analogies.”

James's often parodied, ornate and sometimes convoluted late prose style, has its own musical elements, and one might speculate that its increasing complexity mirrors his deepening engagement with the musical world around him.¹⁸

* * *

I would now like to look at some specific examples of James's use of opera in both novels and short stories that span much of his writing career. There are several instances where crucial scenes take place in the opera box, as well as others that concern operatic music as performance. An early story, "Eugene Pickering" (1874), uses both the opera box and a performance as its focus: it is a story suffused with music. The impression that Patti made on James as an eight-year-old is drawn upon as she features in a crucial scene.

The unnamed narrator of the tale comes upon an old school friend of his at a German spa, Bad Homburg. This friend, Eugene Pickering, has been 'promised' in marriage by his father to the eighteen-year old daughter of a colleague of his father. Soon he is to travel to Smyrna in the Middle East, where the daughter and father are living, to marry her, but is spending some time at the spa before he leaves. He has an unopened letter from the father of the girl he is to marry, but gives it to the narrator to keep for the time being.

The narrator describes how, "in the good German custom," he listens to the Kurhaus orchestra before dinner: "Mozart and Beethoven, for organisms in which the inter fusion of soul and sense is peculiarly mysterious, are a vigorous stimulus to the appetite."¹⁹ However, he has become infatuated with a German woman at the spa, Madame Blumenthal, who is of 'a certain age' and is described in less than flattering terms by the narrator – perhaps a surrogate for James himself: she had embraced an 'intellectual' life: "This meant unlimited camaraderie with scribblers and daubers, Hegelian philosophers and Hungarian pianists."²⁰

The central scene of the story takes place in the opera house where Patti is singing. Madame Blumenthal and Pickering are in a box and the narrator remarks that even Patti's singing "but half availed to divert me from my quickened curiosity to behold Madame Blumenthal face to face."²¹ The narrator is captivated by her when he enters the box: "I observed how sweet her voice was in laughter."²² He sees how smitten Pickering is: "he was but vaguely conscious of the meaning of her words; her gestures, her voice and glance, made an absorbing harmony."²³ Madame Blumenthal rivals Patti in her attraction – like Patti, her voice is alluring.

The narrator tries to shake his friend out of this "enthralment" and "made some remark upon the charm of Adelina Patti's singing," to which Madame Blumenthal was obliged to confess that she could "see no charm in it; it was meagre, it was trivial, it lacked soul."

¹⁸ L. S. Boren (*Eurydice Reclaimed: Language, Gender, and Voice in Henry James*, Ann Arbor 1989, p. 3) observes: "the tensions of James's novelistic form derive from his attempt to make his style bear the burden of music and meaning simultaneously. It is as though James attempts to incorporate the voices of his characters and the music of their feelings in an orchestrated mode of operatic discourse that clashes with the 'baggy monster' of conventional nineteenth-century novelistic form."

¹⁹ H. James, *The Complete Tales*, vol. 3, London 1963, p. 321.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 328.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 332.

“You must know that in music, too,” she said, “I think for myself!” She goes on: “You can’t be a great artist without a great passion!” Suddenly, however, the narrator is struck by the sound of Patti’s voice: “Before I had time to assent Madame Patti’s voice rose wheeling like a skylark, and rained down its sliver notes. ‘Ah, give me that art,’ I whispered, ‘and I will leave you your passion!’”²⁴

The performance ends and, as they are leaving, Pickering describes Madame Blumenthal’s effect on him: “when I listen to her reminiscences, it’s like hearing the opening tumult of one of Beethoven’s symphonies as it loses itself in a triumphant harmony of beauty and faith!”²⁵ Pickering, who has determined to marry her, visits her a few days later and receives a tremendous shock: “One has heard all one’s days,” he said, “of people removing the mask; it’s one of the stock phrases of romance. Well, there she stood with her mask in her hand.”²⁶ Madame Blumenthal exclaims:

“I have done with you!” she said, with a smile; “you ought to have done with me! It has all been delightful, but there are excellent reasons why it should come to an end.” “You have been playing a part, then,” he had gasped out; “you never cared for me?” “Yes, till I knew you; till I saw how far you would go. But now the story’s finished; we have reached the *denouement*. We will close the book and be good friends.”²⁷

The story ends with Pickering, opening the letter and so discovering that he has been released from his engagement, but finally deciding to go out to Smyrna despite this. So what role does the opera performance, and indeed, all the music play in this story? One level it is an analogy for the “performances” occurring “offstage” – both Madame Blumenthal and Pickering are playing roles: Pickering as well, despite however sincere he believes himself to be. In a sense their relationship is pure theatre, and the ‘reality’ is the art that occurs on the stage – the art of Patti, however much it is belittled by Madame Blumenthal, who uses her own voice with a similar artistry to Patti. The crucial comment is that of the narrator: “Ah, give me that art, and I will leave you your passion.” There are two performances occurring, one on the stage and the other in the opera box, but a comment by a friend of the narrator’s regarding Madame Blumenthal is crucial: “there is something sinister about that woman [...] her outward charm is only the mask of a dangerous discontent. Her imagination is lodged where her heart should be.”²⁸ There are strong echoes here of Madame Merle from *The Portrait of a Lady*, a later powerful portrait of a character who is all “performance.” The “truth” of the situation in this tale is perhaps finally to be found in the “grain” of the “silver notes” of Patti’s voice, not in what the characters say.

One of James’s early successful novels, *The American* (1877), has a performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* as a significant component of the narrative. A wealthy young American, Christopher Newman – James’s use of names is often revealing – has met a be-

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 333. G. B. Shaw had some tart comments on Patti, noting her “offences against artistic propriety are mighty and millions. She seldom even pretends to play any other part than that of Adelina, the spoiled child with the adorable voice [...]. [She] will get up and bow to you in the very agony of stage death if you only drop your stick accidentally.” In E. Bentley, *The Modern Theatre*, Garden City 1955, p. 156.

²⁵ H. James, *The Complete Tales*, p. 334.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 344.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 355.

autiful aristocratic Parisian widow, Claire de Cintré. Newman is determined to marry her, but her mysterious and repressive family, the Bellegardes, resist the match. Finally, they give way, and they are engaged. The novel itself might be seen as consisting of two halves: a first part rooted in Parisian realism, and the second part decidedly melodramatic, verging on the gothic. Here is James's first major treatment of the "Transatlantic theme," in which the innocent from the new world confronts the decadent and devious old world.²⁹

Claire is placed under increasing pressure from her family to break off the engagement and it is at this point where the novel shifts its mode from realism to the fantastic, and it is in the pivotal chapter 17, which takes place at the Paris Opera during the performance of *Don Giovanni*, where this shift occurs.³⁰ In the novel there is a clash of classes with the capitalist Newman at odds with the aristocratically disdainful Bellegardes, as well as class issues in some of the subplots of the novel, but it is in the scene in the opera where Newman's role as an outsider in this society is highlighted.

Newman sees the opera as a means to enter this society: he "took a large box and invited a party of his compatriots; this was a mode of recreation to which he was much addicted."³¹ The events surrounding the *Giovanni* performance are set up a few days before when Newman invites friends to hear the great Italian contralto, Madame Albani. However, one of the members of his party had talked "not only during the *entr'actes*, but during many of the finest portions of the performance, so that Newman had really come away with an irritated sense that Madame Albani had a thin, shrill voice, and that her musical phrase was much garnished with a laugh of the giggling order. After this he promised himself to go for a while to the opera alone."³² The choice of *Don Giovanni* by James is crucial, as the opera is concerned with transgression and the blurring of classes. Giovanni himself 'slums' it in his advances towards the peasant girl Zerlina, undermining the class system, just as Mozart has the opera swing stylistically between *opera seria* and *opera buffa* throughout the course of the action. These oscillations between musical styles and the clash of classes reflect the events in the novel where Newman is attempting to negotiate his way through the intricacies of French society.³³

The opera house and its spaces are crucial – the opera box plays a pivotal role here as it does in several of James's later works, and James uses the architecture of the opera house with detailed 'inside' knowledge. The performance starts with Newman in his "orchestra-chair," observing the house: "Presently in one of the boxes, he perceived Urbain de Bellegarde and his wife. The little marquise was sweeping the house very busily with a glass, and Newman, supposing that she saw him, determined to go and bid her good evening."³⁴ Newman then enters the box of the marquis:

²⁹ J. C. Rowe ("The Politics of the Uncanny: Newman's Fate in *The American*," *The Henry James Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, (Winter 1987), pp. 79–80) notes that this distinction "does not hold up under close examination" as Newman's past is "as murky and curious as the Bellegardes' [...]. Newman is as explicitly willful and manipulative as Jay Gatsby."

³⁰ A. Tintner (op. cit., p. 283) notes that the new Paris Opera only opened in 1875, whereas Henry James has Newman arriving in Paris in May 1868.

³¹ H. James, *The American*, New York 1978, p. 196.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 197.

³³ Cf. J. C. Rowe (op. cit., p. 81).

³⁴ H. James, *The American*, op. cit., p. 197.

“What do you think of the opera?” asked our hero. “What do you think of the Don?”
 “We all know what Mozart is,” said the marquis; “our impressions don’t date from this evening. Mozart is youth, freshness, brilliancy, facility – a little too great facility, perhaps. But the execution is here and there deplorably rough.”
 “I am very curious to see how it ends,” said Newman.
 “You speak as if it were a *feuilleton* in the *Figaro*,” observed the marquis. “You have surely seen the opera before?”
 “Never,” said Newman. “I am sure I should have remembered it. Donna Elvira reminds me of Madame de Cintré; I don’t mean in her circumstances, but in the music she sings.”
 “It is a very nice distinction,” laughed the marquis lightly. “There is no great possibility, I imagine, of Madame de Cintré being forsaken.”
 “Not much!” said Newman. “But what becomes of the Don?”
 “The devil comes down – or comes up,” said Madame de Bellegarde, “and carries him off. I suppose Zerlina reminds you of me.”
 “I will go to the foyer for a few moments,” said the marquis, “and give you a chance to say that the commander – the man of stone – resembles me.” And he passed out of the box.³⁵

James uses the operatic situation and characters to suggest Newman’s outsider status in this company; just as he does not know the plot of the opera, so he is unaware of the subtle and unspoken codes that operate in this society and which underlie the reasons for his rejection by the Bellegardes.³⁶ James sets up a doubling of the characters in the novel with their counterparts in the opera, with Newman as the Don, and the opera tracks this movement away from realism to, at times, an almost gothic-tinged romance. James also uses the opera as a parallel to the unfolding events of Newman’s relationship with Claire.³⁷

One of the major parallels between novel and opera concerns a fatal duel that occurs later in the novel but the events leading up to this occur during the performance. This parallels the duel between the Don and the Commendatore which starts the action of the opera. James’s own rather lifeless stage adaptation of the novel, which, of course, does not include the opera, suggests how crucial this scene is. Rowe notes that

Mozart’s opera – indeed, any artistic performance or visual artifact – makes explicit the doubled character of ordinary experience. At once highly stylized and actually experienced in performance, the opera reminds the viewer that the “reality” of experience depends upon the relation between direct impression and the significance informing such an impression. [...] Newman sees nothing but unaccountable events, strange coincidences, unexpected revelations. Whereas the reader is encouraged to read the psychological significances of the allegorization of *Don Giovanni* in terms of the dramatic action of the novel – from Claire’s repetition of Donna Elvira’s fate to Valentin’s reenactment of the operatic duel, Newman sees nothing but entertainment for an evening.³⁸

³⁵ Ibidem, pp. 200–201.

³⁶ Cf. C. Skaggs, op. cit., p. 105.

³⁷ Claire, just as Donna Elvira, after pressure from her family to reject Newman, in fact retires to spend the rest of her days in a convent.

³⁸ J. C. Rowe, op. cit., p. 85. James adapted the novel as a play which was first performed in 1891, with subsequent revisions for further performances. James saw his task as adaptor as extracting “the simplest, strongest, boldest, most rudimentary” elements from the novel, and the play would consist of “pure situation an pure point combined with pure brevity.” In C. Greenwood, *Adapting to the Stage: Theatre and the Work of Henry James*, Aldershot 2000, p. 86. Greenwood notes that while the play emphasizes the “centrality of its eponymous char-

The opera performance plays a crucial thematic role in the novel, but the structure of the opera house, where the unseen Claire is thought to be one box, while the marquise is opposite, is also important. Newman is almost literally outside this orbit, not really understanding the full significances of the various spaces, and will remain an outsider: James plans the choreography of the scene with a director's skill, emphasizing the spatial aspects which further serve to isolate Newman who wanders uncomprehendingly through this bewildering, maze-like structure.

* * *

Italy played a crucial role in James's imagination. In his evocative grouping of travel writings about Italy, *Italian Hours*, he describes a scene in the journey "From Chambéry to Milan"; he is moved to a vividly theatrical description:

It is all so unreal, so fictitious, so elegant and idle, so framed to undermine a rigid sense of the chief end of man not being to float for ever in an ornamental boat, beneath an awning tasselled like a circus-horse, impelled by an affable Giovanni or Antonio from one stately stretch of lake-laved villa steps to another [...]. Yet I wondered, for my own part, where I had seen it all before – the pink-walled villas gleaming through their shrubberies of orange and oleander, the mountains shimmering in the hazy light like so many breasts of doves, the constant presence of the melodious Italian voice. Where indeed but at the Opera when the manager has been more than usually regardless of expense? Here in the foreground was the palace of the nefarious barytone, with its banquetting-hall opening freely on the stage as a railway buffet on the platform; beyond, the delightful back scene, with its operatic gamut of colouring; in the middle the scarlet-sashed *barcaiouli*, grouped like a chorus, hat in hand, awaiting the conductor's signal. It was better even than being in a novel – this being, this fairly wallowing, in a libretto.³⁹

One is always aware in his writings that it is primarily the visual that attracts James. Particularly in a city like Venice, James frequently invokes theatrical images, mainly from spoken drama, but also from the opera; Venice is often compared to a giant stage setting, and is the *mise-en-scène* for several stories and novels, including most memorably, "The Aspern Papers" and *The Wings of the Dove*.

The Portrait of a Lady is one of James's most celebrated, and popular novels; the original version was published in 1881. Much of the novel is concerned with "performance" and its perception, particularly as embodied in the characters of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, who becomes the husband of Isabel Archer, the young American lady of the title. Merle is a fascinating character; one has the sense that she is all performance and is perhaps unwilling or, indeed, unable to look into her own soul. Isabel's first encounter with her is as she overhears Merle playing Schubert, and music plays an important role throughout the novel; paradoxically, it is perhaps only the potency of the performance of Schubert – "It showed skill, it showed feeling" – that Isabel hears, that gives a sense of the actual "essence" of Merle's character which appears all façade.⁴⁰

acter it does little to provide a subtle portrait of him," where the novel portrayed a world "restricted by formal display, the play concentrates solely upon his struggle for possession of the virtuous heroine." Ibidem.

³⁹ H. James, *Italian Hours*, University Park 1947/1974, pp. 46–47.

⁴⁰ Idem, *Portrait*, op. cit., p. 151. James, in his 1908 revision of the novel, replaced Beethoven with Schubert.

The concept of the “gaze” is an important aspect of the use that James as well as many other writers of the period made of the opera box. Those in the box are subjected to the gaze of those in main body of the house, while those in the boxes are able to view the other boxes as well as the rest of the audience. Seeing and being seen has always been an important part of the operatic experience and novelists have made full use of it. James suggests a striking analogy in the Preface to his 1908 edition of the novel where he observes that the “portrait” of Isabel that he has constructed is one of many impressions. In a famous passage from this Preface, which has strong “operatic” overtones, he notes:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million [...]. [A]t each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine.⁴¹

As a young girl Isabel had “kindness, admiration, bonbons, bouquets, the opportunity for dancing, plenty of new dresses, the *London Spectator*, the latest publications, the music of Gounod, the poetry of Browning, the prose of George Eliot” – she has a substantial cultural background with opera an important part of it – much like James’s own.⁴² There is a crucial scene in the novel which takes place in a box in the opera in Rome. Described as “one of the secondary theatres,” it is “large, bare, ill-lighted.”⁴³ Lord Warburton, previously rejected as a suitor by Isabel, pays a visit to her and her cousin Ralph Touchett, “in their box in the easy Italian fashion.”⁴⁴ As in much of James’s early fiction, the actual opera performance itself is not central – in fact, it is badly performed, where “the women look like laundresses and sing like peacocks”; a “bare, familiar, trivial opera” in which “Verdi’s music did little to comfort him.”⁴⁵ Warburton scans “two or three tiers of boxes” and sees in “the largest of these receptacles a lady whom he easily recognized” – Isabel is “seated facing the stage and partly screened by the curtain of the box.”⁴⁶ The first, 1881 version of the novel, reads:

It seemed to the latter gentleman [Warburton] that Miss Archer looked very pretty; he even thought she looked excited; as she was, however, at all times a keenly-glancing, quickly-moving, completely animated young woman, he may have been mistaken on this point.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 37.

⁴² Ibidem, pp. 41–42.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 253.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 255.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 253–254.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 538.

The 1908 New York edition reads:

It struck her second visitor [Warburton] that Miss Archer had, in operatic conditions, a radiance, even a slight exaltation; as she was, however, at all times a keenly-glancing, quickly-moving, completely animated young woman, he may have been mistaken on this point.⁴⁸

Her looking “pretty” and even “excited” has now acquired an “operatic radiance” and become much more precise and directed. This significant change in emphasis continues:

She had discouraged him, formally, as much as a woman could; what business had she then to have such soft, reassuring tones in her voice.⁴⁹

This becomes in the revised version:

She had discouraged him, formally, as much as a woman could; what business had she then with such arts and felicities, above all with such tones of reparation – preparation? Her voice had tricks of sweetness, but why play them on him?⁵⁰

The element of performance is foregrounded in the second version where an “operatic” Isabel again is emphasised: she is drawing on the studied “ricks” used by the great performers of the day – the operatic prima donnas – figures that always exerted a great fascination for James.⁵¹

James engaged with the spaces of the opera house in earlier work, most notably, as we have seen, with the Paris Opera in *The American*. He does so again in his novella-length tale, “A London Life” (1888), which deals in a similar way with Covent Garden in London. Central to the operatic focus is a performance of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s hugely popular opera, *Les Huguenots* (1836), in which there is a plot parallel with the tale: the heroine of the opera, Valentine, offers herself to the hero Raoul and is rejected. In the tale, Laura Wing, a young American girl, similarly offers herself to the central male figure, Wendover, and is herself rejected, although in a much more oblique way. The opera revolves around the St. Bartholomew massacre of 1572, which in a short space of time changed the course of French history. The pivotal, life-changing event in the tale is the elopement of Laura’s adulterous sister, Selina, married to an English aristocrat, Lionel Berrington, with Captain Crispin; this abruptly and permanently changes the sisters’ relationship and their lives.

The elopement is effected during the performance at the opera, and as in *The American*, the intricate spaces of the theatre provide the backdrop with the opera box as a central focus. In *The American*, the events coalesce during the performance of *Don Giovanni*, and are, in fact, mirrored by the events of the opera, some of which play out later in the novel. In “A London Life” the opera scene is very much a backdrop to the events occurring in the boxes and spaces of the theatre, and the “real” deception in the story occurs “offstage”; however, similar betrayals are portrayed onstage.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 254.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 539.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 255.

⁵¹ Cf. Peter Dyson, “Romance and the Prima Donna Image in the Fiction of Henry James,” *The Henry James Review*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 130.

A young American, Mr. Wendover, visiting London, invites sisters Selina and Laura to join him in his box at the opera: “an occasion of high curiosity, the first appearance of a young American singer of whom considerable things were expected.”⁵² Wendover’s box “proved a place of ease, and Selina was gracious to him: she thanked him for his consideration in not stuffing it full of people.”⁵³ A friend of Wendover’s, a “Mr. Booker of Baltimore,” is also with them in the box, and “he knew a great deal about the young lady they had come to listen to, and he was not so shrinking but that he attempted to impart a portion of his knowledge even while she was singing.”⁵⁴

Selina, at the end of the second act, decides to join Lady Ringrose in a box on the other side of the house. Laura notices that Wendover is disappointed: “he had taken some trouble to get his box and it had been no small pleasure to him to see it graced by the presence of a celebrated beauty.”⁵⁵ Laura is scandalised by the fact that it was not usual “for ladies to roam about the lobbies,” but also the fact that she has conspicuously been left alone with Wendover: “It displeased her that the people in the opposite box, the people Selina had joined, should see her exhibited in this light” – Laura feels deeply threatened by any taint of the “immoral” life that Selina appears to be leading.⁵⁶

Laura is soon aware of some commotion in Lady Ringrose’s box, ostensibly Selina’s arrival, and Laura’s distraction becomes more acute: “The opera resumed its course [...]. The American singer trilled and warbled, executed remarkable flights, and there was much applause, every symptom of success; but Laura became more and more deaf to the music.”⁵⁷ It is almost as if Laura tries, but fails, to shut out the music and events from the stage which reflect her own personal crisis. Laura gradually realizes what is happening: “Captain Crispin was there, in the opposite box; those horrible women concealed him [...] they had lent themselves to this abominable proceeding.”⁵⁸ Laura realizes that she has been manipulated, and despite “the pure music [that] filled the place and the rich picture of the stage [that] glowed beneath it,” Laura feels violated: “to her troubled spirit the immense theatre had a myriad eyes, eyes that she knew, eyes that would know her, that would see her sitting there with a strange man.”⁵⁹ She is conscious of Wendover who “was preoccupied – either wondering also what Selina was ‘up to’ or, more probably, quite absorbed in the music.”⁶⁰ Rather than being a place of enjoyment, the theatre for Laura has become increasingly threateningly claustrophobic.

At the interval Wendover rejoins Laura outside the box and tells her that Mr. Booker “has found a place in the stalls,” and will not be rejoining them: “Laura hesitated, looking down the curved lobby, where there was nothing to see but the little numbered doors of the boxes. They were alone in the lamplit bareness; the *finale* of the act was ringing and booming behind them.”⁶¹ She requests that he put her into a cab, but he responds:

⁵² H. James, *A London Life*, Oxford 1989, p. 104.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 105. James reference is to the young American singer, Lillian Nordica, who sang the role of Valentine at Covent Garden in the year of the publication of the tale.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 107–108.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 108–109.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 111–112.

Ah, you won't see the rest? [...] Her eyes met his, in which it seemed to her that as well as in his voice there was conscious sympathy, entreaty, vindication, tenderness. Then she gazed into the vulgar corridor again; something said to her that if she should return she would be taking the most important step of her life. She considered this, and while she did a great burst of applause filled the place as the curtain fell. "See what we are losing! And the last act is so fine," said Mr. Wendover. She returned to her seat and he closed the door of the box behind them. Then, in this little upholstered receptacle which was so public and yet so private, Laura Wing passed through the strangest moment she had known.⁶²

Here James piles on the theatrical imagery including the "soundtrack" of the performance that in a sense is occurring offstage as a backdrop to the "main action" in the boxes.⁶³ The "curtain" that falls is, in a sense, the curtain that is about to fall on Laura's own life as she had known it. She realizes that Selina has "bolted," and "that on the morrow all London would know it."⁶⁴ She is also aware that "there was a certain chance in life that sat there beside her, but it would go forever if it should not move nearer that night."⁶⁵ She realizes that "that was what she had come back into the box for – to give him his opportunity. [...] The music was not there now, to keep them silent; yet he remained silent, even as she did."⁶⁶ The preparations for the final act begin: "there were certain violins that emitted tentative sounds in the orchestra," but for Laura "the whole place, around her, was a blur and swim, through which she heard the tuning of fiddles."⁶⁷ Laura asks him why he has come, but realizes that "her companion was quite unprepared for her question," that "he was distinctly not in love with her and was face to face with a situation entirely new."⁶⁸ Laura senses that she has unwillingly become the focus of and participant in an elaborate "performance," illustrating the paradox of the opera box: it is both intimately private yet immensely public as the object of the gaze of others:

"And is it because you like me that you have kept me here?" Laura asked. She got up, leaning against the side of the box; she had pulled the curtain far forward and was out of sight of the house. [...] Then an unspeakable shame and horror – horror of herself, of him, of everything – came over her, and she sank into a chair at the back of the box, with averted eyes, trying to get further into her corner. "Leave me, leave me, go away!" she said, in the lowest tone he could hear. The whole house seemed to be listening to her, pressing into the box. "Leave you alone – in this place – when I love you? I can't do that – indeed I can't," she heard him articulate. "You don't love me – and you torture me by staying!" Laura went on in a convulsed voice. "For God's sake go away and don't speak to me, don't let me see you or hear of you again!"⁶⁹

⁶² Ibidem, p. 112. C. T. Skaggs (op cit., p. 109) notes that in this scene James "contrasts two modes of living: a life of total disregard for appearances and a life of excruciating enslavement to them."

⁶³ D. Izzo (*Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James*, Lincoln 2001, p. 180) notes the crucial moment where Selina deliberately leaves Laura alone in the box, thus potentially exposing her to scandal that she herself is trying to avoid: "Through Selina's subtle maliciousness, or better, through James's subtle maliciousness by means of Selina, a play within the play is staged in an appropriate theatrical setting – a *mise en abyme* that, fulfilling its peculiar function, self-reflexively interrogates the first representation and puts into question its reality."

⁶⁴ "A London Life," op. cit., p. 113.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 114.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 115.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, pp. 115–116.

Wendover has been maneuvered into this situation: “unaccustomed feelings possessed him and they moved him in different directions.” He then “exclaimed pitifully, ‘Oh Miss Wing, oh Miss Wing!’ and stepped out of the box.”⁷⁰ The exchanges between them become almost “operatic” in their intensity and sense of drama – much is conveyed by James’s melodramatic, operatically heightened language. Laura is devastated:

The one thing that could have justified her, blown away the dishonor of her monstrous overture, would have been on his side, the quick response of unmistakable passion. It had not come, and she had nothing left but to loathe herself. [...] “Poor man – poor dear man!” Laura Wing suddenly found herself murmuring: compassion filled her mind at the sense of the way she had used him. At the same moment a flare of music broke out: the last act of the opera had begun and she had sprung up and quitted the box.⁷¹

While the actual opera perhaps itself is not as significant as *Don Giovanni* is in *The American*, James intends his readers to see the parallels between the opera and the offstage events. However, there is a marked contrast between the gloomy emptiness of Covent Garden compared with the bright, glittering opulence of the Paris Opera, and Laura’s view of donors of the boxes suggests prison cells, analogous with her perception of her future life.⁷² The drama of the events on stage are mirrored by the drama of the those in the opera box and corridors.

The opera box offered James a microcosm of society but also an almost perfect locale for one of the major themes that suffuses his work: vision. This theme is fundamental to his tale of 1896, “Glasses.” The central figure is a young and beautiful girl, Flora Saunt, whose one physical shortcoming is short sightedness which, through vanity, she will not address by wearing corrective glasses, and which finally leads to her blindness. A crucial scene near the end of the tale takes place in an opera box during a performance of *Lohengrin*. The narrator, who is aware of Flora’s plight, describes how from his place in the stalls, with his glass he treated himself to “a general survey of the boxes,” noting that “there was a certain proportion of pretty women,” but one in particular who was “the aim of fifty tentative glasses, which she sustained with an admirable serenity.”⁷³ This figure is strikingly “operatic” in conception: she is “dressed in white, with diamonds in her hair and pearls on her neck, she had a pale radiance of beauty which even at that distance made her a distinguished presence and, with the air that easily attaches to lonely loveliness in public places, an agreeable mystery.”⁷⁴ There is much in this description that matches the glamour attached to the great prima donnas.

The narrator watches Flora move her eyes “over the house, and I felt them brush me again like the wings of the dove.”⁷⁵ He imagines her to have actually seen him and smiled at him, and he makes his way quickly to her box where he presses his lips to her hand which startles her, and she “recovered her hand and jerked at me, twisting herself round,

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 116.

⁷¹ Ibidem, pp. 116–117.

⁷² Cf. A. Tintner, op. cit., pp. 291–292.

⁷³ H. James, *Complete Tales*, vol. 9, op. cit., p. 363.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 363

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 364.

a vacant, challenging stare.”⁷⁶ Now that he is close, he sees that her eyes “didn’t show at all the conscious light I had just been pleased to see them flash across the house: they showed on the contrary to my confusion, a strange, sweet blankness”; he realises that she “had mistaken my entrance for that of another, a pair of lips without a moustache.”⁷⁷ At this moment he realises that she is blind, but they are interrupted by “the opening bars of another scene,” and as Flora’s betrothed, Geoffrey Dawling, comes into the box, “we had sunk noiselessly into our chairs again (for the music was supreme, Wagner passed first).”⁷⁸ The narrator is astounded by her beauty that she has sustained, sacrificing her sight in the process, and “if the music, in that darkness, happily soared and swelled for her, it beat its wings in unison with those of a gratified passion.”⁷⁹

He observes her during the music:

Flora after a while again lifted the glass from the ledge of the box and elegantly swept the house with it. Then, by the mere instinct of her grace, a motion but half conscious, she inclined her head into the void with the sketch of a salute, producing, I could see, a perfect imitation of a response to some homage. Dawling and I looked at each other again: the tears came into his eyes. She was playing at perfection still, and her misfortune only simplified the process.⁸⁰

This is a performance worthy of a celebrated prima donna. The narrator realises that Dawling, who is infatuated with her beauty, “would exist henceforth for the sole purpose of rendering unnecessary, or rather impossible, any reference even on her own part to his wife’s infirmity.”⁸¹ Donatella Izzo suggests that “the gaze of the Other with its paradoxical effects – both objectifying and grounding subjectivity – is ever present in this story; indeed, it is marked by a spectacular success. [...] The passive receptacle of the gaze of her spectators, she is now relieved from all function but the exhibition of her beauty to the ecstatic admiration of her beholders in that most appropriate setting, a theater.”⁸² One might draw a parallel between Flora and Elsa in the opera with Dawling as her knight, Lohengrin. Unlike, Elsa in the opera, however, Flora retains her knight who will be henceforth completely at her service. Again, the opera box provides the crucial moment in the unfolding drama of the story, adding a striking perspective to one of James’s most enduring tropes.

In a much slighter tale, “The Two Faces” (1903), James explicitly invokes the power of the image of the prima donna. Set in the nineties in London, a manipulative Madame Merle-type character, Mrs Grantham, exacts a cruel triumph over her victim, Lady Gwyther, who is the fiancée of a man who has recently jilted Mrs Grantham. The action climaxes during a weekend at a great country house, Burbeck, where a Saturday afternoon tea is served on a magnificent terrace. The setting is deliberately and almost excessively “operatic,” a fitting *mise en scène* for the events about to occur:

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 365.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, pp. 365–366.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 367.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, pp. 367–368.

⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 369.

⁸² D. Izzo, op. cit., pp. 108–111.

It constituted immediately, with multiplied tables and glittering plate, with rugs and cushions and ices and fruit and wonderful porcelain and beautiful women, a scene of splendour, almost an incident of grand opera. One of the beautiful women might have been expected to rise with a gold cup and a celebrated song.⁸³

Mrs Grantham has maliciously encouraged the young Lady Gwyther, who is to make her entrance to society this weekend as a young bride, to wear what are inappropriate clothes for the occasion as a means of exacting her revenge. Mrs Grantham is portrayed by James as a stage director, managing the “operatic” proceedings in which Lady Gwyther is wearing the wrong costume. The narrator, who had wished to marry Mrs Grantham, describes his perception of her:

It somehow struck him on the spot – and more than ever yet, though the impression was not wholly new to him – that she felt herself a figure for the forefront of the stage and indeed would have been recognised by anyone at a glance as the *prima donna assoluta*.⁸⁴

The narrator is horrified by the look of triumph on her face and the painful embarrassment of the young bride. The intensely stylized theatricality of opera is crucial to James’s purposes in scenes such as this where a social occasion becomes a “first appearance,” and all is “stage managed” by the manipulative and vengeful *prima donna*, Lady Grantham. The setting at Burbeck has all the trappings of an operatic stage, intimately known and understood by the upper-class world in which James moved.⁸⁵

James uses the figure of the *prima donna* in several later stories, but in the fiction after the turn of the century he frequently uses opera as an analogue to the power of romance.⁸⁶ Of interest too is his increasing use of Wagner; there are also subtle, but pervasive Wagnerian echoes in one of his late masterpieces, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902).

In “The Velvet Glove” (1909), the central figure is a young writer, John Berridge, whom critics have seen as an analogue of James. Berridge has enjoyed great critical acclaim for his work, and the main action of the tale is his attendance at a Parisian musical soirée where he meets a “princess” who later drives him around Paris at night. It emerges that she is, in fact, Amy Evans, an author of romance fiction, but Berridge insists on maintaining the romantic illusion that she is a princess.⁸⁷ In the end she convinces him of her real identity and requests that he will write a preface to her new novel, *The Velvet Glove*.

The scene where he first meets her is presented by James as an elaborate operatic set piece where Berridge is seduced by the aura of romance created by the “youth and beauty around him.”⁸⁸ James moves specifically into Wagnerian operatic territory with the comment:

⁸³ H. James, *Complete Tales*, vol. 11, op. cit., p. 251.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

⁸⁵ P. Dyson (op. cit., p. 120) notes: “The operatic world of London at this period was an emblem of self-conscious (and self-indulgent) theatricality revolving around its *prima donnas*; even today, one defines the age, operatically speaking, as the age of Patti, of Melba, of Tetrazzini.”

⁸⁶ Cf. P. Dyson, op. cit., p. 131.

⁸⁷ There are echoes of the relationship between James and American novelists: Constance Fennimore Cooper and Edith Wharton.

⁸⁸ H. James, *The Complete Tales*, vol. 12, op. cit., p. 237.

One placed young gods and goddesses only when one placed them on Olympus, and it met the case, always, that they were of Olympian race, and that they glimmered for one, at the best, through their silver cloud, like the visiting apparitions in an epic.⁸⁹

Just before the princess's entrance the guests are summoned to hear "an eminent tenor who stood beside the piano."⁹⁰ Berridge soon notices the effect of the singing; in a passage rich with operatic analogy he observes the

vast, rich, tapestried room where, in spite of figures and objects so numerous, clear spaces, wide vistas, and, as they might be called, becoming situations abounded, there had been from elsewhere, at the signal of unmistakable song, a rapid accession of guests. At first he but took this in, and the way that several young women, for whom seats had been found, looked charming in the rapt attitude; while even the men, mostly standing and grouped, "composed," in their stillness, scarce less impressively, under the sway of the divine voice. It ruled the scene, to the last intensity, and yet our young man's fine sense found still a resource in the range of the eyes, without sound or motion, while all the rest of consciousness was held down as by a hand mailed in silver. It was better, in this way, than the opera – John alertly thought of that: the composition sung might be Wagnerian, but no Tristram, no Iseult, no Parsifal and, no Kundry of them all could ever show, could ever "act" to the music, as our friend had thus the power of seeing his dear contemporaries of either sex (armoured *they* so otherwise than in cheap Teutonic tinsel!) just continuously and inscrutably sit to it. It made, the whole thing together, an enchantment amid which he had in truth, at a given moment, ceased to distinguish parts – so that he was himself certainly at last soaring as high as the singer's voice and forgetting, in a lost gaze at the splendid ceiling, everything of the occasion but what his intelligence poured into it.⁹¹

It is no wonder that Berridge is seduced by the "princess's" entrance immediately following this: "For Berridge, once more, if the scenic show before him so melted into the music, here precisely might have been the heroine herself advancing to the foot-lights at her cue."⁹² The heightened atmosphere that Berridge senses in the room has been created by the performance of Wagner's music which acts as a "potion" – as in the opera – upon his critical faculties, seducing him.

* * *

In all of these scenes, from either tales or novels, operatic performance plays a role, but usually as analogy, trope, or part of a more complex thematic grouping. However, there is a little-known short story where music and music-making is the central narrative and artistic focus. "Collaboration" (1892) is a small-scale example of James's minute and extensive study through a wide range of fiction and drama of the relationship between American and European culture. In this story, music is the catalyst for the depiction of the relationship between a German composer and a French poet. Set in the aftermath of the Franco Prussian War (1870–1871), it takes place largely in the Parisian salon of an unnamed American art-

⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 238.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 239.

⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁹² Ibidem, p. 240.

ist who both narrates and is intimately involved in the events. He describes the atmosphere there as “international as only Parisian air can be,” observing that “[m]usic makes its home there – though I confess I am not quite the master of *that* I house”; perhaps a sly dig at himself by James.⁹³ All is not sweetness – “there are discussions of course and differences,” but he notes that “harmonies prevail in the end.”⁹⁴ A crucial theme is then adumbrated:

Art protects her children in the long run – she only asks them to trust her. [...] Music moreover is a universal solvent; though I’ve not an infallible ear I’ve a sufficient sense of the matter for that. Ah, the wounds I’ve known it to heal – the bridges I’ve known it to build – the ghosts I’ve known it to lay! Though I’ve seen people stalk out I’ve never observed them not to steal back. My studio in short is the theatre of a cosmopolite drama, a comedy essentially “of character.”⁹⁵

The events commence with a description of a German pianist and composer, Herman Heidemauer, who is “a born Bavarian” but had spent some time in England and “had a genius of the sort that London fosters but doesn’t beget, a very German soul.”⁹⁶ He “knows the English poets, and the French, and the Italian, and the Spanish, and the Russian – he is a wonderful representative of that Germanism which consists in the negation of intellectual frontiers.”⁹⁷ James has relatively few German characters in his fiction; the German-speaking lands did not compare with his twin loves, Italy and France.

We then are introduced to the intensely snobbish and beautiful Madame de Brindes and her daughter Paule. The political soon rears its head:

She wears her eternal mourning (I admit it’s immensely becoming) for a triple woe, for multiplied griefs and wrongs, all springing from the crash of the Empire, from the battlefields of 1870. Her husband fell at Sedan, her father and her brother on still darker days; both her own family and that of M. de Brindes, their general situation in life, were, as may be said, creations of the Empire, so that from one hour to the other she found herself sinking with the wreck.⁹⁸

Both mother and daughter have fallen on hard times and struggle to make a living; Paule is engaged to the narrator’s “brilliant” poet friend Félix Vendemer. The crux of the story is the developing relationship between Heidenmauer and Vendemer. While the two women are firmly opposed to the German: “A German was bad enough – but a German with English aggravations!” Vendemer immediately strikes up a conversation with the German when they meet in the narrator’s salon.⁹⁹ The two women are outraged and leave, and left alone with the narrator, Vendemer confesses that “one of the young German’s compositions had already begun to haunt his memory.”¹⁰⁰ A few days later the German arrives as the Frenchman is at the piano, “trying to win back from the keys some echo of a passage in the *Abendlied* we had listened to on the Sunday evening.”¹⁰¹ Left alone with the nar-

⁹³ H. James, *Complete Tales*, vol. 8, op. cit., p. 407.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 408.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 409.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 410.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 411.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 413.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 419.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

rator, Heidenmauer questions him about Vendemer and his poetry, and the narrator gives him a copy of Vendemer's latest collection. Some days later the crucial scene occurs as Heidenmauer observes to the narrator:

"It speaks to me – it speaks to me," he said with his air of happy proof. "I liked the songs – I liked the songs. Besides," he added, "I like the little romantic play – it has given me wonderful ideas; more ideas than anything has done for a long time. Yes – yes."

"What kind of ideas?"

"Well, this kind." And he sat down to the piano and struck the keys. I listened without more questions, and after a while I began to understand. Suddenly he said: "Do you know the words of that?" and before I could answer he was rolling out one of the lyrics of the little volume. The poem was strange and obscure, yet irresistibly beautiful, and he had translated it into music still more tantalizing than itself. He sounded the words with his German accent, barely perceptible in English but strongly marked in French. He dropped them and took them up again; he was playing with them, feeling his way. "This is my idea!" he broke out; he had caught it, in one of its mystic mazes, and he rendered it with a kind of solemn freshness. [...] There was a phrase he repeated, trying it again and again, and while he did so he chanted the words of the song as if they were an illuminating flame, an inspiration. I was rather glad on the whole that Vendemer didn't hear what his pronunciation made of them, but as I was in the very act of rejoicing I became aware that the author of the verses had opened the door. He had pushed it gently, hearing the music; then hearing also his own poetry he had paused and stood looking at Heidenmauer. The young German nodded and laughed and, irreflectively, spontaneously, greeted him with a friendly "Was sagen Sie dazu?" I saw Vendemer change colour; he blushed red and, for an instant, as he stood wavering, I thought he was going to retreat. But I beckoned him in and, on the divan beside me, patted a place for him to sit.¹⁰²

As Heidenmauer plays, the Frenchman sits with his head in his hands, but as soon as he stops, he jumps up and begs him to continue. He does: "He played Wagner and then Wagner again – a great deal of Wagner."¹⁰³ Finally he asks the question: "I've a conception for an opera, you know – I'd give anything if you'd do the libretto!"¹⁰⁴

There follows an intense exchange as the German observes that his countrymen will hate him for this collaboration with a Frenchman, finally commenting:

"In art there are no countries."

"Yes, art is terrible, art is monstrous," Vendemer replied, looking at the fire.

"I love your songs – they have extraordinary beauty."

"And Vendemer has an equal taste for your compositions," I said to Heidenmauer.

"Tempter!" Vendemer murmured to me, with a strange look.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibidem, p. 421.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 422.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 423. P. A. Walker ("Art and Nationalism: The Short Story 'Collaboration,'" in: *Critical Insights: Henry James*, ed. T. Hubbard, Ipswich 2016, p. 182) sees the use of Wagner in ironic terms as perhaps the most potent example of a non-collaborative and highly nationalistic opera composer – writing both the words and music of his operas – in this most collaborative of art forms. But the perceived immorality surrounding Wagner's private life – James had contact with important figures in Wagner's entourage – is also placed under critical scrutiny. At the time of this story, James was wrestling with various attempts to break into the world of the theatre, including a possible collaboration with Constance Fenimore Woolson that did not materialize.

Here is the first suggestion of the famous Franco-German collaboration between Gounod and Goethe – even if it did not occur in quite the same way! *Faust* (1859) was one of the most popular and frequently performed operas in Paris, and, indeed, all over Europe at this time. The narrator takes up this metaphor: “I might have been a more mocking Mephistopheles handing over his pure spirit to my literally German Faust.”¹⁰⁶ Returning later that night, the narrator finds the Frenchman alone in his studio where the air “was thick with Bavarian fumes, with the reverberation of mighty music and great ideas.”¹⁰⁷ It is now the turn of the Frenchman to realize what this collaboration means: “It will cost me everything!” said Félix Vendemer in a tone I seem to hear at this hour. “That’s just the beauty of it. It’s the chance of chances to testify for art – to affirm an indispensable truth.”¹⁰⁸

The narrator defends himself to Madame de Brindes: “I explained that there was no horror to me in the matter, that if I was not a German neither was I a Frenchman, and that all I had before me was two young men inflamed by a great idea and nobly determined to work together to give it a great form.”¹⁰⁹ She asks him to make one last appeal to Vendemer otherwise the engagement would have to be broken. However, to no avail.

The narrator sketches a tantalizing prospect of what this collaboration might achieve as the story concludes:

Herman Heidenmauer and Félix Vendemer are, at the hour I write, immersed in their monstrous collaboration. There were postponements and difficulties at first, and there will be more serious ones in the future, when it is a question of giving the finished work to the world. The world of Paris will stop its ears in horror, the German Empire will turn its mighty back, and the authors of what I foresee (oh, I’ve been treated to specimens!) as a perhaps really epoch-making musical revelation (is Heidenmauer’s style rubbing off on me?) will perhaps have to beg for a hearing in communities fatally unintelligent. It may very well be that they will not obtain any hearing at all for years. I like at any rate to think that time works for them. At present they work for themselves and for each other, amid drawbacks of several kinds. Separating after the episode in Paris, they have met again on alien soil, at a little place on the Genoese Riviera where sunshine is cheap and tobacco bad, and they live (the two together) for five francs a day, which is all they can muster between them.¹¹⁰

However, there is an intriguing little “musical” coda to the story which suggests James’s deeper intentions with the tale. The narrator notes that a few weeks before writing his account of these events he came across Paule de Brindes in her mother’s rooms, alone:

I found her at the piano, playing one of Heidenmauer’s compositions – playing it without notes and with infinite expression. How had she got hold of it? How had she learned it? This was her secret – she blushed so that I didn’t pry into it. But what is she doing, under the singular circumstances, with a composition of Herman Heidenmauer’s? She never met him, she never heard him play but that once. It will be a pretty complication if it shall appear that the young German genius made on that occasion more than one intense impression. [...] I hadn’t fully perceived how deeply susceptible she is to music. She must have a strange confusion of feelings – a dim,

¹⁰⁶ H. James, *Complete Tales*, vol. 8, op. cit., p. 424.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 425.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 427.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 429–430.

haunting trouble, with a kind of ache of impatience for the wonderful opera somewhere in the depths of it. Don't we live fast after all, and doesn't the old order change? Don't say art isn't mighty! I shall give you some more illustrations of it yet.¹¹¹

What are we then to make of this tale?¹¹² Apart from James's obviously strong belief in the power of art to transcend borders and nationalities – James was the great cosmopolitan expatriate – in comparison with his usual preoccupations with fiction, drama and visual art, he here, in a limited form, attempts to invoke music in a similar way. Paule's susceptibility to music seems to be an illustration of his belief, adumbrated at the beginning of the tale, that music has the capacity to be the "universal solvent," unlike the other art forms which much more strongly retain their national characteristics and identities. Here James is somewhat tentatively venturing into territory that had been charted in greater depth by earlier writers, most notably, Gustave Flaubert and George Eliot, invoking the power of music as analogy. James used opera with increasing sophistication in final period of his writing career and his unfinished novel, *The Ivory Tower*, is a tantalizing further glimpse of the way in which the music of Wagner permeated his creative thought and where it might have led.

Bibliography

- Bell, Millicent. *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship*. London: Peter Owen, 1966.
- Bentley, Eric. *The Modern Theatre*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1955.
- Boren, Lynda S. *Eurydice Reclaimed: Language, Gender, and Voice in Henry James*. Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Press, 1989.
- Dyson, Peter. "Romance and the Prima Donna Image in the Fiction of Henry James." *The Henry James Review* 12.2 (Spring 1991).
- Greenwood, Christopher. *Adapting to the Stage: Theatre and the Work of Henry James*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- Ivry, Benjamin. "Portrait of an Author." *Opera News*, vol. 53, 5 (November 1988).
- Izzo, Donatella. *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- James, Henry. *Essays in London and Elsewhere*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893.
- . *A Small Boy and Others*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1913.
- . *Italian Hours*, ed. John Auchard. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1947/74.
- . *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel. Volumes, 3, 8, 9, 11, 12. London: Rupert Hard-Davis, 1963.
- . *The American Scene*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.
- . *The Portrait of a Lady: An Authoritative Text*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975.
- . *The American*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- . *A London Life and The Reverberator*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 430–431.

¹¹² Walker offers a fascinating analysis of this multi-layered tale, seeing in it the expression of James's critical views of nationalism but also as a veiled allegory for a critique of homophobia.

- Newark, Cormac. *Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Rowe, John Carlos. "The Politics of the Uncanny: Newman's Fate in *The American*." *The Henry James Review* 8.2 (Winter 1987).
- Skaggs, Carmen Trammell. *Overtones of Opera in American Literature from Whitman to Wharton*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010.
- Solie, Ruth. "Fictions of the Opera Box." In: *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, eds. Daniel Fischlin and Richard Dellamora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Tintner, Adeline. *The Cosmopolitan World of Henry James: An Intertextual Study*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991.
- Walker, Pierre A. "Art and Nationalism: The Short Story 'Collaboration.'" In: *Critical Insights: Henry James*, ed. Tom Hubbard. Ipswich: Mass. Salem Press, 2016.