Henry James’s Emerging Subconscious and the Wandering Transatlantic Tourist: The Search for Artistic Freedom

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Abstract

With the publication of Roderick Hudson in Atlantic Monthly in 1875, Henry James anticipates the Freudian theory of the ego, super-ego and id. Through the impulse to create, James defines the will as the artist’s desire to achieve self-actualization. But this will is in conflict with society’s social mores and responsibilities. Consequently, the artist is doomed to a limbo world in which the will creates idealized representations of nature, without – like Pygmalion -- having the ability to bring his creation to life. In describing the aesthetic pleasures of visual perception, James tacitly acknowledges pioneering research in perceptual cognition and makes the transition to emerging psychological theories of the subconscious will and desire. James reevaluates the purpose of art in an increasingly commercialized society that depends upon aesthetics for its viable existence and cohesion without providing the tangible means of supporting the emerging artist.

Keywords: Henry James, William James, Art Criticism, American Realist novels, psychology

With the publication of *Roderick Hudson* in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875, James anticipates the Freudian theory of the ego, super-ego and id. Through the impulse to create, James defines the will as the artist’s desire to achieve self-actualization. But this will is in conflict with society’s social mores and responsibilities. Consequently, the artist is doomed to a limbo world in which the will creates idealized representations of nature, without – like Pygmalion -- having the ability to bring his creation to life. James begins his story with a foreshadowing of the conflict between society and the artist’s will through the character Rowland Mallet, who becomes quite literally, the instrument who facilitates Roderick’s trip to Rome where he realizes his dream of becoming a sculptor. A reevaluation of traditional family role models and an institutional challenge to Nineteenth-century aesthetics was made by Henry James when wrote about Venice in his series, “Italian Hours.” Though he appeared to be following a European and American tradition that objectified the city as an aesthetic mecca, he in reality explored the fallow field of the artist’s subconscious and arrived at total social despair. In rejecting middle class familial social models in favor of the artist’s pursuit of creative freedom, James plunged the depth of the cultural matrix to discover the angst of Freud and existentialism of Sarte, and the modern politics of divorce. He emerges a Dantesque character who seeks acceptance from the Madonna’s image he formerly admired, imploring her forgiveness for having endeavored on the artist’s journey of recrimination and persecution. The female character permeates all of James
aesthetic endeavors as a matriarchal role model he rejects as he struggles to free himself from traditional family roles and values as they were defined by Victorian society. Instead, he trades her for the stern taskmaster of the “man above the mantel,” engaging in the paranoid dialectic between the parental sound boards represented in the artwork where he seeks refuge [Wexler 118-33].

Northampton, Massachusetts represents the standard of social values for wealthy Americans. Steadfastly grounded in their aristocratic colonial heritage and rising global influence, it was a position that could only be maintained by adhering to traditional social decorum. Though Mallet obligations toward his cousin’s widow are unwritten, his subconscious will interprets his resistance to offer assistance as an escape from the bondage of marriage altogether. “It was the consciousness of all this that puzzled Mallet whenever he felt tempted to put in his oar.” Mallet feels sympathy for his cousin’s widow, Cecilia, but finds that “he would rather chop off his hand than offer her a check, a useful piece of furniture, or a black silk dress.” When his cousin first married, “he had seemed to feel the upward sweep from the empty bough from which the golden fruit had been plucked.” Even his ambiguously misplaced modifying pronoun reinforces Rowland Mallet’s identification with his dead cousin, who escaped matrimony for the grave, leaving Mallet with an “uncomfortably sensitive conscience” with respect to Cecilia. When Cecilia meets Roderick Hudson, James again confuses the modifying pronoun, suggesting that Mallet represents the Freudian ego while Roderick represents the id. Referring to Cecelia’s flattery of Roderick as a eulogy, James then points to Cecilia’s plans for Rowland’s future. In her eyes, Mallet’s resources obligate him to promote culture through charity. Culture is a reflection of the ideal values which are integral to preserving society. “You are rich and unoccupied, so that it might be abundant. Therefore, I say, you are a person to do something on a large scale. Bestir yourself, dear Rowland, or we may be taught to think that virtue herself is setting a bad example” [2]. Conflating the characters of Rowland and Roderick, allows James to define the motivating drives and conflicts behind the psyche and the will.

The creative subconscious, the aesthetics of modernity and the impulse to freedom lay in the emerging tourism market abroad. The Venice-Paris experience defined the new aesthetics as Henry James, the connoisseur experienced it in the French Impressionist paintings of Claude Monet, James McNeil Whistler and their contemporaries which James described as “the momentary effect of a large slippery sweet, inserted, without a warning between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanition” [Notebooks, 45-46]. Simulating the experience of Marcel Proust’s madeleine cake in À la recherche du temps perdu (1913), James articulates a cogent theory of modern aesthetics and cognition, anticipating and assimilating transatlantic currents in art and psychology. Paris laid the artist’s course with museums, salon art exhibitions, and the recent success of the Impressionists. Thus, when the American author James’ British character, Nicholas Dormer in The Tragic Muse (1890) seeks training in Paris, a transatlantic catharsis takes place as Nick and other English-speaking art converts encounter resistance in French culture, and are relegated to the convalescents’ childhood experience in which absorption occurs on a semi-conscious level while the id wrestles with super-ego over goal actualization and social decorum. Dormer and his id give up much more than a dreary ho hum lifestyle in a London
office, however. According to James, Dormer threatens to transfer the entire destiny of state to an uncertain future by relinquishing his political and financial security to a fleeting aesthetic impulse.

Like James’ earlier artist-protagonist Roderick Hudson, the word and name play associations become transparent. Nicholas Dormer is clearly identified with St. Nicholas who tempts the id while in a dormant subconscious state, when he joins his family on holiday in Paris. The linguistic barrier forces the would-be artist to fall back on his perceptions as a guide to experiential politics: “The people of France have made it no secret that those of England, as a general thing are to their perception an inexpressive and speechless race, perpendicular and unsociable, unaddicted to enriching any bareness of contact with verbal or other embroidery” [17]. In the Palais de l’Industrie, “persons sat together in silence.” As English speakers with a cultural barrier, James’ characters co-mingle their discussion about the art world with primitive theories of child development. Whether art is a necessary step to childhood development is followed by a discussion of the sensory stimulation offered by the salon exhibitions when Nick Dormer comments to his mother: “This place is an immense stimulus to me; it refreshes me, excites me – it’s such an exhibition of artistic life. It’s full of ideas, full of refinements; it gives one such an impression of artistic experience” [23]. Nick’s tragic conflict arises when he gives up a brilliant career in London in Parliament and his family’s noble connections, to pursue life as a bohemian artist. But the conflict is a pretext for James’ psychological enquiry into the Freudian personality divisions, and the role of aesthetics in a definition of the subconscious and the will. James the traveler falls prey to the id’s desire to seek pleasure above all else, while James the psychologist documents and analyzes the symptoms and delusions.

When Henry James wrote about Venice in his series, “Italian Hours,” he was establishing a transatlantic tradition that objectified the city as an aesthetic mecca within Parisian modernism. In James criticism, the watery canals of Venice establish the epistemological foundations of Impressionist aesthetics. The city was literally transformed into an animated waterway of light and color synapses that shaped modern Impressionist aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, it is not surprising that James’ most significant aesthetic criticism was based on the Venetian tourist experience. Artists and writers who visited the city in the Nineteenth-century established a correlation between Romanticism and the city’s unique sights and haunts [Dupperay]. What attracted James’ predecessors like Lord Byron and John Ruskin was the assimilation of visual beauty with the momentary fleeting impression of the tourist-observer. In this respect they anticipated the aesthetics of modern life as it was defined by Charles Baudelaire in his Painter of Modern Life (1863) and affirmed by later French Impressionism. Venice represented a cross-current of cultural traditions dating from the Byzantine period to the Renaissance, and later Baroque and Rococo periods. The city had actively defined the standards in academic art. But in 1879, the Neo-platonic aesthetic which supported the academic tradition was giving way to empirical psychology and experiential literature that focuses on sensations rather than idealism or dramatic narrative. The new materialism was found in the novels of naturalism to the
sociology of Karl Marx. In the aesthetic experience, it is marked by a shift from idealism to symbolism. James’ *Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) use Italy as an aesthetic backdrop, while redirecting the former edifying role of academic art to the aesthetic symbol—the wings of the dove and the golden bowl. Both novels make identifications between the unattainable state of Love, and the material symbol which is mortal, lost and broken. This transposition in aesthetics is sometimes called “art for art’s sake.” The aesthetic impulse, or immediate response to beauty, is perceived as a justification for art. But in Venice, and by extension, Paris, the aesthetics of the city were also complemented by its society of artists, writers, musicians and tourists. The aesthetic impulse was not experienced in a vacuum, like the Romantic sublime in Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Mists* (1818) (fig. 1), rather it was a synthesis of sociability and solitary perception which established Paris as the art capital of the world. Baudelaire’s artist is a transatlantic mutation, a world voyager who experiences the sublime in a single transitory moment as part of the emerging modern experience. But Baudelaire, like James and his predecessors goes beyond the sensory experience to analyze the underlying psychological conditions of modern aesthetics:

Now imagine an artist perpetually in the spiritual condition of the convalescent, and you will have the key to the character of M. G. But convalescence is like a return to childhood. The convalescent, like the child, enjoys to the highest degree the faculty of taking a lively interest in things, even the most trivial in appearance. Let us hark back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of our imaginations, to our youngest, our morning impressions, and we shall recognize that they were remarkably akin to the vividly colored impressions that we received later on after a physical illness, provided that illness left our spiritual faculties pure and unimpaired. The child sees everything as a novelty; the child is always ‘drunk’. Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and color. I will venture to go even further and declare that inspiration has some connection with congestion, that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less vigorous nervous impulse that reverberates in the cerebral cortex [Baudelaire III]

The pleasure of aesthetics overwhelms the traveler-art critic James, and induces his retreat from social responsibilities. Aesthetics affects the viewer’s subconscious rendering him a passive follower of the pleasure principle: the pursuit of pleasure and escape from pain. When James described “a narrow canal in the heart of the city – a patch of green water and a surface of pink wall… a great shabby façade of Gothic windows and balconies,” he substituted words to evoke the ethereal paintings of his compatriot artists. He reference to Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* is lost however in James’ sublimation of Ruskin’s detailed descriptions of Gothic architecture to James’ cognitive studies of light and color. To the elder Ruskin, Gothic architecture was a designation of class and metaphysics, and a manifestation of the noble, the immortal and divine [35]. The philosophy which supported such esoteric diaphanous nuances of light and color was articulated in the evolving dialectic between William James, psychologist and brother of the novelist Henry James, and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. It was here that issues such as consciousness and unconsciousness were freed of formal idealist boundaries and were reattached to the symbol. While William James argued in favor of the existence of God by virtue of extended hypothesis, his theories of attention and association form proofs for the subconscious
perception of images and ideas while at the same time arguing against a modern theory of the subconscious as independent. Henry James seemingly disconnected and incoherent associative musings reproduce contemporary theories of perception as an act which vacillates between a focused consciousness perception and a passive unconscious perception. The same theory is at work in Whistler’s [Honour and Fleming 15-35] and Monet’s paintings which rely on a subliminal dormant perception of form for their aesthetic enjoyment. Shrouded in shadow or bathed in light, the atmospheric effects of light and reflected light lull the viewer into a subconscious perception of experience through form with the slow and peaceful ebb and flow of breeze and waves. William James’ *Principles of Psychology* in its concise articulation and summary of contemporary trends can rightly be called the modern successor to Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry in the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) in its analysis of perception and ramifications for emerging modern aesthetics. For example, William James quotes Herman Helmholtz’ proof for conscious and subconscious perception in describing a diagram of two series of diagonal lines converging at the central vertical line much like the perspectival lines of the canals of Venice (fig. 1).

![Fig. 2](image-url)

(Fig. 2) a) Hering Illusion 1861. b) Wilhelm Wundt’s variation, 1896. (Gregory Fig. 4)
In other words, how does the brain’s visual cortex perceive cognition beyond the focal point (fig. 2)? Helmholtz’s assistant, Wilhelm Wundt created the variation on the Hering illusion, and observed that as a result of optical illusions, a vertical line appears longer than a horizontal line of equal length [Gregory 179-296]. In describing the aesthetic pleasures of visual perception, Henry James tacitly acknowledges pioneering research in perceptual cognition and makes the transition to emerging psychological theories of the subconscious will and desire. In his essay, “Venice,” Henry James writes that that the best way to enjoy Venice is to focus on “simple pleasures.” The simple pleasures include looking at Titian or Tintoretto, but now James equates these great masterpieces with “the way one falls into the habit, -- and resting one’s light-wearied eyes upon the windowless gloom; or than floating in a gondola, or hanging over a balcony…it is of these superficial pastimes that a Venetian day is composed, and the pleasure of the matter is in the emotions to which they minister” [4]. The subtle illusory experiences in Venice contrast the narrow canals, and unexpected dynamic architectural variations with the effervescent effects of light, shadow and color. Absorption of the viewer’s attention is clearly through subconscious perception and wandering attention. The synthesis of aesthetic and social patterns can be absorbed from the sights and sounds of a lazy mid-day sun, the subtle afterglow of twilight or the approaching dawn (fig. 3).

The watery streets of Venice and its reflection in the “dramatic” doorsteps pose an actual perceptual map where the visitor co-mingles past and present. The correlation between the physical perception of the city and its psychological impression suggest that James followed emerging theories of cognition, and that these coalesced with theories of visual perception to form a cogent theory of the subconscious. A latent apprehension of sights and memories form the basis of both existence and reflection for James. But they also inspire the traveler, the artist, the author and the lover. These drives are purely the focus of pleasure via the aesthetic impulse. According to James, “Venetian life is a matter of gossiping and gaping, of circulating without a purpose, and of staring…”[591]. Venetian life, James concludes, is “a mere literary convention” where in the “solemn presence of the church…I forsee I should become even more confoundingly conscious of the stumbling-block that inevitably, even with his first few words, crops up in the path of the lover of Venice…”[591]. Language and visual perception become part of the same subliminal process of absorption where the literal reflection of the Grand Canal entertains the viewer through its free play of form, image and memory. Life has also come to end in Venice since its height as a center of commercial and cultural life during the Renaissance. All that remains is “the most beautiful of tombs” where the traveler contemplates in coldly engraved stones the pleasing impressions of past glory.
In his theory of visual perception, William James is largely indebted to Herman Hemholtz’s “The Facts of Perception” (1878). Hemholtz begins by acknowledging that one of the central questions in philosophical debates is to what extent our perceptions are an accurate
measure of reality. The Romantic transcendentalists believed that reality was internal, and ideals existed independently of material experience [Giesenkirchen 112-32]. By contrast, the natural sciences have posited theories of perception which empirically distinguish word definitions from symbols and fields of perception by applying principles of geometry.

It is apparent that all these differences among the effects of light and sound are determined by the way in which the nerves of sense react. Our sensations are simply effects which are produced in our organs by objective causes; precisely how these effects manifest themselves depends principally and in essence upon the type of apparatus that reacts to the objective causes. What information, then, can the qualities of such sensations give us about the characteristics of the external causes and influences which produce them? Only this: our sensations are signs, not images, of such characteristics. One expects an image to be similar in some respect to the object of which it is an image; in a statue one expects similarity of form, in a drawing similarity of perspective, in a painting similarity of colour. A sign, however, need not be similar in any way to that of which it is a sign. The sole relationship between them is that the same object, appearing under the same conditions, must evoke the same sign; thus different signs always signify different causes or influences.

In divorcing the sensory perception from the object, Hemboltz makes the epistemological transition from image to symbol. It is significant because it implies a synthesis of cognitive perceptions with language, and no longer distinguishes between them. Thus, in the cognitive act of perception, one also intuits the language of signs accompanying it, thereby stimulating a subliminal repository of images connected to linguistic antecedents. For James, these sensory perceptions were keys to human experience through emotion and memory. Time and again, James makes analogies between a character’s feelings and sensory cognition in the form of light and reflection. For example, in his last unfinished novel, The Sense of the Past, he writes: “…after the flush of the amusement of his extraordinary consciousness having begun a bit to abate in the light of the brutalities…his dawning anguish glimmers and glimmers; what it means to see himself married to the elder sister and locked up with her there in that form of the Past” [297]. Memory and image form a diaphanous mosaic of associations among which the mind lingers and responds. The pleasurable sights and sounds of Venice transport the traveler to a place of desire where the subconscious lazily synthesizes meaning and image to create symbols of beauty, passion and repose. With the benefit of reflection, a Jamesian character decodes the visual matrix to determine action and response. But the drives behind goals are lost to the inspiration of the moment: a swirling mosaic of sensations and alliterations:

the windy lanterns flickered in the square and were reflected in the wet, and he turned about for another prowl – his last decidedly this one – he assured himself that he had in his pocket matches for tobacco and that, should he require them, the numerous brave stiff candle-sticks of silver and brass (oh what people knew, even Aurora herself would have given for them!) were furnished with tall tapers [81].

In The Wings of the Dove set in Venice, it is ultimately in death and its contemplation that the subconscious mind finds its ultimate repose, distinguishing between present and past, margin and future. The subliminal drives of the moment only record loss as a fixity in time, and a measure of desire. Consummation can only be enjoyed in the post-coital state after repose and in submerged memory. While the dove symbolizes the flight of the soul to heaven, it also signifies
the fall from grace. The paradise of Eden exists only in the mind, and according to Freud the biblical totem is primary to European culture [Seligson 68-84]. Anticipating Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1912) and its recapitulation of anthropological colonial studies of the early 20th century, James’ symbol – the wings of the dove – is inspired by animism and totem animals which become “receptacles of souls which have left the body on account of their rapid movements or flight through the air”[qtd. in Freud Totem 119]. Totemic primitive cultures were defined as those which established prescribed customs and codes of behavior. James emerging subconscious – like the Wings of Dove --- seeks to free itself from the prescribed codes of social conduct, and return to the ether of primitive semi-conscious cognition. The frequency with which Jamesian characters abandon their social responsibilities is the calculated result of another subliminal force at work [Rowe 226-232]. Synonymous with the subconscious, it reveals itself through the aesthetic impulse, and the momentary, fleeting pleasure of the tourist.

Among his most dramatic expositions of the relationship between the will, the ego and artist is found in *The Sense of the Past* (1917), one of two novels left unfinished at the time of the author’s death, it can be read as James’ conclusion and resolution of the conflict introduced in *Roderick Hudson*. Here the emerging ego defines itself as a consciousness that seeks identification with beauty, or the aesthetic impulse; a source imbues the fleeting momentary consciousness with value. In response to the demand that he become “intellectually great” he replies: “A beautiful?...a delicate classified insect? A slow crawling library beetle? Slightly iridescent, warranted compressible – that is resisting the squash when the book is closed to on him?”[James. Sense of the Past, 12]. With a Kafkaesque reference to emerging modernist existentialism, James returns to the aestheticism of the past century in seeking pleasure, and the inevitable social reprimand for evading social responsibilities. What is remarkable in James’ writing is an awareness of his cultural peers: Freud, Kafka, Impressionism and Post-Impression. Writers and artists who defined the emerging modern era are synthesized with his own aesthetic consciousness, one that is grounded in American aesthetics, metaphysics and psychology. The artist for James is the Romantic who is driven to achieve, yet resists. Here the conflict between the id and super ego results in an impotent aestheticism in which Baudelaire’s Impressionist definition of modernity as the “fleeting, the momentary, the contingent” arrests the motivation of the artist whose metamorphosis into the passive observer becomes the defining characteristic of the Jamesian subconscious will.

What is remarkable in James’s develop, is the consistency of plot lines, as James the psychologist turned novelist assimilates emerging modernism and grafts it onto his protagonists’ conflict [Ellman]. A rise in manufacturing and business resulted in an increase in the affluent bourgeoisie class which gave way to an intellectual crisis concerning value and meaning in life. When Nick contemplates and his rejects a seat in the House of Commons, James the psychologist examines the way in which generational role models establish standards circumscribed by class and wealth. Sir Nicholas, who formerly held the seat passes away; he is Nick’s role model. But the same role model play is found in *The Sense of the Past* in the form of a portrait of gentleman admired by Ralph. It is located above the fireplace mantel, and the figure wears a great military cloak or mantle which recalls the Napoleonic military cloaks of Caspar
David Friedrich’s Romantic paintings of clandestine Germans during a nationalist resistance movement, such as the man portrayed in his Wanderer above the Mists (fig. 1). Friedrich’s man above the mists demonstrates the imperturbable will and covert identity which develops in adolescence. He was designed by the artist as a role model for youth to emulate in joining the nationalist movement to protect the German-speaking nations during the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon (Koerner). The viewer assumes the identity of the figure by literally entering the image from the rear of the rükenfigur through a process of visual identification and cognitive illusion. This establishes a tension between duties demanded by society and the pursuit of pleasure and independent identity. The obvious word play on the homonym mantel/mantle is a function of James’ psychology, and represents the protagonist-artist’s desire to escape the responsibilities of society. It also suggests that the subconscious makes a deliberate choice in perception which intentionally plays with, and perverts the social order to retreat to the level of a child: “This it was that constituted the prodigy, for Ralph had truly never seen a gentleman painted, and painted beautifully, in so thankless a posture” [72]. James the art critic observes: “Painters always have a great distrust of those who write about pictures. They have a strong sense of the difference between the literary point of view and the pictorial, and they invereterately suspect critics of confounding the two” [Painter’s Eye 35]. As a psychologist, James probes beyond the surface of salon criticism and academic training [Bersani]. Painted from the rear, like Friedrich’s Romantic rükenfigur in Wanderer Above the Mists (fig. 1), the figure begins a polar personality transference with the observer. Ralph concludes that the subject had been “young and gallant,” and “was a man of his time at the “dawn of a modern era.” The experiential shift from viewer to role model produces in Ralph Pendrel the effect “of a worshipper in a Spanish church who watches for the tear on the cheek or the blood drop from the wound of some wonder-working effigy of Mother or of Son” [78]. James notes “The huge strangeness…of a gentleman… to meet him and share his disconnection” produces dissociation in the observer. The effects were magical and divine where the portrait like a “saintly image itself reigned, clear and sublime” [78]. But James the Impressionist connoisseur knows that this magical transference occurs through the medium of light, and light which reproduces the technology of a camera. At the same time, he seeks to probe the neurological structure of the subconscious will:

He had after this an instant of confusion, an instant in which he struck himself as catching at a distance the chance reflection of his candle flame on some polished surface. If the flame was there, however, where was the surface? – the duplication of his light showing, he quickly perceived, in the doorway itself …The young man above the mantel, the young man, brown-haired, pale, erect, with the high-collared dark blue coat, the young man revealed, responsible, conscious, quite shining out of the darkness, presented him the face he had prayed to reward his vigil; but the face – miracle of miracles, yes – confounded him as his own [86].

James thus anticipates in the culmination of his aesthetic theory from 1872 to 1917 and personality development the sophisticated theory of Freud’s id, ego and superego first outlined in his Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). In this theory, Freud first defines the personality divisions which act independently of one another creating psychological conflicts:
Most of the ‘pain’ we experience is of a perceptual order, perception either of the urge of unsatisfied instincts or of something in the external world which may be painful in itself or may arouse painful anticipations in the psychic apparatus and is recognized by it as ‘danger’. The reaction to these claims of impulse and these threats of danger, a reaction in which the real activity of the psychic apparatus is manifested, may be guided correctly by the pleasure-principle or by the reality-principle which modifies this [I].

In refusing to follow the career path of his double ego, Sir Nicholas, Nick Dormer retreats from reality and pain into the playful den of the artist. He escapes the responsibility – and the discomfort and pain -- of the both the soldier and the politician and businessman. His will is subsumed to the aesthetic response and the signs of art are absorbed subliminally. The double above the fireplace mantel who turns his back on Ralph Pendrel wearing a large blue great cloak or mantle subsumes the protagonist-artist’s conscious will to the subconscious desire to retreat from pain and follow the pleasure principle. But the rükenfigur also becomes a projection of the viewer’s id, and represents a personality split between the role model of the super ego and the seduction of the id or subconscious. He invites his double to literally turn his back on social responsibilities. The ramifications for society are echoed by Nick Dormer’s mother who laments his loss: “He scarcely needed to hear her wail with a pleading that was almost tragic: ‘Don’t you see how things have turned out for us? Don’t you know how unhappy I am – don’t you know what a bitterness -?’” [Tragic Muse 163]. Here Ralph Pendrel’s Madonna weeps over her son’s expulsion from Eden, as the artist-protagonist tragically and heroically decides to leave the security of society’s mantle, of business and his mother’s protection to venture into the domain of pleasure without society’s protection.

Infused with the vitality of the modern world, Paris at the turn of the century represented a crossroads of cultural, intellectual and scientific ideas. The emerging aesthetics of modernism were founded on the eroding academic traditions. To survive, the modern artist had to forge a new ideology that synthesized the psychology of perception with rugged individualism. The man above the mantel is just such an individual, but his message is sent to viewer’s subconscious like the libidinous advertising of the latter 20th century.
References


