

## HENRY JAMES AND EDITH WHARTON:

### FICTION AS THE HOUSE OF FAME

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In Theory of Literature Wellek and Warren remark that "A man's house is an extension of himself. Describe it and you have described him. Balzac's detailed specifications for the house of the miser Grandet or the Pension Vauquer are neither irrelevant nor wasteful. These houses express their owners; they affect, as atmosphere, those others who must live in them."<sup>1</sup> The importance of this observation cannot be exaggerated. The Comedie Humaine is an exhaustive demonstration of the way in which material considerations like houses, furniture and clothing shape individuals and come to stand as hieroglyphs of their inward selves. Both the early Henry James and Edith Wharton believed that, in his detailed descriptions of houses, clothes, furniture and other equipment of life, Balzac had discovered a distinctive method for bringing characters in fiction to life. Both believed that the material properties of existence not merely express but also, in a special sense, "constitute" character. Both sought, in their fiction, to acknowledge the spiritual kinship which led James to claim Balzac as "really the father of us all."<sup>2</sup>

Balzac's mode of characterization has had its critics. Willa Cather, for one, complained in "The Novel D meubl " that "the novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished" and that "we have had too much of the interior decorator and the 'romance of business' since [Balzac's] day"; "how wonderful it would be," she thought, "if we could throw all the furniture out of the window. . . ."<sup>3</sup> And others, notably Louise Bogan, in "The Decoration of Novels," have felt the same way.<sup>4</sup>

The most significant objection to Balzac's technique of characterization was of course voiced by Virginia Woolf in Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown. Instead of Balzac, James or Wharton, however, Mrs. Woolf makes the "old-fashioned Edwardians" -- H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett -- the focus of her attack. Since Mrs. Woolf is the chief critic of the Balzacean mode of characterization this paper explores, her argument deserves scrutiny. Mrs. Woolf concedes that the task of the novelist is to portray character. But how, she asks, does the novelist establish the reality of his people? The Edwardians, she says, are "never interested in character in itself"; instead, they rely on an outmoded convention which actually disguises real character. For example, she argues, to make us

believe in the reality of Hilda Lessways, Arnold Bennett began "by describing accurately and minutely the sort of house Hilda lived in, and the sort of house she saw from the window. House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy. Indirect as it seems to us, the convention worked admirably, and thousands of Hilda Lessways were launched upon the world by this means. For that age and generation, the convention was a good one."<sup>5</sup> But for the modern writer, she goes on, such conventional techniques are not only outmoded but "the wrong ones to use." The Edwardians (we may understand her to mean by this term simply realistic novelists of manners of any generation), Virginia Woolf continues, "have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. . . . But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it."<sup>6</sup>

We need not go further into Mrs. Woolf's critical proscriptions, or into her defense of the experimental techniques of her fellow Georgians, or into her own exploration in fiction of the luminous halo of consciousness -- especially in To the Lighthouse, in which, incidentally, the disintegration of the summer house is so effective a symbol of the ravages of time. What we should note, however, is that Mrs. Woolf accords no continuing vitality to the aesthetic mode of characterization evolved in the practice of Balzac and his followers. Nevertheless, the novel of manners has continued to be a frequently written and appreciated form.<sup>7</sup> Lionel Trilling, in fact, has observed that the "furniture" of the novel is "endemic in the novel throughout its history" and "essential to the very idea of the novel."<sup>8</sup> For at the most elementary level, the novelist of manners must give attention to the furniture of his settings if he wishes to record the setting of his narrative realistically.

But for Balzac, James and Mrs. Wharton, the use of such properties as make up the furniture of their novels went far beyond mere realistic notation. And this, apparently, Virginia Woolf seems not to have understood. For as Edith Wharton argued in The Writing of Fiction, Balzac was "the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, with all their personal hobbies and infirmities, and make the reader see them, but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions as from their fortuitous contacts with each other."<sup>9</sup> Balzac, and this applied to Stendhal as well, was the first novelist to see that character is the product of a particular set of material and social forces and conditions. For them a character was what he was because of the vocation he took up, because of the kind of house he lived in, because of the level of social relations he aspired to, because of the land he coveted, because of the kind of role he sought to personate. Balzac and Stendhal



*Paramount*

DR. SLOPER: Is it possible this magnificent person is my daughter? But you're sumptuous . . . opulent. You look as if you had eighty thousand a year.

DRESS AND INTERIOR DECOR IN THE 1840'S: A still from the Paramount picture The Heiress (based on James's Washington Square), with Ralph Richardson as Dr. Sloper, Olivia de Havilland as Catherine and Miriam Hopkins as Mrs. Penniman. (Photo from The Heiress by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. London: Reinhardt & Evans, Ltd., 1949, facing 52.)

were (and this is the crux of the matter that Virginia Woolf seems not to have penetrated) "the first to seem continuously aware that the bounds of personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things."<sup>10</sup> When we deal with the realistic novel of manners, then, we must see the novelist's stress on the fabric of things not as an outmoded convention but rather as a mode of apprehending character -- a mode which is philosophically incompatible with the psychological impressionism which underlies Virginia Woolf's criticism and fiction. Novelists of manners like James or Mrs. Wharton simply reject character (or human nature or personality) as an abstraction. Character, for them, does not exist apart from the actualities which have shaped it. Psychological novelists like Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, reject the notion that such material properties can truly affect character. For them, houses and furniture and clothes are "alien and external" to what Mrs. Woolf called "the semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" -- which she claimed, it is the novelist's task to portray.<sup>11</sup> But Mrs. Wharton did not hesitate to assert, in a 1927 essay entitled "The Great American Novel," that little of "human nature" is left "when it is separated from the web of customs, manners, culture it has elaborately spun about itself."<sup>12</sup>

The novels of the early Henry James and Edith Wharton illustrate eloquently Balzac's premise that houses, clothes, furniture and the externals of social existence in fact serve to define "human nature." They worked on the assumption that character cannot be communicated or portrayed with any exactitude except by weaving the web of material properties, by documenting the hieroglyphs by which the personality expresses itself.

Consider their New York novels alone. James and Mrs. Wharton tell us a great deal about their characters simply by presenting the kinds of houses they live in. Most of their social élite live in Washington Square brownstone houses. About Dr. Sloper in his novel Washington Square James wrote, for example: "The ideal of quiet and of genteel retirement, in 1835, was found in Washington Square, where the Doctor built himself a handsome, modern, wide-fronted house, with a big balcony before the drawing-room windows, and a flight of white marble steps ascending to a portal which was also faced with white marble. This structure, and many of its neighbors, which it exactly resembled, were supposed, forty years ago, to embody the last results of architectural science, and they remain to this day very solid and honorable dwellings."<sup>13</sup> They have "the look of having had something of a social history." Dr. Sloper's house functions as a hieroglyph of the social ambitions which have removed him to it. It is also suggestive of the social ambition of Morris Townsend, the suitor of Dr. Sloper's daughter. While Catherine and her father are in Europe, Morris moves into the house and enjoys its comforts without the disadvantage of having a plain and dull heiress on his hands. When Morris "came back, and paused for a minute

WASHINGTON SQUARE RESIDENCES. LEFT: A row of houses on Washington Square North, west of Fifth Avenue, much like those with which Louis Auchinclos was familiar. (Photo courtesy of Gottscho-Schleisner, Inc.)

BELOW: The Sloper residence, typical of the "Washington Square type" mentioned by Henry James. (Photo from New York in Fiction by Arthur Bartlett Maurice. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1901.)



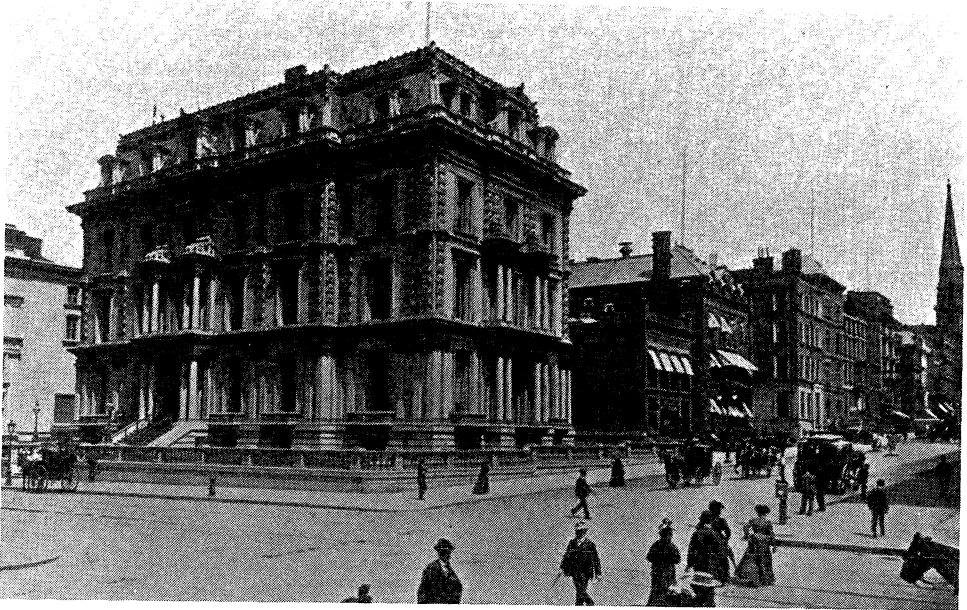
THE SLOPER RESIDENCE.—HENRY JAMES'S "WASHINGTON SQUARE."

in front of Dr. Sloper's dwelling" and let his eyes travel over it, and concluded that it was "a devilish comfortable house," James is telling us more about Morris's character than about the house. For the house is a metonym expressing Morris's ambition to rise in the social world.

The extent to which the old houses on Washington Square express the personalities of those who live within them, or who aspire to move into them (that is, to get into society), is also suggested in Mrs. Wharton's The Custom of the Country. There Ralph Marvell reflects that both his mother and old Mr. Urban Dagonet, New York aristocrats, "from Ralph's earliest memories [were] so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form; and the question as to which the house now seemed to affirm their intrinsic rightness was that of the social disintegration expressed by widely different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue."<sup>14</sup>

By 1900, that is to say, lower Fifth Avenue had begun to collect a string of grotesque residences as the parvenus inched nearer to the heart of old New York. They and the "traitors within the Citadel" were to create what Mrs. Wharton ironically called "the house of mirth." Mrs. Wharton's fiction records the confusion of taste in architectural values after 1900 in Ralph Marvell's observation that "society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogeneous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's roof and the skeleton walls supporting them." And Ralph concludes: "That was what 'they' had always said; what, at least, the Dagonet attitude, the Dagonet view of life, the very lines of the furniture in the old Dagonet house expressed."<sup>15</sup> Ralph's marriage to Undine Spragg is as monstrous as the union of Wall Street and Fifth Avenue. When he discovers that he has allowed Undine to buy him for his social position, he commits suicide.

Most of the newly rich Vulgarians employ someone like Carrie Fisher, of The House of Mirth, to assist them in maneuvering into polite society. But in the case of the St George family in Edith Wharton's The Buccaneers, set in the 1870's, no such tutor is available. And as a result the St Georges discover that in buying and decorating as they do, on Madison Avenue, they have prevented themselves from crashing society. Of the St George house Mrs. Wharton wrote: "When Colonel St George bought his house in Madison Avenue it seemed to him fit to satisfy the ambitions of any budding millionaire. That it had been built and decorated by one of the Tweedring, who had come to grief earlier than his more famous fellow-criminals, was to Colonel St George convincing proof that it was a suitable dwelling for wealth



ARCHITECTURAL EXUBERANCE. ABOVE: Fifth Avenue and 34th Street in 1886 showing examples of the residences of the parvenus in New York City. (Photo from Old New York: Yesterday and Today by Henry Collins Brown. New York: privately printed for Valentine's Manual, 1922, n.p.) BELOW: "The Marble Row" on Fifth Avenue between East 57th and East 58th Streets. (Photo from Perry Walton, Fifth Avenue. New York: printed for Fifth Avenue Bank of New York, 1915.)

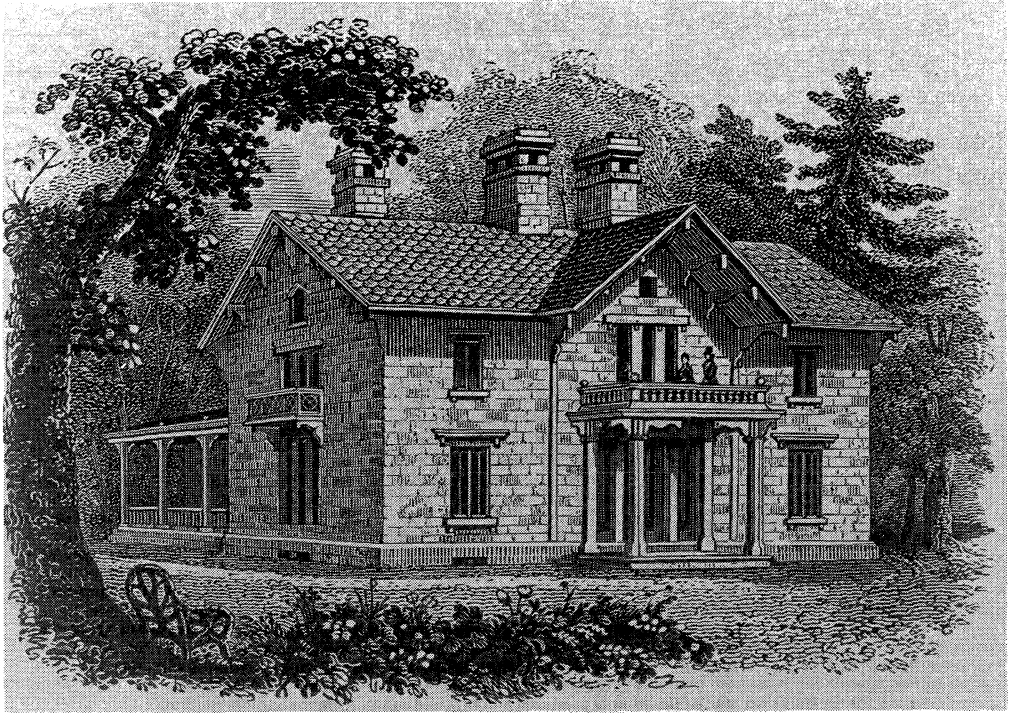


and elegance. But social education is acquired rapidly in New York, even by those who have to absorb it through the cracks of the sacred edifice; and Mrs. St George had already found out that no one lived in Madison Avenue, that the front hall should have been painted Pompeian red with a stencilled frieze, and not with naked Cupids and humming birds on a sky-blue ground, and that basement dining-rooms were unknown to the fashionable."<sup>16</sup> It is not for Colonel St George and his wife to crash society. But no one can prevent their beautiful and conniving daughters from entering, through marriage, the sacred edifice.

Nor is it for the daughters of Silas Lapham to enter society. Although Pen Lapham marries Tom Corey, he reminds her of the sad truth that "it is certain that our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilisation is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these. Perhaps we pay too much; but it will not be possible to persuade those who have the difference in their favour that this is so."<sup>17</sup> Thus the function of the house that Silas Lapham builds differs from the function of houses in Mrs. Wharton's fiction. Although Lapham's house, like Colonel St George's, embodies the social aspirations of his wife and daughters, it must, as the product of his dishonestly-gotten wealth, be destroyed. Howells would have us see that financial ruin must come to Lapham if he is to rise in moral stature so that we may see his character for what it truly is. "Houseless" Lapham is an hieroglyph of the Moral Man standing apart from the accoutrements of social existence that may deflect his moral nature. But for Henry James and Edith Wharton, whether well- or ill-gotten, the houses people live in are, metaphorically speaking, the inseparable shells of their being.

An illustration of the early Henry James' belief that the boundary of personality was not reproducible by a sharp black line but rather flowed imperceptibly into adjacent people and things is offered by The Portrait of a Lady. There Madame Merle justly admonishes young Isabel Archer for not caring about the kind of house her lover might give her: "'That's very crude of you. When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us -- and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self -- for other people -- is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps -- these things are all expressive.'"<sup>18</sup> Isabel, however, naively imagines herself utterly disengaged from the properties which surround her and which are shaping her existence. The conclusion of the novel, however, suggests how impossible





A cottage villa in the bracketed mode. This scene illustrates the author's comments on Hudson River Bracketed. See Footnote 7. (Photo from A. J. Downing, Cottage Residences, or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage Villas, and their Gardens and Grounds. Adapted to North America. New York, 1847, facing 96.)

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it is for her finally to escape the envelope of circumstances which in part constituted her personality. Unlike Mrs. Woolf's envelope, it is not semi-transparent but solidly material.

Mrs. Wharton's final view of characterization in fiction is in harmony with the view expressed by Madame Merle. Mrs. Wharton believed implicitly in the Balzacian premise that the novelist of manners must supply the material appurtenances of a character's existence. And she did not scruple to criticize James himself, to his face, in later years, for his failure of "specification," for hanging his psychological portraits in a void, suspending them without material connections in the sophisticated consciousness of his characters. Edith Wharton would have reminded the later Henry James that personality could be significantly shown only through the material properties with which it interacted.

In his later phase, however, James was more interested in the depths of personality rather than in its fluid boundaries. In "The Jolly Corner"

(1908) James' protagonist Spencer Brydon returns to New York from years of idle leisure in Europe to the family house, which he has just inherited. In the house he becomes preoccupied with the thought of the kind of man he might have become if he had stayed in America and gone into business, as his father wished him to do. He believes that if he waits in the house he will encounter his alter ego, the man he might have been. After many midnight vigils in the house, Spencer Brydon does indeed encounter the specter of the man he might have become -- a brute black stranger wholly other, a figure so hideously different from himself that he must in horror utterly reject it as an extension of his youthful self. As the story implies, Spencer Brydon would have become another man entirely had he remained in the New York house and gone into business. Only by returning to the old house can Brydon re-enter the past, dive into the depths of his consciousness, and thus discover what the potentialities of his own personality had been. In exploring -- through the symbolism of the old brownstone -- the inward depth of Brydon's personality, rather than its fluid boundaries with the external world, James would have reminded Mrs. Wharton, and Mrs. Woolf, that the house of fiction has many windows.<sup>19</sup>

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1956), 210-211.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, "The Lesson of Balzac," The Future of the Novel, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1956), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Willa Cather on Writing (New York, 1949), 35, 39, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Selected Criticism (New York, 1955), 83-85.

<sup>5</sup> (London, 1924), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Despite Virginia Woolf's premature obituary for the realistic novel of manners, Louis Auchincloss has carried on this tradition in his own recent New York novels of manners. As a "Jacobite," or admitted disciple in the Jamesian manner, Auchincloss has even named one of his novels after the residences common to the old New York social aristocracy -- Portrait in Brownstone. Another of his recreations of the social history of old New York is named for one of the brownstones that plays a significant part in the novel -- The House of Five Talents. In thus naming his novels, Auchincloss echoes Mrs. Wharton, about whom he has written extensively. For in Mrs. Wharton's novel Hudson River Bracketed -- the title refers to a gabled, Italianate style of New York architecture -- Vance Weston discovers that the old house "Willows" "had symbolized continuity, that great nutritive element of which no one had ever told him, of which neither Art nor Nature

had been able to speak to him, since nothing in his training had prepared him for their teaching" (New York, 1929), 498. The use of the brownstone and Hudson River Bracketed styles of architecture by Auchincloss and Mrs. Wharton fulfills perfectly the sense of James' observation in The American Scene: "To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically minded . . . is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out; to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter" (New York, 1907), 263.

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Two Notes on David Riesman," A Gathering of Fugitives (Boston, 1956), 93-94.

<sup>9</sup> (New York, 1925), 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader (New York, 1925), 212-213.

<sup>12</sup> The Yale Review, n. s., XVI, 4 (July, 1927), 652.

<sup>13</sup> (New York, 1959), 25-26.

<sup>14</sup> (New York, 1913), 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>16</sup> (New York, 1938), 62.

<sup>17</sup> William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Boston, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> The Portrait of a Lady (New York, 1951), 287-288. Madame Merle's emphasis on things (clothes, furniture and the like) reminds us of Balzac's question in Traité de la vie élégante: "Pourquoi la toilette serait-elle donc toujours le plus éloquent des styles, si elle n'était pas réellement tout l'homme avec ses opinions politiques, l'homme avec le texte de son existence, l'homme hiéroglyphe?" (Paris, 1870), 179. Thus interiors of houses, and the clothes one wears, may also constitute personality as well as exteriors. James is explicit in his preface to The Spoils of Poynton, for example, in asserting the relationship between the furniture and the characters who are associated with it: "On the face of it the 'things' themselves would form the very centre of such a crisis"; "the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged round it, would have been the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle, the Things, always the splendid Things, placed in the middle light, figured and constituted, with each identity made vivid, each character discriminated, and their common consciousness of their great dramatic part established." (The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James, ed. R. P. Blackmur [New York, 1934], 123-126.) Edith Wharton's study (with Ogden Codman, Jr.) The Decoration of Houses also suggests how interiors may be even more representative of the inhabitants of the house than exteriors. In calling her "not only one of the great pioneers, but also the poet of interior decoration," Edmund Wilson complimented her on the way the objects that fill the apartments she describes -- the pale marble

columns, the rare flowering plants, the sparkle of jewels as women move, the dark Italian primitives, the Aubasson carpets -- are not only "furniture" in the literal sense but also elements out of which is created the tragedy that destroys so many of Mrs. Wharton's protagonists. (Cf. "Justice to Edith Wharton," The Wound and the Bow; reprinted in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Irving Howe [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962], 23)

<sup>19</sup> On the very real differences in the critical assumptions of Mrs. Wharton and the late James, see Millicent Bell's Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (New York, 1965). On James' claim for the plurality of perspectives from "the house of fiction," see his preface to The Portrait of a Lady (The Art of the Novel, 46-47).