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Lucas Malet, Dissident Pilgrim
Critical Essays

Edited by Jane Ford and Alexandra Gray

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8 Some Chapter of Some Other Story

Henry James, Lucas Malet, and the Real Past of *The Sense of the Past*

Talia Schaffer

Lucas Malet published a novella called *The Gateless Barrier* in 1900. Sixteen years later, Henry James's rather similar story, *The Sense of the Past*, was posthumously published. While no direct evidence of influence has survived, the stories are comparable enough that we can read them as parallel ways of working out the same dynamic. What does it mean, these authors ask, if a woman haunts what James famously called "the house of fiction"? (James 1986, 45–46). For James, the ghostly woman might be a rival—but for Malet, she might be a role model, or a sobering case study of a predecessor silenced, walled up alive, in a fate that we might be excused for taking as a grim omen of Malet's own history.

Malet, like James, had a strong interest in aesthetic culture, artefacts, and characters. The dilettante collector who appears in so many of James's stories, from Gilbert Osmond and Ned Rosier in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), was also a stock character in Malet's novels, appearing in *A Counsel of Perfection* (1888), *The Wages of Sin* (1890), *The Carissima* (1893), *The Gateless Barrier* (1900), *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901), and *The Score* (1909). The difficulty of late James novels resides in James's insistence that in his characters' endless conversations we read what is only implied or unwritten, the participants' silences or circumlocutions. A similar interest in unspokenness governs Malet's novels too. She uses aesthetic diction as a strategy for depicting the forbidden, an oblique reference to the unrepresentable which it both revealed and concealed.

Malet's work was frequently compared to James's—and not always to James's benefit. In 1885 *The Athenaeum* wrote that some of Malet's prose

> might have been written by Mr. James or Mr. Howells. ... At the same time, we have little hesitation in saying that upon a favourite ground of those ingenious authors, that of international contrasts, they have been fairly beaten by Lucas Malet.
>
> ("Colonel Enderby's Wife" 1885, 723)

Critics sometimes also preferred her psychological insight. *The Wages of Sin* was, in one critic's opinion, "a work which, in my humble judgment, surpasses in psychological insight any English novel published since the death of George Eliot" (MacColl 1891, 252). Another critic writing in 1901 felt that no "living writer could succeed in so profound and vivid a realization of mental history as she has done" ("Sir Richard Calmady" 1901, 260). "None of our later writers of fiction takes higher rank than that which has been won by Lucas Malet," wrote the critic Justin McCarthy (2: 236).

Malet published *The Gateless Barrier* at the end of July 1900. By 14 August 1900, Henry James put down his pen, giving up his ghost story *The Sense of the Past*.[1] James would return to this novel periodically, leaving it unfinished when he died in 1916. Malet's novella and James's manuscript both describe a turn-of-the-century man who travelled back to the Regency to become his own ancestor, replaying that ancestor's passion for his cousin, while risking becoming trapped in the past himself.

It is tempting to imagine that James stopped writing his story because Malet had published her version of the tale, but no records survive that allow us to verify whether James had read *The Gateless Barrier* in July/August 1900. Malet and James were friends, so it is possible that she sent him a copy or asked him to read it in manuscript (Lundberg 2003, 172). James often read and edited other female friends' manuscripts before their publication, as he did for Malet's rival Mrs Humphry Ward and Malet's friend Elizabeth Robins. We know that Malet admired James's work, since she names a painting after James's story "The Madonna of the Future" in her later novel *Adrian Savage*. Both James and Malet made bonfires of their personal papers, so whatever documentation of their possible mutual influence might have existed was almost certainly destroyed (Srebrnik 1994, 199).

Both Malet and James were worried about authorial originality in connection with this story—not unsurprisingly, since, as we shall see, the story itself asks about our debt to past writers. When Malet was working on *The Gateless Barrier* in 1898, she was uncharacteristically anxious to conceal her work. According to one interviewer, "she will divulge neither the title nor a hint as to plot, and does not even trust the typewriter, but is having the necessary copying for the printer done by a member of her immediate family" ("Lucas Malet" 1898, 18).[2]

During the years that James was playing with the unfinished manuscript of *The Sense of the Past*, the idea of rewriting others' work was much on his mind. Adeline Tintner and Isobel Waters have both found several other potential sources for *The Sense of the Past*.[3] On 29 January 1900—during the first weeks of writing *The Sense of the Past*—James told H.G. Wells that "I re-write you, much, as I read—which is the highest tribute my damned impertinence can pay an author" (James 1982, 133).

According to Elizabeth Robins, by 1895 James "positively could not, he said, read anything now, for sake [*sic*] of the story. He had 'lost his innocence.' If a book interested him he wanted to rewrite it" (Robins 1932, 176). In the first several years of the twentieth century, while James was working on *The Sense of the Past*, he was also producing the New York editions. Perhaps that involvement in revisiting and revising his early work accounts for the intense desire to relive history, and the anxiety about swerving from the historical record, in *The Sense of the Past*.[4]

Whether or not *The Gateless Barrier* did in fact influence *The Sense of the Past*, however, it is valuable to read them together. We have a case study of how differently a male and female author treated the same material, when writing at the same time, with comparable careers and reputations. The two stories begin with similarities so uncanny it is hard to imagine they were accidental, but afterwards *The Sense of the Past* and *The Gateless Barrier* diverge markedly. Each wrote a story in which a ghostly woman haunts the house of fiction—but one saw her as a threat, and one as a delight.

Overall, *The Sense of the Past* and *The Gateless Barrier* are so similar that one summary can suffice for both. Each describes a young male amateur writer from New York whose distant English relative dies and bequeaths him the family's ancestral home in England. In Malet's novel, the writer is called Laurence Rivers; James names him Ralph Pendrel. This man immediately travels to see his new house and finds himself fascinated by its aura of history. He neglects his social calls to stare at a portrait, which depicts a young English gentleman who fought against Napoleon. When he views this portrait in an inner chamber during a storm, he realises that, strangely enough, this ancestor looks exactly like him. Laurence is shocked by what he sees:

> [It] was a portrait of whom? Well, of himself—himself, Laurence Rivers. ... He had been a sailor apparently, for he wore the dark-blue, naval uniform of the early years of the century, his brown hair being tied back into a queue. But for these details the resemblance to himself was absolute.
>
> (Malet 1900, 148–9)[5]

James's Ralph has the same eerie recognition: "The young man brown-haired, pale, erect, with the high-collared dark blue coat ... but the face—miracle of miracles, yes—confounded him as his own" (James 1917, 87–88).[6]

Malet's Laurence, like James's Ralph, eventually finds a way to travel back to the earliest years of the nineteenth century and re-enact his ancestor's love story. The Napoleonic sailor had fallen in love with, and proposed to, his charming, sprightly, sweet cousin. The woman plays music and embroiders. She has a pink-and-white complexion, thick curly

brown hair, and she wears a gown of sprigged muslin with short sleeves that reveal her lovely arms (*GB* 221, 50; *SP* 123, 120). Similarly, in a discarded passage from *The Sense of the Past*, James writes that "[the] thickness of loose brown hair, helped the dress of sprigged muslin that kept as clear of her neck as it did of her elbows" ("Unpublished" 152–3). The cousins adore one another. They exchange painted miniatures (*GB* 149; *SP* 134). The woman keeps her cousin's love letters tied with pink ribbon, and the man knows his beloved's letters by heart (*GB* 152–3; *SP* 185–9).

In this otherworldly love affair, the hero deliberately ignores the claims of the modern woman to whom he has proposed, a sophisticated New York socialite. But the ancestor had died in the war against Napoleon before he could finish the love affair with his cousin (*GB* 172; *SP* 77). Thus the time traveller also finds himself forced to abandon his affair, and he eventually returns to his modern era and the New York socialite who awaits him. The ghostly lover sweetly fades into self-chosen oblivion.

Both novels focus on the house, a symbolic space whose antique artefacts represent not only the characters' family history but also the cumulative history of English culture and letters. In both novels, the relative who bequeathed the house to the protagonist was a prototypical English man of letters—but Malet and James define that individual rather differently. In James's *The Sense of the Past*, the elderly Mr. Pendrel is a refined critic and gentlemanly reader. His library is formed by his taste and appreciation for fine sentences, and his young relative's *Essay in Aid of the Reading of History* "moved him to gratitude" (*SP* 42). Literary critics are appreciative, hospitable, intelligent interlocutors. The kindly (if intimidating) family friend Sir Cantopher Bland prizes superb china, explaining, "Yes, I've collections, treasures, and all as pretty things of their kind as you can hope anywhere to see" (*SP* 234).

By contrast, however, in *The Gateless Barrier*, the house's dying owner, Montagu Rivers, is a misogynist, vicious decadent. The Rivers men have always read the most subversive literature available; an earlier ancestor had half-crazed himself with the writings of Paine and Rousseau. Their tradition is one of marginalised and dangerous texts. Whereas the elder man in James's story admired his American relative's essay, Montagu has nothing but cynical revulsion for his relation's writing. He is a skeletal decadent who sees women as mere bestial breeding machines:

> I admit, of course, the necessity of the existence of women, since the perpetuation of the race appears at present desirable. It would be childish to argue the matter. She must be kept and cared for by qualified persons, as are the other higher, domestic animals.
>
> (*GB* 43)

This dehumanising misogyny is in the classic dandy tradition, echoing Baudelaire's announcement:

> Woman is the opposite of the dandy. Thus she must inspire horror. Woman is hungry and she wants to eat. Thirsty, and she wants to drink. She is in heat and wants to be fucked. What fine merit! Woman is natural, that is to say, abominable.
>
> (qtd. in Feldman 1993, 6)

Montagu's costume reveals that his sartorial models are Wilde and Beerbohm, who had made violet a permissible colour for male attire. He sports a violet skullcap and fur-lined dressing gown, wearing purple velvet and gold rings even on his deathbed. Like Wilde, Montagu indulges in accessories like jewellery and flowers and fabrics like velvet and satin. In each case, however, he differentiates his choices from women's wear. His preference for soft flowing fabrics is excused by his invalidism. His jewellery and flowers signify exotic learning, not decoration. Montagu's rings are Egyptian scarabs and amethysts carved with Arabic, resembling Wilde's own rings: emeralds engraved with cabalistic signs (Ellmann 1988, 540). His chosen flowers are aesthetic icons tinged with danger: poisonous orchids and "carmine-stained Japanese lilies" (*GB* 160).

Montagu's artefacts refer to death or sex, sometimes both. A leering tapestry depicting a rape covers one door; his bedposts are carved with dark, straining women who seem to writhe in agonised invitation in the firelight (*GB* 194, 199). His table is covered by a "cloth of gold and crimson embroidery—evidently fashioned from some priestly vestment—upon which rested a [skull], about four inches in height, cut out of a solid block of rock crystal" (*GB* 11). The house is panelled in black oak and hung with dark blue damask; this sombre backdrop allows Montagu to display his eccentric but valuable art collections, including some rather demonic marble busts of some of the more unpopular Roman emperors. "The blind, sculptured faces deepened the general sense of oppression by their rigidity, their unalterable and somewhat scornful repose" (*GB* 24–25). As Montagu's doctor tells Laurence, art collections are a sign of nervous degeneration:

> These delicacies of art are, after all, the refuge of those who have outlived or injured their digestion of, and appetite for, simpler and more wholesome diet. Such dyspeptics are to be commiserated rather than commended ... leave the consolations offered by gems, and ivories, and such like sweepings from the ruins of departed civilisations, to the physically and emotionally decrepit.
>
> (*GB* 242–3)

The doctor would have agreed with one female aesthete, Rosamund Marriott Watson, who complained that "modern decoration" resembled "the monster in Mrs. Shelley's story, compacted mainly from fragmentary relics of the dead, and endowed with artificial and unnatural vitality" (Watson 1897, 85).[7]

Montagu collects rather than creates, like Ned Rosier and Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Jean des Esseintes in *A Rebours* (1884), and Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91). Though he is a remarkable scholar, he refuses to use his information to communicate with vulgar souls. His scholarship is as sterile as his life. His house is a hermetically sealed atmosphere, filled with artificial heat and the musky scent of poisonous flowers. Montagu allows no windows to be opened, no visitors, and no women to enter at all; the decoration of his house reflects this male decadent exclusivity. Like Gilbert Osmond, Montagu Rivers represents the worst aspects of male aestheticism—but whereas Isabel claims "I've no [decorating] ideas," Montagu has a female rival (James 1986, 338).

For at the heart of his moribund manor is a secret "yellow drawing room," decorated with fresh eighteenth-century gaiety, filled with women's work and inhabited by the charming ghost of a young woman, Agnes Rivers. Montagu's decadent bitterness actually comes from his inability to confront this haunting feminine presence. And Agnes's garb and room embody a female aesthetic alternative to the house of the decadents.

Agnes wears the romantic fashions of 1805:

> She wore a high-waisted, clinging, rose-pink, silken gown. Her dark hair was gathered up in soft, yet elaborate bows and curls high on her small head, after the fashion prevalent in the early years of the century. A cape of transparent muslin and lace veiled her bare shoulders.
>
> (*GB* 48)

Agnes also wears a string of pearls and small rose-pink satin slippers set with brilliants (*GB* 53). For an 1890s viewer like Laurence, Agnes's costume would mingle signifiers of seductiveness and innocence. The clinging, uncorseted silken gown reveals her body, and displaying bare shoulders in the daytime had become very daring by the 1890s. On the other hand, pearls were reserved for young girls' wear, and pink was also associated with girls making their first public appearance. Agnes is both sexual and virginal to Laurence's eyes.

This outfit fits into the female aesthetes' preference for eighteenth century and Regency style, as I have explained in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*. Writers like Mary Eliza Haweis, 'Roy Devereux' (Margaret Pember-Devereux), and Rosamund Marriott Watson endorsed gowns of flowing muslin, with high Empire waists and puffed sleeves, as well

as the slender, simple, light-coloured, painted furniture of the period. Agnes's room could hardly be more different from the dark Jacobean oak and dignified blue damask in the rest of the house:

> The furniture of the room was of satinwood, highly polished and painted with garlands of roses, true-lovers' knots of blue ribbon, dainty landscapes, ladies and lovers, after the manner of Boucher. The chairs and sofas were upholstered in brocade, the predominating colors of which were white, pale yellow, and pale pink.
>
> (*GB* 29)

The hand-painted furniture conveys a message of graceful and courtly love, very much opposed to the skulls and writhing nudes in Montagu's collections. Its pale pastel colours are associated with girlishness. The eighteenth-century drawing room is open to a charming garden outside, and it is well-lit and full of pure fresh air. Nothing in it is financially valuable, but everything has a priceless sentimental value. When Laurence opens the escritoire, he finds mementoes of a love affair: a man's shoe buckles, an embroidered waist ribbon, a store of delicate shells, trinkets from India and Italy, a preserved bouquet of posies, a watch, love letters, portraits. The room contains evidence of Agnes's creative production: an escritoire filled with her letters, a piano with her music on it, a harp, a violin, and a workbasket from which her delicate lace spills. Montagu's fear of Agnes makes him "hopelessly lowered in [his own] self-esteem," but even if there was no ghost haunting the yellow drawing room, its violation of all the canons of decadent taste would have probably been enough to repulse Montagu (*GB* 91). The clash between the yellow drawing room and the dark mansion neatly encapsulates two of the main strains of aestheticism, decadent taste and female aesthetic style.

Malet makes Laurence Rivers quite literally the heir of male decadence, but Laurence pities Montagu and instead chooses to attach himself to the ghostly representative of a female literary tradition—a tradition that is very carefully described in Malet's account, although it is absent in James's version. Where Laurence inherits avant-garde prose essays, from Paine and Rousseau to Baudelaire and Wilde, Agnes enacts the history of women's popular fiction. Agnes embodies this tradition quite literally, for during her mock funeral, her empty coffin was stuffed with books to give it the weight of her body. Her real body gets concealed behind the escritoire which contains her letters.

Through the century during which she haunts her drawing room, Agnes moves through the major roles in the canon of women's novels. The events of Agnes's decline and death in 1805 appropriately fit into two of the major narrative genres of the period. Agnes's life makes her the heroine of a novel of sensibility. When Agnes's fiancé was killed

just before their wedding, Agnes went mad and finally died of grief. "Though altogether gentle and docile, she studied nothing but to turn over her dead lover's letters, and play with the various gifts he had bestowed upon her," the old family agent reminisces. "It was the pitifulest spectacle under the dome of the sky, that of her affliction" (*GB* 174). But Agnes's death and the subsequent concealment of her corpse in the unhallowed site of a secret room transform her into a gothic heroine. This embedded tale includes a typical gothic villain, a leering, semi-mad father-substitute who imprisons the dead body of the woman he desires, a crime which produces the very gothic episode of the supernatural visitation.

Agnes haunts her yellow drawing room throughout the entire nineteenth century. No wonder that when Laurence first sees her, she has become the ideal Victorian woman. A ghost is an almost satirically perfect Angel in the House. She has no body, no physical desires, no weight, and she cannot speak until spoken to. She depends wholly on her lover's visits, for she can only live through him: "I see with your eyes, I speak with your voice, I comprehend with your mind when you are present. When you are absent, I become as the echo unevoked by any sound" (*GB* 257). Agnes is nothing but a beautiful image. As the Victorian heroine, Agnes enacts a Victorian maiden's role: pining without her lover, she is restored to health and happiness upon his return and their subsequent engagement. But she is unable to face the consequence of acquiring a real body: the prospect of marital relations. Thus she abdicates at her first stirrings of independence. She decides to die and leave her lover and "the desire of [her] heart" (*GB* 305). At the end of the novel, she fades away, represented and remembered only by a spray of pink roses. She has become one of the sentimental mementos of her own drawing room. Agnes is a lovely lady, associated with an idealised past, with a positively angelic capacity for self-annihilation.

But we can also read Agnes's suicide as a consolidation of her power. When Laurence reawakens her in the 1890s, Agnes immediately adapts to the most recent genre of women's fiction: the New Woman novel. She grows more corporeal, acquiring weight, a body, speech, and mental independence. Montagu's decadence and Laurence's amateurism recede as the novel increasingly focuses on Agnes's powerful art. She quite literally occupies a room of her own. Although Montagu seals his house shut, the walls cannot restrain Agnes, for she floats through walls and paces the garden at night. As Montagu slowly dies, Agnes slowly enters into life, turning from a ghost into a living woman. And Laurence Rivers falls in love with her, symbolically transferring his allegiance from the decadent connoisseur to the vital woman writer. When Laurence reads her love letters, he discovers that he is trapped in a repetition of this powerful narrative generated by the force of Agnes's longing. In that sense,

Laurence is nothing but a character in a story told by a woman—as he himself recognises:

> had the gracious spectre ... lived, as he had fondly supposed, through his life, regained reason and glad, human sympathy through the influence of his will, or had the case, in very truth, been precisely the reverse? Had not she been the active, he the merely passive principle? Had he not reached a higher development, and gloried—for a little space—in conscious possession of genius, had he not lived, in short, through her?
>
> (*GB* 186)

In the most literal sense, she has become a new woman. "She grew in womanhood, and she grew in the charm of ... a fine equality" (*GB* 272). Indeed, it is Laurence who is the real ghost, walking mindlessly through the routines of the day and coming to life only at night when near her; she infuses energy and mind into him. Eventually she uses her independence to leave Laurence and break their engagement. Agnes's refusal to enter a conventional marriage is a spiritualistic version of the New Woman's revolt against traditional marital life. Paradoxically enough, her suicide asserts her refusal to disappear: "I will ... go forward—reaching a fairer world than yours. ... There I shall await your coming; and we shall be one at last," she vows (*GB* 307).

The title of *The Gateless Barrier* refers to many barriers: the difference between life and death, the tapestry separating the yellow drawing room from the decadent house, the sea between America and England, the gulf between the old century and the new, and, perhaps most immediately, the gap between decadent men and aesthetic women.[8] Throughout the novel Laurence broaches all these barriers. He speaks with the dead, enters the yellow drawing room, crosses the Atlantic, moves into the past, and becomes Agnes's follower rather than Montagu's. Laurence Rivers represents the writer of the future, and his future is determined by Agnes. Montagu had tried to teach Laurence that 'woman' was only a higher domestic animal, but Laurence concludes, "since you [Agnes] once were woman, no woman shall ever suffer at my hands—all womanhood being sacred thenceforth since you once were woman" (*GB* 353).

Agnes's and Laurence's union represents the union of the two literary traditions they each enact. This mystic marriage would, Malet imagined, give birth to twentieth-century literature. At the end of the novel, Laurence makes the yellow drawing room into his study, thereby producing joint occupancy of the house of fiction. Malet symbolically foresaw a twentieth-century literary school, a version of modernism, born from the union of female culture and male studies. It is, perhaps, significant that Malet considered *The Gateless Barrier* her most autobiographical novel (Lundberg 2003, 210–4).

Ralph makes himself the instrument of Nan's self-effacement, not of her salvation. Not only does Nan make an "indispensible, unspeakable sacrifice," but Ralph consigns her to precisely that nun-like spinsterhood he foresaw in her face when he, her lover, elects to leave her (*SP* 348). In other words, although the female ghost makes herself disappear in both stories, Malet writes it as a strong woman's decision, while James writes it as female self-sacrifice.

Nan's robust sister Molly looks, at first glance, like a collectible. Ralph first sees Molly's face in a miniature portrait and next when symbolically framed by her embroidery stand, "a piece of fine tense canvas framed and mounted" (*SP* 120).[10] He is certainly there in order to 'buy' her, since their arranged marriage is meant to rescue the family finances. But after prolonged sparring with Molly, Ralph realises that Molly's verbal facility makes her too powerful. Ralph admits, in his final description of Molly, "she's splendid ... beyond any power of mine to show her off" (*SP* 286). She has become irrelevant to Ralph's desires because he cannot place her on display.

By comparison, Nan is a visual artefact from the start, for when Ralph meets Nan he immediately notices her resemblance to "some mothering Virgin by Van Eyck or Memling" (*SP* 281). Sir Cantopher explains that Nan has perfect taste and that he wants to marry her because he is "such a fancier of every mode of the exquisite," while Molly good-humoredly complains about Nan's interest in *objets d'art*, for Molly herself is ignorant of the value of china (*SP* 238, 244, 248). Sir Cantopher similarly (and flirtatiously) tells Ralph, "you're very fine porcelain indeed" (*SP* 261). The two figures associated with fine china, Ralph and Nan, clearly belong together. In Malet's version, Agnes slowly comes to life, gaining flesh, warmth, weight, but in James's version, Nan remains a delicate piece of porcelain, easily shattered.

In some respects, *The Sense of the Past* records the difficulty of distinguishing oneself from a previous story. The character, Ralph, must fight against his ancestor's fate, but the author, James, must also struggle against the difficulty of falling into the pattern set by *The Gateless Barrier*. The past is a dangerous place against which the protagonist has to work desperately to maintain his own individuality. Ralph feels "unspeakable homesickness for his own time and place" (*SP* 335). At the same time, however, the insistence on one's own contemporaneous difference can feel like a betrayal of the past. James noted that Ralph has committed "deviation, violation, practical treachery, in fact" by choosing Nan, for whom his ancestor "wouldn't have cared a jot" (*SP* 322). As Tintner notes, the crossing of the century divide at 1900 invited writers to think about a divide between the past and the future (Tintner 2000, 155).

Ralph himself notices that he is not an original character: "The first flush of his impression was that of stepping straight into some chapter

of some other story" (*SP* 119). Alan W. Bellringer has pointed out that Ralph resembles the novelist, constantly having to figure out characters' motivations and probable actions (Bellringer 1981, 205). Pendrel finds himself caught in someone else's story, with whom he is in intimate, ongoing dialogue, changing important pieces, looking at characters with different eyes. Might this also describe James's own ambivalent entanglement with a precursor text? In reconstructing the history of *The Gateless Barrier* and *The Sense of the Past*, we have to try to recover a past whose records are missing and whose characters are hard to understand. In other words, we find ourselves like Ralph Pendrel and Laurence Rivers, literary readers who discover ourselves to be detectives in someone else's narrative, guests in another time, reading chapters in "some other story."

Thus Ralph's task of controlling and rejecting the witty female rival may be James's own task in writing *The Sense of the Past*. For just as Molly haunts Ralph Pendrel, Malet might have haunted Henry James. The strong woman in *The Sense of the Past* is Mary, nicknamed Molly—and Lucas Malet's real name was also Mary, with the family nickname Polly. Is it a coincidence that in *The Sense of the Past*, the uneasy male writer worries about "keeping up" with a text produced by a witty creative woman named Mary/Molly/Polly? Moreover, in both the real history of James's critical reception and the fictional story of Ralph's growth as a writer, the female rival gets suppressed. Malet prophesied the fate of her own reputation through the figure of Agnes locked for a century in a forgotten room, regardless of her own strength. No matter how strong, how witty, how lovely she was, the woman writer might still be immured. By comparison, the male writer—Laurence Rivers, Ralph Pendrel, or Henry James—achieves the glow of public acclaim, often at the expense of a woman writer.[11]

Susan M. Griffin captures Ralph's first entrance into the house in *The Sense of the Past*: "The doorway, then, is a mirror, but not an everyday solid one. Instead, Ralph is faced with transparent looking glasses like Alice's; indeed, like Alice he eventually steps through one into a world that is the same yet different" (Griffin 1984, 56).[12] Ralph and his ancestor confront each other across a 'gateless barrier,' a doorway that offers a kind of impalpable resistance and sense of otherness. When Ralph enters the door of the house into the past, he feels "an increasingly thick other medium ... like an extraordinarily strong odour inhaled—an inward and inward warm reach" (*SP* 115). This sensation originates in Laurence Rivers's strange feeling of breathless warmth when he fumbles anxiously for the door into the yellow drawing room: "to his surprise, he turned faint and broke into a sweat" (*GB* 28).

Interestingly enough, James broke off his manuscript in 1900 just at the point when Ralph crosses that gateless barrier, as if James feared he was coming too close to a perilous threshold of his own. *The Sense of*

the Past is a meditation on authorial originality; can one write one's own story, and if so, would it do damage? By contrast, *The Gateless Barrier* is a fantasy about escaping an oppressively misogynist, decadent, claustrophobic present into a happier, female-identified alternative temporal zone.

If the two novels have different feelings about history, they also offer divergent allegories of gender relations in the literary marketplace. Malet's "house of fiction" is haunted by a woman so powerful that she replaces the male inhabitants. James's "house of fiction," on the other hand, is occupied by women who must be effaced to preserve the elite male writer. At the same time, Malet and James both offer instructions for training the new author of the twentieth century. At the beginning of *The Sense of the Past*, Aurora Coyne rejects Ralph because he is "the mere leader, of the intellectual life, the mere liver in a cultivated corner" (*SP* 351). By the end, however, his sojourn in the past constitutes a "prodigious adventure" which now befits him to be a real writer, worthy of her hand (*SP* 352). In *The Gateless Barrier*, Laurence also becomes a serious writer through his voyage in the past, although ironically he becomes a more Jamesian writer than his Jamesian counterpart. He realises that high art demands a different market:

> He was haunted by the conviction that he had never yet given his best, the highest and strongest of his nature, either in thought, or art, or adventure. ... The demand had been for a thoroughly presentable and immediately marketable article; and the Best is usually far from marketable, often but doubtfully presentable either.
>
> (*GB* 3)

Both James and Malet make their writer characters search for a mode of art that is not "thoroughly presentable and immediately marketable"—that deals with unsavoury topics and appeals to a small readership.

If James constructed an elite readership with the determination to understand his increasingly difficult language, Malet constructed an elite readership with the education to divine the sources of her narrative patterns. *The Gateless Barrier*, like all of Malet's work, is undergirded with a complex structure of other narratives, so that the reader has to be acquainted with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Genesis, the Mass, the story of the crucifixion, *Paradise Lost*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and even contemporary literature like Oliphant's "The Library Window" and *Lady Audley's Secret* to appreciate the story's highly referential plot.[13]

At the same time, however, it is possible to read *The Gateless Barrier* without access to any of these allusions. Its language is simple; it has very few characters; it is very short. A modern reader can scarcely miss its allegorical significance, but the reviewers of 1900 assumed it was simply an entertaining tale and were puzzled by its mystical story.[14] *The Academy* and *Blackwood's Magazine* both complained that the story

was scientifically improbable. They judged the tale according to the standard of domestic realism, in spite of the fact that this standard is not exactly appropriate for a ghost story. These attempts to determine *The Gateless Barrier*'s probability demonstrates that they were unwilling to offer Malet the kind of specialised, high-culture reading that Jamesian novels seemed to demand. While many women may have written anti-realist, rebellious, experimental fiction at the turn of the century, critics found it harder to credit women writers with such intentions. Because women writers' experiments often looked quite different from men's, they could easily be overlooked in accounts of the emergence of modernism. In *The Twentieth-Century World of Henry James*, Adeline R. Tintner claims that "what is absolutely lacking in the novel by Malet is anything indicating 'a sense of the past.'" (Tintner 2000, 156). If one sees James's sense of the past as a powerful, preordained story as the standard, then Malet's joyful, empowering escapist past will simply fail to register. If James's version of history is the sole measure, then Malet's version is not an alternative but simply a blank spot, something "absolutely lacking."

Early examples of this double standard can be found in the reviews that the same newspaper gave to Malet and James. On 19 September 1900, *The Times* complained that, although Malet's story was written with great style and dramatic vigour, its plot was unconvincing and its subject unworthy. "A story with a ghost for heroine must be a thin-blooded business at best" ("Recent Novels" 1900, 2). Seventeen years later, *The Times Literary Supplement* praised the same tale in the hands of Henry James. Enough of the novel appears "to make us sadly aware of our loss of a complete masterpiece. It would surely have been, we feel, the greatest of ghost stories, with a thrill, a frisson, entirely new to literature" ("The Great Henry James Question" 1917, 427). The unintentional irony of declaring *The Sense of the Past* "entirely new" is evident. But what is perhaps not so evident, is the interesting fact that a woman writer in 1900 was being judged according to realist standards that were waived for a male writer in 1917. In 1917 James could win praise for producing a thrill of terror, but in 1900 'terror' was an inappropriate achievement for a woman writer, who was expected to write a convincing, pleasant, love story.[15]

It would be easy to say that *The Gateless Barrier* was neglected because it was ahead of its time, because it attempted a level of sophistication neither expected nor desired from women writing in 1900. The sad fact is that *The Gateless Barrier* was very typical of its time—typical not only in its ambitious complexity and its espousal of alternative female models, but also in its swift decline into obscurity during the twentieth century. *The Gateless Barrier* emerged from the strong movement of female aestheticism, a period when, as Richard Le Gallienne remarked, "man for the present seems to be at a standstill, if not actually retrograde, and the onward movement of the world to be embodied in

woman" (qtd. in Sykes 1895, 398–9). Certainly, women's work was seen as more popular than men's. As Ann Ardis notes:

> The common perception in the 1890s was that women were taking over the literary world. New publishing houses, new audiences for fiction, new publication formats: all were seen to give women writers, particularly previously unpublished women writers, a distinct advantage in the literary marketplace.
>
> (Ardis 1990, 43)

No wonder that Agnes is striding towards life, gaining new confidence and new powers by the day; no wonder that she announces, "I will ... go forward—reaching a fairer world than yours" (*GB* 307). The novel's very optimism about women's writing, unfortunately, places it inescapably in the premodernist era.

By contrast, *The Sense of the Past* is a document obsessed with loss and failure and danger, a story about a writer who is literally stuck in his own scenes, an unfinished tale that warns against the past. Yet its very difficulty and indeterminability makes it a paradigmatic modernist text. The modernist canon is full of failed, blocked, suppressed, unhappy, or aimless men: Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus, Septimus Smith, Mrs Dalloway, John Dowell, Merton Densher, Colonel Kurtz, and Lord Jim. Add to that list Ralph Pendrel, who feared he could never escape the past in which he was trapped, and Henry James, who fought to finish a tale he could never quite claim as his own. Perhaps the last gift of *The Gateless Barrier* and *The Sense of the Past* is to make us rethink our own sense of our own past, and the alternative stories we might have had.

Notes

1 Patricia Lorimer Lundberg has found a letter to Malet about *The Gateless Barrier* dated July 22 and 23. James's letter to W.D. Howells explains, in a postscript dated August 14, that he has given up the novel (James 1982, 157–58).
2 Lundberg, however, points out that the manuscript is in Malet's handwriting (Lundberg 2003, 192–93).
3 Tintner believes that James drew on Henry Newbolt's *The Old Country* (1906), another story of a male time traveller moving through an ancient house to find a ghostly woman, although Newbolt sets his story much earlier (Tintner 2000, 157–61). Waters connects it to Gertrude Atherton's "The Bell in the Fog" and James's own "A Passionate Pilgrim" (Waters 2009, 192–193).
4 Oliver Herford traces a fascination with referencing his personal past throughout James's late writings (Herford 2016).
5 Future references to this novel will be marked as *GB* and noted parenthetically in the text.
6 Future references to this novel will be marked as *SP* and noted parenthetically in the text.
7 For more information on Marriott Watson see Schaffer (2000).

8 It is also, as Malet herself points out in her preface, a major Zen koan collection. She borrows this for her own cultural interests.
9 Malet's later novels provide interesting examples of modernist experimentation. *The Far Horizon* (1906) is Malet's experiment with the new naturalism favoured by Moore and Gissing. It shows a humble bank clerk's lonely life enriched by friendship with a rather tawdry actress. *Adrian Savage* (1911) keeps the frame narrative of the Victorian love story, but within that frame explores madness, suicide, hallucinations, and sexual repression in new forms, including stream-of-consciousness perspective. *The Survivors* (1923) describes the erotics of sadism through shifting points of view.
10 This reading of Molly's embroidery comes from Williams (1993, 77). Williams places *The Sense of the Past* in the context of James's other descriptions of portraits and points out that the novel explores a number of concerns finding their way into James's shorter fiction of the same period. James used the theme of a ghost from another time in "The Third Person" (1900) and the American moving to an English estate in "Flickerbridge" (1902).
11 This was a common concern in women's writing of the 1890s; a particularly memorable example is Mabel E. Wotton's story "The Fifth Edition."
12 See Waters (2009, 187) for a discussion of the importance of thresholds, gates, and doors in *The Sense of the Past*.
13 Laurence's journey represents a kind of Pilgrim's Progress through various sorts of temptation. Agnes's forbidden fruit, the bread and wine she is tempted to eat, resonate with Adam and Eve's story and also allude to the Mass. Her self-sacrifice is supposed to be Christlike, since it redeems Laurence, yet the idea of her long wandering out of God's sight is also like Milton's Satan. Malet took some of the specific gothic effects of the novel from Radcliffe and Oliphant. From *Lady Audley's Secret*, Malet borrowed the idea of a locked central room which is feminine and charming but hides an awful secret. This kind of synthesis of multiple sources is characteristic of much nineteenth-century women's writing, particularly popular fiction.
14 On the baffled reviewers, see Lundberg (2003, 206–8).
15 The critic W.L. Courtney declared that all women's fiction amounted to glorified diary entries – a position that would certainly make it hard to know how to read a ghost story (xiii).

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Part 4

Catholic (Proto-) Modernism