

PLEASURE AND PROPRIETY IN HENRY JAMES

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I offer a critical re-reading of James's fictions focused around two themes. First, dissenting from readings of James's attitude to his material which have him squeamish and evasive when it comes to his treatment of sex, I argue that an essential part of the evolution into the late work is James's growing reconciliation with the sensual, and with the energies and pleasures of the transgressive sexual passions he writes about. Second, I read that development in the fictions as entangled with the issue James returns to so often in his critical writings: the radically contrasting conventions of propriety governing the English language and European novel traditions in the nineteenth century.

Although by implication the thesis addresses itself to James's whole oeuvre, I have chosen to focus on particular texts. The reading arose in the beginning from detailed responses to the close-knit texture of these complex fictions, and I have tried to reproduce in my writing that movement of criticism from the micro-reading to the macro-context, giving the individual works which are discussed extended treatment. After an introduction which outlines my themes, the following two chapters address writings from the 1880s (his 'middle' period), two chapters are given to the transitional work of the late 1890s, and the final three chapters discuss the three 'late' novels written in the first years of the century.

Rather than addressing the critical material on James as a separate issue, I have incorporated my responses to it into the flow of my argument, either using it to support and expand my own ideas, or as a focus for dissent. The critical work that has been most suggestive has often been the work I have most wanted to take issue with: Alfred Habegger's indictments of James's conservatism have stimulated a great deal of what follows. On the other hand, my discussion of the disjunction between the English language and European novel traditions would have been impossible if I had not been able to build upon Tony Tanner's

ideas in *Adultery and the Novel* and Ruth Bernard Yeazell's in *Fictions of Modesty*.

Two articles based on this material have already been published (copies are bound in): the article on 'The Aspern Papers' in *The Cambridge Quarterly* is more or less the same as chapter 3, but the article on *What Maisie Knew* in *English* was substantially rewritten before becoming chapter 4.

The themes I have chosen to emphasise in my reading of James seem to me new ones, and important: I feel confident therefore that this thesis represents an original contribution to knowledge of the subject.

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1. Introduction

If, after some fantastic Borgesian literary cataclysm, we had lost the texts of Henry James's last three novels, and were left with only the shelves upon shelves of criticism about them, what impressions would future generations have of how those novels actually felt in the reading? And if then by a further twist of fate copies of the novels were rediscovered deep inside some labyrinthine ultimate library, what qualities of those novels would most surprise the readers who had only known them through critical accounts?

It is a spurious speculation, of course, and unfair to criticism; criticism is not supposed to replace the texts it writes about. Critics participate in a long argument through changing times and fashions which presupposes at every step a return to the ur-text where criticism began. But with regard to these last novels of James's, this thought experiment does throw up something interesting. Those who had only read the criticism might well feel they had read a disproportionate amount about James's resignation and renunciation, James's interest in alienated observers from life's margins, James's sexlessness, James's retreat from the world into art. They might well find themselves astonished, opening *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, at the ripe worldliness of these late books, the passionate and sexual love affairs at their centres, James's obvious infatuation with the glamour and glitter and stylishness of his beautiful young scions of a *fin de siècle* leisure class. An account of the novels could not stop there, with the glamour and the infatuation: but it might begin there. It is interesting (though of course it doesn't constitute any sort of proof) that recent film adaptations of *The Portrait of a*

Lady and *The Wings of the Dove*, whatever their merits as films and as interpretations of the novels (and the two films are very different), seemed to have no difficulty in discovering in James's stories enough excitement to entertain a contemporary cinema audience: the electric excitement of life chosen and not life refused.

What this thesis argues is that there is a way of making out the whole history of James's oeuvre in the light of that great release of ripe worldliness in the late novels. Far from reading the development into the late style as a progressive retreat into the ivory tower of art, it is possible to think of the late style with its difficulties, its lofty aristocratic ironies, its rhetorical display, as the way James found for writing himself out of that common-sensical middle-class middle-ground which the English-language novel had made its own: a middle-ground which had always been profoundly ill-at-ease with worldliness, with glamour, and with sex. In the transitional novels of the late 1890s James wrestled with his writing: with his narrative forms, bent upon displacing that middle-ground proneness to judgemental omniscience; and with his material, as he explored to their very sources the ideals of feminine innocence and decency and chastity which haunt *What Maisie Knew*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Awkward Age*. Progressively as he uncovered the sources of those ideals in a distorted and distorting patterning of gender in his culture, he liberated himself to step over the boundaries of the middle ground into the open space outside; to make the journey Strether makes in *The Ambassadors* from a nervous conventional propriety to a grown up reconciliation with and honouring of the sensual side of life.

When a critic wants to talk about James's proneness to renunciations, or his preference for seeing over experiencing, she or he usually turns to Strether in *The Ambassadors* (which is not surprising in that nobody in the other two late novels is in the least renunciatory and all the characters in them struggle greedily for their share of happiness). Alfred Habegger, for instance, among his excoriating but always stimulating attacks on James writes:

James's failure lay in his insistence in one way or another that the shut-in life is after all better than the open-air life, or worse, that the secret alternative sphere is all there is ... Deep within James and Strether ... there seems to be a solipsistic child who fails to notice other people and creates an autonomous world of his own by repetitious patterns of sound and movement. Or is it rather a caged wolf treading back and forth, his gaze quickly sweeping the external world as his feet pivot in the same spot, his nose grazes the same bar?¹

Even Ruth Bernard Yeazell, in her most percipient and sympathetic reading of the late novels which argues for the importance in them of sexual passion, writes about James's 'sexual reticence', says his characters 'repress and evade' sexual knowledge, and describes the late style as 'the recording of the mind's effort to walk the tightrope between that fascination and that fear [of sexuality]'.²

But in *The Ambassadors*, while it might be fair to say that Strether is indeed reticent, and does indeed seem both fascinated by and afraid of that 'whiff of the jungle' he catches in Paris, none of the others around him necessarily share that reticence or that fear. Chad talks cynically about women like any experienced boulevardier and man of the world. If Mme de Vionnet is afraid it isn't of sex, it's of ageing, and losing her beauty and her lover. Strether imagines Maria Gostrey exclaiming to him after he's faced the reality of Chad's and Mme de Vionnet's love affair: 'What on earth - that's what I want to know now - had you then supposed?' (468).³ And while undoubtedly James was making some kind of gently ironising self-portrait in Strether, James the novelist is not wholly identified with his character: James the novelist is as responsible for creating all the sinning pleasuring suffering rest of the world of the novel as he is for his hyper-susceptible, hyper-imaginative alter ego who by his own wry confession has missed too much of life ('it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there' 215).

¹ Alfred Habegger, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982, 282-3.

² Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1976, 20.

³ For convenience, all page references to James's full length novels unless otherwise stated are to the readily available Penguin editions. Where different editions are used, this will be indicated in the footnotes.

The most important way in which *The Ambassadors* in itself represents an answer to the kind of impatience Habegger expresses is that the whole novel turns on the moment in which Strether changes his mind. He not only finally has to stop prevaricating and face the reality of the relationship between the lovers: he also, having held off in his Woollett reticence from even admitting to their physical embraces, allows himself to begin voluptuously imagining them ('he found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things' 468). Imagining them he envies them, he feels acutely his fifty-five years and his missed opportunities, he feels acutely in other words just what Habegger feels, that the shut-in life is sad and sterile and incomplete. Is Strether a 'solipsistic child who fails to notice other people': isn't the whole subject of *The Ambassadors*, as well as of Strether's excogitations, the real differences between lives lived, between experiences; the real possibility of pleasure, as well as the real possibility of missing it. James's telegraphist in 'In The Cage' (1898) knows that 'Real justice was not of this world, yet, strangely, happiness was...' (41). What sense could 'real happiness' make, if Strether - or James - couldn't imagine difference, couldn't imagine 'other people', couldn't imagine life lived up to as well as life evaded and postponed?

As for Habegger's 'open-air': at every place in the late novels where the voluptuary music sounds and the protagonists turn from talk to bodies and to touch, James signals it with sunshine and wind and rain and weather. There is the vivid grey August afternoon when Charlotte and the Prince walk into the Park; the lusty showery pagan April at Matcham before they steal their afternoon in Gloucester; the 'French ruralism, with its cool special green' (452) for Strether's day of discovery; the 'great sunny space', the 'bright historic air' and the 'flutter of the doves' in St Marks' Square (327, 321) when Merton asks Kate to come to his room.

This thesis will argue that James, from his beginnings in a moralised English-language novel tradition, makes something like the same journey that Strether makes from a sensitive propriety to voluptuous imaginings of pleasure. It is not always appropriate to describe a life's work in terms of a 'progress';

that description is in danger of implicitly undervaluing the earlier writing, as if it were only 'on its way' somewhere. But that story written so explicitly into *The Ambassadors*, the imaginative man 'changing his mind' about the propriety and the morality of the relationship he sees (a relationship which could only have been condemned within the context of James's earlier work), seems to license us to talk about a significant development, a 'change of mind', in the unfolding of James's writing.

Inseparable from that journey in the oeuvre is the evolution of the late style. J M Coetzee in an aside calls James 'the outstanding exception' to this generalization about the novel form:

The traditional novel is wedded to an ideal of realism that includes not only the representation of the ordinary speech of ordinary people, but the imitation, in its own narration, of a sober, middle-class manner. The poetics of the novel are anticlassical: with exceptions, it does not go in for the aristocratic mode of irony.⁴

James's late narratives are anything but sober. They break all the rules of that 'formal realism' which Ian Watt considers virtually co-extensive with the English novel, with its 'pursuit of verisimilitude', its pretence of being no more than a 'transcription of real life'.⁵ And rather than reading this 'aristocratic irony' of the late style as representing James's retreat from the common humanity of the middle-ground, we might try to read it instead as his making his escape from the middle-ground constraints of the English language novel, from a moralising propriety, from a proneness to sententiousness, from a deep suspicion of pleasure, from a sexual puritanism entangled with ideals of feminine innocence and chastity.

If James 'invents', almost, an aristocratic irony for his late style, it can only have a tenuous and oblique relationship with the 'real' style of any 'real' late nineteenth century aristocracy. Something in his phrasing and vocabulary and exaggeratedly inflated poise mimics the flair and drawl and slang we might think of as aristocratic; he borrows from the

⁴ J M Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1992, 159.

⁵ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1987, 30.

louche arch talk of a smart set whose *moeurs* and attitudes can still be distinguished from 'respectable' and 'middle-class'. Such a smart set certainly hadn't been much written about in nineteenth-century English novels (Trollope's ruling class sound so bourgeois); it wasn't a significant presence in English letters. Unlike the eighteenth-century ironists (Gibbon, Swift, Hume) whose 'aristocratic' style Coetzee is contrasting with the novelists in his essay, James's ironies cannot be confidently addressed to an audience of peers, cannot depend upon 'a bond among the *élite* who can decode its inverted operations'.⁶ If James has taken refuge in aristocratic ironies it isn't in order to recover the security of a supportive *élite*; it is a move out of security, against the prevailing middle-ground discourse of his English *fin de siècle*, it is in a sense unprecedented and without context. There is finally something self-consciously *quixotic* about James's sustained high style; perhaps his 'aristocratic' is as invented as Don Quixote's 'romance', with its impossibly exaggerated refinement? And like Cervantes, perhaps James is making full play of the ironic conjunction of a high style with novelistic realism? Thomas Mann writes about Cervantes's self-criticising Spanishness: 'it looks as into a mirror at its own grandezza, its idealism, its lofty impracticality, its unmarketable high-mindedness - is this not strange?'⁷

If the first theme of this thesis is James's changing attitude to the proprieties, the second theme comes inextricably entangled with that; it would be impossible to discuss issues of propriety in the late nineteenth century novel without discussing the difference between the English-language tradition and the European one. English language fiction was still governed on both sides of the Atlantic by a fierce convention of propriety: no matter if one learns that even George Lewes (Prince Consort to the creator of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the*

⁶ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 180.

⁷ Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H.Lowe Porter. London: Secker and Warburg, n.d, 437.

Floss) told scurrilous anecdotes in (male) company after dinner, it was not permissible to represent that reality of English social life in fiction. The episode in *The Awkward Age*, where newly married sexually teasing Aggie captures and sits on an 'improper' French novel so that she can be pulled off again by a Lord Petherton unconvincingly concerned for her 'morals', is James's ironic rehearsal of the English convention that European novels were improper and forbidden. A man may own a French novel (Vanderbank does); he may lend it to a married woman (he lends it Mrs Brookenham); but she must find it 'disgusting' and should on no account let it fall into the hands of her unmarried daughter (Mrs Brookenham makes sure Nanda sees it and reads it, so that she is spoiled for marrying Van). As late as 1890 Edmund Gosse introducing his *International Library* series felt bound to apologise for it with something of the hot under the collar rectitude of a housemaster initiating a discussion of the birds and the bees:

Life is now treated in fiction by every race but our own with singular candour ... the [Continental] novelists have determined to disdain nothing and to repudiate nothing which is common to humanity; much is freely discussed ... which our race is apt to treat with a much more gingerly discretion. It is not difficult, however, we believe - it is certainly not impossible - to discard all which may justly give offence, and yet to offer to an English public ... many masterpieces of European fiction ...⁸

This disjunction between the English language and European fiction traditions is something that James himself is always intrigued by, bothered by; in his critical essays, even from the decades when the material of his own novels fitted unexceptionably inside the parameters of an English propriety, James the reader and critic keeps returning to those other possibilities outside. The writer who loves Balzac and admires Flaubert has to answer satisfactorily for himself why he can't write about, say, adultery and prostitution in his own novels; and he has to ask himself whether he would want to if he could.

From his first experiences of living alone in Paris in 1876, French culture - its *moeurs*, its talk, its literature - had existed for the young James in a sort of crucial

⁸ Edmund Gosse, Editor's Note. Mathilde Serao, *Fantasia*. Heinemann International Library, 1890.

counterpoint to his own Anglo-Saxon background. His letters home that year (he is in his early thirties) are full of a slightly uneasy playfulness, teasing and upsetting his family and friends with glimpses of Gallic frivolity and wickedness. Brother William writes to him to warn him to give up his 'French tricks' in his letters: his *bon mots* and rhetorically stylish constructions are antipathetic to the James family atmosphere, whose own sense of humour savours more of the schoolroom than the salon.⁹

James writes to Thomas Perry that he has heard Zola characterise Gustave Droz's writing as '*merde à la vanille*'.

Why the Flaubert circle don't like him [Droz] is their own affair. I don't care ... I send you by post Zola's own last - *merde au naturel*. Simply hideous.¹⁰

James bristles with defensive critical dissent, but he bristles with consciousness, too, at the forbidden word used so casually and cleverly. Although William's and Henry's letters to one another are preoccupied with their bowel movements to a degree unique, probably, in collected letters, the word *merde* or its English equivalent has never been put on paper between them. Initiated, James won't simply shrink and think New England thoughts: he tries the note out for himself. To W D Howells James writes:

They are all charming talkers - though as editor of the austere *Atlantic* it would startle you to hear some of their projected subjects. The other day Edmond de Goncourt (the best of them) said he had been lately working very well on his novel - he had got into an episode that greatly interested him and into which he was going very far. Flaubert: 'What is it?' *E de G*: 'A whore-house de province'.¹¹

Howells - 'editor of the austere *Atlantic*' - writes back to thank God he is not a Frenchman.

He writes to them about the emancipated young girl of the Faubourg Saint-Germain who asked James what he thought of incest as the subject for a novel; and about the Turgenev-Viardot gossip. And years later in a letter to Edmund Gosse James

⁹ *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel. London: Macmillan, 1974-84. To William James (1876). Vol.2, 58.

¹⁰ To Thomas Sergeant Perry (1876). *Letters*, Vol.2, 44.

¹¹ To W D Howells (1876). *Letters*, Vol.2, 23.

recalls one more story; this one presumably he kept to himself at the time:

... the memory of a Sunday afternoon at Flaubert's in the winter of 75 - 76, when Maupassant, still *inédit*, but always 'round', regaled me with a fantastic tale, irreproducible here, of the relations between two Englishmen, each other, and their monkey! A picture the details of which have faded for me, but not the lurid impression.¹²

Along with brothels and incest, there must have been plenty of mention in the Flaubert *cénacle* of homosexuality; we have no idea how much of an initiation - a linguistic initiation - this might have been for James.

James in Paris in 1876 wasn't of course only interested in 'naughty' stories. There is a wealth of other material in the letters home, more the sort of thing the young American abroad was supposed to be getting out of Paris: 'the contemplation of beauty and the culture of the mind'; 'the *Ville Lumière* ... a glimpse of a possible civilisation in which the manners belonging to a ripe social intercourse shall be the index of a moral refinement'.¹³ But there are strikingly enough stories from 'Babylon' (as James teasingly called it in his letters) to suggest a shock of contact for a sensibility neither securely watertight nor simply comfortably assimilative. James is nothing like, say, his Chad in *The Ambassadors*; Chad is prompt to avail himself of the opportunity to exchange New World constraint for Old World license, but that is all. When the time comes for him to return to Woollett Chad will change worlds back again, unscathed.

It is not the exchange of values that interests James, the mere substituting of one set for the other; but the contradictory co-existence of opposed values. Howells's austerity and Zola's indecency exist in the same world: what is unspeakable in one language is casual conversation in another. James writes to Howells that 'you and he [Zola] don't see the

¹² Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 445.

¹³ These phrases come from a couple of essays from the 1950s which innocently - and usefully illustratively - misread *The Ambassadors* by vindicating Paris against Woollett precisely in Woollett's idealist-humanist terms: Joan Bennett's from *Chicago Review* (1956), Vol 9, no.4; Joseph Warren Beach's from *The Method of Henry James*, 1954. Beach is quoting verbatim here phrases from Henry James Sr.

same things - you have a wholly different consciousness - you see a totally different side of a different race'.¹⁴ This flexibility of language, that can say in one place what is unspeakable in another, is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls its 'heteroglossia':

Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems; within these various systems ... are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound ..¹⁵

It doesn't matter that for our purposes here these different 'verbal-ideological' systems aren't in fact within one 'national language'. James's position in Paris, between languages, trying to communicate blasé Parisian sophistications to New England decencies, is in Bakhtin's account the very type of the novelist's interest in and relationship to heteroglossia:

All languages of heteroglossia ... are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people - first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels.¹⁶

The disjunction between the *moeurs* of the French and the New England intelligentsias, and between the English-language and French novel traditions, was not simply a matter of the naming or the silencing of taboo subjects. The whore-house and the *merde* were signs of a profound difference of attitude in the French novel: sexual impropriety was to be named along with every other reality because it was *there*, because representation for Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant came dragging after it none of the clumsy apparatus of moralisation. James writes about the Flaubert *cénacle* in an essay on Turgenev years later:

What was discussed in that little smoke-clouded room was chiefly questions of taste, questions of art and form; and the speakers, for the most part, were, in aesthetic matters, radicals of the deepest dye. It

¹⁴ Leon Edel, *The Life*, 226.

¹⁵ M M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: Texas UP, 1981, 288.

¹⁶ M M Bakhtin, 292.

would have been late in the day to propose among them any discussion of the relation of art to morality, any question of the degree in which a novel might or might not concern itself with the teaching of a lesson. They had settled these preliminaries long ago, and it would have been primitive and incongruous to refer to them.¹⁷

We suspect that the young James rather wanted to ask that 'primitive and incongruous' question about the teaching of 'lessons', and that he found the extravagant certainty and impenetrable consensus of the little group infuriatingly narrowly focused (there is plenty of irony at their self-importance in that 'radicals of the deepest dye'). But what the older James is recording, looking back, is not a moment of conversion to what the French writers believe so much as a moment of liberation from being certain at all; his encounter with precisely their certainty and their consensus has given him a new purchase from outside on the moralising frame of his own English language fiction. It is possible to write within a quite different frame, and to write well; and before the moralist can condemn he has to answer the sheer persuasiveness of the work of a Maupassant, say, whose sensual, visual, intelligent power sits 'like a lion in the path'¹⁸:

... this little group, with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner - its intense artistic life ... and in spite of their ferocious pessimism and their handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest ...¹⁹

and:

We are accustomed to think, we of the English faith, that a cynic is a living advertisement of his errors ... It is easy to exclaim that if he judges life only from the point of view of the senses, many are the noble and exquisite things that he must leave out. What he leaves out has no claim to get itself considered till after we have done justice to what he takes in ...²⁰

The juxtaposition of these two different fictional frames of reference becomes a recurrent theme in James's criticism of the 1880s and 1890s. The English tradition asks questions in novels about what is 'good' and what is 'right' (or - at worst -

¹⁷ Leon Edel, *The Life*, 448.

¹⁸ 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888). *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira. London: Heinemann, 1963, 93.

¹⁹ To W D Howells (1884), *Letters*, Vol.3, 29.

²⁰ 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira, 93.

imposes answers to those questions). The European novel asks whether what it writes convinces, whether it feels like life, whether it tells the truth about how life feels (but a dimension is missing - what is 'good', what is 'right'?). Again, James's position outside the two frames stimulates him, keeps him interrogating, doubting.

He argues in a number of essays, but at length in his 1888 essay on Maupassant and his 1902 essay on Italian novelist Mathilde Serao, that the explanation for the convention of propriety governing English fiction at the end of the century lies in how thoroughly through its history the English novel had been in the control of women: not only frequently and successfully written by them, but also hugely and significantly read by them. In a culture (such as that represented in *The Awkward Age*) where certain kinds of information were conventionally proscribed for women, the consequences of such female participation in the novels' making had to be significant:

... if the element of compromise - compromise with fifty of the 'facts of life' - be the common feature of the novel in English speech, so it is mainly indebted for this character to the sex comparatively without a feeling for logic ... Nothing is at any rate more natural than to trace a connection between our general mildness, as it may be conveniently called, and the fact that we are likewise so generally feminine.²¹

Again, this is not simply a matter of the proscription of certain taboo subjects. The obligatory innocence, or excision of unsuitable subject matters from the material of fiction, tended, James argued, to result in an overall moralising 'optimism':

No doubt there is in our literature an immense amount of conventional blinking, and it may be questioned whether pessimistic representation in M Maupassant's manner does not follow his particular original more closely than our perpetual quest of pleasantness (does not Mr Rider Haggard make even his African carnage pleasant?) adheres to the lines of the world we ourselves know ... It must never be forgotten that the optimism of that [English] literature is partly the optimism of women and spinsters; in other words the optimism of ignorance as well as delicacy.²²

James writes ambivalently about that optimism. Straddling the disjunction between fictional possibilities, he can see the

²¹ 'Mathilde Serao' (1902). *Notes on Novelists*. 1914, 236.

²² 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira 103.

English-language version as naive and vulnerable beside the better informed cynicism of, say, a Maupassant; or even (in the case, say, of African carnage) as saccharine mendacity. From both these possibilities he wants to dissociate himself, and the 'honesty' of the French realists and naturalists (in spite of their 'pessimism and handling of unclean things') fills him sometimes full of disgust for the 'soap and water' of English fictional propriety.²³

His complaints, however, are always counterweighed with positive emphasis on strong 'feminine' qualities in English fiction: its 'piety, in the civil and domestic sense'.²⁴ In English, he suggests, it has been the women writers rather than the men who have written for the 'grown-ups':

The female mind has in fact throughout the competition carried off the prize in the familiar game, known to us all from childhood's hour, of playing at 'grown-up'; finding thus its opportunity, with no small acuteness, in the more and more marked tendency of the mind of the other gender to revert, alike in the grave and the gay, to those simplicities which there would appear to be some warrant for pronouncing puerile. It is the ladies in a word who have lately done most to remind us of man's relations with himself, that is with woman. His relations with the pistol, the pirate, the police, the wild and the tame beast - are these not prevaillingly what the gentlemen have given us?²⁵

James's sense of the essential deep seriousness of women's narrow focus in their subject matter - their writing turns inward, upon relationships and the personal, not outward to the world - counterbalances interestingly the problem of women's 'ignorance'. A certain masculine bravado may even get in the way of seriousness; his point here is obviously aimed at Rider Haggard and Stevenson rather than the French novelists, but that wariness of the *élan* of male adventure (the French adventure is more likely to be sexual than colonial or on horseback), and that sympathy for the feminine and inturning, will persist in James even into the very improper last novels.

James even suggests in his Seralo essay that the future freedom of the English novel may depend on that very tradition of its femininity which has so constrained it:

²³ To W D Howells (1884). *Letters*, Vol. 3, 29.

²⁴ 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira, 103.

²⁵ 'Mathilde Seralo' (1902), *Notes on Novelists*, 237.

... the novel will surely not become less free in proportion as the condition of women becomes more easy. It is more or less in deference to their constant concern with it that we have seen it, among ourselves, pick its steps so carefully; but there are indications that the future may reserve for us the surprise of having to thank the very class whose supposed sensibilities so oppressed us for teaching it not only a longer stride, but a healthy indifference to an occasional splash.²⁶

The 'constant concern' and the picking its steps so carefully imply the inhibiting propriety of the women, which has limited where the novel has been able to step; but they imply too the concentration and commitment - precisely, the carefulness - with which the women have worked, within their frame. The frame, James understands, is cultural and imposed, not intrinsic (their 'supposed sensibilities'; and 'the novel will ... not become less free in proportion as the condition of women becomes more easy'). And it may be the very carefulness they have painfully learned which will in the future qualify the women writers to liberate the novel from 'oppressions' just as they will have liberated themselves.

The optimism of English literature has been the 'optimism of ignorance as well as delicacy'. We might choose to read that 'delicacy' as mere residue of the moralism James is progressively shedding as he grows farther from his roots in Hawthorne and George Eliot and nearer to the filial homage to Balzac of his 1905 American lecture. On the other hand, the chapters following will explore the possibility that 'delicacy', the female-centredness of the English tradition, persisted as a value for James even into the late fictions; the possibility that what interested him, again, was not the exchange of one system for another, but a perch between, a fictional medium in which both possibilities, a feminine-optimistic and a masculine-cynical, could be made real and co-existent, and neither of them offered as exhaustive.

James's prophecy was not fulfilled: it was Joyce and Lawrence who were to 'teach' the novel to make its 'splash' in forbidden waters; and the modernist period was to bring to an end the long predominance of women writers in the English-language novel tradition. On the other hand, while the great male modernists pursued their dizzying intellectual adventures,

²⁶ 'Mathilde Serao' (1902), *Notes on Novelists*, 237.

ruthlessly radical, contemptuously anti-bourgeois and anti-domestic, James would perhaps have appreciated how Jean Rhys and Elizabeth Bowen, or Willa Cather and Katharine Mansfield, stubbornly and carefully nurtured the quieter traditions of English fiction, and kept alive, not exactly its old 'optimism', but at least its intimacy with the ordinary and everyday, its movement of inturning self-awareness, and its concentration on relationships, on 'man's relations with himself, that is with woman'.

Those, then, are the two central arguments of the thesis around which everything that follows arranges itself: first, that there is an evolution in James's oeuvre from an acquiescent conventional propriety to a reconciliation with the 'improper' energies of sensuality and pleasure; and second, that that this evolution is entangled with the issue of the very different conventions of propriety governing the English language and the European novel traditions. The introduction concludes with a brief résumé of how those arguments are carried through the chapters that follow.

If the argument of this thesis is that we can make out the whole history of James's oeuvre in the light of the ripe worldliness of the late novels, then it seems sensible to begin, not quite at the beginning, but at least in that novel of James's middle period which is most suggestive of all those themes and preoccupations which are to follow. *The Portrait of a Lady* ends on an *impasse*: an *impasse* for Isabel, and an *impasse* for the English novel which has brought her to the very brink of the contradiction it has always contained. The English language novel has always made much of its material and gained much of its energy from the spirit and the independent-mindedness of its heroines; from their *resistance* to what presses upon them, so to speak (from Clarissa to Evelina to Elizabeth Bennet to the problematic Becky Sharp to Jane Eyre to Maggie Tulliver). No doubt the novel also nurtured in its reading public a high valuation of that spirit and that independent-mindedness. At the same time, in order for their resistance to be poignant and

admirable, to be real, the pressure upon these heroines has to be given an unanswerable force, has to be the very frame within which their stories exist. The English novel in the nineteenth century has made its space within the parameters of certain conventions of femininity and feminine goodness; and its stories have mostly been of women struggling for accommodation of their spirit and their independence within those conventions.

In Isabel Archer James makes this struggle reach its logical *impasse*. Isabel, who has always put the highest value upon her personal freedom, is trapped in a loveless marriage to a man who attacks and erodes that freedom. Nothing holds her in the marriage but convention; all the arguments Caspar Goodwood makes to persuade her to leave her husband are, to our modern ears, unanswerable. But convention in *The Portrait of a Lady* is never merely convention; it is rendered as grown in to the very structures of Isabel's imagination, entangled with the roots of her idea of herself. And not only Isabel; what James represents in Isabel is a whole literary ideal of chaste womanhood, an ideal that has deeply succumbed to the poignant sacrificial aesthetic of Isabel's contradiction. A whole literature is hooked, so to speak, on the heady gesture with which Isabel will refuse and the way she will turn her heavy movement of submission into a thwarted negative assertion, a dignity, a piece of pride. It is beautiful, and its aesthetic is more ancient than the novel; it borrows something, for example, from Hermione's gesture of wronged submission in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare's turning Hermione into a statue both underlines for us that her gesture is part of an available formal female rhetoric, and warns of the power of that rhetoric to drain away vitality and warmth. Of course Hermione, set down in quite another world from Isabel's late nineteenth century North Atlantic leisure class, has no choice; her ideal of conduct is inseparable from her husband's literal power of life and death over her.

The rational argument of James's novel has come up against its aesthetic, and both stand locked together on the brink of the novel's - and Isabel's - future. This great fiction of James's middle period feels at its ending inconclusive; it strains forward but has no language - no argument, no aesthetic

- to express what can come next. It cannot tell us whether Isabel goes back to her husband or not; or whether James's novel form will be able to imagine a woman who might say yes instead of no, without having to become the instant she said it a Mme Merle, cast out from sympathy, ruined.

The Aspern Papers also turns upon an unease in James crucial to the whole development into the late works. The story's comic interrogation of the literary industry is not merely at the expense of bogus *littérateurs* parasitic upon 'real' art; it is too uncomfortable for that. By the time Miss Bordereau catches the narrator in the act of opening her desk in search of the precious letters, we feel ourselves implicated guiltily along with him: we ask ourselves what we are doing in an old lady's private rooms, heaped up untidily with her lifetime's accretions, and what right we have to know her story, which she does not want to tell. Who decides what her story is anyway? Does it stop - as our narrator rather wishes it had stopped - when Jeffrey Aspern stops writing it? (Or when James stops writing it?)

Out of these kinds of interrogations in the works of James's middle years grows the complex late style, with its evasions of finality, its refusal of the judgemental middle-ground, its lofty aristocratic irony reluctant to foreclose upon its subjects. And again, it is essential to *The Aspern Papers* that a male narrator tries to achieve his 'story' at the expense of two females; and that the two females he is trying to outdo frustrate and elude him at every turn, even finally sending his old letters up in smoke. Along with James's ever more complex awareness of the frame that narrative imposes, goes his perception of the complex position of the female subject within that frame. Miss Bordereau is the ideal female to whom Jeffrey Aspern's poems were offered up; but she is not only that. Whenever our narrator comes close she offers him another side of the truth, material, scathing, fiercely resistant to assimilation to anyone's ideal. James will carry into his later works all this excitement in *The Aspern Papers* at what

possibilities for women might lie beyond the ideal frame that narrative imposes.

At the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* James uses the gesture of renunciation, however opaquely and hesitatingly. In the transitional novels of the late 1890s he re-explores the roots of that gesture, and the roots of the cultural ideal of chaste, renouncing, refusing femininity which gives rise to the gesture, by writing novels and stories centred in female childhood and adolescence. In *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw* he is particularly interested in the teachers who transmit the ideal; the Mrs Wixes and Miss Overmores and hungry deluded governesses from country vicarages. Mrs Wix sits with Maisie in their room in Boulogne and reproaches her with her absence of a 'moral sense', while all the pleasuring world of France offers itself up to the child from outside the window. By the end of the novel Maisie has learned how to renounce. At the end of *The Turn of the Screw* the pedagogue who has too much of her own dignity and importance invested in ideals of innocence and sexlessness destroys the child who will not pretend to see the ghosts he can't see. The adults have all their meaning and value invested in ideas and ideals which exist with terrifying independence from anything the children can see or believe in; James, through entering the innocences and ignorances of the children can unlearn those adult frames, re-open a space in which to see the world cleanly and without Mrs Wix's 'straighteners'.

These fictions represent a crisis, virtually, in the oeuvre, a crisis of authority. There is no appeal within them against the adult, pathological, version of things: Mrs Wix's dingy (and easily bought-off) proprieties, the vicarage girl's contaminated sex-obsessions. Only the fictions themselves confirm that what the children see is real, more real. And significantly this pathology of propriety that James sees interposed everywhere as frame between the real and the child-perception is mostly ministered by women, women whose imagination has been tainted by seclusion, narrowness, and ignorance, and who zealously perpetuate therefore the very

conventions of perception through which they themselves (and this irony is particularly acute in *The Turn of the Screw*) have been excluded and diminished.

In *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw* adult sexuality is rendered with a frankness new in James's oeuvre: the driven promiscuousness of Maisie's parents, the dingy dissimulations over whether Sir Claude has been in Mrs Beale's bedroom, the all-but-spoken unspeakableness between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. But it is rendered with considerable distaste; these stories whose subject is the legacy for the imagination of a guilty Victorian propriety are themselves uncomfortable in a rather Victorian way, only able to imagine innocence in an unsexual child. As James's new frankness grows into its adolescence in *The Awkward Age*, he is able to reconcile himself more easily with the sexual facts. It is a more forgiving fiction than its two predecessors: it is not tensed around that same recoil from the sexual and mistrust of the adult.

Just as *The Awkward Age* is transitional in James's work, its subject is a transition in mores in late nineteenth century English 'society'; the abandonment of that custom devoted to preserving an old chaste ideal of femininity like the one Isabel sacrifices to at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Nanda is allowed to grow up not only knowing all the sexual facts but bumping up against them daily in her mother's *fin de siècle* idly promiscuous fast set. Aggie is brought up according to the old custom, only her innocence, in a society that has long ago broken with all the prohibitions of its grandmothers, can only be a fragile sham sustained conveniently until the point of marriage. But the novel isn't simply a celebration of a new openness, any more than it is a lament for the old closed perception. In a sense the novel is about the power of the past - Mr Longdon's revisiting from the past, almost from the dead, is its central motif - and the persistence of the aesthetic of an ideal of femininity long after the fact, haunting these girls for whose contemporary reality ignorance or even innocence could only be a disastrous preparation.

In the complex tangle of values in the novel, it is Nanda herself, hopelessly initiated, who most acutely appreciates the aesthetic of her grandmother's kind of womanhood, Isabel's kind, that refuses and sacrifices and sets the impossible high standard. 'Ah,' says Nanda, 'say what you will - it is the way we ought to be!' (259). And by a similar perverse twist the man Nanda loves is the very man who can't accept her modern initiated knowingness. Her choice of Vanderbank is no accidental perversity; it is precisely her being unencumbered with the old-fashioned superstitions of femininity that liberates her to admire the old-fashioned magic of his type. His 'sacred terror', as Mitchy calls it, is the same superb male presumption of advantage which puts her out of question for him. Partly, he simply can't imagine himself partnered by anyone who understands so much about his male mystique.

As James's fictions concentrate more and more on unpicking the complex feminine dependencies, he is also more and more interested, naturally, in men's power, a power that in *The Portrait of a Lady* only the monster Osmond was allowed to have over Isabel. And just as Nanda, liberated from superstition, loves Van, who is haunted by the superstition of the gentleman; so James, as he learns to see through the phenomenon of the glossy nineteenth century male worldling, is all the more able to render him with especial tenderness. The men, the lovers, of the late novels - Van, Chad, Gloriani, the Prince, and, complicatedly, Merton Densher - are the truly splendid products of nineteenth century upper class culture: polished, privileged, callous, scrupulous; with thoroughbred fierce pride and flawless good taste; beneficiaries of the sexual double standard (no-one has ever wanted Vanderbank to be innocent or ignorant). In the late novels it is in relation to the imperturbable-seeming power of these men that James understands the real risks his women take when they refuse refusal and innocence, and adventure for happiness and knowledge for themselves.

In *The Ambassadors* both Strether and James face up to imagining sex. Shyly, after having at first allowed himself to suppose 'nothing', Strether confronts the carnal fact of the lovers' relationship and finds himself supposing 'innumerable and wonderful things'. As for James: almost all of his stories have been love stories, but sex has been either postponed or denied or only allowed to appear - like the wicked adulteries in *The Portrait of a Lady* or the tawdry ones in *The Awkward Age* - at the periphery. Something in the whole movement of the development of the oeuvre, however, has been bringing James up to this threshold which in *The Ambassadors* he finally crosses: no longer at the periphery but at the very heart of this novel the lovers like lovers in the real world take off their clothes and embrace ('We can arrange it - with two grains of courage. People in our case always arrange it' says Merton to Kate in *The Wings of the Dove*, 326). No more 'blushing in the dark' for 'dressing dolls'; the writer who has always read Balzac and Flaubert no longer scruples to name the simple facts that the French novelists had always told.

The development that brings James to this threshold is not the squeamish fascination of voyeurism - although that possibility has worried him as it has worried Strether. Instead it is as though some counter-impulse has been operating in his work to the one that has had him unpicking and unmaking the persuasive power of the aesthetic of renunciation and refusal. In proportion as James has understood how that aesthetic is founded in sacrifice and bondage - how it can only bring Isabel's free spirit to the *impasse* of the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* - an alternative possible value has grown in his imagination to counterbalance his loss. Isabel in her kiss with Caspar Goodwood felt herself in danger of being swept away, she beat her feet to find solid ground to stand on. In the late fictions it is as though James, doubting that Isabel's watertightness is the whole story, has wanted in his work an aesthetic abandoned to flood and risk, whose core is natural rather than moral, driven by what Walter Benjamin called in a different context the 'explosive will to happiness' (Benjamin's essay on Proust is endlessly suggestive for a reading of late James):

Nor is it hard to say why this paralyzing, explosive will to happiness which pervades Proust's writings is so seldom comprehended by its readers. In many places Proust himself made it easy for them to view this oeuvre too, from the time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism. After all, nothing makes more sense to the model pupils of life than the notion that a great achievement is the fruit of toil, misery, and disappointment. The idea that happiness could have a share in beauty would be too much of a good thing, something that their *ressentiment* would never get over.²⁷

What Strether and James imagine, finally, is not the morality but the pleasure of the lovers' embraces.

James has not simply substituted a French male sexual cynicism for his old English propriety. The pleasures at the novel's heart are unmistakeably ephemeral and vulnerable, and James is especially interested in how helpless his women are once they step outside the shelter of the conventional propriety which the women writers had worked so determinedly to consecrate in the English tradition. As well as being his homage to things sensual and things French, *The Ambassadors* is also James's critique of the Continental sexual system in so far as it cruelly privileges the male: Chad will move on, and Mme de Vionnet has no recourse to any rhetoric of righteousness, nor any appeal save to a stoic *vieille sagesse* passed on through the immemorial tradition of such inequities and such abandonments. But having registered all that, the essential gesture of the novel is not Mrs Newsome's, or anyone's, disapproval. It is Strether's recognition - fired, envious, perturbed; and his submission, eventually, to the flood of the realities of sensual pleasure and momentary happiness which can't be explained or moralised or extended into an infinite future but which sit nonetheless 'like a lion in the path'.

The aesthetic of the late novels, no longer hooked on gestures of renunciation, is deeply enamoured of appearances - or Appearances: James gives them an exceptional capital in the opening of *The Ambassadors*. Of course James the novelist has always been enamoured of appearances, his seeing eye has always

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. London: Fontana, 1992, 199.

been alive to everything that rooms and clothes and customs could suggest; only the novelist of *The Portrait of a Lady* couldn't help himself also wanting (whether it was the New England transcendentalist or the George Eliot moralist in him) to see through them. Appearances in *The Portrait of a Lady* deceive. Lockleigh with its parterres and still waters is as much a trap for Isabel as Osmond's and Mme Merle's precious old things. We can't make sense of the world of *The Wings of the Dove* unless we appreciate how the seeing eye has come to rest differently; in things, rather than on them. We are not invited to judge Kate Croy's hungry materialism but to experience it; to share the sharp tooth of her desire for privilege, for happiness, for pleasure. The distribution of these things (to borrow the formulation again from the telegraphist in *In the Cage* who knows about it so painfully well) is not just; but it is real. Instead of a greasy tea-table, banquets; instead of the prison of mean employment, Florence, Venice. Instead of the safe partnership in a grocery, the letting down one's beautiful hair for a lover; instead of inconsequence, power.

The real pleasures of the world are not moralised in the late novels; but they are not sentimentalised either. This is very much the argument Benjamin makes out for *À la Recherche de Temps Perdus*: deeply infatuated with the appearances - flawed, super-subtle, absurd, seductive - of his extraordinary Parisian élite, Proust is the very writer who can most accurately and most inwardly describe the very process and the pains of class identity. The James of the late novels is not an unpolitical writer; he is more political in these novels succumbed to the deep appeal of privilege and pleasure than he ever is in *The Princess Casamassima*, his middle period novel explicitly conscientiously concerned with class. In *The Wings of the Dove* class privilege is not an iniquitous static framework sighed over by conscience from outside; it is a minutely differentiated, conflictual process imagined from inside, driven by the life energy of all those who strive with one another for their place near the golden flame. Privilege is not passive, it is a perpetual performance; exhilarating, exhausting. The girls and the men alike find themselves cast in social roles - the charmer, the ironist, the dove - that pinch and chafe and

suffocate; the roles lightly entered upon overgrow the individuals until the sustaining them becomes a matter of social life and social death. At important points in the novel the effort of privilege spills over into moments of lapsed restful contact with a world outside the brilliantly lit inner circle: Milly rests in Regents' Park among men sleeping on the grass, Merton brushes sleeves with Venetians in brown jackets, Kate and Merton walk the streets like the housemaid with the baker.

James's late novels don't represent any kind of polemical argument against the privileged *fin de siècle* leisure class they represent. But he is interested in discovering deep within the imagination of that class - its imagination of itself - the dynamics of privilege, its real pleasures, its real pains.

In a sense *The Golden Bowl* resumes precisely that great argument which has been the theme of this reading of the oeuvre: the argument between an optimistic moralising innocence and a pessimistic experience. And, as in the other fictions, that argument is entangled problematically with issues of gender. We may be half inclined to read *The Golden Bowl* as elegy for a defeated version of aristocracy (of privilege), lived out in the senses and the body in Charlotte and Amerigo's love affair, disturbingly displaced by the Ververs' bland innocence and its infinite power of purchase. But the novel itself will frustrate us, because it cannot but also enlist our sympathy for Maggie's adventure, her unmaking and reconstructing the reality of her marriage, and her escape, too, from the suffocating hermetic seal of her relationship with her father. In the real ambivalence of *The Golden Bowl*, it is rather as though Isabel Archer was juxtaposed in a novel with a Mme Merle given back youth and beauty and a share in the sun and allowed to weigh equally in the novel's scale (though not the world's scale) with her 'good' bright rival. It is significant that that pleasure in the body, that sensuality, which James has worked towards giving full expression in his oeuvre is not, in the temporal structure of *The Golden Bowl*, felt to be more 'advanced' than the chaste decency of the Ververs. On the contrary, if anything it is the

romance of the beautiful sinful couple which belongs to an 'old' world of values; it is the childish domestic 'Anglo-Saxon' model of privileged living that prevails over 'Continental' sensual romance and reaches into the future at the end of the novel. The barbarian, the Prince, the glossy male worldling, is finally tamed and - really, at last - married.

Why are we still interested, after almost a hundred years, in *The Golden Bowl*: in that immense expenditure of complex reflection and exquisite manner upon the tiny space of its story? Four lovers circle one another, change partners, embrace, at the very pinnacle of privilege, exempt from all ordinary material considerations. They seem to have no responsibility to any larger social context, save to the exigencies of that perpetual high performance of intelligent good taste, so that even as the Prince and Maggie talk to one another across the pieces of the smashed golden bowl both are aware that 'the occasion was passing, that they were dining out, that he wasn't dressed, and that, though she herself was, she was yet, in all probability, so horribly red in the face and so awry, in many ways, with agitation, that in view of the Ambassador's company, of possible comments and constructions, she should need, before her glass, some restoration of appearances'(425). In their extraordinary lives the ordinary questions of what to do, or what to be, never arise; instead what they endlessly earnestly discuss is where to go, where next in the material paradise their wealth can purchase (the English country house, the London mansion, the historic 'collectable' Continental cities, or the open opportunities of America) to set down the golden tent of their free-floating privilege.

Whatever this is, it isn't a universal fable of love relationships. The kind of the love, the pathology of it, the pleasures and the pains in it, belong not incidentally but in their essence to an extraordinary moment in the history of a particular leisure class civilisation, founded on an immense economic and social inequity, embodied in a vast complex system of caste distinction, of social ritual and taboo. The more

James's late manner exaggerates the glamour and heightens the charm of the aesthetic of his *fin de siècle* leisure class, the more the fictions also find their strong purchase on its strangeness, its arbitrariness, the sacrifices built in its foundations. All these fine artificial creatures - but the women especially - walk on knives.

Neither that civilisation nor its pains and pleasures are much like ours (it is not the inequity that has vanished, it is the ritual and the taboo and the caste distinction). But just as the past in James's novels reaches both its long shadows and its long illuminations into the present of his stories, so the mysteries James explores reach forward into our own different world as if they still held secrets for us, as if even the most occult initiations of extreme privilege could speak to us across the time and change between. That tension in the oeuvre between on the one hand the almost elegaic rendering of a now vanished cultural aesthetic - the beauty of custom, of ritual, of Appearances - and on the other hand James's revolutionary interrogation of the function of women's consciousness and women's representation within that aesthetic, seems particularly telling now, seems part of the essential history of our selves.

2. 'Just you wait!': reflections on the last chapters of *The Portrait of a Lady*

The end of *The Portrait of a Lady* is a significant focus for beginning any discussion of James's evolving attitude to the proper and the improper in his culture. Critics (and presumably readers) have been tripping up on and debating its ending since the novel first appeared in 1881: in those early days with unsophisticated perplexity and often impatience. Even the very sympathetic review by James's friend W.D. Howells in *Century* balks at James's leaving us 'to our own conjectures in regard to the fate of the people in whom he has interested us' before submitting to swallowing his treatment meekly: 'We must agree, then, to take what seems a fragment instead of a whole, and to find, when we can, a name for this new kind in fiction.'¹

James in *The Portrait* has constructed his *impasse*: the spirited Isabel in an impossible marriage, having made what feels like a terminal rupture in disobeying her husband and coming to England to be with her dying cousin, tempted momentarily by the renewed importunity of Caspar Goodwood. But he doesn't seem to have left us all the instructions for how we get out of it. Does Isabel have to return to her hated husband and his punishments for her defection ('It will not be the scene of a moment; it will be a scene of the rest of my life', 565)?² What other possible futures does the novel allow us to envisage

¹ (November 1882.) *Henry James: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Roger Gard. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, 126-134.

² The revision here from the 1881 edition, from 'a scene that will last always' to 'a scene of the rest of my life' seems to make Isabel's meaning less ambiguous: she has to be implying to Henrietta here that she will go back to resume her marriage with Osmond. Of course the fact that she implies it to Henrietta doesn't necessarily mean she isn't entertaining other possibilities.

for her? Is Caspar a solution? These speculations sound very like Isabel's own, in her railway carriage crossing Europe on her way to Ralph (although she hasn't calculated yet on Caspar's offer), and she too feels that the 'middle years', the years ahead, the immediate question of what she will do, are wrapped from her in a 'grey curtain', she only has a 'mutilated glimpse' of any future (ML 492³).

These days (after more than a century of accumulated interpretation, the scale of it latterly - *mea culpa* - a phenomenon that needs one of James's own stories to do it justice) we are more sophisticatedly perplexed. The problem is not simply one of James's 'frustrating the reader's curiosity' about a handful of 'characters'.⁴ As readers - or at least as critics - we are irreversibly committed to the idea that a serious novel will have moved beyond '"objectively realistic representation" to a stage of reading the significations that lie behind or within reality'.⁵ What James means us to understand Isabel might do at the end of his novel matters, because James is elaborating a crucial moment in the development of that theme of marriage and adultery which, it has been argued, is one of the fundamentals to the whole novel 'project', from the beginnings of the theme in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Elective Affinities*, and so on.⁶

One of the energies driving the nineteenth century development of the novel is that head of steam built up by the contradiction between the form's tendency on the one hand towards a resolution in adaptation to social forms and norms (its inbuilt drive, for example, towards happy endings in marriages); and on the other hand, its narratives rooted in a subjective individualism that can't always square with

³ Mostly in this chapter references will be to the 1881 edition (Macmillan, London), indicated by ML before the page number; not because the original version is 'better', but because the revisions are so significant to an interpretation of the ending that they need pointing out where they occur. Page numbers without letters are to the Penguin imprint of the New York Edition, as usual.

⁴ (From an unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, December 1881.) Gard, 98.

⁵ I have borrowed this formulation from J.M. Coetzee, in *White Writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988, 113.

⁶ Notably of course in Tony Tanner's *Adultery and the Novel: contract and transgression*, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1979. But the idea by now is so thoroughly disseminated it almost feels like common property.

resolution, that can't but register individual reluctance, resistance, *differentness*, and raise unanswerable protests against the 'contract'. (In Tony Tanner's elegant formulation, it is the 'tension between law and sympathy which holds the great bourgeois novel together'.⁷) The *impasse* James has engineered at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*, between submission to the form of marriage and commitment to the individual pursuit of happiness and freedom, is a place the English language novel has visited numerous times already by 1881.

The 'solutions', or resolutions, for Dorothea Casaubon and Gwendolen Grandcourt (and for that matter for Jane Eyre) come from 'off', in the form of convenient demises; but we know already from something in the texture of *The Portrait of a Lady* - partly to do with just how very consciously it inscribes itself into that tradition of novels structured around strained marriage contracts - that James is pressing the development of the tradition to a new point where that kind of formal manipulation won't answer. An authorial rescue (Osmond falling out of a small high window at the Palazzo Roccanera?) would intrude here like an outmoded piece of theatre.

James introduces the possibility of another way out of the *impasse* - also traditional, even if traditionally (in the English language novel) outlawed - in the shape of Caspar Goodwood offering himself in defiance of all convention and all contract. The offer opens up under Isabel's feet - abyss, escape - but in her first panicking recognition of it she flies, away from the lover and back to the security of the lighted house. Has James proposed the third ingredient of the classic adulterous triangle - the 'other man' - only in order to eliminate him from the equation? It is difficult now to read the 1881 ending of the novel as if we didn't know the New York Edition revisions, but originally it finished with Henrietta's injunction to Caspar:

"Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"
On which he looked up at her. (ML 520)

⁷ Tanner, 14.

Taking that by itself, it doesn't seem ridiculous to interpret it as a reviewer in the *Spectator* did in 1881, relishingly appalled at what he calls James's 'pure agnosticism':

...never before has he closed a novel by setting up so cynical a sign-post into the abyss, as he sets up at the close of this book. He ends his *Portrait of a Lady*, if we do not wholly misinterpret the rather covert, not to say almost cowardly, hints of his last page, by calmly indicating that this ideal lady of his, whose belief in purity has done so much to alienate her from her husband, in that it had made him smart under her contempt for his estimates of the world, saw a 'straight path' to a liaison with her rejected lover.⁸

Most contemporary reviewers, after some puzzled hesitation, saw that Isabel's 'straight path' was away from and not into the arms of Caspar Goodwood, but their hesitation was understandable. Without the New York Edition underscoring, Henrietta's injunction and Caspar's look are deeply equivocal: *uninterpretable*, surely? How could we read them and be sure Caspar has nothing to hope for? Although when James added his final sentence in 1905 (the year he worked on the revisions for the New York Edition) he may have imagined he was making obvious what insensitive readers had only too densely missed, he was in fact tipping into definiteness a 'close' which, intriguingly, had closed nothing, had hovered on the brink of a future which it did not offer to make out any better than Isabel could herself in her 'mutilated glimpse'. In the 1881 edition Isabel is sent back to Rome but we only have an unclear idea - we can only piece together into a guess all the fragments of Isabel's own and her friends' speculation - as to *what for*, and *what could 'happen' next*. In the New York Edition at least we are made sure that what could happen next cannot be Caspar:

"Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"

On which he looked up at her - but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience. (592)

⁸ (R.H. Hutton, Nov. 1881.) Gard, 96.

It makes for a neatly ironic measure of cultural shift that the language used in the *Spectator* to deplore James's 'agnosticism' - 'the tendency of life, he holds, is to result in a general failure of the moral and spiritual hopes it raises' - sounds remarkably like a strain of late twentieth-century disapproval of James' conclusion to *The Portrait*. Only where the *Spectator* reviewer upbraided James for giving Isabel to her lover we are now outraged (with some better justification perhaps) that he seems to be giving her back to her husband. It is of course no mere accident of narrative that it is Rome Isabel returns to. The city cannot help standing for the weight of past empire and the constraints of tradition, for 'law' against 'sympathy'; although James is too complex a writer to labour this value one-sidedly, and the novel is rich with the consolations as well as the constraints for Isabel of Rome's and Europe's pastness. (When she sits looking from St. John Lateran across the Campagna, she registers the 'endurance' as well as the 'splendid sadness' of the old ruins: 'she leaned her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright', 518.) The argument, though, that the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* represents a willed conservatism on James's part, a sort of resistance in the spirit but submission to the letter of the law, needs to be met; and is seminal to an interpretation of James's attitude to the proprieties in his later novels.⁹

Before we can justly decide what order of gesture James's is at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*, and whether he is cutting away at a stroke all the equivocation of the second half of the novel in a resort to a transcendent and absolute value - 'the traditional decencies and sanctities of marriage' (ML 404) - we need to penetrate further back, to see how that equivocation - that *impasse* - is constructed in the first place. Significantly, most interpretations of the ending as a conservative return of Isabel to her husband (whether sympathetic or unsympathetic to James's gesture) depend upon a reading in which James has constructed Isabel as flawed; as

⁹ As in Habegger: 'The freedom that interests James is the internal kind, where the manacles do not get taken off the hands but the spirit -somehow- spreads its wings'. Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, 180.

committing, out of *hybris* or lack of self-knowledge, some fatal punishable error, or exhibiting - the psychoanalytic sin - some 'inner damage'. In other words, the logic of the conservative ending is perceived as being that if James feels justified in punishing her, he must have had her do something to be punished for (even if he/we perceive her punishment as tragic: i.e. 'this is going to hurt us more than it hurts you').

This is the retributive model of fictional structure. Interestingly, from the evidence of contemporary reviews of *The Portrait*, literary criticism of our 'agnostic' twentieth century is more prone to the retributive model than James's contemporary and relatively unsophisticated reader. The reader in 1881 might require Isabel to be punished, certainly, if she reneged on her marriage; but he (occasionally she) doesn't require it because Isabel has 'an inability to extend her imagination beyond the superficial, the conventional' or because she 'wants the sense of knowing and loving without incurring the risk of positive loss' or for that matter because she 'refuses to let the "light" of her own sexuality shine'¹⁰. Here and there in 1881 (the American reviewers like her - and believe in her - more often than the English reviewers) she gets a most sympathetic reading:

The fine purpose of her freedom, the resolution with which she seeks to be the maker of her destiny, the subtle weakness into which all this betrays her, the apparent helplessness of her ultimate position, and the conjectured escape only through patient forbearance - what are these, if not attributes of womanly life expended under current conditions?¹¹

The open-endedness of that - its absence of fictional determinism - surely approximates more closely to the experience of reading the character than any punitive closed system.¹²

¹⁰ From Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992, 239. Adrian Poole, *Henry James*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester New Readings, 1991. Bonnie L. Heron, 'Substantive Sexuality, Henry James constructs Isabel Archer as a Complete Woman in his Revised Version of Portrait of a Lady', *Henry James Review*, xvi 2 (1995): 139. F.R. Leavis seems to think James doesn't punish Isabel enough: 'that she shouldn't be led by their unanimity to question her own valuation convicts her of a notable lack of sense, not to say extremely unintelligent obstinacy... but James doesn't let us suppose that he shares this view.' (*The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1948, 127.)

¹¹ (H.E. Scudder, from an unsigned review, *Atlantic* xlix, (1882).) Gard, 126-30.

¹² For an intelligent suggestion that George Eliot's portrait of Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* is indeed - disturbingly - retributive, see

'Under current conditions' - with the sharpness of contemporaneity - the woman struggling between her personal unhappiness and her ideal of loyalty in marriage evoked, not astonished psychopathology (there must be something the matter), but (at best) tact and respect.

Rather than having worked from the idea of a closed, predetermined psychology, James has in fact taken the risk in *Portrait of a Lady* of inhabiting a psychology in flux, still in formation, full of the potential for surprises. Searching through the treatment of Isabel's advancing disenchantment to discover what she has it in her to do in her *impasse*, what we come away with is an Isabel whose consciousness and experience aren't single and unified but made up of bewilderingly contradictory elements; intuitions and ideals, fragments learned and instinctual, obstinacies and vanities and self-doubt. She convinces herself, and us, both that she can't co-exist with Osmond and that she can't leave him. She literally voices both possibilities, gives in the words that visit her brooding reflections both values their weight and power: the 'traditional decencies and sanctities of marriage' (ML 404), 'the violence there would be in going when Osmond wished her to remain' (ML 474), as well as 'the rapid approach of a day when she should have to take back something that she had solemnly given' (ML 404) and 'I don't know what great unhappiness might bring me to' (ML 428).

As well as what Isabel consciously reflects on, James gives us in tangible fact the deep instinctual resistance of her spirit to Osmond that goes on at a level below consciousness, in the comedy of how helplessly provokingly defiant she is with him even as she believes herself most to be conforming to the letter of his law. When he tells her to sit on the sofa she chooses the chair (ML 421). How fiercely, staunchly, she resists him in argument (compared, say, to Dorothea): 'There is a thing that would be worth my hearing - to know in the plainest words of what it is you accuse me' (ML 422). And how adequate to him, intellectually, verbally, her defiance is (compared, say, to

Gwendolen's): 'I don't think that on the whole you are disappointed. You have had another opportunity to try and bewilder me.' (ML 423). She can't help (James knows uncannily the operations of married conflict) the very punctiliousness of her obedience becoming a twisted critique of what he commandeers her obedience for.

Incidentally, there is some comedy, too, in Isabel's believing she keeps the secret of her unhappiness so effectively. She proclaims it in fact at every pore, surely, for anyone attuned to her (for example when she replies to Lord Warburton's remarking her husband must be very clever that he 'has a genius for upholstery' ML 337): not because she wants to be pitied, or even because she wants them to know, but simply because she doesn't have the faculty of pretence.

Osmond's response to his wife's galling rectitude-with-reservation is not to dissimulate the inequity of his conventional, obligating advantage over her ('he was her appointed and inscribed master', 462) but simply to invoke it. (Again, uncanny insight into that spiralling married refusal of one another's terms of reference: if she accuses him of being tyrannous, he'll answer with exaggerated tyranny.) Isabel in the subtlety of her psychological flux, in which conventional obligations have long been entangled with the filmy stuff of an intuitive and personal value-system, has come up against the brute archaic power-fact, still, for all its different dressing up, in nineteenth century marriage. It's no mere incidental joke that the Countess, after Isabel tells her Osmond has forbidden her to travel to England, says, '...when I want to make a journey my husband simply tells me I can have no money!' (ML 474).¹³ What is someone made of subtler stuff to do with brute fact?

¹³ The question of Isabel's money is an interesting one. The impression we have from the novel is that she has retained control over it after her marriage: at some point she wishes she could give it all to Osmond in return for her freedom, and then the Countess Gemini talks about Isabel's power to give or not give Pansy a dowry. There had been in England Married Women's Property Acts in 1870 and 1874; in any case the 'top 10% of society were already marrying under the settlement arrangement, by which the wife kept control over her property through trustees' (Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990, 375). We don't know for certain, of course, which law Osmond and Isabel were married under.

It is the nature of the irony that plays around the portrait of Isabel which is at issue in deciding how retributive or open-ended James's 'solution' is, and what his attitude is, finally, to her 'formlessness', her psychology in flux. In the later dialogically-structured novels James dispenses with an omniscient narrator capable of commenting, for example, that Isabel 'was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem' (ML 41), or that she 'flattered herself that she had gathered a rich experience' (ML 279). Here in *The Portrait of a Lady* he is still employing that conventional apparatus of discursive commentary which it is easy to interpret as some kind of directional inscription, or 'last word', on the primary illusionistic fabric of the novel. Yet when James informs us from his superior vantage that Isabel has 'an unquenchable desire to think well of herself' (ML 42) that trajectory of comprehension could hardly produce the illusion of life by itself: the commentary has to be carried into conviction on the back of a wave of other 'experiences' of Isabel - her talk, her situation, her appearance, her adventures, and, by the second half of the novel, her own insistent self-commentating narrative and analysis which almost replaces the intrusive authorial one. The illusion, finally, outpaces the circumscription; an explicit commentary can be contained within a novel which is by no means circumscribed by that commentary.

Alfred Habegger suggests that the 'pattern' for Isabel's story comes from James's ironic reading of contemporary American women novelists: in numerous early reviews for *The Nation*, *The North American Review* and others James expressed his exasperation with so many 'middle-aged lovers' who spent their time 'breaking the hearts and wills of demure little schoolgirls', those same school-girls who had most passionately professed desires for freedom and self sufficiency. It seems very plausible that James should have made this anomaly - a much reiterated high value on personal freedom going along with a profound unacknowledged desire to submit to a suspiciously paternal-seeming master - a hidden ingredient in the psychological baggage of an Isabel formed, after all, in the

same America as Anne Moncure Crane and Elizabeth Stoddard (the novelists Habegger makes reference to). No doubt it is closely tied up with Isabel's 'unquenchable desire to please' (ML 28) and her 'infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong' (ML 42); and it is probably connected too with one very characteristic movement of Isabel's thought, out of complacency and into a painful and hurriedly repressed self-doubt: it happens, for example, just after she's refused Lord Warburton.

Who was she, what was she, that she should hold herself superior? What view of life, what design upon fate, what conception of happiness, had she, that pretended to be larger than this large occasion?... she was wondering whether she was not a cold, hard girl; and when at last she got up and rather quickly went back to the house, it was because, as she had said to Lord Warburton, she was really frightened at herself. (ML 95)

That fear at herself is reiterated throughout the novel, particularly in the last sections as she contemplates, having no idea what she will do next, the crisis in her marriage: 'I am afraid...Afraid of myself! If I were afraid of my husband, that would simply be my duty. That is what women are expected to be.' (ML 441); and, '...constantly present to her mind were all the traditionary decencies and sanctities of marriage. The idea of violating them filled her with shame as well as dread...' (ML 404). 'Marriage meant that in such a case as this, when one had to choose, one chose as a matter of course for one's husband. "I am afraid -yes, I am afraid," she said to herself' (ML 474).

These are all James's representations, no doubt, of the operations of what Habegger calls Isabel's 'hidden internal bondage': they are easy for us to recognise, now, as part of an especially feminine equipment, results of a cultural patterning at the deepest and most unconscious level.¹⁴ Habegger is plausible, too, when he suggests James might be ironising, even, qualities of Isabel's dignity in suffering at the Palazzo Roccanera: the 'noble nickel-plated mask worn by so many women's heroines of the time' is also part of the cultural equipment, and part of Isabel's 'unquenchable desire to think well of herself'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 156.

¹⁵ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 157.

What is at issue, though, is whether in imagining Isabel James's irony is a containing medium, as Habegger suggests, setting up a contemporary 'pattern' in order to knock it down, in the process producing a 'work of fiction...short on moral candour'; or whether the irony is simply a component in a whole movement that opens for imagining Isabel a generous space much larger than her ideas about herself, or, for that matter, James's 'ideas' about her.¹⁶ Are James's ironies in invoking this 'pattern' closed ones? Or can't we celebrate his recognition of a treacherous double bind in contemporary imaging of the female, and of how the individual fluid consciousness finds its stumbling and inevitably incomplete account in and through and around these images?

If James is at pains to register this 'pathology' of a feminine ideal, it would be misrepresenting the overall effect of *The Portrait*, however, not to stress how he also registers in Isabel a resilience, an energy, a self-confidence, all independent of the outcome of her idealistic experiments. (It is in fact the irresistible surging of that self-confidence that causes some of her moments of self-doubt in the first part of the novel: how dare she be so sure she doesn't want to marry Lord Warburton?) We know this resilience of hers is independent of her early optimistic rhetoric because we have one of the strongest expressions of it at one of her worst moments, when she is travelling across Europe back to Ralph:

This impression carried her into the future, of which from time to time she had a mutilated glimpse. She saw herself, in the distant years, still in the attitude of a woman who had her life to live, and these intimations contradicted the spirit of the present hour. It might be desirable to die; but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. Deep in her soul -deeper than any attitude for renunciation- was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost exhilarating, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength -it was a proof that she should some day be happy again. It couldn't be that she was to live only to suffer -only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged -it seemed to her that she was too valuable, too capable, for that. Then she wondered whether it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it ever been a guarantee to be valuable?...Was it not much more probable that if one were delicate one would suffer? It involved then, perhaps, an admission that one had a certain grossness; but Isabel recognised, as it passed before her eyes, the quick, vague shadow of a long future.(492)

¹⁶ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 159.

The sources for these energies are not cultural, but *natural*. Life is Isabel's business. In her self-interrogation here, she passes in review several major items in the Victorian female agenda. Aren't delicate things supposed to suffer? Isn't renunciation a key gesture in the feminine repertoire? Faced with the insoluble contradiction of her unhappy marriage, wouldn't the delicate thing to do be to pale away and die? If so, then delicacy (that prime ingredient of Victorian femininity) isn't for Isabel: *can't be*, because life surges in her from somewhere deeper than the Victorian ideal, and if that convicts her of a certain 'grossness', by Victorian standards, then so be it. She's learning all the time, and knows now to let this ideal pass her with a shrug.

It is James's creation of this energetic field around her rather than her specific utterances that engages us with the youthfully presumptuous Isabel at the opening of the novel; the presumption of youth borrows at any given cultural moment whatever rhetoric is current to express reach and appetite and potential. And it is the natural source of Isabel's energies that Osmond hadn't counted on when he planned his cultural manipulations, her mind 'attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park', where he would 'rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nosegay' (ML 378). Instead among the carefully tended hybrid blooms he calls honour and decency thrust the rank weeds of Isabel's 'pure mind': 'We don't live decently together!' she cries (ML 472).

If we don't believe that James is interested in punishing Isabel for her presumption or for the inadequacy of her ideas, by invoking at his ending a sacrifice to law in returning her to Rome and to her husband, then we are left with a novel in which the tension between law and sympathy is unresolved at its close. Taking the 'open' rather than the 'closed' view of Isabel and her actions, we understand from her return that she still feels herself answerable to law, to what 'seems right' (Ralph says, 'As seems right -as seems right?...Yes, you think a great deal

about that.' ML 507). 'I don't think anything is over,' she says (ML 507). But equally the return to Rome feels provisional; she has made her first gesture of disobedience to Osmond which alters everything, they have acknowledged to one another that any such disobedience will be irrevocable.

To break with Osmond once would be to break for ever; any open acknowledgement of irreconcilable needs would be an admission that their whole attempt would prove a failure. For them there could be no condonement, no compromise, no easy forgetfulness, no formal readjustment. (ML 405)

If there is any sense in which Isabel is returning to 'submit': well, we have seen something of what her submission looks like. We know, too, that her return is partly for Pansy, who figures as the sister/daughter left behind in the very mill of the conventional, and helpless, because she doesn't have Isabel's energy, to resist it; so that the return certainly has its aspect as a gesture of female solidarity, although surely it can't be read as wholly that. Whatever else Isabel strikes us as, she doesn't, surely, strike us as self-sacrificing.

We have a novel that ends poised on the brink of something, balanced over a choice it doesn't - with any finality - actually make. In so far as a choice is made - albeit a provisional, opaque, equivocal one - it is a choice against Caspar Goodwood, and it is Isabel's. She saves herself, by flying from England: the loss of control, the wave of sudden new passionate - erotic - sensation she experienced in Caspar's arms isn't what she wants, now, as a solution to her marriage. She wants to stand on her feet. ('In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on' ML 519.) The flight from drowning sends her back for that confrontation with her marriage which lingering in England only postponed. It's a flight we (liberated) modern readers can hardly disapprove: yes, abandonment to passion is like swooning, drowning, its involuntary helplessness is the alibi classically offered wives exiting their unsatisfactory marriages, and Isabel wants none of it. She wants a clear head.

The function of Caspar's intervention, though, draws our attention to just how *Portrait of a Lady* is not, in fact, composed around the classic adulterous triangle; James's

interrogation of the law as represented by the traditional sanctities and decencies of marriage isn't to consist in this novel of testing it primarily against the pressures of passion, of abandonment, of ecstasy. The conflict is all within the Apollonian civilised temple, around an internal moral contradiction and opposed conceptions of honour, one outward and conventional, one personal and instinctive: between versions, in fact, of what is *right*. When Caspar does offer himself and for a moment - in spite of the fact that the actual words of his appeal to Isabel are in the spirit of the most enlightened New World rationalism - the novel opens to a glimpse of that other, Dionysiac, thing, a 'comet in the sky' (ML 517), 'the hot wind of the desert', 'something potent, acrid, strange' (589), it can only come in the context of the rest of the novel as a sidelight, a surprise, something Isabel has left out of count and can't make space for suddenly. If she is 'natural', then her nature is something straight and sunlit; it's instructive to compare her English churchyard at Ralph's funeral ('the air had the brightness of the hawthorn and the blackbird' ML 509) with the lusty paganism of Charlotte's and the Prince's Matcham in *The Golden Bowl* ('sunny, gusty, lusty English April, all panting and heaving with impatience, or kicking and crying...like some infant Hercules who wouldn't be dressed', 250).

Readers complain of a sexual numbness in the novel, and it is true that one of the ways in which James fails to convince us of the likelihood of an Isabel choosing an Osmond is in failing to create for us his sexual attractiveness for her; although Habegger's clues about that search for the dream-father and his quotation from Constance Fenimore Woolston's astonished recognition of how James had 'divined' something in female fantasy do help.¹⁷ (Creating convincingly the sexual attractiveness of men for women is to be one of James's distinctive achievements in the late period, from the vacillating Sir Claude through the fatal Vanderbank to Merton Densher and Chad and the Prince.) We know very little about the sex in the Osmond marriage. (This compares interestingly to how much, without a single explicit word, George Eliot lets us feel

¹⁷ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 153.

we know about sex and the Casaubons.) We know that sex happened because we know there was a child; we risk a guess that it has terminated, because the child died. The connection is imaginative, not logical, but Isabel's baby figures so little as an emotional reality - never occurs in her introspections - that it inevitably seems just to stand for the death of a link between them.

It is impossible for us to imagine reading an Isabel who says yes to Caspar, the whole dynamic of *The Portrait* runs against it. Yet at that late moment his offer is suddenly almost overwhelmingly tempting. It's not the open-air fresh reasonableness of his arguments that tempts Isabel, but an erotic she has never opened to before; it reaches her now perhaps just because she's broken down and in extremity. James revising in 1905 is careful to specify that this sex which tempts her is bodily, animal, participatory ('the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid, and strange, forced open her set teeth' 589); not the etherised swoonings *Yellow Book* seducees were prone to. She's afraid of Caspar - he's 'dangerous' - for the first time, as she takes in 'each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence' (591). There's a thundering recognition in that 'had least pleased her': in retrospect the whole callowness of her maiden reading of him appears, her treating him as her conquest to be wound in and out at the end of her silver thread, to be exasperated with, to be pitied. Now the very hardness of him that had seemed - to her maidenliness - repellent and awkward, is revealed as dangerous and desirable. It's in fact the 'maidenliness' of Isabel that's under threat and collapsing in this scene, the persisting 'virginity' of her type even into marriage and motherhood: and as she speeds her 'straight path' to the lighted house we can both appreciate the consistency of the Diana-like flight and survival intact (she is Isabel Archer, after all), and regret the sexual womanliness she hasn't tasted: isn't, perhaps, ever to taste. She makes her enigmatic pause at the door to look around her: why? Is it in an unacknowledged hope that he has followed her and will prevent her going in? But even Caspar is too much of a gentleman for that.

Revising *The Portrait* in 1905, James no doubt had a different perspective - having written into his late novels such different, non-virginal, women as Kate and Mme de Vionnet and Charlotte - on just what he had created, in Isabel: her type, its maidenliness, its essential chastity. (Perhaps he felt more certain that from Isabel's type there was no hope, ever, for Caspar; and hence his addition of the determining last sentence.) His comment on the type in his later novels is more ironised, their fate less straight, more twisted. Nanda in *The Awkward Age* would have abased herself in order to get Van, and weeps bitter tears at retiring to her nunnery at Mr. Longdon's. Fleda in *The Spoils of Poynton* travelling to fetch the trophy of her sacrifice of her lover to decent conduct, the Maltese cross to treasure secretly into a maiden-auntish old-age, finds the whole fine thing gone up in dirty smoke. We fear that the Isabels of one generation, making their sacrifices to their ideals of honour, become the Lady Julias (in *The Awkward Age*) of another; the treasures of their refusals, their abstentions, are an equivocal legacy for their hungry and curious grand-daughters.

What James has finely understood in 1881, in Isabel's scene with Caspar, is the actual operation, in behaviour and language, of this 'virginal' cultural ideal of womanhood; 'good' girls profoundly impressed with the need to 'please' and not to do 'wrong'. What the erotic threatens here is not simply a social form, even though it may have tremendous - infinite - social implications. As Thomas Mann wrote about *Anna Karenina*:

Custom and morality, how far are they distinguishable, how far are they -in effect- one and the same, how far do they coincide in the heart of the socially circumscribed human being? The question hovers unanswered over the whole novel. But such a work is not compelled to answer questions. Its task is to bring them out, to enrich the emotions, to give them the highest and most painful degree of questionableness.¹⁸

A cultural ideal of womanhood is enmeshed tentacularly, tenaciously, at the very roots of the construction of literary

¹⁸ Mann, 184.

femininity. We watch the rehearsal of a literary trope: man presses woman to give herself to him; woman is overcome by the desire to give in to him, but a cultural overvoice that judges against herself never remits its condemnatory commentary. 'What bliss?' says Anna Karenina with disgust and horror. For Mme de Renal in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, 'all at once that terrible word: adulteress, came to her'. 'It's wrong,' says Chekhov's lady with a lapdog. 'You'll be the first not to respect me now'.¹⁹ And we seem to see that trope in operation within the psychological flux and fluidity of a 'real' woman, within Isabel's personality and selfhood (illusion outpaces circumscription again). Isabel has no language in which she can say yes; her language says no for her, rehearses in her own mouth a familiar protest, attempts to circumscribe in thin conventional words the inchoate flood of her actual experience.

'...The world's all before us -and the world's very big. I know something about that.'

Isabel gave a long murmur, like a creature in pain; it was as if he were pressing something that hurt her. 'The world's very small,' she said at random; she had an immense desire to appear to resist. She said it at random, to hear herself say something; but it was not what she meant. The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters...(ML 518)

'Ah, be mine as I'm yours!' she heard her companion cry. He had suddenly given up argument, and his voice seemed to come through a confusion of sound.

This however, of course, was but a subjective fact, as the metaphysicians say; the confusion, the noise of waters, and all the rest of it, were in her own head. In an instant she became aware of this. 'Do me the greatest kindness of all,' she panted. 'I beseech you to go away!'

'Ah, don't say that. Don't kill me!' he cried.

She clasped her hands; her eyes were streaming with tears.

'As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!'(ML 519)

Isabel cannot speak what Caspar can, that 'the world is very big'; even though that is, for a moment, her actual experience. She is in pain 'as though he were pressing something that hurt her', she can only answer that 'the world is very small', as if the utterance came from an infinitely less space of possibility. She says to him 'Are you mad?', although at that moment it is she who is experiencing sensations like madness, a

¹⁹ *Anna Karenina* trans. Maude, Oxford U.P., 1965, 169, II xi; *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964, 93 (my translation); *Lady with a Lapdog*, trans. Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 268.

confusion of sound and noise of waters in her own head. When she begs him, 'As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!' she offers the archetypal virtuous compromise with sexual temptation, inviting the desired profanation - the kiss; admitting incapacity to resist even while articulating the still predominant desire *not* to succumb, to be honourable, to be *good*. A still predominant honour is helpless none the less - because femininely weak - in the path of the onrush of desire.

It is a compromise convenient for literature, crushing for the female subjectivity that finds its account there. However ambivalent we may feel about Isabel's Diana-like chastity, we can't want her to succumb to the compromise, to act *yes* while still only able clearly to articulate *no*. Edith Wharton's stories, even though written out of very divorced and extra marital *fin de siècle* New York, are full of women more or less broken in that particular double bind: distinct from, of course, though not unrelated to, the double bind that has freedom loving girls in search of a master to submit to.²⁰ (Wharton's very good, too, in connection with Mann's remarks, on the impossibility of disentangling within the individual subjectivity social verdict and self-condemnation.)

In *Anna Karenina*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Lady with a Lapdog*, it goes without saying that the 'consciousness' of the fiction inhabits a much more open space than can be filled by the rehearsal of dismayed feminine virtue by Anna Karenina, Mme de Renal, or Anna Sergeyevna. In all these cases, the enveloping 'larger' space around the female moralising feels specifically male; the male author/ narrator may value and admire or even count on this female will-to-chastity (Chekhov's narrator finds it boring), but he knows it co-exists with a world of other sexual varieties. The male consciousness has an advantage of worldliness it may even deplore (Tolstoy, for example, who throws so much weight behind Anna's 'intuition' of her own transgressiveness) but can't wish away.

What is distinctive in the rehearsal of the pattern at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* is how James's account of it

²⁰ See, for example, 'Souls Belated' and 'Autres Temps', reprinted in *Roman Fever*. London: Virago Modern Classics, 1983.

stands within and not outside the troubled self-contradicting female subjectivity. This has partly to do, of course, with his writing in the English/American and not the 'improper' European tradition: the English fictional space was precisely supposed to be co-existent with a 'female' virtue (we remember what a mess this makes of the end of *The Mill on the Floss*). But behind James's position lies all his saturation in that European tradition, and his scorn, sometimes, for the 'soap and water' of English fictional 'propriety':

I have been seeing something of Daudet, Goncourt, and Zola; and there is nothing more interesting to me now than the effort and experiment of this little group, with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner - its intense artistic life. They do the only kind of work, today, that I respect; and in spite of their ferocious pessimism and their handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest. The floods of tepid soap and water which under the name of novels are being vomited forth in England, seem to me, by contrast, to do little honour to our race.²¹

James treats the scene from within Isabel's subjectivity not because he can't imagine or approve of other perspectives, but because he wants and needs to engage in an interrogation of 'propriety' from within. It's possible that he convicts himself, *vis à vis* the European tradition, of a little 'maidenliness' in the process. But the danger with a male enveloping worldliness and how it fictionalises female 'virtue' is that the treatment can verge on 'connoisseurship', on relishing the 'piquancy' of a less evolved consciousness than the narrative's own. We have no reason to wish to see Mme de Renal liberated from her conventional notions of the wickedness of adultery: they are, on the contrary, intrinsic to her charm, not because *Stendhal* believes in the least that she ought to be faithful to Monsieur - after all, this is the writer who later in the same novel creates relishingly, and without a trace of squeamishness, a Mademoiselle de la Mole! - but because the fact she thinks she ought to speak an innocence the male narrative can only yearn for and never return to. And because Mme de Renal is conventionally 'moral', Julien's conquest of her is all the more piquant. Purity - 'goodness' - can still have a 'value' (in the

²¹ To W.D. Howells (1884). *Letters*, Vol. 3., 29.

connoisseur's sense) even for a palate that has long entertained all the other colours.

James's interrogation of the value of 'traditinary decencies and sanctities', though, is sited at the very point where convention focuses: in the 'goodness' of 'good' women themselves. James has committed himself enthusiastically to that tradition in English fiction of siting narratives within female consciousness; but he is also to commit himself progressively to broadening the scope of that female consciousness to include the big unchaste world of European fiction. An image crops up on Isabel's journey to Ralph which not only seems to suggest in embryo the imagery James uses to express in *The Golden Bowl* Maggie Verver's slow process of uncovering the real beneath the innocent-seeming surface, but also could serve as an account of the whole drive behind the renewal and development in James' writing from *What Maisie Knew* onwards:

She had plenty to think about; but it was not reflection, or conscious purpose, that filled her mind. Disconnected visions passed through it, and sudden dull gleams of memory, of expectation. The past and the future alternated at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which came and went by a logic of their own. It was extraordinary the things she remembered. Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her, and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. (ML 491)

The architectural vastness could be Maggie's pagoda, the whist game looks forward to the bridge game Maggie prowls around, at once excluded and controlling. The intuition of vast secret structures of behaviours underlying surface proprieties suggests the problems of 'knowledge' for the heroines of *Maisie* and *The Awkward Age*, as well as Milly Theale's vulnerability and Woollett's obtuseness.

Meanwhile back at the end of the *Portrait of a Lady* Isabel, having been plunged dizzyingly under the surface by her discoveries about her husband and by Caspar's kiss, scrambles back out onto the dry land of her belief in herself, leaving us with the sensation of an opaque and not entirely fulfilling

ending to the novel. The novel tests out traditional decencies and sanctities on their own terms and ends in an impasse: Isabel has taken the first steps out onto a bridge which as yet only reaches into the air and has no dry land the other side to come down on. The 'proprieties' are ironised in the novel -even tragically; and James has accurately recorded the inbuilt constraints, the double binds, in a 'good' woman's psychology and in her language; but he hasn't found another voice for his woman yet. She thinks and feels beyond the conventional, but she can't say or act: he can't imagine it for her. She doesn't have a language to override what 'seems right', nor to say yes to that erotic that opens up for her late, and frighteningly.

The challenge Isabel's unfulfillment sets for the development of this theme in James's writing - the formal/conventional stretched and tested by the subjective/affective - is to create a language for womanliness which is not anchored in goodness, or chastity, or unsexuality. James of course was not not in any vanguard in English language fiction in terms of his subject matter: heroines were flying from husbands to lovers in their throngs, long before James dreamed up Kate or Mme. de Vionnet or Charlotte. Yet what so many 'daring' novels testify to is the linguistic and ideological persistence of ideals of 'goodness' long beyond the fact. (For example, again, Edith Wharton's troubled adulteress in 'Souls Belated'; and of course Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*.) What is really a radical development in late James is the convincing creation of a space and language in fiction for a womanhood liberated to kick over the traces with no more ado than a man. If Charlotte is destroyed at the end of *The Golden Bowl* it's not because of the operations of her own conscience. If Merton makes a judgement against Kate at the end of *The Wings of the Dove*, it's not because she came to his room: on the contrary, that was his sign of her good faith. If Mme de Vionnet is unhappy, it's not because she thinks she's sinful, but because she knows she can't keep Chad.

Perhaps in the end the bridge is never built to bring Isabel safely down on another side: perhaps the sort of development James has to make out of her impasse is more like a leap, a free fall. Certainly the women of the later novels

inhabit a space where it's no easy matter - where it's in fact wishful thinking - to find footholds and control as Isabel sturdily insists. And although those women may have the sexual fulfillment she eschews, there are no certainties in their universe to match that real centre of *Portrait of a Lady*, more pivotal in fact than Caspar's kiss, when Isabel and Ralph finally - on his deathbed - share the truth about her marriage in a transcendent scene of mutual enlightened intelligence:

...nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish - the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together...

'...You said just now that pain is not the deepest thing, No -no. But it is very deep. If I could stay - '

'For me you will always be here,' she softly interrupted. It was easy to interrupt him.

But he went on, after a moment -

'It passes, after all; it's passing now. But love remains...'

'And remember this,' he continued, 'that if you have been hated, you have also been loved.'

'Ah, my brother!' she cried, with a movement of still deeper prostration. (ML 507)

There's plenty of mutual enlightened intelligence in the late novels, but transcendent it isn't; it's contingent, vulnerable, temporary. (What becomes, for example, of the exceptional mutuality of Kate and Merton at the opening of *The Wings of the Dove*, described as if they found themselves face to face at the top of a pair of ladders looking over their respective garden walls? 38) With new freedoms for James's heroines comes a loss of certainty; a free fall intimately related, of course, to the developments in James's form, where whatever was left of the controlling intrusive narrator and his containing ironies is sunk in the opaque subjective dialogic medium of the late fiction.

3. Henry James's 'editorial heart': *The Aspern Papers*

The 'open' ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* represents a real (and not merely formal) *impasse* for James (how can he give Isabel to law or sympathy?), out of which grow the women of his late fictions and their struggles either to refuse law or to enforce it. That is, the *impasse* in itself becomes his subject, not his problem. *The Aspern Papers*, written in 1888, also turns on a self-unease within the fiction which is to become powerfully generative for the late development: it scrutinises the very processes by which life becomes 'material' for literature, and the very authority narrative claims for interpreting that material (an issue of authority particularly acute when a 'male' narrative interprets female living).

The story makes uneasy reading for literary people. We know from early on, from our narrator's own half self-deprecating confession, that given a choice between the answer to the riddle of the universe and a bundle of old letters written by a dead poet, he'd go for the old letters every time. At this point we bookish readers - biographers, literary critics, et al - need only recognise him with a twinge of complicity. When, near the end of the story, the ancient Juliana turns the full flare of her once-lovely gaze on our narrator caught in the act of opening her desk in search of those wretched letters (he feels 'like a burglar caught in the flare of a gaslight'¹) and hisses

¹ Only in the New York Edition of the tale, which as Wayne C. Booth points out in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961) tends to 'work up' the language of the 1888 original version into something more explicitly accusatory, criminalising. References to *The Aspern Papers* and to all the shorter fiction will be to *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962-4. *The Aspern Papers* is in Vol. 6. Where specific mention is made of the New York Edition, page references are to *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Aspern Papers* and other

out 'passionately, furiously: "Ah, you publishing scoundrel!"' (CL 195) we are probably jolted with something more uncomfortable than just amusement (although that too). A wince of *hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable ...?*

But this is after all, among other things, a very funny story about the ignominies of literary discipleship. In order to get his hands on these old letters a grown-up, sane and ordinarily respectable man is willing to have visiting cards printed with a false name and practice upon the sensibilities of the two vulnerable ladies who possess them. We don't need the less-than-overawed reaction of his friend Mrs Prest to get his pursuit of the letters into proportion. (She 'made light of [Jeffrey Aspern's] genius' and 'was amused by my infatuation, the way my interest in the papers had become a fixed idea', 276.) But the female pragmatism he rather irritably grants Mrs Prest (it is she who first has the idea of his becoming the Miss Bordereaus lodger: women 'sometimes throw off a bold conception - such as a man would not have risen to', 275) is a neat foil for certain male qualities in him, that boy-collector single-mindedness, that stubborn self-fulfilling absorption in a single purpose. The letters must be important because he *makes* them so, by devoting so much of himself - and his time and his money - to his quest for them.

The ignominy is not simply a matter of his disreputable research methods, either. This critic-biographer's whole relationship to the dead poet who has become his life's work is under comic scrutiny in the story, surely? It has often been noted how relatively little interest he actually shows in Aspern's poetry (except perhaps in - 'after infinite conjecture' - establishing its dates) and how much in the periphery of Aspern's life, in which he can by sheer application become expert without even needing to prove he is particularly sensitive to the verse. To judge by his own occasional excursions into poeticizing language, if Aspern is any good our narrator hasn't learned much from him: as for instance when he imagines that Juliana read Aspern's letters over every night 'or

at least pressed them to her withered lips', 299. As is sometimes the way with high priests of literary reputations, he seems to have a blunt ear... Or perhaps that is to underestimate the narrator's subtlety: perhaps the essential quality of his more purple passages is more like flippancy, near-pastiche: in Jeffrey Aspern's shadow there is only room for our protagonist to have mock-enthusiasms, a mock-career, mock-love ('Juliana, on summer nights in her youth, might have murmured down from open windows at Jeffrey Aspern, but Miss Tita was not a poet's mistress any more than I was a poet'³¹²). He can only act out the satyr play that follows the tragedy.

We recognise instead of poetry the familiar features of the literary property developer: how he frowns under the solemn weight of 'editorial responsibility' on his shoulders; how he stakes out his claim in a bland heritage-speke: '[the letters] would be of such immense interest to the public, such immeasurable importance to Jeffrey Aspern's history', 335. Or to use another analogy, the narrator's own, he is the priest of the revealed religion, guardian and interpreter of the scared flame. 'The world, as I say had recognised Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognised him most. The multitude, today, flocked to his temple, but of that temple he and I regarded ourselves as the ministers', 277. And as a minister, he wants to keep his god in his fixed place: Aspern's work isn't up for critical discussion with Mrs Prest, who is an unbeliever. 'One doesn't defend one's god: one's god is himself a defence', 277; Aspern 'hangs high in the heaven of our literature', and one's not to interrogate his belonging there: after all, that would throw into question a whole career of pious administration and interpretation, as well as a privileged access to the oracle. Art is commodified, it becomes property: we see at work the processes of status-making, how the author is assimilated, translated into the constellation of *authority*.

A complex of motives drives this process in the narrator. He is not of course driven by material greed: on the contrary, some of the finest comedy in the story is at the expense of his

desperate attempts to keep the ideal and the material worlds safely separated. ('Don't, Juliana; for *his* sake, don't!', he moans to himself at one point when she presses him about the rent: '...how much will you give for six months?', 342.) It is an intensely material story, our reluctant narrator is submerged at every moment in the dense brute detail of the economic underpinnings of these lives and these relationships: the rent, the money the old ladies get from America, the 'dowry' for Miss Tita, the price for the miniature of Jeffrey Aspern. These are all part of the dirty, vexed intransigent *real*, as scruffy and lived-in and unromantic as the interiors of the old ladies' rooms in the fine old palace, the dirty *real* which our critic is at such pains not to allow inside his temple of the ideal.

This is not of course because he is an angel who can live in his temple upon ambrosia and poetry. As a matter of fact he's perfectly careful with his own money. His romantic extravagances (the exorbitant rent Juliana so disappointingly asks) are based on rapid commercial calculations ('there was many an old palace in an out-of-the-way corner that I might on such terms have enjoyed by the year', 294): it's crazy, but he wants it and he can afford it (for the first three months anyway). His material investments are elsewhere (in bonds or mining or rubber or suchlike, presumably: the chamois leather bag of respectable dimensions he has from his banker is reassuringly substantial) and what he has invested in Jeffrey Aspern is something quite different.

It is clear that his idea of the life of the poet offers him some sort of displaced fulfilment; as Susanne Kappeler puts it, 'Through Aspern's history he hopes to experience a small share of the life he does not permit himself to live through at first hand'.² In the safe space of his temple he relishes imagining, ironically enough, the very qualities - the generous abandon, the careless expenditure - which his careful proprietorship and propriety preclude. He displays much waggish bravado on the subject of Jeffrey Aspern's (fifty-year old) womanising, much squeamish amusement over the rather faded

² Susanne Kappeler, *Writing and Reading in Henry James*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980, 58.

question of Miss Bordereau's 'respectability' (his euphemism). We find his fantasy of himself being less kind, less considerate, to the besieging Maenads, had he been in Aspern's place, as improbable as clearly he does: 'if I could imagine myself in such a place!' he self-mocks in parentheses.

The besieging Maenads are more difficult to imagine, in fact, than his unkindness: we suspect he is not only a 'man' without 'the tradition of personal conquest', but deeply uncomfortable with women. The frequently invoked invisible presence in the narrative of his co-worker and fellow-obsessive John Cumnor lines up a pair of men against a pair of women: the men orotund, self-important, driven, taking for granted that their 'quest' can not only not be shared with, but must be fought for *against*, the women; the women suspicious, defensive, secretive, frustrating. His narrative (not the story) is uneasily misogynist. And a hovering suggestion of the narrator's homosexuality contributes extra comedy and bathos to the 'mock-romance' with poor Tita as well as deepening our sense of his jealous resentment of Juliana: when he wanted to touch her hand it really was in order to touch Jeffrey Aspern's, in more ways than one it is the poet rather than his female relict our narrator is interested in. Perhaps Juliana makes that discrimination and that's why she refuses him.

Difficulties of one kind (biographical details, datings, texts) are the stock in trade of this kind of literary expert: difficulties of another kind threaten the foundations of the cult. The poet himself doesn't threaten, because he's not only safely dead but (the narrator imagines) even prone to nudging his high-priest in comradely approval from the beyond. 'It was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to tell me that he regarded the affair as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, cheerfully to a conclusion', 305. But Miss Bordereau is improbably disconcertingly fiercely alive and proves resistant to assimilation. We note the contrast between his complacent imagining of Jeffrey Aspern's social graces - 'it was my constant conviction that no human being had ever had a more delightful social gift than his', 325 - and his baffled sulky hurt at Miss Bordereau's teasing: that 'mocking lambency which must have been a part of her adventurous youth

and which had outlived passions and faculties', 327. So how exactly did he imagine Jeffrey Aspern's social gift? It doesn't seem to occur to him that the poet might have had a taste for 'mocking lambency'. The dead poet is art tamed: the living relic is life making trouble.

In that leisurely stretch in the story where, enjoying the garden, close to the papers but not in possession of them, our narrator is happy, he offers us his strongest assertion of the qualities in Aspern he admires: '...he had found means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, understand and express everything', 311. It's a fine thing to have written above the altar. If it affects us as an irony it's only because it administers to our sense of the contrast between the critic's ideal of creativity and his actual labours; between the certainties he serves in his temple of art and his blunderings in the musty half-lit unromantic world outside. The very edifice of authority he is constructing around Aspern, and the equivocal strategies he is all the while calculating to further his 'service of art', his working for 'beauty, with a devotion', (305: that is, to get hold of the letters) are in direct contradiction to his ideal, - 'free and general and not at all afraid' - so that his words about Aspern strike us even with a kind of yearning, for the thing he can't be, for the enviable, the desired, the unattainable.

Temporarily, in the garden of the palace, he seems to be able to hold the ideal and the real in equipoise, and imagine they can coexist. But the garden after all (dissenting here from Susanne Kappeler's analysis³) is not at the heart of the story's metaphor, it's only the pleasant periphery of the significant place. The heart is where he finally (once legitimately, then illegitimately) penetrates: Miss Bordereau's room, that wonderful-terrifying rag and bone shop of a life-time's accretions, so unlike what, in his idealising fantasy, our

³ She makes the garden a 'displaced object choice' for the papers he wants, to evidence the strategic disingenuousness of his narrative, 33-39.

critic would have liked as his 'image of the woman who had inspired a great poet with immortal lines', 339:

The room was a dire confusion; it looked like the room of an old actress. There were clothes hanging over chairs, odd-looking, shabby bundles here and there, and various pasteboard boxes piled together, battered, bulging and discoloured, which might have been fifty years old. (352)

And there, at the significant heart of the story, we stand accused, caught with our hand on the knob of the desk we hope will contain the precious papers, covered with ignominy: 'Ah, you publishing scoundrel!' Of course, how uncomfortable the reader feels at this point depends on how successfully they have managed to distance themselves from the narrator-character, how smartly they have done their work as 'detective-reader', as Susanne Kappeler calls it. The detective-reader, in her account, has naturally some time ago asked himself, 'Is our hero indeed good? Is his enterprise noble?' Understandably enough she also hopes that her detective-reader sees clearly that our 'hero' is definitely not 'one of us', not a real literary critic:

That he is historian or biographer rather than literary critic he proves beyond question and despite his repeated professions of literary interest.⁴

Wayne C. Booth, in his analysis of the story, is concerned on the same grounds. After quoting a particularly orotund passage of the narrator's 'Aspern-worship' ('...the revived immortal face - in which all his genius shone- of the great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come') Booth criticises James' *inconsistency*:

Surely this is no ridiculous schemer: this is the worthy disciple of the great poet, speaking in the voice that James himself uses in describing his feelings about Venice and his imagined Aspern.⁵

In other words, our narrator meets with Booth's approval for so long as he is worshipping Jeffrey Aspern: it's only when he stoops to underhand methods to get hold of the letters that he is suddenly a problem. And Booth uses to express his approval exactly that overblown language of the literary priesthood -

⁴ Kappeler, 24.

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, 359.

'worthy disciple'- that *The Aspern Papers* is all the time subtly taking apart. The story surely *isn't* about whether or not our narrator is a worthy disciple. It asks rather whether great poets deserve to have 'worthy disciples' inflicted upon them at all; whether the processes of discipleship however worthy - appropriative, exclusive, disingenuous, coarsening - aren't *in themselves* a betrayal of whatever the poet originally wrote for: 'to be free and general and not at all afraid'.

Which would recover the story comfortably, of course, for the Common Reader. All Common Readers have to do is to spot the *littérateur*, point the accusing finger, and they have enrolled themselves safely in what Michiel Heyns calls 'the narrative community' of those in the know and on the side of the angels, or at least the writers:

We assume that we share with [the author] a standard of judgement which enables us to place the characters just where they should be. We feel, in other words, contained within a narrative community that defines itself, if not in opposition to the actual community of the novel, then as privileged over it in being able to claim the author... as its patron.⁶

Bolstering for common readers, refreshingly chastening for literary specialists, this account of *The Aspern Papers* goes a long way: yet somehow it doesn't quite answer to the whole of our discomfort as we read, it doesn't explain why, at the moment our scoundrel is discovered with his hand on the knob of the desk, we somehow identify ourselves in his wincing exposure, and not with the righteous and outraged Miss Bordereau, however exhilaratedly we (and he) feel she is justified.

We never do actually feel the gap between narrator (him) and 'narrative community' (us) as securely fixed as Susanne Kappeler suggests. She describes a 'wide space between the narrator's first-person voice and the title and authorship of the novel' and calls it 'the space of irony'. But irony can

⁶ Michiel Heyns, *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-century Novel: scapegoats in English fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, 50. Heyns is actually writing here about Jane Austen, and his idea of a privileged 'narrative community' answers of course much better to Jane Austen's novels than to James'.

have, in fact, more complex structures. Somehow in the very act of reading our *littérateur's* story we feel implicated, entangled, in his blunders, his betrayals, and his failure. Apart from anything else, we are likely to share with him at least one appetite: which readers worth their salt are not greedily curious as to the content of those wretched letters and are not bereft (like him) as well as mysteriously moved (like him) by Miss Tita's sacrificial fire?

And then, who is the primary source of our sense of our narrator's 'immorality', as Wayne Booth calls it, if not our narrator himself? All the changes to the New York edition of the tale, which underline the 'criminality' of his actions and situation ('the burglar caught in the flare of a gaslight' and so on) also surely underline *his own consciousness* of that criminality; after all, we are to understand that these are words he *chooses* to use about himself. This links, as well, to the narrator's *own account* of his life lived as pastiche in the shadow of greatness, the burlesque of his 'love affair' with Miss Tita, the self-conscious near-camp of his occasionally purple prose. Self-knowledge, to be such, doesn't have to be complete, perhaps can't be: we all have to live on inside our partial recognitions of ourselves. It is possible without trying in any sense to 'rehabilitate' the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* to at least complicate the irony that structures our reader's relationship with his perceptions. A proportion of that irony is *his own*.

Rather than replacing our 'unreliable narrator' with a consoling (reliable) 'sub-narrator' who knows better, we are invited to take the risk the story takes, and *inhabit* the unease, the unreliability. At which point the whole enterprise of *The Aspern Papers* begins to seem more equivocal, precarious: once we stop searching out the 'comfortable' ground in the narration, we start to wonder whether it was ever James' intention to make any. Perhaps as well as being a fable of literary 'discipledom' and its ignominies, the story is also a fable about the ignominies - the appropriations, the disingenuousness, the manipulations, even the coarsenesses - implicit in the very act of writing. As well as opposing the 'literary industry' to 'art', might it be that the story

opposes 'art' to 'life', in a complex ironic act of self-critique?

Which 'publishing scoundrel' is it in fact who threatens to bring the glare of publicity into the scruffy, cluttered private rooms, to 'pounce' on Miss Bordereau's 'possessions and ransack her drawers'? The narrator is directly responsible: but it bears an uncanny resemblance to the writer's process of making stories. Whose appetite to know won't leave alone the women's lives, won't relinquish Miss Bordereau's past to the decent oblivion she desires for it, won't leave Miss Tita's inarticulate innocence untouched but pokes, probes, awakens? Whose quest for meaning makes him arrange all the arbitrary accidental vast sum of the details of a life around one centre, like random scratches on glass seeming to radiate around a light? (As our narrator with his conspiracy theory imagines that every time Miss Bordereau opens her mouth she makes some coded reference to Jeffrey Aspern.) As the story progresses the reader may begin to wonder whether writing itself (and by extension our enjoyment of and community with the writing, in reading) is not, as Joan Didion expressed it, 'an aggression...an imposition...an invasion of someone else's most private space'⁷.

But it is also as though the story actually contains within itself a *counter-process*: alongside and counteracting the urge to narrative, to shape, to resolution, the tale is freighted with the sheer accumulation of resistant life, material that doesn't fit. Not only is our narrator burdened uncomfortably with all the banal detail of the Miss Bordereau's material survival, which seems so distastefully to preoccupy them (and why shouldn't it? how couldn't it?): the women also give him all sorts of other kinds of information about themselves which he is unable to 'use', in the single-mindedness of his pursuit. It is characteristic that out with Miss Tita he 'discoursed to her' at length about Florence before taking in that she 'might be supposed to know Florence better than I, as she had lived there for some years with Miss Bordereau', 331.

⁷ Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979, 20.

Everything for him has to belong somewhere in his central thesis (his figure in the carpet?) before he is interested in it: and when Miss Bordereau talks he's so full of nerves and suspicions (and a tinge of jealous resentment? she's had an access to the god he'll never have, perhaps even threatens his authority as oracle) that he doesn't actually hear half of what she says, he doesn't know how to listen to her at all. She tells him much more than he ever appreciates: only it isn't all about Jeffrey Aspern, it's about a whole life, a life that continues for long after Aspern's death, with a 'hard' middle age, with other friends: however intrinsically ridiculous they may seem to the narrator, because they are not Aspern, we are not bound to dismiss offhandedly like him the Contessa Altemura, the Churtons, the *avvocato* Pochintesta. Probably Juliana even had other lovers: we know Pochintesta wrote her poetry too. Just because it (probably) wasn't good poetry doesn't mean he was an insignificant man.

Perhaps even what Miss Bordereau does say about Jeffrey Aspern is more telling than the narrator ever understands. Her 'he was a god' (reported by Miss Tita) mightn't be the same as his: doesn't she have that habit of 'mocking lambency'? Didn't mortal women's encounters with the gods, even if never to be regretted, traditionally leave them at least a little singed? And she says,

'Inhuman? That's what the poets used to call women a hundred years ago. Don't try that: you won't do as well as they!...There is no more poetry in the world -that I know of at least.' (328)

As well as an old lady's nostalgic high valuation of the period of her youth that surely also contains some irony (perhaps bred in the 'hard', all too 'human' times afterwards?) at the expense of the poets and a poetic convention?

Apart from what Miss Bordereau tells the narrator, he might listen to *how* she tells it. Her epigrammatic coquettish *galanterie* with its flavour of another (more piquant, less prosing?) era is in itself a precious live contact with that 'visitable past' he is supposed to be interested in. 'He will show you the famous sunsets, if they still go on - do they go on?' she says, 328, and 'If you think me brilliant today you

don't know what you are talking about; you have never seen a brilliant woman. Don't try to pay me a compliment; I have been spoiled.' All this gives us a glimpse of her in her hey-day, of her with Aspern; yet our narrator only quails under it, it seems to him 'an incongruous suggestion that she was a sarcastic, profane, cynical old woman', 328. Why incongruous? Why isn't he interested instead that (after her life, after her encounter with Aspern) she might be all those things?

As Gilbert and Gubar might put it, the narrator can only see Miss Bordereau in the safe dead 'looking-glass' of the 'male authored text'⁸. Juliana matters only through Jeffrey Aspern's poems about her. He has the woman herself in front of him, a woman with a history, a woman with rare living memory of the poet, a woman in fact so extraordinary that (in a final twist of the art-life irony structuring the story) the poems themselves which he prizes so highly were written presumably (if Aspern is a 'real' poet, who 'feels, understands and expresses everything') in homage to Juliana's life. It was not the other way around, her life was not lived as homage to Aspern's poetry. And yet all the narrator can be in Juliana's actual presence is furtive and frightened. He doesn't know how to make anything of her reality, so he focuses his desires instead on the (dead) letters. He actually impatiently anticipates her death, as the event that will finally release the letters to him.

One cannot help being reminded here of the disturbing remarks in James's letters on learning of the death of his cousin Minnie Temple twenty years earlier. 'The more I think of her the more perfectly satisfied I am to have her translated from the changing realm of fact to the steady realm of thought,' he writes to William.⁹ And we know that he 'translated' the dead Minnie into his fictional Isabel in *Portrait of a Lady*. It might be possible to argue that a certain quality of shifting

⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, 44.

⁹ To William James (1870). *Letters*, Vol.1, 223. Quoted and discussed at length for its disturbing implications in Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 143-146.

discomfort which characterises the narrative of *The Aspern Papers* represents an important development in James's oeuvre: that in it he begins to interrogate with a new scrupulousness his own authority as 'writer', even perhaps the sources in his own 'editorial heart' (the phrase recalls those notebooks stuffed with lists of names, anecdotes, fragments of lives) of the need to write.¹⁰ And his including within his narrative what almost amounts to a perpetual critique of the very fictionalising process and its appropriations of 'real life' is highly suggestive for any analysis of his late style.

Although his narrator (and we ourselves) cannot help a greedy curiosity about the letters, they seem to us (and perhaps, depending on how we read the final sentence of the story, to the narrator too) a pseudo-mystery finally, beside the vision of Miss Tita turning them one by one to smoke in the kitchen.¹¹ The real mysteries were under our narrator's nose all along, the ordinary ones: Miss Tita's hunger for life and love, Juliana's old age and solitude. And the kitchen - the hearth of the palace whose inner sanctums so unnerve him - is the perfect place for the celebration of such mysteries: perfectly out of keeping with the *littérateur's* bogus temple of art ideal, perfectly right for the expression of that other preoccupation in *The Aspern Papers* which prefigures the great themes of James' late development: alongside the interrogation of authority in narrative, the interrogation of woman as the object of narrative. As Elizabeth Allen puts it:

...in James' early work we see the letter more clearly than the woman... It is in the later novels that the conscious woman, reflecting and internally questioning... gradually emerges to be the subject of the text as much as the sign value that she carries.¹²

¹⁰ The narrator's phrase, TAP, 306.

¹¹ James himself, of course, could feel both things, greedily curious and an ardent sacrificer to oblivion: in his note of the original anecdote that suggested the *The Aspern Papers* he expresses some dismay at the casual destruction of Byron's letters, yet we know he was himself a committed letter-burner, and he has a strange passionate image of privacy in his 1897 essay on George Sand: 'the pale forewarned victim, with every track covered, every paper burnt and every letter unanswered, will, in the tower of art, the invulnerable granite, stand, without a sally, the siege of all the years.' *Notes on Novelists*, 134.

¹² Elizabeth Allen, *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984, 39.

The women in *The Aspern Papers* are freighted with life which the male narrator cannot or will not take on board. He can only wish them out of the way in order to see his real subject more clearly, to have it all for himself: his 'real' subject which turns out, ironically enough, only to lead him back to Miss Bordereau, to the Juliana Jeffrey Aspern's poems were written for.

4. 'In a dream or an old novel': governesses in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*

In a review of a children's novel in 1875 Henry James complained:

It is evidently written in good faith, but it strikes us as a very ill-chosen sort of entertainment to set before children. It is unfortunate not only in its details, but in its general tone, in the constant ring of the style. The smart satirical tone is the last one in the world to be used in describing to children their elders and betters and the social mysteries that surround them...Miss Alcott...goes too far, in our opinion, for childish simplicity or paternal equanimity. All this is both poor entertainment and poor instruction. What children want is the objective, as the philosophers say; it is good for them to feel that the people and things around them that appeal to their respect are beautiful and powerful specimens of what they seem to be. Miss Alcott's heroine is evidently a very subjective little girl, and certainly her history will deepen the subjective tendency in the little girls who read it.¹

It would be stretching a point to pretend that this description of *Eight Cousins* exactly fits *What Maisie Knew*, the novel that James himself wrote twenty-two years later. *Maisie* is at great pains never to be 'smartly satirical', and of course although its subject is a child it was not written for a child to read. But it represents none the less a revolution in James's thinking, to have come round from the review's position of satirical disapproval to the point of making a whole novel out of the history of a highly subjective little girl discovering that 'the people and things around [her] that appeal to [her] respect' are very far from 'beautiful and powerful specimens of what they seem to be'. This discovery in *Maisie* is a part of her growing up, and not 'pert', 'vulgar', or 'depraved'.

¹ (The book reviewed is *Eight Cousins: or, The Aunt-Hill*, Louisa May Alcott, Boston, 1875.) *Literary Reviews and Essays*, ed. Albert Mordell. New York: Grove Press, 1957, 245.

It is generally agreed that James's writing in the late 1890's, after the crisis of his failure in the theatre and his disappointment in not achieving the kind of mass-readership for his novels it seems he had hoped for, underwent just such a revolution in thinking. The 'late style' begins to be recognisable from *What Maisie Knew* onwards, with its new 'difficulty' and its retreat from a commentating, hierarchising narrative voice. At the same time James produced a series of fictions centred on studies of childhood or adolescence: almost as though he was making, out of his disappointments and doubts, a re-entry in his writing into the vulnerability and openness of childhood and adolescence, and through it a new interrogation of the very sources of adult authority, of the authority of the 'objective' referred to so confidently in the 1875 review. Under particular scrutiny are not only the children of those turn of the century novels and stories themselves, but also the adults in those fictions who are directly responsible for the children's initiations: the educators, the transmitters of adult knowledge, particularly the governesses.

In his 1906 and 1907 *Harper's Bazar* essays on the manners and speech of American women, James wrote nostalgically about the governess or schoolmistress of the past who had served as 'the closed vessel of authority, closed against sloppy leakage'; her strict primness was 'one of the ways in which authority can be conveyed'. The essays protest at the so different femininity of contemporary girls:

'Don't let us have women like that,' I couldn't help quite piteously and all sincerely breaking out; 'in the name of our homes, of our children, of our future, of our national honour...'²

But even in the context of this extravagant conservatism, James can't help choosing words which suggest his ambivalence towards 'closed vessels of authority'; and that ambivalence is the very subject matter of *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*. In these fictions the whole point of all the governesses - Mrs Wix, Miss Overmore and the girl from the Hampshire vicarage - is that

² *French Writers and American Woman Essays*, ed. Peter Buitenhuis. Branford, Conn.: Compass, 1960.

they are extremely 'leaky vessels', and the 'precious ripe tradition' they embody comes under the most sceptical scrutiny.

To establish how fundamental this interrogation of authority and tradition is to the whole development of James's work and style through the transitional period of the 1890s, it is worth re-examining Tony Tanner's suggestion that it is 'the tension between law and sympathy which holds the great bourgeois novel together'. In early novels such as *Washington Square* and *The Europeans*, the operation of that tension as structural principle is self-evident. Without Dr Sloper's 'law' (and he has to be *right* about Morris) there is no space, no narrative, for Catherine's 'sympathy': a Catherine who could marry whichever dreadful man she liked wouldn't be interesting. In *The Portrait of a Lady* the law-sympathy tension is, as we have seen, within Isabel herself. Her struggle is to sustain the two polarities in relation: to do what 'seems right' relative to both the 'law' and her own freedom. And she experiences - problematically - their interdependence: that any transgression of hers against the 'law' will also be against her idea of her free self.

What feels different as soon as we turn to *What Maisie Knew* is how the structuring around law and sympathy has altered its equilibrium. There is plenty of 'law' in the novel, invoked at one point or another by most of the adults (except for Sir Claude) and especially by Maisie's teachers, but it isn't constructed there as authority: the narrative meticulously unlearns for us any objective and authoritative over-reading, begins instead with Maisie's blank page and develops through her interpretative gropings. The pronouncements of 'law', of what is 'right' and 'wrong', when they come, are looming phenomena which Maisie has painfully to reckon with, and which are unmistakably going to have to take up a great deal of room in her imaginative space; but they remain objects of puzzled and troubled perception, they are not justified inside the experiencing subjective intelligence of the novel.

In Boulogne, while Mrs Wix and Maisie are waiting for Sir Claude to return, Maisie falls under the spell of her first

foreign country: everything it invites her to is in another language, both literally and metaphorically, than her life in London; a language Maisie isn't able properly to interpret yet, but which seems to represent a possibility of exciting liberations. The liberations she dreams of in Boulogne need not be literal: what matters is her openness, her sense of scale, of far off horizons and beckoning experiences. But all the while, Mrs Wix's 'dingy decencies' and 'frumpy old-fashioned conscience' are urging in her ear in familiar and reproachful English³:

'Haven't you really and truly any moral sense?'

...after this the idea of a moral sense mainly coloured their intercourse. She began, the poor child, with scarcely knowing what it was; but it proved something that, with scarce an outward sign save her surrender to the swing of the carriage, she could, before they came back from the drive, strike up a sort of acquaintance with. The beauty of the day only deepened, and the splendour of the afternoon sea, and the haze of the far headlands, and the taste of the sweet air. It was the coachman indeed who, smiling and cracking his whip, turning in his place, pointing to invisible objects and uttering unintelligible sounds ...who made their excursion fall so much short that their return left them still a stretch of the long daylight... The bathers, so late, were absent and the tide was low; the sea pools twinkled in the sunset and there were dry places as well, where they could sit again and admire and expiate: a circumstance that, while they listened to the lap of the waves, gave Mrs. Wix a fresh support for her challenge. 'Have you absolutely none at all?' (193)

Responsible, aghast at Maisie's depravity, conscientiously fulfilling her duty as guardian and pedagogue, as 'closed vessel of authority', Mrs Wix intrudes her dingy apparatus of sin and shame upon the sensual movement and beauty of the day, as if she would like to prevent Maisie having any but blinkered glimpses of it through her own 'straighteners'. Laying the groundwork for the familiar female double binds, she bemoans in Maisie the lack of consciousness of a system of social taboos and regulations she won't even explicate: Maisie has to piece together for herself out of muddled fumbled hints what exactly it is that is 'wrong' about Sir Claude's liaison with her stepmother. She is supposed to intuit the indecency of sex without - God forbid - knowing anything about sex. Mrs Wix insists with almost Alice-in-Wonderland tenacity that the thing - the 'moral sense' - is out there, real, where Maisie only sees sea and sky. By the end

³ *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock. New York: Oxford UP, 1961, 257.

of their ride, with a little vulnerable gesture of willingness and compliance, 'surrendering to the swing of the carriage', Maisie signs her readiness to try to believe.

Later the same evening, Mrs Wix continues her challenge to Maisie's 'moral sense' inside the hotel room, and we are given again the conflict within the child - paradigmatically expressed by her situation *inside* the room but looking out of the window - between all the multiple live promptings of experience and the monologic insistent voice of authority.

'What I did lose patience at this morning was at how it was without your seeming to condemn -for you didn't, you remember!- you yet did seem to know. Thank God, in his mercy, at last, if you do!'

The night, this time, was warm and one of the windows stood open to the small balcony over the rail of which, on coming up from dinner, Maisie had hung a long time in the enjoyment of the chatter, the lights, the life of the quay made brilliant by the season and the hour. Mrs Wix's requirements had drawn her in from this posture and Mrs. Wix's embrace had detained her even though midway in the outpouring her confusion and sympathy had permitted, or rather had positively helped, her to disengage herself. But the casement was still wide, the spectacle, the pleasure were still there, and from her place in the room, which, with its polished floor and its panels of elegance, was lighted from without more than from within, the child could still take account of them. She appeared to watch and listen: after which she answered Mrs Wix with a question. 'If I do know -?'

'If you do condemn.' The correction was made with some asperity.
(196)

The distinction made here between knowing and condemning is surely a crucial one, that expresses something radically new in the structures of representation and judgement in *What Maisie Knew*. James is opening a space between seeing the world and interpreting it - a space with room for all the pleasuring life outside the window. It is the space Mrs Wix with all the force of her adult authority is trying to close for Maisie, even if as yet Maisie in the shadowed inner room can still see the lights reflected from outside. In the language and gestures of these paragraphs James is explicitly separating out the premises of perception from the presuppositions of a given social code: separating out knowing and condemning and even, finally, opposing them. Mrs Wix really believes that Maisie's freedom to see and know without condemning is sinful. Even as, with Calvinistic solemnity, she searches in vain for the 'moral sense' in Maisie that she believes should be 'innate' and not 'taught', we watch her in fact try to transmit and impose a

learned system of interpretation and condemnation. For Maisie to be 'saved' will require shutting out the possibilities of seeing and knowing beyond the window, possibilities the sympathy of the novel is unequivocally committed to.

Something has changed here in James's attitudes; an independence is being made out deep inside the text from a whole received system of social propriety, something prepared for in the interrogations of earlier works, but only fully realised in these works of the late 1890's onwards. That independence could only be won with the lapsing of the authoritative kind of hierarchising narrative voice (we saw James probing at the unreliability of narrative authority in *The Aspern Papers*) and through the unlearning, the unmaking, of certain kinds of authority-in-perception within the texts. We saw in *The Portrait of a Lady* how far for all his power to create protest, and to test and stretch law to its very edge, for so long as his authority as writer was interpenetrated with the authority of a certain social order, all that testing and stretching couldn't finally break out of a circularity in which there was no narrative, no knowledge, outside interpretation and judgement. The problem may have felt for James in its writing out as much a problem of narrative as of his own personal 'morality'; if the structure of 'the great bourgeois novel' had been dependent on the tension between law and sympathy, then into what form could narratives grow if the conviction of law was allowed to lapse?

Seminal to James's making out his independence from the social law is this period in the late 1890s when he absorbs himself in the child-perspectives, entering their ignorances and innocences, effortfully unwriting all the signs of knowing worldliness, or rather, separating those signs from the authority, the voice, of the novel. Law (convention, propriety, the whole apparatus of social regulation) becomes external to the narrative, becomes the circumstance within which the narrative takes form. Instead of one of the poles of narrative being located, as it were, outside the individual, in the external world (law), all the tensions and irreconcilables, and

all the dynamic of narrative development, are displaced on to the subjective, and the subjective interpretation of law. The fictions uncover the sources of social convention within the individual consciousness, and the processes by which objective law is grafted upon subjectivity. The polarity is not between law and sympathy, but between innocence and experience.

In the novels of this transitional period James significantly uses narrative devices that make impossible the kind of omniscient narrator who in the very process of telling interprets, hierarchises, judges: in *Maisie* (1897) the narrative through child 'eyes'; in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) a Conrad-like Chinese box of narratives within narratives, uncharacteristic of James; in *The Awkward Age* (1899) that drama-like principle of composition described explicitly in the Preface as making 'the presented occasion', like a play, 'tell all its story itself' in a succession of scenes consisting mainly of dialogue.⁴ In the later novels, there is no longer any need for devices. The scruple that relinquishes a monologic authority has been internalised; that middle-ground proneness of English novel-narrative to judgemental omniscience has been purged from the style itself.

In his studies of governesses, Mrs Wix with her straighteners, the carnivorous Miss Overmore/Mrs Beale, the leaky and fantasising girl from the Hampshire vicarage, James gives us virtually a pathology of propriety, of the processes of transmission of the law. All the certainties these adults construct as they transmit to the children their version of what is happening, are problematised within the text by James's representation of the children's resisting 'innocence'. Innocence reads around and through and beyond an adult discourse charged and distorted and closed in infinitely regressive short circuitings by its imagination of and fear of sin; scarred by its own processes of self-censorship and self-suppression; and muddled and equivocal with self-protection and self-interest.

⁴ This does not hold true for *The Spoils of Poynton*, 1897.

This recoil from the adult, from the discourse of experience, characterises both *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*. It makes these two fictions read, in fact, as a *crisis* of authority in the oeuvre. There is no appeal that can be made in the world of these novels against the governesses' versions, nowhere the children can turn to find out whether Mrs Wix's 'moral sense' or the sin-burdened ghosts are *real*. Only the fiction itself represents and vindicates that appeal. We hold out hopes of a common sense humaneness from Mrs Grose in *The Turn of the Screw*, but although she does eventually take Flora away, her caste-submission to the educated governess's superior propriety doesn't seem seriously to falter (it is significant that she herself can't read); she docilely takes it from her that stealing letters and 'saying things' are enough to put the children outside the protection of the civilised pale.

In *What Maisie Knew*, Sir Claude can clearly see the pleasuring world that Maisie sees and hear its call: and without straighteners. But his sight of it is a wistful glimpse backwards from an adulthood essentially compromised: he can't help her. When he watches 'the fine stride and shining limbs of a young fishwife who had just waded out of the sea with her basketful of shrimps' (184), we know things about how his gaze follows her up the beach that Maisie doesn't: in fact the essential boundary marker between child innocence and adult unreliability in these transitional fictions is the initiation into sexual awareness. The girl from the vicarage, trespassing beyond the marker, sublimates her shame at her trespass onto Miles and Flora; Maisie at the end of her novel is finally forced beyond the marker and into awareness, thanks to Mrs Wix's and Mrs Beale's ministering initiations. Sir Claude, lost on the far side of adult complications, is not merely unreliable, he's positively drowning: his pleasure in the company of Maisie, whom he calls his 'boy', is surely partly to do with the relief from sexual complications; and his glance at the fishwife coming out of the sea is at an Eden-like dream of sex uncompromised by markers and consequences. (Not only are the fishwife's naked limbs and emergence out of the sea mythic, outside history: more prosaically, the fact that as a fishwife she's out of Sir

Claude's class holds out, for a man of the world, the promise of sexual irresponsibility.)

These two transitional fictions locate crucially around the issue of sexual initiations; and in both of them the 'far', adult side of initiation is represented as treacherous country. It is interesting that these two stories whose very subject is the legacy for the English imagination of Victorian guilty propriety, should themselves manifest vestiges of troubled Victorianism, in that they are only able to represent innocence as possible for an unsexual child, unstained by the dirty water of adult passions. If we read *Maisie* and *The Turn of the Screw* as James finally writing himself out of the conviction that 'it is good for [children] to feel that the people and things around them that appeal to their respect are beautiful and powerful specimens of what they seem to be', this first straight look at the reality is as yet more appalled than forgiving. It is not until *The Awkward Age* that James will find it in him to write his sordid adult sinners not as grotesques but only as flawed, disappointed, damaged human beings.

The pathology of propriety in both these transitional fictions is represented as essentially something manipulated by women; the product of a female imagination tainted by its long seclusion, its narrowness, its ignorance. The men may seem to be the first causes, the prime movers: it is for the love of Sir Claude, or in the service of the 'master', that all the stories' development comes about. Yet while the women are actively promoting and manipulating that development, the men uneasily or indifferently absent themselves, wash their hands of responsibility. Both stories centre in the agitation produced in women by men; but it would be more accurate to call it an agitation arising in these women which they then ascribe to the power of the men. Even the men's ultimate authority and the women's dependence on them is to some extent actually stage managed and orchestrated by the women: in the case of *Turn of the Screw* the master does not actually exist at all within the primary narrative (the governess' one meeting with him happens

outside her 'manuscript'); he is only operative as the girl's fevered imagination of him.

Isn't James probing, in his treatment of governesses in *Maisie* and *Turn of the Screw*, at that old story which had been told and retold countless times by and to and about women in English fiction in the nineteenth century: the governess-master story of which *Jane Eyre* is both source and supreme manifestation? Isn't he exploring how that story had penetrated to the very roots of perception of the female and of the imagining of women's fulfillment, how it had entangled itself with 'law', and how latent in its apparent innocence and cleanness were dangerous contradictions - its passionateness with its decency, its hunger with its control? The story had a dangerous power to delude, to hold out as the rewards for righteousness promises of what it could not deliver: the promise, ultimately, of the master.

In Mrs Wix James's *Jane Eyre* pastiche works through comic realism. A parodistic fragment of the old story is dropped down into another world altogether, a world where there is no-one to fall in love with Mrs Wix's sobriety or her grey dresses. Her very dinginess, her straighteners, her ill-at-easeness amidst gallic pleasurings, all derive by some crooked mocking line from Jane's sober grey wool and cool disapproval of Adèle's French fineries. Even the dead child seems a detail out of the Victorian store: but realism reads its way round the pathetic tale of Clara-Matilda and picks up its sordid hint of a differently unhappy story, of illegitimacy perhaps (where is Mr. Wix and why is he never mentioned?). Mrs Wix's nursery stories are not, as in *Jane Eyre*, robust North English folklore; but 'distressed beauties' and 'perfect gentlemen, strikingly handsome' (72): the governess-master story reduced to absurd and fatal paradigm.

In her moment of greatness Mrs Wix breaks out and makes a passionate appeal to Sir Claude; makes the classic *Jane Eyre* step across gender and caste divide, charged with all those years of schoolroom imaginings, emboldened by the new finery Sir Claude has paid for (she should have listened to Jane who knew new clothes would turn her head). In accents she has never tried out before - and to Sir Claude, to her employer, to a gentleman!

she reveals herself at last peremptory, vociferous, accusatory, equal, and female:

Maisie could scarcely believe her eyes as she saw the good lady, with whom she had associated no faintest shade of any art of provocation, actually, after an upward grimace, give Sir Claude a great giggling insinuating naughty slap. 'You wretch -you know why!' And she turned away. The face that with this movement she left him to present to Maisie was to abide with his stepdaughter as the very image of stupefaction; but the pair lacked time to communicate either amusement or alarm before their admonisher was upon them again. She had begun in fact to show infinite variety and she flashed about with a still quicker change of tone, 'Have you brought me that thing as a pretext for your going over?' (197)

It has never occurred to Sir Claude, of course, that he need give any account of what he is doing whatsoever, let alone a pretext, to Mrs Wix. His hold on his gentlemanliness may be ever so shaky, but his 'stupefaction' registers none the less the deserts of difference between himself and Mrs Wix's fusty sad insignificance. He's brought her over to Boulogne precisely for her decency, and now it turns out even she harbours complications; the 'precious, ripe tradition' he had counted on for safety cries out, in its extremity, in the unsound cadences of sacrifice and self-abandonment, in the rhetoric of wish fulfillment.

'You're dreadful, you're terrible, for you know but too well that it's not a small thing to me that you should address me in terms that are princely! ... Take me, take me,' she went on and on -the tide of her eloquence was high. 'Here I am; I know what I am and what I ain't; but I say boldly to the face of you both that I'll do better for you, far, than ever she'll even try to. I say it to yours, Sir Claude, even though I owe you the very dress on my back and the very shoes on my feet. Owe you everything -that's just the reason; and to pay it back, in profusion, what can that be but what I want? Here I am, here I am!' -she spread herself into an exhibition that, combined with her intensity and her decorations, appeared to suggest her for strange offices and devotions, for ridiculous replacements and substitutions. She manipulated her gown as she talked, she insisted on the items of her debt. (201)

In this *Maisie* world of manipulating women and vacillating men (Beale is not weak exactly, but the Countess does *pay* him) it is Sir Claude's fatality to be desired. No wonder that after Mrs Wix's outbreak he abandons his moment's dream of escape (with Maisie his 'boy', and to France and the fishwife) and resigns himself to Mrs Beale, a Blanche Ingram among governesses.

It is possible that among the things Maisie is *refusing*, in that first gesture of her independence at the end of the novel, is just this Victorian female love-pathology, the melting and the sacrificing, the cult of the man (Mrs Wix discussing her 'secret feelings ... by the hour' with Maisie in the schoolroom); the high-tone and the sordid accommodations. It is 'realism' that Maisie awakes to, at the end, a recognition beyond delusions that however nicely she and Sir Claude get on, there is no place for her innocent play-romance in the adult economy of emotions: competitive, possessive, conflictual, sexual. He doesn't even wait to wave to their steamer from the balcony: she knows he has gone to Mrs Beale. Sir Claude doesn't think much about Maisie when she's not there: it's very important for Maisie to know that. It's on the way to healing a certain debilitating habit of the female imagination.

This is a habit which the leaky governess of *The Turn of the Screw* is very prone to. One of the features of her volatile and inconsistent narrative is how it perpetually imagines itself exposed to a male gaze, to her master's attention; and how it gains its significance and importance from that, its rewards.

... I liked it best of all when, as the light faded - or rather, I should say, the day lingered and the last calls of the last birds sounded, in a flushed sky, from the old trees - I could take a turn into the grounds and enjoy, almost with a sense of property that amused and flattered me, the beauty and dignity of the place. It was a pleasure at these moments to feel myself tranquil and justified; doubtless, perhaps, also to reflect that by my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure - if he ever thought of it! - to the person to whose pressure I had responded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me, and that I *could*, after all, do it, proved an even greater joy than I had expected. I dare say I fancied myself, in short, a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear... One of the thoughts that, as I don't in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone. Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that - I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face.(35)⁵

⁵ *Complete Tales*, Vol.10

We readers know, as Maisie learns, that really there is no such gaze, no such 'knowing'. The narrative directs us around its ostensible statement to realist readings of probability: it is obvious that the master is indifferent to his employee and oblivious of her fantasising perpetual consciousness of him. But the governess never attains to that objective purchase on her experience from outside her own narrative that Maisie does: never recognises that she has constructed her master herself. Too much, fatally too much, depends upon the verification that gaze and its imagined approval bestows upon her project of authority. Her sense of her own authority is entangled at too deep a level with the sense of it as an authority by proxy: a dangerous responsibility without answerability, the need to act without the requirement to examine the premises of action. (She does what she's told, doesn't she; what she should; what she must).

Of course the male watcher for whom the governess's narrative performs is not only the master (and not only Peter Quint on the tower): it is for Douglas that she writes her story down, and in his susceptible youth her narrative finds at last its male underwriter, its guarantee of her justification, and (too late and too attenuated, smelling too much of the 'sweet dim faded lavender' of genteel unfulfillment⁶) its reward, in his lifelong devotion to the memory of her truth. The pathos and quiet dignity of Douglas's country-house ghost story frame to *The Turn of the Screw* are just the qualities the governess has intended him, or us, to read into her narrative. But in his meticulous mimetic reproduction of the language and cadences of the 'old story', James is uncovering something else, something less dignified as well as less quiet, a veritable pathology of perception, in which for instance the master's very indifference and neglect are contorted into privilege and consolation:

It was striking of the children ... never to fail - one or the other - of the precious question that has helped us through many a peril. 'When do you think he will come? Don't you think we ought to write?' ... 'He,' of course, was their uncle in Harley Street; and we lived in much profusion of theory that he might at any moment arrive to mingle in our circle. It was impossible to have given less encouragement than he had done to such a doctrine, but if we had not had the doctrine to fall back upon we should

⁶ Ezra Pound's phrase. 'Henry James', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T S Eliot. London: Faber, 1974, 323.

have deprived each other of some of our finest exhibitions. He never wrote to them - that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of me; for the way in which a man pays his highest tribute to a woman is apt to be but by the more festal celebration of one of the sacred laws of his comfort; and I held that I carried out the spirit of the pledge not to appeal to him when I let our young friends understand that their own letters were but charming literary exercises. They were too beautiful to be posted; I kept them myself; I have them all to this hour.(89)

This daughter of a clergyman finds the language and apparatus of religion to hand - 'doctrine', and 'festal celebration of ... sacred laws' - to reconcile herself to the arrangements of patriarchy and class system which consign her to narrowness and unfulfillment, and to insist upon the significant presence of the in-fact-absent watcher.

With consummate doubleness, she both encourages the children too endlessly to count upon the imminent appearance of the master, and pockets their letters to him in a gesture that not only presumes but effects their futility. It is in this that the pedagogy of the governess consists: she teaches the children to believe in a fulfillment that can't happen, and to address themselves to an authority who will never hear them. She perpetuates her own pathology: not out of innocence (the mere perpetuation of the watertight tradition) but in a narrative fractured around its own bad faith. The very cadences of longing and sweet, funny hopefulness - 'we lived in much profusion of theory that he might at any moment arrive' - are the flowery surfaces concealing the violences sprung at their roots, in their very vocabulary. The 'young friends', the 'charming' and 'beautiful' letters, the 'adorable children': these are the emphases which invariably produce within the narrative tension of *The Turn of the Screw* a violently dissenting anti-reading, against sweetness and against innocence. 'Their more than earthly beauty, their absolutely unnatural goodness. It's a game ... a policy and a fraud'(82). Beauty and charm and adoration are intoxicating poisons the vigilant narrative has perpetually to articulate against:

There appears to me, moreover, as I look back, no note in all this more extraordinary than the mere fact that, in spite of my tension and of their triumph, I never lost patience with them. Adorable they must in truth have been, I now reflect, that I didn't in those days hate them!(89)

The little wretches denied it with all the added volume of their sociability and their tenderness, in just the crystal depths of which -

like the flash of a fish in a stream - the mockery of their advantage peeped up.(87)

...with their voices ['our small friends' voices', New York Edition] in the air, their pressure on one's heart and their fragrant faces against one's cheek, everything fell to the ground but their incapacity and their beauty... It was a pity that I needed once more to describe the portentous little activity by which she sought to divert my attention - the perceptible increase of movement, the greater intensity of play, the singing, the gabbling of nonsense and the invitation to romp. (62)

The changed reiteration of the diminutive in that last passage is significant. The 'small' that is tender, protective, coy in the account of the children's charms becomes the 'little' that is lashing, sceptical, hostile in the governess' conviction of Flora's contamination. Both energies seem to come from the *same source*.

The excessive protestations of abasement and service to the master, too, and the very commitment of the narrative itself to the presumption of his gaze, also have their violent underside of resentment and refusal, in such a narrative divided against itself. As the narrative progresses, or the governess finds herself farther and farther committed in to the fragile and fantastic narrative web she has spun, we watch the process of the transmutation of the master out of the underwriting authority for her invention into the enemy of it. He becomes the one to whom it had better not be reported, the one from whom it must be kept secret, the one who the governess-missionary wincingly recognises will conspire with Flora to misunderstand, to make her out 'the lowest creature'.

'...Flora has now her grievance, and she'll work it to the end.'

'Yes, Miss; but to *what* end?'

'Why, that of dealing with me to her uncle. She'll make me out to him the lowest creature-!'

I winced at the fair show of the scene in Mrs.Grose's face; she looked for a minute as if she sharply saw them together. 'And him who thinks so well of you!'

'He has an odd way -it comes over me now,' I laughed, '-of proving it! But that doesn't matter. What Flora wants, of course, is to get rid of me ... It's you who must go. You must take Flora.'

My visitor, at this, did speculate. 'But where in the world - ?'

'Away from here. Away from *them*. Away, even most of all, now, from me. Straight to her uncle.'

'Only to tell on you-?'

No, not 'only'! To leave me, in addition, with my remedy.'(119)

Miles is to be feared for, left alone, the 'remedy' for his governess who girds herself for her final test of strength, Macbeth-like, amidst the falling away hourly of the reassurances and the old superstitions that have sustained her; excepting the one or two superstitions to which she is committed too far to retreat:

...within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he were innocent what then on earth was I?' (136)

In spite of her moments of 'perverse horror' at what she is doing - 'To do it in any way was an act of violence, for what did it consist of but the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature who had been for me a revelation of the possibilities of beautiful intercourse?'(132) - an act of violence it is to be, and the Macbeth analogy doesn't seem disproportionate to the violence of the language of the last pages of the story: 'fighting with a demon for a human soul', the 'ravage of uneasiness', 'the hideous author of our woe', 'the drop of my victory and all the return of my battle' and the 'wide overwhelming presence' that 'filled the room like the taste of poison'(137).

It's the language of violent conflict; it's also more specifically the language of the gothic, of violence interiorised, domesticated; of the suffering underside of reasonableness and respectability; and of the vision of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*. Almost until the last moments of the struggle in the dining room, the governess is *knitting*: and we remember that one of the worst condemnations she and Mrs Grose have ever actually articulated of that 'horror of horrors' Miss Jessel is that she goes outside *without a hat* (108). She encounters Peter Quint for the second time when she goes in search of a pair of gloves 'that had required three stitches and that had received them - with a publicity perhaps not edifying - while I sat with the children at their tea (41)': almost as if the tiny shame links itself subliminally with the terrible apparition. James is locating that specific and predominantly

feminine terrain in the nineteenth century imagination where the very minutiae of refinement give rise to the worst dreams; where the vast disposition of thundering life-forces is around the tea-table and the sewing-basket.

The governess's crucial act of assertion of authority in the newly masterless house that last evening is to dine downstairs: 'to mark, for the house, the high state I cultivated'(126). In all seriousness, now, she acts out the possession and authority which she had entertained in playful language at the opening of her narrative ('I could take a turn into the grounds and enjoy, almost with a sense of property that amused and flattered me, the beauty and dignity of the place', 35). In place of fantasies of obedience and reward, she now paces the house in an assertion of dominance, 'clutching the helm', 'very grand and dry', causing it to be known that 'left thus to myself, I was quite remarkably firm'(125). At first reading her language here is in complete contrast to her conventional gushing grateful and self-doubting girlishness at the beginning of the story:

In spite of this timidity - which the child herself, in the oddest way in the world, had been perfectly frank and brave about, allowing it, without a sign of uncomfortable consciousness, with the deep, sweet serenity indeed of one of Raphael's holy infants, to be discussed, to be imputed to her and to determine us - I felt sure she would presently like me. It was part of what I already liked Mrs.Grose herself for, the pleasure I could see her feel in my admiration and wonder as I sat at supper with four tall candles and with my pupil, in a high chair and a bib, brightly facing me, between them, over bread and milk. There were naturally things that in Flora's presence could pass between us only as prodigious and gratified looks, obscure and roundabout allusions.

'And the little boy -does he look like her? Is he, too, so very remarkable?'

One wouldn't flatter a child. 'Oh miss, *most* remarkable. If you think well of this one!' - and she stood there with a plate in her hand, beaming at our companion, who looked from one of us to the other with placid heavenly eyes that contained nothing to check us.

'Yes; if I do -?'

"You *will* be carried away by the little gentleman!"

'Well, that, I think, is what I came for -to be carried away. I'm afraid, however,' I remember feeling the impulse to add, 'I'm rather easily carried away. I was carried away in London!'

I can still see Mrs.Grose's broad face as she took this in. 'In Harley Street?'

'In Harley Street.'(25)

How does the governess's narrative transform like this from its beginnings in a language of subordination to its climactic disastrous assertions of dominance? What is the development between her perception of Flora's Raphael-like 'holy innocence' this first tea-time and the vituperative fury of the scene by the lake, where she sees Flora's face as a 'small mask of reprobation': her 'incomparable childish beauty' 'suddenly failed' and like a 'vulgarly pert little girl in the street, she hugged Mrs Grose more closely and buried in her skirts the dreadful little face'(116)? What James seems to be exploring is how these apparently mutually contradictory values - the sweetness and the foulness, the adoration and the loathing, the submissiveness and the domination - are intimate co-presences in a language essentially *dyadic*, constructed around a Manichean vocabulary of positives and negatives. The one excess entails the other: all the potential for the governess's visions of horror is there in her vision of an impossibly radiantly innocent childhood. And the bad faith of the narrative hovers from before she has ever even seen Peter Quint, as a miasma of overstatement ('one of Raphael's holy infants'), of mendacity ('There were naturally things that in Flora's presence could pass between us only as ... obscure and round-about allusions'), of false logic (why do they proceed to flatter Flora, having said they shouldn't?), and of helplessness to control (the 'placid, heavenly eyes ... contained nothing to *check* us' recalls the omnipresent possibility of being 'carried away').

Most important of all, the bad faith is in the monologic solipsism of a narrative that fails consistently to make its move into dialogue, on to the separateness of others. The governess talks *about* Flora but not *to* her. It pretends to be a story of service and sacrifice in Miles's and Flora's name; they and their childishness certainly become the fetish objects of her missionary project ('I ... covered her with kisses in which there was a sob of atonement' 30). But there is a sense in which all her obsessive attentiveness to them misses their actuality in the text; smothers all their speech in interpretation; expends much energy on coercing them to 'tell the truth' but can within its own logic only ever hear their offer of it as postponement and ploy:

I was of course thoroughly kind and merciful; never, never yet had I placed on his little shoulders hands of such tenderness as those with which, while I rested against the bed, I held him there well under fire...

'You must tell me now - and all the truth. What did you go out for? What were you doing there?'

I can still see his wonderful smile, the whites of his beautiful eyes and the uncovering of his clear teeth, shine to me in the dusk. 'If I tell you why, will you understand?' My heart, at this, leaped into my mouth. Would he tell me why? I found no sound on my lips to press it, and I was aware of replying only with a vague, repeated, grimacing nod. He was gentleness itself, and while I wagged my head at him he stood there more than ever a little fairy prince. It was his brightness indeed that gave me a respite. Would it be so great if he were really going to tell me? 'Well,' he said at last, 'just exactly in order that you should do this.'

'Do what?'

'Think me - for a change - *bad!*' I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word... He had given exactly the account of himself that permitted least of my going behind it...(79)

As soon as she asks the question she sets up the impossibility of believing any answer but her pre-selected (impossible) one: that he has been with Quint. There is a circularity to their thus betraying themselves to her suspicions: unless they tell her her suspicions are correct, she is bound to hear their 'lies' as confirming those suspicions. But a realist reading around the governess' narrative directs us to attend to Miles's offered explanation with all the seriousness his governess can't afford: he seems to have been alerted precisely to that entrapment within their governess's interpretation of things which insists too much on their innocence and goodness; he wants to break into her dyad of perfect innocence and devilish foulness by offering his own ordinary imperfection: he wants her to 'think me - for a change - *bad!*'.

We can seek out a reading through and behind the governess's fantasising presentation of the children's strangeness: James affords us plenty of occasions when we hear them, through the entanglements of her interpretative web, doing their utmost to speak plainly, to make sense. These are indeed likely to be peculiar children: orphaned, with an indifferent father-substitute, attaching themselves to a succession of paid minders all more or less driven and preoccupied, if not simply subservient like Mrs Grose. They are surrounded with all the

material care belonging to the power-to-command of a privileged caste; but in fact, because they are not adult and not able to command, they are vulnerable to whatever more or less sublimated resentments may be felt by those of lower caste or whose caste-status (like the governesses') is ambivalent, insecure. They are haunted by sudden deaths and disappearances *which no-one ever speaks of*.

If we give them a reading uncontaminated by the governess's dyadic values, these are indeed not 'innocent' children. They inhabit a real un-innocent world which naturally they are groping to understand. They are acutely sensitive to their new governess's moods (which she imposes more and more peremptorily) and even as she promotes that sensitivity she reads it with characteristic doubleness as sign of their corruption. Theirs is the sensitivity of children who are quite used, for instance, to weeping governesses with secrets ('She had looked at me in sweet speculation and then had accused me to my face of having 'cried'. I had supposed the ugly signs of it brushed away...'62). They are used to adult motivations obscure but dangerous; and behind the innocent-seeming codes of adult surfaces, to hidden realities which children are not allowed to name. (Miles is presumably expelled from school for transgressing - too innocently, ironically enough - this interdict.) They are indeed haunted, they have presumably been through all this with Miss Jessel before: they know about demented governesses and indifferent men.

Their new governess never speaks to them about the deaths, or her fears, she never asks them about the real Peter Quint and Miss Jessel; her narrative never opens on to genuine dialogue, it is only the space in which she acts herself:

The large, impressive room ... the great state bed as I almost felt it, the full, figured draperies, the long glasses in which, for the first time, I could see myself from head to foot...(24)

"How do you know what I think? [the governess asks].

"Ah well, of course I don't [Miles replies]; for it strikes me you never tell me."(93)

She either addresses the children in baby-talk or, later, in a coy knowingness that both invites and fears their complicity: but she presumes always that they can in fact read the hidden

realities behind her surface code (and that very presumption becomes further proof of their contamination). We presume, in fact, that they do indeed try very hard to read her, to fathom and to please her, like Maisie struggling to discover the 'moral sense' that Mrs Wix insists is there; they are indeed more initiated than is compatible with their governess's ideal of Raphael-like holy innocence. 'We must do nothing but what she likes,' Miles anxiously suggests to Flora and Mrs. Grose after he has first broached the subject of his returning to school, and made his first gesture of appeal to his uncle, to an outside and objective authority, against his governess's threatening quivering refusal to let him go.

At the end of the story, abandoning baby-talk, the girl addresses them in screams and vituperation, in the whole unleashed arsenal of feminine 'sensibility', in the gothic of prostration, of fainting fits and embraces and falling against things for support. '"No more, no more, no more!" I shrieked, as I tried to press him against me, to my visitant' (137). (This is uncharacteristic: James's women on the whole eschew the Victorian hysteric body-vocabulary. At most they cry. If anything, it is his men whom he puts through the 'gothic' range: in *The Jolly Corner* and *The Beast in the Jungle*, for example.) And it is at those moments of fracture, as the code founders and the suppressed breaks through, that the frightened children struggle to make themselves heard. Flora shouts aloud, 'I don't know what you mean. I see nobody, I see nothing.'

Flora refuses to see; Miles (and we remember the weak men and manipulating voracious women of *What Maisie Knew*) tries, little gentleman that he is, desperately to save himself by obliging, looking first for Miss Jessel - isn't that who she wants? that was who she wanted, by the lake - and then, when that doesn't please, for the other one he guesses that she means. (They have intuited enough about her obsessions, to guess. And anyway, it would seem natural that her obsessions coincided with the children's own, that they too would be preoccupied, haunted, by the secrets and the deaths.)

... his head made the movement of a baffled dog's on a scent and then gave a frantic little shake for air and light, he was at me in a white rage, bewildered, glaring vainly over the place and missing wholly, though

it now, to my sense, filled the room like the taste of poison, the wide, overwhelming presence.(138)

But although Miles tries to oblige, he can't say he sees what he doesn't see, what isn't there. Only the children, within the text, refuse to see what isn't there; candidly they articulate their scepticism, they accuse, they name names, oppose their personal realism to the trajectory of adult fantasy. All the adults, including and especially the comfortable listeners to Douglas's old story, are complicit in accepting the governess's version of what happens, accepting in obedience to the conventions of the old story that she sees what isn't possible, the dead returned to life.

It is this complicity which makes *The Turn of the Screw* a story about much more than one individual pathology. The very survival of the story in Douglas's manuscript, the very hush which the blasé sophisticated listeners of a different generation still accord to the old-fashioned tale, suggest the persuasiveness and persistence of the governess's version of things. Worldly ladies and gentlemen seem to need to believe in her slightly comical fusty respectable *rightness*: the ritual circumstances of the re-telling and Douglas's piety signal that we are in presence of a foundation myth, some fundamental underpinning of caste and gender tradition, a childhood-learned core of magic and belief. The narrative experiment of *The Turn of the Screw* does not consist simply in the analysis of a disturbed individual: it is launched rather into the exploration of the wider field Millicent Bell suggests, 'social classes and their relation to one another and ... gender in this context'.⁷

Bell analyses at length in her essay 'Class, Sex and the Victorian Governess: James's *The Turn of the Screw*' the

⁷ It seems appropriate that James's idea for *The Turn of the Screw* originated with an anecdote told him by Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, himself by all accounts a stern and distant patriarch, pillar of church and state. The Archbishop, of course, told the story 'straight', believed in the children's depravity and in an evil which beckoned and solicited them from dangerous places. From an article on Benson by Penelope Fitzgerald, *London Review of Books* (June 1998), Vol.20 no.12, 17.

especially anomalous position of the governess within the nineteenth century class structure:

a woman burdened with the task of upholding and transmitting the increasingly 'Victorian' domestic ideal, though she herself was single and unable to count on the prospect of a marriage; she was a 'lady' in the nineteenth century sense of the term, yet anomalously earning her own living.⁸

It is required of her that she both embody in her own existence and perpetuate in her teaching systems of thought of which she is not in fact the beneficiary. James makes her story therefore the focus for his explorations of those systems of thought. Her own anomalous 'false' position refracts as violences and hiatuses into her narrative just those inconsistencies and suppressions which are tangled at the very premises of ideals of propriety, of ladylikeness, of feminine innocence and ignorance. What is forced out of the narrative in efforts of innocence, and in the effort to identify 'nature' with innocence, will return as sub-text, as shadow reading, as the revelation of the hidden contents of the 'respectable' surface. The governess cannot afford to hear the children; to believe the children would be to undo that dyad of innocence and guilt which is holding together all the contradictions, all the false logic, of her own role. She can only be ladylike and modest and contented and important by imagining the children are foully contaminated with guessed at desires. If she admitted the mere ordinary reality of the children, she might have to discover that she herself is inferior, thwarted, raging, desiring, and doomed to unfulfillment.

Despite all the surface appearance of accusation of 'them', a great deal of the governess's language actually obliquely suggests her own guilt. She wonders, '"What will they think of that? Doesn't it betray too much?" It would have been easy to get into a sad, wild, tangle about how much I might betray' (67). 'I tried to laugh, and I seemed to see in the beautiful face with which he [Miles] watched me how ugly and queer I looked' (91). 'I was like a jailer with an eye to possible surprises and mistakes' (90). In her sightings of Miss Jessel,

⁸ Vivian R. Pollak, ed. *New Essays on Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Vivian R. Pollak. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

her very readiness to condemnation hints that what she sees and fears in the broken woman weeping on the stairs is a vision or a premonition of herself, her own capacity to be broken and betrayed: '...she vanished without looking round at me. I knew, for all that, exactly what dreadful face she had to show;' (74). Knows, because it, and its dreadfulness, is familiar from that long treacherous mirror in her room? Her unpityingness has just the flatness of self-chastisement.

When the governess comes upon her predecessor in the schoolroom, 'she ... looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers' (97). Miss Jessel exacts a recognition of identity: the screams - 'You terrible, miserable woman' - might be the governess's protest at herself. When she berates against Flora to Mrs Grose we seem again to hear incontinent fury at herself, a transfer onto the child of shame and disgust that is in origin self-shame: 'Oh, I see her perfectly from here. She resents, for all the world like some little high personage, the imputation on her truthfulness and, as it were, her respectability... Ah, she's 'respectable', the chit!' (119) The vision of her broken predecessor is of that propriety and intactness and control which it is her life's struggle to sustain, invaded and brought down; by the foulness of Quint, the foulness of sex and of sin.

As Miss Jessel 'appears' in relation to the governess's anxieties about herself, so Peter Quint 'appears' on the tower at the very moment she imagines walking into the fulfillment and completion of the master's gaze ('Someone would appear there at the turn of the path and would stand before me and smile and approve ... I only asked that he should know' 35). Quint is the master's surrogate, who wears his cast-off clothes, and, actor-like, exercises in the master's absence (Mrs Grose thinks) too much of the master's authority. Like the master he is 'remarkably handsome', and the sexual frisson this draws from the governess in the text is a shudder at something devilish, the dyadic counterpart of the benign swoon of uncontrol produced

in her by the master's equivalent good looks ('I was carried away in London', 25).

There is a telling moment early on where the governess suddenly extends the taint she has been attributing to Quint into her thoughts of the master; she speculates that he too, like Peter Quint, was 'not so very particular perhaps about some of the company he himself kept' (51). The almost proprietorial chaffing knowingness, over this man she's only met twice, is a first sign of what's to come, in the gradual translation of her idealised master into the resented enemy of her project as the story progresses. How could she possibly know what company he kept: from what under-depths of female imaginings of male freedoms do such knowingnesses come? (We remember the gauche man-of-the worldliness in *Jane Eyre*, over Rochester's wild oats.) Is this part, in fact, of the unexamined content of the myth of the adored master? Is Peter Quint the embodiment even of what the governess requires the master to also be?

Almost as soon as Quint is glimpsed she unloads onto his figure a dread and foulness that has been waiting for him to appear, waiting in her very language as the dyadic 'dark' that shadows a too exclusive insistence on innocence and beauty; he becomes the repository for and the embodiment of the whole hoard of her sexual and social taboos and fears. Mrs Grose complains that Quint was 'much too free': his character as the governess constructs it with the help of Mrs Grose threatens the whole system of propriety and 'place' that binds these two women to the safety of submission and dependence. He stole (waistcoats), he drank, he had 'secret disorders' and 'vices more than suspected', he moved in and out of the constraints of the house and grounds, he had other (of course 'lower') social contacts.

He talked to Miles (too freely, no doubt), and 'spoiled' the boy, whatever we understand by that: possibly (it's one of the realist 'counter-readings' to the governess's narrative that James hints at for us) offered the boy a relatively uncomplicated cross-caste companionship. Being too free with Miles and 'spoiling' him sound distinctly preferable to the governess's obfuscations and her preoccupation with Miles's being 'spoiled' in the way she chooses to understand the word. In his moment of extremity at the end of the story Miles casts

around for an escape (he's already spent the day outdoors) and says he has to see Luke. Who is Luke? One of the servants the governess shares her isolation with and yet never names? (She reflects when discussing Quint with Mrs Grose that some of them, too, are 'too free', 50.) Might we guess that Miles is grasping for the safety of the stables or the kitchen, invoking the different (and masculine) authority of tackle and traps against this female spirit-conjuring?

Peter Quint is like the governess's dream of her master and yet dangerously unlike: the essential dividing marker between them is that Quint is not a 'gentleman'. On the wrong side of the caste marker that makes the master a gentleman and herself a lady lies the undoing of the governess's whole identity and *raison d'être*. The caste marker holds apart those dyadic possibilities of love-fulfillment around which her imagination circles: her fantasised reward in the master's approving gaze, and Miss Jessel's degradation, ending in exposure and death, when she succumbs to the attention of Peter Quint. The vision of Quint signals for the governess the dangerous real content of the apparent innocence of her fantasy of the master, and her whole project of realisation through the master's recognition. Or, to express it differently, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel provide the ugly realism that haunts the governess's idealising fantasy of her master; they are the parodistic enactment of the impossible romance. They provide the counter-narrative to the governess's dreams, her high-mindedness and inexplicit, swooning fulfillments of recognition from an unseen watcher; instead, they act out class degradation, pregnancy (we presume), exposure, shame, and death. (The close presence of that brute other realistic possibility behind the fairy tale is present, also, in *Jane Eyre*: in the look, for example, that Mrs. Fairfax gives Jane the night she comes upon them kissing after Rochester's proposal in the garden.)

In the field of the governess's narrative, it is only 'gentlemanliness and ladylikeness', or propriety, that hold back the possibility of her own 'love story' becoming the story of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel: and the children get caught up in the deployment of energies around this. The boy and girl, in their presumed but doubted sex-innocence, must be protected, for

the sake of the lady and the master, from the sex-knowledge of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Invested in the children, in other words, is the fetish of the governess's own innocence.

But that is not all the story. As well as the governess's dread of the ghosts, there is also her jealousy of them, and her curiosity. Miss Jessel has had what the governess herself longs for: the crude sexual maleness of Quint is after all something projected not only by the governess's fear but by her desire. The boundary of propriety is something that both saves her and prevents her. The walking into the gaze wants more than mere absent approval, the body in its gesture of surrender to the imagined presence asks for more than it dares to acknowledge:

Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that -I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. That was exactly present to me -by which I mean the face was- when, on the first of these occasions, at the end of a long June day, I stopped short on emerging from one of the plantations and coming into view of the house. What arrested me on the spot -and with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for- was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there! ... (35)

Once these ghost-emanations from an under-world of her imagination have shown themselves to the governess, she wants to know, she prefers 'the fullness of [her] own exposure'. The alternative seems more dreadful, would condemn her to a perpetual exclusion: 'What I had then had an ugly glimpse of was that my eyes might be sealed just while theirs were most opened' (87). What the governess offers as missionary sacrifice in her determination to go on seeing ghosts reads in fact as more like hungry need: the quiet of Bly without her ghosts is the emptiness of a theatre without a play: they are her story, the story that transforms the 'grey prose' of her office and 'the stupid shrubs I knew and the dull things of November' (40, 129) into experience, into a life; into, what's more, romance:

The place, with its grey sky and withered garlands, its bared spaces and scattered dead leaves, was like a theatre after the performance - all strewn with crumpled playbills. There were exactly states of the air, conditions of sound and of stillness, unspeakable impressions of the kind

of ministering moment, that brought back to me, long enough to catch it, the feeling of the medium in which, that June evening out of doors, I had had my first sight of Quint, and in which, too, at those other instants, I had, after seeing him through the window, looked for him in vain in the circle of shrubbery. I recognised the signs, the portents - I recognised the moment, the spot. But they remained unaccompanied and empty, and I continued unmolested; if unmolested one could call a young woman whose sensibility had, in the most extraordinary fashion, not declined but deepened... I had then expressed [to Mrs Grose] what was vividly in my mind: the truth that, whether the children really saw or not - since, that is, it was not yet definitely proved - I greatly preferred, as a safeguard, the fullness of my own exposure. I was ready to know the very worst that was to be known.(86)

This fear of being left 'unmolested' by her ghosts connects significantly with that rhetoric of resignation in the governess' bright talk in the opening chapters about her fulfillment in looking after the children. Close by her reassurances in the prose there always nestle the signs of her resentment, of her dread that there will be nothing more than this:

The attraction of my small charges was a constant joy, leading me to wonder afresh at the vanity of my original fears, the distaste I had begun by entertaining for the probable grey prose of my office. There was to be no grey prose, it appeared, and no long grind; so how could work not be charming that presented itself as daily beauty?(40)

The question insists that it is already answered; yet, once asked, it remains operative against all her ecstatic reassurances. It is the same question, of course, that Charlotte Bronte/ Jane Eyre asks eloquently at Thornfield: this material sufficiency and respectability and employment; why isn't it enough?

The nexus of gender and power conflicts that concentrates itself in the governess's sightings of Peter Quint is even more complex, too, than simply issues of sexual fear and sexual desire. There are frequent moments when she seems not so much in sexual relation with Quint as in a rivalry of authorities. She outgazes him, in their penultimate encounter on the stairs, turns the tables on the power he had over her when he watched her from the tower, when he was the watcher she had and had not been longing for. This time, in a complex manoeuvre of authorities, she asserts caste against his sexual advantage: 'I definitely saw it turn, as I might have seen the low wretch to

which it had once belonged turn on receipt of an order' (71). The neutral pronoun triumphantly unsexes Quint.

There are also moments where, just as happens with Miss Jessel the broken governess, Peter Quint appears as a parodistic distorting reflection of the governess herself; he the employee-usurper of authority, he the actor, 'much too free', he in the final scene with the 'prowl of a baffled beast'. Aren't these displacements onto the ghost of aspects the governess can't afford to recognise in herself? As the story winds up to its climax, as she asserts her dominance in the emptying house, and as she forces her terrible un-innocent knowledge on to Miles ('strange passages and perils, secret disorders' 52), doesn't she more and more resemble the Peter Quint that she has conjured up?

The interrogations into adult objectivity in *The Turn of the Screw* and *What Maisie Knew* are crucial markers in the development of James's late work. Both stories seek out under the surface of social decencies and norms a totemic core of belief tightly entangled in fetishes of sexual innocence, child innocence, femininity, and female powerlessness: it is at the rehearsal of this core of belief that Douglas's audience sits enthralled and complicit. The adult objective law becomes simply the version of the story that the adults tell: in a recoil of mistrust and distaste at how that version manipulates and betrays, James falls back for his 'truth' upon the vulnerable uninitiated children.

Both fictions render his perception of the bad faith and damaged perceptions of the women in whose ministering and mothering voices the broken story is to be retold, the totem is to be perpetuated. At the same time both fictions represent with sympathy the causes of the damage, the entrapping mechanisms of innocence and sacrifice, the beguiling stories of reward and fulfillment, and, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the inevitability with which disempowerment and unfulfillment will return to haunt the story in neurosis and dissimulated revenges. The sleep of the innocence of these women produces monsters. The world of the

little girl at the Hampshire vicarage was supposed to be made up of the happinesses that cat and pony bring; she was supposed to be 'slavish idolater' to her brothers while they showed no corresponding 'fine consideration' for her 'inferior age, sex, and intelligence' (68). She cannot afford to let this little boy whose voice is a 'high casual pipe with which ... he threw off intonations as if he were tossing roses' escape from her to grow up into the deep-voiced world of men, of absent and indifferent masters.

5. 'The sacred terror': *The Awkward Age* and James's men of the world

From the vantage point of *What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*, both fictions centred in childhood, the adulthood lying beyond the marker of initiation into sexual knowledge looks like treacherous country. In *The Awkward Age*, centred in adolescence, James makes some tentative explorations into that country on the far side of the marker, and finds out that after all it has firm ground and breathable air. It is a more forgiving fiction than its two predecessors: at least, it is not tensed around that same recoil from the sexual and mistrust of the adult which animates *Maisie* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Even from inside *The Awkward Age*'s sordid tangle of impropriety and treachery James finds it may be possible, after all, to talk; there may be language, and even candour, beyond the breakdown of the old law, and the old story; there may be ways of talking about taboo rather than simply inhabiting a language (as in *Maisie* and *The Turn of the Screw*) broken over it. It may be possible to imagine adults who can hold apart 'knowing' and 'condemning'.

If we are reading these fictions of the late 1890s as transitional within James's oeuvre, he was at the same time excitedly reading the specific cultural detail of those years as transitional for English leisure-class society: in *The Awkward Age* transition is his explicit subject, located as it is between the secure proprieties of Lady Julia's generation and the incalculable consequences of the openness of Nanda's. In his notebooks, just before and after the sketch which is the seed for *The Awkward Age*, James made notes from Brada's

Notes sur Londres, a journalistic analysis from the French perspective of change in contemporary English society:

What Brada speaks of in particular, as the two most striking notes to him are *Primo*, the masculinization of the women; and *Secondo*, the demoralization of the aristocracy -the cessation, on their part, to take themselves seriously...

The idea of this little book is the Revolution in English society by the *avènement* of the women, which he sees everywhere and in everything. I saw it a long time ago -and I saw in it a big subject for the Novelist. [Quoting from Brada] ...'*car c'était une belle chose après tout, que de voir une puissante aristocratie, une société si riche et si forte, tant d'êtres divers tenu en respect par quelques fictions qui suffisaient à défendre l'edifice sociale; c'était une salubre illusion que de supposer toutes les femmes chastes, tous les hommes fidèles, et d'ignorer, de chasser résolument ceux qui portaient quelque atteinte visible à cette fiction.*' [...because it's a wonderful thing after all, to see a powerful aristocracy, a society so rich and strong, so many different individuals, kept in check by a few fictions which are enough to sustain the social edifice; it is a happy illusion to suppose that all women are chaste and all men faithful, and to chase off resolutely anyone who visibly gives the lie to such a fiction.]

I seem to see the great, broad, rich theme of a large satirical novel in the picture, gathering a big armful of elements together, of the *train dont va* [rate it's going] English society before one's eyes - the great modern collapse of all the forms and superstitions and respects, good and bad...¹

In Brada's perception of a turning tide in English society, the apparatus of sexual prohibition and regulation and the defence of the social edifice (that is, the system of class and the protection of leisure-class privilege) are inextricably entangled. The 'salutary illusion' that women are chaste and men are faithful is an important part of what has safeguarded that social edifice. And that safeguarding system of sexual prohibition depends in turn, Brada suggests, on sustaining the 'femininity' of women; if they become 'masculinized' (that is, if they have access to traditionally masculine forms of knowledge, masculine freedoms to know), then the whole edifice is jeopardized.

In Brada's integration of the sexual with the political, James recognises his subject: not only the subject-to-be of *The Awkward Age*, but the whole nexus of the preoccupations he has been writing around since he began, the preoccupations that are first tried in the 'international theme'. What do *mores* mean,

¹ *The Notebooks of Henry James*. 192, 194, 195.

what are the ultimate sanctions for behaviours, if they are prescribed differently in different cultures? What does it mean to be a 'good' girl (as Daisy Miller is good), if it means something different in different places? What can Isabel's 'goodness' go on meaning to her in the new world of her marriage, whose surfaces offer no purchase for that 'goodness'? In the novels of the late 1890s these probings of mores and propriety have twisted themselves further and further out of neutrality and into an unresolved problem. Those core values of female innocence and goodness which have been central to a feminised English-language novel tradition seem to require from James, in *Maisie* and *The Turn of the Screw*, fundamental re-examinations, rewritings. Is it possible that the 'old story' of sacrifices and rewards, restraints and fulfillments, has had its aspect as corrupted and corrupting? In the 'great modern collapse' of all the 'forms and superstitions and respects' the ghosts of which broken promises will return to haunt the ruins? In order properly to understand the implications of that collapse, James like Brada will find his focus in the phases of transformation of sexual mores; in the proprieties the most intimate points of contact between individuals become the key to unlock an understanding of an age and its significant historical transformations.

James refers to Brada as 'he' and 'him'; in fact, she was a woman, but the mistake is understandable. The unapologetic cynicism of her comments depends upon that French tradition of the disaffiliation of the writer from the bourgeois project, a disaffiliation whose roots lie back in *Lucien Leuwen* and *Le Rouge et le Noir* and in Rousseau. The French novel tradition, unlike the English one, had been mostly in the hands of men, and its freedom to speak from outside propriety was inseparable from male freedoms in a given cultural system to think and know from outside that propriety. (Once a tradition is located in that 'outside', of course, it is possible for some, few, women to write there too: James in his writings on George Sand makes much of how she took her freedoms 'exactly like a man'.) From the perspective of a French anti-bourgeois intellectualism which had never been affiliated to the idealising project of decency and chastity and duty, the 'modern collapse' of the old

'superstitions' in English society will simply mean the removal of a hypocritical gloss from an unaltered reality; will afford some natural satisfaction at the deflation, finally, of the famous English hypocrisy. A properly chic cynicism will even lament the end of such a useful fiction, that had served so effectively to hold together a society 'so rich and so strong'.

Even in James's first notes, however, Brada's seamless cynicism at the collapse of the convenient fiction of propriety that holds together the social edifice is translated into something more complex. Reading the transformation from a centre, a *feminine* centre, in which ideals of 'innocence' and 'goodness' had a potency not wholly ironised by their juxtaposition with a different 'reality', the change that comes with the collapse is not so slight, not superficial. James's phrase 'the great modern collapse of all the forms and superstitions and respects, good and bad' is open-ended. It does not suggest that the subject of *The Awkward Age* is simply to be elegy, that 'long argument for the old lavender' so many critics seem to read it as.² But equally, a 'great collapse' of 'forms' suggests more than a cheerful change of labels; it suggests upheavals in the very structures of imagination, in the very stories a society has told itself and lived by.

The problem of getting the balance right in a reading of *The Awkward Age* between lament for a world passing and excitement at new energies liberated seems to centre on Mr Longdon. He is fifty-five (James was the same age at the time of writing the novel) and his country retreat makes us think of Rye; readings tend to identify Mr Longdon with the novelist, and therefore hear his voice as somehow privileged, as James's own. At its most extreme, this reading has given us an interpreter of a corrupt *fin de siècle* whose old-fashioned and shockable innocence is underwritten in a critical vocabulary positively sacral:

² *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 325.

The light of 'beauty' is first shed on Mrs. Brookenham's circle by the arrival of Mr Longdon. 'Beautiful' even in his 'narrowness' or prejudices', he stands apart from their self-approbation; his devotion to memories of Lady Julia has kept him unpolluted by modernity. For Mrs. Brook, standards march with the times; for him, they are fixed and unalterable. As an agent of James's own judgement, he asserts both the inflexibility and the power of absolute moral values.³

or, in a more sophisticated version;

Amidst the prevailing verbal inflation and moral disintegration, he 'maintained the full value of the word', and the possibility of integrity through a fusion of expression and substance.⁴

'Pollution', and 'beautiful narrowness'; 'moral disintegration' and 'integrity': we are in the language world of the governess of *Turn of the Screw* here, with its dyadic vocabulary of cleanness and corruption, innocence and guilt. But the apparatus for the enforcement of those kind of judgements, for the separating out of the clean from the polluted, is determinedly eschewed in *The Awkward Age*; explicitly, in James's explanation of his method in the *Preface*, where the 'presented occasion', like a play, is to 'tell all its story itself'. What is the reliance on dialogue in the novel for, if not to suspend the 'version' of a Mr Longdon in flexible and evolving relationship with, say, the 'version' of a Duchess?

If there is a self-portrait of sorts in the novel it is scrupulously ironised. We might even say that Mr Longdon's wisdom, his values, his moral universe, do sound something like the more confident, secure narrator-voice of *The Bostonians*, say, or *Washington Square*; only here that narrator voice is relegated from (to use the Bakhtinian vocabulary) monologic centrality to being only one of the voices, the values, of the heteroglossia of the novel. In conversation with the Duchess, Mr Longdon does not always have the last word. They are talking here about Mrs Brook's relationship with Van:

His silence, for a little, seemed the sign of a plan. 'What is it he hasn't done with Mrs Brook?'

'Well, the thing that would be the complication. He hasn't gone beyond a certain point. You may ask how one knows such matters, but I'm afraid I've not quite a receipt for it. A woman knows, but she can't tell. They haven't done, as it's called, anything wrong.'

³ H.K.Girling, '"Wonder" and "Beauty" in *The Awkward Age*', *Modern Judgements: Henry James*, ed. Tony Tanner. London: Macmillan, 1968, 240.

⁴ Nicola Bradbury, *Henry James: the Later Novels*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 24.

Mr Longdon frowned. 'It would be extremely horrid if they had.'

'Ah, but, for you and me who know life, it isn't *that that* - if other things had made for it - would have prevented!'(288)

The 'wrong' that is no more than part of a system of euphemism for the Duchess ('they haven't done, as it's called, anything wrong') - just as the 'innocence' she has arranged for Aggie is part of a system of marriageability - strikes Mr Longdon with all its old weight, of judgement, of sin. But then the only vocabulary his old-fashionedness has to meet 'wrong' in, the language of good manners and gentility, seems as inadequate here (as comical) as her cynicism: 'It would be extremely horrid if they had'.

'Ah, but for you and me who know life...' the Duchess goes on, appealing round the closure of judgement to other qualities she chooses (teasingly, but accurately, as it turns out and she perhaps intuitively) to suppose in him: an openness, finally, to the facts, to a changeable reality; an interest in knowing that reaches beyond the closure of condemning. 'It isn't *that that* - if other things had made for it- would have prevented!'. Whether the 'old forms and superstitions and respects' were 'good' or 'bad', a whole world of reality lies beyond the boundaries where those forms had seemed to hold back possibilities; and *The Awkward Age* leans, like Mr Longdon, across those boundaries and into that world.

Not only is Mr Longdon not the privileged interpreter of *The Awkward Age*; he is by no means an inflexible, static value. A case might even be made that he undergoes a Strether-like 'conversion', not quite to immoralities, but at least to talk. In his final scene with Nanda he is almost garrulous; so eager to articulate his exasperation at Van, his interpretation of Van's reasons and Van's conduct, as to almost qualify him for inclusion in Mrs Brook's insatiably articulating and interpreting 'set'. It is Mr Longdon who has made his adjustments to 'the great modern collapse of all the forms', who has learned to imagine Nanda's informed and initiated condition outside the old language of taint and pollution; in the process, of course, of informing and initiating himself. It is Vanderbank whose imagination has failed. Mr Longdon's new-found garrulousness represents an openness to the new forms, or to

whatever it is that succeeds the end of the old; Vanderbank's irreproachable good taste and unfailing charm remain disastrously (disastrously for Nanda, that is) part of a closed system.

In Nanda's and Van's love story, at the centre of *The Awkward Age*, we can examine the crux of the transition in English mores from an era when an essential value was invested in an ideal of innocent femininity to an era when all the apparatus of totem and taboo protecting that essential value was breaking down under the weight of its own sheer improbability. Van asks Nanda at the end of their last interview to 'Look after my good name' (360) with Mr. Longdon, and there in the very forms of his language is expressed his incapacity to change. His 'good name' is a fetish from inside a system of honour, that system whose end Brada pretends to deplore, a system dependent ultimately upon the appearances of a male initiated protectiveness standing guard over a female innocence and ignorance, a female 'chastity'. The essence of good name is appearance - your 'name' takes its value in the mouths of others: Nanda's actual virginity is not to the point, when it comes to the problem of whether Van can marry her. It is her appearance of contamination that makes her impossible, her failure to dissimulate the ordinary unprotected experience that any intelligent girl in this fin-de-siècle London was bound to pick up.

Van's unacknowledged relationships with other women are not to the point either, relationships we know about from the Duchess (that useful informant): 'Vanderbank's a man whom any woman, don't you think, might be - whom more than one woman is glad of - for herself, *beau comme le jour*, awfully conceited and awfully patronising, but clever and successful and yet liked...' (187). In fact Van's sexual experience outside legitimate courtship is, albeit unacknowledged, positively a component of his conventional male honour, his 'good name'. After all, sexual innocence cannot stand guard over innocence: would not know, literally, what to guard against. That Van's experience is part of his attractiveness for Nanda is apparent

in their exchange in the park at Mitchy's 'weekend' over Van's silver cigarette case, the case that is undoubtedly a present ('such things always are -people don't buy them for themselves', 161), and from someone he can't name to her. Nanda turns the case over and rubs it against her cheek, she interrogates him about it. The male mystique is supposed to be potent for her. But she is not supposed to make conscious and articulate its potency; or to recognise, as she so plainly does, its representations (the case), or to interrogate them ('by whom was it given you? ... you must have forgotten').

Nanda asks him for a cigarette, and she says she would like a cigarette case of her own. 'Why, it holds twenty,' he demurs: oughtn't her feminine capacity to be less (or oughtn't she to know the rule that would have her represent it so)? 'Well, I want one that holds twenty.' Her relationship to his otherness - to his male history, his freedoms - is supposed to be in defining herself against them, not trying them for herself. Van's charm thickens around him almost in direct proportion to his unease. All his sophistication seems bent upon making harmless - making innocent - these damages Nanda does herself, these betrayals of knowledges and understandings she shouldn't have, within his system: "I want so to give you something," he said at last, "that in my relief at lighting on an object that will do, I will, if you don't look out, give you either that or a pipe" . 'We're such jolly old friends that we really needn't so much as speak at all', he enthusiastically suggests (161).

Almost everything Nanda says to Van has this effect of making her more impossible as his wife: it is the very gestures with which she offers herself to him ('Oh, Mr. Van, I'm "true"! ', 161) that inhibit him, at the moments he seems to come closest to making *his* gesture, his offer of marriage and a permanent protection. Van's dilemma represents the paradox of the old forms and superstitions of gender: posited upon a femaleness so prone to awakening male desires that it has to be safeguarded by a complex apparatus of modesty and segregation, male desire finally becomes focussed not so much on the protected females but on the protecting apparatus of femininity itself. Nanda's availability, her offer of her own vulnerability, her virtual confessions of her own passion, aren't desirable, for Van;

although generations of girls have been constrained on the grounds that their availability would be impossibly enflaming.

Nanda's knowingness, her articulated knowledge of the world and of herself and of Van, break the closed circle of a feminine mystique upon which male desire has come to depend; break a whole system of gender relations in which male initiated knowledge (contaminated) and female ignorance (innocent) renew one another and make one another whole. For all his sophistication, Van's imagination of himself is so closely structured around that male-female polarity that he cannot transcend his conservative instincts, in spite of his good will. He is 'superstitiously haunted', to use James's own words from another context, 'by the conception of the gentleman'.⁵ Almost to the very end he holds Nanda off, deflects the straightness with which she addresses him, by talking to her tenderly *de haut en bas* as if she were still the little girl whose innocence could redeem the painful adult story he's all too uncomfortably aware of: 'And your writing touched me - oh, but really. There were all sorts of old things in it... I see you go in for sets - and, my dear child, upon my word, I see, *big sets*. What's this - "Vol.23: The British Poets". Vol.23 is delightful - do tell me about Vol.23. Are you doing much in the British Poets?' (351). It isn't that Van is old-maidish or virginal in his scruples; it's quite the opposite. Nanda's knowingness curdles the very piquancy of that separateness-in-contamination upon which his male conquering potency depends.

The Awkward Age, then, takes its step across the restraining walls of the old system, and is a critique, finally, of a system of gender from a point of purchase outside. In all its talk it is searching out a language not simply subject to the structurings of an accultured imagining of gender and sexuality but able to transcend them and talk about them. In a complex manoeuvre of double consciousness, however, the novel also works to recreate inside its talk the power in imagination of the very

⁵ 'George Sand' (1899). *Notes on Novelists*, 167.

system it deconstructs. Just as in *The Aspern Papers*, the measure of narrative complexity does not consist in how securely an ultimate narrative authority locates itself in an ironic position outside the false position of the mere material. The complexity - the irony - is a matter, rather, of 'inhabiting an unease, an unreliability'; in the case of *The Awkward Age*, of inhabiting a transition, rather than looking back from the safety of the far side. *The Awkward Age* is not an elegy, Pound's 'lament for the old lavender'; but it is not a revolutionary project, either.

Van's masculinity is not simply ironised, or analysed. In the very act of imagination in which he sees through Van, James wants to render him with all his power to move, all his commanding presence, his aesthetic; he wants to imagine the bottomlessness of the very phenomenon he is at the same time embarked upon seeing all round. He reproduces in his text the flutter of Van's passage through his world; his power to move is talked about, from the Duchess who calls him the man that 'any woman ...might be glad of, *beau comme le jour*,' (187) to Mitchy in his last interview with Nanda, 'He has turned up at last then? How *tremendously* exciting!' (361). And Van's actual presence has to strike the reader with the same conviction as Chad strikes Strether in the café on the Avenue de l'Opéra in *The Ambassadors*: 'He saw him in a flash as the young man marked out by women' (98). In Van's talk, his manner, James records the 'type': the soothing reticence, the self-deprecating charm, the unfailing kindness (except perhaps with Mrs Brook) that somehow wards off intimacy; the quickness of his wit; and those refusals, that thoroughbred fine pride that shies at obediently taking jumps (after all, he refuses a fortune with Nanda). For all the exhibition of confessional ease with Mr Longdon in the bachelor flat, his intelligence and his charm are a finished surface that deflects as much as it absorbs; his irony is essentially self-protective:

'It will be tremendously interesting to hear how the sort of thing we've fallen into - oh we *have* fallen in! - strikes your fresh ear. Do have another cigarette. Sunk as I must appear to you, it sometimes strikes mine. But I'm not sure, as regards Mrs Brookenham, whom I've known a long time -'
Mr. Longdon again took him up. 'What do you people call a long time?'

Vanderbank considered. 'Ah, there you are - ! And now we're "we people"! That's right; give it to us. I'm sure that in one way or another it's all earned. Well, I've known her ten years. But awfully well.'

'What do you call awfully well?'

'We people?' Vanderbank's inquirer, with his continued restless observation, moving nearer, the young man had laid on his shoulder the most considerate of hands. 'Don't you perhaps ask too much? But no,' he added, quickly and gaily, 'of course you don't: if I don't look out I shall have, on you, exactly the effect I don't want. I dare say I don't know how well I know Mrs Brookenham.' (34)

In James's writing from the late 1890s onwards, it is in this double movement of creation, this seeing all around and at the same moment this consent to the sheer power of the phenomenon in itself, that the novels' dialogic essence consists. The dialogism is not simply a matter of the characters *speaking* for themselves (so that we have Mr Longdon's version suspended in flexible relation with the Duchess's, say): it is in that gesture of submission the late novels are so preoccupied with making, to the power of the characters *being* what they are. In the opening chapters of *The Ambassadors*, Strether's wondering enchantment with Appearances (the exceptional capital A is in the first chapter), which of course is to be darkened and complicated as the story unfolds, is emblematic of all the late novels' concentration on the sheer power - the imaginative persuasiveness - of forms. The possibilities of dining *tête-à-tête* by the light of a pink shaded candle before the theatre, or walking the old walls of Chester, are enchanting not because they signify something beyond themselves, but because they *exist*: and so elaborately, in such complexity, evolved over such long histories. Their very arbitrariness (he might not be there, he could be at Woollett, where forms are other) is their authority and their mystery. The authority and the mystery are nothing the novel can contain, it can only surround them.

The argument for James's dialogism that Irena Auerbach Smith makes in her essay on *The Golden Bowl* puts all its emphasis on the second part of that novel, on Maggie's empowerment through devices of James's which Smith suggests almost amount to delegating her a subordinate authorial function⁶. But although Smith does make reference to the

⁶ Irena Auerbach Smith, 'The Golden Goal: Toward a Dialogic Imagination in Henry James's Last Completed Novel'. *The Henry James Review*, XVI 2 (1995), 175.

bipartite structure of *The Golden Bowl*, she doesn't in this essay approach its other, fundamental, dialogism; the dialogue (unsynthesised, as she suggests,) between the two parts. If Maggie's struggle to know, to control, is the antithesis in *The Golden Bowl*, then the thesis, the Prince's part, is nothing like knowledge, struggle, or control. The concentration in the Prince's part is upon the power - the aesthetic - of these two types, the Prince and Charlotte, whose primary function is representative, is being themselves: they are the Roman Prince, the intelligent society beauty, and are bound for our maximum appreciation and for the fulfilment of tradition to live out possibilities - of glamour, of romance, of experience in and on and of the body - which can only exist in painful contradistinction to the Maggie project of knowledge and control and conscience. It is because they have no story - no aesthetic - to fulfill inside their marriages that the lovers turn to one another in the first place: Adam and Maggie in their innocence will give them nothing to do. 'What do they really suppose,' Charlotte asks, 'becomes of one? -not so much sentimentally or morally, so to call it, and since that doesn't matter; but even just physically, materially, as a mere wandering woman...' (232) It is partly the impossibility of having it both ways - having the romance and the conscience, so to speak - that makes Maggie's sense of loss acute at the end of the novel even as she triumphs: after all it was for the Roman Prince in him - barbarian, by her lights, as he was bound to be - that she wanted her husband in the first place.

Through the novels of the middle period James's narratives worked to explore and eventually disestablish forms - 'law'; both in writing himself through and beyond a whole accultured perception of gender and sexual propriety (in *Portrait of a Lady*, for instance) and in writing himself into a habit of narrative scepticism, a scrupulous eschewing of certain kinds of narrative authority. Then, in the transitional novels of the late 1890's and in the late novels, it becomes apparent how that same hard worked for independence from the law and the old forms becomes the means by which the law and the old forms are rendered and appreciated. It is precisely in creating an intellectual space in which, say, a certain convention of gender

is understood and seen through, that James is able to wholly render the power, the poetry, the imaginative persuasiveness, of that convention.

The Awkward Age offers a critique of Vanderbank's 'masculinity', seeing round it, rendering how incompletely it answers to new, changed possibilities. But alongside that the novel also creates the perception of the power, the persuasiveness, of his 'type' as he lives it out. And this double consciousness of possibilities is not only sustained for us as readers; characters within the novel are quite capable of it too, they discuss themselves the paradox that it is Van's very limitations, his very belonging to an inflexible typology, that make him ultimately more desirable than, say, the open-minded and flexible Mitchy. It is Mitchy who first gives a name to the 'power-to-move' of Van's type:

'What I mean is that I don't give out the great thing.... The great thing's the sacred terror. It's you who give that out.'

'Oh!' ...

'Aint' I right, Mrs Brook? - doesn't he, tremendously, and isn't that, more than anything else, what does it?'

The two again, as if they understood each other, gazed in a unity of interest at their companion, who sustained it with an air clearly intended as the happy mean between embarrassment and triumph. Then Mrs Brook showed that she liked the phrase. 'The sacred terror! Yes, one feels it. It is that,' (227)

And later, to Mr Longdon;

'There are people like that - great cases of privilege.'

'He is one,' Mr. Longdon mused.

'There it is. They go through life, somehow, guaranteed. They can't help pleasing.'

'Ah,' Mr. Longdon murmured. 'If it hadn't been for that....!'

'They hold, they keep, every one,' Mitchy went on. 'It's the sacred terror.' (343)

It is Mitchy and Nanda (not Vanderbank) who name that very scruple in Van which makes it impossible for him to marry Nanda, it is in their vocabulary that the phenomenon is surrounded;

'You're so good that nothing shocks you,' she lucidly persisted. 'There's a kind of delicacy you haven't got.'

He [Mitchy] was more and more struck. 'I've only that -as it were- of the skin and the fingers?' he appealed.

'Oh, and that of the mind. And that of the soul. And some other kinds, certainly. But not the kind.'

'Yes' -he wondered- 'I suppose that's the only way one can name it.' It appeared to rise there before him. 'The kind!'...

...'The man with the kind, as you call it, happens to be just the type you can love? But what's the use,' he persisted as she answered nothing, 'in loving a person with the prejudice - hereditary or other - to which you're precisely obnoxious? Do you positively like to love in vain?' (260)

In the same way, although the treatment of the dead Lady Julia is complex, and her example as icon of unpolluted femininity in one sense burdens the living women in the novel, the power - the persuasiveness - of the icon is testified to by the very characters who are least capable of imitating its perished brittle narrowness. 'Ah, say what you will,' says Nanda, 'it is the way we ought to be!' (259).

It is by definition only those who don't have 'the delicacy' who can discuss and name it; yet because the likelihood of a secret contamination had always been a part of the male mystique, it is possible at least for Van to listen. He can be part of Mrs Brook's set and find himself incapable of marrying Nanda because Mrs Brook's set has contaminated her. The new-feminine, on the other hand, born out of the collapse of the old forms, is almost necessarily committed to scepticism: for the women to know anything at all is to exclude themselves in the same moment from the innocence upon which the old form depended. The women in these late novels are more likely to be committed, then, to 'seeing around', to the struggle with and the manipulations of representations; the men are more likely to continue afloat upon that tradition of male worldliness, so richly developed in its aesthetic appeal, and preventing them so little. How different the 'consciousness' of Charlotte's 'performance' as society beauty is to The Prince's 'performance' of himself. In the antiquarian's shop in Bloomsbury, it is Charlotte who, sceptical of the accidents of form - the arbitrary divides of class and race - is uncomfortably aware of the shopkeeper as conscious agent. For the Prince those forms are so final, so conclusive, as to simply put the man outside the sphere of his perception: 'He took, always, the meaner sort for granted - the night of their meanness or whatever name one might give it for him made all his cats grey'(99). The old forms - the old 'law' - serve the Prince. For Charlotte the very

traditions of romance, of the privileges of intelligent feminine beauty, work equivocally, so that she fears even as she fulfills; they contain (and traditionally, of course) the seeds of her undoing, just as the shopkeeper's consciousness she is so reciprocally conscious of will precipitate eventually her suffering and her punishment. We remember that the Prince waits for 'the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away ... the man could always expect it without lifting a finger' (61). Charlotte's only advantage is at least to be aware that she is doing it: 'Giving myself, in other words, away -and perfectly willing to do it for nothing. That's all.' (94)

The gloss, the worldliness, the liberty, of these men, these most perfected and privileged products of nineteenth century upper class culture, with their mixture of callousness and scruple, brutality and delicacy (Mitchy's 'sacred terror' conveys both the deep, the magical appeal, and the scent of blood) had always by James's own account stirred his imagination; in *Notes of a Son and Brother* he recalls a schoolboy encounter in the Rue de Rivoli:

There swung into view the most splendid, as I at least esteemed him, of my elders and betters in the Rue Balzac, who... with his high hat a trifle askew and his cigar actively alight, revealed to me at a glance what it was to be in full possession of Paris. There was speed in his step, assurance in his air, he was visibly, impatiently on the way... I but went forth through the Paris night in the hand of my mamma; while he had greeted us with a grace that was as a beat of the very wings of freedom!⁷

All the irony of an old man's perspective on the dazzled child he was, all the long retrospect in which the dandyisms of an era have had time to decay to dusty pathos, serve to see around the phenomenon for what it was, yes: but only in order that, in the same moment, the writing will recover the live gloss, the power-to-move, the once-authority of a 'type', the completeness of the thing-in-itself. It is the live gloss, of course, that no amount of biographical industry can restore now to the name of a Jocelyn Persse or a Morton Fullerton, those friends James paid homages to that seem out of all proportion to the meagreness of what they left 'for the record'. He wrote to Persse 'I rejoice

⁷ *Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee. Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1983, 213.

greatly in your breezy, heathery, grousy ... adventures, and envy you, as always, your exquisite possession of the Art of Life which beats any Art of mine hollow'.⁸ Only the novels can initiate us now into a male mystique whose magic consisted in all the lost ephemera of dress, and manner, and form.

James's interest in these men is something like Benjamin's account of Proust's fascination with aristocracy, with its 'language established along lines of caste and class and unintelligible to outsiders' and those 'lives planted so firmly in their social habitat ... inextricably intertwined in the thicket of their fate'.⁹ And like Proust's, James's interest in recreating all the power of fashion, of form, is inseparable from his interest in the passage of time: James sees that form as historically created, historically contingent, he sees *all round it* and in the same movement vibrates to it with an intense sympathy - and not only in the *Autobiography* but even in those novels supposed to be contemporary with the phenomena they describe - as if for something vanished, irreplaceable, precious *because it existed*.

This sense that in the late writing the independence from the old forms serves James precisely to render those forms with a renewed sympathy has been interpreted critically as a renewed conservatism: notably by Habegger, whose suggestion is that after the radical experiments ('the delayed adolescent rebellion') of the transitional novels (*What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*) James lost his nerve:

But *this* line of business was too daring for James. *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* had taken their brave new heroines only up to the border of sexual experience. Now, moving beyond this boundary with the character of Mme de Vionnet, James had to retreat. Just as Strether recoils to Woollett, the French lady lacks George Sand's gay resilience and daring. *The Ambassadors* is about drawing back after going as far as one can possibly manage. In this novel, as in *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, James once again took it upon himself to defend the costs the civilised order exacts.¹⁰

⁸ Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 511.

⁹ Benjamin, 203.

¹⁰ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 235.

The argument as to whether indeed in those last novels James is defending (as opposed to describing) the 'costs the civilised order exacts' is probably the most important argument that has to be made in an appreciation of the oeuvre. For the moment, though, and as a first step towards that argument, it is worth complicating Habegger's account of *The Awkward Age*.

Habegger's argument in *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* focuses percipiently on the important role that 'incestuous daydreaming' played in the novels of nineteenth century American women writers. Through novel after novel by Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stoddard and Anne Moncure Crane Seemuller, Habegger documents a pattern: 'the frequent pairing of an independent and original girl-heroine with a much older lover'. It is a 'disturbing family romance', a 'mass feminine daydream, one whose symbolic incest was an unavoidable consequence of patriarchal family life'. The young Henry James, reading and reviewing these novels in the 1860s, was alert to the pattern and 'recorded his distaste' for this middle aged man who (in James's own words) 'spends his time in breaking the hearts and the wills of demure little schoolgirls, who answer him with "Yes, sir," and "No, sir"'. In suggesting that *The Portrait of a Lady* is 'about the collective imagination that wrote and read all those novels' Habegger is surely onto something. As discussed in chapter two, the problem that has recurred for readers over what it is that attracts Isabel to Osmond in the first place is met most interestingly by Habegger's speculations about Isabel's love for her dead father, and of how potently the tableau of doting father and obedient daughter that Osmond arranges for her benefit acts upon her imagination. It is not insignificant in this context that Nanda in *The Awkward Age* loves the man her mother is also in love with.

However, as also discussed in chapter two, it does not necessarily follow that James himself is making a conservative gesture in rendering Isabel's own subjection to that contemporary double bind in the young female imagination. Habegger reads the unacknowledged inconsistency in his women writers' heroines between their defiant pluckiness and their eventual submission to father-lovers as a creative

contradiction; 'If her imagination has been to some extent subverted by her life of bondage, so that she dreams of surrendering, she also dreams of independence and fights hard for it'.¹¹ It seems casuistical to then go on to read James's making the contradiction explicit and tragic, with awful consequences, as resolving, but '- the wrong way'. How can James's demonstration of the consequences of the contradiction be a betrayal - 'unfair and illiberal' - of Isabel's 'free spirit', when Habegger himself has astutely demonstrated how most of that freedom is delusion?

To dispute Habegger's reading of James' treatment of this double bind in Isabel's imagination is to dispute the distinction (crucial to his whole argument about the development of the oeuvre) which he makes between James's treatment of Isabel and his treatment of Nanda and Maisie. For Habegger, what characterises James's fictions of the late 1890s is his 'rethinking the whole problem of female independence'. 'Fleda, Maisie, and Nanda are all versions of those sturdy and upright early heroines, and they all take on the world without being able to avail themselves of some traditional female sanctuary. They all fail to get the man they want ... and they all achieve a sad liberation'.¹² He is right of course that these novels focus with a new urgency and explicitness on the angst of virginity, that hesitation at the perilous brink of sexual experience; and he is right that they strikingly eschew resolution in pairing off. But is Nanda really liberated from that contradiction that bound Isabel? Is Van's refusal of her all her 'liberation' is to amount to? The only man who will answer her deepest desires is the very man who will inevitably thwart them: it is her very availability for Van (her 'grovelling', as she calls it) that makes her impossible for him. ('Do you positively like to love in vain?' Mitchy asks her.) Isn't this a bondage (a contradiction) of the same species as the one in *Portrait of a Lady*?

And isn't James's analysis of that contradiction for Nanda one that complicates the very idea of liberation? Nanda's

¹¹ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 26.

¹² Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 233.

liberation isn't even anything she wanted, and certainly had nothing to do with her being plucky or defiant. It is an effect historically produced; she grows up during a period of cultural transition, and is a manifestation of that transition. Mitchy celebrates for her, at the end of the novel, all her new freedoms to know and to name (among them to know and to name herself), the freedoms Lady Julia never had: 'This luxury, you see, now, of our freedom to look facts in the face is one of which, I promise you, I mean fully to avail myself... We've worked through the long tunnel of artificial reserves and superstitious mysteries ... You go down to the roots? Good. It's all I ask!' (366) But Nanda is silent while he speaks; both she and Mitchy know he offers this 'liberation', as compensation, in fact, for what - and as a consequence, precisely, of her liberation - she can't have.

In the second half of *Portrait of a Lady* we are privy to Isabel's baffled struggling between opposed and equally potent imagined possibilities - to be 'good' (to please), and to be 'free'. In that novel James can't imagine for Isabel the kind of purchase on her own bafflement he gives Nanda. But Nanda's intellectual liberation, that is, her 'seeing round' even the fatal bondage in her own imagination that resembles Isabel's, doesn't show her a straight path out of it. Wherever we think Isabel's 'straight path' is taking her, it is interesting that it is she, who is still subject to the old self-contradictory ideals of womanhood (free, and yet good) who acts, who imagines there *is* a straight path to follow; while Nanda is held in an impasse special to a certain kind of reflective consciousness, a certain kind of self-knowingness.

Nanda cannot wish herself back into bafflement; consciousness can't unwish itself. The very metaphors in which she imagines consciousness have a forward trajectory:

'Aggie's only trying to find out-'
'Yes - what?' He asked, waiting.

'Why, what sort of person she is. How can she ever have known? It was carefully, elaborately hidden from her - kept so obscure that she could make out nothing. She isn't now like me.'

He wonderingly attended. 'Like you?'

'Why, I get the benefit of the fact that there was never a time when I didn't know *something* or other and that I became more and more aware, as I grew older, of a hundred little chinks of daylight.' (371)

The hidden thing once uncovered can't be re-concealed; the daylight of Nanda's vision can't be snuffed out, she can't put herself back inside whatever dark place broke open around her burgeoning consciousness. Aggie in the novel is the very exemplar of the impossibility of wishing a way back into ignorance: the sham of her innocence and its consequences bear no relationship (or only a parodistic one) to the authentic problem of the innocence of an Isabel or a Lady Julia. Knowledge is not a choice; once the 'old story' has been seen through, or seen around, it can only henceforward be play-acted.

However, 'liberation' from the old story in *The Awkward Age* (and in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Spoils of Poynton*) is an equivocal advantage. As Mr Longdon points out, incensed at Van's defection, the advantages of Nanda's 'case' seem to be 'mainly for others' (377). Nanda's liberation only brings her round to a new tenderness for a lost simplicity she can't recover; her 'seeing through' the mechanisms of gender makes her impossible for Van and in the same movement makes him in his very discrimination against her ('the delicacy') all the more desirable.

There is a sense that in these novels of the late 1890s James is dealing with new material, as Habegger suggests; or perhaps rather dealing with similiar material from a new point of purchase much farther outside the system under analysis. But the primary difference between Isabel and Nanda is surely not in how 'liberated' they are so much as in the degree of self-reflexiveness they attain; in their different degrees of conscious awareness of their imaginative entanglement inside the system. (Habegger's account that Maisie grows up into a 'mature sense of moral justice' at the end of her novel seems the wrong emphasis, too; somehow, the wrong language, the language, almost, of Mrs. Wix's moralised universe. Of course it is important - it is adult, it is sane - that Maisie asks things

for herself at the crisis. This is what Habegger means us to recognise: although doesn't Isabel - whatever her 'entangling sense of duty' - ask things for herself too? But it is Maisie's consciousness of herself in her situation, and her new hard-won objectivity, rather than any justice she dispenses or judgement she makes, which mean she is capable of taking control of her situation, detaching herself from the tangle of her dependencies.)

The open-endedness - the independence from 'law' - which gives James his purchase on Nanda's predicament from outside any system of gender or propriety, is not measured by how 'liberated' he makes her from that system; if anything, the measure might be in how conscious he makes her of her entanglement within it. Just so, the question of the conservatism or otherwise of the late novels will not depend upon how 'liberated' the women in those novels are, as Habegger seems to suggest; what will matter is the frame within which their entanglements and unfreedoms are understood. Habegger's reading of the sequence of novels (*What Maisie Knew* and *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Awkward Age* as radically concerned with the 'evolution and transformation' of women; the later novels as 'drawing back after going as far as one can possibly manage') also ignores the essential equivocation - or dialogism - of the transitional novels; *The Awkward Age*, for example, with its creation of Vanderbank's power to move alongside its rendering of his finite inflexibility; its homage to a lost past alongside its sturdy commitment to the new territory on the far side of the old proprieties.

The past in *The Awkward Age* - that 'lost simplicity' and all those lost ways of being - are imagined and hinted toward in numerous oblique, tentative, impressionistic touches; between the lines, almost, of the explicit memories. 'I belong to a different period of history,' says Mr. Longdon. 'There have been things this evening that have made me feel as if I had been disinterred - literally dug up from a long sleep' (30). Mrs Brook with unfathomable degree of irony says to her husband: 'Mamma

was wonderful. There have been times when I've felt she was still with us, but Mr Longdon makes it vivid'(75). Nanda discusses the changes in 'young girls' with Mr Longdon at Beccles:

'He can't shut his eyes to the facts. He sees we're quite a different thing.'

'I dare say' - her friend was fully appreciative. "Yet the old thing - what do you know of it?"

'I personally? Well, I've seen some change even in my short life. And aren't the old books full of us?'(249)

Van's rather conventional young-fogey's lament for 'values' is often read as James's own attitude within the novel: 'London doesn't love the latent or the lurking, has neither time, nor taste, nor sense for anything less discernable than the red flag in front of the steam-roller. It wants cash over the counter and letters ten feet high'(43). But this is unsubtle, too comfortable - has something of Van's characteristic imperviousness - beside how the past affects Mr Longdon, Nanda, Mrs Brook, Vanderbank. They are all chilled in the long shadow it casts. The past's very unalterability, its consistency and completeness unto itself, haunts their present, presides over it; its potency threatens to drain the present of significance. 'Ah,' says Nanda, 'say what you will -it is the way we ought to be!'(259).

In a phase of cultural transition, while it is impossible to imagine oneself back inside the old forms which have broken open, to imagine oneself outside those forms is to imagine oneself nowhere. Mrs Brook's whole set is defined by being in transition. The past, the previous generation, is a matter of constant reference. Some of this reference is set up by the return - almost *from* the past - of Mr Longdon; but the contrast he seems to bring out for all of them is not simply their reassuringly making connexions for him. Implicit in their talk and manner all the time even without Mr Longdon is a defiance, sometimes exhilarated, sometimes jaded, of 'the old system'; a modernity which defines itself not really in new forms, but in a sort of scandalising game of dares with the old ones. The breaches they make in the containing walls of the old system are not to get out by. Mrs Brook, for instance, always gives as the

reason for her involvements with the Lady Fannys and Carrie Donners that she is devoting herself to *keeping* them from running away:

'Surely I've not to remind you at this time of day how Captain Dent-Douglas is always round the corner with his post-chaise, and how tight, on our side, we're all clutching her.'

'But why not let her go?'

Mrs Brook, at this, showed a sentiment more sharp. '"Go"? Then what would become of us?' She recalled his wandering fancy. 'She's the delight of our life.'

"Oh!" Vanderbank sceptically murmured. (141)

In this fin-de-siècle drawing room world where irony is a way of life, her mock role is as mock guardian of the proprieties. The French novels that litter the rooms of this generation are occasion for extravagant rehearsals of scruples, offences, delicacies which everybody knows that nobody believes in any more (the women, always, have to be shocked at the books which the men bring):

'Mitchy dear, those two French books you were so good as to send me and which -really, this time, you extraordinary man!' She fell back, intimately reproachful, from the effect produced on her, renouncing all expression except that of the rolled eye. (77)

Nanda is incapable of her mother's performance of travestying respectability, of mock innocence. Hers is the next inevitable stage of the cultural evolution: after irony, flatness, open-endedness, acceptance. She has no sense of humour; it is *funnier* to be perpetually parodying than to be unsurprised and candid. Out of the very thoroughness of her knowing Nanda remakes an 'innocence' that is almost diametrically opposite to Lady Julia's kind, and yet bears a family resemblance to it; her incapacity for the game of irony and parody stands in for Lady Julia's 'ignorance'.

Readings of the novel have tended to concentrate on Nanda, and have tended to write Mrs Brook away in the other - the dark, the polluted - part of that dyadic, moralising critical language which finds Mr Longdon the embodiment of 'absolute moral values':

'Wonderful' first informs the reader that she [Mrs Brook] is extraordinary; gradually that she is so extraordinary as to be outrageous, and finally, that she is so defiantly and persistently outrageous as to be loathsome.

and:

This disregard for 'decorum', or appropriate expression, whether in speech or in other social codes, such as those governing the unchaperoned movement of unmarried girls in society, characterises Mrs Brook and her 'set', although a specious charm is acquired through their skill in manipulating the forms devoid of true expressive power.¹³

The problem seems partly to come through that convention of interpretation in which Mrs Brook has been read as a 'value' - wicked or degenerate or (occasionally) clever - so that her history has been mostly ignored. But Mrs Brook comes furnished with a past as vivid and specific and crucial to understanding as if she was a character from an Ibsen play: it is an interesting quirk of literary history that while criticism has mostly lent its sympathy to Hedda Gabler it has mostly come down very hard upon poor Mrs Brook. Nora Helmer's flow of chatter on the edge of hysteria is not, for all its comparative unconsciousness, absolutely unlike Mrs Brook's creative extravagance, her wails, her deprecations, her wide-eyed appeals; both are performances, both sustain the fiction of happiness (or perhaps in *The Awkward Age* the fiction of brilliance), the 'brave face'. Van's discrimination against Nanda, incidentally, bears a family resemblance to Thorvald Helmer's 'A songbird must have a clear voice to sing with -no false notes'. Nora's anxieties about a time when 'I'm no longer as pretty as I am now', 'when Thorvald's ... lost interest in watching me dance, or get dressed up, or recite' are the essence, surely, of Mrs Brook's crisis in the novel?

The crisis of Mrs Brook is the other significant story of the novel: at least as important as, and inseparable from, Nanda's. The question of Nanda's 'coming downstairs' isn't only a problem for the mores of a society in transition, it is also the moment at which her mother faces the beginning of the end of her youth, her life as a focus of sexual attraction; the moment

¹³ Girling, in *Modern Judgements: Henry James*, 239; Nicola Bradbury, 25.

at which she understands her replacement by her daughter. Nanda and her mother communicate in guarded, scrupulous politenesses: 'they had for each other, in manner and tone, such a fund of consideration as might almost have given it the stamp of diplomacy' (232). But the 'smash' Mrs Brook brings about at Tishy Grendon's can only have come out of a motivation extreme and violent that lies beneath the surface of that mutual accomodation. She can't bear Nanda to have Van. She loves him for herself: but there's more to it even than the desperation between rivals, Van is her youth, to give him up to her daughter is to accept the end of her own life as a lover of men (and would illustrate neatly in passing the inequity that the man who is after all her own age can have if he wants it his 'second chance' at the new generation at the very point the mother is passed over).

In Nanda's last interview with Van, when she finally succeeds in making him talk sensibly to her, adult to adult, it is she who has understood this inequity and her mother's situation best:

'I just ask you - I even press you. It's because as she said, you've practically ceased coming. Of course I know everything changes. It's the law - what is it? - the 'great law' of something or other. All sorts of things happen - things come to an end. She has more or less - by his marriage - lost Mitchy. I don't want her to lose everything. Do stick to her. What I really wanted to say to you - to bring it straight out - is that I don't believe you know how awfully she likes you. I hope my saying such a thing doesn't affect you as 'immodest'. One never knows - but I don't much care if it does. I suppose it would be immodest if I were to say that I veritably believe she's in love with you. Not, for that matter, that my father would mind - he wouldn't mind, as he says, a two penny rap. So" - she extraordinarily kept it up - "you're welcome to any good the information may have for you: though that, I dare say, does sound hideous. No matter - if I produce any effect on you. That's the only thing I want. When I think of her downstairs there so often nowadays practically alone, I feel as if I could scarcely bear it. She's so fearfully young.' (356)

There is a nuance of precosity in that clairvoyance; just a touch - unconscious in Nanda - of the cruel privilege of youth, to pity what it replaces (Nanda's straightness might remind us of the unsettling leverage young Hilde Wengel exerts in *The Master Builder* on the lives of her enmeshed and compromised elders). But Mrs Brook's own sense of her history with Van is saturated with time-consciousness, with her awareness of ageing and loss:

There was a time, in fact, wasn't there, when we rather enjoyed each other's dim depths. If I wanted to fawn upon you ... I might say that, with such a comrade in obliquity to wind and double about with, I'd risk losing myself in the mine. But why retort or recriminate? Let us not, for God's sake, be vulgar - we haven't yet, bad as it is, come to that. I can be, no doubt - I some day *must* be: I feel it looming at me out of the awful future as an inevitable fate. But let it be for when I'm old and horrible; not an hour before. I do want to live a little even yet. So you ought to let me off more easily - even as I let you. (317)

The whole history of Mrs Brook furnishes us with so many reasons why, instead of accepting gracefully her transition to middle age, she rages against it, and in her rage pulls down her own world self-destructively on her own head (the 'smash' at Tishy's loses her Mitchy as well as Van, doesn't it - his marriage alone would never have stopped him coming?). In Ibsen it is always the fathers we need to know about to understand the women (Nora's, Hedda's). For Mrs Brook, the crucial figure is her mother. Counterbalancing the sacral rosiness that tends to accumulate around the memory of Lady Julia in the talk of Mr. Longdon and Nanda and Vanderbank are some brute facts. Who married Fernanda to Edward Brookenham? What kind of 'innocence' in the mother could have promoted and sanctified this monstrous coupling; what notion of 'good' and uncontaminated girlhood consigned this intelligent passionate woman to that waste?

The quality of Lady Julia and Vanderbank's mother that seems to be most commemorated is their power of *refusal*: all the things they did not do and did not know; the men they did not marry; the changes they could not have lived with. Van says that his mother was 'taken in time', saved from suffering when her daughter Blanche Bertha Vanderbank metamorphosed into modern Nancy Toovey(41). What grandeurs of high-minded femininity are conjured by 'Blanche Bertha', its portentous chastity, its moody poetry. No wonder the daughter of the mother who chose that name needed to wriggle, with whatever loss of dignity, out from under it. And Mr. Longdon himself suggests some of the more twisted convolutions of that feminine power-in-abstention:

I think she rather liked the state to which she had reduced me, though she didn't, you know, in the least presume upon it. The better a woman is - it has often struck me - the more she enjoys, in a quiet way, some fellow's having been rather bad, rather dark and desperate, about her - for her. I dare say, I mean, that, though Lady Julia insisted I ought to marry, she wouldn't really have liked it much if I had. (47)

This is another twist of the 'old story': the abstentions and reticences the woman imposed upon herself turn out to have their price, for others: the 'better' the woman, the more sternly - and righteously - she exacts it.

Whenever the conversation waxes lyrical over Lady Julia's graces Mrs Brook's eyes widen even further than usual and she sounds at her most limpidly judicious.

Of course I revere mamma just as much as he does, and there was everything in her to revere.(144)

Mamma was so sincere. The fortune was nothing to her. That shows it was immense.(142)

...compared with her, I'm a poor creeping thing. I mean ... that of course I ache in every limb with the certainty of my dreadful difference. It isn't as if I *didn't* know it, don't you see? There it is, as a matter of course: I've helplessly, but finally and completely, accepted it.(150)

How does she mean these things? Mrs Brook's sincerity is at any given point a difficult thing to define, not because there's so little of it but because in fact, in spite of her mannered drawl, her gushes, there's so *much*. Everything she says has its aspect as performance (even those comic married silences in which she hands Edward his tea) but she is an actress whose eyes convince us that for all she is wedged into her part she is also at every moment intensely, feelingly alive. She 'means' and 'ironises' in the same breath, she's not capable of her mother's or Nanda's transparency, she represents that opaque transitional moment at which discourse becomes sceptically aware of its own premises and yet can't articulate itself outside a parodistic relationship to the old habits, the old cadences, the old gestures.

Alone with Nanda, when Nanda says 'I could have done much better if I hadn't had the drawback of not really remembering Granny', Mrs.Brook moans, 'Oh, well, I remember her!' with 'an accent that evidently struck her the next moment as so much out of place that she slightly deflected' (234). This moment of

exasperation is not because she knows something - something factual and awful about Lady Julia - that the others don't. It is just that all the graces look differently depending on just from which angle they strike their beneficiaries. It is not difficult to imagine how a Lady Julia's old-fashioned ideals of femininity might have acted upon a daughter of different temperament and in a different era, to produce some of the tensions, the suppressions, the resentments, which we feel pent up in Mrs Brook, as she paces the petty cage of her miserable marriage, steps out along the high wire of her public performances.

James wrote about *Hedda Gabler* that it was 'the portrait of a nature, the story of what Paul Bourget would call an *état d'âme*, and of a certain state of nerves as well as soul, a state of temper, of health, of chagrin, of despair'.¹⁴ And if one of Ibsen's contributions has been to our understanding of certain qualities of 'femininity' produced by deforming social and cultural pressures (*Hedda*, *Nora*), then surely Mrs Brook is the product in James's art of the same kind of analysis? Her circumstances - her mother, her marriage, her long presumably unconsummated flirtation with Van - and what they have made of her are at least as much James's subject as her *effect*. In her long-suffering, plaintive diatribe to Nanda it is impossible to mistake at least some of the truth about her life: 'money, money, money at every turn, running away like water,' and, 'your father's settled gloom is terrible, and I bear all the brunt of it' (259). The plaintive and the long-suffering are notes as habitual as the drawl of innuendo Nanda winces from elsewhere ('So tremendously made up to, you mean - even by a little fussy, ancient man? But *doesn't* he, my dear ... make up to you?', 237). But Mrs Brook's complaint is bigger even than the sum of its fairly grinding parts: it flashes out for an instant at a remark of Nanda's:

'He goes himself on Saturday, and if I want I can go a few days later.'

'And what day can you go if *I* want?' Mrs Brook spoke as with a small sharpness - just softened in time - produced by the sight of a freedom on her daughter's part that suddenly loomed larger than any freedom of her own. (240)

¹⁴ *Essays in London and Elsewhere*. London: Osgood, 1893.

It is unfair of her here to be irritated at just that 'modern' independence she has encouraged - for her own purposes, mostly - in Nanda. But the very freedom that has been her convenience and has cost Nanda so much is also suddenly enviable, unattainable: it's for that moment everything Nanda's mother hasn't had.

Michael Egan in his book making out a relationship between James and Ibsen puts all his stress on the influence of Ibsen's symbolism: 'the golden bowl was struck in Norway', and 'it was Ibsen who showed James how to use Hawthorne'.¹⁵ It certainly doesn't seem far-fetched to suggest a relationship between the towers and the pagodas, the wild ducks and the doves, the tarantellas and the bridge tables; or to speculate that the advent of Ibsen on the London stage could have been fortuitous at a stage in James's development when he was working to loosen the surface of his realism and liberate the freehand of his late designs. Even the late James 'manner' might conceivably owe something to Ibsen's dialogue, the stiffish communications of his characters, their talk undressed of the muffling familiarity of its everyday clothes. Certainly Ibsen continues to provoke James's sometimes exasperated, sometimes ecstatic criticisms throughout the 1890s. Ibsen weaves his 'more or less irritating spell', in the Preface to *The Awkward Age*; 'from the moment he's clear, from the moment he's "amusing", it's on the footing of a thesis as simple and superficial as that of *A Doll's House*'. But in *London Notes* (January 1897) writing about *John Gabriel Borkman*, in spite of Ibsen's vision 'so indifferent to the comedy of things', 'the whole thing throbs with an actability that fairly shakes us as we read', 'the sturdy old symbolist comes this time with a supreme example of his method', Ibsen has a 'rare mastery of form'.¹⁶

The likeness may be no more, of course, than a matter of cultural synchronicity; and the unlikeness at first sight seems

¹⁵ Michael Egan, *Henry James: the Ibsen Years*. London: Vision Press, 1972.

¹⁶ *The Awkward Age*, 20; *Notes on Novelists*, 337-8.

so much more striking (James's fascination with urbanity and social sophistication, for instance, which Ibsen isn't interested in). Yet if we are thinking of James's writing in the late 1890s as mediating in some sense Continental ('masculine') cynicisms and English-language ('feminine') innocences within the novel tradition, it seems relevant to consider that in the Scandinavian drama a similar conflict of systems was being enacted. Ibsen's plays are about the cracking and straining of gender conventions of male contamination and female innocence; and the plays themselves also represent the confrontation, or rather the dialogue, of a new anti-hypocritical sexual realism with a tradition of moralising Protestantism.

For James, as for Ibsen, 'the great modern collapse of all the forms and superstitions and respects, good and bad' was most surely approached through what Brada called the 'masculinisation of the women'; that is, through the opening up, within the women characters in their fictions, of a *knowledge* of themselves: a conscious awareness of their femininity, of the function of femininity within a gender system, and of the sacrificial ideal buried in the foundations of that system. In his exploration of Mrs Brook as well as of Nanda, James works to break down that separation of 'masculine' and 'feminine' knowledges upon which the perpetuation of the system depended: the masculine-cynical 'unclean honesty' (James's own words) represented by the novels of a Maupassant, say, or a Balzac; the feminine-optimistic idealism perpetuated by the propriety of the English-language novel tradition. In his fictions he represents an intermediate, transitional possibility; women whose relationship to 'innocence' is all problematised, whose knowledge from outside innocence liberates them, as Habegger suggests, but endangers them too, puts them at the mercy of a cultural machinery still predicated upon dyads of innocence and guilt, cleanness and pollution.

6. Blushing in the dark: language and sex in *The Ambassadors*

Tone is everything in *The Ambassadors*: it is the very subject of the novel. Strether has to mediate, like James in his letters from Paris to his family at home in the 1870s, Old World sophisticated *moeurs* for New World decencies. Is there a tone he can find - playful? ironic? appealing? - in which he can reconcile a Sarah Pocock or a Mrs Newsome with a Mme de Vionnet? Will he be able to make out a place, or rather a *language*, in which the one can imagine the other? All those thick missives he despatches across the Atlantic represent his sincere effort to translate the one tone-world into another; to bring about, by his own sheer efforts of imagination-in-language, their mutual transparency.

It is in the very nuances of his language, too, that he stands most accused by Sarah of defection (like the younger Henry accused by William James of 'French tricks' in his letters): the crimson spots burn brighter in her cheeks and she is - significantly - lost for words when he tries on her his little *galanterie*, his sample of 'how Parisians could talk':

'And yet, dear Sarah,' he freely broke in, 'I feel when I hear you say that, that you don't quite do justice to the important truth of the extent to which - as you're also mine - I'm your natural due. I should like much better,' he laughed, 'to see you fight for me.'

She met him, Mrs Pocock, on this, with an arrest of speech... (342)

The challenge, then, for a reading of *The Ambassadors*, is to find a tone in keeping with the spirit of the novel itself. And the danger that always hovers is that the critical mode will not be able to sustain the novel's lightness, its poise between New World earnestnesses and Old World elegances where *both* -

however the balance finally tips - have their weight. Of its nature criticism tends towards earnestness. Although readings of the novel can't but take its essential point, its essential tenderness towards the transgressive love affair, it is surprising how often there lurks submerged in the critical prose a Puritanical school-master who sounds more like Woollett than Paris. 'Chad's good appearance is essentially of the surface', his freedom 'smacks of licence here as well as liberty'. Maria Gostrey 'has betrayed his [Strether's] trust, putting her own desire for him above his need for the truth'. Strether 'fools himself that he has discovered a utopia where the self is anonymous, the place nowhere'. Or, 'The pure perception, the "artless" impression, are dangerous illusions in James, which ought to signal to the reader a character's willing self-blindness'.¹

There is some support in the text for this in-built critical inclination to read the novel as a lesson (the retributive model of fictional structure again, as in Isabel's having to have done or been something wrong, in order for her to be punished: Strether has to be guilty of some mistake, in order for him to be corrected). Strether himself often finds the idiom of the lesson, the moral exemplar, close to hand when he is interpreting his own experience. Good Woollett product that he is, his introspections tend to sort his experience in terms of a language of 'duties', 'responsibilities', 'scruples', and the need to 'justify himself'. Most of all (very New World) he feels the need to 'make of it all what he could' (466), that is, to read the whole painful process of his changing his mind as a learning curve from which it would be unworthy of him not to profit.

However, even as Strether is prone to the explications of a Woollett pedagogy, so he is also prone to a perpetual self-irony in which his own earnestness and dutifulness - what Ian Watt calls his 'enormous sense of responsibility about personal relationships' - are as much fair game as all his other qualities. Watt diagnoses this 'ironic ambivalence' of

¹ Bradbury, 51, 52, 66; John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*. London: Methuen, 1985, 197, 199.

Strether's in his masterly close analysis of the first paragraph of the novel; in the very detail of the vocabulary and grammar we 'are getting into Strether's mind, and we have been prepared to relish the irony of its ambivalences'; Strether is 'comically loyal to what he would like to feel'.² Some of the irony at Strether's earnestness is the narrator's; but (and Watt's insistence that this is not a novel which insists upon its 'intellectual distance' from its protagonists seems so right) some of the irony is Strether's own.

What Strether ruefully contemplates, as in the course of the novel his moral frameworks for interpretation endlessly complicate themselves, is that after all there may be no lesson in this story. There may be imperatives of character and upbringing which belong to a world of lessons and dutifulness, so that, for instance, he has to say to Maria Gostrey at the end of it all that he must not, 'out of the whole affair', have 'got anything for' himself (512). (We may alternatively choose to read that as the most courteous possible expression of a refusal which is really on other grounds; 'dear old Maria' may be Strether's great friend but it is not *she* whose womanliness has come to embody all the 'life' he enjoins upon little Bilham, the 'life' he envies Chad, and is himself too late for.) But the story itself overflows, finally, the successive patternings Strether's New World conscientiousness can't help trying to urge upon it. There isn't any moral system within which Strether can explain to a Mrs Newsome that a Mme de Vionnet is 'good' for Chad. When Maria or little Bilham are persuaded to agree that she is 'good', they mean of course - and Strether allows them to get away with meaning - that different 'good' they might apply to painting, or wine, or air. This is, finally - even criticism has to face it - a novel not about goodness but about pleasure.

Benjamin's essay on Proust furnished some hints, in the last chapter, for James's complex attitude towards his young men of

² Ian Watt, 'The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication'. *Essays in Criticism* 10 (1960), 250-74.

the world. In finding the right tone for a reading of *The Ambassadors*, it helps again.

Nor is it hard to say why this paralyzing, explosive will to happiness which pervades Proust's writings is so seldom comprehended by its readers. In many places Proust himself made it easy for them to view this oeuvre too, from the time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism. After all, nothing makes more sense to the model pupils of life than the notion that a great achievement is the fruit of toil, misery, and disappointment. The idea that happiness could have a share in beauty would be too much of a good thing, something that their *ressentiment* would never get over.³

The place where James's fiction can finally unlearn that 'time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism' has to be France. The novel is a homage, really, to all those possibilities France has stood for in the cultural 'map' James has been making out in his fictions; all those possibilities - of happiness's 'share in beauty'? - which from his very earliest writings he has perceived as existing in dynamic and essential contradistinction to the Protestant values of an Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition.

In his essay on Maupassant of 1888, for instance, the decent American in James can't help recoiling in distaste from the explicit sexual content of the stories:

...nevertheless it may be said that whatever depths may be discovered by those who dig for them, the impression of the human spectacle for him who takes it as it comes has less analogy with that of the monkey's cage than this admirable writer's account of it.⁴

The imagery, though, reveals an uncertainty, an intimation of other possibilities. Somewhere concealed in the language is an acknowledgement of concealments: to say, in however high a tone and out of whatever tradition of good taste, that one chooses not to 'dig' for 'depths', is to admit a consequent, albeit undirtied, superficiality. The depths are *real*: James doesn't imply they are a consequence of Maupassant's distorted perception, he simply questions the propriety, the necessity, of seeking them out. And then, the monkey's cage: why is that the image to hand to express sexual animality, and not free monkeys

³ Benjamin, 199.

⁴ 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira, 93.

in forests? Does it offer itself out of that common experience of childhood visits to zoos, that shame of unseeable things watched with horrified fascination none the less through the bars or the glass? The image places the writer and the reader outside the cage, but looking in. It involves more shames than the voyeuristic sexual one, too: the choice of the monkey (not rabbits, say,) post-Darwin, can't be without significance, and its caging can't be without a sense of responsibility for its unfreedom. Which 'monkey', here, is actually 'caged'? And where, after all, has shame located itself, in the propriety of James's recoil from the sexual here?

This equivocation deep in James's language as he attends to the issue of sexual propriety exists at the level of conscious argument in the same essay, too. The whole piece is addressed as if to an Anglo-Saxon propriety, and insists upon how, no matter how a reader's sense of the proper - a literary ideal of 'noble and exquisite things' - may be offended by so much from the monkey's cage, that same reader will be - problematically - stirred and persuaded by the powerful realism of the writing. Out of the *same sensuality*, it seems, come both the offending sexual content and the power of the writing to move and convince. That sensuality, when it is not monkeys, persuades the hesitating reader as unanswerably, royally, as a 'lion in the path' (James's own phrase from the same essay):

We are accustomed to think, we of the English faith, that a cynic is a living advertisement of his errors... It is easy to exclaim that if he judges life only from the point of view of the senses, many are the noble and exquisite things that he must leave out. What he leaves out has no claim to get itself considered till after we have done justice to what he takes in...⁵

France is invoked in James's *oeuvre*, in his cultural mapping, to stand for the sensual and the beautiful, for pleasure, with whatever complications that brings for Anglo-Saxon propriety ('resignation, heroism, asceticism'). In *What Maisie Knew* it is the sounds and smells of Boulogne life which float up to Maisie's hotel room in counterpoint to Mrs. Wix urging her lessons in conscience and condemnation upon Maisie

⁵ 'Guy de Maupassant', Shapira, 94.

inside. When James wants to express his outrage at the desecration of France in the late essays on the Great War, it is an imagery of earth and growth and fruitfulness that comes to hand:

But I verily think there has never been anything in the world - since the most golden aspect of antiquity at least - like the way in which France has been trusted to gather the rarest and fairest and sweetest fruits of our so tremendously and so mercilessly turned-up garden of life. She has been gardened where the soil of humanity has been most grateful and the aspect, so to call it, most toward the sun, and there, at the high and yet mild and fortunate centre, she has grown the precious, intimate, the nourishing, finishing things that she has inexhaustibly scattered abroad.⁶

Italy too, of course, has its special function in the novels. But an Italian culture is never sharply focused as an alternative system, an alternative way of seeing, to the moralising and conscientious Anglo-Saxon one; issues of history and national identity apart, this is really a question of literature. What we feel from the very beginnings of James's writing is that his relationship to the French nineteenth century literary tradition is fundamental, not auxiliary; the polarity in his imagination between a George Eliot and a Balzac, say, or a Hawthorne and a Flaubert, is at the very basis of his perception and his curiosity.

In a sense *The Ambassadors* enacts precisely the evolution of that relationship throughout James's own fictions. Strether's origins, his deep dutiful sense of a responsibility to 'home', his instincts of respectful tenderness towards the products and the qualities of 'home': these are like the deep roots James's early and middle period fictions put down in the English fictional tradition and its 'piety, in the civil and domestic sense'. Strether's middle aged adventure, his sheer incapacity to resist another way of seeing as it persuades itself upon him; this is like James grappling with the Maupassant. He ought to be able to feel, as W.D.Howells did in reaction to some of James's anecdotes from Paris-Babylon, that he 'thanks God he's not a Frenchman'.⁷ Instead he (Strether, James) finds himself prevented from keeping to that straight and narrow: the persuasiveness, the authority, the unanswerability of pleasure

⁶ *Within the Rim and Other Essays 1914-15*. London: n.p., 1919, 91.

⁷ See Introduction, 11.

as a system-unto-itself, sit like a lion in his path. Ultimately, like Strether, James finds himself, his poise, somewhere outside both systems, seeing into and appreciating both and not quite at home in either. In the last novels James opens his fictions onto a dialogue of both ways of seeing.

Ruth Bernard Yeazell sets out in her *Fictions of Modesty* just what was perceived as the essential difference between the nineteenth century English-language and Continental novel traditions.⁸ The English novel according to her, committed to centering its narratives more often than not in the evolving consciousness of its young women, was structured fundamentally into the space of courtship between love and marriage. This was the only space left available to its young women for manoeuvre, for quest, for choice, once English fictional parameters were understood as more or less identical with ideals of feminine propriety. In other words, nothing could 'happen' to the young women after marriage. As Thackeray boasted (or complained?) in the sentences from his *Autobiography* which Yeazell uses as epigraph:

Can anyone by search through the works of the six great English novelists I have named, find a scene, a passage, or a word that would teach a girl to be immodest, or a man to be dishonest? When men in their pages have been described as dishonest and women as immodest, have they not ever been punished?

On the contrary, 'without adultery, it would not be too much to say, the Continental novel would scarcely be possible'.⁹ Yeazell finds notes for one of James's own stories from 1902 which set out precisely that interdependence: '*L'honnête femme - n'a pas un roman*'; 'if she's *honnête*, it's not a *roman* -if it's a *roman* she's not *honnête*'.¹⁰ She suggests in fact that Tony Tanner's argument for an 'intimate connection between adultery and the

⁸ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty, Women and Courtship in the English Novel*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991.

⁹ Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty*, 78.

¹⁰ 'The Story in It' (1902). *The Complete Tales*, Vol.11.

novel' is actually an account of Continental rather than English language fiction.¹¹

When the stuff of the Continental novel impinged on *The Portrait of a Lady* it was as a substance lurid, gothic, deadly. Osmond's and Mme Merle's adultery can only be associated negatively, threateningly, with the novel's centre of consciousness in Isabel. In her long flight across Europe to Ralph she turns over and over its alien, exotic reality, but can't assimilate it, can't adapt to it her sympathetic imagination formed in such a different moral air. (Or does her discovery dug out of the depths, her stare into the monkey's cage, contaminate even Isabel just slightly: enough for her to feel for a moment the 'hot breath of the desert' when Caspar kisses her: a stirring which is of course written up in the New York Edition?) The adulterers are punished, too, as Thackeray prescribes; as is conventional, the man loses a little (a little of his power over Isabel) and the woman loses everything, lover, friend, child, happiness. Osmond is a continuing factor at the end of the novel: Mme Merle, in the proper tradition of English fictional adulteresses, falls, upon her discovery, beyond the Pale of the narrative. (The one last glimpse backwards at all she has lost reads - as well as poignantly - like a convention too: it is the same hell of loss that is prepared for Maria Bertram, Bertha Mason, Lady Barbara in *East Lynne*, Mrs. Glasher in *Daniel Deronda*.)

In *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* the exotic, lurid stuff of the Continental novel is handled more familiarly. The novels pitch themselves inside a world in which the dingy news of adultery is everyday; mixed up with, even, and contaminating, the 'innocence' of the young girls. And the ideal of that innocence itself is becoming shadowed, problematic; it seems it can only be sustained at the cost of such exclusions, such sacrifices, such distortions of language (the dyadic vocabulary of innocence and contamination in *Turn of the Screw*, the 'innocence' of a little Aggie). All this development in the writings of the late 1890s is like Strether's squeamishness, alongside the irresistible advance of his reluctant recognition.

¹¹ Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty*, 79.

How can the innocent core of English fiction be kept immune, once it finds itself in relationship with a world of such other realities?

When, in Book 11 iv, Strether is finally confronted with the incontrovertible carnal fact of Chad and Mme de Vionnet's affair, and he can no longer pretend to himself that he does not know what it means when a man like Chad is 'formed to please'(511) and 'marked out by women'(167), a whole fiction of innocence collapses in a single, final gesture. It is like growing-up, all at once (except that it has been prepared for by a long development); like some fictional rite of passage. The system of proprieties and concealments and euphemisms is suddenly something for children, or virgins. Strether blushes, the same night, for 'the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll'(468). The innocence of that 'little girl' has depended on too much ignorance: 'It must never be forgotten that the optimism of [English] literature is partly the optimism of women and spinsters; in other words the optimism of ignorance as well as delicacy'.¹²

We can extend the words in which Strether reflects on his 'discovery' to imply issues of fictional as well as social propriety.

He was rather glad, none the less, that they had in point of fact not parted at the Cheval Blanc, that he hadn't been reduced to giving them his blessing for an idyllic retreat down the river. He had had in the actual case to make-believe more than he liked, but this was nothing, it struck him, to what the other event would have required. Could he, literally, quite have faced the other event? Would he have been capable of making the best of it with them? ... He moved ... back to the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed. That was what, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was *like* that - and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll. He had made them - and by no fault of their own - momentarily pull it for him, the possibility, out of this vagueness; and must he not therefore take it now as they had had simply, with whatever thin attenuations, to give it to him?

¹² 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira, 103.

...He foresaw that Miss Gostrey would come again into requisition on the morrow; though it wasn't to be denied that he was already a little afraid of her "What on earth - that's what I want to know now - had you then supposed?" He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things. (468)

Strether and James confront together the whole question of *imagining* intimacy, imagining those 'deep deep truths'. Strether up to this point has not actually been 'deceived' about Chad and Mme.de Vionnet's relationship. (When criticism has wanted to attribute a *mistake* to him so that he can be *corrected*, this is usually the one: he is deceived, he misinterprets the situation.) But the language of his reflections here only confirms what James has been careful to be precise about earlier in the progress of Strether's attitude to the affair. 'He had been trying all along to suppose nothing': not that he had supposed *something* (i.e. that the affair was unconsummated) which turned out to be incorrect. Of course he has tried out, over and over, the possibility that their attachment is 'virtuous', in the Woollett sense: he tries it on Maria, on little Bilham. Only we recognise the over-insistence, the too calm certitude, of someone who is trying to convince himself. He is so alert, too, to when those others, however they want to spare him, can't help their shades of hesitation, of demurral:

Poor Strether's face lengthened. She's impossible?'

[Maria]'She's even more charming than I remembered her.'

'Then what's the matter?'

She had to think how to put it. 'Well, I'm impossible. It's impossible. Everything's impossible.'

He looked at her an instant. 'I see where you're coming out. Everything's possible.' Their eyes had on it in fact an exchange of some duration, after which he pursued: 'Isn't it that beautiful child?' Then as she still said nothing: 'Why don't you mean to receive her?' (221)

When Strether sees Mme de Vionnet in Notre Dame he certainly decides that this helps the case for her 'virtue': but he puts it to himself that it 'helped him to stick fast at the point he had then reached; it was there he had resolved that he would stick, and at no moment since had it seemed as easy to do so' (276). His understanding of the relationship is felt as some sort of progress or movement, and he recognises his own desire to hold himself back from continuing further (beyond the 'point

he had then reached') by an effort that seems only momentarily easier, but has by implication been difficult to sustain. That is, it has been difficult to stop himself going further: further, in the way the image is structured, can only imply further away from a conviction of her 'virtue'.

The essence of what Strether has imagined is that he has tried, precisely, to imagine nothing. He has failed to anchor his conviction in the 'virtuous attachment'; his intellectual habit, whatever he 'wants' to think, is too doubting and questing for that. (He is especially sceptical, in fact, of anything he wants to believe.) So instead of conviction he has left a space (an impossible-to-sustain space, of course) in which he simply refuses to imagine anything. It's a postponement: it has felt like the only way he can sustain in one consciousness the morals of Woollett and the pleasures of Paris. For what is concealed - deferred - inside that space there is in Woollett's vocabulary no name which does not condemn; there is no name in the vocabulary of Paris that is not euphemism - 'make-believe', Strether calls it. The third possibility - that he find a truthful language for it of his own - he is holding off out of habits of reticence and delicacy deeply entangled at the root of his perceptions. He has believed there are things which must not, can not, be named. He has known there is a monkey's cage, but he has believed that no sympathy, no interest, no art, could justify the voyeurism of looking in.

In a letter to Paul Bourget written in 1888, James rehearses much the same scruples about the erotic content of Bourget's latest novel.

What can one know of these matters as far as they concern others and how can one speak about all this on behalf of anyone other than oneself? For this reason it is preferable to talk of them as little as possible, for if one speaks of them as they concern oneself, the result is fatuous, tasteless and immodest. For me, the conduct of love seems to constitute a very special part of our existence, essentially characterised by *action* and not by *thought*. This element of action is the affair of each one of us, but as soon as thought is brought to bear upon it - as soon as one drabbles intellectually in the matter, as a novelist or as a painter, it becomes unhealthy and distasteful. And that is why infinite tact and taste are required lest one should founder in the mud: it is a question of treatment,

an entirely practical problem... I should never wish to know what happens between a man and a woman in their bedroom and in their bed...¹³

There is a reasoned argument here which calls the issue a 'practical problem', a 'matter of treatment'. A distinction is made between 'what happens between a man and a woman in their bedroom' and all the other 'parts of our existence': what happens in the bedroom has a special status as 'action' which has - to protect it, to protect ourselves? or both? - to be kept absolutely separate from our reflective selves, our 'thought'. It is impossible, he argues, to write about this 'action', because it should exist unmediated by thought. The moment thought - language, writing, painting - is allowed to imagine the 'action', then that action is spoiled, it becomes dirtied, 'unhealthy and distasteful': we 'founder in the mud'. The shame is not in the thing itself, but in the voyeur's stare. Because the thing itself and the reflective consciousness are by definition mutually destructive, there is no imagination of the action, no language for it, no way of re-creating it, which is not the voyeur's.

As well as the reasoned argument, there is a powerful charge in the language of the passage which goes beyond what the reasoning quite justifies. The appeal elsewhere in the letter to an Anglo-Saxon consensus ('almost our only reaction to him [the sensitive and eminent young man beginning his first adulterous affair] is a desire to give him a good kick in the behind'); the invocation in support of his protests of a collective middle-ground common sense ('we do not want it and we do not believe in it') are not characteristic of James, and signal a defensiveness, a felt need to raise more than just his own reasoning against the threat perceived. Fiercely James purges himself of the shame of voyeurism, a contamination which the act of reading the Bourget novel seems to have brought too close. And he invokes a final inaccessibility of the sexual facts which reads (to be infinitely tactless and tasteless) almost as a moment's biographical insight; we glimpse at once an intensely

¹³ To Paul Bourget (1888). *Letters*, Vol.3, 220. (Original in French: translation from Georges Markow-Totevy, *Henry James*, London: Merlin Press, 1969.)

guarded privacy and an intensely felt exclusion. 'What can one know of these matters as far as they concern others and how can one speak about all this on behalf of anyone other than oneself?'

If we decide that the distinction James makes between sexual behaviour and all the other 'parts of our existence' is spurious, then his argument breaks down. It would seem unfair, if that were the case, for him to protest at Bourget's realist detail. 'How can these things then possibly concern us,' he writes, '- the details of Desforges' flirtations or of the love-making of René and his mistress and the state of disarray of the shirts or corsets worn?'. But in James's own novels, with regard to every other part of existence, it is precisely these details which function as the very material of the illusion and the guarantees of its truth. The essence of the realist curiosity is that art 'needs to know' everything else; isn't it simply anomalous to assert that it needs for its own health not to know this one thing?

However, this whole issue of sex in fiction is, notoriously, and even today, something like a special case: the vexed question that seemed in some sense answered along with the end of the nineteenth century system of fictional propriety, has re-asserted itself in the debate over pornography. There may well be an ultimate untellability special to sexual behaviour which has to do with precisely the problem James locates; the contradiction between the intrinsic voyeurism of fiction and the intrinsic privacy of sex ('less capable of open delineation than anything else in the world', in the letter to Bourget). This special problem needs responding to with special tacts; and the failure of those tacts risks more than just literary flatness, it jeopardises perhaps (certainly anti-pornographers would recognise this argument) some core of individual privacy, has a power to intrude and damage beyond the ordinary power of fictional illusion. The sexual details in Bourget's novel certainly seem to have offended James in the way pornography offends: they have intruded behind his merely literary judgement and he feels attacked, personally (to judge from his defensiveness and his tone, which rather overflows,

interestingly enough, another kind of tact; the letter must have annoyed Bourget, surely?).

James in this letter proposes as solution to the problem simply a literary decorum which holds off even from curiosity about the locked room in this Bluebeard's castle of realism. There is, after all, so much else to write about: '...despite the infinite variety of life, you devote to her and to her underclothing [James's italics] a quite particular and unwholesome attention'. (As in the Maupassant essay: 'the impression of the human spectacle for him who takes it as it comes has less analogy with that of the monkey's cage than this admirable writer's account of it'.) Like Strether he chooses to make his enjoyment (his material) out of all the charms and effects and urgencies of love - after all, they are love stories that James writes - but simply to hold off from imagining the sexual act whose implications if not facts lie hidden somewhere at the stories' centres.

James changed his mind. In a letter to Hugh Walpole in 1910 about one of Walpole's novels, he complained that what was missing from the fiction was 'the marital, sexual, bedroom relations of M and his wife ... which have to be tackled to mean anything'. And this is consistent, of course, with the material of James's own last three completed novels. Instead of inserting themselves into that space of courtship between love and marriage which Yeazell defines as the essential place of the English language novel tradition, and where most of James's own novels before *The Ambassadors* certainly fit (*Washington Square*, *The Bostonians*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Tragic Muse* - more or less, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Awkward Age*) the three late novels belong instead (although with some essential qualifications which will need to be made) inside the Continental tradition of novels centred on illicit sexual relationships. (The illicit relationship is adulterous in *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*; what makes *The Wings of the Dove* inconceivable within the tradition of James's earlier fictions is partly the fact of Kate's visit to Merton's room,

but much more the sympathetic interiority of much of the treatment of Kate, who is duplicitous and - put crudely - uses her sexual favours in Balzacian fashion to achieve her financial ends.) The locked room has been opened, and what is inside does have, after all, to be 'tackled', turns out in fact to be essential to an understanding of the whole.

When Strether is confronted, finally, with evidence he cannot sidestep, when he can defer no longer the 'imagining' of what is between Chad and Mme de Vionnet he has so uncomfortably eschewed, it is almost as if he enacted James's conversion on this point. And as with Strether, this conversion for James is not really in the least a matter of a sudden all-transforming switch from no to yes; we have traced already through the novels of the middle years and of the transitional period of the late 1890s that trajectory of ever-widening inclusiveness, that history of an imagination always rebounding upon and re-interrogating its own premises and fundamentals, which finally brought James's fictions to the door of the locked room and the felt necessity of finding some way of 'tackling' what lay unexpressed and unexplored within.

That trajectory, that history, could be described in James's own words, writing about R.L.Stevenson in a review of 1900:

There is world enough everywhere ... for the individual, the right one, to be what we call a man of it. He has, like everyone not inconvenienced with the backdoor of stupidity, to make his account with seeing and facing more things, seeing and facing everything, with the unrest of new impressions and ideas, the loss of the fond complacencies of youth.¹⁴

James quotes appreciatively just after this from one of Stevenson's letters which contrasts: 'the prim obliterated polite face of life, and the broad, bawdy and orgiastic - or maenadic - foundations'. The pagan suggestions in the Stevenson remind us interestingly, first, of Strether's reiterated imagining of Chad as pagan in *The Ambassadors*, and, second, of the transformation of the significance of a particular image in James's vocabulary between the Bourget letter of 1888 and the

¹⁴ (Review of *Letters of R.L.Stevenson to his Family and Friends*.) *Essays on English and American Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson. New York: Viking and Cambridge UP, 1984, 1269.

first of the late three novels. In the letter he complains that 'an intellect like your own should have thought it necessary to make so great a sacrifice to false gods!'. In *The Ambassadors* Strether wants to be 'expiatory' towards little Bilham because he 'has been sacrificing to strange gods'. 'I feel as if my hands were imbrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars - of another faith altogether' (393). James's own use of the language of rite and creed in connection with the propriety issue seems to justify our talking about Strether's, and James's, change of mind in terms of a 'conversion'; and it certainly suggests James making connections between Anglo-Saxon systems of sexual propriety and a Protestant idealism. But most significantly, in the Bourget letter there are false gods and therefore by implication a true one. By the time of *The Ambassadors* the false gods are only strange ones; Strether's sacrifice to them is uneasy and half-hearted, perhaps, but none the less propitiatory. The strange gods are real, and must be answered.

When the anonymous lady and gentleman in the boat in the ideal picture Strether has been composing reveal themselves in fact as his friends Chad and Mme de Vionnet, Strether of course experiences shock, discomfiture, distaste. Their meal at the Cheval Blanc is the least happy one they've ever shared. But, returned to Paris and alone in his room, his strong reactions are not only of shock and distaste. Along with the astringency of those there's a relief, an exhilaration at finally 'seeing and facing' (to use James's terms from the passage on Stevenson). While Strether was hovering outside the locked door of the secret, the door opened wide and the secret thrust itself upon him. And although he had held off from the secret out of a delicacy that eschewed the voyeurism of imagining it, in the new light of certainty new decorums disclose themselves, and that very delicacy, that hovering, sting him in dissatisfied retrospect.

That was what, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was *like that* - and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its

being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll. He had made them - and by no fault of their own - momentarily pull it for him, the possibility, out of this vagueness; and must he not therefore take it now as they had had simply, with whatever thin attenuations, to give it to him?(468)

There are all kinds of prurience, and perhaps hovering too busily around a secret while deferring actually naming it is one of them: there may be more ways of muddying and soiling secrets in imagination than simply (as in the Bourget letter) too crudely telling them. The exhilaration - or perhaps just the relief - at that finally seeing and facing seems to be more than merely Strether's; it reverberates in James's whole oeuvre.

Into the world of sayable things intrudes the presence of the other realities that have only been guessed at and hinted at so far, have only been circumlocuted. And the language, the vocabulary, they finally exact in their text is the simplest, the most stating; neither the Woollett language of moralising high-mindedness nor Parisian sophisticated euphemism. Neither Chad nor Mme de Vionnet 'speak', there are no conceivable explanations: facts speak, bodies speak, and so unequivocally that in Strether's separate interviews afterwards with both of the lovers they simply presume he now 'knows', though no word has been said. Literally, it is the bodies that speak: Mme.de Vionnet has no shawl, Chad no overcoat, these things are taken off and left at the room both of them shared the night before. A veil is torn away and what is revealed beneath is after all only ordinary human nakedness.

...intimacy, at such a point, was like that - and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll.(468)

It seems a particular felicity that after such long prevarication the sign that is finally found to stand for the secret in the locked room is something as simple, as ordinary, as the taking off of clothes.

But then it is an evening of other ordinarinesses too: it is not for nothing that the scene is staged as pastoral. Strether's pastoral is ironised, of course; into his exquisite

framed picture row, not after all the anonymous lovers required for colour contrast and the suggestion of an erotic Arcadia where love can be both innocent and fulfilled at once, but instead his real known pair who drag with them all the world's complications and take off real clothes. But the vitality with which the pastoral is evoked in this chapter is too strong for mere irony. The day, the place, are too beautiful, too full of pleasures, only to be spoiled ('the lap of the water, the ripple of the surface, the rustle of the reeds on the opposite bank, the faint diffused coolness and the slight rock of a couple of small boats' 459). Pastoral has its other usual functions here too: as a corrective to urban over-refinement, as a means of re-acquaintance with hidden, 'natural' sources of strength. Strether and Chad and Mme de Vionnet share their rustic supper; even the most exquisitely sophisticated ladies and gentlemen need to break bread and pour wine when they are hungry; by implication, even the most rarefied of virtuous attachments will be bound to stoop to bodies sooner or later. And even ladies and gentlemen with the most tasteful possible manners will sometimes be reduced to covering their nakedness in ordinary fibs, however these may disagree with delicate stomachs. These are the chastening lessons that sophistication has conventionally taken from pastoral along with its solaces: that refinement confers no immunity to ordinary ills and frailties; that we are all made of the same earth. This function of pastoral coincides interestingly with a realism whose concern is often with the actual lived implications of ideals of conduct.

So, within the terms of his own argument in the letter to Bourget, what solution has James made out for himself to the problem of representation of the details of 'what happens between a man and a woman in their bedroom'? The crucial problem for the James of the Bourget letter, was that absolute inadmissability of any reconciliation of the 'action' of sexuality and the imagination of it. To imagine it was to dirty it; thought became muddied, voyeuristic, as soon as it approached the privacies that could only exist sealed off,

uncontaminated by imagining them. The impossibility of sustaining that watertight separation made James in the letter defensive, uncomfortable: wasn't the unthinkable guiltily thought even in repudiating the possibility of cleanly thinking it?

In *The Ambassadors*, the solution to the problem is as simple as acknowledging the truth that the thing *exists already* in thought. Fiction can render it by rendering its effects in imagination; it need not pretend to enter the room behind whose locked doors imagination takes on flesh. So, James has us 'imagine' Kate's visit in Venice through how it haunts Merton afterwards; or we 'imagine' all the pleasures of Charlotte's and the Prince's visit to Gloucester through their anticipations of it that spring morning at Matcham. What Strether feels as he reflects in his room alone is not only shock, and not only relief, at 'seeing and facing' what he had postponed; there is also voluptuousness, as he gives himself up at last to imagining what he had not allowed himself to think:

He foresaw that Miss Gostrey would come again into requisition on the morrow; though it wasn't to be denied that he was already a little afraid of her 'What on earth - that's what I want to know now - had you then supposed?' He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things.(468)

His imagination, finally, of the relationship between Chad and Mme.de Vionnet is not of its 'goodness', or its justification: it is of its pleasures.

The moment is his loneliest one:

The very question, it may be added, made him feel lonely and cold. There was the element of the awkward all round, but Chad and Mme de Vionnet at least had the comfort that they could talk it over together. With whom could he talk of such things? (468)

With the imagination of their pleasures comes his acknowledgement of his exclusion from them. Part of his enjoyment of his day in the countryside had been in his striking himself as 'engaged with others and in midstream of his drama'(457): in the light of his encounter with the lovers that sense of engagement seems suddenly a little foolish, a little futile. The essential of the business that preoccupies them all

is carried out in pairs, and he is not needed for it. And his exclusion is not just something for a day, it's of a whole lifetime. In *The Ambassadors*, which is essentially a novel about middle-age and ageing, the imagination of the erotic is painfully entangled with the idea of youth, an inaccessible lost youth:

It's too late. And it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that.(215)

What Strether refuses when he gently-determinedly puts aside Maria's offer of herself is the let-down of mere compensation. It is part of his character (perhaps it's Woollett in him) to believe that the real, recognised loss can't be fudged, shouldn't be 'made up for'. There would finally be something demeaning (Woollett has its pride) in seeming to console himself for the absence of the real, the authentic thing (youth, passion, pain) with the mock-erotics of a middle-aged pastiche-passion.

Even as James's fiction finds its way to write sex into the story, it also ruefully writes its own ultimate exclusion from an erotic that is only real outside fiction: this is the acknowledgement of that special problematic status of sex-in-writing discussed earlier. The art gestures outside art to the places it can imagine but can't enter. Strether with his lost opportunities is the embodiment of a rueful comic apology for the sixty-year old writer come late to make his homage to pleasure, to 'the idea that happiness could have a share in beauty', having painstakingly unlearned the 'time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism'.

If we read *The Ambassadors* as centring on a significant moment of 'seeing and facing' in James's oeuvre, then in that moment the issue of the erotic and the issue of language and tone are inseparable. What Strether finally allows himself to imagine ('he found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things')

is only possible because of the changes in the tone and the texture and the vocabulary of his thinking which have already scandalised Sarah Pocock. He has learned a different language in Paris, a language which 'gave Strether such a sense of depths below it and behind it as he hadn't yet had' (this after Mme de Vionnet presses Sarah to bring Mamie to visit her: 'You may think me indiscreet, but I've *such* a desire my Jeanne shall know an American girl of the really delightful kind' 347). He has picked up archness, extravagance, indirection, perpetual irony, he has developed, in a word, *manner*: and only *manner* bestows the elasticity that finally allows him - ironically enough - to call a spade a spade, to accuse himself and his old unmannered straightness of a culpable ignorance, the innocent ignorance of 'little girls dressing dolls'. 'Straightness', the common-sense of middle-ground, had become a straight-jacket, it had become impossible to communicate the truth in it because the truth had turned out to be curved and nuanced and ambivalent in ways straightness could not express:

'I mean,' he explained [to Sarah], 'that she [Mme de Vionnet] might have affected you by her exquisite amiability - a real revelation, it has seemed to myself; her high rarity, her distinction of every sort.'

He had been, with these words, consciously a little 'precious'; but he had had to be - he couldn't give her the truth of the case without them;... (419)

Those great efforts of conscientiousness represented by Strether's voluminous correspondence with Woollett almost seem to represent James's own desire, in his own writing, to keep faith with the origins of his oeuvre in the moralising conscientious Anglo-Saxon novel tradition. As he moves into the larger open space from where there are other, less 'straight' ways of seeing, he continues to try to explain the one way to the other, to mediate different tones, to make transparent all the premises of his perception, just like Strether:

'Well, what can I do more than that - what can I do more than tell her everything?' To persuade himself that he did tell her, had told her, everything, he used to try and think of particular things he hadn't told her. When at rare moments and in the watches of the night he pounced on one it generally showed itself to be - to a deeper scrutiny - not quite truly of the essence. When anything new struck him as coming up, or anything already noted as reappearing, he always immediately wrote, as if for fear that if he didn't he would miss something; and also that he might be able to say to himself from time to time 'She knows it now - even while I

worry'. It was a great comfort to him in general not to have left past things to be dragged to light and explained; not to have to produce at so late a stage anything not produced, or anything even veiled and attenuated, at the moment. (246)

This, the very image of a vigilant Protestant conscientiousness, also seems to describe the characteristic Jamesian exhaustiveness. The trouble is, that the very exhaustiveness in itself sounds suspect - 'precious' - to Sarah and Mrs. Newsome and Woollett. The more minutely Strether (and James) explains himself, the less straight he seems.

Finally when it seems as though his very efforts of conscientiousness bring down Woollett's disapproval, Woollett's silence, Woollett's ultimatum on his head, Strether takes 'the numerous loose sheets of his unfinished composition [his latest letter], and then, without reading them over', tears them into small pieces. Afterwards he sleeps ' - as if it had been in some measure thanks to that sacrifice - the sleep of the just..' (287) At some point in James's oeuvre justice - truth - exacts a break with the old forms, the abandonment of an old world of tone, and a whole commitment to an ever more nuanced, opaque, convoluted manner and language. The late manner is one to which the innocence and ignorance of Sarah and Mrs. Newsome and Woollett won't ever find - won't ever want to find - access; even though in some measure it has evolved under the pressure of their expectation. The breakdown of the Paris-Woollett correspondence in *The Ambassadors* rehearses the evolution within the oeuvre of the late style, gives an account of the necessity, finally, of its quixotic mannered lofty inaccessibility, its aristocratic irony 'asserting a bond among the élite who can decode its inverted operation'.¹⁵ The story (Chad's and Mme de Vionnet's, Kate's and Merton's, the Prince's and Charlotte's) exacts the style; the old straightness was not adequate, particularly, to explaining the power in the story of pleasure. In order to find out his robust plain signs for sex - Mme. de Vionnet and Chad without their outdoor things, the powerful presence-in-absence of that room in which their clothes are abandoned illicitly together - James has had to free himself from that

¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 159. See Introduction, 10.

frame of plain middle-ground decency within which the Anglo-Saxon novel tradition had grown up. Plainness, in some contexts, can even come to depend upon opacity and complication.

However, if the evolution of James's late style was a matter of liberating himself from the proprieties of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it need not follow that the late style represents James's English version of the Continental tradition. Strether, if he 'loses' Woollett, doesn't 'gain' Paris; he can't naturalise himself there. His reiterated insistence that 'the strength of his position ... was precisely that there was nothing in it for himself'(313) has been taken as a manifestation of Jamesian asceticism, an opportunity for the exercise of the Jamesian self-exclusion, in that reading of the oeuvre which has James as the high-priest of renunciation if not incapacity (Benjamin's 'time-tested, comfortable perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism'). In a reading of the late novels which finds them instead deeply responsive to passion, appetite, energy, Strether's insistence that he is somehow justified by not 'getting anything out of it' may stand for something rather different. The novel may be heavy with an almost Yeatsian burden of ageing; the regret for lost opportunity, the yearning admiration for an inaccessible youthful completeness-unto-itself, the futility of a too middle-aged desire:

The prime effect of her [Mme.de Vionnet's] tone, however, - and it was a truth which his eyes gave back to her in sad ironic play - could only be to make him feel that, to say such things to a man in public, a woman must practically think of him as ninety years old.(344)

But the compensatory lightness - as for Yeats? - comes in the fictional purchase on all that, in the being able to express it precisely so well because so finally outside of it. The compensation itself, of course, is - for added lightness - accessible in turn to further ironies, because who wouldn't rather have the real (foolish, transient) thing than the power to tell it? (That further irony is a *locus classicus* of love discourse, in Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, in Jonson's

'On My Picture Left in Scotland', in that letter of James's to Jocelyn Persse. 'I ... envy you, as always, your exquisite possession of the Art of Life which beats any Art of mine hollow'.¹⁶)

Strether's loss in life, and strength in art, is that he is 'out of it': he has made for himself eventually a tone, a poise, that is both outside Woollett's closed attitude of disapproval, and outside (if a little wistfully) the heady enchantments of sex in France. His 'genius for missing things' is the key to his grasp on things (407); his disabling 'obsession of the other thing' ('I'm always considering something else; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment', 66) is what qualifies him for us (if not for Mrs Newsome) as ambassador, as mediator of the different worlds. Having embodied this detachment from both ways of seeing in Strether (whose spectacles - 'eternal nippers' - both separate him from the world and make him see it more clearly) James doesn't feel the need to focus it explicitly again; nobody is in the least renunciatory or detached in *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*. The detachment is established as a perspective, and the characters are free to be as embedded and entangled and embroiled in things as they possibly can.

In making out the ways in which *The Ambassadors* commemorates a significant disestablishment within James's fiction of the Anglo-Saxon moralising tradition, it is important to make much of Strether's imagination, which in the end he can not prevent from 'supposing innumerable and wonderful things'. In making, from the other direction, the case for the ways in which James's late fiction is not like the Continental tradition, rather different qualities of Strether's count. His wry self-deprecating comedy at the expense of his successive inglorious uncomfortable positions (ambassador for Woollett's offended prudery, spokesman for Paris's licentiousness) raises issues of gender entangled with the issues of ways of seeing. His 'foolishness' is a confusion of his manliness, almost: his very sensitivity, his very scrupulousness, his 'enormous sense of responsibility about personal relationships' (Watt's phrase),

¹⁶ Kaplan, 514.

and in the end his very *imaginativeness*, make it impossible, once he has broken with the controlling women of Woollett, that he should smoothly identify himself with the controlling men of Paris. Scrupulousness, sensitivity, imaginative identification with the opposite sex: these are not the qualities Strether guesses in Gloriani, admires in Chad. But they are Strether's qualities: and they commit him to a kind of limbo, beneficiary of neither gender system, berated for his weak male susceptibility by Woollett, excluded from the pleasures of Paris by a too feminine conscientiousness, tenderness.

Paris holds out its promise to the body through its refinements of food and dress and comfort-in-living, tantalising with its half-revealed, half-concealed cult of sexual pleasure unburdened with shame, the mystery at the centre of all its initiations. But its promise is essentially to a male appetite; and depends upon certain male freedoms. Chad throws them off as casually and strikingly as his black crush hat, that night of his first conversation with Strether in the café:

Chad turned this over. 'I don't answer your question?' He spoke quite without resenting it. 'Well, such questions have always a rather exaggerated side. One doesn't know quite what you mean by being in women's "hands". It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is. And then one can't quite give people away.' He seemed very kindly to explain. 'I've never got stuck - so very hard; and, as against anything at any time really better, I don't think I've ever been afraid.' There was something in it that held Strether to wonder, and this gave him time to go on. He broke out as with a more helpful thought. 'Don't you know how I like Paris itself?'

'...But our suspicions don't matter,' [Strether] added, 'if you're actually not entangled.'

Chad's pride seemed none the less a little touched. 'I never was that - let me insist. I always had my own way.' With which he pursued: 'And I have it at present.'

'Then what are you here for? What has kept you,' Strether asked, 'if you have been able to leave?'

It made Chad, after a stare, throw himself back. 'Do you think one's kept only by women?' His surprise and his verbal emphasis rang out so clear in the still street that Strether winced till he remembered the safety of their English speech. 'Is that,' the young man demanded, 'what they think at Woollett?' (171, 172)

Of course Chad's exhibition of male indifferences here ('I've never got stuck, so very hard', and 'Do you think one's kept only by women?') is partly precisely because he's being a *gentleman*; that is, he's making light of his attachments to

women in general in order to conceal, as it goes without saying a gentleman must, the reality of his liaison with one woman. He is protecting Mme de Vionnet's honour by denying her power. The lie is excusable within this code because it is not to protect the gentleman himself; the affairs are no shame to him, but frankly referred to. Chad's every *aperçu* ('One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is') breathes modest taken for granted know-how: belongs to a male discourse where such know-how, such implications of wide sexual experience, such lightly worn trophies of the erotic pursuit are even more indispensable to male style and *éclat*, to male dignity and self-respect, than the walking stick and the knowing how to enter an opera box at ten o'clock at night. And in the end, the form and the habit and the manner of such male privilege convince all by themselves; we can't help finding that Chad's assertions of his ultimate indifference ring 'true', even when we know about Mme de Vionnet. Any system which defends its attachments by denying them (so any system where male sexual adventure is defined as primarily adulterous and therefore of its nature clandestine) is too anomalous to support mutuality or reciprocity for long.

If Strether is only half understanding Chad's blasé Parisianisms that evening in the café, equally Chad has forgotten how to talk to Strether, how they talk in Woollett. For perhaps the only time we catch unadulterated in Chad's easy frankness the whiff of that male 'jungle', that 'great world covertly tigerish' which Strether identifies for himself at Gloriani's party, seeing at once that Gloriani, that 'glossy male tiger, magnificently marked' (216) has in this Paris world (so unlike Woollett) the advantage over any merely female Duchess. But by the time Strether is onto the whiff of the jungle Chad is covering his tracks: part of his being formed to please is that he is quick to intuit what doesn't please Strether, and he speaks henceforward about women in softer tones. In their last interview, when Strether tries to persuade Chad not to leave Mme de Vionnet, his tones are even too soft for Strether's liking; the more he says nice things about her, the more Strether hears that if the nice things need saying then they're not enough. Through Chad's protestations of her claims to his benevolence show the brute underpinnings of this gender

system; 'I'm not tired of her', Chad says; and, 'she's never bored me ... she's never been anything I could call a burden'(502).

Mme de Vionnet works very hard not to be that burden. Chad's pleasure depends upon her not boring him; her happiness depends upon his not being bored. When Strether is surprised she doesn't know anything about Jim Pocock he asks, "Doesn't he [Chad] tell you things?"

She hesitated. 'No' - and their eyes once more gave and took. 'Not as you do. You somehow make me see them - or at least feel them. And I haven't asked too much,' she added; 'I've of late wanted so not to worry him.'(356)

She is not to worry him, not to bore him. Unlike Sarah Pocock, she is 'obliged' to have 'charm'(354). And that 'charm' Strether defines elsewhere as a performance, in which her skill is all reflective and responsive, finding out the 'tones' to fit others:

One of the things that most lingered with him on his hillside was this delightful facility, with such a woman, of arriving at a new tone; he thought, as he lay on his back, of all the tones she might make possible if one were to try her, and at any rate of the probability that one could trust her to fit them to occasions.(456)

It does not seem too crass to extend Strether's expression here as he imagines Mme de Vionnet's social versatility and skill at pleasing to implicitly suggest other more sensual skills; because of Strether's Woollett-tutored reticence, because Woollett doesn't have a language in which to name those skills, it remains of course an unfocused suggestion, only a part of the sensuousness of the day and his situation, lying on his back in the sunshine in the grass, 'luxuriously quiet'.

When Miss Barrace points out to Strether how Mme de Vionnet can make herself for Jim's entertainment and 'for Chad, in a manner, naturally, always', 'easily and charmingly, as young as a little girl', or, 'about twenty years old' we have a glimpse of the huge female effort, the female desperateness, of this particular gender arrangement. It is poignantly important in the story that Mme.de Vionnet is older than Chad, and that she has

(like Mrs Brookenham) a young daughter, whose turn it is for youthful loveliness, waiting in the social wings to replace her as the object of male desire. The idea of Jeanne and her youth seems fatally entangled, somehow, in other people's speculations about Chad's future and his affections. It is not that Mme de Vionnet is only vulnerable because Chad is younger than her; but the disparity in their ages that so disadvantages her expresses a fundamental inequity, a fatality for femininity, built into their arrangement (*it can't last*).

In his letter to Bourget James objected to 'this character who so often appears in French novels: the sensitive and eminent young man beginning his first adulterous affair ... Almost our only reaction to him - as Anglo-Saxons - is a desire to give him a good kick in the behind'. The objection is part of James's irritated reaction in that letter to the whole impropriety, as he sees it, of 'drabbling intellectually' in 'the conduct of love'; but it may also be an objection to an element of the French novel tradition which sometimes appeared conventional and unexamined to James, an ideal of sexual freedom and adventure structured upon a fundamental gender inequity. He writes in his 1878 essay on Balzac:

He takes the old-fashioned view - he recognises none but the old-fashioned categories. Woman is the female of man and in all respects his subordinate; she is pretty and ugly, virtuous and vicious, stupid and cunning. There is the great *métier de femme* - the most difficult perhaps in the world, so that to see it thoroughly mastered is peculiarly exhilarating. The *métier de femme* includes a great many branches, but they may be all summed up in the art of titillating in one way or another the senses of man ... The great sign of Balzac's women is that in all things the sexual quality is inordinately emphasised and the conscience on the whole inordinately sacrificed to it ... It is their personal, physical quality that he relishes - their attitudes, their picturesqueness, the sense that they give him of playing always, sooner or later, into the hands of man...¹⁷

In so many nineteenth century French *bildungsroman* centred in the consciousness of young men, crucial passages in their development - the rite of initiation into sexual manhood, the social climb, the middle aged disillusionment - are presided over by a whole cast of female types, the ingénue, the demi-mondaine (Coralie in *Illusions Perdues*), the aristocratic

¹⁷ *French Poets and Novelists*, London: Macmillan, 1878, 109.

patroness (la Sanseverina in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Mme de Bargeton in *Illusions Perdues*), or the decent wife whose husband is unworthy, self-tormented by her own infidelity (Mme de Renal in *Le Rouge et le Noir*). Sometimes, if they have social status and influence, or for as long as they are desired, the women wield considerable power. (No-one would want to underestimate the command of a Sanseverina or a Mathilde de la Mole over her own destiny; and his interest in them is one of the ways in which Stendhal is distinctively different to Balzac). But there is nothing like the same drive as in the English novel tradition towards resolution in marriage: and there is nothing like the same exploration of and search for values of mutuality and reciprocity in love. There is no convention of a novel-framework through which female characters can exact commitment, desert, equity (as, say, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, and all those Trollope heroines can). Here we feel the significance of Ruth Bernard Yeazell's point about the 'space of courtship' in the English novel tradition; that narrow but crucial space where the female subjects of novels still had the (limited of course) power of decision over their destiny.

Mme de Vionnet is the skilled exponent of that *métier de femme* James writes about in the essay on Balzac. And that last phrase in the passage - the playing of women always, sooner or later, into the hands of man - sounds like the Prince in *The Golden Bowl*, who 'once more, as a man conscious of having known many women ... could assist, as he would have called it, at the recurrent, the predestined phenomenon, the thing always as certain as sunrise or the coming round of Saints' days, the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away' (61). In his late fictions James is exploring indeed a world of relations between men and women quite other than that safer and more protected space of courtship where the Anglo-Saxon novel tradition had mostly sited itself; and a great deal of what he has learned about it he has learned from the French novel tradition. But the difference between James's and Balzac's representations of the types and presumptions and power relations of these un-innocent men and women is that James, like Strether, is no more finally persuaded of, say, Chad's version of the story (or the Prince's) than he is by Woollett's. Into a

world charged with a very masculine sexual energy and élan he intrudes qualities of gentleness and conscientiousness (Strether's 'enormous sense of responsibility about personal relationships') which read as coming rather from the Anglo-Saxon novel tradition: and his women perceive as well as being the objects of perception. When he writes that Balzac is not interested in women's *conscience*, the word need not only mean that his women are not *good*; it suggests that he is not interested in their *consciousness* of what they are at all.

In his critical writing James had both complained about and celebrated the 'delicacy' of the English-language novel tradition. The ambivalence is there from the earliest essays; from the very beginnings of James's reading the 'pessimism' and 'indelicacy' of the French novels seem to have exerted a pull, exacted an attention, even in the period when his own writing was comfortably inside the English-language tradition:

...if the element of compromise - compromise with fifty of the "facts of life" - be the common feature of the novel in English speech, so it is mainly indebted for this character to the sex comparatively without a feeling for logic ... Nothing is at any rate *a priori* more natural than to trace a connection between our general mildness, as it may conveniently be called, and the fact that we are likewise so generally feminine.

No doubt there is in our literature an immense amount of conventional blinking, and it may be questioned whether pessimistic representation in M. Maupassant's manner does not follow his particular original more closely than our perpetual quest of pleasantness (does not Mr. Rider Haggard make even his African carnage pleasant?) adheres to the lines of the world we ourselves know... It must never be forgotten that the optimism of that [English] literature is partly the optimism of women and spinsters; in other words the optimism of ignorance as well as delicacy.¹⁸

This ambivalent relationship in the critical essays with English fictional propriety reads very like the complex pained tenderness with which Strether feels the pressures, the claims, of Woollett:

'And yet Mrs Newsome ...has imagined, did, that is, imagine, and apparently still does, horrors about what I should have found. I was booked, by her vision - extraordinarily intense, after all - to find them;

¹⁸ 'Mathilde Serao' (1902), *Notes on Novelists*, 236; 'Guy de Maupassant' (1888), Shapira, 158.

and that I didn't, that I couldn't, that, as she evidently felt, I wouldn't - this evidently didn't at all, as they say, 'suit' her book. It was more than she could bear. That was her disappointment.'

'You mean you were to have found Chad horrible?' [asked Maria.]

'I was to have found the woman.'

'Horrible?'

'Found her as she imagined her.' And Strether paused as if for his own expression of it he could add no touch to that picture.

His companion had meanwhile thought. 'She imagined stupidly - so it comes to the same thing.'

'Stupidly? Oh!'

But she insisted. 'She imagined meanly.'

He had it, however, better. 'It couldn't but be ignorantly.'

'Well, intensity with ignorance - what do you want worse?'

This question might have held him, but he let it pass.(449)

His hesitations are not simply a residual loyalty to Mrs Newsome (although they are that too): he corrects Maria's too glib certainty, her writing off Woollett. (Maria is angry with Woollett of course partly in his defence - as well as for her own purposes.) He insists Mrs Newsome's failure to imagine Mme de Vionnet is not stupidity; if she's *ignorant* then that is something that can be forgiven her. How was she, given her culture, her circumstances, given her very imagination and its formation, to know? And he doesn't give his assent to Maria's contempt for 'intensity with ignorance': we suspect that, for better or for worse, it has come too close ever to be quite easily dismissed; it has impressed its permanent high water mark on him, left him forever with the taste of its strong flavour, its peculiar convincedness.

Even while the progress of his own 'seeing and facing' has made relations with Woollett's 'intensity with ignorance' impossible, that's only because Woollett won't go on understanding him. He can go on understanding Woollett and Mrs Newsome, giving them his tribute of appreciation which is almost deepened and made more resonant by its non-reciprocity:

It struck him that he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer clearer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed. He walked about with her, sat with her, drove with her and dined face-to-face with her - a rare treat 'in his life', as he could perhaps scarce have escaped phrasing it; and if he had never seen her so soundless he had never, on the other hand, felt her so highly, so almost austere, herself: pure and by the vulgar estimate 'cold', but deep devoted delicate sensitive noble.(302)

'In his life' that treat of full appreciation of the things Mrs. Newsome is was hard to come at, up too close. 'Out of his life', in that suspension of belonging Paris has produced in him, he can more generously take in her value, the complete picture of her type. The sonorous string of her qualities - 'deep devoted delicate sensitive noble' - is both meant and gently ironic; it is not that she *isn't* those things, but just that they might be, all together like that, something too much for him ever to be adequate to (or for any man, certainly too much for a Waymarsh, a Jim Pocock, a Chad).

Strether's strongest protests against Woollett are when he painfully feels just how one-sidedly the Woollett way of seeing condemns him, even as all his own efforts have been to to be so just, so transparent and explanatory towards Woollett in the letters to Mrs Newsome: 'I've been, from the first moment, preoccupied with the impression everything might be making on her - quite oppressed, haunted, tormented by it. I've been interested *only* in her seeing what I've seen' (446). But his very tone, the very transparency of his expression is what he is condemned for: there should be no space for a question or for balance. He is condemned in fact because he doesn't condemn:

"What is your conduct." [Sarah] broke out as if to explain - "what is your conduct but an outrage to women like us? I mean your acting as if there can be a doubt - as between us and such another - of his duty?" (417)

It is significant that it is Sarah Strether has to negotiate with and not her mother: Sarah is the blunt end of Woollett values and James is able to render her righteous indignation with comic gusto while still leaving over for the mother who waits at home an aura of deeper solemnity, a power to affect that is only partly compromised and ironised (and at these moments we somehow feel her more like Strether's 'mother' than by any stretch of the imagination any sort of 'lover'). But if Sarah is comic in the scenes of her confrontation with Strether then James is capable of a wry comedy at Strether's (and his own) expense too: he makes us hear how the mannered elaborations and hyperbole of Strether's (and his own) late style might sound in the decent ears of plain-speaking Woollett:

'You can sacrifice mothers and sisters to her without a blush, and can make them cross the ocean on purpose to feel the more, and take from you the straighter, how you do it?'[exclaimed Sarah].

'...Your coming out belonged closely to my having come before you, and my having come was a result of our general state of mind. Our general state of mind had proceeded, on its side, from our queer ignorance, our queer misconceptions and confusions - from which, since then, an inexorable tide of light seems to have floated us into our perhaps still queerer knowledge...'

It put to her also, doubtless, his tone, too many things; (418)

In the end, any criticism of the novel has to take the tone of its attitude towards Woollett from all that gentle tact Strether exercises on its behalf. However impossibly far he has left its narrow proprieties and certainties behind, and even if he can't talk to it any more, Woollett is where his imagination was formed, and he has learned things from there that incapacitate him for the Parisian male 'jungle'. Some of Woollett's delicacy was prudery, and its decency the false 'optimism of ignorance' as James wrote of the Anglo-Saxon novel tradition. But delicacy has traditionally operated as a protection and a shelter as well as a blinkered conservatism: a protection for certain kinds of seriousness, a shelter for women (for 'good' women, anyway). In the gynocentric world James imagines for Woollett, the women are full (even too full) of a conviction of their rights and their privileges, and feel under no obligation to charm; and nor do they fear the loss of their youth, their looks, their men. They are not afraid that they will be boring. In James's Paris there is more charm and less tedium all round and even the women whose 'attachments' are not 'virtuous' have their share in the sun, but as he basks in its life-giving sensuality Strether can't help his suffering sense that this happiness, this pleasure, is exposed and vulnerable, free from the protecting binds of socially imposed conscience and responsibility.

Strether's suffering is most acute whenever he has to consider Jeanne, the daughter; it is as if she stands, rather impersonally realised as she is, for some generalised sacrifice buried deep within Parisian sexual culture which he cannot bear

to entertain nor to lend himself to, not in word nor even in imagination. Some instinct of refusal almost as if at an incestuousness (he's sure she loves her mother's lover, her mother's lover is going to marry her off to someone else; and the text makes repeated play of misunderstandings over Chad's relation to Jeanne) hurries the very mention of Jeanne's initiations out of Strether's conversation, out of his mind, as soon as they chance there. She represents some secret, final shame in the whole liaison which he can't lend himself to - or even perhaps *has* lent himself to, innocently, involuntarily?

He had allowed for depths, but these were greater: and it was as if, oppressively - indeed absurdly - he was responsible for what they had now thrown up to the surface. It was - through something ancient and cold in it - what he would have called the real thing... He was prepared to suffer - before his own inner tribunal - for Chad; he was prepared to suffer even for Mme de Vionnet. But he wasn't prepared to suffer for the little girl.(364)

At the end of the novel, the liaison with Jeanne's mother has served its purpose for Chad in the time-honoured (Continental) tradition. Gallantly he acknowledges the inestimable gloss that only Mme de Vionnet's femininity could have bestowed upon him; he is improved and ready to move on. (We note Strether's and Maria's guess - how Strether's coming on in worldliness! - that there is another woman in London.) Mme de Vionnet can't be indignant at his desertion - she has no rights, nor sense of her wrong, only to help her out an old female wisdom, *vieille sagesse*, which unites her with a whole history of abandoned women in a gender commonality of powerlessness and emotional subjection. This transcends, James suggests, the divides of class and refinement, so that she cries in front of Strether 'as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man'(483). The *vieille sagesse* of these women makes Strether squeamish sometimes ('to deal with them was to walk on water'482), with its currency of innuendo, gossip, secrets, betrayals. It is a female 'know-how', the counterpart of Chad's male bravado that first evening in the café; only, it reflects such a different spectrum of experience, and of the experience of power in the relations between men and women. 'A man in trouble *must* be possessed somehow by a woman, if she doesn't come in one way she comes in another',280; 'It's when

one's old that it's worst...It's a doom - I know it; you can't see it more than I do myself. Things have to happen as they will'(484). Or from Maria, 'What woman was ever safe?'(492).

Mme de Vionnet's tears don't last too long; we suppose, Strether supposes, that they are after all, as well as being real and heartfelt, another part of the performance of this woman of many tones, 'like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold'(256). She is (like Cleopatra at the end of her play) both genuinely desperate and calculating what she can do to help herself. In her last scene she never deplores or protests; it is her 'doom', and in a spirit that has nothing to do with being 'right' or 'good', and much to do with an aesthetic, a 'good form', she will carry it off. When Strether finally opened the door on the grown-up reality of the pleasures of passion, he also discovered how intimately pleasures were tangled with pain; that to take a step off the edge of the safeties of Woollett, to really take the risk he enjoined upon little Bilham with his 'live all you can!' was to step into the free fall of suffering, that 'great and constant suffering' which Benjamin says in his essay on Proust is what saved Proust's pleasures in 'life and the course of the world' from being merely 'ordinary indolent contentment'.¹⁹

There is a passage in the correspondence of Flaubert and George Sand which sets out starkly the ground plan, as it were, of sex and gender relations for the sophisticated classes in nineteenth century France. Flaubert's remarks certainly suggest that it is not ridiculous to connect much of the energy and brilliance of the French nineteenth century novel to a male sexual élan, to a whole system of permissive and often exploitative male sexuality. And if we remember that the young James fresh from New England in 1876 was made welcome by Flaubert and spent time with him, then it might seem likely that the roots for the confrontation of cultural systems inside *The Ambassadors* lie far

¹⁹ Benjamin, 210.

back in the shocks and distastes and excitements of the young James responding to his first freedom of the male jungle.

Flaubert and George Sand are discussing Saint-Beuve, who is 'plunged in gloom at the thought that he can no longer haunt the Cyprian groves'. Flaubert writes:

How hard you are on old Beuve. After all, he is neither a Jesuit nor a green girl... Men will always be of the opinion that the one serious thing in life is sexual enjoyment. Woman, for all the members of my sex, is a groined archway opening on the infinite. That may not be a very elevated attitude, but it is fundamental to the male...

George Sand replies;

I am *not* a Catholic, but I do draw the line at monstrosities! I maintain that the old and ugly who buy young bodies for cash are not indulging in 'love', and that what they do has nothing in common with the Cyprian Venus, with groined arches or infinities or male or female! It is something wholly against nature, since it is not desire that pushes the young girl into the arms of the ugly dotard, and an act in which there is neither liberty nor reciprocity is an offence against the sanctity of nature...²⁰

That glimpse of a fundamental argument within French culture may also help an understanding of why James persisted in his sympathetic criticisms of George Sand long after she had died and gone out of fashion. Does her particularity within the French novel tradition have something to do with an effort, not to moralise pleasure, or return it inside the bourgeois fold, but to write a feminised version of it, so that male pleasure is no longer contingent upon female suffering? Is it possible to read her as defending, protecting, the 'seriousness' of passion, against a cynicism which depended upon the impossibility of mutuality, reciprocity? (It must have seemed very hard to write the seriousness of passion after *Madame Bovary*.) If so, then it is hardly surprising that the author of *The Ambassadors* should have felt an especial tenderness towards even the inconsistencies of this particular predecessor, a loyalty even to what seemed to him dated and dusty in her enterprise.

²⁰ André Maurois, *The Life of George Sand*, trans. Gerard Hopkins. London: Cape, 1953, 429.

7. Poor girls with their rent to pay: class in *In the Cage* and *The Wings of the Dove*

Those moments in Benjamin's essay on Proust where we can feel the pressure on him to justify Proust's writing in the language of class struggle and historical determinism seem redolent of their period now, reminders of the intellectual polarisations of a vanished era:

This disillusioned, merciless deglamorizer of the ego, of love, of morals - for this is how Proust liked to see himself - turns his whole limitless art into a veil for this one most vital mystery of his class: the economic aspect. He did not mean to do it a service. Here speaks Marcel Proust, the hardness of his work, the intransigence of a man who is ahead of his class. What he accomplishes he accomplishes as its master. And much of the greatness of this work will remain inaccessible or undiscovered until this class has revealed its most pronounced features in the final struggle.¹

The assimilation, though, of that 'hard' vocabulary of historical determinism to the description of a 'soft', mysterious, aesthetic - 'limitless art', art as 'veil' - is Benjamin's unique achievement within that polarisation: nothing could be less utilitarian than his appreciation of Proust, no criticism could be more empathetic with the convolutions of Proust's class consciousness, his minute snobberies, his surplus of material detail, his valetudinarianism. If Benjamin's is a 'revolutionary' reading of Proust, then whatever radical critique of the French nineteenth century he attributes to the oeuvre is at a level more entangled with its material than mere surface disapproval and detachment:

We do not always proclaim loudly the most important things we have to say. Nor do we always privately share it with those closest to us, our

¹ Benjamin, 205.

intimate friends, those who have been most devotedly ready to receive our confession. If it is true that not only people but also ages have such a chaste - that is, such a devious and frivolous - way of communicating what is most their own to a passing acquaintance, then the nineteenth century did not reveal itself to Zola or Anatole France, but to the young Proust, the insignificant snob, the playboy and socialite who snatched in passing the most astounding confidences from a declining age as from another, bone-weary Swann.²

What Benjamin suggests is that fundamental to the deepest critique literature can make of a society is a contamination, virtually, of that literature by its society: in order to penetrate society's deepest secrets, the writer needs to be an initiate, a skilled practitioner of all its appearances and disguises. Immunity and objectivity, for all their superficial appearance of being the right qualifications for authority, are not enough. It is Conrad's contamination with the mentality of the colonial exploiter that makes his rendering in *Heart of Darkness* of the damaged white psyche in search of its lost meaning so harrowingly plausible. (While Chinua Achebe changed our reading of the novel for ever when he pointed out how its rendering of *black* Africa is flawed and jejune.) It is Jane Austen's contamination with the values of a conservative gentry class that makes her penetration of its economics and its finely nuanced social structure so coolly dissecting.

The analogy Benjamin makes between the transmission of history into literature and the making of important personal confidences is a complex one. 'We do not always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say': he suggests that there exists, in individuals, in culture, a kind of protectiveness, a cherishing of 'important things' (a 'chastity', he calls it), and that this protectiveness prefers the oblique and the half light, suspects that any blaze of apparent recognition and illumination may in fact lose the important things half their definition, half their truth. Betrayal and exposure are less likely if important things are confided improbably, offhandedly (deviously, frivolously, he calls it). For culture, 'important things' - important truths - may be better protected in a narrative that sidesteps the obvious critique than one that assaults it head on (Proust as opposed to Zola, for Benjamin.)

² Benjamin, 201.

For all that the language of Benjamin on Proust is of its period - we can recover, reading him, the force of that 'class struggle', but we can't with any freshness remake it in our contemporary writing - it none the less never feels as if that language is addressed to the wrong issue. On the contrary, it is as urgent as ever for our readings of nineteenth and early twentieth century texts that we find out ways of unlocking in them their inwardness to their society and their privileged access to its inner functioning, its underpinning secrets, that only that inwardness (that contamination) can give. In the end, any reading of James has to answer in some form the question of that 'economic aspect' which Benjamin has Proust at once placing at the very core of his representation of his society and 'veiling in mystery'.

James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1885) offered one kind of answer to the 'economic' question. It reads very much as a novel exacted by conscience, produced under the pressure of the consciousness of suffering. James had seen the 'ragged slum children in London parks', gin mills, prostitutes, an old woman 'lying prone in a puddle of whiskey': he had written about them in *Portraits of Places*.³ He had read Dickens and Balzac and Zola. To Grace Norton in 1879 he wrote in a letter about 'that great total of labour and poverty on whose enormous base all the luxury and leisure of English country houses are built up'.⁴ In *The Princess Casamassima* the pressure of that consciousness of suffering, that 'conscience', is both the source and the explicit subject of the novel. Hyacinth is destroyed because he can't either silence his conscientious awareness or believe in a revolutionary solution to the inequity he sees. The argument of the novel, in the end, is apologetic for that impasse, presents it virtually as a tragic dialectic; Hyacinth cannot imagine the things that make life worth living without the social inequities

³ Leon Edel, Introduction. *The Princess Casamassima*. London: The Bodley Head, 1972, 6. Page references to this edition indicated by BH.

⁴ *Letters* Vol.2, 209.

which make their production possible (the revolutionist 'would cut up the ceilings of the Veronese in strips, so that everyone might have a little piece', BH 407).

The argument can't silence but *appeases* conscience; Hyacinth's death is a sacrifice to the unanswerable. And the argument is made too transparently - too glibly - in the novel to give it the mass and weight it requires to really drag the bottom of this social structure depending on 'the immense disparity, the difference and contrast, from class to class, of every instant and every motion'.⁵ Not only does Hyacinth literally move too easily between these immense disparities, camouflaged rather improbably in smart circles by his 'air of aristocracy'; more importantly, the language of the novel itself doesn't create for us the reality of disjunction. It *describes* irreconcilables and abysses of difference between classes but does not enact them. It seems rather by associating them in the seamlessness of its realist narrative to conjoin them in a mild irony:

...in the enjoyment of her [the Princess's] unwonted situation (she had never before, on a summer's evening - to the best of Hyacinth's belief at least - lost herself in the unfashionable districts on the arm of a seedy artisan) the distinguished personage exhibited certain coincidences with the shop girl. She stopped as Millicent had done to look into the windows of vulgar establishments and amused herself with picking out the abominable objects she should like to possess; selecting them from a new point of view, that of a reduced fortune and the domestic arrangements of the 'lower middle class', and deriving extreme diversion from the idea that she now belonged to that aggrieved body. (BH 430)

The Princess Casamassima is (Benjamin's phrase) 'devotedly ready to receive a confession' from its age. But the confession is too murky and ingrown a secret to yield itself up to the lucidity, the keen conscientiousness, of this prose of James's middle period. That confession can only be bestowed at the end of a process analagous to (and in fact inseparable from) the one we have traced through the preceding chapters, where the progressive opacity and ingrowing irony of his prose have won James an independence from the proprieties and pieties of the English language novel tradition. Those social structures which in the early and middle periods of his writing may be sometimes criticised head-on but none the less feel implicit in and

⁵ 'In the Cage' (1898), *Complete Tales*, Vol.10, 153.

essentially co-extensive with his fictional worlds, seem to come alive with a new menace in the late Jamesian imagination. They loom immense, mobile, devouring.

Of the late novels, *The Wings of the Dove* is the one most manifestly interested in social class. It is characteristic of *The Wings of the Dove* that at significant moments in its narrative individual consciousness tends to spill over the usual constraints of class and perceive a world outside itself. Where Milly pauses in Regents Park on her way home from the interview with her doctor, she shares the park with 'smutty sheep' and 'idle lads at games of ball'. In Venice on the day he sees Lord Mark Merton brushes shoulders with 'brown men with hats askew'. Kate watching from the balcony of Milly's hotel room sees 'a small public house, in front of which a fagged cab-horse was thrown into relief'. Kate and Merton fall in love, more or less, on the Underground, exchanging smiles and looks until they finally get seats, having to wait for this passenger and that to leave the train. When Merton walks Kate home they are 'for all the world, she said to herself, like the housemaid giggling to the baker'(40). Those moments of touch across class are small things in themselves; but they are significantly telling in this novel where Chirk Street (with its crumpled table-cloth, scraped dishes, and lingering odour of boiled food), or Leonard Croy's lodging house (with its slippery and sticky upholstery) are always just around the corner.

The Wings of the Dove contrasts, in this respect, with *The Golden Bowl*, where the hermetic seal of class and wealth is part of the subject of the novel. Those ranks of servants who attend the Prince and Princess from their carriage after their dinner engagements are never looked at (they are livery glimpsed out of the corner of an eye), let alone named. One might well read the houses in Portland Place and Eaton Square as filled with the servants' rustle, and intimacy in the novel as at every point shaped and constrained by the servants' omnipresence; yet the only subjects from outside a privileged élite ever pulled into actual focus or given voice in the novel are the two Jewish

antique dealers in Brighton and Bloomsbury. Neither of these encounters suggests anyway any breaking of the seal: on the contrary, the suggestions are all of the dealers' expertise and insight ministering, almost sacerdotally, to the initiations of wealth and privilege. Their Jewishness makes their class ambivalent in the novel in any case; makes that latitude in which they are at once shopkeepers and the guardians of sophisticated mysteries.

Chirk Street and the lodging house in *Wings of the Dove* may be what Kate dreads, and what makes her not so much want Milly's money as desperately need it: but they are certainly not part of an undifferentiated class-mass that is everything outside the closed doors of Lancaster Gate. The social structure represented in the novel consists of innumerable minute and precise differentiations. (And of course the doors of Lancaster Gate are by no means the last doors in the novel's long vista of social hierarchy; Mrs Lowder - for example - can't get her invitation for Matcham until Lord Mark chooses to manage it for her.) Mrs Condrip has a governess for her children, although only an Irish one (presumably cheaper), who can't keep much control. Mrs. Condrip doesn't wash up; but she sits at an uncleared table.

Her status, in fact, of gentility pressed and fraught and threatened at every turn, haunted by the possibility of sliding into the abyss of exclusion which is all gentility can imagine below a certain social marker, is one James finds particularly rich for his representation of a minutely stratified, striving, competitive, mobile social structure. The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is fraught with a similar status anxiety (we remember how she ignores and mistrusts and never names any servants below the housekeeper). The telegraph operator in *In the Cage* guards her unlikeness from her co-workers fiercely and sufferingly inside the cage of family memories of 'better times'. In 'Brooksmith' the intelligent butler can't reconcile his servant status with the fatal taste he has had of the privilege of 'good conversation'; the story makes vivid the uncomfortable inadequacy of 'good conversation' in the face of

the brute facts of the man's social exclusion. In 'The Bench of Desolation' Herbert Dodd comes to recognise the disastrous mistake he has made in preferring the signs of Nan's refinement and ladylikeness and taste (her 'natural elegance stamped on her as by a die, ...'her dim and disinherited individual refinement of grace', her inability to 'abide vulgarity') to the signs of Kate's passionate and purposeful pragmatism. It was Nan's very ladylikeness that made her unfit for the reality of sharing his daily struggle with material survival:

...a scramble up an arduous steep where steps were planted and missed, and bared knees were excoriated, and clutches at wayside tufts succeeded and failed, on a system into which poor Nan could have intelligently entered only if she had been somehow less ladylike.⁶

It is in *The Bench of Desolation* that James seems to shape most explicitly a suggestion which hovers in all these later stories, that actually the touch of that great world lying outside the boundary markers of the refined and the superior - outside the closed doors of 'good society' - is a healing touch. Brushing shoulders with Venetians in brown jackets, sharing a space of repose with those 'scattered, melancholy comrades - some of them so melancholy as to be down on their stomachs in the grass' (166) as Milly does in Regent's Park (and she deliberately sits on the common bench, eschewing the chair she would have to pay for and that would mark her apart from those 'comrades' in superiority and privilege); these feel like moments of release from a class consciousness which excludes both ways. James has Strether imagine Mme de Vionnet weeping for Chad 'like any shopgirl weeping for her lover' (483) (just as Kate and Merton are like the housemaid and the baker); the sharp particular angst of leisure class *amours* opens up onto a commonality of experience which soothes and ironises at once. After all, nothing's so special under the sun. 'Their box, their great common anxiety, what was it, in this grim breathing space, but the practical question of life?' (163).

In *The Bench of Desolation* the very qualities of Kate Cookham which had seemed to make her inferior to Herbert -her indifference to picturesque sunsets, her interest in money -

⁶*Complete Tales*, Vol.12, 381.

deliver up to him finally relief, companionship, comprehension. Not only Nan's 'refinement', but also Herbert's 'superiority' which made him ruin himself to try and pay Kate (his 'pride and his honour' his 'self-respect') look to his retrospect like shams. It is the solidity of the tea at the Royal, and Kate's face worn into beauty through labour and calculation which are the real values in the story; fruits of a petit bourgeois thrift and materialism which gentility had despised. Gentility, stretched thin at the margins of respectability, turned out to be an inadequate resource; Nan's refinement is reduced to mere protest and denial in the face of sordid daily grind.

In *In the Cage* too, James's representation of class values is richly ambivalent. The telegraphist herself, fatally infected with those intimations of 'superiority' which make her rage and suffer in her straitened circumstances, is no mere dupe of them. Her rage is not only at her 'inferiors': her rage is at a whole system based on inequitable accidents of distribution:

What twisted the knife in her vitals was the way the profligate rich scattered about them, in extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins, an amount of money that would have held the stricken household of her frightened childhood, her poor pinched mother and tormented father and lost brother and starved sister, together for a lifetime. (153)

She sees and judges the inequity at the foundations of the system, but that can't liberate her from recreating in her imagination and longings the very discriminations of taste and style through which the system perpetuates itself: the young telegraphist is ground inside this contradiction. It is something like the same contradiction as Hyacinth's in *The Princess Casamassima*, when he fears that a redress of the social inequity from which he has suffered will make impossible the art whose exclusivity he has loved (Veronese will have to be cut into strips). But in the girl's imagination the contradiction is realised so much more opaquely and densely. It is the same passion of desire for the touch of superior possibilities which is also a passion of resentment at her exclusion, and it wrings

her and wraps her up in the dark subjectivity of her imaginings; in contrast to Hyacinth who is capable of such lucid companionships, such free movements between the terms of his contradiction.

The metaphor around which the whole story is constructed, the girl's situation as the copyist and transmitter (her office does not receive telegrams) of messages and meanings she can't actually participate in or alter, is fundamental to James's insight into how a class culture based on separation and exclusion perpetuates itself in imagination. The telegraphist is the sensitised receptor at the very point at which closed class languages cross; she picks up the language of the extravagant telegram-senders whose 'much loves' and 'awful regrets' 'cost the price of a new pair of boots'(153); she also picks up the language of a Mr Mudge, whose reading of aristocratic extravagance in terms of petit bourgeois profit is as seamlessly untroubled, complete unto itself, as is the aristocratic unconsciousness of him. They are there for his profit just as he is there for their pickles and hams. But painfully, and unlike either Mr Mudge or his customers, the telegraphist can see both ways.

What she sees is not Mr Mudge's best of all possible smoothly synthesised social systems;

He couldn't have formulated his theory of the matter, but the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade, and everything was knit together in a richness of pattern that it was good to follow with one's fingertips. (171)

She sees that the apparent equivalence of convenience between the grocer and the customer isn't a real equivalence at all. 'Real justice was not of this world, yet, strangely, happiness was...' (174). The difference in opportunities for happiness between those employed long hours in tedious work and those privileged leisured beings for whose pleasures the employed ones are merely instrumental, are vividly actual, factual, for this girl 'in whom the sense of the race for life was always acute'(160). When Lady Bradeen is contemptuous of the little corner where the customers have to write out their telegrams, the girl is in the same moment of recognition able both to be in

sympathy with the discrimination and all the personal taste and refinement of sensibility it represents; and to see as Lady Bradeen can't see the irony of her unquestioning assumption of her right - her right to pleasantness, to convenience, to *what she wants*. The girl knows - no-one could know better - that one might, after all, have all that discrimination and all that sensibility (and all that want) and yet discover there is no right at all. One might in fact, however one's taste and sensibility revolted, even have to spend a lifetime in a smaller and nastier space than the one Lady Bradeen is disgusted at having to use for a few minutes.

This real pain of social exclusion is passionate in the story; it drives that apprehension of injustice into consciousness much more cruelly than even conscience, even social responsibility, could drive it. (That is why the telegraphist's suffering, is so much more intensely felt, intensely created, than Hyacinth's; his feels so much more like an *idea*.) It is because she feels in her own want the reality of the advantage of privilege that the girl understands its arbitrary inequitable basis. In the summer season the telegrams she has to send are full of names - Eastbourne, Folkestone, Cromer, Scarborough, Whitby - which torment her 'with something of the sound of the splash of water that haunts the traveller in the desert':

She had not been out of London in a dozen years, and the only thing to give a taste to the present dead weeks was the spice of a chronic resentment. The sparse customers, the people she did see, were the people who were "just off" - off on the decks of fluttered yachts, off to the uttermost point of rocky headlands where the very breeze was playing for the want of which she said to herself that she sickened.' (183)

The power of the idea of an aristocratic 'superiority' builds upon the girl's unfulfilment; her dreams feed off her hunger and her hunger feeds off her dreams in a spiralling drama of intense interior awareness. It is interesting that in this story James has under his pen a material so close to the material of *Madame Bovary*; and that he treats it so significantly differently. The

narrative perception, to begin with, is sited so differently in James's story. Flaubert's perception of Emma's want and of Emma's dreams is remote; the whole length of intelligence and self-consciousness yawns between the author and the character. Emma's story would sound quite differently, presumably, if she told it herself; presumably it would sound like one of those novels she reads.

In *In the Cage* the narrative is intricately, inextricably meshed with the self-awareness of the girl; not because she is exceptional (she is not Flaubert) but because James's instinct is that whatever story there is in these dreams and this unfulfilment it is in the girl's own consciousness of it as story and dilemma. He doesn't try in any of his stories of petit bourgeois struggle for an imitation of class 'colour' or accent (there is nothing unfortunate like Katherine Mansfield's 'The Lady's Maid', say, or Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, or the pub voices in *The Waste Land*). But he lends his own complex opaque expression to the girl's complexity, rendering a state of fantasising need that is nothing like Emma Bovary's delusion, because it is so charged with sharp recognition of its own precariousness, and its fatality:

But she forbore as yet to speak; she had not spoken even to Mrs Jordan; and the hush that on her lips surrounded the Captain's name maintained itself as a kind of symbol of the success that, up to this time, had attended something or other - she couldn't have said what - that she humoured herself with calling, without words, her relation with him. (172)

The 'relation', in her own mind, defines itself through a series of withholdings and negations. It exists, almost, because it doesn't exist; she protects the possibility of dreaming it by never naming it, not to anyone, not even, in words, to herself. Once named, the 'relation' would have to appear for the absurdity it is. The withholding his name in itself eroticises it; she surrounds his name with her lips but doesn't let it out. But the tenderness with which she protects the 'relation' also more or less acknowledges its extreme vulnerability; she can allow herself to surround it with consciousness just because she understands that she is 'humouring herself', cheating, practising a sleight of imagination, turning a nothing by surrounding it with desire into a something.

She would have admitted indeed that it consisted of little more than the fact that his absences, however frequent and however long, always ended with his turning up again. It was nobody's business in the world but her own if that fact continued to be enough for her. It was of course not enough just in itself; what it had taken on to make it so was the extraordinary possession of the elements of his life that memory and attention had at last given her. There came a day when this possession, on the girl's part, actually seemed to enjoy, between them, while their eyes met, a tacit recognition that was half a joke and half a deep solemnity. He bade her good morning always now; he quite often raised his hat to her. He passed a remark when there was time or room, and once she went so far as to say to him that she had not seen him for 'ages'. 'Ages' was the word she consciously and carefully, though a trifle tremulously, used; 'ages' was exactly what she meant. To this he replied in terms doubtless less anxiously selected, but perhaps on that account not the less remarkable, 'Oh yes, hasn't it been awfully wet?' That was a specimen of their give and take; it fed her fancy that no form of intercourse so transcendent and distilled had ever been established on earth. Everything, so far as they chose to consider it so, might mean almost anything. The want of margin in the cage, when he peeped through the bars, wholly ceased to be appreciable. It was a drawback only in superficial commerce. With Captain Everard she had simply the margin of the universe.(172)

This is a passage of absurd disproportions; between the minuteness of their real relations and the hugeness of the imaginative power they have for the girl; between the banality of their exchanges and the meaning she compresses into and reads out of them. There are two different experiential scales on which their moments of contact can be read; one in which the power of imagination and desire is so vast it delivers her momentarily, out of such insignificances, into the universe; another in which her very gesture of repletion ('the want of margin in her cage, when he peeped through the bars, wholly ceased to be appreciable') actually underscores for us the extreme of her constraint, reminds us of those bars and of that cage.

The real complexity in the passage is the problem of just how much of the consciousness of that disproportion, that experiential instability, is the telegraphist's own. Is she deluding herself that her fantasy of desire is reciprocal, in the real world of possibilities? Or is it in her consciousness that the perpetual play of irony indulges and exaggerates what it also undercuts and exposes? It seems likely that the clue is in the passage; the game is 'half a joke and half a deep solemnity'. Her imagination dances on a razor's edge between delusion and mockery. The Captain's comment on the weather both

is (because it takes her breath away) and, hilariously, is not, 'remarkable', and she can sustain both those truths in the air at once. She knows the 'relation' is a nonsense in the very same moments that she is creating it as a reality. She never loses hold of the fact that the Captain 'was in love with a woman to whom ... a lady-telegraphist, and especially one who passed a life among hams and cheeses, was as the sand on the floor'(174). But what she builds upon these insurmountables is a fragile fantastic structure of nuance upon nuance, intimation upon intimation, inference upon inference; it takes up no space in the real world, it exists only fluidly in the interstices between the solidities of real life and between the immense disparities 'from class to class, of every instant and every motion'(153).

Her dream creates and fills a fantastic classless uncomplicated nowhere, a nowhere where their relations can be at once eroticised and innocent. It is a nowhere whose impossibility makes it resemble those novels the girl has filled her head with, and she knows it; the very language in which she imagines it touches so closely and playfully on pastiche:

He was in love with a woman to whom ... a lady-telegraphist ... was as the sand on the floor; and what her dreams desired was the possibility of its somehow coming to him that her own interest in him could take a pure and noble account of such an infatuation and even of such an impropriety(174).

Not only the 'pure and noble' but the very syntax makes fun there; the girl as good as acknowledges the far-fetchedness of her fantasising in that cumulative twisting convolution which is characteristic in the story. It bears a family resemblance, naturally, to any late Jamesian elaboration; but there's a disingenuous piling up of improbability on improbability with an appearance of artlessness which seems particularly telling here. (It's so unlike, for instance, the prose of *The Turn of the Screw*, with its different disingenuousness.)

They would never perhaps have grown half so intimate if he had not, by the blessing of heaven, formed some of his letters with a queerness - ! It was positive that the queerness could scarce have been greater if he had practised it for the very purpose of bringing their heads together over it as far as was possible to heads on different sides of a cage. It had taken her in reality but once or twice to master these tricks, but, at the cost of striking him perhaps as stupid, she could still challenge them when

circumstances favoured. The great circumstance that favoured was that she sometimes actually believed he knew she only feigned perplexity. If he knew it, therefore, he tolerated it; if he tolerated it he came back; and if he came back he liked her. This was her seventh heaven...(175)

'She sometimes actually believed he knew she only feigned perplexity': the attenuated reasoning stretches syntax just as the hope strains probability. 'The queerness could scarce have been greater if he had practised it for the very purpose of bringing their heads together over it': the sweet possibility is kept at a tentative distance by that implicit negative ('but of course he *hadn't* practised it, for any purpose at all...') whose irony hovers, unprecipitated. This is a reasoning tense with awareness of its own factitiousness.

The telegraphist is no louche fantasist addicted to her wish-fulfilments. She dreams with rigour, sustaining impossible possibilities through the ingenious devices of her double thinking; and a sort of critical scrupulousness makes all her dreams stop short of actual fulfilments. Or rather, whenever they approach fulfilments, a fierce mocking realism intervenes, insisting upon raising the dark spectres of the only real relations possible, within this class system, between a man like Captain Everard and a girl like her. When she imagines confronting him with all she 'knows' about him, from somewhere a sordid picture distorted with ugly motives and sinister exchanges imposes itself even on her fantasy:

She quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do. It would be a scene better than many in her ha'penny novels, this going to him in the dusk of evening at Park Chambers and letting him at last have it. 'I know too much about a certain person now not to put it to you - excuse my being so lurid - that it's quite worth your while to buy me off. Come, therefore; buy me!' There was a point indeed at which such flights had to drop again - the point of unreadiness to name, when it came to that, the purchasing medium. It wouldn't, certainly, be anything so gross as money, and the matter accordingly remained rather vague, all the more that *she* was not a bad girl.(176)

Of course this is also the implicit acknowledgement of that part of her which is a bad girl. There is a frank acknowledgement of hungers, of potential other selves, in the 'thrill', in the

dusk, in the fierce commanding unaccustomed language, in the daring of the hint fantasy opaquely circles: if the purchasing medium is not to be money, what is it to be then? But a great deal of the relish - and the conscious comedy - is in the sheer incongruous impossibility of the scene. She *knows herself*, how careful she is, and decent; even if she also knows she has it in her to at least *imagine* behaving differently, imagine talking the language, in a context crackling with sexual electricity, not of 'love', but of buying and selling.

The danger is a thrill, it's a glimpsed temptation. She dreads the dénouement of her fantasies, but also desires it; and it is essential to James's story that to a certain extent she gets it, her chance and her opportunity and her recognition, in the real world. There is another possible story, a poignantly ironic one, in which what we finally learn is how completely oblivious Captain Everard is to all the girl's dreams: he probably doesn't even recognise her, out of her cage. In that story the girl is a deluded fool. But instead, in James's story, the man and the girl really do talk, she really moves him, he's really drawn; the story asserts the power of imagination and dream to produce real, surprising, improbable effects in the real world. In *Mme Bovary* Emma's fantasies certainly produce real effects. But there remains a separation - a separation of delusion - between those effects and what Emma thinks they are; whereas in *In the Cage* the telegraphist sustains even into the heady interview in the park with the Captain her own scrupulous realism, sustains her poise on that razor's edge between believing too much or believing nothing at all.

In the dusky park the girl has momentarily made the impossible thing happen, made real the impossible classless space in which she can speak to the Captain as an equal, and as if there really was a 'relation'. For a moment there *is* a relation. The man, here, is not simply the repository of her fantasies; we make out (and she does) through all the penumbra of her idea of him, and of his beauty and of the charming casual good manners of his class, a real attention to her; he's astonished at this little working girl suddenly so sharply in focus, he's rather bewildered as to whether she is offering herself to him or not. His gentlemanly tact is at full stretch

as he takes his lead from her; may he hold her hand? ask her to supper?

What, in it all, was visibly clear for him, none the less, was that he was tremendously glad he had met her. She held him, and he was astonished at the force of it; he was intent, immensely considerate. His elbow was on the back of the seat, and his head, with the pot-hat pushed quite back, in a boyish way, so that she really saw almost for the first time his forehead and hair, rested on the hand into which he had crumpled his gloves. 'Yes,' he assented, 'it's not a bit horrid or vulgar.' (193)

And she persists in her impossible juggling: holding off the possibility of a 'relation' with him with the one hand, because it can only be one kind of relation: she sees and doesn't see the couples entwined in the dusk on the benches all around them; inviting it with the other, taking in a rush all the privileges of womanliness she knows about from the novels and from the telegrams; the tears, the touches, the dignities, the evasions.

She is almost too much for him: he means it when he says she's 'cleverer'. She's cleverer, he's thinking, than Lady Bradeen, but he's thinking that she's cleverer than him too; and of course that irony underpins all the complex power structures in the scene. She's cleverer, brighter, stronger than him, the scene is all hers, controlled by her initiative, her imagination, her intelligence; he is the comparative helpless spectator, or rather the *object*, of it all. And yet, because he's a man and even more because he's a *gentleman*, she's also powerless beside him, powerless to project anything forward out of this moment save one of those two polarities available to her, to them, in the real daylight world outside the impossible space. She can have him, and lose herself, and become at the same instant his lover and abjectly his social inferior - it's a touch away, and very tempting, and one afternoon weeks later she comes boldly close to abandoning everything for the sake of that touch. Or she can lose him, and preserve herself, in the 'time-honoured' gesture of renunciation which will close forever the impossible space her imagination has opened. The dilemma does not depend on any nineteenth century moralising of the sexual act. It has to do with social control and the impossibility of separating, ever, sexual relations out from the nexus of political and class relations within which they occur.

The essential of the scene is that she has him at a loss; for as long as she holds open the impossible space for them and he has the good taste not to spoil it, we can glimpse the possibility that the social structure which holds them apart is as constraining and as limiting for him as for her. We glimpse, as it were, the pain of the whole experience of social class. The Captain is momentarily bereft of his privileged status - that privilege which has so completely wrapped him up again by the time he comes to Cocker's desperate to recover the compromising telegram. (He hardly sees the girl, then, as she saves him.) But in the park we do - just - seem to hear from the Captain those strains of class identity, that pressure of class performance, which would find their solace in the cross-class (out of class) 'relation' that momentarily seems a possibility. Lady Bradeen is exacting, their affair is fraught, he needs 'help', he's in 'danger'. There are things he 'can't' do. There are hungers *on the other side of privilege* for release, escape; the very world of those telegraphed indulgences the girl has so envied suddenly looms as the tangle it also has to be. The girl, so utterly out of that world, with her passionate desire to serve his privilege ('We must manage it for you somehow', 195) and soothe his complications ('I believe you like it - my always being there and our taking things up so familiarly and successfully', 195) can't but seem an attractive possibility.

Such cross-class sexual relationships are everywhere, of course, in nineteenth century European literature (perhaps less obviously apparent in the more 'proper' English tradition); like the dark undergrowth of a socio-sexual reality out of which the tall trees of the great leisure-class love stories flourish. (It feels as though Thomas Mann is writing the very archetype itself in *Buddenbrooks*, in his poignant treatment of the affair between Thomas Buddenbrook and the flower-girl in Fisher's Lane. Nadine Gordimer updates the tradition, while gesturing to its European origins, in transposing it to twentieth century South Africa and making it an issue of race as well, in her story 'Town and Country Lovers'.⁷)

⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, Penguin 1982.

If *In the Cage* is distinctively different from *Mme Bovary* in its sympathetic, interior treatment of female fantasy, and in its granting to the telegraphist herself her own grasp on her own delusion, it is also worth noting another quality in the story which marks it out decisively as belonging to the English rather than the French literary tradition. The treatment of Mr Mudge the grocer is surely tender and respectful in a way that would have been incompatible with that French anti-bourgeois presumption which James often takes issue with, here in an essay on Balzac:

...it is impossible to believe that a chronicler with a scent a little less rabidly suspicious of Philistinism would not have shown us this field in a somewhat rosier light. Like all French artists and men of letters, Balzac hated the bourgeoisie with an immitigable hatred...⁸

Mr Mudge is not simply the ludicrous foil to the Captain's desirability; in the end the girl's option is not simply, either, a discrimination in favour of Mr Mudge's safety over the Captain's glamour, although it is that too. The 'immense disparity, the difference and contrast, from class to class, of every instant and every motion' (153), to be rendered with justice, will exact a relativity of treatment which will make Mr Mudge and the Captain *both* men, both representative of certain utterly different possibilities, both authoritatively, as it were, *themselves*. The telegraphist herself is a practised relativist; she actually does not have a position, she simply moves somewhere on the axis between those aristocratic values she loves and condemns (exuberant, profane, prodigal, improper, greedy,) and those petit bourgeois ones which are her refuge from poverty and inconsequence (non-conformist, materialist, decent, thrifty, continent).

No amount of sympathetic reading can find in Mr Mudge the power to move the girl's imagination that the Captain has. This is not personal, it belongs to the accident of the Captain's beauty and (much more) to all that heady perfume of leisure and pleasure and style and manner that drifts after the fact of his

⁸ *French Poets and Novelists*, 102.

arbitrary privilege. And she will never have her chance to 'let down her hair' for any man's appreciation; we glimpse a longed-for fulfilment in that touching dreamy moment of self-display when she gestures Lady Bradeen's beauty to Mrs. Jordan (233). Such a gesture, such a self-display, couldn't ever possibly be for Mr Mudge. But there are places within the story where James makes us feel the telling weight of other possibilities, other ways of seeing than the Captain's, and other ways of seeing the Captain than the girl's. Mr Mudge casually calls Captain Everard a 'cad', and we're sure he might well be, given half a chance, a cad. Mr Mudge is numbingly unimaginative and predictable, but capable of suddenly surprising with an act of dignity, as when he saves his marriage proposal until the end of the holiday. His 'serenity of possession' is and is not, at once, what the girl wants. She needs and needs at his unshakeable confidence in her. The Captain is beautiful, but it is Mr Mudge who is willing to have her mother to live with them; and his generosity in that associates in her mind with the episode where he showed her another kind of manliness, putting out the drunken sailor from the shop.

In the final sentences of the story, we are made to wonder with the watching policeman for a moment whether the disappointed telegraphist is going to throw herself into the river: a gesture out of the vocabulary of ha'penny novels (and out of the same repertoire as 'bad girls' making their way alone to gentlemen's rooms). Then the story reproaches us for our suspicion. She was not thinking about any such thing. There would have been something tawdry - and, perhaps more important, something *second-hand* - about such a gesture. It would belong (the last words of the story place it there) rather with the choices of Mrs Jordan and Mr Drake, who, as servants, inhabit apologetically the hand-me-down refinements and gentilities of their masters and mistresses, than with the choices of the future wife of Mr Mudge, she who possesses with a sturdiness that truth of Milly Theale's, that she 'would live if she could' (163).

It might be interesting to think about the telegraphist's relationship with the world of 'superior' leisure class *moeurs* in terms of a Girardian mimetic rivalry. The telegraphist learns to desire Captain Everard because the 'model' she both emulates and envies (Lady Bradeen) desires him, or perhaps - just as Girardian - because the heroines she reads about in her romances would desire him. She desires *him* because she wants to *be* them. In Girard's words:

'The hero in the grip of some second-hand desire seeks to conquer the being, the essence, of his model by as faithful an imitation as possible. If the hero lived in the same world as the model instead of being distanced from him by myth or by history ... he would necessarily come to desire the same object. The nearer the mediator, the more does the veneration that he inspires give way to hate and rivalry'.⁹

What this suggestion opens up are two interesting ways of exploring the Girardian model of desire further. First, it is certainly worth thinking about class systems as perpetuating themselves within culture through Girardian mechanisms of imitative desire; and James's oeuvre offers all sorts of insights into the workings of such a social dynamic. Secondly, it is also worth thinking about how such a model might interact specifically with systems of imagining gender; how especially prone to sublimating rivalry into desire women might be. A Girardian reading might suggest that what the telegraphist really wants is power, is freedom. By a Girardian transference she ends up wanting Captain Everard; she comes in fact very close to ruining herself (losing her real self) through mistaking him for the object of her desire. Is there something representatively feminine in this predicament? In terms of that great underworld of transgressive cross-class sexual relationships which the telegraphist feels herself approaching so scorchingly close to in the story, the pattern certainly seems full of suggestion.

Following a Girardian reading further, his logic might suggest that it is the rivalrous mimetic desire in the first place (the class envy) which needs to be uncovered and extirpated in order for the poison of rivalrous conflict to be purged. But that would feel like a solution arrived at in a

⁹ René Girard, *To Double Business Bound*. London: The Athlone Press, 1988, 3.

social vacuum. It is not the telegraphist in *In the Cage* who creates the rivalry, the rivalry begins in the inequitable social system in which the girl finds herself, in the real recognition she has of the real 'immense disparity ... from class to class, of every instant and every motion' (153); her recognition that 'justice was not of this world ... yet, strangely, happiness was...' (175); her sharp desire for a share in that possible happiness, that pleasure.

Can a Girardian reading help uncover patterns of intention in James's late novels, in *Wings of the Dove* in particular, which stress his interest in class division and in social exclusion and the consequences of class in culture and in consciousness? Such a reading of the late novels would be consistent with an impression that those stories of the late nineties and the new century which have petit bourgeois protagonists are not by any means marginalia in the oeuvre. They seem to represent on the contrary a significant part of a whole enterprise of perception of class and of the mysteries of social order, its rituals, its taboos, its sacrificial secrets. In attempting to read James's late writing as such an enterprise, we would be addressing that essential question raised by Habegger's remarks in *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*: is James in the late novels as Habegger believes 'engaged in defending the costs the civilised order exacts', or is he engaged rather in *describing* those costs? It is a very Girardian distinction: Girard writes - not à propos of James - that 'in the first case the obsession masters the works, in the second the work masters the obsession'¹⁰.

A reading of *The Wings of the Dove* which *did* interpret it as *defending* the costs the civilised order exacts would tend, following Girard, to scapegoat one of the girls in this novel conveniently provided with two heroines; we would expect a narrative closure in the expulsion of that scapegoat into the desert, charged with all the sins of the social order, thereby purging and renewing the collective (the 'civilisation') left

¹⁰ Girard, 49.

behind. We can see why Habegger suspects James of this purging through narrative closure. It is true that at the end of all three of the late novels someone is abandoned, rejected, or taken off to American City; and it is significant that every time that 'scapegoat' is female.

But *The Wings of the Dove* has two heroines, and complicatingly both of them are in a sense cast out at the end of the novel: Milly dies, and Kate loses Merton. Readings of the novel have tended to scapegoat one or the other of them; either, straightforwardly, have accused Kate of corruption and delusion and vindicated Milly, or (sometimes reading 'against' James, as Leavis did) have found Milly insufferable and at least indirectly guilty of spoiling the more 'authentic' life of Kate and Merton. But there have of course also been readings which have registered the real importance for James's fiction of the difficulty in deciding between them; notably Oliver Elton's insightful appreciation in 1903:

And - chief alteration of all - the sympathies are entangled with both sides. The puritan dualism, so to call it, of the older books is greatly blunted; and the artist, borne along by his own discoveries, comes to bend his intensest and finest light upon the arch-conspirator, who nearly supplants the intended victim in tragic and intellectual interest.¹¹

Elton reads the conflict between the girls as a 'conflict between the world and the spirit' which ends 'drawn'. Building on his intimation that James is working through and beyond a 'puritan dualism' in the novel, we may be able to uncover the extent to which the novel is in fact also about that dualism, about the process which establishes the rivalry which locks the girls in competition.

Of course *The Wings of the Dove* is by no means the first English novel which has two 'heroines'. Milly and Kate are created out of a stock of such contrasting pairs: Fanny and Mary, Emma and Jane, Hetty and Dinah, Becky and Amelia, Maggie and Lucy. A distinct pattern emerges; one girl is dark and one fair, one vivacious and one compliant, one dangerous and one 'good'. They

¹¹ Gard, 349.

are often friends; but their relationship is vitiated by an uneasy apprehension on one side at least that they will somehow do one another harm. Fanny Price finds Mary Crawford 'careless as a woman and a friend'. There is no acceptable mould into which their 'competition' can be cast, as there might be if they were young men; it is not a part of the apparatus and expectation of femininity that girls should even playfully spar together. Therefore their concealed competition - their sense, often, that one has what the other wants - is dissimulated under all the appearances of a feminine cosy communion, the innocent sharing of shopping and confidences. But this in turn makes the anticipated betrayal loom all the more oppressively (we remember those last sour days of Maggie's in Lucy's house before she elopes with Stephen, or Emma's miserable consciousness of the cheating games she has played with Jane Fairfax).

The early days of Kate's and Milly's friendship are full of just such concealments and suppressions:

Milly's range was thus immense; she had to ask nobody for anything, to refer nothing to anyone; her freedom, her fortune and her fancy were the law; an obsequious world surrounded her, she could sniff up at every step its fumes. And Kate, in these days, was altogether in the phase of forgiving her such bliss; in the phase, moreover, of believing that, should they continue to go on together, she would abide in that generosity. She had, at such a point as this, no suspicion of a rift within the lute...(116)

Susan Shepherd at least bored [Kate] - that was plain; this young woman saw nothing in her - nothing to account for anything, not even for Milly's own indulgence: which little fact became in turn to the latter's mind a fact of significance. It was a light on the handsome girl - representing more than merely showed - that poor Susan was simply as nought to her. This was, in a manner too, a general admonition to poor Susie's companion, who seemed to see marked by it the direction in which she had best most look out. It just faintly rankled in her that a person who was good enough and to spare for Milly Theale shouldn't be good enough for another girl...(120)

She had lived with Kate Croy for several days in a state of intimacy as deep as it had been sudden, and they had clearly, in talk, in many directions, proceeded to various extremities. Yet it now came over her as in a clear cold way that there was a possible account of their relations in which the quantity her new friend had told her might have figured as small, as smallest, beside the quantity she hadn't...(124)

The two girls - and through them the two archetypes, dark and light, of tradition - are distinctive even in their mode of apprehending the 'rift within the lute' of their communion. Kate is chaffing and attacking, naming the worst to herself in her

robust elastic ironies: how generous it is in her to forgive Milly her wealth! One might so easily have been jealous, unforgiving: except that finally one is at least intelligent enough to laugh! The passage rings with that arrogance of health and beauty whose acute survival instincts pick up even at this early stage something 'wrong' in Milly, some vulnerability that makes Kate sure that in spite of everything she wouldn't want to 'change places, to change even chances with' her (116). At this stage of course one doesn't know - Kate doesn't know - whether the upshot of that quick intuition will be sympathetic-protective or exploitative. Perhaps it disturbs us that the intuition of vulnerability helps Kate with the 'forgiving' everything else.

Milly's apprehensions feel quite differently. They loom out of a white mist of hopeful anticipations and thinking the best of everyone. Her doubts are involuntary and reluctant, rather than embraced, like Kate's, on principle and in anticipation of the worst. Sharp and dark objects emerge from out of the mist, Milly winces, but concentrates on them, takes them slowly privately in, drinks down whatever bitterness they have in them as if she is used to taking medicines because they will be 'good for her'. 'It rankles' with her that Susan isn't good enough for Kate; but she dwells on it long enough to come round to understanding it as something more to appreciate in her; 'the handsome girl was, with twenty other splendid qualities, the least bit brutal too, and didn't she suggest, as no one yet had ever done for her new friend, that there might be a wild beauty in that, and even a strange grace?' (120).

The pattern is established between them. Kate with her instincts for what she can 'use' has fastened on to Milly's weakness and can be kind to her because of it. Milly has already learned to fear a 'brutality' in Kate, and yet admires her, because of it. And while Kate hasn't noticed that Milly has noticed anything, Milly, for all she is less 'clever', has more 'consciousness': she actually knows what's missing from Kate's conversation (Merton Densher) while Kate doesn't know that Milly is aware. James wraps up this whole nexus of relationship with its inequities (Kate's health, Milly's wealth), its needs, its dissimulations, in a striking image:

...Milly was the wandering princess: so what could be more in harmony now than to see the princess waited upon at the city gate by the worthiest maiden, the chosen daughter of the burgesses? It was the real again, evidently, the amusement of the meeting for the princess too; princesses living for the most part, in such an appeased way, on the plane of merely elegant representation. That was why they pounced, at city gates, on deputed flower-strewing damsels; that was why, after effigies, processions, and other stately games, frank human company was pleasant to them. (113)

It is Susan's image: and superficially it has Susan's innocence, as well as her 'Boston quaintness'. But it has a resonance beyond what Susan thinks she means by it. To begin with, it defines the girls and their relationship in terms of social function and status. Milly is the 'princess' with its aristocratic implications of unearned privilege, its greatness that is innate, 'in the blood', genealogical. Kate is the representative of the burgesses whose sphere is probably in some sense inferior but certainly separate: that is, the city they welcome the princess to is theirs, independent of her. Presumably the welcome is a kind of permission as well as a courtesy. The importance of the burgesses, we presume, (and of their daughters) rests rather upon bricks and mortar, on the solidities of material accumulation through effort, than on genealogy. Although we note that the burgesses' daughters do the strewing, there is the implication of an equality in separateness, a fittingness to the companionship.

What this clearly can't represent is any sociological or historical reality in the novel: if anything, English Kate is more likely to have aristocratic 'blood' than Milly; Milly's princess-like fortune was amassed in a democratic America where her ancestors must at some stage have been (at best) burgesses. But here the imagery, the taxonomy of social class or caste is used as a sort of flexible transparency to be overlaid, deliberately, on incongruous material. It is the essential process of caste differentiation James wants us to feel here; how in custom and perception, and in naming and in language, functions of status and place are assigned to individuals, and individuals are interpreted as representative of particular arrangements of place, and particular forms of power. Latent in those arrangements, too, are elements of competition, of rivalry. The charming ideal form of the flower strewing welcome

is surely a civilised, *feminised*, re-playing of an alternative possibility, where the invading noble is met at the closed gate by the burgesses' militia?

In a sense what James is drawing our conscious attention to here is that process of *making representative* which is the one that has produced, to begin with, the two girls set up in opposition (dark and fair) within the patterning of the novel. It is a process we continually see at work on both Kate and Milly. Kate is required to represent the female object of desire, and this responsibility is far from being a passive one. She 'earns' her role, her value, at Lancaster Gate by a constant, conscious effort:

This was the story that she was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the 'value' Mrs Lowder had attached to her. High and fixed, this estimate ruled, on each occasion, at Lancaster Gate, the social scene; so that our young man now recognised in it something like the artistic idea, the plastic substance, imposed by tradition, by genius, by criticism, in respect to a given character, on a distinguished actress. As such a person was to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt's roof, to represent. It was made up, the character, of definite elements and touches - things all perfectly ponderable to criticism; and the way for her to meet criticism was evidently at the start to be sure her make-up was exact and that she looked at least no worse than usual. Aunt Maud's appreciation of that tonight was indeed managerial, and Kate's own contribution fairly that of the faultless soldier on parade. Densher saw himself for the moment as in his purchased stall at the play; the watchful manager was in the depths of a box and the poor actress in the glare of the footlights. But she *passed*, the poor actress - he could see how she always passed; her wig, her paint, her jewels, every mark of her expression impeccable, and her entrance accordingly greeted with the proper round of applause...(217)

...He struck himself as having lost, for the minute, his presence of mind - so that, at any rate, he only stared in silence at the older woman's technical challenge and the younger one's disciplined face. It was as if the drama was between *them*, them quite preponderantly; with Merton Densher relegated to mere spectatorship, a paying place in front, and one of the most expensive. This was why his appreciation had turned for the instant to fear - had just turned, as we have said, to sickness; and in spite of the fact that the disciplined face did offer him over the footlights, as he believed, the small gleam, fine, faint, but exquisite, of a special intelligence. So might a practised performer, even when raked by double barrelled glasses, seem to be all in her part and yet convey a sign to the person in the house she loved best.(218)

Here the analogy between a social process and the processes of representation in art is explicit; beyond analogy, in fact, the two processes are really interrelated. Like an actress, Kate is really 'earning her living' by her performance; as for an actress, of course, there is élan as well as sacrifice involved in the huge effort of performing well, perhaps élan in the very exhilaration of sacrifice. All the stress of the passage is upon the production of the female object of desire as a process in the hands of collaborating women; Merton's misery in the face of this sacrificial ritual of charm is partly at his helplessness - his irrelevance - in a procedure ostensibly intended for male audience and male gratification. He finds himself paying - and dearly - to participate in a fixed (and fundamentally commercial) ritual of female performance for male appreciation which is nothing like what he wants. Both sexes are locked into models of performance and desire which may not answer to what either actually wants. Of course this is just Mrs Lowder's point; she insists on the fixed pattern of male connoisseurship of female performance precisely in order to assert the impossibility - the commercial unviability - of that alternative which Merton and Kate are clandestinely pursuing, outside the 'theatre'.

Mrs Lowder's collaboration with her niece in the 'production' of Kate's charm is felt ambivalently in the novel. If Kate in James's analogy is an 'actress', with all that has implied both in terms of genuine stage skills and commercial sexual availability, then Mrs Lowder is both the procuress and the experienced stage practitioner, past her prime, to whom the talented and promising girl is apprenticed. Mrs Lowder is genuinely looking after Kate (even to the extent eventually of collaborating in her scheme to deceive Milly) as well as realising the assets of her beauty and her intelligence. But the collaboration is constructed upon premises of a social existence whose fundamental dynamic is conflictual differentiation, perpetual rivalry for place, a 'you-win-I-lose' process of inclusion through exclusion. In a sense, the only way Mrs Lowder knows to help Kate is to use her.

James does not casually employ the analogy with the actress to express Kate's entanglement in the social process. Like

Kate's thought that she and Merton are like the baker and the housemaid, or like Susan's idea that Kate represents the burgess's daughter greeting a princess, or like Milly in the Park comparing herself to 'a poor girl' with 'her rent to pay, her rent for the future'(165), the novel characteristically borrows from a vocabulary of class differentiation to express complications of leisure class relationships. In other words, the complications of leisure class relationships do not exist independently from the large social systems of which the leisure class are beneficiaries. Leisure class relationships will on the contrary reproduce in their processes, in whatever complex disguises, the sacrifices and the pains, the struggles and the losses, the exclusions, on which their privilege is founded.

This is Benjamin's 'class struggle'; a struggle not only between classes, but intrinsic to the very mobile, competitive processes of class identity itself. Kate's talk to Merton, the same evening of her 'performance' at the dinner party at Lancaster Gate, reproduces these underlying structures of loss and gain both ironically and with relishing expertise: a mobile and pressured and ever self-reconstructing frame of social 'value' and social hierarchy based upon social exclusion:

Yet he stuck a minute to the subject. 'You scarcely call [Lord Mark], I suppose, one of the dukes.'

'Mercy, no - far from it. He's not, compared with other possibilities, 'in' it. Milly, it's true,' she said, to be exact, 'has no natural sense of social values, doesn't in the least understand our differences or know who's who or what's what.'

'I see. That,' Densher laughed, 'is her reason for liking me.'

'Precisely. She doesn't resemble me,' said Kate, 'who at least know what I lose.'

Well, it had all risen for Densher to a considerable interest. 'And Aunt Maud -why shouldn't she know? I mean, that your friend there isn't really anything. Does she suppose him of ducal value?'

'Scarcely; save in the sense of being uncle to a duke. That's undeniably something. He's the best moreover we can get.' (235)

She sounds very reminiscent of Mary Crawford gamely ironising her problem in falling for an Edmund who is not only younger son but even clergyman. And just as Mary is capable, out of the same irony, of admitting how convenient it would be if the elder son died of his fever; so Merton even as he marvels at Kate's ironising grasp also experiences a pang of fear at its potential for cruelty (expressing his admiration too, perhaps only half

consciously taking his note from Kate, in terms borrowed from the language of competition, and struggle, and surpassing):

'No marvel Aunt Maud builds on you -except that you're much too good for what she builds for. Even "society" won't know how good for it you are; it's too stupid, and you're beyond it. You'd have to pull it uphill -it's you yourself who are at the top...'

...It had been, however, as if the thrill of their association itself pressed in him, as great felicities do, the sharp spring of fear. 'See here, you know: don't, don't...'

'Don't what?'

'Don't fail me. It would kill me.'

She looked at him a minute with no response but her eyes. 'So you think you'll kill me, in time, to prevent it?' She smiled, but he saw her the next instant as smiling through tears...(235)

In the logic of competition, every felicity must be twinned with a corresponding fear; every gain must represent a loss somewhere along the logical sequence. Of course just what they anticipate for a moment here is what will happen; Kate will 'fail' him; or rather, he will 'kill' her, first, so that he doesn't have to see it. The playful, eroticised, vocabulary of violence gives covert expression to the latent antagonism in their relationship. And, at moments like this, it is their half-articulated awareness of that antagonism which is the very material of their special sympathy, their exhilarated appreciative hyper-consciousness of one another.

That same evening at Lancaster Gate, Merton is also the reluctant witness to another kind of performance-production than Kate's as the female object of desire: he watches the production of Milly in her absence as a social phenomenon, a success, a 'feature of the season's end'. The dinner guests, spurred on by Kate and Mrs.Lowder, who both have their ulterior motives, work Milly up in a way that makes both Susan, her real friend, and Merton, reluctantly 'paying dear' for his spectator seat, uneasy and slightly appalled:

...the young man had, by an odd impression, throughout the meal, not been wholly deprived of Miss Theale's participation. Mrs Lowder had made dear Milly the topic, and it proved, on the spot, a topic as familiar to the enthusiastic younger as to the sagacious older man. Any knowledge they might lack Mrs.Lowder's niece was moreover alert to supply, while Densher himself was freely appealed to as the most privileged, after all, of the

group. Wasn't it he who had in a manner invented the wonderful creature - through having seen her first, caught her in her native jungle? Hadn't he more or less paved the way for her by his prompt recognition of her rarity...

...What touched him most nearly was that the occasion took on somehow the air of a commemorative banquet, a feast to celebrate a brilliant if brief career. There was of course more said about the heroine than if she had not been absent, and he found himself rather stupefied at the range of Milly's triumph. Mrs Lowder had wonders to tell of it; the two wearers of the waistcoat, either with sincerity or with hypocrisy, professed in the matter an equal expertness; and Densher at last seemed to know himself in the presence of a social 'case'.(219)

...though (Susan) unmistakably rejoiced and soared, he none the less saw her at moments as even more agitated than pleasure required. It was a state of emotion in her that could scarce represent simply an impatience to report at home. Her little dry New England brightness ... had its actual reasons for finding its relief mostly in silence; so that before the subject was changed he perceived - with surprise at the others - that they had given her enough of it. He had had quite enough of it himself by the time he was asked if it were true that their friend had really not made in her own country the mark she had chalked so large in London.(220)

Again, as with Kate's performance, we see the women collaborating through their social modes - making conversation, being charming, promoting values in the social currency of talk - to produce the feminine spectacle (this time Milly) which depends ultimately for its success on its appreciation by the men. In other words, we see how the interactions of gender lock both sexes more or less helplessly into role, so that neither is free to withdraw without hurting from the fatality of charming and being charmed.

Everyone at the dinner table is aware, more or less consciously, more or less uncomfortably, that Milly is 'weird', 'wonderful', 'rare', 'brilliant', because she is fabulously rich. It is not that they are lying when they eulogise her; her wealth really does transform her for them, the wealth in itself really does excite their awe, their aesthetic appreciation, their imagination of her type. But Merton's, and Susan's, deep unease at Milly's canonisation in this secular church recognises that there is unmistakably a sacrificial element in the process. Milly, absent, is being sacrificed to an idea of Milly: an idea that can't be separated from her 'economic aspect'. Even as they begin to produce their 'idea' of her, Merton hears in it a premonition of its end: the dinner sounds to him like 'a commemorative banquet, a feast to celebrate a brilliant if brief

career'. What Milly 'represents' will be privileged far over what she 'is'; and what she represents can only end by consuming her. What she represents for this social machinery is not a stable value, but a value mobile, cumulative, devouring: a value defined by the others' need of her, that is, of her money. The very qualities the guests eulogise in (or onto) Milly put them in fact invisibly, essentially, in conflict with her.

Milly herself is very well aware of this sacrificial element in the 'representativity' that is pressed upon her at every turn: it is a part of why she is so upset when at Matcham Lord Mark shows her the Bronzino portrait. As well as her shock at mortality ('she was dead, dead dead' 144) the shock is at the possibility that a dead, finished, beautiful version of oneself might end by being substituted for the sacrificed live thing. Milly is in fact hyper-sensitive to other people's versions of her. She is wryly sorry she can't be more of a Byzantine 'princess' for Susan (167). She takes on board the whole apparatus and implications of the 'Dove' imagery the others invent for her with a private sceptical detachment. She half embraces the simplifications of the role, and the shelter it seems to afford her from confrontation: the 'Dove' first comes up at a moment when Kate has made her sharply afraid with one of her half-franknesses, half-confessions, as the girls talk. 'Oh, you may well loathe me yet!' Kate says. 'Why do you say such things to me?', Milly asks, and Kate replies, inspired, 'Because you're a dove'.

She met it on the instant as she would have met the revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she lately had walked. *That* was what was the matter with her. She was a dove. Oh, wasn't she? - it echoed within her as she became aware of the sound, outside, of the return of their friends. (184)

But this shelter - this privacy - behind an idea of oneself can be an equivocal advantage: her being a dove is not only 'the revealed truth', it is also 'what was the matter with her'. Milly finds her friends address themselves in fact safely and simplifyingly to the Dove and the Princess and she becomes increasingly isolated behind her double privilege (of rank and innocence):

Her heart could none the less sink a little on feeling how much his [Merton's] view of her was destined to have in common with -as she now sighed over it - the view. She could have dreamed of his not having the view, of his having something or other, if need be quite viewless, of his own; but he might have what he could with the least trouble, and the view wouldn't be, after all, a positive bar to her seeing him. The defect of it in general - if she might so ungraciously criticize - was that, by its sweet universality, it made relations rather prosaically a matter of course. It anticipated and superseded the - likewise sweet - operation of real affinities. (196)

Both girls are partly complicit in the production of views of themselves. Kate energetically performs and competes. That habit of self-concealment behind compliance in Milly (she doesn't want to 'ungraciously criticize'), that reluctance to owe anyone any 'trouble' (Merton 'might have what he could with the least trouble'), perpetuate and license the Princess and the Dove.

The dove of course is chaste, too. In James's sketches for the novel in his notebooks, there are two strong emphases to Milly's story both of which are complicated, diffused, almost dissimulated in the completed novel. First, Milly in the notebooks reacts with violent incontinent protest to her death sentence: 'She is in love with life, her dreams of it have been immense, and she clings to it with passion, with supplication. "I don't want to die - I won't, I won't, oh, let me live; oh, save me! ..." She is like a creature dragged shrieking to the guillotine - to the shambles'. And secondly, it is explicit in the notebooks that Milly's appetite to live - her fear that she will have missed out on life - is focussed in a sexual passion. James deliberates at some length on the problems for decorum in representing this sexuality of a sick girl:

The young man, in his pity, wishes he could make her taste of happiness, give her something that it breaks her heart to go without having known. That 'something' can only be - of course - the chance to love and be loved. The poor girl, even if he loved her, has no life to give him in return: no life and no personal, no physical surrender, for it seems to me that one must represent her as too ill for that particular case. It has bothered me thinking of the little picture - this idea of the physical possession, the brief physical, passionate rapture which at first appeared essential to it; bothered me on account of the ugliness, the incongruity, the nastiness *en somme*, of the man's 'having' a sick girl: also on account of something rather pitifully obvious and vulgar in the presentation of such a remedy for her despair - and such a remedy only. 'Oh, she's dying without having had it? Give it to her and let her die' - that strikes me as sufficiently second rate.¹²

¹² *The Notebooks of Henry James*, 169-74.

The 'brief physical, passional rapture' at first 'appeared essential'; and of course that essential thing is not lost in the finished novel, it is only that in a final tragic twist of the rivalry that binds them to one another's insufficiency, Milly's 'physical passional rapture' is displaced onto Kate. Kate has the sexual consummation that Milly wanted, the sexual consummation that James wanted for Milly but couldn't find means to express within the vocabularies of representation, within his contemporary aesthetic. What has prevented Milly is that she has to be a 'dove', she is the fair girl and not the dark one, she can't be allowed to be sexual, or sexually desiring.

In the light of this transferral of sexuality from the one girl to the other, the whole issue of Merton's room in Venice, Kate's visit there, the visit Milly asks for, Merton's reluctance to let her come there, then his changing his mind but too late, is poignantly suggestive. Both these themes in the notebook, in fact - Milly's incontinent unseeemly rage at dying young, and the focus of that in her dread of missing out on sexual passion - *remain*, in fact, central within the finished novel, and their dissimulation is not a matter of James's squeamishness, but is in a sense a *representation*, even, of a social processing which continually dissimulates certain realities, deflects and disallows them, renames and redescribes them. Reading the space between the Dove and Milly, observing Milly negotiating with the Dove idea how it will both shelter and constrain her, we read the pain - the sacrificial element, to borrow from the Girardian vocabulary - in social identity and social function, social becoming.

When Merton is made uneasy by the processing of the two girls at the Lancaster Gate dinner party, this distorting performance in talk and manner of their social value, he is able to put some distance between himself and the process:

So he judged, at least, within his limits, and the idea that what he had thus caught in the fact was the trick of fashion and the tone of society went so far as to make him take up again his sense of independence. He had supposed himself civilised; but if this was civilisation - ! One

could smoke one's pipe outside when twaddle was within. He had rather avoided, as we have remarked, Kate's eyes, but there came a moment when he would fairly have liked to put it, across the table, to her: 'I say, light of my life, is *this* the great world?' (224)

The 'process' is a kind of stupidity ('twaddle'), an unreality; at this point Merton is still able to keep it firmly outside himself (or, as his image has it, the 'twaddle' is inside, and freedom outside it). But by the end of the novel, Merton's definitional boundaries are collapsed, and he is compromised, contaminated. When he meets Mrs Lowder on Christmas morning and they talk about the news of Milly's death, he finds himself assenting in paralysed self-disgust to the falsity of the exchange:

'Our dear dove then, as Kate calls her, has folded her wonderful wings.'

'Yes - folded them.'

It rather racked him, but he tried to receive it as she intended, and she evidently took his formal assent for self-control. 'Unless it's true,' she accordingly added, 'that she has spread them the wider.'

He again but formally assented, though, strangely enough, the words fitted an image deep in his own consciousness. 'Rather, yes - spread them the wider.'

'For a flight, I trust, to some happiness greater - '

'Exactly. Greater.' Densher broke in; but now with a look, he feared, that did, a little, warn her off. (427)

He has lost his power to dissent, to find a different version of his own. Earlier, he was able to oppose to the smothering Dove imagery his own impression that talking to Milly was 'as simple as sitting with his sister might have been, and not, if the point were urged, very much more thrilling' (308). Now, he even disconcertingly finds congruences between his imaginings and Mrs Lowder's: his new involvement with Milly comes to him in images entangled with *their* ambiguous imagery of dove-grace, and dove-sacrifice.

This progressive contamination of Merton by that 'civilisation' he ironises earlier in the novel is embodied particularly acutely in the evolution of his relationship with Lord Mark. To begin with - at the dinner party at Lancaster Gate - Merton's irony is watertight, his contempt secure:

'Oh!' said the other party [Lord Mark], while Densher said nothing - occupied as he mainly was on the spot with weighing the sound in question ... It wasn't ..., he knew, the 'Oh!' of the idiot, however great the superficial resemblance: it was that of the clever, the accomplished man;

it was the very specialty of the speaker, and a great deal of expensive training and experience had gone to producing it.(232)

The 'Oh!' represents some essence of class codification; communication and expression in it are atrophied to the point where Lord Mark is all sign, and all belittling, placing judgement. The man is so lost in the manner he is indistinguishable from it. 'What has the brute to do with us anyway?' Merton asks. ('What indeed?' replies Kate.) But his indifference to the 'Oh!', the judgement, of a Lord Mark, is eroded as he lets himself progressively farther and farther in to the deep games of Lord Mark's world. On Christmas Day when Merton peers into Mrs Lowder's carriage expecting Kate it is Lord Mark who is startlingly disconcertingly in her place:

Densher felt his own look a gaping arrest - which, he disgustedly remembered, his back as quickly turned, appeared to repeat itself as his special privilege. He mounted the steps of the house and touched the bell with a keen consciousness of being habitually looked at by Kate's friend from positions of almost insolent vantage ... Densher was thinking that he seemed to show as vagrant while another was ensconced. He was thinking of the other as ... more ensconced than ever; he was thinking of him above all as the friend of the person with whom his recognition had, the minute previous, associated him. The man was seated in the very place in which, beside Mrs Lowder's, he had looked to find Kate, and that was a sufficient identity.(424)

Merton can no longer count on the 'independence' he felt at the dinner party from 'twaddle' and 'the great world'. He is helplessly in relationship - humiliating and abject relationship - with this almost *grand guignol* representative of the great social machine who sits significantly in the place he looks for Kate; Lord Mark's presence there, 'ensconced', makes a mockery of any superiority Merton ever imagined he had, makes an irony of Merton's irony. The distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' which had seemed to constitute his independence, finally (when Lord Mark is in Florian's, or *inside* the carriage) only leaves him abjectly excluded.

The girls are to an extent complicit in their representations, and Merton is progressively contaminated by his complicity in

their rivalry. This is not a novel about the mere victims of social process, or indeed about social process as something existing outside of and independent of those individuals who enact it. It is not a novel, even, which protests at social process, or subverts it. The novel itself in fact enacts the complicity, the involvement, the dissimulation, the incompleteness, of its subjects; it renders at their maximum power-to-move those social identities bound in to rivalry (male, female; dark girl, light girl; old woman, young woman) whose social construction it also renders. But what James wants primarily to record - as in *In the Cage*, as in his other 'petit bourgeois' stories, and as in the whole oeuvre - is the pain of social process, the suffering entailed in class identity. The characteristic of this suffering in the oeuvre is that as it is imposed in one place (that is, in the simple inequity of privilege, so that Lady Bradeen can disdain to spend a minute in the little office where the telegraphist must spend her lifetime, so that the telegraphed surplus effusions of the leisured class would be enough to buy boots and dinners for the class that serves them) it takes its subterranean course and resurfaces in another. (Is Captain Everard 'happy'? Is Milly? Is - above all - Kate?)

This is not a system of compensations, which somehow balances out the imposition of privilege by 'paying back' winners and losers in the struggle, spoiling their triumphs or 'making up for' their losses. On the contrary, one of the things James is strongest on is the reality and the amorality, the undeservedness, of happiness. As the telegraphist puts it, 'Real justice was not of this world, yet, strangely, happiness was...' (175). James's novels all centre upon 'real things', real happinesses rendered precious, beautiful, desirable precisely by their difficulty-of-achievement in a dizzyingly inequitable society, in a competitive 'race for life' (*In the Cage*, 160). Milly is really lucky to be rich; only a sentimental reading could discount her opportunity, her scope, her freedom, the whole glorious temptation of the kingdoms of the world. And Kate is really lucky to have her 'physical possession, the brief physical, passional rapture' (James's words from his notebooks). All the late novels make that chance weigh - for joy, for poetry

- in any scale against any sounder, solider, longer happiness. The reality of the luck of each girl is made sharp, is made poignant, is made into the very essence of the desirable, by how much each would have given for the luck of the other. Each would have given everything: the last twist of that rivalrous process of co-definition that binds the girls fatally to one another's loss.

That system in the novels which registers the pain of social process is a system, then, of accumulations, not of compensations; it is not moralised. All acts, all complicities, all mere involuntary participations in this inequitable social process add to the sum of hurt, because its inclusion works through exclusion, and in its long chain of connectedness all its happinesses are also losses somewhere. For Lady Bradeen to arrange her dinner engagements with facility, the telegraphist must be paid to sit day in day out in her cramped hole. For Kate to triumph in that role which is the only way she - and we - can imagine her fulfilment - as dazzling society beauty - Milly has to die, so that Kate can have her money. For Milly to have what she wants - to make Merton see her, and not merely the Dove in her place - Kate has to be spoiled in Merton's eyes. This sacrificial element in happiness is of the essence of a society arranged to privilege a leisured segregated élite; and it is of the essence of an aristocratic vision of life and of pleasure.

James is not interested in imagining alternatives. His critique of that late, threatened, declining, leisure class world of Western Europe is not a polemic. He is interested rather in discovering deep within the imagination of that world - its imagination of itself - the dynamics of identity, rivalry, fulfilment, loss. And he is interested too in 'doing justice' (the only kind of 'justice' there is in the novels) to the aesthetic of that leisure class world, to its 'style'. That essential aristocratic elegance, tensed over its foundations in sacrifice and exclusion, consists in the good form, the panache, the style, with which the inevitable pain is carried off; so that Milly will never 'smell of sickness' and Kate will cover her eventual defeat with a performance of high-mindedness in magnificent good taste. They will both in the end thoroughly and

spectacularly be that which they have been required to represent.

Milan Kundera writes about Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*:

Until Stravinsky, music was never able to give barbaric rites a grand form. We could not imagine them musically. Which means: we could not imagine the beauty of the barbaric. Without its beauty, the barbaric would remain incomprehensible. (I stress this: to know any phenomenon deeply requires understanding its beauty, actual or potential.) Saying that a bloody rite does possess some beauty - there's the scandal, unbearable, unacceptable. And yet, unless we understand this scandal, unless we get to the very bottom of it, we cannot understand much about man...

It is all the more interesting in that [Stravinsky] had always, and explicitly, declared himself a partisan of the Apollonian principle, an adversary of the Dionysian: *Le Sacre du Printemps* (particularly in its ritual dances) is the Apollonian portrayal of Dionysiac ecstasy: in this portrayal, the ecstatic elements (the aggressively beating rhythm, the few extremely short melodic motifs, many times repeated and never developed, and sounding like shrieks) are transformed into great, refined art (for instance, despite its aggressive quality, the rhythm grows so complex through the rapid alternation of measures with different time signatures that it creates an artificial, unreal, completely stylized beat); still, the Apollonian beauty of this portrayal of barbarity does not obscure its horror; it makes us see that at the very bottom point of the ecstasy there is only the harsh rhythm, the sharp blows of percussion, an extreme numbness, death.¹³

In order to discuss further James's interest in aristocratic 'style' - the beauty of the barbaric - and also the complex relationships within the late work between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac, it makes sense to move forward into a reading of that most stylized and most enigmatic of James's novels, *The Golden Bowl*.

¹³ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, 91.

8. 'The house of quiet': privileges and pleasures in *The Golden Bowl*

James's fascination with privilege and the privileged predicament culminates in his last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*. His protagonists and his plot and the late Jamesian manner are all screwed up to an improbable ultimate high pitch of performance; from all of them the novel exacts extreme demonstrations of elegance, of complexity, of rarity. The novel is emptied of any significant life outside the Ververs' rarefied oxygen tent, pitched at the pinnacle of social amenity and exempt from all the ordinary pains and mess of material struggle. (Nicola Bradbury calls it the 'goldfish bowl'.¹) The ranks of servants that attend everywhere are mute as furniture. There are no Venetians in brown jackets, no comrades sleeping off sorrows in the dusty grass of the park. Only occasionally, with Charlotte, a moment's breeze blows in from a world outside: she first arrives in the novel fresh from 'winds and waves and custom-houses ... far countries and long journeys' (58), and later comes to the Prince from a day spent wandering in London streets and lunching 'on some strange nastiness, at a cookshop in Holborn' (231). And then there's the inn at Gloucester and the train timetables ...

The vacancy that follows on that exemption from material struggle - what to do? what to be? where to go? when there is no need - and the resulting intensifications of attraction, angst and antagonism inside the narrowness of the privileged space:

¹ Bradbury, chap.5. It's Maggie's own image too; their guests are 'a kind of renewed water supply for the tank in which, like a party of panting goldfish, they kept afloat' (494).

these are James's subjects. The novel is not, of course, a naturalistic representation of the real transactions of a European/ North Atlantic turn of the century leisure class. It is another kind of representation. James's exaggerated and mannered imagination of class and privilege, with its concentration on good form, its self-regarding stylishness, its disregard for humdrum concrete detail, and its implied contempt for any 'ordinary' reading of its situation, is absolutely in keeping with his subject. If he invents an impossibly sophisticated aristocracy, he invents it out of a material to hand. His style mimics characteristics - the drawl of initiated knowledge, the high patina of charm, the overstatement of a perpetual ironising concealment - which convince us as representing something of how that turn of the century leisure class imagined itself. Part of the authenticity of the novel is in the intensely period feel of its vocabulary and imagery, with its 'wonderfuls' and 'beautifuls', its 'ah's and its 'poor dears' and its 'funks'.

Rather than that habit of realism which counters and unpicks those ideas a culture has of itself (Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, say), James is exploiting realism's other potential; to build its reality out of the material of a culture's own image of itself, within, as it were, the culture's own *mystique*. Kipling both invents and imitates (impossible to say which movement of the double pulse comes first) the *mystique* of the Raj. Borges both imitates and invents the *mystique* of the Buenos Aires neighbourhoods. In his dream of an impossibly rarefied upper class entanglement James is both imitating and creating a *fin de siècle* European/ North Atlantic 'aristocracy'. And just as the very essence of, say, Kipling's rendering of the Raj is in the minute accuracy with which he demonstrates his credentials as insider and defines the criteria for insiders at the same time (the military know-how, the dropping of place-names, the specialised Anglo-Indian vocabulary and so on), so in James's novel for all its exaggeration (and in a sense because of its exaggeration) the essential content, the essential definition of class, is established with extreme precision.

If it's an 'aristocracy', then it's a complex transnational composite quite unlike aristocracies at other periods: the

Prince lends to it his (European) genealogy, Charlotte her (American) personal distinction (we never learn anything of her antecedents) and the Ververs their (American) money. The old aristocratic association with land and buildings is severed; the wealth that sustains the oxygen tent of this leisure was created in the insubstantial transactions of high finance. The Ververs don't build homes, or even buy them, they rent houses. Their very relationship with the substantial symbols of their wealth is different. Adam Verver's precious material items were commissioned by other aristocrats in other eras, but Adam doesn't commission them or even use them, he collects and collates them, he puts them away in his museum. To borrow Yeats's symbol from 'Ancestral Houses', he merely has his ear to the exotic shell that is all that is left of a life once lived in the 'rich streams'.

though now it seems
As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,
And not a fountain, were the symbol which
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known;
But when the master's buried mice can play,
And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

O what if gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else old Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities;
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?²

The pretty shell is easy to handle and admire; the creature whose biology it once was part of would have been disconcertingly alien. Yeats's definition in 'Ancestral Houses' of successive phases of aristocracy is surely relevant to the analysis of *fin de siècle* privilege in *The Golden Bowl*. In Yeats's poem the 'violent bitter' man who sponsors artists to

² W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1973, 225.

create that 'sweetness' he longs for, is succeeded by a 'mouse', by 'slipperd Contemplation', whose greatness has been taken along with his violence. James's novel could be read as an interestingly complicating account of that 'gentle' phase of privilege. Strictly speaking, it is the Prince who is the real heir to the genealogies of 'violent bitter men', and certainly he represents the tradition of European nobility tamed. The last vestige of 'violence' that breaks out in him - the last violence that's left available to him - is chastened and brought to heel by the end of the novel. But the actual contemporary tenant of the ancestral house doesn't belong to the aristocratic bloodline at all: it is Adam Verver with his New World wealth who 'finds his ease' in 'levelled lawns and gravelled ways', and enjoys his 'slipperd' domesticated Contemplation. By the standards of the old aristocratic code, he's certainly a 'mouse', this man who can't father a child on his new young wife (Charlotte's certainty, 233, can presumably only mean that she and her husband no longer have sexual relations), who never actually speaks a word to accuse his son-in-law who cuckolds him nor his wife who dishonours him; whose reply to their insult is to enfold himself in an ever less penetrable white fog of seeming innocence and ignorance. And yet in James's configuration it is the mouse at last, and for his very appearance of innocence, that all the others most fear. (In Yeats's poem too the mouse is - triumphant? It seems the wrong word. Like Adam Verver he quietly complacently possesses.)

Within the dispossessed space of the ancestral house of *The Golden Bowl*, two ideas - two ideals - of aristocracy contend. It would be absolutely a mistake to read Maggie and Adam's cosy domesticity - 'like children playing at paying visits, playing at "Mr Thompson" and "Mrs Fane", each hoping that the other would really stay to tea'(196) - as bourgeois. Maggie herself, before the last tea-time of all with the other pair, uses to her husband the vocabulary of class differentiation to ironise the anxiousness with which they wait:

'We're distinctly bourgeois!' she a trifle grimly threw off ... though to a spectator sufficiently detached they might have been quite the privileged pair they were reputed, granted only they were taken as awaiting the visit of Royalty. (537)

It's ironic, and she's grim, of course, because 'bourgeois' is so far from the reality of how they perceive themselves. We shouldn't be surprised to discover that Maggie has her class pride, just because she has been so little interested in the invitations to the Foreign Office or to Matcham, and so indifferent, until piqued into jealous curiosity, to the opinion of, say, a Lady Castledean. Maggie's class pride is a very different thing to Charlotte's; it does not feed upon knowing 'what it was to look "well"' (191), or feeling herself 'in truth crowned' (192) at grand public occasions. It perhaps consists rather in turning down grand occasions with genuine indifference, preferring the privacy of a home whose status in the ranked order of social priority is beyond question. The suggestion in the passage above that the bourgeois appearance of eagerness is redeemed by the possibility that it is Royalty the couple await, feels just right; there has always been a latitude for Royalty and its close connections to be little and modest and domestic without jeopardising their position at the apex of a great system of leisure class display and surplus consumption.

Adam and Maggie's ultimate class privilege expresses itself as indifference to the very parade and apparatus of that privilege. And this is only one of the many notes in *The Golden Bowl* which, as has often been remarked, touch off significant reminiscences of *The Portrait of a Lady*: only, as so often, what was exposed as spurious and faked in the earlier novel, has its face value in the later one. One of the ways Isabel learned to 'see through' Gilbert Osmond was in discovering that his indifference to opinion was only pretended; in fact his whole life was an attitude struck in order to be admired. In Adam and Maggie the indifference is quite authentic.

The 'aristocratic' in Maggie's consciousness is at first experienced primarily not as entailing consequences (the need to 'appear', the need to 'live up') but as exempting her from them. Her 'aristocracy' is sentimental (in the older sense of the word and perhaps - we will come round to discussing this - in its newer sense too), private, conscientious, innocent. She buys with her privilege, or so she believes, a fairytale clearing in the dark forest. And it comes into conflict in the novel with an

opposite kind of 'aristocracy'; Charlotte and the Prince know they have been bought for their 'value', and to prove they have been worth their high price they can only imagine that they must perform the superior man and woman that they are. Their aristocracy resides not in exemption from responsibility, but in the responsibility to live out their 'type' to its fullest possibility, its fullest expression in romance and glamour: what other use can they have? That responsibility had always been part of an old aristocratic ideal; the presumption of precious, superior qualities intrinsic to the blood-line entailed the 'proof' of superiority in more striking behaviour, in stronger passions and larger needs.

At Matcham, just before the Prince and Charlotte consummate their adulterous affair at Gloucester, this question of the function of privilege and the 'proof' of superiority comes up with particular urgency:³

All of which, besides, in Lady Castledean as in Maggie, in Fanny Assingham as in Charlotte herself, was working for him [the Prince] without provocation or pressure, by the mere play of some vague sense on their part - definite and conscious at most only in Charlotte - that he was not, as a nature, as a character, as a gentleman, in fine, below his remarkable fortune.

... the Prince had the sense, all good-humouredly, of being happily chosen, and it was not spoiled for him even by another sense that followed in its train and with which, during his life in England, he had more than once had reflectively had to deal: the state of being reminded how, after all, as an outsider, a foreigner, and even as a mere representative husband and son-in-law, he was so irrelevant to the working of affairs that he could be bent on occasion to uses comparatively trivial. No other of her guests would have been thus convenient for their hostess; affairs, of whatever sorts, had claimed, by early trains, every active, easy, smoothly-working man, each in his way a lubricated item of the great social, political, administrative *engrenage* - claimed most of all Castledean himself, who was so very oddly, given the personage and the type, rather a large item. If he, on the other hand, had an affair, it was not of that order; it was of the order, verily, that he had been reduced to as a not quite glorious substitute.

³ Is it at Gloucester that they sleep together for the first time - 'I've wanted everything', 'You shall have everything' (272) suggests it, as well as the superior formal elegance for the novel of having this first specified opportunity be the first actual opportunity? If so, then it is possible that in the whole novel they *only* sleep together once, because it is on their return from Gloucester that Maggie is alerted to their secret, after which we presume they have to be circumspect while they wait to see what she does... One doesn't want, of course, to stumble into the (bourgeois!) vulgarity of being caught out counting: as the Prince almost is when Maggie first confronts him with her 'proof', and he queries 'two relations?', misunderstanding her (429). Presuming Gloucester is the first time further presumes (or does it?) that their love affair before their marriages was unconsummated: the Colonel is sceptical about that: 76.

It marked, however, the feeling of the hour with him that this vision of being 'reduced' interfered not at all with the measure of his actual ease. It kept before him again, at moments, the so familiar fact of his sacrifices - down to the idea of the very relinquishment, for his wife's convenience, of his real situation in the world; with the consequence, thus, that he was, in the last analysis, among all these so often inferior people, practically held cheap and made light of. But though all this was sensible enough there was a spirit in him that could rise above it, a spirit that positively played with the facts, with all of them; from that of the droll ambiguity of English relations to that of his having in his mind something quite beautiful and independent and harmonious, something wholly his own.(264)

'As a nature, as a character, as a gentleman, in fine'; the narrative is interior to the very process of the Prince imagining himself, imagining his identity; his sequence of selves, in ascending order of exhaustiveness, begins with blood, and ends, subsuming all those others inside it, with caste, with the privilege and the exigencies of aristocracy. The privilege is his 'great fortune', the exigency is that he will earn his 'great fortune' by living up to it. His sense of being 'happily chosen' is of the essence of aristocratic identity; in a complex reconciliation the accident of birth, of privilege, conspires with and is justified by individual distinction. Luck and desert gratifyingly fulfill one another.

But the Prince's sense of himself as a gentleman is reworking itself carefully in the passage here around certain difficulties, around alternative versions of caste definition. All the English gentlemen he has spent the weekend - and other weekends - dining hunting and shooting with, have gone back up to town by early trains, claimed by 'the great social, political, administrative *engrenage*'. There is a nineteenth century British version of aristocracy whose justification has displaced itself from fulfillment in individual distinction onto fulfillment in self-sacrifice to a greater social good. It is the type of English aristocracy which James so enjoyed representing at its maximum possibility (the maximum possibility as expressed, say, in Lawrence's portraits) in Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady*. But even the generosity of that portrait is interestingly qualified: Isabel refuses to marry Lord Warburton because she sees his so consummately representing a social ideal as essentially, personally limiting. His eyes 'burned with a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser

parts of emotion - the heat, the violence, the unreason - and that burned as steadily as a lamp in a windless place'(105). In James images of stillness are usually images of qualification; in the end, it is Caspar Goodwood, whose passion is full of heat and violence, and not Lord Warburton, who comes closest to convincing Isabel.

By the time he comes to write Lord Castledean James's way with the British aristocratic type is less respectful, more offhand (in the meantime he has also 'done' Lord Mark). The qualification of Castledean's importance in the 'great social, political, administrative *engrenage*' is there in the Prince's all-but-imperceptibly raised eyebrow, at 'Castledean himself, who was so very oddly, given the personage and the type, rather a large item'. We don't need to know anything more about the 'personage' and the 'type' except to know that for the Prince, confident in his own nature and character, it makes his greatness odd; that, and the fact that while the Lord goes off to his kind of affairs, his Lady amuses herself with a Mr Blint. It's what the Prince puzzles over in these English gentlemen, it's what makes their 'gentleman' count so differently to his. That 'nature' where his sense of himself as justified in being a gentleman is centred doesn't count with them. He has no problem with recognising their gentility; but they do not convince him, according to *his* idea of a gentleman, as being enough *men*. Tied up with competing ideals of aristocracy here are competing versions of masculinity.

Competing versions, because of course what the Prince is reacting to in so carefully reimagining himself in relation to these Englishmen here, is a version of manliness which would emasculate *him*, not by impugning his sexuality nor his sexual honour but by relegating him through his lack of function in the social *engrenage* to that margin where he is *merely*, decoratively, irrelevantly sexual (that margin in the British imagination where, at the other end of the social scale, are the gigolo and the warbling Italian tenor in tights). It could sting; the Prince is quick to register how he is 'held cheap and made light of' (265), how he's being 'placed' on the British scale. His thoughts revisit for some moments the 'sacrifices' that have left him open to such implications. There are Italian

responsibilities, we gather, a 'real situation in the world' which the Prince has more or less relinquished 'for his wife's convenience'(265); although we learn elsewhere that rather than a role in any 'social, political, administrative engrenage', these are matters of property and family. The Continental aristocracy which the Prince represents has never displaced its responsibility from the 'tribe' onto the general good, any more than it has displaced its blood-borne superiority from the splendid male individual onto the collective or the ideal of service.

The Prince is a barbarian; with all that has always implied both of essential limitation and especial sensuality and strength. We know that he is a barbarian, for example, from his fundamental absolute assumption, swaddled under however many paddings of exquisite courtesy and consideration, that woman's 'nature' exists in an intrinsically dependent and abject position in relation to man's:

Once more, as a man conscious of having known many women, he could assist, as he would have called it, at the recurrent, the predestined phenomenon, the thing always as certain as sunrise or the coming round of Saints' days, the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away. She did it, ever, inevitably, infallibly - she couldn't possibly not do it. It was her nature, it was her life, and the man could always expect it without lifting a finger. This was *his*, the man's, any man's, position and advantage, that he only had to wait, with a decent patience, to be placed, in spite of himself, it might really be said, in the right. Just so the punctuality of performance on the part of the other creature was her weakness and her deep misfortune - not less, no doubt, than her beauty.(61)

(One reading of the novel would have the Prince learning his lesson, his fundamental assumptions broken by the one woman who *doesn't* 'do the thing that gave her away'.) We know he is a barbarian because he is - really, it's no mere joke - superstitious; because there is more than a tinge of anti-Semitism in his contempt for the Jew in the Bloomsbury shop. We know he is because (as Charlotte, who is so different, notes) 'below a certain social plane, he never saw'... he 'took the meaner sort for granted - the night of their meanness or whatever name one might give it for him made all cats grey'(99).

It's out of his 'barbarism', out of his unbounded faith in his own 'nature', of his belief in a superiority centred, after all, not in a bureaucracy or in a 'post' but in his blood, his

body, that in the very instant of registering the implied slight from the self-importantly preoccupied Englishmen the Prince reasserts an alternative scale of importance, through a personal irony, through the raised eyebrow of his tone, through the smile (at the 'droll ambiguity of English relations') on the beautiful face. For its great moment - whatever happens in the long run - the splendid male creature so sure of his 'nature' as the basis of his breeding owes no apology to mere 'lubricated items' of the social machine. This is the Prince's moment:

... sunny, gusty, lusty English April, all panting and heaving with impatience, or kicking and crying, even, at moments, like some infant Hercules who wouldn't be dressed ... the bravery of youth and beauty, the insolence of fortune and appetite ... Every voice in the great bright house was a call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure; every echo was a defiance of difficulty, doubt, or danger; every aspect of the picture, a glowing plea for the immediate ... a world so constituted was governed by a spell, that of the smile of the gods and the favour of the powers; the only handsome, the only gallant, in fact the only intelligent acceptance of which was a faith in its guarantees and a high spirit for its chances...(251)

His taking advantage of the moment is no mere opportunism, it is rather his assertion of his idea of himself in the face of other ways of imagining him. His idea of himself as a gentleman is so bound up with himself as a *man*, that Maggie and Adam's trust in his sexual abstinence is virtually insulting:

Being thrust, systematically, with another woman, and a woman one happened, by the same token, exceedingly to like, and being so thrust that the theory of it seemed to publish one as idiotic or incapable - this was a predicament of which the dignity depended all on one's own handling.(252)

It is not only out of privilege - luck - that he takes Charlotte off to Gloucester; it is almost out of responsibility too, responsibility to his nature, his identity as gentleman, his princeliness.

It is poignant, somehow, that in creating in *The Golden Bowl* his sensual Continental male with a touch of barbarism (out of that typology that has ranged - developed - from the Count Gemini who beat his wife in *The Portrait of a Lady* to Gloriani the male tiger in the jungle in *The Ambassadors*) James has made his Prince Italian and not French. James has used the Italian reference in his human typology much less; here in the Prince we have our idea of what he means it to evoke. Sensual Frenchmen in

James are intellectually sensual (Gloriani is an artist); what the Prince has above all is personal, the charm of the person, of the body: beauty.

Charlotte's function in the novel, and in the little world of the novel, links her to those other performing and displaying women in the late works, Mme de Vionnet and Kate Croy. Rather than reading like a theme of James's, the sequence of these women reads like a theme of the era; a theme expressed, say, in contemporary fashion, those turn of the century dresses with their bold gestures, flaunting sexuality, crippling constraints.⁴ It is interesting that James experiments with this typology across nationality: the French, the English, and the American are all, in a sense, the more or less doomed counterparts to the Prince's assumption of advantage, his presumption upon 'the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away. She did it, ever, inevitably, infallibly ...' (In the final scenes of *The Wings of the Dove* even Merton, uncomfortably, reluctantly, finds himself at an impasse where he can't help using his advantage, the advantage, against Kate.) This is the old sexual relation, the one that belongs with the old idea of aristocracy based on the ideal of the splendid male individual, on the male sexual *élan*.

Buried deep under the sophisticated courtesies of that ideal, the dissimulations of its elaborate homage to female refinement, somewhere the man seeks the right female *animal*, to match with. She must reflect his nature, in its special superiority; or rather, because reflect sounds too passive, too merely a matter of self-gratification, she must absorb his superiority and re-radiate it out of a superiority of her own that matches his. All these three women work so hard at absorbing and radiating, at *charming*. Their very lightness and grace, the very pleasure of their company, how they soothe and

⁴ Jane Campion's film of *The Portrait of a Lady* made much effective play with these qualities of display and subjection in dress; Osmond literally tripped Isabel onto the floor in one scene by stepping on the train of a skirt that was wide at her ankles but tight around her knees.

facilitate and entertain, even (or above all) how they are beautiful, is all, paradoxically, the result of an effort James meticulously records the strain of. Kate is an actress dressed and painted for the footlights; Mme de Vionnet, mother of a marriageable daughter, can make herself seem a twenty-year old girl. Maggie imagines Charlotte 'always on the rampart, erect and elegant, with her lace-flounced parasol now folded and now shouldered, march to and fro against a gold-coloured east or west' (397). Like Mme de Vionnet with Chad, Charlotte must 'never, on any pretext' bore her Prince (280). And all three women will be sacrificed, at the end of their novels, in spite of (or because of) all their efforts. In the Prince's formulation, it is indeed the very busy-ness of the women's charm which will eventually 'give them away': 'the punctuality of performance on the part of the other creature was her weakness and her deep misfortune'. Their very efforts will put them at an intrinsic disadvantage with the man who will simply wait while they perform: the essence of *his* charm is that he does not 'lift a finger' for it. (It is interesting, for example, that even Chad's great transformation in *The Ambassadors* from rude American to smooth cosmopolite is never discussed in terms of *his* efforts in achieving it; they are always Mme de Vionnet's efforts and successes, she did it for him.)

The novels, of course, do not only record the sacrifice: they also enact the romance. If one merely reads the novels as chains of causation, then they certainly do have that story to tell, that sacrifice of the female deep buried within a certain masculine ideal. But, to re-use the spatial metaphor formulated in other chapters, because the late novels are essentially dialogic and not monologic, in the same movement of imagination which sees through and round such a phenomenon, they also imagine its bottomlessness, its persuasive beauties, its pleasures. The 'truth' of *The Golden Bowl* does not only lie along that trajectory of *chronos*, linear time, which delivers as its last word Charlotte's defeat and Maggie's victory. In fact one of the models of consciousness being contested within the ancestral house of privilege by the two pairs of subjects (the Ververs, here, against the lovers) might be precisely this issue

of meaning in time; meaning which is either linear and progressive and delivers triumph at its ending, or circular and fatalistic, shaped around a centre of climactic realisation. The reconciliations of comedy are opposed to the irrevocable losses of tragedy; it is the dialogue between these models inside *The Golden Bowl* which has led to the primary critical quarrel over it, over whether James is writing to justify the Ververs or the lovers, whether he is giving us a happy or a tragic ending. It helps defuse the quarrel to suggest that he is creating a world in which both readings co-exist: not reconciled, but in a perpetual tension.

In Charlotte's - tragic - novel, there is triumph, happiness, fulfillment, completion of a sort; only of a different shape to Maggie's. Ignoring the power of the pleasure in the novel is like hearing *Don Giovanni* without the music; to merely read the adulterous affair as a transgression which the narrative will, for better or for worse, eventually purge, is to miss what it *sounds* like as James writes it. Even critics who give persuasive accounts of James's narrative commitment *against* the Ververs' version of events are often dismissive - disapproving, even - of the love affair. For example, Michiel Heyns, whose analysis of the Ververs' acquisitiveness in terms of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is very fine, describes the Prince and Charlotte as 'all too evidently parading their contempt for the "sweet simplicity" of the Ververs as "sacred" solicitude', and writes that 'The comic discrepancy between the Prince and Charlotte's dialogue and their actions is merely an extreme form of the manipulations of language, whereby bedizened description does duty for moral definition'.⁵ But that simple opposition between 'true' action

⁵ Heyns, 205. Just to give a sample of this consensus of critical disapproval of (not to say animus towards) the lovers, and Charlotte in particular, from works chosen pretty much at random: Bradbury in *Henry James: The Late Novels* writes about what she calls the 'elopement scene' at Matcham, 'the false tone of the operatic diction ... depends on a complicity as tawdry in moral terms as the intellectually slipshod communication of the cliché' (149). Daniel Mark Fogel in *Henry James and the Structure of the Romantic Imagination*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981) says Charlotte's thoughts are 'consumed with self-display and self-justification, with perhaps as brazen an indulgence in vanity as is ever allowed a major James character' and talks about 'the false equilibrium that Charlotte ought not to enjoy but to deplore' (129). The 'allowed' and

and 'false' bedizened description simply doesn't seem to answer to the late Jamesian manner: if we are to mistrust bedizened description as mere cover for real actions, what in the late novels can we trust?⁶ James's own narratives demonstrate surely how bedizened description enacts, and becomes, its own reality. And then, would we prefer lovers who *did* exchange 'moral definitions'? And if the Prince and Charlotte are this shabby - this 'comic' - then how can we readers be made to mind their being bought by the Ververs anyway?

The novel is engaged in scrupulously defining just what kind of arrangement the Prince and Charlotte negotiate, and just how it is founded in inequity, in male advantage and female sacrifice, in male freedom and female abject need. The novel is also engaged in defining how that arrangement has to compete against the Ververs' different values, against a reading which finds the lovers, precisely, shabby and immoral. But that match between the splendid male animal and the splendid female animal isn't only set up in order to be deplored and seen through; it moves James, surely? And surely he means it to move us, to seduce us, just as when Strether finally allows himself to imagine Chad with Mme de Vionnet he finds himself, somewhere beyond all his anxieties and qualifications, consenting to the

the 'ought not to' are symptomatic of a certain kind of moralised reading: it's that punitive structuring again, which we saw at work in readings of *The Portrait of a Lady*, where critics seek to find what a character has done 'wrong' in order to justify James's 'punishing' them. In Manfred Mackenzie's *Communities of Honour and Love in Henry James* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976) the Prince and Charlotte 'would provide the official situation, the international marriage, with its poisoned or left-handed imitation' (174); Mackenzie even wonders whether Charlotte 'has in the first place broken off with Amerigo with a view to lying close and keeping herself for another go' (171)!

⁶ That argument of Heyns's about James signalling his disapproval of the relationship by displaying in his writing a gap between 'bedizened description' and the moral reality of what is happening, is interestingly like Bradbury's argument that the whole 'uneasy narrative extravagance' of *The Golden Bowl* is a device intended to convey - to represent, presumably - 'the loss of a common basis of understanding', a sort of decay of integrity in the world of his characters; this even though Bradbury's fundamental argument, which has Maggie as eventually 'extricating' us from the 'confusion', is almost opposite to Heyns's. (Bradbury, 135.) A distaste in these critics - and others - for the erotic, 'romance' content of the novel seems to subliminate itself into a reading of James's late manner as a mere strategy of pastiche and self-irony (or perhaps the distaste is for the manner itself?).

inevitability and the beauty of the idea of their embraces, 'supposing innumerable and wonderful things'. He is not supposing that they exchange moral definitions (or answer any of his anxieties); any more than Zerlina is seduced by Don Giovanni's morality when he sings to her. What Giovanni promises Zerlina is not anything she can have permanently, to defeat anxieties and qualifications. It is the erotic secret space inside the anxious world, not extended into chronological real time and real futures; just as the telegraphist in *In the Cage* dreams up the impossible space in which she can love Captain Everard. The erotic is the secret space where the very material of inequality (seigneur and peasant, gentleman and working girl, or just male and female) can be transformed, can dissolve in a new fluidity. Reciprocities and equalities impossible to establish in the real structures of a world in time (or inverted inequalities, like Swann abjecting himself before the *demi-mondaine* Odette) can be invented and enacted and played out in the alternative world of the body, they can become the very material of touch and exchange:

They were silent at first, only facing and faced, only grasping and grasped, only meeting and met. 'It's sacred', he said at last.

'It's sacred,' she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge (237).

This in *The Golden Bowl* is the very description of that loss of self, that confusion of the boundaries between self and other, literally, on the skin and in the body, that Isabel feared and fled from in *The Portrait of a Lady*. When Caspar kisses her Isabel's sensation is that she has lost her footing: 'it wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet', and 'she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on' (598,90). Later in *The Golden Bowl* Maggie is also described as feeling for her feet - and then, like Isabel, finding them - in a sea of sensations: 'She had her feet somewhere, through it all - it was her companion, absolutely,

who was at sea. And she kept her feet; she pressed them to what was beneath her'(438). Isabel's imagination of the kiss is in terms of something exotic and foreign: 'the hot wind of the desert ... potent, acrid and strange'(598); Maggie complains to herself that 'husbands and wives, luxuriant complications, made the air too tropical'(471). What is different in *The Golden Bowl* from the earlier novel is that James can create with sympathy both the woman who - saving herself - resists the strange flood of the erotic and the woman whose genius is to give herself to it. Isabel no longer has the novel to herself; it is almost as if Mme Merle were given back her youth and beauty to weigh in the scale with her rival, the bright good girl.

The metaphors of space and time in James's account of the Prince's and Charlotte's kiss describe an erotic space exempt from linearity, provisionally free. The space begins as a circle of reciprocity: ('facing and faced, grasping and grasped, meeting and met'; 'this tightened circle'); then the tightened circle, self-completing, reaching out nowhere, inverts itself and becomes instead a passage, a 'narrow strait', through which the very self-containedness, completion, of the circle of two becomes paradoxically an opening onto boundless fluid space: 'the sea beyond'.⁷ The metaphor imitates and suggests sexual penetration just as the kiss does, in a realm of infinite correspondences, where all definitional boundaries 'broke up, broke down, gave way'. The violence of entry from one dimension, linear narrative, to this circular surrounding of the sea, changes, after the 'narrow strait', to 'the longest and deepest of stillnesses'; the minute ('moment') and the infinite ('longest and deepest') are experienced alongside one another in a time that defies counting by any standard of linear extension.

There are two places in the novel where these two alternative shapes of experience, of narrative - the linear, and the circular - are placed side by side, quite explicitly. The first is where Charlotte persuades the Prince to come out with her to buy Maggie's present:

⁷ It is interesting how James's spatial metaphor for the erotic sensation here is very like the model that has been used in previous chapters to describe that dialogue in his late novels between the intelligence that 'sees all round' a phenomenon and the imagination that acknowledges its bottomlessness.

'Well, now I must tell you, for I want to be absolutely honest.' So Charlotte spoke, a little ominously, after they had got into the Park. 'I don't want to pretend, and I can't pretend a moment longer. You may think of me what you will, but I don't care. I knew I shouldn't and I find out how little. I came back for this. Not really for anything else. For this,' she repeated as, under the influence of her tone, the Prince had already come to a pause.

'For "this"?' He spoke as if the particular thing she indicated were vague to him - or were, rather, a quantity that couldn't at the most, be much.

It would be as much, however, as she should be able to make it. 'To have one hour alone with you.'

It had rained heavily in the night, and though the pavements were now dry, thanks to a cleansing breeze, the August morning, with its hovering, thick-drifting clouds and freshened air, was cool and grey. (88)

'This', in one way of reckoning, can't be 'much'; the Prince is about to marry Charlotte's friend for a lifetime, and the one hour she has managed to contrive with him for herself (and at the cost of giving herself away to him absolutely) doesn't seem in any ordinary reckoning like any kind of compensation. But it has been enough in Charlotte's imagination for her to travel half way round the world for; and, in the long run it will indeed turn out to be 'much', in the sense that the golden bowl they find on this expedition will be the key to Maggie's uncovering the secret of their liaison. Charlotte has put, as it were, all the rest of the time in which she can't have the Prince in a scale against the one hour ('or say two') in which she can, and found they weigh equally.

The language of disproportion, of the extreme relativity of values, is picked up and played with in the Prince's and Charlotte's talk about Maggie's present in the chapter; he hates 'to encourage her - and for such a purpose, after all - to spend your money'. She replies 'Because you think I have so little? I've enough, at any rate - enough to take us one hour' (90).

'I'm too poor for some things,' she had said - yet, strange as she was, lightly enough; 'but I'm not too poor for others.' And she had paused again at the top. 'I've been saving up.' (91)

She is weighing Maggie's purchasing power against her own; Maggie can 'buy' the Prince in extension, for permanence; all Charlotte can 'buy' is this hour out of time, whose worth is not in its duration but in its intensity, in its density of meaning. And the intensity accumulates precisely through Charlotte's

deprivation; she can't have duration, permanence, she has nothing else: 'I've been saving up'. The connection between this language of relative value here and their adulteries later is obvious; the intense short hours and afternoons stolen by the lovers in the secret erotic space will be bargained against the long extensions of time on the surface of life where they obediently appear as husbands and wives.

One of the ways James makes us experience in the very texture of the novel the intensity - the relative value - of the 'hour' of pleasure is in that easy movement in the prose from Charlotte's announcing she's come back to have her hour alone with the Prince to the vividly individuated August day: 'It had rained heavily in the night, and though the pavements were now dry, thanks to a cleansing breeze, the August morning, with its hovering, thick-drifting clouds and freshened air, was cool and grey'. Our reading consciousness is released from speculation into motives and futures and pasts into a different temporal awareness, of the now of the novel, felt on the skin and breathed in: the description is given in terms of sensations and scents rather than primarily in visuals. The weather itself has cleared a space of freshness and opportunity after heavy rain, just as Charlotte is taking possession of her moment amidst all her difficulties and disappointments: the 'heavy rain' suggests tactfully and eloquently for us (and perhaps for the Prince too, if we take his as the narrative register of the passage) the sorrows she isn't going to complain about. The sensuality of the moment and the appreciative leap of responsiveness to its appeal in Charlotte create an excitement in the text that escapes the linear sequencing of plot: what's going to 'happen next', however short, is also infinite in possibility. And James's description here invokes a natural, pagan, magic; just as he will in another erotically charged context, later, at Matcham, with its April like an infant Hercules; just as he did in the French countryside on the day Strether met Chad and Mme de Vionnet. The rain has cleansed the odours of the city and its civilisation and through them 'a wholesome smell of irrigation ... rose from the earth'.

The other place in the novel where the two alternative shapings of experience (an 'hour' as opposed to a lifetime; the

moment's intensity of the circle as opposed to *chronos*, the projection of linear time) are explicitly contrasted is near the very end, when Maggie imagines Charlotte's desperation in the weeks before she leaves for America.

Behind the glass lurked the whole history of the relation she had so fairly flattened her nose against it to penetrate - the glass Mrs Verver might, at this stage, have been frantically tapping, from within, by way of supreme, irrepressible entreaty ... She could thus have translated Mrs Verver's tap against the glass, as I have called it, into fifty forms; could perhaps have translated it most into the form of a reminder that would pierce deep. 'You don't know what it is to have been loved and broken with. You haven't been broken with, because in your relation what can there have been, worth speaking of, to break? Ours was everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness; and if it was to have no meaning, no better meaning than that such a creature as you could breathe upon it, at your hour, for blight, why was I myself dealt with all for deception? Why condemned after a couple of short years to find the golden flame - oh the golden flame! - a mere handful of black ashes?' (521)

The two women are separated by the glass that first seems to exclude one way, then the other. Once it shut Maggie out, and she registers how she demeaned herself, seemed childish ('flattened her nose against it'), in her first efforts to see what was on the other side; now it traps Charlotte, leaves her - and foolishly - at the mercy of Maggie's interpretations, Maggie's charity. The glass separates two ideas, two versions of life and value. Its transparency represents their mutual awareness, their mutual dependency, even; its impermeable hardness represents their irreconcilable opposition.

This passage exists in a relationship to Charlotte's 'hour' with the Prince that is like the before and after of fulfillment. It is in the very nature of 'romance' that it doesn't last; the 'hour' of the erotic choice, the choice out of responsibility, out of consequences, will end, in linear time, and will be succeeded by loss and diminishment. That pattern - of desire for a fulfillment that promises exemption from linear time, succeeded in *linear time* by emptiness, doubt, decay, is of course the shape of sexual pleasure itself (*post coitum omni animalis tristis sunt*); and is the classic dualism of love-in-poetry. Poetry promises - and, within its own space, delivers - exemption from all laws outside the charmed circle of the erotic; but in its very hyperbole of assertion it also acknowledges its own vulnerability in time to all those laws.

(Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' - 'Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,/ Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time'; or Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'.) This 'before and after' shape is in fact the 'shape' of the European novel of adultery (*Elective Affinities*, *Mme Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*); while Maggie's story represents something more like the English novel tradition, with its gradually and problematically progressing love story ending in the fulfillment of marriage, projected into a linear future full of the unknown. The European novel-shape is a steep curve, a pinnacle of fulfillment, then a falling off as steep and sharp, an ending; as opposed to the English winding, thwarted slow approach to a threshold.⁸ Both shapes co-exist inside *The Golden Bowl*.

It is difficult to resist reading the whole intrusive hyper-elaborated commentary by the Assinghams in the novel as playing out James's explicit interest in how the story revolves around these two polarised possibilities in novelistic structure, the European and the English. The invention of Fanny and the Colonel, characters whose only function in the action is their agitated and fascinated consciousness of it, is not characteristic of James's method elsewhere in the oeuvre. Fanny, surely, is the female English - or American - novelist, irrepressibly match-making, unstoppably imagining, feverishly romanticising: hence her 'exotic' colouring and dress. But under the exoticism - the romance - of her surface, as she herself often jokes, there shelters a highly respectable lady; moralising, shockable, conscientious, frightened and guilty at the wild improprieties her naive dabblings in romance have set in train. The comedy here is at the expense of those anomalies in the English language novel tradition exemplified by, say,

⁸ Of course there are numerous exceptions to this pattern in both traditions. *Mill on the Floss*, for example, has the curve of tragedy, consequent on Maggie's bungled choice of the erotic, which she must be punished for without even having had her 'hour'. And although *Le Rouge et le Noir* appears to follow the European curve, that can't be understood in terms of the erotic choice; if anything, it's Julien's 'choice' of 'linear' ambition, his obliviousness of the boundlessness of the erotic that undoes him...

Jane Eyre or *Mill on the Floss*; those anomalies which owe everything to the preponderance in the tradition of women both as writers and readers, women sufferingingly juggling the irreconcilables of contemporary femininity. Fanny is trapped inside a 'novel' whose romance won't stay inside the boundaries of the proper where she wants it; won't end with marriage, but spills over, and out of the very energies of passion she responds to so quiveringly, into the improper territory of the European novel. At the end of *The Golden Bowl* Fanny is even punitive, vengefully and relishingly (and apparently without any of Maggie's ambivalent feelings about it) expelling Charlotte, who had so threatened to spoil the happy ending she had planned, to the ends of the earth; rehearsing that familiar scapegoating device by which so many English language novelists had purged and made safe the passions conjured in their fictions.

'Ah, make no sacrifice,' said Maggie. 'See me through.'

'That's it - that's all I want. I should be too base -! Besides,' Fanny went on, 'you're too splendid.'

'Splendid?'

'Splendid. Also, you know, you are all but "through". You've done it,' said Mrs Assingham.

But Maggie only half took it from her. 'What does it strike you that I've done?'

'What you wanted. They're going.'

Maggie continued to look at her. 'Is that what I wanted?'

... Her companion smiled superior. 'I don't need to be told - either! I see something, thank God, every day.' And then as Maggie might appear to be wondering what, for instance: 'I see the long miles of ocean and the dreadful great country, State after State - which have never seemed to me so big or so terrible. I see *them* at last, day by day and step by step, at the far end - and I see them never come back. But never - simply... '(505)

It would be absurd to stretch a point and have James make the Colonel represent Flaubert or Tolstoy. But his less moralising *laissez faire*, his man-of-the-world's unflappable realism (when Fanny convinces herself that the Prince and Charlotte didn't have time to consummate their relationship in Italy, he wonders 'Does it take so much time?'⁷⁶) do represent within the novel a different way, and a male way, of reading what happens. It's interesting that, unlike his wife's, his sympathy is often with Charlotte; he often gives voice to shades of hesitation in response to his wife's unqualified talking up of Adam and Maggie:

'In the first place Mr Verver isn't aged.'
 The Colonel just hung fire - but it came. 'Then why the deuce does he
 - oh, poor dear man! - behave as if he were?'
 She took a moment to meet it. 'How do you know how he behaves?'
 'Well, my own love, we see how Charlotte does!'
 Again, at this, she faltered; but again she rose. 'Ah, isn't it my
 own point that he's charming to her?'
 'Doesn't it depend a bit on what she regards as charming?' (292)

It's almost at moments like these as if they write the story between them, demonstrating its incompleteness and the impossibility of finalising it, of reconciling their versions, as they dispute one by one - hesitating, doubting, ironising - the very terms in which it is told. The Colonel challenges the pattern through which Fanny reads Adam's innocence and Charlotte's defection; he inserts instead into the story Charlotte's need and Adam's defection. Her frame of reference is moralising, and in terms of female duty; his is sexual and in terms of male responsibility. For a long way into the novel Fanny dissimulates and denies the adultery; the Colonel realistically estimates its likelihood from the start, out of that male tradition of frank and unagonised recognition that could be said to connect him with Maupassant and Balzac, and that has something to do with a wider male experience (his wife with characteristic feminine hyperbole says he has 'taken part in the sack of cities', 84). 'What in the world did you ever suppose was going to happen?' (213) he asks, like Strether's 'what in the world else would one have wished it to be like?'. The Colonel responds to Charlotte with a kind of wistful sympathy: he likes Charlotte's 'knowing what she wants' (84) and her 'instincts that made against waste' (73); he feels she is 'much more of his own sort than his wife' (73). Both the sympathy and its wistfulness, its essential ineffectiveness to save her, could be thought of as characteristic of the treatment of the adulterous woman in the European novel tradition.

Charlotte's instincts make against waste: to borrow from her own vocabulary of economy, she 'spends' her life where Maggie 'saves' hers. It is characteristic of the anti-Puritan

frame of reference of the late novels, that here it is the spender, and not the saver, who doesn't 'waste'. All Maggie's long struggle to recover her husband is expressed to herself in terms of abstinence. Over and over again her syntax defines the almost said that is held back, the almost done that is restrained. 'Had he but uttered ... she would have found herself ... voluble almost to eloquence'(318); she might 'sound out their doom in a sentence' (457) but she doesn't. Her first impulse, or at least her second, is always to preserve the bridge game, not to allow the 'cry to pierce the stillness of peaceful sleep'(352). Her 'high undertaking' is 'to prove there was nothing the matter with her' (354), she practises a 'passionate prudence'(357). Her triumph on the very last page of the novel is in preventing her husband from telling her the truth he is at last ready to tell her; 'All she now knew ... was that she should be ashamed to listen to the uttered word;(547) she seals it up in silence with her kiss.

It is 'bad' Charlotte and not 'nice' Maggie, who is the truth teller in this novel. Wherever all that is unspoken and dissimulated in the novel comes closest to utterance, it is in Charlotte's mouth. When Adam proposes to her, for instance, she doesn't speak one word in her reply that isn't painfully, painstakingly truthful:

'I won't pretend it won't be good for me to marry. Good for me, I mean,' she pursued, 'because I'm so awfully unattached. I should like to be a little less adrift. I should like to have a home. I should like to have an existence. I should like to have a motive for one thing more than another - a motive outside of myself. 'In fact,' she said, so sincerely that it almost showed pain, yet so lucidly that it almost showed humour, 'in fact, you know, I want to be married.'(175)

When Adam says that he has known her 'long and from far back' she asks him 'Do you think you've "known" me?' and 'I mean when it's a question of learning, one learns sometimes too late'(176,7). She doesn't of course actually offer him the salient fact, of her past relationship, whatever it was, with his son-in-law. Her truth telling is not of this kind: it is not moralised. Her utterances aren't confessions: they represent rather proffered openings into the seamlessness of Verresque certainty and safety. She rends the fabric of the linear

unfolding of their imperturbability. Maggie's defeat of her in the linear unfolding of the novel consists in her repairing, sewing up that fabric as fast as Charlotte's open-ended utterance gashes it open.

It is perhaps this 'truth-telling' that distinguishes Charlotte the American and Kate the English girl, from their Continental counterpart in Marie de Vionnet. The *vieille sagesse* Mme de Vionnet falls back on in her crisis on has very little, we know from Marie herself, to do with telling the truth; on the contrary, all her hopes of keeping Chad, or, failing that, of best protecting her own future, depend on her traditionally feminine skills of dissimulation. Kate and Charlotte can be skilled dissimulators too, but their real, rare pedigree, their special attraction, consists in how frankly and with what intelligence they can describe - so long as they are never boring - their situation to their lovers. Mme de Vionnet plays out a role ultimately, knows from a common stock of women's wisdom on such matters what the older mistress of a young man must eventually expect. Kate and Charlotte, within a culture that (the famous English hypocrisy) has no stock of gestures for sustaining and explaining their improper and illegitimate roles, are inventing as they go along, offering analysis from the very frontiers of possibility.

There is some advantage for Charlotte in her frankness. It is the advantage she names herself, when she takes her hour with the Prince:

'I wanted you to understand. I wanted you, that is, to hear. I don't care, I think, whether you understand or not. If I ask nothing of you I don't - I mayn't - ask even so much as that. What you may think of me - that doesn't in the least matter. What I want is that it shall always be with you - so that you'll never be able quite to get rid of it - that I *did*. I won't say that you did - you may make as little of that as you like. But that I was here with you where we are and as we are - I just saying this. Giving myself, in other words, away - and perfectly willing to do it for nothing. That's all.' (94)

It is impossible to imagine Mme de Vionnet clearing that space for her own motives to be articulated aloud - or wanting to. Of course as Charlotte says herself, speaking them aloud can't help her, isn't even intended to make any difference in how the Prince thinks of her. All she is able to articulate, in fact, is

that she at least knows and can freely name her own abjectness, her own 'giving herself away' to him. Her articulation is essentially for herself. It is a small, an equivocal freedom, it only exists provisionally and in relation to the Prince's encompassing larger one; but for her moment Charlotte is able to transform it into a generous breathing space, and to find a paradoxical self-possession in the very naming of her helplessness.

In the scene on the terrace the night of the bridge game, the same pattern of rending freedom and repairing reticence is played out in the speech between Maggie and Charlotte. Charlotte - and violently (as in the relationship between Kate and Milly, one of things James is interested in showing us is how women, even working within the codes of charming appeasing femininity, threaten and fear one another) - appears to assert herself as the offerer of candour, the clearer of an air 'heavy with thunder' (463).

'Have you any ground of complaint of me? Is there any wrong you consider I've done you? I feel at last that I've a right to ask you.' (466)

The risk she takes is characteristic; bravely she brings the novel to the brink of plain statement. Maggie has only has to reply with the same candour for all the 'high decorum' of the bridge game to fail and collapse in an instant. But equally characteristically Maggie falters back from that brink; denying that there is any 'complaint' with her usual protective reticence. And Charlotte's appearance of candour here is not in fact quite candid: she is presuming upon Maggie's reticence, gambling on Maggie's not answering her, on Maggie's refusing to say that she knows what Charlotte is talking about. She offers the truth, but in order for Maggie to deny it for her. The rent she proffers in the fabric no longer opens onto any real world of possibilities outside; or perhaps - because perhaps the possibility that Maggie will answer is, for its moment, real - they both look through the rent into the howling storm, and both, each momentarily dependent on the other, the dissimulator on the impasse of the truth-teller, the truth-teller on the persistence of the dissimulator, step back from that brink. So that in the end Charlotte's candour as her story winds down into

her collapse and defeat dwindles to only representing a very limited kind of openness: all she can do, finally, is force a situation in which both women will, explicitly and directly, and each knowing the other knows she is doing it, lie to one another, in full view of their little world. In the end the truth-teller can only compel an inverted anti-truth. By the end of the novel Charlotte has forced open Maggie's eyes; Maggie has forced shut Charlotte's mouth. The kiss seals the reciprocity of the exchange.

Maggie and Charlotte's rivalry in the novel is reciprocal. It is not only Charlotte who offends against Maggie's 'right'; there is another offence, Maggie's offence, written into the novel, more submerged and covert, a sin whose appearance is all innocence and daylight (the Prince calls it a 'thickness of white air that was like a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals', 42), counterpoint to the more old-fashioned night-time sin of Charlotte's and the Prince's adultery. Maggie's 'sin' reminds us of Isabel Archer too, the Isabel Alfred Habegger writes so percipiently about in *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*:

Months later, visiting Gilbert Osmond's apartment on Bellosguardo for the first time, Isabel is fascinated by his obedient, porcelain-like daughter, Pansy is fifteen years old and physically mature, but somehow remains a little girl. Isabel is twenty-two. Osmond is forty. They are all sitting together. Suddenly, the devoted father does something: He has Pansy get up 'out of her chair ... making her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm round her little waist. The child fixed her eyes on Isabel with a still, disinterested gaze, which seemed void of an intention, but conscious of an attraction'. ... A childish grown-up is required, in the presence of a stranger, to stand between her father's knees, her waist encircled by his arm, her mind emptied of all volition or interest and containing only a passive responsiveness ... We wonder what cruel operation has been performed on her to make her so perfectly responsive to another's will. Is the will that has shaped her engaged in another project at this very moment? Could Osmond be using Pansy to reach Isabel in some sinister fashion?

It seems so, for when we next observe father and daughter in this scene, standing now but still entwined, the heroine has begun to mimic the feelings that presumably possess the serene daughter:

Mr Osmond stood there ... with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and his daughter, who had now locked her arm into one of his own, clinging to him and looking up, while her eyes moved from his

own face to Isabel's. Isabel waited, with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed.⁹

As in so many other places, that which was mere hypocrisy in *The Portrait of a Lady* is translated into the authentic thing-in-itself in the later novel. James in *The Portrait* could not fully explore that proneness to filial abjection in Isabel because Osmond is not really a good father. We are meant to be in no doubt in *The Golden Bowl* that Adam is completely the father Maggie believes he is. All that tenderly proud appreciation she has for his modesty, that painful sensitivity to his vulnerability, that responsible protectiveness which provisionally inverts their relationship so that she often refers to Adam as if he were her child and not she his; these are real values, not founded on any 'mistake'. When Maggie finds Adam with Mrs Rance he sees 'the look in his daughter's eyes - the look with which he saw her take in exactly what had occurred' (130); and indeed, just as Maggie has intuited, Adam has been victim of the predatory conversationalist just because of his inability to be anything but gentle and generous socially. When Maggie agonises (and exults) at the irony that her father 'did it all for me ... did it all for me and only for me' (415) she is right; we are privy to Adam's 'discovery' that he might 'put his child at peace' by his own marriage; that Charlotte might 'contribute to' this 'service to his daughter' (168). When Maggie wails to Fanny over the adulterers' betrayal, it does not surprise us that it is the betrayal of the father that has for her the second, weightier emphasis: 'They pretended to love me ... And they pretended to love *him*' (416).

The whole plot of the second part of the novel is structured around the father's and daughter's hyper-considerateness towards one another. The mainspring of Maggie's great effort at first is to protect her father from knowledge of the adulterous affair by her own appearance of seamless contentment. Later that effort seems to transform into an effort to appear not to know (again through demonstrating her contentment) what she now presumes her father knows, because she

⁹ Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'*, 151.

doesn't want him made unhappy by knowing she's unhappy. By the end of the novel what we seem to make out is that both father and daughter not only know about the affair, but presume the other knows about it too, and that the other knows they know. Yet the actual fact of the separation is as close as they get to an admission to one another of what both know. They continue to dissimulate that knowledge from one another almost as a kind of inverted mutual reassurance; their refusal to even once ever candidly name what has happened amounts to a denial of its power in the face of their power. At the end their collaborative dissimulation is victorious, even: it demonstrates that nothing the adulterers have done can break the sacred rules between father and daughter ('full as she was of little rules, considerations, provisions', 139) in which such possibilities have no names.

Deep in the very language James uses to piece out the relationship of father and daughter there is an ambivalence; the contradiction of their innocence and their concealments, their transparency and their denial. Maggie's own articulated version of this contradiction is that the innocence was real until the intrusion upon their innocence of the sin-bearing Charlotte. Repeatedly her imagination in its soreness returns to an iconic, yearning, familial Eden before the father and daughter, intact in their self-sufficiency, were intruded upon (an Eden in which somehow both of them are the parents and both the children; one of her repeated tender jokes with her father is that he is much younger than she is):

...the treasured past, which hung there behind them like a framed picture in a museum, a high watermark for the history of their old fortune; the summer evening, in the park at Fawns, when, side by side under the trees just as now, they had let their happy confidence lull them with its most golden tone. (357)

and:

...the loss, more than anything else, of their old freedom, their never having had to think, where they were together concerned, of anything but each other. (354)

The absolute contrasts between the innocent then and the experienced now are expressed in Maggie's imagination in terms of various oppositions; a temperate summer is opposed to an

overheated tropicalism ('husbands and wives, luxuriant complications, made the air too tropical,'471); young America is opposed to old Europe; images of the sacred are opposed to the profane; and above all the seemliness and decorum of a chaste reticence are opposed to the floridity and indecency of frank talk:

'...this very fact of their seeming to have nothing 'inward' really to talk about wrapped him up for her in a kind of sweetness that was wanting, as a consecration, even in her yearning for her husband.(349)

and

The fractions of occasions, the chance minutes that put them face, to face had, as yet, of late, contrived to count but little, between them, either for the sense of opportunity or for that of exposure; inasmuch as the lifelong rhythm of their intercourse made against all cursory handling of deep things. They had never availed themselves of any given quarter of an hour to gossip about fundamentals; they moved slowly through large still spaces; they could be silent together, at any time, with much more comfort than hurriedly expressive. It appeared indeed to have become true that their common appeal measured itself, for vividness, just by this economy of sound; (352)

Consistently, for Maggie, for Fanny, it is Charlotte and not Amerigo who is the serpent in this Eden, the scapegoat who must be expelled from it in order to decontaminate its original happiness. We watch the process of the scapegoating of Charlotte in the novel by all its characters (but not by James: this nice distinction carefully made by Michiel Heyns¹⁰) including the Prince, that barbarian, whose gentleman's honour, towards the end of the novel, seems to consist in the unflinchingness with which he sacrifices she-who-had-been his match, his mate: 'He had to turn away, but he wasn't in the least a coward; he would wait on the spot for the issue of what he had done on the spot'(499). It is a sacrifice licensed, of course, by Charlotte's having from the beginning 'given herself away'. The Prince's phrase has folds upon folds of implication: of Charlotte's generosity; of her exposure; and of a contract, almost, in which she has dispossessed herself of herself, and of her right to exact, as a woman, from the gentleman in him. The scapegoating of Charlotte by the characters in the novel is

¹⁰ In Heyns's account 'Charlotte is the scapegoat of Maggie's text, in that Maggie's fiction is "controlled by the effect of a scapegoat it does not acknowledge"; but *The Golden Bowl* "acknowledges the scapegoat effect which does not control it".'268.

essentially a gendered process. It is a familiar cultural trope, of course, that in the sexual crime against propriety, or against Eden, it is the woman's act that profanes the trust of innocence, which was invested in her and not in the man. In *The Golden Bowl*, though, the perception of the gendering of the scapegoating process goes behind the sexual shock at Charlotte's incontinence; it is not sexual *shame* that Maggie, appalled, attributes to Charlotte and then punishes. It seems rather to be Charlotte's sexual power, and then her powerlessness, that rouse Maggie to such energies of retribution. When a scapegoat is sought to purge the crime and restore the innocence of Eden, it is the woman and not the man who is helplessly available for punishment, because in her transgression she has forfeited, socially and in imagination, her rights and power.

In the light of this scapegoating of Charlotte, it is striking that the only time when the scapegoat is mentioned explicitly is when Maggie makes reference to herself in the role:

They thus tacitly put it upon her to be disposed of, the whole complexity of their peril, and she promptly saw why: because she was there, and just as she was, to lift it off them and take it; to charge herself with it as the scapegoat of old, of whom she had once seen a terrible picture, had been charged with the sins of the people and had gone forth into the desert to sink under his burden and die. That indeed wasn't *their* design and their interest, that she should sink under hers; it wouldn't be their feeling that she should do anything but live, live on somehow for their benefit, and even as much as possible in their company, to keep proving to them that they had indeed escaped and that she was still there to simplify. (457)

We need to ask what the significance of this transference is, and what makes Maggie see herself as the scapegoat even as she is engaged in the process of shedding Charlotte and recovering her husband. Associated with this transference are all those other moments when Maggie's identification with Charlotte's suffering is so intense that she even voices to herself, ventriloquising for Charlotte, how it feels to be deprived, like Charlotte, of 'the golden flame' and left with 'a mere handful of black ashes' (521). Is this sympathetic identification disingenuous in Maggie, a sort of sublimated gloating over her rival?

There is certainly a way of reading a degree of disingenuousness as psychologically consistent with that Maggie whose precise history and persona are vivid in the novel; that plucky bright-faced convent-school girl whose natural mode is a shy playful irony. When the Prince in their courtship asks her to believe he's not 'a hypocrite', Maggie stares and blushes: 'duplicity, like "love", had to be joked about' (37). Much later on, and in the face of the Prince's 'duplicity', she thinks of the lovers as 'high-Wagnerian', with whatever little touch of private contempt. When she discovers 'high-Wagnerian' passion ensconced at the very hearth of her life, she is not merely overwhelmed by it, she has her own mockery of it, her insightful spiky guesses at its stumbles, its foolishnesses (as when she catches the Prince out misunderstanding what she means by 'two' relations with Charlotte, 429). At dinner with Maggie Lady Castledean no doubt believes she's with 'a smaller social insect'; but it is Maggie's private irony that in fact the 'smaller insect' with its 'little protuberant eyes' is at that moment seeing more than her Ladyship (334).

In other words, there is in Maggie's very timidity a kind of stubbornness, a quiet presumption; something rather like how her father's unassuming social persona covers his huge ambition for American City, his imperturbable belief in himself. We are given sudden glimpses of Maggie's temper, her sheer indignation at being crossed; this little rich girl, after all, has always had everything she wanted. There's the revealing passing flash, for instance, while she's sticking her hatpin in, at the new maid who 'she had lately found herself thinking of as abysmal' (355); of course the fury and the pin are meant for Charlotte, but it seems telling too that this little vent of rage is one of the few places in the novel where James suddenly opens up for us an impression of how every least domestic gesture, every private twist of feeling in the two households is afloat on the support of numberless nameless voiceless 'inferiors'.

That quietly opinionated Maggie, fighting her corner, we can imagine permitting herself some dissimulated satisfactions at Charlotte's defeat; nice convent-educated girls won't gloat - they are 'full of the superstition of not "hurting"' (135) - but

may not be beyond dwelling, with every appearance of meek feelingness, on the abasement of Wagnerian tragic heroines. But the timbre of the late passages of the novel must convince us, surely, that James means there to be more to Maggie's identification with Charlotte's suffering than merely the sneaking triumph of the 'protuberant eyed' social insect. There are moments in the last drawn-out weeks at Fawns when the tensions between the protagonists feel more vexed and complex than can be explained by anyone's straightforward 'victory'.

Or, to put the problem the other way round, Maggie's triumph in having her husband finally all to herself in the last pages of the novel is too unalloyed not to make us ask some questions of it: wouldn't we expect it to be mixed up with some sense of loss of that father she has been almost inseparable from in all that 'treasured past', that father the preservation of whose well-being has been the paramount law of her life? Maggie has lost her fantasy-companion, her child-parent in that Eden-relationship of innocence which has been at the heart of her imagination of value. But the huge relief at the departure of the senior Ververs for American City does not only feel like a relief at getting rid finally of the scapegoated Charlotte. Some other trouble, some other weight, has been lifted out of Maggie's life to liberate her for the final soaring reconciliation with her husband. She and the Prince agree to postpone their reconciliation, their reckoning, not until *Charlotte* has gone, but until *they* have gone, the mistress and the father both; 'till they're away ... till they've left the country ... Till we've ceased to see them - for as long as God may grant! Till we're really alone.' (535)

In those last weeks at Fawns when Maggie weeps at Charlotte's torment there are glimpses in her narrative, flashed in the interstices of perception rather than seen head-on, of her father as something other than child-companion and put-upon innocent. His very neutrality, his mouse-likeness, his withholding of his utterance and verdict from everyone, loom suddenly, even to Maggie, as terrible in their own unaccusable way:

One of the attentions she [Charlotte] had from immediately after her marriage most freely paid him [Adam] was that of her interest in his rarities, her appreciation of his taste, her native passion for beautiful objects and her grateful desire not to miss anything he could teach her about them. Maggie had in due course seen her begin to 'work' this unfortunately natural source of sympathy for all it was worth. She took possession of the ground throughout its extent; she abounded, to odd excess, one might have remarked, in the assumption of its being for her, with her husband, all the ground, the finest, clearest air and most breathable medium common to them ... Maggie, wonderfully, in the summer days, felt it forced upon her that that was one way, after all, of being a genial wife; and it was never so much forced upon her as at these odd moments of her encountering the *sposi*, as Amerigo called them, under the coved ceilings of Fawns while, so together, yet at the same time so separate, they were making their daily round. Charlotte hung behind, with emphasized attention; she stopped when her husband stopped, but at the distance of a case or two, or of whatever other succession of objects; and the likeness of their connexion would not have been wrongly figured if he had been thought of as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long silken halter looped around her beautiful neck. He didn't twitch it, yet it was there; he didn't drag her, but she came; and those indications that I have described the Princess as finding extraordinary in him were two or three mute facial intimations which his wife's presence didn't prevent his addressing his daughter - nor prevent his daughter, as she passed, it was doubtless to be added, from flushing a little at the receipt of. They amounted perhaps only to a wordless, wordless smile, but the smile was the soft shake of the twisted silken rope, and Maggie's translation of it, held in her breast till she got well away, came out only, as if it might have been overheard, when some door was closed behind her. 'Yes, you see - I lead her now by the neck, I lead her to her doom, and she doesn't so much as know what it is, though she has a fear in her heart which, if you had the chances to apply your ear there that I, as a husband, have, you would hear thump and thump and thump.' (492-3)

The apparent innocence of silence and inaction (Adam has *done* nothing) might after all, Maggie suddenly intuits, cover such brutalities, such a cold relish at his so cruelly withholding himself. In Maggie's imagination the flutter in her own breast, where she conceals in shame what she has heard (shame at herself for recognising it, shame at Charlotte's abjection, shame at her father's exposure of a secret self?) sympathetically becomes the thump of fear in Charlotte's breast, the breast where Adam, taking his rights as a husband, may lay his head exultingly to listen to the fear he causes. The sexual charge of that imagery (the wife's breast where he listens is for a moment so close to the daughter's) is a part, surely, of Maggie's flutter of shame.

The image of Adam's leading Charlotte by a silken halter explicitly reverses that image Maggie has earlier entertained of him as a lamb sacrificed to the wickedness of the others (356). It also revisits Maggie's perpetual fallacy of the parent-child inversion: in fact her father is not a lamb, led, not a child,

minded. It is he who leads and controls. In one of their long tête-à-têtes in the grounds at Fawns, Maggie had exclaimed, in the kind of sentimental hyperbole characteristic of her filial piety, that 'Everything that touches you, everything that surrounds you, goes on - by your splendid indifference and your incredible permission - at your expense' (479). Maggie's mode as daughter has been mostly to bask in the all-powerfulness, the 'permission', of the father; reading it as a generosity by which they all live, as a power characterised, as it were, negatively, by its not exercising itself. But towards the end of the novel, as she is witness to Charlotte's punishment, that mode falters, and with an ambivalence that could almost be the ambivalence of an Emily Dickinson poem (and the discomfiting merging of father-lover imagery belongs in Dickinson territory too) she glances obliquely, through her moments of identification with Charlotte, at the real effects of the all-beneficence of that 'Papa above', wrapped around concealingly in his philanthropic white mist.¹¹ Does he suddenly frighten her; does she suddenly feel the silken halter of his devotion to her, his immense investment in her (her stupidity at bridge had ever been 'his small, his sole despair,' 456) around her own neck? (That that ambivalence might in fact extend outside the familial into the social and political is of course quite explicit in *The Golden Bowl*. The inhabitants of American City clearly want nothing to do with Adam Verver's philanthropy; which can either be read as their 'horrible vulgar' philistinism, 479, or as his unwanted imposition upon them of his willed fulfillment.)

Maggie's own image for the discovery she makes in the course of the novel - or rather, one of many images she tries out on what she discovers - is that she finds a sinister stranger in her home:

She saw at all events why horror itself had almost failed her; the horror that, foreshadowed in advance, would, by her thought, have made everything that was unaccustomed in her cry out with pain; the horror of finding evil seated, all at its ease, where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously *behind*, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness. It was the first sharp falsity she had known in her life, to touch at all, or be touched by; it

¹¹ The reference is to Dickinson's poem that opens 'Papa above! / Regard a Mouse / O'erpowered by the Cat!'. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H Johnson. Boston: Little, 1960, 32.

had met her like some bad-faced stranger surprised in one of the thick-carpeted corridors of a house of quiet on a Sunday afternoon; and yet, yes, amazingly, she had been able to look at terror and disgust only to know that she must put away from her the bitter-sweet of their freshness.(459)

Ostensibly, this only reiterates that version of her experience which has an intrusion, brought by the adulterers, contaminating an Eden perfect before their transgression. But in the interstices of this account (or looking, like Maggie, *behind* it) can't we uncover something else? Because of the high decorum exacted of her as 'her husband's wife ... her father's daughter', Maggie has asked whether she hasn't been cheated of 'the protests of passion', 'the rages of jealousy'. We are concentrated absolutely here on what 'the civilised order exacts'; we are experiencing the learned movement of Maggie's reticence from the inside. It was not only bridge her father schooled her in; and perhaps all her lapses were met like her failure at bridge with his undemonstrative but definite disappointment. Or perhaps in anticipation of his disappointment she never lapsed.

Because of her learned high decorum, Maggie has had to put away the terror and disgust that came with her discovery of the adultery; she has had to put away 'the bitter-sweet of their freshness'. We remember how the susceptible governess in *The Turn of the Screw* didn't only dread her ghosts but began to dread the possibility of their absence. There's an ambivalence, to begin with, about that thick-carpeted house of quiet, an ambivalence we don't perhaps quite focus until we read to the end of the sentence. Was the thick-carpeted quiet of the house stale, so that Maggie found even terror and disgust fresh? Why were those strong emotions of repulsion bitter sweet and not just bitter; and why was even their bitterness part of their freshness? And although Maggie has always wanted to tell herself that the 'evil' came from outside and contaminated the house, doesn't this ambivalent thrill at the astringency of 'seeing and facing more' (James's phrase from his review of Stevenson¹²) suggest that there was something wrong, something false, in the hermetic seal of the house before the stranger came?

¹² *Essays on English and American Writers*, 1269. See chapter 7 note 14.

In dreams, the mean-faced stranger met in the corridors of home turns out as often as not to be a family member, an intimate there (we remember James's pursuing-fleeing ghosts in *The Jolly Corner* and the dream of the *Galérie d'Apollon*). In the corridors of Fawns in those last weeks Maggie often surprises 'a little quiet gentleman' who 'presented a somewhat meditative back', leading Charlotte by her halter: he is her dear father, and he is at the same time a man capable of bringing a woman's 'heart in[to] her throat' and compelling her to follow him around with her shame and her defeat 'done up' in a 'napkin'(491). That image of the napkin, borrowed nightmarishly from dinner table niceties, is particularly telling. The thing you carry round in a napkin, looking vainly for 'some corner' to put it down in, so that it can't be traced to you, is something spat out, humiliating, unswallowable. The adjacent mention of Charlotte's (and/or Maggie's) heart in her throat can't help interacting with the napkin idea; the heart, instead of the high-Wagnerian vessel of passion, is become a piece of choking gristle. (Is it making too explicit a nuance of suggestion to point out too that for women carrying around shaming secrets hidden in awkward-to-dispose-of-napkins has usually to do with menstruation? Part of Charlotte's humiliation is that she will be the mother of no-one's children.)

In her own words, Maggie had only *dreamed* of finding 'good' behind 'so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness'(459). The sharp, painful, bitter-sweet discovery of the stranger in the house wakes her up out of that dream; her own imagery makes the change sound less like innocence outraged (these things were real, and now they are spoiled) than innocence growing up into experience (these things were not real, and I was ignorant and deluded). In retrospect, all the idealism and all the trust were not only misplaced, but were also intrinsically inadequate to the grown-up truth. The adultery in the novel is not the only wrong thing lurking in the Eden of this privilege.

Charlotte really has something to complain about; the ferocity with which she turns on Maggie in the garden temple at Fawns ('I want to have him [Adam] at last a little to myself; I want, strange as it may seem to you ... to keep the man I've

married',512) is not merely a dissimulation of the rage she feels at the loss of her lover. It has also simply been true that the relationship of father and daughter has prevented her having that marriage with her husband she thought she was agreeing to in Brighton. She protests, with a vehemence as if she really feels herself justified, as at a trick played on her, at something crooked and unclean in the bargain she accepted when she told Adam then that she thought it would be good for her to be married:

'Good for me, I mean,' she pursued, 'because I'm so awfully unattached. I should like to be a little less adrift, I should like to have a home. I should like to have an existence. I should like to have a motive for one thing more than another - a motive outside of myself.'(175)

But she hasn't had the home, or the marriage, or the motive. When Fanny, flustered and reproachful, interrogates Charlotte on why she's come out with the Prince to the Foreign Office squash, Charlotte isn't appeasing or defensive; she candidly, although never expecting Fanny to appreciate her point, explains. She is being as much wife as her husband is making space for her to be: 'I accepted Adam's preference that I should come tonight without him; just as I accept, absolutely, as a fixed rule, all his preferences. But that doesn't alter the fact, of course, that my husband's daughter, rather than his wife, should have felt that she could, after all, be the one to stay with him, the one to make the sacrifice of this hour...' (199).

When Charlotte finally makes her way to the Prince that rainy March tea-time, her explanation that she is there in the end more or less because she hasn't anything else to do, isn't, after all, mere pretext, or mere 'bedizened description'. Somewhere between amusement and exasperation (never falling into the complaint which would fatally bore him) she spells out for the Prince fragment by banal fragment - timings, domestic details - the baffling crime against them that isn't a crime, the innocence that blocks them and thwarts them and yields to them nowhere; channels them, effectively, into the inevitability of committing their own dark ordinary crime, the counterpoint to this bright unaccusable childish one:

'I can't help wondering when you must have last laid eyes on them.' And then as it had apparently for her companion an effect of abruptness: 'Maggie, I mean, and the child. For I suppose you know he's with her.'

'Oh yes, I know he's with her. I saw them this morning.'

'And did they then announce their programme?'

'She told me she was taking him, as usual, *da nonno*.'

'And for the whole day?'

He hesitated, but it was as if his attitude had slowly shifted. 'She didn't say. And I didn't ask.'

'Well,' she went on, 'it can't have been later than half past ten - I mean when you saw them. They had got to Eaton Square before eleven. You know we don't formally breakfast, Adam and I; we have tea in our rooms - at least I have; but luncheon is early, and I saw my husband, this morning, by twelve; he was showing the child a picture book. Maggie had been there with him, had left them settled together. Then she had gone out - taking the carriage for something he had been intending but that she offered to do instead.'

The Prince appeared to confess, at this, to his interest. Taking, you mean, your carriage?'

'I don't know which, and it doesn't matter. It's not a question,' she smiled, 'of a carriage the more or less.' (231)

Charlotte has been back to Eaton Square - her home - three times in the course of her day, to find Maggie still there, to slip away again, unnoticed. 'What do they really suppose,' she asked, 'becomes of one? - not so much sentimentally or morally, so to call it, since that doesn't matter; but even just physically, materially, as a mere wandering woman...' (232). At Portland Place the Prince is waiting for his wife, feeling her absence obscurely wrong, obscurely significant, in a way that is a mirror-image of how Maggie will wait for him, later, on his return from Matcham. 'He could have named to himself no pressing reason for seeing her at this moment, and her not coming in, as the half-hour elapsed, became in fact quite positively, however perversely, the circumstance that kept him on the spot' (224).

Amerigo and Charlotte, for all their trying, are not married enough; the primary, the precedent bond between parent and child, that needs to be broken in order to make way for these grown-up marriages, remains inviolable, intact, takes up all the human space. 'For Mrs Verver to be known to people so intensively and exclusively as her husband's wife', the Prince says to Fanny, '... he should manage to be known - or at least to be seen - a little more as his wife's husband' (209). The Prince and Charlotte's conversation circles what's wrong, in a sort of incredulous confirmation of what both recognise. Maggie's and Adam's relationship is the very incarnation of

innocence: a grandfather looks at a picture book with his grandchild. Yet when Charlotte and the Prince spell over all the apparently insignificant signs that somehow add up to the significant problem, the very idiom, the rhythm, of their fascination is just the same as the way Maggie, later, will rehearse and re-rehearse the innocent appearances between the lovers in order to uncover the secret crime beneath.

Even Fanny wavers momentarily over something wrong in the Verver dolls-house of familial contentment, 'children playing at paying visits, playing at "Mr Thompson" and "Mrs Fane", each hoping that the other would really stay to tea' (196):

'He and Charlotte must have arrived - if they have arrived - expecting to drive together to Eaton Square and keep Maggie on to dinner there. She has everything there, you know - she has clothes.'

'The Colonel didn't in fact know, but he gave it his apprehension. 'Oh, you mean a change?'

'Twenty changes, if you like - all sorts of things. She dresses, really, Maggie does, as much for her father - and she always did - as for her husband or herself. She has her room in his house very much as she had it before she was married - and just as the boy has a second nursery there, in which Mrs Noble, when she comes with him, makes herself, I assure you, at home. *Si bien* that if Charlotte, in her own house, so to speak, should wish a friend or two to stay with her, she really would be scarce able to put them up.'

It was a picture into which, as a thrifty entertainer himself, Bob Assingham could more or less enter. 'Maggie and the child spread so?'

'Maggie and the child spread so.'

Well, he considered. 'It *is* rather rum.'

'That's all I claim' - she seemed thankful for the word. 'I don't say it's anything more - but it *is*, distinctly, rum.' (279)

This 'rum' oblivious innocence of the filial pair, as if nothing could ever happen in the blue sky of their privileged Eden, can't easily be accused; and yet it is as responsible for skewing and perverting the two marriages as the adultery of the others. Adam Verver, the inheritor of the wealth of the nations is indeed Yeats's 'mouse'; and the maintenance of his childlikeness turns out to entail twists and abuses as convoluted as any violent and bitter ancestor. Fanny, catching him out early on in the novel in the most innocent of social evasions, sees 'the touching, confessing eyes of a man of forty-seven caught in the act of handling a relic of infancy - sticking on the head of a wooden soldier or trying the lock of a wooden gun' (112): the mixture in the image of Adam's innocence with something disconcerting - the man of peace caught out

playing with mock-violence - is characteristic of James's representation of him. And Maggie, the daughter of this child-man who plays with expensive toys, schooled at the convent in worship of her 'Papa above!', is doubly bound: as his daughter fulfilling in her spotless happiness the great investment he has made in her, and as the parent of the child in him, keeping clean and sacrosanct that space in which he is not to be contaminated by what blows in from the 'horrid, vulgar' world outside. Just as he holds Charlotte on his silken halter he holds Maggie, as it were, *sentimental*; for as long as he remains the centre of her emotional life she can only persist in being, or at least, latterly, pretending to be, that pert, sweet girl-child who jiggles his neck-tie and rubs noses with her Daddy 'according to the tradition of their frankest levity' (356). It is only when her father and Charlotte are 'away ... they've left the country ... we've ceased to see them - for as long as God may grant! ... we're really alone,' (535) that Maggie can touch a man with gravity instead, having painfully unlearned her father's lesson that '"love", had to be joked about' (37).

Maggie is James's further exploration of that abjection which he first touched upon in Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and then evaded wholly following through by writing Osmond as only a pseudo father figure. Maggie is, though, defined differently from the virginal Isabel. She may suspect the high-Wagnerian, and have painfully to unlearn certain sentimental innocences. But it is made clear that her passion for her husband is sexual, even that she is sexually subjected to him, from the very beginning of their relationship, from the innocent first days of their marriage, in their shared play-fantasy of his cruelty;¹³

One of the comfortable things between the husband and wife meanwhile - one of these easy certitudes they could be merely gay about - was that she never admired him so much, or so found him heart-breakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had fatally and

¹³ Jane Campion in her film of *The Portrait of a Lady* went further than the novel does in exploring Isabel's proneness to seek out a father figure to subject herself to, so that even her own desires are directed for her, and how that might translate itself into a sexual relationship.

originally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute her substance. There was really nothing they had talked of together with more intimate and familiar pleasantries than of the license and the privilege, the boundless happy margin, thus established for each; she going so far as to put it that, even should he some day get drunk and beat her, the spectacle of him with hated rivals would, after no matter what extremity, always, for the sovereign charm of it, charm of it in itself and at the exhibition of him that most deeply moved her, suffice to bring her round. (138-9)

Maggie proceeds in the course of the novel to get exactly what she wants: the rival, the passive pulp, the - metaphoric - beating and so on; notoriously, of course, in novels as well as fairy tales, getting exactly what you want involves painful discoveries about exactly what it costs. No doubt this founding fantasy in their relationship is a part of Maggie's need, at the very end of the novel, to hand back to the Prince intact at least the appearance of his power over her which his confession might have jeopardised. It is an open question whether in the closing moments we are glad of the silence, or miss too much the intelligent explanation of the truth telling Charlotte.

The novel ends with a kiss, and it is punctuated by kisses, the Prince's with Maggie, Maggie's with Charlotte, Charlotte's with the Prince, Maggie's with her father, Maggie's with Fanny, Fanny's with the Colonel: these embraces weave a musical pattern of touch, electric, attractive, repulsive, through all the novel and around its polarities of innocence and experience. The novel is structured as a dance of changing partners, suffused with eroticism. In its involved concentration upon the erotic *The Golden Bowl* doesn't really seem quite representative of the nineteenth century novel, either English or European: novels are usually 'about' so much 'more'. Even Jane Austen's seem to occupy a much larger social space than this. A search for antecedents for James's late love tangle might come up with something as improbable as *Liaisons Dangereuses*, which Ian Watt excludes from his mainline novel tradition of formal realism because it is 'too stylish to be authentic', its elegance and concision the opposite to the 'diffuseness' more characteristic of the novel form, the diffuseness of 'le réel écrit'.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 30. 'Le réel écrit' is from Flaubert.

In order to characterise *The Golden Bowl* we may even be tempted to make reference outside the novelistic tradition itself. It feels rather as though it belongs in a tradition of erotic tragi-comedy, which would include, say, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Così Fan Tutte*. Or with Jean Renoir's film *Les Règles du Jeu*; there too in order to represent a late phase in a declining leisure class civilisation the artist deploys a style that imitates and exaggerates the laconic elegance, the 'good form', the oblivious privileges and aching voids and lurking violences of that class. In these comedies, as in *The Golden Bowl*, dark and light stories co-exist; happy endings are imposed with much music of reconciliation and resolution onto material that has repeatedly come near to forming itself into the threatening darker shapes of danger, waste, and loss. *The Golden Bowl*, like the others, is full of suffering and sacrifice; sacrifice involuntary, resisting, unresigned. But that is not all; the music, the writing, also makes actual in these erotic comedies the momentary boundless possibilities of play and pleasure.

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For convenience, all references to the full length novels are to the Penguin editions (Harmondsworth, Middlesex), unless otherwise stated. The novels which are the main focus of the thesis are listed below. The original date of publication for each novel follows the title in brackets; then the date of the Penguin edition used; then an explanation of which text in each case the Penguin is based on.

<i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> (1881)	1981 (New York edition)
<i>What Maisie Knew</i> (1897)	1985 (New York edition)
<i>The Awkward Age</i> (1899)	1979 (New York Edition)
<i>The Ambassadors</i> (1903)	1986 (New York Edition, with misplacement of what is now chapter XII corrected)
<i>The Wings of the Dove</i> (1902)	1965 (First edition)
<i>The Golden Bowl</i> (1904)	1966 (First English edition, 1905)

Where I want to make references to differences between the New York Edition (1907-9) and the original 1881 edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, I have used an original Macmillan text, London, 1881.

References to the shorter fictions unless otherwise stated are made to *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962-4: this seemed the best way of offering consistency. Edel's collection uses the original book form (not the magazine serialisation) in which the stories were

first published. The dates of first book publication of the stories given significant treatment in the thesis are as follows:

The Aspern Papers (1888)

The Turn of the Screw (1898)

In the Cage (1898)

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APPENDIX

Copies of published articles based on work in this thesis:

i) *'What Maisie Knew: Elders and Betters and Henry James'*, *English*, Vol 46 No 186.

ii) *'The Aspern Papers: Henry James's Editorial Heart'*, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol 26 No 4.

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