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***Lee Clark Mitchell***

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and the Fin de Siècle**

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**Princeton University  
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Lee Clark Mitchell  
Princeton University  
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Henry James and the *Fin de Siécle*

Literature, as well as criticism--the difference between them being delusive--is condemned (privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself.<sup>1</sup>

All but exactly a century ago, on January 5th, 1895, Henry James finally made his London theater debut. The story of that terrible disaster has been frequently told: how he labored intensely for five years, writing scripts that repeatedly failed to find a producer, until he finally succeeded with Guy Domville, a costume drama set in eighteenth-century England. James was so nervous on opening night that he went instead to see a performance of Oscar Wilde's An Ideal Husband before returning to his own premiere just as it was ending. Mischievously? foolishly?--we will never know for sure--the actor-manager invited the author onstage, where James endured (in his own words) for "an abominable quarter of an hour . . . the hoots and jeers and catcalls of the roughs, whose roars (like those of a cage of beasts at some infernal 'zoo') were only exacerbated (as it were) by the conflict." The play was not very good. Toward the end of the last act, the hero asserts "I am, sir, the last of the Domvilles," to which a voice in the gallery supposedly retorted, "And it's a bloody good thing y'are."<sup>2</sup>

Yet remarkably, on the very next day James "vibrated with the sense of liberation, and he began to enjoy, physically and intellectually, a freedom which had hitherto been foreign to his

nature."<sup>3</sup> Moving to Rye, he began writing narratives unlike anything he had ventured before, "scenic" and "dramatic" fictions that would lead to his great late masterpieces. He had discovered, that is, in the shambles of his playwriting interlude the key to the kind of writing that would transform him from an accomplished author into America's most important novelist.

I open with this anecdote because literary studies faces a similar problem at this **fin de siècle**, finding its audience a bit rambunctious, coming to an end and needing to know where to go next. The transition may not be as dramatic as James's, but there is a developing uneasiness with directions that literary study has recently taken. Two decades ago, dissatisfaction with the "linguistic turn" of structuralism and post-structuralism--with the disembodied study of language free of historical or social context--led to a series of critical movements concerned to show how literature is always political. And in politically charged times, that was a truth well worth recovering. In particular, Foucault and Geertz inspired the rise of New Historicism, whose salutary effect was to show how fully literature is inflected not only by issues of economics, philosophy, law, anthropology, and so on, but by the particular structures themselves characteristic of these disciplines. Literature, like any other cultural practice, produces hierarchies that structure personal identity, whether through race, class, gender, or other social oppositions. And through the past decade, an extraordinary range

of readings has given us back a sense of how fully literature is always engaged with the particular culture that produces it.

Yet there has now arisen a sense that literature is no longer its own--that it is less an occasion for aesthetic astonishment than for arguments in economics, law, or philosophy. Increasingly, those of us devoted to "literature" have come to feel it is an alien field. Even Stephen J. Greenblatt, that renegade from New Criticism who invented the New Historicism, has turned most recently away from the contextual "resonance" of a cultural poetics to the "wonder" of aesthetic accomplishment.<sup>4</sup> And others have rushed to follow.<sup>5</sup> There is a scene in Steven Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind, in which people from radically different backgrounds and contexts begin to experience the same vision, to move their hands in Kodaly signs, responding without volition to a message from above. So now, spontaneously in many literary fields, there is a new passion for the aesthetic, even for individual genius.

The question is what might be meant by this call for a return to the literary--and whether that turn is, as so often in interpretations of music, simply a retreat to the non-social, non-translatable, even non-rational. It is clearly not an invitation to rely on exclusively formalist considerations (a return to the New Criticism of Brooks and Warren, as it were). New Historicism has shown not only that history is always textual but that texts need always to be historicized, and literary analysis is well rid of the assumption that it can take place in

a cultural vacuum. Still, after a decade of being told how anything can be read as a text, readers are losing patience with special pleas for texts simply because written by black, female, gay, or ethnic authors. As well, readers are less inclined to grant the New Historicist shift (as Walter Benn Michaels states it) in "the focus of literary history from the individual text and author to structures whose coherence, interest, and effect may be greater than that of either author or text."<sup>6</sup> Autonomous triumphs of literary art, self-contained acts of verbal pyrotechnics, continue to be what we return to.

There is, in short, a renewed sense that literature offers pleasures different from other kinds of writing--economic treatises, philosophical essays, legal briefs, political speeches, economic analyses--and while the cultural ramifications of any literary performance are important, they are not the **reason we read** to begin with. Homologies with other disciplines do not help to clarify why the "literary" is a category worth defending, or what it is about the aesthetic power of verbal art that allows it to produce delight and exhilaration. In this regard, literature has less to do with history, law, and social science than it does with painting and sculpture, music and dance.

### I. Literature in Crisis

The idea that literature is primarily an art would seem non-controversial, except that in these times such claims sound poli-

tically incorrect. I hope it becomes clear that my expectation for a turn in literary studies is nothing like what William Bennett, Alan Bloom, or Lynn Cheney have in mind when they conceive of literature as a moral repository. To me, it is no more preferable to read literature primarily for its moral content than for any other presumed ideological thrust--historical, political, or otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Literature is not a handmaiden for social considerations, offering attractive verbal forms to ease deliberation on tough civic issues. It has nothing to do with solving problems, nor offering models for behavior. It does not, as Irving Howe argues, "make ideas or ideologies come to life," which is why political novels and historical novels must transcend their hybrid status before they become literature.<sup>8</sup> As Auden said, "Poetry makes nothing happen." Paradise Lost does little to "justify the ways of God to man"; Uncle Tom's Cabin and Beloved both bear witness to the appalling effects of chattel slavery; Lolita teaches us nothing about how to avoid the horrors of child abuse. Each of these texts takes a compelling human issue, but their claim occurs through an aura engendered by particular constellations of words. They may draw our attention to the arbitrary form of cultural constructions, but only by revising our sense of verbal possibilities. Politics, however compelling, is always dependent on aesthetics, and the literary aesthetics is such that each of these examples becomes a text of "jouissance, . . . that imposes a state of loss, . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the

consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."<sup>9</sup>

Even two decades after this definition, Roland Barthes's vision of texts that produce awe may well be too radically utopian. But we **can** agree that literature is not simply a medium for getting from here to there, made up of moral fables that all could be expressed more directly in discursive prose. Whatever it is that we call "literary" earns the label by speaking in unechoable ways, compelling us to respond with a great sophistication that nonetheless speaks to how intractable those "things" finally are. In contrast to criticism that domesticates literature, we need to resist the kind of paraphrase that erases what is most distinctive about literary texts (their verbal resonances, formal ambiguities, structural indeterminacies). Literature, after all, should "bring to a crisis" one's relation with a language one had assumed to be straightforward, transparent, unproblematic.

This "crisis" in criticism, occurring as we speak, is akin to the aesthetic turn from social historicism in the 1890s. Yet the present **fin de siècle** differs sharply from the last in being less a return to a premise of "art for art's sake" than a reconsideration of what is at stake in treating literature as a proper art at all. And interestingly, the figure most frequently invoked in that reconsideration is Henry James. Not that he has ever been far from critical scrutiny, even at the height of New Historicism--which seems a peculiar context for him. Emotionally



and sexually repressed; a defender of the Victorian status quo; politically retrograde: James nonetheless has prompted recent studies of his sexual orientation, his position on blacks and ethnic minorities, his anti-feminism, his view of social power and the lower classes, his credentials as a card-carrying intellectual, even his businessman's savvy in a market where literature was becoming a commodity.<sup>10</sup>

Why do we keep returning to James? Why is someone whose texts are **not** obviously about, say, race, class, or sexual orientation invoked to study such matters? Is this just the exhausted need of theory to justify itself through unlikely choices? I think not; in fact, I think just the opposite: that it is because James is considered America's central literary figure who, more than any other novelist, has come to exemplify the writerly itself. Self-consciously over a long career he created novels at once so resistant to paraphrase and yet so evocative that they compel readers simply to reread. In particular, the late novels defy reduction, as if their "literary" status resided in this oscillation between a reader's need to systematize James's vision and the recognition of that impossibility. Or, as Ruth Yeazell has noted: "Few novels demand more persistently that we translate them, yet few novels feel so relentlessly verbal, even so untranslatable."<sup>11</sup>

Still, even those who most admire James's style end by subjecting it to paraphrase, which may well be the unavoidable hazard of any critical analysis--certainly, any that ventures to

point to textual meaning. Yet recognizing the dangers of paraphrase induces a wise caution about any transcription from one critical discourse to another. Or at least it should. And to clarify the reasons for such caution, let me turn to a recently influential critic of James whose ethical readings can stand for a broader circle of literary theoretical positions--Foucaultian, New Historicist, feminist, law and letters, cultural studies, anthropology. Martha C. Nussbaum, the American philosopher, has mounted a powerful critique of the "compartmentalizing" of academic disciplines from each other, especially moral philosophy from literary criticism, and she has delivered a widely-heeded summons to return to ethically engaged readings. At a time when even Foucault turned from coercive social structures to proclaim at last, "I am a moralist"--and when Derrida was likewise committed to ethically charged readings--the 1980s signalled a turn among philosophers as well as literary critics toward an ethics of reading.<sup>12</sup> The question that literature always asks, so Nussbaum asserts, is "How should one live?" For her, it is "the ethical and social questions that give literature its high importance in our lives," and she calls for "a future in which literary theory . . . will also join with ethical theory in pursuit of the question, 'How should one live?'"<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum wants to reinvigorate the two disciplines, making philosophy less abstract and reductive by confronting literary texts, and making literary criticism less sterile and detached from what she takes to be central human concerns. As an expert in moral philosophy

who also happens to love late James, she finds him the perfect site for testing ethical considerations.

This all seems vaguely familiar. In fact, for more than half a century, critics have relapsed at moments of vocational uncertainty into two habits: ethical self-consciousness, and attention to James.<sup>14</sup> Here the two habits come crashing together, with Nussbaum focusing on James's late novels because their difficult style itself suggests an engagement with the deeper, more vexing problems of moral philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Aesthetic complexity, it seems, points to ethical self-consciousness, while the plain style of Hemingway or Dreiser is ill-suited for complex moral problems. True or not, it is worth meeting Nussbaum on her own grounds, if only to show how even The Golden Bowl (1904) resists being the ethical conduct guide she would make of it.

Strangely, we tend to think we understand what The Golden Bowl is all about: a woman who wants to marry yet still to keep a perfect relationship with her father. Later, she suspects that her husband may be having an affair with her step-mother, and she decides to part from her father in order to separate the two erring spouses, to restore married relations to their proper status. If most readers would agree with this barebones account, it nonetheless risks a great deal, doing what William James as usual confidently implored of his brother: "Say it **out**, for God's sake, and have done with it."<sup>16</sup> The problem for Henry of saying "it out" is that the "it" at issue so often remains in dispute, a matter not of facts but of interpretations, of ac-

counts actually being created by both characters and readers dangling in the web of James's crafted prose.

Instead of continuing with plot summary, then, we need to do what Nussbaum and other critics of ethics in literature promise but rarely achieve: turn to James's irreducible style itself. And since any place should serve equally well, I'll begin with the father, Adam Verver, who happens to be my age, 47, and like me the parent of a single beloved child. That is, I'll turn to the figure with whom I as reader can most easily be seen to have an identity--who might best form a model, positive or negative, for my own moral behavior (even if his billionaire status is, unfortunately, far from my own).

## II. Objects Pursued

Our first view of Adam occurs at the beginning of the second of the novel's six Books in a hesitant formulation: "Adam Verver at Fawns, that autumn Sunday, might have been observed to open the door of the billiard-room with a certain freedom--might have been observed, that is, had there been a spectator in the field."<sup>17</sup> The widower Adam clearly wants to be alone, to escape from those at his country house, and on this Sunday morning when nearly everyone else is at church he heads to the one room in the house--the billiard room--least suspected by any visitor left behind. Yet the narrator himself persists in pursuit, hounding Adam much as the eager house guest, Mrs. Rance, soon will: "We

share this world, none the less, for the hour, with Mr Verver; the very fact of his striking, as he would have said, for solitude, the fact of his quiet flight . . . investing him with an interest that makes our attention--tender indeed almost to compassion--qualify his achieved isolation" (129). The irony of this minor scene of Adam vainly trying to escape attention, indeed trying to escape from the novel itself, is that he thus evokes from the self-described snoop of a narrator only greater "interest" and "compassion." And though the narrator describes his pursuit apologetically, the fact cannot be hidden that Adam is being denied "the sense . . . of one's having the world to one's self" (129).

Curiously, both narrator and reader are made to realize their own disturbing similarity to the Verver's "avid" house guest, Mrs. Rance, who soon tracks Adam down to the billiard room and holds him veritably hostage. An hour later, Maggie will return from church to find her father beleaguered by the Mrs. Rance, which fosters Maggie's plan for him to marry Charlotte Stant and thus be free of future female supplications. Pursuing people, holding them hostage--these persecutions are, for Adam, implicit in how he is represented from the moment we first see him. A moral issue--how one uses another (one of the central concerns of the book)--is raised initially as a question of reading **at all**, since reading always turns others into objects of our perusal.

Yet here is an ethical dilemma: the prose gives no sense (other than selfish curiosity) why we should read on about Adam, or how "reading on" is different from Mrs. Rance's crudely hot pursuit. Yet the irony of this treatment of Adam is compounded at the end of the opening paragraph, when we discover that he himself is divided about his own need to escape the social whirl. The final two sentences are almost caricatures of James's late style, and worth quoting in full:

It may be mentioned also that he always figured other persons--such was the law of his nature--as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection, one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had never for many minutes together been his portion to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached. It shaded off, the appeal--he would have admitted that; but he had as yet noted no point at which it positively stopped. (129-30)

These tortuous sentences suggest how much Adam is a part of what he resists, "surrounded and committed," able to objectify himself as a source of desire and yet caught in the odd projected metaphor of the rainbow "appeal" of others (his for them? theirs for him? it is left deliberately vague). Moreover, that appeal is something from which he "sometimes" thinks he wants to escape into "impersonal whiteness." The chiasmus of the two sentences has the effect of turning the reader outwards yet back, oscillating between two extremes.

Without lingering over this dense conceit, we can form two general conclusions: first, that Adam Verver has never attained that state of isolated seclusion, the "impersonal whiteness" of

independence, which he thinks he so much desires; and second, that the dense phrasing of this point, its baroque accretion of clauses and amplifications, paradoxically tightens his hold on our attention even as it confirms his mysterious isolation.<sup>18</sup>

Through the novel, Adam remains inscrutable and yet (or rather, and therefore) a character everyone wants to know--most especially, the reader. We can never decide whether he is actually being used **by** others (including his daughter) or instead uses himself **for** them, therefore becoming a generous master of their fates. James allows us no clear perch from which to judge. All we can be sure of is that even someone so elusive as Adam conceives of himself with others in terms of ineluctable metaphors--and further, that his fictional representation itself implicates us in the process of exploitation delineated through the novel.

This connection between **exploitative** behavior and **metaphorical** language becomes an exercise in the meanings of possession, both figuratively and literally understood. Metaphor, after all, is a trope of willful appropriation, an imperialistic plundering of resemblances, a colonizing of partial similarities into asserted identities. And it comes as no surprise that a novel so sensitive to people's use of each other should find the allure of metaphorical language so compelling. The person who best understands this connection is Adam's daughter, Maggie, whose own alleged "brutality" derives from a capacity to reveal to herself her own deepest concerns through the play of metaphor--especially

striking metaphors that transform simple perception into a grasping, "treating," possessive mental act.

Maggie begins her half of the novel by thinking of **herself** this way, turning her ideas into things, her cognitive processes into disposable items, as she waits for her husband to return from his Easter weekend with Charlotte. Sitting dressed in "her newest frock," she wonders what the perfectly appointed Charlotte thinks of her--a question that leads to a long conceit of unanswered questions treated as if they were physical belongings:

her accumulations of the unanswered . . . like a roomful of confused objects, never as yet "sorted," which for some time now she had been passing and re-passing, along the corridor of her life. She passed it when she could without opening the door; then, on occasion, she turned the key to throw in a fresh contribution. So it was that she had been getting things out of the way. They rejoined the rest of the confusion; it was as if they found their place, by some instinct of affinity, in the heap. What she should never know about Charlotte's thought--she tossed **that** in. It would find itself in company, and she might at last have been standing there long enough to see it fall into its corner. (334-35)

As Maggie ponders her comfortable life, she begins to be unsettled by the state of her relations with others--a state suddenly imaged for her as a setting full of things she can no longer get "out of the way." A casual string of unanswered questions has become a heap of "confused objects" shoved behind a closed door. Only moments after she peeks behind that metaphorical door, moreover, her returning husband pushes "the quite different door" to her actual room ajar. Mental and physical worlds intersect, giving a sense for how fully a lively metaphorical treatment of others slides over into more tangible personal treatments. And



so the second half of the novel--the second half of Maggie's life--begins.

### III. The Princess and Possession

Martha Nussbaum would like to draw a "universal prescription" from the novel, and her ethical reading leads to the conclusion that we should act as Maggie does.<sup>19</sup> Yet even were our family situations more like that of a wealthy Edwardian clan, the larger problem of this reading is what it might mean to become "like" Maggie--to become, that is, more metaphorical, more creative and penetrating, more "finely aware and richly responsible" (in the phrase that Nussbaum likes to repeat from James). After all, the transition to Maggie's half of the novel is defined not through notable actions or scenes but through the prose style itself, which becomes immediately less direct, more playfully allusive.

The passage above, describing Maggie's open mental door on her "accumulations of the unanswered," comes at the end of a series of striking metaphors that depict her thinking about herself, beginning with the notorious image of the "outlandish pagoda" in "the very centre of the garden of her life" (327). The narrator then starts to "multiply my metaphors" (330), representing the play of Maggie's consciousness in terms first of a water spaniel, then the mother of a bastard, later a craftsman with sharp tools, followed by a "timid tigress," and finally an

actress performing on stage, before her roving mental eye is rivetted by the open closet of questions unanswered, all but unasked, fallen into corners. At that precise moment as the Prince enters the room, she sees in his changed response to her how fully their relationship depends on a tenuous balance that requires **her** to imagine him much as he does her, subject to her mental will, as if her possession. Indeed, this pivotal chapter ends with that very word: "possession."

Here at the novel's midpoint, Maggie's decision to regain control of her marriage poses a confusing ethical moment. She acknowledges some responsibility for her husband's straying as part of a larger recognition that no perspective, no person is fully guilty or innocent--that those terms themselves are inadequate to describe her role as both subject **and** object, user **and** used, possessor **and** possessed in an unstable emotional "equilibrium." And that recognition allows her to become at once more responsible **yet** more ruthless, which seems an odd combination. Psychologically, she can be said to have finally accepted limits on her idealism, having matured into a jealous, necessarily possessive, state of mind. She wants the Prince for herself (he is, after all, her husband), and she will reorient the relationship of the two couples without anyone knowing in order to save her father from the pain that accusations of adultery would involve.

The extraordinary quality of Maggie's behavior in the second half of the novel lies in her acceptance of the fact that individuals are never simply ends **in** themselves but rather always means

even to themselves. That is both an anti-Kantian and anti-Aristotelian position. Moreover, the project of trying to find a moral haven safe from the ruthless parry and thrust of social construction is doomed (at least, according to James) by the very intensity of our possessive imaginations, for those with richest imaginations willy-nilly exploit themselves as well as others. Love in this sense means seizing and being seized, possessing a certain exclusive command of the other, leading Maggie to realize that choices always exclude other choices; keeping her husband means renouncing her father. Two desires, two loves, two commitments, cannot exist side by side, as if in a kind of metonymic harmony of association. The peculiar power of such love exists as a possessive act of transformation, best reflected in the allusive intricacies of her own metaphoric turn of mind.

In short, the problem of giving a moral account on the basis of this constellation of motives is that the motives remain at once so mixed and so unclear. Maggie is not directly available to the reader in the first half of the novel, since only other characters' perspectives are given. And her new-found sense of responsibility in the second half hinges, paradoxically enough, on possessive jealousy. The problem for Nussbaum, then, is that we see too little of Maggie at first, too much later on, creating in both cases similar problems for judgment. We cannot be sure that her early "innocence" has led, as Nussbaum claims, to "an inability in any area of her life to see values, including persons, emerge as distinct ends in their own right. In every case

they are rounded, accommodated, not recognized insofar as their claims collide with other claims."<sup>20</sup> Nor is it evident that Maggie later comes to view others from an Aristotelian perspective, "beginning to see that meaningful commitment to a love in the world can require the sacrifice of one's own moral purity."<sup>21</sup> All we know for certain--indeed, what we learn from being plunged into Maggie's consciousness--is that we need to imitate her in resisting easy assumptions or ready generalizations. The dense Jamesian luxuriance of her thought itself radically devalues anything so large or abstract as considerations of Nussbaum's "moral purity."<sup>22</sup>

Which is not to claim that ethical considerations simply subside in our **reading** of the novel, as any review of its critical history makes clear. The point is how hard it is to sustain Maggie's metaphoric sensibility and how easy it is to succumb to moral summary and evaluation. For the ethicist Martha Nussbaum, responsive intelligence becomes love; for the Foucauldian Mark Seltzer, love is always power. But neither of these exegetical extremes gets at James's curiously amoral blend of sympathy and manipulation. From the Prince's opening sense of himself as a valued item in the Verver's collection, to Maggie's paralyzing desire for the Prince--the repeated "terror of her endless power of surrender" to his physical charms (345, 568-69)--finally to her fear of being "treated" by others, however "nobly" and benevolently (353-55): throughout, the mixed implications of how we possess ourselves and others are exhaustively explored. The

troubled institution of marriage itself best thematizes this concern, as nearly everyone becomes aware that this most personal of choices is rarely one's own to make. The Prince opens the novel realizing that Fanny "had made his marriage," and wonders only at how she thereby may have "profited" (55). Fanny realizes that Charlotte had also helped by simply staying away, and then decides--as Maggie separately does--to marry Charlotte off to Adam.

Hard as it is for readers to resist moralizing over this kind of "meddling," characters also fall into the trap, justifying themselves according to the ethical principle of acting **for** others. Fanny wants Charlotte to marry, for instance, to "make up" for any possible "chance" of having wronged Charlotte or Maggie earlier. And her husband's "why keep meddling?" prompts Fanny's response that one cannot help doing so for those one cares about (99).<sup>23</sup> The Prince, Maggie, Charlotte herself all begin by troubling about each others' affairs, morally justifying their actions out of what Fanny calls "highest intentions" (441). Yet the novel repeatedly shows how distant intentions are from consequences--a lesson Maggie learns best. As the narrator notes toward the end, she "had so shuffled away every link between consequence and cause that the intention remained, like some famous poetic line in a dead language subject to varieties of interpretation" (563). The web of desire, intention, mutual possession, and imaginative play is simply not to be parced by categorical imperatives or ethical maxims.

#### IV. Whose Morals, Whose Ethics, Whose Views?

If few other novels highlight possession as much as The Golden Bowl, few do so little to resolve the moral implications involved. All the characters "treat" each other in ways that can seem morally repugnant, beginning with Maggie's admission to a "sense of possession" (339) as she realizes her love of the Prince. Later (thinking of Fanny Assingham), she delights in "using her friend to the topmost notch," glittering with a sense of her power to make others "convenient" (425). At the end, Adam and Maggie continue to think of themselves and each other in terms of things and the people they possess. Maggie realizes, for instance, that in leaving her a beloved Florentine painting, Adam "was doing the most possible toward leaving her a part of his palpable self" (573). And the final view they have of the Prince and Charlotte together is embraced by the logic of Adam's flat appraisal, "You've got some good things" (574).<sup>24</sup>

What helps preclude this possessive vision from being reduced to either an ethical or a Foucauldian position is Maggie's capacity to make us realize how essential the idea of possession is as part of our mental processes. Not only, that is, does she imagine others as valued objects, but she imagines **herself** that way, and further, imagines objects themselves so vividly that they seem to come alive as persons, independent, unconstrained. That imaginative pliancy allows her to conceive of possibilities well in excess of the facts, and to grant to others a similar

capacity, helping to account for her success in imposing her will. Rich as is the first half of the novel--depicting the private reflections of Charlotte, the Prince, Adam, and the Assinghams--Maggie's second half forms an explosion of metaphoric possibilities, a dramatic turn to a riotous and richly contorted way of thinking.

Others are simply not half as creative nor half as careful in their use of words. The mark of Charlotte's and the Prince's deficiency is less their adulterous passion itself than the banal terms with which they represent it, embracing each other in a language that sounds at once clichéd, self-serving, and comically inflated, proposing a "sacred" (259) trust before collapsing into each others' arms. They separately assume that the Ververs are simply inadequate to them, or as the Prince complacently muses, "one found one used one's imagination mainly for wondering how they contributed so little to appeal to it" (261). Likewise, for all her imaginative energy, Fanny Assingham resorts under stress to simple, conventional figures: "Evil--with a very big E" (310).<sup>25</sup> Only Maggie conceives of her life in terms not centered on herself, in vivid images that allow her to understand what she does not yet know, to discover what she cannot confirm, and in the process to reconceive her relationship with those she still loves.<sup>26</sup>

The baroque complexity of her metaphors leads not to narrative clarity but to ambivalent moments that involve the reader, once again, in the same self-conscious process of handling

characters, treating them as pliable things, that Maggie herself indulges. A final example, as arbitrarily selected as my first of Adam Verver, should confirm once again the power of Maggie's intensity of vision--an intensity that is infectious for others. The moment occurs on the last occasion at her father's country estate in July, moments prior to Maggie's getting him to suggest that he and Charlotte return to America. She has just admitted to the depth of her power of love, measured by her capacity for feeling jealous.

The mere fine pulse of passion in it, the suggestion as of a creature consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea, some element of dazzling sapphire and silver, a creature cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers, in which fear or folly or sinking otherwise than in play was impossible--something of all this might have been making once more present to him, with his discreet, his half-shy assent to it, her probable enjoyment of a rapture that he in his day had presumably convinced no great number of persons either of his giving or of his receiving. He sat a while as if he knew himself hushed, almost admonished. (506-7)

The image of Maggie as a sea creature, swimmingly at ease in the "rapture" of love, "buoyant among dangers," is an image only gradually revealed as Maggie's own--an image she imputes "as if" to her father, who does not experience it himself. Moreover, he has "presumably" never felt such passion himself. What contributes to the complication of the passage (as of the moment) is the fact that Adam is viewed (by Maggie) extending to Maggie only a "probable enjoyment." The very hesitations in the syntax of "presumably," "probably," and "as if" all shape a strangely ineluctable moment of expressed love--a moment in which the ability to love is expressed in loving imaginative acquiescence



to someone deeply beloved. And our momentary uncertainty about who is speaking here--Maggie? Adam?--suggests how fully love is at once an act of imaginative possession and transformation.

The reader feels on no firmer ground as the image is further detailed, just before Adam himself admits to never having felt such a passion for another:

The beauty of her condition was keeping him at any rate, as he might feel, in sight of the sea, where, though his personal dips were over, the whole thing would shine at him and the air and the splash and the play become for him too a sensation. That couldn't be fixed upon him as missing; since if it wasn't personally floating, if it wasn't even sitting in the sand, it could yet pass very well for breathing the bliss, in a communicated irresistable way--for tasting the balm. It could pass further for knowing--for knowing that without him nothing might have been: which would have been missing least of all. "I guess I've never been jealous," he finally remarked. (507)

The passage continues to modulate Maggie's silent sense of wonder at Adam, imputing to him a hopeful recognition of all he has done for her. If he has missed the experience of passionate love that has transformed her, he has nonetheless gained if only through her radiant capacity to love. And part of the dense surprise of this passage, which keeps turning back on itself, is the fact that Maggie's jealousy has all along been not for the Prince, but for him--as she later reveals.<sup>27</sup>

Such passages confirm how difficult it is to find grounds for any categorical reading of James. How can one untangle the dazzling image that conflates Maggie and a sapphire sea creature, when one cannot locate the subjective point of view from which such images or judgments are made? This is not to say that James is being obscure, as his brother William complained. But it is

to register the restlessness of his work.<sup>28</sup> To convert unsettling language into a series of settled ideas--of rules, exemplars, models, allegories, or the like--is to miss James's literary aura in order to domesticate him to our own uses.<sup>29</sup>

The Golden Bowl, in short, gives no help to the ethical question "how should one live?" Novels more generally offer us little that might be construed as advice. What they tend to do, on the contrary--apart from the very important function of making us better readers--is to reveal the inadequacy of any ethics at moments of intense experience.<sup>30</sup> That is not to say that moral considerations are irrelevant in novels or in life. Quite the contrary (as I've shown above), such considerations are regularly illustrated and invoked, if only to show how fully beside the point they can be--how inadequate they are to given constraints, particular conditions, actual individuals, and how literary experience does not reduce itself to a moral algebra. When we participate most fully in the tragedies of Oedipus or Othello--when we inhabit imaginatively the fictional worlds of Isabel Archer and Lord Jim--it is not to figure out how we should live but to respond in pity, terror, exhilaration, sheer wonder at how far outside the normal bounds these characters are subjected.<sup>31</sup> To respond otherwise is to reverse the process of Tolstoy's judgment on Anna Karenina--a judgment that originated in high moral outrage against any adultery and ended, many revisions later, in the heart-wrenching novel he finally wrote.

A century ago, Henry James left London for Rye, abandoning the moralizing dramas of his West End experience for the stylistic experiments that would lead to his three final masterpieces. He took a new direction, and today, we need ourselves to reconsider what it is we expect of literature. The particular burden of my paper has been to show how the appropriation of late James by moral philosophers has been a mistake--how a novel like The Golden Bowl evades ethical categories. But more generally, I would claim that the triumph of this novel (perhaps all novels we want to count as literature) lies in its ultimate evasion of any such discursive categories, all those other disciplinary agendas--historical, social, political--that would look to the "literary" for confirmation. Recent movements in philosophy and literature, law and literature, anthropology and literature, and more generally in the New Historicism have taught us how fully fiction always resonates with other contemporary structures. But they have not freed us from the obligation to read literature as an art, or from the particular verbal and narrative pleasures it provides.

Endnotes

1. Paul de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," in Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), p. 19.
2. See Fred Kaplan, Henry James: The Imagination of Genius--A Biography (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1992), pp. 376-79; and R. W. B. Lewis, The Jameses: A Family Narrative (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), pp. 504-5.
3. Edmond Gosse's recollection, cited in Henry James: Interviews and Recollections, ed. Norman Page (New York: St. Martin's P, 1984), p. 70.
4. In discussing the move of French Impressionist art to the Musée d'Orsay in his essay, "Resonance and Wonder," Greenblatt depicts a shift from wonder to mere resonance: "the museum remakes a remarkable group of highly individuated geniuses into engaged participants in a vital, conflict-ridden, immensely productive period in French cultural history. . . . But what has been sacrificed on the altar of cultural resonance is visual wonder centered on the aesthetic masterpiece." See Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 180.
5. As Lionel Gossman has claimed, "But I do have occasional perverse impulses. I am sometimes carried away or overwhelmed by the experience of a literary work to the point where I am oblivious of or indifferent to its historicity. Naturally, I sometimes ask myself whether literature might not be deeply inimical to the historical categories in which, as a scholar and professor of literature, I try to capture and contain it." See Between History and Literature (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), p. 3.
6. Walter Benn Michaels, The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), p.
7. Anthony J. Cascardi has made a representative claim: "literature can be seen as providing a field for the realization of the ethical by providing cultural models and modes of self-representation." See Literature and the Question of Philosophy, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 133. On the other hand, Richard Poirier argues rightly against "the notion that the writing and reading of literature have a culturally redemptive power"; since great writing is "discernably on edge about its own rhetorical status"; "such works resist as well as absorb the meanings which their adopted language makes available to them, and to us." See The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), p. 9.
8. Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York: Meridian, 1987), p. 21.

9. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (1973; New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 14.

10. Jean Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," in The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 67-100; Alfred Habegger, Henry James and the 'Woman Business' (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); Mark Seltzer, Henry James and the Art of Power (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984); Kenneth W. Warren, Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993).

For an interesting assessment in this turn in critical response, which raises the problem of "the impact of James's work" and the constant reinvocation of "the aesthetic" by those committed to political analysis of literary texts, see Winfried Fluck, "Radical Aesthetics," Real 10 (1994): 31-48. As he points out, "In eliminating the need for a reasoned argument on specific dimensions and effects of aesthetic experience, the road is paved for a direct and unmediated appropriation of the text for one's own purposes of self-definition and self-esteem."

11. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), p. 129.

12. Cited by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics (Chicago: U of Chicago: 1992), p. 24.

13. Martha C. Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 168; see also pp. 36, 50.

14. See, for two prominent examples, Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (New York: Anchor, 1950); and Dorothea Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962. For a critique of Nussbaum, see Hilary Putnam, Richard Wollheim in NLH, and Harpham, 43.

15. Nussbaum claims that fictional texts are important to moral philosophy "so long as these are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion, and so long as they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling" (Love's Knowledge, p. 46). She later adds, "And we would want to look at philosophical authors as makers of stylistic choices, asking what ethical commitments their own literary choices express" (186). In a discussion of Dickens, she elsewhere notes: "We can now understand that the persistent exuberant metaphoricality on the language of Hard Times is no mere game, no stylistic diversion; it goes to the heart of the novel's moral theme." See "The Literary Imagination in Public Life," New Literary History 22 (1991): 901. Rarely, however, does Nussbaum ever indicate with close stylistic analysis what these kinds of assertions mean.

16. His brother's full complaint was written on May 4th, 19028 "You can't skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. The method seems perverse: 'Say it **out**, for God's sake,' they cry, 'and have done with it.' And so I say now, give us **one** thing in your older director manner, just to show that, in spite of your paradoxical success in this unheard-of method, you **can** still write according to accepted canons. Give us that interlude; and then continue like the 'curiosity of literature' which you have become. For gleams and innuendos and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable, but the **core** of literature is solid. Give it to us **once** again!" See The Letters of William James, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly P, 1920): II, 278.

17. The Golden Bowl (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 129. Future references will be included parenthetically in the text.

18. As David W. Smit rightly remarks of these lines, "I . . . do not know what to make of a man who desires so much to retreat from the world and still manipulate it to his advantage." See The Language of a Master: Theories of Style and the Late Writing of Henry James (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988), p. 54.

19. Love's Knowledge, pp. 166-67. This attribution flattens out somewhat Nussbaum's own more modulated understanding of "universalizing." As she claims, however, "the ethical rightness of the characters' deliberations here is universalizable, and could be captured by a set of extremely concrete and fine-tuned universal principles" (166).

There is a sense, strangely enough, that Nussbaum's aspiration toward an Aristotelian ideal is much like Maggie's longing for the earlier, untrammelled relation with her father. Geoffrey Galt Harpham has made a similar point about Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre: "Both urge a return to a lost sense of the wholeness and oneness of life in which the individual inhabits a community, evaluates properly, and behaves appropriately in a world without gaps, without theory. What offends both is the idea of the otherness, the distance, of ethics, the notion that ethical imperatives might be hostile or indifferent to one's general worldly interests and circumstances" (Getting It Right, p. 51).

20. Love's Knowledge, p. 130. Even if one could be sure that this **were** true, as Hilary Putnam has shown, Nussbaum's argument for James would be flawed: "The problem with thinking in terms of 'values' and 'conflicts' rather than in terms of 'rules' and 'exceptions' . . . is that the metaphor of **balancing** quickly gets the upper hand. To think of all moral problems in terms of 'trade-offs' is precisely not to think morally at all." See "Taking Rules Seriously--A Response to Martha Nussbaum." New Literary History 15 (Autumn 1983): 195.

21. Love's Knowledge, p. 134. Nussbaum goes on to describe this development as "a new way of getting at perfection. . . . We might describe the new ideal this way: See clearly and with high intelligence. Respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination. If there are conflicts, face them squarely and with keen perception. Choose as well as you can for overt action, but at every moment remember the more comprehensive duties of the imagination and emotions. If love of your husband requires hurting and lying to Charlotte, then do these cruel things, making the better choice. But never cease, all the while, to be richly conscious of Charlotte's pain and to bear, in imagination and feeling, the full burden of your guilt as the cause of that pain" (134-35).

22. Critics regularly translate the novel into categories or terms that they then reimpose on the novel. Dorothea Krook, for instance, distinguishes the "aesthetic" from the "moral sense"-- "the surpassing dignity, power and beauty of the moral by which it transcends the inferior dignity, power and beauty of the merely aesthetic"--and then defines certain characters (particularly Charlotte and the Prince) in terms of their deficient humanity. See The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), p. 272.

Later, Krook seems to pull back from this judgment in a description (remarkably akin to mine) of "James's experience of the unavoidable, unalterable mixed motive of all human action, and the consequent dual ('ambiguous') character of all human endeavour. The selfless motive is inseparable from the selfish, the beneficent action from the acquisitive, the courage and intelligence of love from the cravenness of fear, the beauty of good faith and good will from the meanness of moral evasion and the cruelty of sexual power. Nor are they merely conjoined but rather causally connected: the good is somehow the result of evil, the base is somehow a necessary condition of the noble--is, indeed, the very soil from which it springs and in which it is nurtured" (319). As she points out, though this is common to all great dramatic artists, "James's distinction is that he invented a literary technique, the late style, which enabled him to render his sense of the fusion, or rather fusedness, of these co-existent and interdependent elements with a peculiar immediacy" (320).

Mark Seltzer asserts, from a Foucaultian perspective, that in The Golden Bowl, "the imperative of organic form guarantees the Jamesian values of love and freedom even as it achieves a virtually 'automatic' regulation of character and narrative." See Henry James and the Art of Power (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), p. 18.

Ruth Bernard Yeazell has said the same of critics who "postulate a consistent referential universe to which a novel's words finally point. But one thus translates James's late novels at the risk of doing violence to what is most idiosyncratic and exciting in them, of making their peculiarly fluid and unsettling reality something far more stable and conventional." See Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James (Chicago: U of Chicago

23. Maggie later realizes how fully responsible Fanny is for her marriage, but chalks it up quite simply to her "affectionate interest" (395). The most remarkable passage of this sort occurs as Maggie ponders the reasons for her father's marriage to Charlotte, and of her own responsibility for the prospect that she may now have to part forever from her beloved parent:

It all came from her not having been able not to mind--not to mind what became of him; not having been able, without anxiety, to let him go his way and take his risk and lead his life. She had made anxiety her stupid little idol; and absolutely now, while she stuck a long pin a trifle fallaciously into her hat--she had, with an approach to irritation, told her maid, a new woman whom she had lately found herself thinking of as abysmal, that she didn't want her--she tried to focus the possibility of some understanding between them in consequence of which he should cut loose. (381)

The astonishing interjection here--of Maggie considering the need to fire a maid incompetent to prepare her hats--occurs precisely as she wonders at how her father will also "cut loose" from her, as if one activity were implicated in the other. The curious double negative that first clarifies Maggie's meddling to herself ("her not having been able not to mind") leads through a series of more syntactically direct statements until at last, a paragraph later, she comes to realize "from the perfectly practical point of view, that she should simply sacrifice him."

24. Laurence Bedwell Holland rightly notes that this appraisal weaves the moral and emotional into the economic and aesthetic, in The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964), p. 405.

25. Ruth Yeazell has observed that Henry James's metaphors do not function like George Eliot's, which extend horizontally and connect characters together. For James, metaphors work vertically, as meanings unfold for the individual. See Language and Knowledge, pp. 50-51.

26. As Ruth Yeazell has argued, "Maggie discovers the existence of a conspiracy here not by unearthing new facts, but by pursuing--or being pursued by--implications which subconsciously she has already sensed." She later adds, Maggie will "discover a world to which the clear-cut terms of good and evil no longer apply--a world of ambiguities and fearful mysteries, one in which knowledge itself must remain finally tentative and uncertain. And only through metaphoric indirection can such knowledge even be approached." (Language and Knowledge, pp. 28, 49).

Laurence Holland has noted that Maggie succeeds through "carefully chosen words," which succeed "by virtue of not filling in specifications"--in the process offering a model that both ethicists and Foucauldians ignore at their risk (Expense, p. 389).



27. Laurence Holland calls this "one of James's most moving passages" (Expense, p. 393).

28. Apropos this point is T. S. Eliot's remark that James "had a mind so fine it was never violated by an idea"--a comment Eliot intended as a high compliment. See "On Henry James," The Egoist (January 1918), rptd. in The Question of Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York: 1945), p. 110.

29. For a powerful investigation into this issue, see Lionel Gossman, "The Figaros of Literature" (1988), in Between History and Literature (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), pp. 55-79.

30. As Ruth Yeazell notes, "To approach the late James as if his language were a beautiful and mysterious screen placed between us and the moral facts of the novels is to miss more than half his power: in few novels do the realities of moral life seem so compelling, yet for few novels do social and ethical categories feel so incomplete, even so removed from what actually happens to us as we read" (Language and Knowledge, pp. 13-14).

31. Or as Lambert Strether responds to the scene of Mme de Vionnet and Chad appearing in the Lambinet setting: "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?" This is what fiction does--makes us realize compassion, intimacy, imaginative daring. See The Ambassadors, Norton ed., p. 313.