

## The Reign of Consciousness: Henry James's Late Phase

During the last fifty years or so, the image of Henry James has gone through many transformations. The fast-turning carousel of changing theories has provided us with several sets of critical spectacles each of which has made us look at him with new (or different) eyes. I remember that when I first read him as a student in the late 1950s, it was the New Critics (such as R. P. Blackmur) who made us see in James the early master of the modern novel, the expert craftsman whose work – supreme example of the pure autonomy of art – transcended its historical and/or political contexts and conditions. To be sure, there was also a counter position (mostly Marxist) that rejected James as esoteric and elitist, despised him almost for what it called his ahistorical aestheticism. But since this counter-image was fairly crude and the denunciation of the aesthetic so obviously ideological, it was easy to dismiss.<sup>1</sup>

The various revisions since then have never questioned James's status as a master of fiction, but they have sacked the modernist monument that the New Critics had made of him. The New Historicists saw his insistence on aesthetic appreciation – which he himself had understood as a critical response to a rising culture of “the cheap and easy” (“The Lesson of Balzac” 70) – in uncanny alliance with that culture; just as Foucauldian readings saw his aesthetics of perception as complicit with a social system of surveillance and metaphorically linked to the coercive power politics of Empire. Poststructuralist readings, not surprisingly, found in James's textual ambiguities the Lacanian gap through which the signified had left forever, sending his readers on an endless search for an ever-elusive meaning. Finally, recent pragmatist reassessments of his work have seen what James called his “religion of doing” as part of a “natural history of pragmatism” (Richardson 80) that included Emerson and ran via William James to Gertrude Stein, or even anticipated the flexible strategies of Dewey's thought or the dialectic subtleties of the Frankfurt School.<sup>2</sup>

What has remained a constant in this kaleidoscope of shifting critical opinions is the importance James gave to “consciousness” in the theory as

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<sup>1</sup> Among New Critics, see Blackmur; Dupee, *Henry James and The Question of Henry James*. For a Marxist approach to James, see Hicks and, more subtle and substantial, Agnew. Agnew argued that the aestheticism of James's late phase was complicit with the culture of consumption it so vehemently opposed.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from Richardson, see Seltzer; Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*; Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*.

well as the practice of his fiction – although what its function might be and how it worked continues to be a matter of debate. It was, in any case, this emphasis on consciousness that distinguished him from his fellow realists and marked him, in the eyes of later critics, as a forerunner of Proust, Joyce or Virginia Woolf. As his friend William Dean Howells wrote in 1904, “He seems to have grown more and more inward, and to retire to his own interior to ruminate the morsels of his fellow men which he captures in his consciousness of things outside” (qtd. in Anesko 330).

In what follows I shall discuss the limits, the doings and the ideological implications of “consciousness” as it becomes manifest in James’s late fiction and in his theoretical reflections. Of course, this could be the subject of a book whose argument can only be outlined here.<sup>3</sup> I shall walk around “consciousness” as if it were a concrete object of Jamesian representation – touching on its different aspects and assuming the position of various approaches to it. But let me first point out that James’s insistence on the centrality of consciousness in his “Art of Fiction” as well as in his earlier experiments in subjective point-of-view (his famous “center of consciousness” as practiced for the first time in Isabel Archer’s midnight meditation in chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*) still falls within the logic of realism. Since, in this logic, reality is defined as subjectively experienced yet commonly shared, realism has indeed many different faces within the same conceptual frame. Howells and Mark Twain both emphasize the experience of common people – people of the middle class in the case of Howells, people on the margins in the case of Twain. Their heroes are able to rely on the simple truths of “reason,” of the senses and the instincts of the good heart which allow them to eventually do the right thing. Howells conceives of the democratic as average, grounded in shared values and common experience (he thus rarely uses a subjective point of view), while with Twain the common is frequently subjectively mediated via the senses. Twain’s heroes are non-intellectual, the process of perception is more important than the process of reflection.

In contrast, James (with only a few exceptions<sup>4</sup>) prefers educated protagonists, capable of reflection and with a rich inner life. What is represented is not what is seen and experienced directly but the reflected impression, the reflected experience. Howells’s realism had been based on a concept of mimesis that made the novel a mirror of reality. He attempted, as he once wrote, to hide the joint between the “real” and the mere image of the real, and worried that the joint would always be visible (*Selected Literary Criticism* 3: 225). James’s concept was more flexible from the beginning. He did not ask whether his fiction was true to reality but whether it had

<sup>3</sup> For an earlier study of that subject see, for instance, Berland.

<sup>4</sup> The heroine (an unnamed telegraphist) of his novella *In the Cage* (1898), for instance.

“life” – which puts emphasis on the work of art itself.<sup>5</sup> Only if it had life could it create interest and involve the reader. That interest he identified, especially in his fiction of the late 1890s and after, with the life of the mind, the process of thinking (what his brother William had called, in his *Principles of Psychology* of 1890, the “stream of thought”); and it is the richness of the inner life, of reflection and consciousness that becomes his increasing obsession. While his novels of the 1880s – *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, *Princess Casamassima*, *The Tragic Muse* – still present the broad social panorama of the realist tradition and prove his ambition to become the American Balzac, the more experimental fictions of the 1890s display what Howells saw as James’s “inward” turn.

But with the exception of *The Portrait of a Lady*, his big novels of the 1880s had all failed to attract an audience. “I have fallen upon evil days,” he wrote to Howells in the early 1890s, “every sign or symbol of one’s being in the least *wanted*, anywhere or by anyone, having so utterly failed” (*Letters* 1: 237). Since his novels did not sell he tried to convince himself for five years that his plays might. Yet after his stubborn attempt to achieve “fame” and “fortune” via the drama had also ended in disaster, he faced and, to some extent, accepted his alienation from the popular audience. He returned to fiction and committed himself, with even greater intensity, to exploring new possibilities of the narrative medium – hoping that the very expansion of the literary market would eventually allow for smaller, yet more refined publics that would accept him on his own terms. If the dominant culture of the *fin de siècle* and after had turned itself more and more toward the “mass-produced,” the “public” and “commercial,” James’s work from now on turned decidedly to the private inner life, to consciousness in short – as any comparison of the opening paragraphs of, let’s say, *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1886) with *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903) will show.

James’s novels display, from early on, his delight in the concretely visualized “picture” and the dramatic “scene.” However, the passages from his later fictions give evidence not only of a much greater degree of narrative economy but also of a now more subtle combination of the pictorial and the dramatic. At the same time, there is a noticeable reduction of the authorial narrator’s role. True, there is a narrative voice above the protagonist’s consciousness, a voice that speaks of him (or her) in the third person – “Strether’s first question”, “She waited, Kate Croy” – but it rarely ventures beyond the personal perspective. In addition, the “scene” dramatizes in both cases a mental state: Strether’s wavering between expectation and delay or Kate Croy’s restless indecision (as evident in the inverted structure

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<sup>5</sup> Their differing concepts of realism become clearly evident in James’s “The Art of Fiction” (1884) and Howells’s “Novel Writing and Novel-Reading” (1899).

of the sentence) whether she should leave or stay in her father's shabby living room are both enacted in the linguistic performance of the text.

James's achievement here is the result of a longer period of experimentation in which he tried to make what he called "the divine principle of the Scenario" (*Notebooks* 188) part of his narrative technique. This resulted, on the one hand, in the dramatization and externalization of mental processes and, on the other, in a preference of the scenic over the descriptive. James was fascinated by the theater because the stage implied immediacy, an absolute Now, and the audience had to work hard to understand action and character primarily from gesture and from speech. His short and theatrical novels of the late 1890s are accordingly either narrated dramas of reflection, enacted and performed on the inner stage of consciousness, or a sequence of cleverly arranged scenes in which a limited number of characters engage in witty but by no means transparent conversations whose deeper meanings the reader has to draw from the only partially articulated, from unaccountable exclamations or from tantalizing silences.

An example of the first would be *What Maisie Knew* (published in 1897), where James takes the unprotected innocence of Isabel Archer, the young protagonist of his *Portrait of a Lady*, even farther back to the vulnerability of childhood; at the same time that he seems to anticipate the pragmatist resiliency of a more consciously self-creating woman, Maggie Verver, the heroine of *The Golden Bowl*. In this earlier novel, however, James chooses a little girl, Maisie, as reflector or "center of consciousness" who is bounced, like "a shuttlecock" (13), between parents and their lovers in a choreography of changing places and shifting marital and extra-marital relationships. Maisie's small consciousness expands with her knowledge of life: From "dim discernment" (280) it slowly grows and unfolds in several stages of observation, sensuous awareness and reflectiveness. Although she is, for a long time, the object of the game of others (a selfish and manipulative game of love and jealousy, of greed and sexuality), she tentatively grasps its rules without understanding them. She participates in it initially as a "clueless" player, but increasingly learns to discriminate between the actions of the others which enables her to shift the balance and the symmetry of the relations and eventually to leave the game. In the process of playing it in its various shifting constellations, she gains aesthetic and sensuous appreciation – perhaps even acquires what Mrs. Wix calls (and what probably is) "a moral sense" (278, 296). "Oh I *know!*" Maisie keeps insisting till the very end. Although what she merely *thinks* she knows, or only *pretends* to know, or actually *comes* to know, the reader can never be certain of.

An example of the other, the purely "scenic method," would be *The Awkward Age* (1899). The ambivalent title points to the book's adolescent heroine, Nanda Brookenham, as well as to its temporal and social setting: a

segment of London's so-called "good" but in fact rather decadent society. Nanda is thus not only *of* awkward age but also born *into* an awkward age whose moral corruption is a threat to the young girl's innocence. Although Nanda occupies the center of the novel, she is not a "center of consciousness" – consciousness is in fact what the reader has to read from (or into) the speech or physical and verbal gestures of the participants in social interaction. The "scenic method" only allows for an outside view whose hidden inner dimension has to be constructed by the reader. James ultimately preferred the integration of the scenic into the drama of consciousness (as the three great novels at the beginning of the new century demonstrate), but he never completely gave up its opposite. His last published novel, the long forgotten *The Outcry* (which came out in 1911) is, in fact, a return to pure scene (and was originally meant to be a play).<sup>6</sup>

The turn inward has brought James the reputation of a being a master of psychological representation, but several critics have pointed out that the label is misleading.<sup>7</sup> Like his brother's *Principles of Psychology*, which, despite its title, is a work more of philosophy than of psychology, Henry James's dramas of consciousness are not psychological in the Freudian sense: They do not push toward the unconscious, do not explore the secrets and abysses of the soul, the yearnings of the instinctual life – although they are aware of them. They rather stage, in their fictional representations of how the mind works, the labors and (re)discoveries of memory and reflection. It is therefore quite plausible to compare Henry's enactments of consciousness with William's "study of the mind from within" (*Writings* 21). Indeed, William James's attempt to "unstiffen" established notions of the mind (*Selected Writings* 7) by conceiving of thought as fluid, continuous and constantly changing has many echoes in his brother's narrative work: that consciousness is grounded in experience and constantly shaped and reshaped by it; that any notion of a pre-given stable "self" is therefore untenable (although we do create or confirm forms and structures through habit); that what seems a firm and solid image in the stream of thought is steeped in association and suggestiveness; that thought is relational and extends into the sensually perceived and felt, into the pre-verbal and non-articulate; that it is therefore worked out of the fluid stuff of experience like a sculptor "works on his block of stone" (*Writings* 73). And very much like his brother, Henry James pursues the "reinstatement of the vague"

<sup>6</sup> See the chapter on James in Schneck.

<sup>7</sup> As did, most emphatically, Sharon Cameron, on the opening pages of *Thinking in James*. Ross Posnock writes: "For all his renown as a psychological novelist, Henry James conceives of the representation of consciousness not as a descent into psychic depths in search of truth but as a dissolving of the stable oppositions—depth and surface, inside and outside—that defined selfhood as a discrete and intelligible entity" (*The Trial of Curiosity* 103).

(*Principles* 237), the feelings of “if” or “but” or “and,” as is apparent in the verbalization of the pre- or non-verbal life of the mind enacted in his later fictions.

There are differences, however. Although both brothers accept the idea of a “personal consciousness,” William insists on its “absolute isolation” in a “pluralist universe” (*Principles* 226). He seems much closer here to Emerson’s individualism than Henry who sees personal consciousness not only as relational in its own processes but as formed by social relations and interactions. His emphasis of the subjective point of view should not make us forget that each “center of consciousness” acquires knowledge through being worked on *by* others as much as it is working *on* others. It is central *and* relational.<sup>8</sup>

I want to elaborate this by a more detailed discussion of two novels of the major phase: *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). I start with the opening passage from *The Ambassadors*: The first word of the novel is “Strether.” (It is the novel’s last word as well: “‘Then there we are,’ said Strether” – his consciousness encompasses the entire narration and we, as readers, are confined to it.) The passage enacts Strether’s wavering between the known quantity of Waymarsh, his stable but “joyless” New England friend, and his own joyous expectation of Europe. This tension forms in fact the structure of the whole book: Strether is torn throughout between the moral certainties of Woollett, Massachusetts, and the sensuous and aesthetic lure of Paris; he moves from one pole to the other without giving up Woollett altogether. He has been sent to Paris by the rich Mrs. Newsome (who represents Woollett and beyond that a Puritan and business-minded America) in order to retrieve her son Chad from what she conceives to be the seductive charms of a morally depraved woman. This is the melodramatic fantasy projected by all of Woollett’s ambassadors (first Strether’s and later that of Mrs. Newsome’s daughter Sarah Pocock and her family) – a fantasy acted out in countless melodramas of popular fiction and the popular stage. These are the moralistic pre-judgements that ‘frame’ whatever the pilgrims from Woollett expect to experience as Paris – except that in the case of the aging Strether his repressed aesthetic and artistic sensibilities infiltrate and undermine the moral convictions he has brought from overseas. Especially since what he actually encounters in Paris does not apparently fit the Woollett pattern: To be sure, there is a woman, Madame de Vionnet, but she is not the expected *femme fatale*. To Strether’s admiring eyes she rather seems to be the very embodiment of

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<sup>8</sup> “The self is a transitional agency within the dynamic web of relations in which it appears,” thus Jonathan Levin argues in *The Poetics of Transition*. “No element of that web has any meaning in isolation. Though many of James’s most interesting characters are distinctively individual, his fictions invariably confront their individuality with the irreducible relationality of social experience” (112).

European culture. He is therefore ready to believe that Chad's relation to her is, as he is told, a "virtuous attachment" that has transformed an uncouth American adolescent into a polished and well-mannered gentleman. To make Chad break with Marie de Vionnet and go back to a provincial America appears to Strether now a violation of good taste as much as a denial of visible evidence. He therefore betrays Woollett and inverts his mission: Instead of sending Chad back to America, he tries to keep him in Paris as long as possible.

When a second set of Mrs. Newsome's ambassadors arrive in order to achieve what Strether has failed to accomplish, the break with the rich widow (whom he once hoped to marry in exchange for bringing back Chad) becomes irreparable. One of the high points of the novel is the comic confrontation between Strether and Sarah Pocock (chapter 27) when Strether's vagueness – his inexpressible sense of the felt richness and inter-relatedness of everything he has experienced – encounters the hard rock of Sarah's moral certainties. Not much later, however, Strether is forced to realize that he has been systematically deceived: that the attachment of Chad to Mme. de Vionnet is not at all a virtuous one; that Woollett has been right despite of being wrong. Chad's affair *is* morally dubious and yet has changed him – but it has most of all changed Lambert Strether who, the innocent "lamb" and fool of perception, has acquired new knowledge in the process of perceiving. Although he has been deceived by those he had wanted to "save," he has nevertheless learned to understand that truth is not a stable entity but changes in the twists and turns of an ever-changing flow of experience; that it can comprise different, even antagonistic meanings; that the aesthetic has its own virtue. Even though Strether cannot completely give up ethic for aesthetic values, he is eventually able to hold both as complementary if irreconcilable facts of human experience.

There are two scenes relevant in this connection: The first is the reception in Gloriani's garden when Strether, overcome by the sensual "assault" of Paris and by a mounting regret for having missed to live his life, implores Chad's friend, Little Bilham, not to commit the same mistake: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to." He then continues:

The affair – I mean the affair of life – couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured – so that one "takes" the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it; one lives in fine as one can. (153)

On first glance this seems in accord with a Puritan notion of life as having a God-given, predetermined shape which allows for living one's life only "as one can." On second glance, however, the metaphor contains a pragmatist program – for we can only know the eventual shape of our lives by actively

shaping or living it. “Live all you can” therefore claims mastery of the shape of one’s life by the action of living it to the full. The ambivalence of the metaphor (the tension between passive acceptance and the self-determining freedom of action) echoes in all of James’s late fiction – as, for example, in *The Wings of the Dove* where Milly Theale wavers between the life “one would live if one could” and the “life one could live if one would” (182). Life, in late James, is at least potentially a pragmatist project: its eventual form brought out in the very action/process of shaping and ‘stretching’ it. (Strether thus turns out to be a ‘stretcher.’)

The second scene is developed in two chapters that have become famous in the history of the modern novel (chapters 30 and 31): Strether’s recognition of what, until then, he had successfully managed to ignore – the sexual relationship between Chad and Mme. de Vionnet whom he had both excessively idealized as “gentleman” and “lady.” From the beginning, Strether has been prone to project conceptual ‘frames’ that pre-structure experience. He shares this tendency with other representatives of Woollett, except that their moral fundamentalism prevents them from ever changing the ordering ‘frame’ of their prejudices and pre-judgments. In contrast, Strether’s moral consciousness is mediated by his aesthetic sensibility. In the eyes of Woollett, his appreciation of sensuous perception, his being too easily seduced by the senses as much as by “his poor trick of quiet inwardness” (349), amounts to moral weakness. In a dialectic process of reflection he constantly negotiates between things imagined and things seen, between idealizing ‘frames’ and the flow of experience. Accordingly “letting go,” “plunge,” “give in,” “adrift,” “at sea,” “afloat” are key words: Strether gradually exchanges moral for aesthetic pre-conceptions. Until his last ‘frame’ – the pastoral image of a nostalgically remembered painting by Lambinet – is shattered by the boat that, at first, seems to fit perfectly into the frame of the ideal mental picture but in fact shatters it. For it reveals Chad and Mme. de Vionnet as expert lovers (who know “how to do it” 389), thus forcing Strether to finally face the truth of experience directly: “I have no ideas,” he says at the end, “I am afraid of them, I have done with them” (437).

And yet it would be wrong to regard this final state of disillusionment as the essence of Strether’s Paris experience. It is only the end of a process of reflected perception in which truth has been changed from moral certainty to a fluid and relational concept, in which “everything has come as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else” (348). For truth cannot be isolated from the specific moment and sensuous context of its experience, truth, in other words, comprises the whole process, all stages of Strether’s knowing. Without his idealizing frames, without his self-deceptions and the deceptions suffered by his Paris friends it would have been impossible for him to “plunge” into the experiential flow of Paris.



Whether, at the end, Strether's hands are full or empty remains an open question. They are full because he has, after all, lived all he (still) could, thereby expanding the shape of his consciousness in the act of exposing it to the experience of Paris. Yet they are also empty since, by abandoning all idealizing pre-conceptions, he has lost the incentive to interpret: his habit of 'framing' which got him going in the first place. In this sense, the novel confronts the reader with the premises not only of Strether's knowing, but also of James's own imagination which dialectically straddles the gap between an idea of form and the formless flow of experience. The energizing contradiction hidden in Strether's double-coded "live *as you can*"-"live *all you can*" which runs the gamut between passively accepting and actively shaping one's life marks the choice that all protagonists of James's late novels have to make. In *The Ambassadors* James follows this paradoxical concept to its very limits: the concept of a form of life or consciousness pre-given, yet shaped, or rather stretched, through process. In his next novel, *The Golden Bowl*, he moves into the opposite direction. Here, the heroine tries to reset, through the power of her reflective imagination and by faith in the validity of form, the shattered pieces of her social life.

*The Golden Bowl* occupies a special place in James's work. Up to now his "centers of consciousness," although heroes or heroines of reflection, were mostly victims in the game of life – people who, like Lambert Strether, suffer losses or do not want to selfishly gain from their actions: "That you see, is my logic," argues Strether at the end. "Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself" (438). They are lambs or doves to the panthers and tigers of this world. Maggie Verver, however, the heroine of *The Golden Bowl*, wants back what she has lost; and so, by refusing to be a victim, she becomes a victimizer, exerting power over others. No wonder that the novel has given cause to many controversial interpretations. For some, Maggie's success is a triumph of art, love and consciousness; for others it is the result of rather sinister machinations. In their view the whole book is not only a strange fable of love but also one of power and coercion. Or, as Mark Seltzer argues, it is "a story of power and authority told *as a story of love*" (95).

The novel deals exclusively with the personal relations of hardly more than a handful of people, but its very privacy reverberates with cultural, even political, implications. In the *donnée* of the novel, the Italian Prince Amerigo marries Maggie Verver because he needs her father's money to pay off the mortgages on his Renaissance palaces. In exchange, Adam Verver – American multimillionaire and art collector – acquires the Prince as the most valuable object in his vast collection of European art treasures. Since Maggie loves the Prince, yet does not want to leave her father, she arranges Adam's marriage with Charlotte Stant (her old school friend and, though she does not know it, one of Amerigo's former lovers). Their

marriage gives the impoverished Charlotte the freedom to be socially “magnificent,” while it allows the Ververs to continue their close father-daughter relationship.

If the Ververs have the means to acquire precious objects, they do not have the knowledge of how to put them to right use. By withdrawing into their pre-marital symbiosis and by letting Charlotte and Amerigo – both “worldly” and “made for exhibition” (59) – lead their social lives for them, they shift the balance of their mutual arrangement and inadvertently encourage Amerigo and Charlotte to resume their earlier passionate affair. Accepting the chance that Maggie and Adam offer them in the naïve assumption of their safe possession (“We’ve never lost anything yet,” Maggie playfully says to Amerigo referring to her father’s art collection), Charlotte develops an elaborate strategy of caring deception that would maintain the arrangement and, at the same time, leave each couple in its respective state of bliss.

When Maggie finally acts on her growing suspicion, she answers Charlotte’s deception with a subtle counter-strategy of dissimulation that gradually forces their relation back to its original symmetrical design. Like Charlotte and Amerigo, Maggie is determined to spare the father who thus, by his mere presence, enforces the authority of patriarchal rule. Without their unspoken agreement to act with consideration for each other, and without the precondition that the weights of their relationship be changed without disturbing the “equilibrium,” playing this complex game of communicative interaction would be impossible. Since for all players success depends on the strictest observation of appearances, and “truth” may not, under any circumstances, be revealed,<sup>9</sup> the game can only be won by strategies of observation, interpretation, calculation, dissimulation that will eventually force the other player’s hand.

Therefore, the reality in which they move is one of pure surface: an ambiguous ‘text’ of verbal and gestural cues that can be understood only by those capable of the most imaginative interpretation. Charlotte misreads Maggie because she cannot imagine her (“I can’t put myself into Maggie’s skin” 236) – whereas Maggie, in imaginatively assuming the place and role of the other, is not only able to read the social text but also to change it in the very act of interpreting it. This process of reflective observation which can call magically into being what it can foresee is compared several times with a game of cards or with a theatrical performance which unfolds in the interaction of the players. If Maggie, in the first part of the novel, is a figure in a play written and directed by Charlotte, in the novel’s second part

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<sup>9</sup> “[H]ow it would have torn them to pieces, if they had so much as suffered its suppressed relations to peep out of their eyes” (543).

she turns Charlotte and the other players into “figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author” (548).

In this fiercely competitive game the players nevertheless form a closely interrelated community of interpretation. They are united in their consensus to respect the forms, and it is precisely this silent agreement that allows Maggie to force *her* reading of the social text on all the others. Their communication must at least partially do without the explicitness of utterance. It is said of Maggie that she “lived, inwardly, in a consciousness that she could but partly open even to so good a friend, and her own visitation of the fuller expanse of which was, for that matter, still going on” (447). Therefore it is not only the reader who is kept in the dark about what is understood but not said, or what is not said because it is not known, or what is only said to pretend or to hide knowledge, or what cannot be said because appearances have to be saved. Silence speaks as much as the spoken word – and it is often hard to distinguish between what is thought and what is spoken. So great is Maggie’s power of reflection and so intense the “reign” of her consciousness that much of what seems to be dialogue are actually words she only imagines as hearing: “She had turned away from [Amerigo] with some such unspoken words as that in her ear, and indeed she *had* to represent to herself that she had spiritually heard them, had to listen to them still again, to explain her particular patience in face of his particular failure” (448). It is even more difficult to distinguish between what she imagines as saying and what she actually says: “‘Yes, look, look,’ she seemed to see him hear her say even while her sounded words were other [...]. And her uttered words, meanwhile, were different enough from those he might have inserted between the lines of her already-spoken” (427).

In her subtle and provocative study of *Thinking in Henry James*, Sharon Cameron argues that what seems the result of Maggie’s extraordinary empathy is, in fact, a usurpation of the thoughts of others. Especially in the second part (when Maggie becomes the novel’s “center of consciousness”) “thinking is prescriptive,” Cameron writes, and turns into “a form of communication that looks curiously like mind reading. Because speech is made incommunicative, what characters think can only be intuited” (96). In fact, so supremely real (for Maggie as much as for James) is the life of the mind that “the presumed functions of speech and thought appear inverted” (85) and, in the intensity of Maggie’s reflection, thought receives, by way of metaphor, the weight and concrete shape of real things. This is true of the elaborately imagined pagoda whose image, it is said, “may represent our young woman’s consciousness of a recent change in her life” (302). It is also true of the extraordinary passage representing Maggie’s thoughts while waiting for her husband (after his betraying her with Charlotte). Here, the inward scene is materially and spatially projected outward until “[t]he quite different door had opened and her husband was there” (309). “The very

power of Maggie's thought," writes Bill Brown in his analysis of this scene,

is suggested by the fact that, even though the opening door interrupts her thinking about the roomful of confused objects, it is as though her thinking about the door of that room has conjured the opening of the other. The materialization of thought—understood either as thought's externalization or as the internalization of the physical object world—serves not just to contain anxiety but to work on and in that world. (165)

In the ensuing rearrangement of relationships, hermeneutic competence and knowledge become instruments of domination. Maggie's choice is either to remain the victim of Charlotte's manipulations or to victimize Charlotte (who is not only her husband's lover but also, to make matters really complicated, her friend of school days and her stepmother) through manipulations of her own. When she lets Amerigo know *that* she knows (but not *what* she knows), she can trust his sense of social form (his 'manners'): He will not let Charlotte know that Maggie knows. By leaving Charlotte in the dark, Maggie, in selfish selflessness, turns her own knowing into power. She eventually deceives Charlotte into "magnificently" choosing the role that she, Maggie, has designed for her. The struggle between interpreters and interpretations, in which the participants engage passionately to the fullness of their mental and social abilities, thus issues into a hierarchy of knowledge and intelligence. Playing the game restores "a violated order" (448) as much as it asserts the value of the individual players.

If the novel, as its idealizing rhetoric implies, converts an "abstract acquisitive drive [...] into acquisition of a higher order" (Mull 138), it also curiously duplicates the market world of competition and accumulation that is otherwise excluded from it. In a social world in which Adam Verver rules by pulling invisible strings and guarantees by his financial presence the very possibility of all arrangements ("without him nothing might have been" 477), the protagonists "work," "labor," "struggle," "succeed," or "fail" in the effort of "making" their lives. The hierarchy of hermeneutic competence established at the end thus doubles the economic hierarchy that is the premise of the game. *The Golden Bowl* inquires into the potentialities of money. It makes possible the acquisition of beautiful objects at any price which may then be converted into "spiritual furniture" (160), into priceless pieces in the treasury of consciousness. Therefore one could read the novel as a quasi-utopian fairy-tale that celebrates the transformative power of consciousness but does not hide the price paid for its practice. In behaving "beautifully" and "magnificently" by keeping up appearances, the

protagonists establish art (and a social life become art) as the latent, the potential 'form' of capital.<sup>10</sup>

In her deconstructive reading Cameron argues that James stages, in Maggie's triumph, an omnipotence of consciousness in which he cannot really believe himself: "In the last paragraph of *The Golden Bowl*," she writes,

James turns away from consciousness (or has Maggie do so by burying her eyes in Amerigo's breast), a consciousness whose meaning-making faculties he so consistently exalted in the five hundred pages preceding it [...]. Therefore she sees, or hides her face so as not to continue to see, the destruction she has wrought. (112)

However, the novel's ambivalent ending rather seems to suggest that the marital and patriarchal order Maggie's consciousness has worked so hard to repair, is reconfirmed in her final gesture of submission to the institutional as well as to the sexual power of her husband. *That* gesture cannot be without "pity and dread" (547) since Maggie must place trust where trust has been betrayed before. Whether she has restored the golden bowl with or without the original crack thus remains undecided.

The novel may perhaps most plausibly be read as an exercise in "hermeneutic education" (P. Armstrong 208) – Maggie's as well as the reader's – and as part of "James's ultimate attempt to salvage imaginatively the ideals of a civilization that his deepest instincts warned him was doomed" (Pearson 301). Indeed, James passionately believed that "forms," in the widest sense, were the essence of all civilized behavior, "that the observation of forms," as Leo Bersani once wrote, "is sufficient to produce a conversion of being" (74). But James was also aware that he wrote at a historical moment when such a concept of civilized life was becoming obsolete. This is apparent in the fierce, almost merciless, analysis of society's corruption in his novels of the late 1890s, but also in the extravagant rhetoric of his late essays and speeches on American manners –when he tried to create, for a larger American public, a consciousness of social form that was, he feared, rapidly disappearing in a commercial culture whose new fetish was publicity. Thus, in a commencement speech at Bryn Mawr College, he urged the young student ladies to acquire mastery in their manners of speech as well as their behavior:

What I thus urge upon you [...] is a consciousness, an acute consciousness, absolutely; which is a proposition and a name likely enough to raise among many of your friends a protest. [...] Therefore your consciousness will now present the phase of awakening, and that will last what it must. Unconsciousness is beautiful when it means that our knowledge has passed into our conduct and our life; has

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<sup>10</sup> See also Ickstadt, *Faces of Fiction* 137-55.

become, as we say, a second nature. But the opposite state is the door through which it has to pass, and which is [...] rather straight and narrow. (*Henry James on Culture* 52)

But once through that “narrow portal,” they would see “the blue horizon across the valley, the wide fair country in which your effort will have settled to the most exquisite of instincts, in which you will taste all the savor of gathered fruit” (52).

What the young ladies thought of this utopian vision of a style whose perfection would, through the exertions of self-culture, eventually become a “second nature,” we can guess from a related essay where one of them speaks to him of “oppression” and of “oppressive obligation” (75). Against which James argued “that so small and easy an application of taste made really not for servitude of situation, but for interest of discourse” was not too high a price to pay; for, he concluded:

Everything hangs together, I say, and there is no isolated question of speech, no isolated application of taste, no isolated damnation of delicacy. The interest of tone is the interest of manners, and the interest of manners is the interest of morals, and the interest of morals is the interest of civilization. (78)

And the interest of civilization, he might have added, is the interest of art.

Obviously, all these elements are part of an all-encompassing aesthetic ideology that also informs the art of his fiction: his consciousness of form and the forms of consciousness it enacts; as much as it informs an economy of literary style that “bristles” (as he would say) with social, even with political implications. For James, all questions of aesthetics are therefore matters of utmost relevance. This defines the social function of the artist and his responsibility to make “public [...] and civic use of the imagination” in a time of change and crisis. “One does, thank heaven, encounter here and there symptoms of immunity from the general infection,” he wrote in the Preface to “The Lesson of the Master.” “One recognizes with rapture, on occasion, signs of a protest against the rule of the cheap and easy; and one sees thus that the tradition of a high aesthetic temper needn’t, after all, helplessly and ignobly perish” (*The Art of the Novel* 223).

James made the cultivation of form and consciousness an antidote, a counter-strategy “in behalf of the something better [...] that blessedly [...] *might be*” (222). His fictions of inwardness, in balancing out the losses of an ongoing “process of historic waste” were embodiments of “all the Style the community is likely to get” (*The American Scene* 191, 97). Accordingly, they should not be regarded as marking James’s retreat into mere aestheticism but as an attempt to actively, pragmatically, “take his place in a community-in-the-making by joining in the process of making it” (Holland ix). So that the hermeneutic education *in* his fiction and *by* his

fiction would not only create new generations of readers who delighted in his subtle representations of cultivated consciousness but would also help bring about a more refined civilization that saw itself as shaped *by*, and as represented *in*, his work.

Such hopes mark several of his endeavors in the first decade of the new century, especially his major novels, the New York Edition and the cultural criticism of *The American Scene*, the account of his trip through the U.S. which was published in 1907. Although all of these ventures failed in so far as they did not realize the high hopes he had placed in them, James never allowed himself to fall into the “blackness” of cultural despair. Thus he wrote in an essay of 1910 (“Is There A Life After Death?”) which is perhaps his most sustained theoretical reflection on consciousness:

This mere fact that so small a part of one's visionary and speculative and emotional activity has even a traceable indirect bearing on one's doings or purposes or particular desires contribute strangely to the luxury [...] of thought, and strongly reminds one that even should one cease to be in love with life it would be difficult, on such terms, not to be in love with living [...].

[I]n proportion as we [...] enjoy the greater number of our most characteristic inward reactions, in proportion as we do curiously and lovingly, yearningly and irrepressibly, interrogate and liberate, try and test and explore, our general productive and [...] creative awareness of things [...] in that proportion does our function strike us as establishing sublime relations. It is this effect of working it that is exquisite [...]; it is in a word the artistic consciousness and privilege in itself that thus shines as from an immersion in the fountain of being. Into that fountain, to depths immeasurable, our spirits dip—to the effect of feeling itself, *qua* imagination and aspiration, all scented with universal sources. (*Henry James on Culture* 125-26)

And again four years later in a letter to a depressed Henry Adams:

*Of course* we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss—if the abyss *has* any bottom [...] But [...] I still find my consciousness interesting – under *cultivation* of the interest. [...] You see I still, in presence of life (or of what you deny to be such), have reactions – as many as possible [...]. It all takes doing – & I *do*. I believe I shall do yet again – it is still an act of life. (*Life in Letters* 533)

This remarkable insistence on the life-giving, life-revealing and life-sustaining activity of consciousness should warn us not to insist too much on the ideological dimension of Henry James. It is true that our reading of the late novels can profit from placing them within the larger context of what one might call his civilizing project which is most clearly expressed in the educational appeal of his essays on American manners. But although these essays illuminate the novels to some extent, they do not explain them. They offer a conservative ideology of “form” that marks James indeed as

“the lone survivor” of a society long gone. They project “form” quite rigidly against the deficits of social life – whereas the novels, in contrast, open form to experience, test it or bring it out in the process of groping for it, shaping it. In fact, it is the very testing and groping that makes for “interest” and adventure in the life of the mind.

To that extent, Cameron is right when she argues that, in James’s late novels, experience undermines the claims he makes for the powers of consciousness. I would modify and say that the novels affirm those powers, yet in doing so also make us see the limits of the very ideology that they sustain or that sustains them. This, one should remember, defined Strether’s position. He cannot do without form but he opens up form to the flow of experience until he is no longer able to deny that its shaping power had been feeding on illusion. It is in the working, the doing, the shaping of the reflective mind that consciousness is formed by exposing itself to the flow of, and the struggle with, experience. Shaping one’s world in the process of ‘reading’ it constitutes the ‘hermeneutic education’ of James’s characters as much as that of his readers. In this sense, the “cultivation of consciousness” *in* and *by* his fictions still works for us – quite independent from the ideology that may once have sustained them.