The Poynton Marbles

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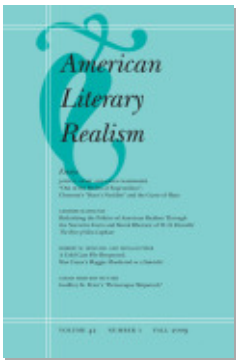

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Marbles—as (false) transl. of F. *meubles*: furniture, movables, personal effects; 'the goods' (*slang*). (*OED*)

Edgar Allan Poe's master detective explains the principle of ratiocination that enables him to locate the letter that the prefect of police cannot find. "It is merely," says C. Auguste Dupin, "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent"—a principle that enables the schoolboy playing at the game of "even and odd" to win "all the marbles of the school."[1] It is not far-fetched, I think, to consider some of Henry James' detective-like characters as somehow related to Dupin—Hugh Vereker's readers in "The Figure in the Carpet," the governess in "The Turn of the Screw," the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, or Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Each of them works, with varying degrees of success—not to win a game per se—but to establish pertinent facts, fit pieces to a puzzle, or search out the mystery at the center of some web of relationships. The efforts of Mrs. Gereth of *The Spoils of Poynton*, however, are of a different sort. She is more like Poe's schoolboy, intending to win all the marbles. To win she must not lose the furnishings she and her late husband have so assiduously assembled and that, at her husband's death, must now pass to their son and the wife he chooses.

In an account of James' use of French words and phrases in his fiction, Edwin S. Fussell writes of *The Spoils of Poynton* that even though the action of the novel is "purely English and its language nearly as insular," the novel contains significant French touches: "former Parisian art student [Fleda Vetch] obligingly gives us *morceau de musée* and *bibelot*, the former continental antique hunter [Mrs. Gereth] adds her *n'en parlons plus*, and narrative authority chimes in with *endimanché*, *flair* (italicized as if French), *objets d'art*, *cachet*, and 'entrée.' Louis Seize furniture is spoken of and Marie Antoinette

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in the Conciergerie."[2] Missing from James' novel, oddly enough, are *meuble* and *meubles*, words that appear in French translations of *The Spoils of Poynton* as the equivalents for "furniture" and "furnishings" and that James employs elsewhere—*The Golden Bowl*, for example.

The Spoils of Poynton is "a story of cabinets and chairs and tables," James recalled. Its germ—another case of "clumsy Life again at her stupid work," he said—was an anecdote about "a good lady in the north, always well looked on, [who] was at daggers drawn with her only son, ever hitherto exemplary, over the ownership of the valuable furniture of a fine old house just accruing to the young man by his father's death."[3] The novel cannot be reduced to a "damned fuss about furniture," as Ezra Pound would have it.[4] There is more to it than the irony that it is an early morning fire that "inherits" the Poynton collection, foiling, once and for all, Mrs. Gereth's one-sided game and its high-stakes gamble. No one is a match for her, but the laws of inheritance are another matter. The lawful outcome of disestablishment at her husband's death she has not circumvented. Mrs. Gereth will be outmatched not by any of her opponents but by the insensitive and undiscriminating law of the land. Only by weaning her son away from Mona Brigstock and steering him in the direction of the acceptable and more deserving Fleda Vetch, Mrs. Gereth reasons, can she "save" her "Things," the "rare French furniture and oriental china" in place at Poynton—her own Imperial Garde Meuble.[5] Indeed, Fleda, too, will be "a bit of furniture," as Mrs. Gereth says to Fleda, "for that, a little, you know, I've always taken you—quite one of my best finds." And Fleda does not object, for "the position of a scrap of furniture was one that Fleda could conscientiously accept" (245).

When James published the novel in book form, he changed its title from "The Old Things," as it was called during its serialization in the *Atlantic Monthly*, to *The Spoils of Poynton*. Some of his readers lamented the change. "We prefer the original title," wrote one reviewer, "for really these 'old things'—namely, a collection of rare and choice objects of art—furnish the motive and center of action of the novel."[6] Another reviewer went so far as to declare that "the real Personage of the book is . . . none other than 'The Old Things'"—not any of its characters.[7]

In retitling his story, however, James effected a significant shift in emphasis from the "things" themselves—the connoisseur's furnishings collected at Poynton—to a "war" over those furnishings as spoils. That there was a joke in all this fuss, I think, was indicated by the reviewer who concluded that "the reader remains calmly indifferent, as to what becomes of either the *meubles* or the *dramatis personae*."[8] When he identifies the Poynton "spoils"

as *meubles,* James' reviewer points to the pun that goes to the heart of what matters in *The Spoils of Poynton.*

—*Brown University*

Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 231.
2. Edwin S. Fussell, *The French Side of Henry James* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), p. 167.
3. James, "Preface" to *The Spoils of Poynton* in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), X, vii, xiii.
4. May Sinclair, "The Reputation of Ezra Pound," *North American Review,* 211 (May 1920), 659.
5. James, *Spoils,* 24. Subsequent references cited parenthetically.
6. "Books and Authors," *Outlook,* 27 February 1897, p. 610.
7. "Mr. James's Latest Tendency," *Chap-Book,* 15 February 1897, p. 296.
8. *Literary World,* 17 April 1897, p. 127.