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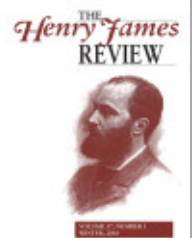
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Henry James, the Robber Barons, and *The Golden Bowl*

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It is likely that Henry James, who submitted a piece to the *Atlantic Monthly* in the summer of 1870 that was published in the November and December issues, saw the article, “Mr Hardhack on the Sensational,” which appeared in August of that year. If so, he may have been struck by the metaphor of the robber barons. The business practices of the newest generation of the rich were the object of criticism and ridicule in the *Atlantic* and elsewhere, and the robber baron metaphor remained in the public imagination. In 1907, the year of the first publications of the New York Edition, we are still hearing about the super-rich businessman who “ought in some way to render at least an equivalent service for all that he draws or uses out of the common wealth” but who has instead “merely seized and fortified a height above the city and become a robber baron” (Doyle 815, 817). The anger was directed not only at the lack of social return on colossal fortunes of a scale hitherto unseen but also at the unlawfulness of the methods of accumulation, which were perceived to have little enough to do with competition. “A few individuals are becoming rich enough to control almost all of the great markets, including the legislatures,” the *Atlantic* reported in 1882. Such men are “traitors to all the ties of honor, justice, and mercy that make the American community possible” (Lloyd 80).

This “new aristocracy of swindling millionaires” arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as C. Wright Mills reminds us in his classic study *The Power Elite*, for reasons having less to do with personal character traits—whether positively or negatively perceived—than with an objective structure of opportunity. What had changed fundamentally by the 1870s were the circumstances relating individuals to institutions and to the social structure in which they made their profits. The number of millionaires in New York City and Massachusetts in the 1840s was thirty-nine. This number had increased two orders of magnitude by the 1890s (Mills 102). The growth of this economic substratum is linked with the transformation from a rural

capitalism to the post-bellum industrial economy via a complicitous political framework that tolerated the manipulation of its laws by the great accumulators to protect their expanding corporate interests. Mills locates the origins of the new opportunity structure for runaway gain in the corruptions of the war economy, the protection of wealth in the tariff system, the National Banking Act of 1863, and the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), which was used to protect corporate ventures. Mills vividly summarizes:

The robber barons, as the tycoons of the post-Civil-War era came to be called, descended upon the investing public much as a swarm of women might descend into a bargain basement on Saturday morning. They exploited national resources, waged economic wars among themselves, entered into combinations, made private capital out of the public domain, and used any and every method to achieve their end. They made agreements with railroads for rebates; they purchased newspapers and bought editors; they killed off competing and independent businesses, and employed lawyers of skill and statesmen of repute to sustain their rights and secure their privileges. (95)

Henry James was acquainted with some of these very rich. In 1882, in Washington, D.C., he attended a dinner party whose guests included Andrew Carnegie (Edel 32), and he was friends with George Vanderbilt, youngest son of the railway tycoon, with whom he visited in London and at whose imitation French chateau in North Carolina, Biltmore, he stayed in 1905—a site whose “wondrous deludedness” amused him (*HJL* 408). The Notebooks indicate his awareness of “the ferocity of business,” this phrase appearing in the entry just before the germ of *The Golden Bowl* is recorded in November 1892 (*CN* 74). This earliest outline of the novel situates a wealthy American in what James calls a “rotary motion” (75). Emphasizing the formal symmetry of the adulterous intrigue, this early sketch does not endow Adam Verver with the stupendous wealth he possesses in *The Golden Bowl*. It is merely indicated that he “has settled a handsome *dot* on his daughter (leaving himself also plenty to live on)” (74). Perhaps the robber baronial trappings—including the conceit of a museum in American City as self-commemorative tribute to his countrymen—themselves evolved as a formal consideration, a counterbalance to the aristocratic bloodlines that the Prince offers in exchange. Be that as it may, by the time the novel had taken its final shape we are asked to accept a mogul without the amoral rapacity that the *Atlantic* and other social critics castigated. Though there are indications late in the novel of a possibly less agreeable side to his character vis-à-vis his unfaithful wife, the fact of Adam Verver’s fortune is never subjected to critical scrutiny by the text.

The aim of the present essay is to interrogate that omission. If for James the rotary motion spins a purely formal social geometry that downplays historicity, we may return that formalism to its historical context by situating plot and character dynamics within an ideology that revolves in combinatory positions that further expose conceptual impasses. I first explore how narrative meaning is produced within a novel whose inaugural move is the positing of a fictional robber baron innocent of his profits and then consider the text’s own uneasy awareness of inconsistencies and vulnerabilities within this narrative program. In a narrative environment that

effaces facts and histories, there is an erosion of referentiality. The novel's celebrated preface, written for the New York Edition (1909) five years after the novel was first published, offers a critical perspective on these stress points and gestures at a resolution unattainable in the novel itself.

The Golden Bowl begins by establishing contrasts between an aristocratic young Italian and the ultra-rich American who has settled an enormous amount of money on him in the marriage arrangements just concluded for his daughter.¹ The Prince, in playful conversation with his fiancée, maps out some familiar Jamesian coordinates, the effete cultural richness of Europeans on the one hand, the vigor and crudeness of Americans on the other: "I'm like a chicken, at best, chopped up and smothered in sauce; cooked down as a *creme de volaille*, with half the parts left out. Your father's the natural fowl running about the *bassecour*. His feathers, his movements, his sounds—those are the parts that, with me, are left out" (23: 8). Where we might have expected to find these opposing terms presented through the introduction of the two characters in question, the exposition is left entirely to the Prince, who, by way of banter, establishes the naturalness and simplicity of a capitalist without claws (if one may be permitted to modify the Prince's metaphor) well in advance of that character's first appearance in the novel.

We learn in the same conversation that the Prince is defined by history, as documented in the many tomes devoted to his family in libraries and museums: "one is made up of the history, the doings, the marriages, the crimes, the follies, the boundless *bêtises* of other people" (9), he tells Maggie, and such is the logic of the binary opposition that his American counterpart is understood as having no history to speak of. For although Maggie cheerfully and teasingly responds that it is precisely "the follies and the crimes, the plunder and the waste" (9–10) of the Prince's ancestors that attract her most, there is no corresponding catalogue of crimes and follies that documents her own family history, the absence of such record being equated with the youngness of the country itself: "American City isn't, by the way, his native town, for, though he's not old, it's a young thing compared with him—a younger one. He started there, he has a feeling about it, and the place has grown, as he says, like the programme of a charity performance" (12). The dramas and excesses that form such a diverting part of the Prince's history find their echo here in the humorous reduction to an amateurish, well-intentioned entertainment run amok that evidently captures the essence of a city's rapid growth and the concomitant accumulation of a vast fortune. This history is proleptically subsumed in an image that refers the past to Verver's present grand preoccupation, the charitable endowing of the city with a museum, already mentioned by Maggie as "the motive of everything he does" (12).²

Although the plundering and swindling deplored in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1870 find no place in the novel's account of Adam Verver, the rhetoric of exploitative market practices does surface in the preface to the novel, with the reader of literature cast as a victimized consumer not the less "swindled" (23: xxiii) for being unaware of frauds perpetrated against him:

We may traverse acres of pretended exhibitory prose from which the touch that directly evokes and finely presents, the touch that operates for closeness and for charm, for conviction and for illusion, for communication, in a word, is unsurpassably absent. All of which but means of course that the

reader is, in the common phrase, “sold”—even when, poor passive spirit, systematically bewildered and bamboozled on the article of his dues, he may be but dimly aware of it.

Insurance against this type of bamboozlement is provided by James’s commitment to developing the story through the consciousness of the characters themselves, which is opposed to what is termed, in a difficult phrase, the “mere muffled majesty of irresponsible ‘authorship’” (vi). James asserts here that the story should not appear to be founded on an authority that comes from outside itself, though why this is deemed irresponsible is far from clear. But when he returns to the notion of muffled majesty a few sentences later his relation to it has shifted:

Beset constantly with the sense that the painter of the picture or the chanter of the ballad (whatever we may call him) can never be responsible *enough*, and for every inch of his surface and note of his song, I track my uncontrollable footsteps, right and left, after the fact, while they take their quick turn, even on stealthiest tiptoe, toward to the point of view that, within the compass, will give me most instead of least to answer for.

I am aware of having glanced a good deal already in the direction of this embarrassed truth—which I give for what it is worth; but I feel it come home to me afresh on recognizing that the manner in which it betrays itself may be one of the liveliest sources of amusement in “The Golden Bowl.” It’s not that the muffled majesty of authorship doesn’t here *ostensibly* reign; but I catch myself again shaking it off and disavowing the pretense of it while I get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with . . . the more or less bleeding participants.

This rhetoric is notable for the way it continues and extends images of moral culpability and concealment that were introduced in the explicitly disallowed practice of omniscient narration. James himself in fact seems very much muffled as he traverses the text “on stealthiest tiptoe” in pursuit of what will give him “most instead of least to answer for.” We are then given the perplexing assertion that, while the muffled majesty of authorship “*ostensibly*” reigns in *The Golden Bowl*, the author disavows its pretence and does his best to engage the narrative at the level of the characters themselves. In what sense does the muffled majesty of authorship ostensibly reign in this novel?

Although the phrase “rotary motion,” in the Notebooks, refers to the formal symmetry of the adultery, it could be applied as well, from James’s description in the preface, to the organizational principle of the story itself:

It is the Prince who opens the door to half our light upon Maggie, just as it is she who opens it to half our light upon himself; the rest of our impression, in either case, coming straight from the very motion with which that act is performed. We see Charlotte also at first, and we see Adam Verver, let alone our seeing Mrs Assingham, and every one and every thing else, but as they are visible in the Prince’s interest, so to speak. . . . With a like consistency we see the same persons and things again but as Maggie’s interest, her exhibitional charm, determines the view. (*GB* viii)

James anticipates a possible objection to the presence of Mrs. Assingham, who sometimes crowds the Prince in his volume. This he describes as a disparity that is “superficial,” presumably because her own vociferous opinions and intrusions do not prevent our viewing characters from other perspectives.³ A less superficial departure from his narrative plan, however, is discernible in the presentation of Adam Verver.

Adam Verver’s first appearance in the novel occurs at the beginning of Book Second, when another belated presence, identified as “we,” intercepts him as he enters the billiard-room in search of privacy:

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, almost on tiptoe, through tortuous corridors, investing him with an interest that makes our attention—tender indeed almost to compassion—qualify his achieved isolation. For it may immediately be mentioned that this amiable man bethought himself of his personal advantage, in general, only when it might appear to him that other advantages, those of other persons, had successfully put in their claim. (125–26)

Given the violation of James’s prefatorial precepts—for here something much closer to an omniscient narrator has taken over the script—it is worth asking where this “we” came from. James’s peculiar explanation is that because Verver had wished to be alone, the very act of narrative scrutiny is an invasion dramatic enough to create “us” as spectators; we are evoked, that is, by virtue of the importance accorded his preferences.

In the surprise of finding ourselves syntactically present and participating in the text, it is easy to pass over the description of Verver as an “amiable” man. This is not in fact the Prince’s adjective, though he had had various other complimentary things to say about his future father-in-law at the beginning of the novel. James however soon returns to the word, this time qualifying it as largely irrelevant: “Amiability, of a truth, is an aid to success; it has even been known to be the principle of large accumulations” (128), but as an explanation of Verver’s fortune, it is wryly acknowledged, must be judged inadequate. “A dim explanation of phenomena once vivid must at all events for the moment suffice us; it being obviously no account of the matter to throw on our friend’s amiability alone the weight of the demonstration of his economic history.”

The word amiable is not applied to any character other than Verver in the novel. It next occurs in a passage sufficiently ironic in its inflection that the word begins to stand out as not just inadequate but highly problematic, even conspicuously ill-chosen:

Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer, had we time to look into it, than this application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions; all the more indeed that the amiable man was not without an inkling on his own side that he was, as a taster of life, economically constructed. (196)

The suggestion here, I think, is that the word amiable is Verver’s own, his chosen epithet for himself. He wishes to be thought of as amiable—it is, as the text concedes,

an “aid to success”—and the novel obliges, at the price of opening a register at some distance from its formal program, opening, that is, the register of muffled majesty. This is another of the rare instances in the text in which “we” are conjured as mute witnesses, for the force of the descriptor lies not in conveying Verver’s private sense of himself, whatever that might be, but in producing the conception he demands others to hold of him. Our presence is required.

The degree to which Verver’s self-image is accepted without question is indicated in the Prince’s reflections during a dinner party on the “simplicity” (323) of his host: “it amused him to feel how everything else the master of the house consisted of—resources, possessions, facilities and amiabilities amplified by the social legend—depended, for conveying the effect of quantity, on no personal ‘equation,’ no mere measurable medium” (324). Verver’s power, as apprehended by those around him, seems strangely unrelated to his personal character, though “facilities and amiabilities,” emanating not so much from the man himself as from a social framework, are understood to be constitutive. As in C. Wright Mills’s analysis of the robber barons, Verver is indeed empowered by virtue of his privileged relation to a complicitous institution, in this case the institution of the novel itself. The characters in *The Golden Bowl*, with one exception, are defined by how they perceive other characters and by how they are perceived by them. Adam Verver, in unique relation to the narrative form, possesses authority to disseminate his own characterization. But if the text appears not to question directly Verver’s view of himself, and the enabling myth too of a hardworking and supremely talented businessman who can earn his way to untold millions legitimately and honestly, this myth generates a certain dissonance in the novel.

I want to conclude this portion of the essay by commenting on a liminal figure, the antiquarian merchant, purveyor of the golden bowl. We never learn his name, and he appears only briefly in the novel, but he plays a decisive role, providing Maggie with the evidence of infidelity she needs and also supplying the symbol that is the title of the book. How are we to understand a minor character of such significance? He is pre-eminently a character who defies expectations. He shocks Charlotte and the Prince by understanding Italian, though it appears that he is not in fact Italian. Later he shocks Maggie with the truth about her marriage. He may shock the reader as well, in advancing the plot at the cost of an unlikely coincidence (“While he was waiting he looked at the few photographs that stand about there and recognized two of them” [24: 197]). In the midst of these surprises, and not least among them, is the astonishing fact of an honest businessman who places ethics before his own profit:

I can only think of him as kind, for he had nothing to gain. He had in fact only to lose. It was what he came to tell me—that he had asked me too high a price, more than the object was really worth. There was a particular reason which he hadn’t mentioned and which had made him consider and repent.

One could argue that the merchant reinforces the notion of an innocent or good faith capitalism, since here we actually see the phenomenon in action—on a small scale, to be sure, but perhaps to be taken as reassurance that business practices, from the very lowest (in Bloomsbury) to the highest (in American City), have not severed all connection to morality. But the affect from this episode is more complex. For one

thing, this reverse business transaction is not treated as anything but highly unusual. There is moreover a portentous aura of mystery surrounding the dealer. He declines under questioning to identify either his own origins or the provenance of the golden bowl, the issue, he suggests, “of a lost time” (23: 113–14). The shopkeeper himself has seemingly wandered in from some other, older world, and his interactions with Maggie seem to date from that lost time rather than any recognizable contemporary style of business.⁴

The antiquary furnishes Maggie with information that will lead indirectly but inevitably to her father’s removal with Charlotte to America. At the end of the novel none of the characters, not even Maggie, is altogether happy. But one character arguably loses more than the others, and that is the aging Adam Verver, who will be separated from the daughter and grandson he adores, without the compensations either of a renewed intimacy with a beloved spouse or of a geographically transportable youthfulness and sexual vitality. It is a dramatic irony, unspoken but powerful, that Verver is undone by this nameless shopkeeper. If the business practices of the robber barons flaunted a *caveat emptor* market approach, the Ververs reap the consequences with the Prince and Charlotte, two expensive acquisitions whose histories and motives they might have subjected to closer scrutiny.

The Golden Bowl does glance at Adam Verver’s prior history. We are told that the accumulation of such immense wealth “argued a special genius” and that the “stiff American breeze of example and opportunity” fanned this spark of genius (23: 127). After these offhand remarks, which raise as many questions as they answer, the novel returns to what it calls the “years of darkness” at the beginning of the next chapter:

It was the strange scheme of things again: the years of darkness had been needed to render possible the years of light. A wiser hand than he at first knew had kept him hard at acquisitions of one sort as a perfect preliminary to acquisition of another. . . . He had had to like forging and sweating, he had had to like polishing and piling up his arms. They were things at least he had had to believe he liked, just as he had believed he liked transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling all for themselves, the creation of “interests” that were the extinction of other interests, the livid vulgarity even of getting in, or getting out, first. That had of course been so far from really the case—with the supreme idea all the while growing and striking deep, under everything, in the rich warm earth. (144)

Adam Verver, it appears, has to some extent rewritten his past: if during those dark years of single-minded commitment to “transcendent calculation” he had actually enjoyed himself, we now gather that he “had had” to enjoy himself. The suggestion is that he had had to force himself to like it, in order to like it at all. And in fact we then learn he had merely believed he was enjoying himself, rather than actually enjoying himself, because that had “of course” been so far from the case, now that he is dedicating himself to something he genuinely enjoys, gathering the acquisitions for his future museum. Whether Verver is fooling himself in believing he only believed he liked what he was doing with money is not information about his character to which the reader has access, because his years of darkness are also years of darkness for us. As readers we must either believe his beliefs or depart from the text in speculations

that cannot be supported. The narrative of producing an unhistoried capitalist is called to operate in a somewhat precarious register of meta-belief.

The question of belief in Adam Verver will return at the emotional climax of the novel. This occurs at the end of a long delicate negotiation between Maggie and her father in which the idea of Verver moving back to America with Charlotte is sounded. In response to Maggie's concern that she is sacrificing him, he tells her that he will think so only on the day she has ceased to believe in him. This request for assurance does not lead to an immediate reply. Instead, Maggie in an extended meditation considers him in his public capacity, "the 'successful' beneficent person, the beautiful bountiful original dauntlessly wilful great citizen" whose power and influence spans two hemispheres:

He positively, under the impression, seemed to loom larger than life for her. . . . His very quietness was part of it now, as always part of everything, of his success, his originality, his modesty, his exquisite public perversity, his inscrutable incalculable energy; and this quality perhaps it might be—all the more too as the result, for the present occasion, of an admirable traceable effort—that placed him in her eyes as no precious work of art probably had ever been placed in his own. There was a long moment, absolutely, during which her impression rose and rose, even as that of the typical charmed gazer, in the still museum, before the named and dated object, the pride of the catalogue, that time has polished and consecrated. . . . Before she knew it she was lifted aloft by the consciousness that he was simply a great and deep and high little man . . . (24: 273–74)

The doubt she has harbored that he is a "failure," because of the failures of their marriages, fades in this expanded view. After which she turns to him:

"I believe in you more than any one."

"Than any one at all?"

She hesitated for all it might mean; but there was—oh, a thousand times!—no doubt of it. "Than any one at all." (275)

In order for her to "believe" in the person she knows so well, Maggie must create a space for belief. She casts her father as a quasi-mythic character of public consequence, the "infallible high authority he had been and still was" (273). This we may appreciate as a counterbalance to the perceived personal failure of the cuckold, but James emphasizes that something more than a weighing of the public and the private is involved when Maggie transmutes Adam into a work of art, "the pride of the catalogue" at his own future museum, in which she is then able to read such qualities as strength, sureness, and youthfulness. Critics have argued convincingly that reification is a central feature of James's late style, and we unquestionably find Maggie so engaged.⁵ This particular image, however, is problematized within the text itself, since we had earlier had Verver's own perspective on the art he is collecting: "he cared that a work of art of price should 'look like' the master to whom it might perhaps be deceitfully attributed" (23: 146–47). Verver is not interested in unrepresentative or atypical masterpieces. He wants great art to look like what it is supposed

to look like, and the sentence gestures slyly at the possibility that he can on occasion be duped, since counterfeiting preys on this desire for the predictable. Perhaps the numbered and dated object in the museum, the portrait of her father as “a great and deep and high little man” that Maggie gazes at in her vision is not authentic but a counterfeit that slipped past Verver and into the catalogue, just as the earlier passage about Verver’s taste in art may slip unbidden into our consciousness, complicating our response to this passage.

Characters in *The Golden Bowl* apprehend reality with great difficulty. Artistic representation is a primary, though only more or less reliable, conduit for their beliefs. Maggie first perceives the degree to which her marriage is imperiled in the fabulous image of the pagoda—“a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly” (24: 3)—which bizarrely invades her consciousness. It is the extravagance of its artistic details that convinces her that her domestic situation has indeed undergone a significant change. The golden bowl, having made its way to Portland Place, is displayed as evidence for her husband of Maggie’s knowledge of his infidelity. But its power to persuade is limited by the individual propensities of the beholder. Fanny Assingham perversely declines to accept the meaning that Maggie attributes to the bowl: “I don’t believe in this, you know,” she says, lifting it up (177). When Fanny smashes the object a moment later she claims to have obliterated its meaning as well: “Whatever you meant by it—and I don’t want to know now—has ceased to exist” (179). This may seem scandalous as an approach to what is cognitively permissible, but Fanny is not altogether wrong in thinking she has changed the signifying potential of the bowl: shattered in three pieces, it now references fractured domestic relations openly and confirmedly.

A more radical examination of the threats to referentiality is dramatized in the scene at the antiquary’s shop. The Prince is disposed to offer Charlotte a “ricordo” or memento of their excursion together. Charlotte is angered by the inconsistency of intention, since their morning together must be kept secret: such a gift would be a “*ricordo* of nothing. It has no reference” (23: 108). That the stakes are even higher becomes clear a moment later: “‘You don’t refer,’ she went on to her companion. ‘I refer.’” (109). Charlotte appears to be saying that the Prince does not adequately acknowledge their past history, and so a ricordo can only be a ricordo of nothing, whereas she herself, by her presence in England on the eve of his wedding, refers to the love affair he would suppress. But the verb “refer” has slipped from its usual transitive usage to something closer to intransitive. The Prince (by his suppressions) does not refer, ceases in fact to have the capacity for reference, while Charlotte (by her refusal to suppress) remains a medium for reference. She refers and in doing so contributes to the Prince’s own history in progress.⁶

Although the Prince is eventually “referred” (24: 180) back to his wife by Fanny Assingham and restored to a marriage in which each party is more present and real to the other than formerly, the novel itself seems dangerously close at times to becoming a ricordo of nothing. Adam Verver, as viewed by the character who knows and loves him best, is little more than a straw hat and waistcoat in the late chapters of the novel. He does not refer and generates uncertainties that undermine the reader’s attempts to understand the intentions and levels of awareness existing between father and daughter, thwarting a coherent interpretation of the story presented.

The question of narrative opacity is foregrounded in the preface, where James uses the image of walking through snow as a way to describe the experience of understanding his novel:

It was, all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had quite unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling into another, which might sometimes indeed more or less agree with the original tracks, but might most often, or very nearly, break the surface in other places. (23: xiii–xiv)

Snow—which in this account figures the real content or meaning of the text, as opposed to the narrative tracks that register its formal incarnation(s)—is a curious choice of figure, being an opaque layer or thick covering that obscures the specificity of the landscape below it.⁷ James earlier in the preface had emphasized the “illustrative claims” of fiction: “The essence of any representational work is of course to bristle with immediate images” (ix), but that essence is seemingly whited out or reduced to mere suggestive outlines that only follow the contours of what lies beneath. Content for James remains at one remove from a reality actual but untouchable that it cloaks. The revelations of re-reading, for James, occur when more surface is “broken”: these are the moments of cognitive enhancement that guide the process of rewriting. Breaking the surface does not bring the author closer to what lies hidden beneath but effects alterations in this intermediary layer of meaning or content as new tracks sheer away from previous tracks in a further scuffing of the “clear matter.”

The snowy expanse that figures the accessible for the text is also present within it, resurfacing as the “white curtain” (26) or confusing medium in which the Prince moves as a cultural outsider to the world of the Ververs. This image is itself derived from “the story of the ship-wrecked Gordon Pym, who, drifting in a small boat further toward the North Pole—or was it the South?—than any one had ever done, found at a given moment before him a thickness of white air that was like a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the color of milk or of snow” (22). Literature can describe our experience of the thickness of the medium in which we experience our lives, at the same time as it contributes to our confusion (“the North Pole—or was it the South?”). This white curtain is further apprehended as a horizon of moral blankness, a screen to the appeals to which Verver as a wealthy man is subjected. We are told that it “had 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” (126).

Authorship, for James, is canonically asserted in the act of revision, which inaugurates a “chain of relation and responsibility” with respect to one’s own work that appears to have little enough to do with a world in which “disconnexion and disavowal” (23: xxv) are conceded to be all but inevitable. Yet the preface ventures a confidence in the power of representation that exceeds the self-referential moral exercise of revision. James’s optimism is substantiated in a passage in the preface that describes an act that itself enacts a re-reading. This is the account of a walk that the author takes with the photographer Coburn in search of an image for the anti-

quary's shop that would serve as the frontispiece for the first volume of *The Golden Bowl*. Indeed the "little hunt" that Charlotte and the Prince go on in Bloomsbury is rewritten in the preface as "an amusing search" that the author himself makes in the same neighborhood, a walk that revisits the trauma ("You don't refer") skirted in that portion of the novel.

James—who had stipulated that photographic illustration in novels should disavow "emulation" of the narrative, operating instead at the level of "mere optical symbols or echoes, expression of no particular thing in the text but only of the type or idea of this or that thing" (xi)—evidently thought it advisable to accompany Coburn on his photographic shoot⁸:

The problem thus was thrilling, for though the small shop was but a shop of the mind, of the author's projected world, in which objects are primarily related to each other, and therefore not "taken from" a particular establishment anywhere, only an image distilled and intensified, as it were, from a drop of the essence of such establishments in general, our need (since the picture was, as I have said, also completely to speak for itself) prescribed a concrete, independent, vivid instance, the instance that should oblige us by the marvel of an accidental rightness. It might so easily be wrong—by the act of being at all. It would have to be in the first place what London and chance and an extreme improbability should have made it, and then it would have to let us truthfully read into it the Prince's and Charlotte's and the Princess's visits. It of course on these terms long evaded us, but . . . as London ends by giving one absolutely everything one asks, so it awaited us somewhere. It awaited us in fact—but I check myself; nothing, I find now, would induce me to say where. (xii)

A similar success is reported in the hunt for "some generalized vision of Portland Place" to be sought for the second volume of *The Golden Bowl*:

The thing was to induce the version of Portland Place to generalize itself. . . . All of which meant that at a given moment the great featureless Philistine vista would itself perform a miracle, would become interesting, for a splendid atmospheric hour, as only London knows how; and that our business would be to understand. (xii–xiii)

James uses the word "re-representation" (xiii) for the process of re-reading or re-writing (the distinction is blurred in the word revision, which he prefers). Art is not a simple matter of depicting "this or that thing" out in the world. A robber baron, for instance, cannot be introduced into a text without changing the terms of the representation itself, which warps in collusion, refracting his self-presentation in a way that maintains a power differential. His history can be suppressed in the novel, but such a narrative practice destabilizes reference as a meaningful activity for other characters and for the text itself. The validity of literature is triumphantly affirmed in the passage quoted above, but in this rewriting of the walk through Bloomsbury we find an extraordinary inversion of the creative process, which emerges as a fantasy supplement to a text that is ineluctably prior to it. Having written the novel, the

author goes out and looks for it in the real world, which by a “miracle” supplies it. The “white curtain” or snowy expanse that mediates our experience, filtering our apprehension of the actual, reassuringly recedes, if only temporarily, to mere atmosphere, “a splendid atmospheric hour.” The world in fact “refers.” It refers to the text, confirming the authenticity of its representation. The text in fact “refers.” It refers to the referring world. This mutually referring system of re-representation, in which our needs prescribe instantiation of our projected world and discover an actuality in which we can “truthfully read” our texts, encourages James to hope, in the concluding words to the preface, that “‘connexions’ are employable for finer purposes than mere gaping contrition” (xxv).

NOTES

¹The contrast between European and American sensibilities had of course been previously explored by James. For a recent sophisticated study of James’s “geocultural mythology of the United States” (129) that discusses notions of social identity formation in both contemporary popular literature and his travel writings, see Blair.

²Perosa usefully reviews James’s comments on art collecting, finding a “notable change in his view of museums and collecting” (153) in the direction of ambivalence about wealthy Americans’ mania for snapping up European masterpieces. Brown analyzes “the museal operation” in the larger context of reification: “you could also say that James intensifies and extends our understanding of the accumulating instinct by internalizing the operation—that is, by rendering thinking itself as a mode of accumulation” (163–64).

³Asymmetries in the bipartite division of the novel have been noted by many critics. Yeazell, observing that the Prince shares his volume with Verver, Charlotte, and Fanny Assingham, describes some ways in which Maggie benefits in coming second: “the fact that Maggie’s interpretation is the last—and most comprehensive—inevitably draws us closer to her vision of events” (103).

⁴Holland comments that the shopkeeper figures the novelist himself, offering the Prince and Charlotte “My Golden Bowl.” Oster more recently argues that he is Jewish and positions his opposing business practices in this context: “His simultaneous subject/object, insider/outsider status offers James a position from which to explore the transferability of value between people and things, and the ethical economy that undergirds acts of material exchange and the production of exchange value” (978).

⁵See, in addition to Brown, the discussion of reification in Agnew. Porter relates the stifling environment the novel describes—“Everyone intends the best, everyone tries to act for the best, and no one is really insincere”—to the reified world the characters inhabit: “the reifying process has reached the point where man confronts a world he has made, and therefore ought to be able to know, but cannot know because his own productive capacity has been obscured within the congealed form of commodities” (137).

⁶The scene in the shop has been a point of departure for many critical readings. Warren, noting the chime of *ricordo*/record, argues that even a “ricordo of nothing” can subvert Amerigo’s fantasies of denying history. Cameron situates the “asymmetry” in Charlotte’s “You don’t refer. . . I refer” in a politics of meaning: “what is implied by reference is something like agency, specifically, the power to exert control over meanings” (91). Steele discusses this asymmetry in terms of the “different referential languages” employed by the speakers (79). Teahan finds narratological implications in the figure of the bowl, commenting: “the bowl is transfigured from a ricordo of nothing to a ricordo of the narrative we know as *The Golden Bowl*” (114). My discussion locates the vulnerability of reference in a narrative practice that engages systematically in suppression and emphasizes a thematized link between representational objects and credulity.

⁷Miller gives a sensitive reading of this passage, noting, “Only if there is difference and deviation is it possible to distinguish between a knowledge simply of what the text says, which is relatively without value, and a knowledge of what the text represents or allegorizes, the “thing” or “shining matter” that gives the text whatever authenticity, value, and interest it may have” (117).

⁸“James’s hunt through the streets of London for photographs with Coburn exteriorizes the classical art of memory,” Ross observes (248). Adams relates James’s surprising decision to include photographs in the New York Edition to anxieties late in his career about exhausting his subject materials, a process of depletion that photography would appear to reverse.

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