The Challenge of Bewilderment
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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford.

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Chapter 1

Interpretation and Ambiguity

in *The Sacred Fount*

*The Sacred Fount* is an especially revealing example of James's explorations of the possibilities and the pitfalls that beckon to and threaten the composing powers of consciousness. Because we understand by shaping parts into wholes, James finds that worlds can be formed in a marvelous variety of configurations. But he also worries that this invigorating invitation to interpretive creativity may encourage a vicious circularity— tempting us to make dubious assumptions justified only because they fit our pattern. Because the limits to our perspectives both compel and entitle us to project guesses about hidden sides, James believes that an active imagination can be rewarded with powerful insights. But it may also trick the observer, he fears, into placing excessive confidence in fanciful suppositions. The interpretive career of the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* oscillates between these alternatives.

The notorious ambiguity of this novel exemplifies the contradiction between James's belief in the singleness of reality and his fascination with hermeneutic multiplicity. The undecidability of the hermeneutic confrontation between the narrator and Mrs. Brissenden at the end is as far as James goes toward the position that understanding is irreducibly pluralistic. But even in the resolute inconclusiveness of the ending there are suggestions of his empirical faith in the real. The narrator is surprised to discover that someone else can compose the pieces in his pattern into an entirely different arrangement—one that gives them another meaning altogether. He does not know how to respond when Mrs. Briss foils his “wish for absolute certainty” by challenging his constructions with the charge: “My poor
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dear, you are crazy.”¹ This may be a gambit to discredit with a show of bravado a reading as tenable as her own. Or the narrator may indeed have so dangerously overextended his assumptions and guesses that he has approached the madness of solipsism.

The former alternative suggests that tests for validity can lead to mutually exclusive but equally legitimate results. The latter possibility implies that there are controls on understanding which can determinately distinguish truth from falsity if they are implemented with more caution than the extravagantly speculative narrator showed. If the narrator had not ignored the dangers of interpretation in his fascination with its possibilities, then perhaps he would have a surer hold on reality. This is the lingering empiricism evident even at James’s most radical moment of epistemological uncertainty. The ambiguity of The Sacred Fount leaves the reader poised between two unanswerable questions: Have the narrator’s excesses ironically reaffirmed the determinacy of the real? Or does his final bewilderment suggest that our tests for “truth” are more tenuous than we ordinarily assume and can lead to more various results than we customarily imagine?²

The anxiety this ambiguity produces in the narrator differs from James’s

¹Henry James, The Sacred Fount (1901; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1953), pp. 25, 318; original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

²According to one widely accepted view, “the effect of the final dialogue” between the narrator and Mrs. Briss “is to echo how reality can come barging in and destroy the fine fruits of theory” (Leon Edel, Henry James: The Treacherous Years, 1895–1901 [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1969], p. 342). But this resolutely ambiguous novel refuses to specify whether Mrs. Briss’s view is “reality” or a lie. Almost all of the novel’s critics agree that its main subject is how we understand. There is still considerable confusion among even the best of them, however, about the status of truth and reality in James. For example, Dorothea Krook sees The Sacred Fount as evidence of James’s skepticism about “the final incapacity of the enquiring mind to know with certainty whether what it ‘sees’ is fact or delusion” (The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], p. 167). But after arguing that the novel denies our ultimate ability to distinguish truth from error or hallucination, Krook contradicts herself by ranking its characters according to a hierarchy of wisdom. John Carlos Rowe’s brilliant Henry Adams and Henry James is unusually sophisticated in its epistemological distinctions. But Rowe goes too far when he argues that James understands “both man’s longing for truth and the unfulfillable nature of such a desire” inasmuch as no inherent order of things can stop “the free play of interpretation” and “the freedom of signification” (Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976], pp. 169, 240). Although provocative and insightful, Rowe’s reading of James is somewhat anachronistic. James is not yet Derrida. James’s paradoxical combination of epistemological monism and pluralism makes him a pivotal early modern figure in the novel’s movement away from representation, but his empirical faith that reality is independent and discoverable differentiates him from such postmodern figures as Beckett or Borges.
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celebration elsewhere of creativity and multiplicity in interpretation. The narrator revels in his opportunities to “guess the unseen from the seen” and to “trace the implications of things” (to recall lines quoted earlier from “The Art of Fiction”), but his exercise in hermeneutic imagination ultimately leads to a frightening impasse rather than to glorious revelations. He and Mrs. Briss may show in their disagreement that “the measure of reality” is indeed “difficult to fix.” But the narrator’s fear of solipsism differs radically from James’s confident affirmation that “the house of fiction has . . . not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather.” Perhaps we are to rise above the narrator’s anxieties by viewing him comically. Or perhaps James can celebrate hermeneutic imagination and variety only as long as these do not jeopardize his confidence in the independence of reality—his faith that, even though each observer at fiction’s windows has “an impression distinct from every other,” all of them are nevertheless “watching the same show.”3 In *The Ambassadors*, for example, Strether is freed to defend the integrity of his appreciative reading of the Parisian scene only after admitting his many errors about what was there before him. More experimental and more modern than this later work, *The Sacred Fount* asks more pointedly whether interpretive disagreement is a celebration of our epistemological possibilities or an invitation to solipsism. But because *The Ambassadors* is a more conservative work, it is also a more classical expression of James’s vision and of his position in the history of the novel.

My reading of *The Sacred Fount* attempts to exploit its radical experimentation with interpretation and representation to prepare for an analysis of *The Ambassadors*. The first section of my reading shows how the narrator’s excesses as an interpreter make him exemplary of Jamesian hermeneutics. In taking to their limits (and beyond) processes of interpretation which James portrays at work more moderately elsewhere, the narrator casts their structure into striking relief. The second section explores how James’s experiments with representation in *The Sacred Fount* are correlated to his dramatization of the vicissitudes of understanding. Here again the excesses in the novel make it an especially useful revelation of James’s customary practices. Almost a self-conscious commentary on his typical narrative techniques, *The Sacred Fount* shows how the late style offers the reader an ongoing challenge to reflect about hermeneutic processes that traditional fiction relies on for its mimetic effects.

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The many eccentricities of the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* make him particularly vulnerable to Grace Brissenden's attack. His extravagant imagination, his obsession with constructing theories, his vanity over his superior vision, his aggressive curiosity about the private lives of others, his aloof isolation as an observer—these traits have led one reader to call *The Sacred Fount* "a self-satire," and another to call it "one of the most stupendous parodies ever concocted. . . . It is Henry James deliberately turning a searchlight on Henry James."4 Not exactly a parody in the sense of comic self-mockery, however, the novel is rather a paradigm in extremis of how interpretation works in James's fictional universe. The narrator's strange temperament exacerbates hazards that James portrays throughout his canon as inherent in the process of understanding. But some of this character's eccentricities also open him up to the possibility of attaining deeper insights than less strenuous interpreters could achieve. The narrator exemplifies Jamesian hermeneutics in at least three areas: the possibilities and liabilities inherent in the circularity of understanding, the dual role of other people as both an obstacle and an aid to interpretation, and the limits to the tests for "truth" which might decide the conflict between opposed readings.

At the outset, the narrator is bewildered because he is at a loss to explain the transformations he notices in Gilbert Long and Grace Brissenden. Long seems to have changed from stupid to clever, Mrs. Briss from old to young. The narrator overcomes his initial confusion and explains the transformations, which surprised him, by invoking the analogy that gives the novel its title. After discovering that Guy Brissenden seems to have aged considerably, the narrator speculates: "Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom, somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy himself? She *has*, by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain, extracted them; and he, on his side, to supply her, has had to tap the sacred fount" (p. 29; original emphasis). By extension, Gilbert Long must have tapped someone's store of cleverness to overcome his dullness.

This elaborate chain of inferences dramatizes the role of belief in understanding. The narrator's hypotheses give him a set of expectations about the relations he will discover among the guests at Newmarch—a prior, anticipatory understanding that he amplifies and refines over the rest of the weekend by placing May Server as Long's fount and by connecting Briss's continued decline to his wife's increasing vitality. A circular process is at work here, as Mrs. Briss explains: "When one knows it, it's all there. But what's that vulgar song?—'You've got to know it first!'" (p. 70). Or, as the narrator notes later, "I was sufficiently aware . . . that if one hadn't known it one might have seen nothing; but I was not less aware that one couldn't know anything without seeing all" (p. 169). This circularity insists on the need for assumptions and expectations in knowing. Without the anticipatory understanding provided by his analogy, the narrator could not have discovered the complex relations he thinks he sees between the tappers and the tapped. But his danger is that his disclosures may merely work out explicitly what was already contained implicitly in his beginning interpretive hypotheses.

The narrator's readings are also circular in the sense that they are compositions in which parts and wholes reciprocally define each other. The metaphor of the "sacred fount" provides the narrator with what he calls "a law that would fit, that would strike me as governing the delicate phenomena—delicate though so marked—that my imagination found itself playing with" (p. 23). His "law" is the explanatory principle that, throughout the rest of the novel, will guide his work of building elements into a coherent configuration. The circle here is that the narrator's vision of the whole is necessary to make sense of his individual observations but that they in turn are necessary to vindicate, clarify, and complete it. Again and again, on discovering another bit of proof for his organizing hypothesis, the narrator exults and congratulates himself: "the next moment I was in all but full enjoyment of the piece wanted to make all my other pieces right—right because of that special beauty in my scheme through which the whole depended so on each part and each part so guaranteed the whole" (p. 223). Each piece has meaning and value to him because his sense of the whole confers them on it; without his law, he could not understand its elements. But the more pieces he fits together—the apparent liaisons, for example, of the triumphant Long and Mrs. Briss and of the suffering May Server and Guy Brissenden—the better he understands the law he began with (in this case by discovering a corollary of it whereby the tappers seek each other out as do the tapped).
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James's novel suggests that this circle is unavoidable. After accusing the narrator of "build[ing] up houses of cards" (p. 262), for example, Mrs. Briss does not refute him by avoiding circular reasoning and simply pointing to the facts. Rather, she presents "her own . . . finished system" (p. 318)—elements arranged in a configuration that explains them as they explain it. Even those who lack the narrator's interpretive scheme do not escape the circle whereby expectations prefigure understanding; they see nothing suspicious only because they expect nothing unusual. Their expectations are as blinding, the narrator thinks, as his are revealing. His experience suggests that we change our minds not by seeing new facts but by having our expectations defied. The narrator's surprise when he met Long and Mrs. Briss at Paddington shows that he even then had expectations about them which they no longer seemed to fit. His analogy is not his first entry into the hermeneutic circle. It is instead an attempt to replace an anticipatory understanding that proved inadequate because it could not assimilate several anomalies.

The narrator wagers for insight by following the lead of his compositional law so avidly and rigorously. But he also acknowledges the risks here. After balancing new pieces into place, he reminds himself at one point: "I mustn't take them equally for granted merely because they balanced. Things in the real had a way of not balancing; it was all an affair, this fine symmetry, of artificial proportion" (pp. 182–83; original emphasis). The narrator's danger is not, as some critics argue, the mistake of "impos[ing] order and organization onto the chaos of experience."5 Throughout James's canon, his characters pursue understanding by ordering and organizing parts into the whole that is their point of view. The narrator's risk is that this process can become closed and self-confirming. By adhering too rigidly to the principle of proportion, he may close his horizons to anomaly and surprise—unsettling experiences that might suggest alternative configurations. He is right to warn himself that the way things have of "not balancing" may indicate the need to revise or even reject his hypotheses. But by vainly and almost obsessively relishing the

disclosures his analogy makes possible, he forgets his own call to remain open to the unexpected.

An act of imagination is required for the narrator to divine the relations between the pieces in his pattern. The narrator's "fantastically constructive" imagination (p. 85) also builds theory upon theory about what is hidden from his view. These are the two basic roles of belief in understanding which fascinate James—the dual work of composing and completing an observer's perspective. At the end, however, Mrs. Briss indicts the narrator for believing too much: "you're carried away—you're abused by a fine fancy" (p. 262). And almost every critic of the narrator has repeated her charge. His imagination can be extravagant, but it also has necessary and legitimate hermeneutic functions. Earlier in the novel, for example, the narrator shows unusual caution in acknowledging the absence of any "symptom" that Guy Brissenden and Mrs. Server have "compared notes," to support each other as they should have, according to the narrator's hypothesis that they have joined together as fellow sufferers. "The fellow-feeling of each for the lost light of the other remained for me," he confesses, "but a tie supposititious—the full-blown flower of my theory" (p. 169).

This state of affairs, like many others, lies beyond the horizons that define and limit his perspective. He can only know about it by making guesses. But belief must be balanced by skepticism if, as in this case, further pieces do not complete his picture as his theory predicts they should. His at times excessive imagination heightens the narrator's risk of delusion by carrying belief farther into the territory of the hidden and the unknown than criticism can warrant. But without imagination he could not interpret at all.

The narrator's extravagant imagination frequently inspires critics to invoke the distinction between appearance and reality. In particular, the question arises: Does the metaphor of the "sacred fount" correspond to what is truly there, or is it a groundless construction? To ask this question

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at all, however, is to presume that we can grasp “reality” outside a process of construal—a presumption this novel contests. The duality of appearance and reality is confusing and inaccurate. The narrator’s metaphor neither starts from nor attempts to explain independent facts. Unfolding completely in the realm of signs and interpretation, the image of the “sacred fount” is the product of a conflict between two modes of categorization.

In biological terms, Guy Brissenden is younger than his wife. In aesthetic terms, however, the reverse is true. Ordinarily, these two sets of categories complement each other, and their mutual consistency helps make the “reality” projected by them seem fixed and lawlike. Their conflict here undermines the stability of the “real.” This instability then occasions the narrator to draw new boundaries of similarity and difference to replace the old, no longer effective, groupings. His metaphor is an attempt to transcend the conflict between the aesthetic and the biological. It projects a new “reality” by proposing a new categorization that organizes the world not according to age or beauty but in terms of exploitation. What seemed like an accidental discrepancy according to the old constructs is now explained causally.

The crucial antitheses in the novel are not between appearance and reality, then, but between interpretive constructs—between the narrator’s metaphor and the categories it hopes to supersede, or between his explanatory hypotheses and the interpretations proposed by other guests. His metaphor is indeed awkward, as Philip Weinstein has pointed out. What, after all, could someone’s “sacred fount” be if we attempted to find a referential correspondence for it? But this awkwardness simply emphasizes its artificiality as a construct to be judged not by its verisimilitude but by its hermeneutic power. The narrator’s construct stresses the hermeneutic function of metaphor—its ability to aid understanding by proposing new terms of similarity and difference with which to arrange the world.

On these grounds, the narrator’s metaphor demands scrutiny for what it reveals that other constructs suppress, as well as for what it disguises that other interpretations include. And this ratio of disguise and disclosure reflects the narrator’s presuppositions about human nature, his temperament, his overall view of the world. If interpretation is a matter of projecting hypotheses about hidden sides and the relation between parts and wholes, it will be powerfully influenced by the basic, deeply held beliefs of

8See Weinstein, Requirements of the Imagination, p. 109.
the interpreter. The narrator reveals his temperament in his very first sentences: “It was an occasion, I felt—the prospect of a large party—to look out at the station for others, possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going. Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy ambiguities” (p. 1). The narrator seems to balance faith in others against suspicion of the dangers they may hold. But the uneasy wariness in his outlook reveals an essentially distrustful assumption that human relations operate according to a ledger sheet of gains and losses, and that it is crucial therefore to discover whether others are “friends” or “enemies,” with me or against me, the cause for “hopes” or “fears.” It is a small step from this accounting system of help versus hurt to the exploitive theory of human relations which motivates his method of interpretation—the theory whereby one member of the relationship “always gets more out of it than the other” and drains the other dry (p. 80).

The method appropriate to his theory is an interpretation of suspicion which unMASKS the seemingly innocent surface of things to uncover the horrible truth behind. Consider how greatly the narrator's theory differs from Strether's famous declaration of faith in human possibility: “Live all you can; it's a mistake not to.” Strether's belief in possibility informs an appreciative, revelatory approach to interpretation which trusts the noble indications of the surface. He and the narrator of The Sacred Fount dramatize two opposing hermeneutic principles—reading by revelation versus reading by unmasking.

The adequacy of their different methods depends in part on the judiciousness of the beliefs behind them. Strether's beliefs fail him when his trust in others proves misplaced, but then he emerges into a postcritical faith that practices suspicion in order to cherish and defend humane values. The difficulty of evaluating the narrator's assumptions is an important source of the ambiguity of The Sacred Fount. Is his theory “profoundly true”? Or is it the product of a corrupt society where exploitation prevails, in which case his beliefs may be ethically disturbing but nonetheless an effective guide to his world? Or does his theory mislead him into obsessive, excessive suspicion—into reading horrors behind innocent signs because

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his "imagination of atrocity" (p. 173) sees deception and hidden motives everywhere? By foiling any easy, conclusive assessment of the narrator's assumptions, *The Sacred Fount* calls attention to the role of presuppositions in prefiguring and directing interpretation. In order to evaluate the narrator's interpretations, we as readers must judge his convictions about psychology and human relations. Readers will side with or against him according to their own basic beliefs. But their choice will always be menaced by the possibility of a different assessment. This variability in possible attitudes toward the narrator's outlook reenacts in the reader's own experience how understanding can vary according to the observer's presuppositions about the object of interpretation.

*The Sacred Fount* suggests that, for James, interpretation arises as a problem primarily because other minds are opaque (or at least not directly open to inspection). Someone's being-for-others is a set of signifiers that both offer and withhold an ultimately inaccessible signified, the being of another for himself or herself. The narrator's theory assumes that a wide gulf separates the self from others, a gap that makes it possible to lie and conceal. His task is to penetrate the pervasive opacity of others which makes his world mystifying and mysterious. For him, however, other people are not only a hermeneutic challenge but also a much-needed resource—a potential fund of intersubjective confirmation for his readings. Because he assumes an immense "effort of concealment" (p. 125) all around him, the narrator fears that "a confession might, after all, be itself a lie" (p. 302). But he nevertheless seeks confirmation from others by enlisting Ford Obert and Mrs. Briss as collaborators—even as he fears that their opacity might make their agreement or dissent untrustworthy.

The narrator's inability to validate his readings by achieving a conclusive consensus heightens his vulnerability in the other areas of understanding we have explored: the tendency of expectations to fulfill themselves, his rigidity in composing parts into too symmetrically balanced wholes, his extravagant imagination, and his zealous commitment to debatable assumptions. One of the deepest ironies of the novel is that the narrator's attempt to understand others actually results in his increasing isolation. Although he hopes, through interpretation, to bridge the gap between himself and others, he actually widens it until, at the end, he is near the solipsism that the effort to understand others seeks to transcend.

The most striking examples of how the narrator paradoxically approaches solipsism through his attempt to know others can be found in
his peculiarly intimate but distant, silent relation with Mrs. Server. He claims that “in the whole huge, brilliant, crowded place I was the only person save one who was in anything that could be called a relation to her” (p. 95). He bases his claim on his hypothesis that only he and her fellow sufferer, Guy Brissenden, understand and sympathize with her attempt “to create, with intelligence rapidly ebbing, with wit half gone, the illusion of an unimpaired estate” (p. 97) as a disguise for what she has sacrificed to Gilbert Long. But the narrator’s actual relation to her consists almost entirely of “mute recognitions” (p. 93)—what he reads into her “vacancy,” which “was eloquent” (p. 152), and what he infers from her “blankness,” which “itself was the most direct reference of all” (p. 196).

Silence can indeed be revealing, and her inability to speak can be taken to confirm his theory that she has lost her former cleverness. But May Server’s silence also frees the narrator to imagine anything he wishes about her secret self, without correction from her. By projecting himself into her private thoughts, the narrator is deeply at one with May Server. But since he is simply imagining them, he is with her only in his own consciousness. Although he claims to have bridged the gap between them through a profound act of sympathetic understanding, he is nonetheless far apart from her as he communes solipsistically with his own hypotheses. His imagination of what her silence expresses gives intersubjective confirmation to his beliefs without the risk of falsification, which must accompany any serious test for validity.

The narrator also paradoxically increases his risk of solipsism by trying to see past lies. He demystifies lies by unmasking their no to reveal their hidden yes (and vice versa). He practices this circular procedure again and again. “Yes, they were natural” (p. 57), he notes when he sees Mrs. Server and Gilbert Long together in the portrait gallery. Demystified, the “natural” is an artificial disguise for their relation as victim and vampire. Here and elsewhere, the absence of signs is itself suspicious when construed as a sign meant to cover up the truth behind a deception. Later, when he goes to confront Mrs. Briss, the narrator readies himself to protect his theory and to unmask her facade by expecting to find a confirmation in her every denial. The circularity of the narrator’s procedure is inescapable. After all, he can only unmask lies by assuming that the truth is not what they pretend. But the power of his method is also its weakness, since it shuts off the possibility of disconfirmation. By seeing through lies, the narrator may be uncovering the hidden sides of other minds; but by persistently
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reading denials as confirmations, he may also be enclosing himself in a circle of self-deception.\textsuperscript{11}

The narrator holds himself aloof from those he interprets. He bridges the gap between himself and others only by understanding them, not by becoming intimately involved with them in relations based on mutual recognition and reciprocal exchange. With May Server and Guy Brissen-den, the narrator explains to himself that keeping his distance will help “to spare them both and to spare them equally” (p. 153). His detachment will assist her deception, he thinks, and save their secrets from exposure. He does not mention that it will also protect his theory from challenge. Even more, however, by holding himself back, the narrator also asserts his power over them. His superior vision of their secrets gives him a sense of controlling their destinies. According to Ford Obert, interpretation that rests “on psychologic signs alone” is “a high application of intelligence. What’s ignoble is the detective and the keyhole” (p. 66). Throughout James’s canon, however, from *The Aspern Papers* to *The Golden Bowl*, seeking to know others better than one is known by them is portrayed as an attempt to gain power over them. One wins ascendancy over others when their subjectivity is transcended and reified by being made more an object of knowledge than a source of it.\textsuperscript{12} Obert’s distinction misplaces the moral point. The narrator’s profession of interpretive power confirms and even widens the gap between the self and others, although (ironically) his superiority results from his presumed triumphs in understanding.

The narrator enlists others, of course, to test his powers. By recruiting Ford Obert and Mrs. Briss as collaborators, he seeks assurances of validity through agreement with other observers—what he calls “a verification by

\textsuperscript{11}The narrator’s habit of construing a no as a disguised yes justifies Geismar’s description of him as “the perfect proto-Freudian analyst... who is always right, who always understands the peculiar behavior of the ‘patients’ who may oppose or flatly deny his speculations” (*Henry James and the Jacobites*, p. 208). Typically blinded by the fury of his polemic, however, Geismar simply adds this to his indictment of the novel and the novelist instead of recognizing that it is both the strength and the weakness of the method of unmasking. The enabling assumption of psychoanalysis is Freud’s wager that, by distrusting the disguises of the repression, he will uncover hidden psychological processes that an acceptance of the innocence of signs could not disclose. The risk he takes, of course, is that the surface he unmasks may deserve to be trusted. But every hermeneutic procedure has its own characteristic, defining dangers. To take the risks out of psychoanalysis would be to rob it of its powers. For an interesting psychoanalytic defense of the narrator’s demystifications, see Susanne Kappeler, *Writing and Reading in Henry James* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 145–48, 154–57.

the sense of others of the matter of my vision” (p. 174). As these three characters discuss their observations (and their conversations make up much of the novel), they give evidence of James’s fascination with the ambiguous role of persuasion in determining “truth.” Since the narrator’s interpretations depend on his assumptions about human nature, on his hypotheses about how parts compose into a whole, and on his speculations about hidden sides, he cannot simply ask Obert and Mrs. Briss if they see what he sees. He must first convert them to his beliefs and persuade them to see as he sees. During one of his first conversations with Mrs. Briss, the narrator reflects: “I felt a little like a teacher encouraging an apt pupil” (p. 35). And later, when Obert reports the revelations he has achieved thanks to the narrator’s analogy, this “teacher” rewards his other “pupil” with shouts of “Bravo! . . . Bravissimo!” (p. 223). The ascendancy of the narrator’s vision presumably gives him the authority of an instructor, although not an authority protected by the institutional sanction that professional pedagogues enjoy. His authority is consequently more tenuous and more vulnerable to rebellion and a rival assertion of power. The narrator cannot do without persuasion in his quest for verification. But because rhetorical force is an act of power, this method of validation is especially precarious and volatile.

Inasmuch as his collaborators are also potential rivals, the narrator’s conversations with them seem at times like dueling matches. Both fearing and desiring their views, he is worried that they will contest his theories even as he hopes they will confirm them. Less an outright antagonist than Mrs. Briss, Ford Obert is an invaluable resource for the narrator, but a resource he ultimately squanders because of his fear of defeat. Obert confirms near the beginning that May Server has changed and acknowledges near the end the usefulness of the metaphor of the sacred fount as a tool for interpretation (see pp. 216–17, 222). But the narrator still refuses to trade views fully and openly with Obert in their final discussion. Obert and the narrator finish each other’s sentences as if they were partners in a deeply shared vision. But the narrator also uses this tactic to control their conversation for the defense of his position.13 Hiding himself behind a mystifying wall of opacity, the narrator finally forces Obert to ask: “How on earth can I tell what you’re talking about?” (p. 205).

By keeping himself opaque and seeking confirmation through indirec-

tion, the narrator hopes to minimize his risk of being usurped while maximizing his chances for the validation of his theories. But the danger of his strategy is that his need to disguise himself interferes with the exchange of views which makes intersubjective verification work. As a result of his mystifying tactics, the narrator is precariously close to solipsism when he ends his final discussion with Obert. By refusing to test his interpretation openly with Obert, he has weakened himself for the challenge awaiting him.

The narrator approaches Mrs. Briss with complete self-confidence. “We had, of a truth, arrived at our results,” he thinks, “though mine were naturally the ones for me to believe in” (p. 243; original emphasis). He expects disagreement, but he is certain his views can pass any test that awaits them. At the end, however, the “supreme assurance” (p. 318) of his rival has so unsettled him that he wonders: “What if she should be right?” (p. 305; original emphasis)—or, even worse, what “if perhaps I mightn’t be” insane, as Mrs. Briss charges (p. 278). Oblivious to the precariousness of his hypotheses, the narrator is dumbfounded to find that a thoroughly plausible but totally opposite reading can be defended persuasively. Mrs. Briss contests the narrator’s interpretation in several areas: Long’s lover is Lady John, not Mrs. Server, and he is “the same ass” as always (p. 305); consequently, Long “would have no need” of anyone “having transformed and inspired him” (p. 305); May Server “isn’t all gone” (p. 315), and she had tried to tempt Briss into an affair, not simply (as the narrator inferred) an innocent liaison of mutual solace based on their mutual sacrifice. Mrs. Briss disagrees with the narrator so thoroughly that he cannot save his theory by rearranging the pieces in his pattern without rejecting the law governing the whole.

The narrator’s bewilderment is a commentary on the tests for validity. He would have been less disconcerted by Mrs. Briss’s rival reading if he had not overreached their limits. If he had not kept the parts in his whole balanced in such rigid proportion, he might not have closed off his horizons so completely to indications that could have suggested alternative hypotheses. If he had not let the expectations projected by his analogy direct his attention so single-mindedly, for example, he might have considered earlier the possibility of a less noble motive behind Mrs. Server’s contacts with Briss. If he had not held so tenaciously to his theory of the sacred fount, he might have been less surprised at Mrs. Briss’s confident assertion that Long and Lady John are lovers. And if he had not speculated so uncritically beyond the limits of his perspective, he might have been less
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taken aback by Mrs. Briss's report, based on her conversations with Long and her husband, that his hypotheses about hidden sides were wrong. By recklessly ignoring the hazards accompanying the inherent circularity of interpretation, the narrator made himself especially vulnerable to refutation. But his recklessness ironically reaffirms the tests for validity he abused by implying that a more moderate application of them could avoid his errors. Each of the if's in my description of his excesses suggests that the narrator made unnecessary mistakes and that he now faces facts that he cannot not know.

It is not certain that these were mistakes, however, and the narrator's quarrel with Mrs. Briss also dramatizes why interpretations can disagree without permitting reconciliation or a definitive choice between them. After protesting to Mrs. Briss that "you're costing me a perfect palace of thought" (p. 311), the narrator pleads: "It's in point of fact so beautifully fitted that it comes apart piece by piece" (p. 311), as his rival's refutations have just demonstrated. "I should almost like, piece by piece, to hand them back to you. . . . I believe that, for the very charm of it, you'd find yourself placing them by your own sense in their order and rearing once more the splendid pile" (p. 312). The narrator contends that Mrs. Briss would feel the compelling logic behind his composition if she stepped into his circle. She would find, he argues, that his pieces would put themselves back together again in exactly the pattern he had arranged. But when she refuses, the narrator recognizes that "she need, obviously, only decline to take one of my counters to deprive it of all value as coin" (p. 313). By refusing any one of his pieces, or by giving it a different meaning (which amounts to the same thing), she will construct a different whole. She has constructed her own configuration of parts—a different palace, with different elements—her palace conferring a different meaning on its elements, and its different elements erecting a different palace. The narrator and Mrs. Briss go around in mutually exclusive circles. Her refusal to enter his makes him wonder if it is a vicious one—self-confirming and therefore solipsistically self-enclosing. But it also shows that combatants in hermeneutic conflict may not be able to agree because they cannot see the other's point without leaving their own circle and entering a different one.

With Briss as her informant and collaborator, Mrs. Briss has the support of an independent observer which the narrator deprived himself of by cutting himself off from Obert. Isolated from others despite his insight into their motives, the narrator cannot match Mrs. Briss by invoking intersubjective evidence. If agreement between observers is an important
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sign of validity for James, the narrator's uncertainty at the end shows the risks he ran by cultivating an understanding of others through hermeneutic practices that distanced him from them. But once again this point is ambiguous. Mrs. Briss's charge of solipsism suggests that the narrator will discover "reality" when he returns to the community. She may not be the representative of communal opinion she pretends to be, however, and her charge may simply be a rhetorical tactic aimed at unsettling the narrator's certainties. Instead of putting an end to interpretation, an appeal to the opinion of others must itself be interpreted and can be contested. The narrator might indeed find backhanded vindication of his interpretation in Mrs. Briss's treatment of him "as an observer to be squared" (p. 273). As many readers have noticed, Mrs. Briss implicitly contradicts her denial of the narrator's sanity by meeting him at such a late hour and expending so much energy to defeat him. The hermeneutic principle here is that opposing interpretations offer indirect confirmation of each other's merits, despite their disagreements, when they recognize the other as worthy of serious argument.

At the end of their confrontation, the narrator consoles himself on different but related grounds: "it wasn't really that I hadn't three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone" (p. 319). Since persuasion plays so central a role in the quest for verification, rhetorical "tone" is crucial. Mrs. Briss reinforces her appeal to her husband's authority as a privileged insider by proclaiming herself an authority through her own bearing. The narrator regarded his expertise with "method" as his special claim to hermeneutic privilege. The conflict between her "tone" and his "method," then, is a conflict between different strategies for dominance in the dispute for ascendancy which rival interpretations wage. The ambiguity of the ending of The Sacred Fount demonstrates, however, that a claim of authority (whether through tone or method) can be a mystification in a world where there is no decisive court of appeal outside the sphere of interpretation.

The Sacred Fount has been called a psychological detective story. And one critic has complained: "is there not something wrong, or at least unusual, with a detective story which ends with the discomfiture of the detective?" By solving their mysteries, conventional detective stories assert the independence of reality and the determinacy of truth. Detectives are masters of interpretation whose success at restoring clarity and order

14Cargill, Novels of Henry James, p. 288.
where bewilderment had prevailed suggests that reality and truth exist beyond interpretation. The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* is not a traditional detective because his world does not conform to the genre's hermeneutic presuppositions. His bewilderment at the end shows that he inhabits a world where sign leads only to sign, without any necessarily conclusive outcome but with a variety of possible readings left equally open. The monist in James invokes the expectations of a genre where the solution of a puzzle affirms our everyday empirical outlook. But the pluralist in him ironically frustrates those expectations in order to challenge their epistemological assumptions.

**Narrative Ambiguity: Representation versus Reflection**

Reading *The Sacred Fount* is a bewildering experience. Because of its unresolvable ambiguity, the novel frustrates the reader's attempts to assemble its parts into a consistent, unequivocal whole. No sooner does the reader compose the text's elements in one configuration than an alternative arrangement suggests itself. To read the novel is to shift back and forth between conflicting configurations that refuse to stabilize: the narrator is crazy, or Mrs. Briss vanquishes him by deception; no conspiracy of exploitation exists at Newmarch, or the narrator has truly uncovered horrors behind "the marvel of [its] civilized state" (p. 167).

The novel is therefore like one of those "impossible objects" that can alternately be seen as a rabbit or a duck, an urn or two faces. And like these figures, *The Sacred Fount* calls attention to the very processes of interpretation by playing with them. Since we cannot experience alternative readings simultaneously, the shift from rabbit to duck and back again sets up a microcosmic conflict of interpretations within us. As the faces emerge by suppressing the urn and vice versa, the play of shifting readings reveals the interdependence of disguise and disclosure inherent in interpretation.

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Since the arrangement we see depends on what we look for, these "impossible objects" emphasize the role of expectations in prefiguring understanding. As they do so they also bring to the fore the essential circularity of interpretation. Each alternative reading is a different whole that confers a different meaning on its parts—a whole that its parts in turn substantiate.

All of these aspects of interpretation are crucial to the quest for understanding which James portrays in The Sacred Fount. As an "impossible object," this ambiguous novel gives the reader an experience of blockage and inconclusiveness in the process of construing it which parallels the narrator's bewilderment in his drama of interpretation. By perpetually interrupting and redirecting the reader's efforts to build consistent meaning, The Sacred Fount bewilders in order to challenge the reader to reflect about the vicissitudes of understanding. The object is "impossible" because it defies the assumption of the natural attitude that reality is simply there, independent of interpretation.

The activity of construing an impossible object can be playful and instructive, but it can also be frustrating and confusing. Many readers have echoed Edmund Wilson's complaint that The Sacred Fount "is not merely mystifying but maddening." Even sophisticated contemporary readers, accustomed to complexity and obscurity, have agreed with the original consultant for Scribner's that "the sense of effort" involved in meeting the novel's demands "becomes acutely exasperating." These complaints suggest the risk of James's wager. The strategies he employs to promote reflection about interpretation may backfire and annoy instead of amusing and educating the reader.

All of the most frequent criticisms of The Sacred Fount can be traced back to risks inherent in the hermeneutic strategies of the novel. For example, James foregrounds the narrator's processes of understanding by making his interpretive gymnastics disproportionately grand in contrast to the meager interest that the guests at Newmarch might seem to deserve. But in focusing attention on the interpretive process by trivializing its

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16 This is what Charles Thomas Samuels fails to recognize when he argues that a text that "invites and supports incompatible or contradictory responses" is "a sign of confusion or deviousness," as opposed to "a multifaceted character or theme" that "is a sign of control and profundity" (The Ambiguity of Henry James [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971], p. 4). A work that elicits and refuses to decide between mutually exclusive responses can be profound and controlled.

object, James runs the risk of making interpretation itself seem unim­
portant. Similarly, by concentrating more on how the narrator understands
than on what he seeks to know, James sacrifices much of the appeal of
immersion in a represented world. This strategy hopes to encourage re-

Taking advantage of the gaps and indeterminacies that invariably accom­
pany representation, James creates ambiguities in *The Sacred Fount* by
offering objects through aspects that conflict with each other—unlike
traditional realism, where perspectives customarily blend in a relatively
continuous harmony to give their objects a lifelike sense of completeness
and stability. Let us take as an example a somewhat sparse but for that
reason especially revealing snatch of dialogue between the narrator and
Mrs. Briss about Mrs. Server, as the novel's ambiguity nears its climax:

"She's horrid!" said Mrs. Briss.
"'Horrid'?' I gloomily echoed.
"Horrid. It wasn't," she then developed with decision, "a 'dash,' as you say,
'of the same sort'—though goodness knows of what sort you mean: it wasn't,
to be plain, a 'dash' at all." My companion was plain. "She settled. She stuck."
And finally, as I could but echo her again: "She made love to him [Briss]."
"But—a—really?"
"Really. That's how I knew." (P. 316; original emphasis)

Mrs. Briss's initial outburst—her abrupt, highly allusive "horrid"—leaves
more unsaid than it says. It displays Mrs. Server in a distinctly limited
aspect, with many indeterminacies. Mrs. Briss then elaborates, of course,
and fills in some of these gaps by completing her perspective on May
Server as an aggressively amorous adulteress. But the reader's dilemma
(parallel to the narrator's) is that this perspective conflicts with the earlier
aspects offered by the narrator which displayed Mrs. Server as a silent,
powerless sufferer. Mrs. Briss heightens this conflict by explicitly com-
menting on it—quoting the narrator's characterization of Mrs. Briss's
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symptomatic restlessness (her "dashes") in order to deny its exhibitional value.

By interrupting the completion of Mrs. Briss's perspective, the repetition of "horrid" and then "really" dramatizes the blockage that occurs here—the break in the reader's (and the narrator's) attempt to build a consistent pattern out of the aspects offered. Where the reader expects further aspects to fill in some of the gaps left by earlier ones, this discontinuity creates a new gap between two mutually exclusive perspectives: restless sufferer, or a flirt who "settled" and "stuck"? Where the harmonious unfolding of aspects encourages a sense of completeness which overlooks the indeterminacies they necessarily leave, this conflict of perspectives draws attention to how little the reader really knows about Mrs. Server. It thereby makes explicit what realistic representation leaves implicit—that a novel displays its world incompletely, through aspects.

Although all novels call on us as readers to reflect about the world of the work as well as to involve ourselves in it, the experience of discontinuity produced by James's ambiguity demands a more exclusive commitment to reflection. Because conflict among the work's aspects prevents us from giving ourselves over to what the aspects display, we are asked to step back and evaluate the contradictions we have produced in attempting to concretize its world. The stability and consistency of aspects that represent an unequivocal, realistic world encourage the assumption that reality is fixed, certain, and independent of interpretation. But the conflict of perspectives in The Sacred Fount portrays a shifting, unstable world that varies according to one's mode of construal. This is what we are challenged to reflect about as we evaluate the mutually exclusive configurations of parts and wholes which the dialogue between the narrator and Mrs. Briss can support. James runs the risk, however, that readers may refuse this challenge out of frustration at the failure of the novel's aspects to harmonize. The inconclusiveness of the narrator's exchange with Mrs. Briss can act as a playful prompt to serious reflection, or it can seem like a pointless game that interferes with the ultimate synthesis of the novel's world.

Not only at the level of scenes but also in individual sentences, The Sacred Fount challenges the reader's assumptions about representation and reality. In a self-conscious comment about the structure of signification, James's language represents objects by withholding them. His notoriously complex sentences are self-referential in ways that contest the everyday assumption that meaning refers to an independent object and not to still
Consider, for example, the narrator's explanation of why May Server can count on the other guests not to notice her loss of wit: "There was a sound law in virtue of which one could always—alike in privileged and unprivileged circles—rest more on people's density than on their penetrability. Wasn't it their density too that would be practically nearest their good nature? Whatever her successive partners of a moment might have noticed, they wouldn't have discovered in her reason for dropping them quickly a principle of fear that they might notice her failure articulately to keep up" (p. 98). The narrator seems to be describing a situation that exists outside of his language. But his sentences project a sense of absence rather than an illusion of presence. To begin with, his choice of words is more abstract and theoretical than concrete and particular. He describes his fellow guests as manifestations of a "law" that governs the qualities "density" and "penetrability," and he generalizes Mrs. Server's anxiety into "a principle of fear." Not only a manifestation of the narrator's penchant for theorizing, his preference for abstractions presents objects by holding them at a distance. His insubstantial wording accentuates the gap that inherently separates signs from the things they pretend to be connected to.

The structure of his sentences is a similar comment on the workings of signs and interpretation. Throughout the novel, the narrator habitually builds sentences around negatives (there are two, for example, in the quoted passage: "Wasn't it . . . ," "they wouldn't have . . ."). Every positive statement harbors hidden negatives, of course, both because it differentiates what is from what is not and because it chooses what to say by not selecting other possibilities of expression. But the narrator's fondness for negative constructions—a prominent feature of James's late style—makes explicit the implicit role of negation in meaning. In this passage, the narrator's two negatives create a different effect than the equivalent positive statements would have done (their density was their good nature, they think Mrs. Server is still articulate). Such affirmative formulations encourage the illusion that meaning bodies forth an object. The narrator's negative constructions hinder the reader's attempt to move from meaning to referent. They instead compel the reader to reflect about what it is that is implied.

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by what the statement claims is not. The narrator's parallel constructions serve a similar purpose. Here and elsewhere, he repeatedly resorts to doublings: "privileged and unprivileged," "density" and "penetrability," "might have noticed" and "wouldn't have discovered." This extreme balance not only mirrors his effort to keep the elements in his interpretation in a proportioned composition. His persistent parallels also match signs to other signs with a self-referentiality that discourages the assumption that the matching intention of language is directed toward the outside world.

In these and other ways, the narrator's language explicitly refers meaning to meaning instead of encouraging the reader's natural tendency to move from sign to object—hence, for example, the narrator's habit of alliteration where word sounds seem to generate each other in a phonetic game of repetition and substitution. Hence too his repeated use of empty verbal counters that serve ostensibly to reassure him of his reading's truth but instead merely keep the chain of signs moving ("pure and simple," "in fine," "at any rate," "in fact," "in truth," "doubtless"; examples all taken from pp. 99–100). And hence, finally, his proliferation of words that do not offer additional aspects of an object but seem rather to pile signifiers upon signifiers for their own sake (Mrs. Server "dodged, doubled, managed, broke off, clutching occasions, yet doubtless risking dumbnesses, vaguenesses and other betrayals, depending on attitudes, motions, expressions, a material personality, in fine, in which a plain woman would have found nothing but failure"; p. 99). The playful self-referentiality of the narrator's language may seem to the reader a pleasing, even liberating display of our capacity for semiotic creativity. But the other side of James's gamble here is that the refusal of the novel's language to countenance our everyday assumptions about meaning can also seem exasperating and artificial.

There are similar contradictions in the reader's relation to the narrator, the second of the four dimensions of my model of fiction. On the one hand, an unusual degree of intimacy can arise between reader and narrator because of our participation in his hermeneutic enterprise. By following his reasoning, filling in his allusions, and joining with him to imagine hidden sides, we become the narrator's collaborators. We may even find ourselves pulled into remarkably intense involvement with his perspective because of the compositional and projective activity required to shape and fill out in our reading the constructs he builds to understand events at Newmarch. On the other hand, many readers have felt put off and even annoyed by the narrator. And this response is justified insofar as the novel
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calls on the reader to be the narrator's critic as well as his companion. As we feel that he is asking us to imagine too extravagantly or to unmask too recklessly, we will switch over to the role of judge—a role we readers may exercise all the more strenuously because of our previous participation in a hermeneutic project that now seems to have gotten out of hand. The collaborator turned critic may judge with the fury and severity of someone who feels his or her good faith taken advantage of—hence, perhaps, the violence of some of the critiques this novel has received.

The reader's movement between criticism and collaboration is not a one-time switch but an ongoing alternation. This back-and-forth movement sets up a productive tension between two levels of hermeneutic activity—the reader's interpretation of the narrator's adventure paralleling the narrator's own interpretive processes. As the reader oscillates between criticism and collaboration, he or she goes back and forth between hermeneutic alternatives that recapitulate the major questions about validity which the narrator's history raises: Is the narrator's composition of parts in a whole adequately inclusive, or is it overly rigid? Is it an effective guide to his world or a fantastic castle in the air? Are the beliefs behind his theory well founded, or are they prejudices held to with excessive tenacity? Do others confirm his reading directly, through corroborating evidence, or indirectly, through suspicious conduct and deliberate deception? Or does his interpretation fail the test of intersubjective agreement? The novel's resolute ambiguity prevents the reader from answering these questions conclusively, an impasse leaving two alternatives that reflect the two sides of James's wager: The reader may tire of the indeterminacy and find fault with the novel instead of pondering its unanswerable questions. Or the reader may rise to the level of reflection and try to figure out why this impasse occurred, by contemplating the limits of understanding.

The reader's oscillation between criticism and collaboration should also promote reflection about the kind of hermeneutic suspicion in which the narrator specializes. By taking a suspicious attitude toward the narrator, the reader enters the same circle of unmasking which the narrator goes around when he construes a no to mean yes. And like the narrator, the reader enjoys the powers of this procedure only by incurring its risks. The narrator's claims of superior vision may deserve demystification as signs of a will to power. But the reader can unmask the narrator's assertion of authority only by distrusting his interpretations in the same way the narrator suspects May Server by construing her denials as affirmations. This
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can be a self-confirming, potentially self-enclosing procedure—and a growing sense of its dangers may push the reader back from criticism to collaboration.

Furthermore, demystifying the narrator's claim of privileged insight is itself an assertion of power on the reader's part—an assertion of ascendancy over a narrator who arouses suspicion precisely because of his own drive for ascendancy. By criticizing the narrator's shortcomings, we become his rivals in the battle for dominance which competing interpretations wage. The reader who condemns the narrator's will to power commits the very crime of which he or she disapproves. One way out of this paradoxical trap is to reflect about its causes. 19 This ambiguous novel frustrates and thereby calls attention to the drive for mastery implicit in reading—the drive to achieve an understanding superior to the partial perspectives that make up a novel's world.

Unlike the novel's ambiguous aspects and its unorthodox mode of narration, the handling of time in The Sacred Fount seems relatively straightforward. The narrator tells his story sequentially, with the order of events during his country weekend aligned to the temporal progression of the novel. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, this third dimension of the novel's structure contributes as well to promoting reflection about interpretation and realism. Such is the case with each of the two main characteristics of the novel's temporality. First, the novel is relatively static because it is an exploration of a situation. Second, although the novel gives a retrospective account of events, it confines itself as it goes along to the present moment, with the reader informed at any given stage only of what the narrator knows and feels at the time.20

19Shoshana Felman points out a similar contradiction in her powerful, subtle interpretation of The Turn of the Screw: "Since it is the governess who, within the text, plays the role of the suspicious reader, occupies the place of the interpreter, to suspect that place and that position is, thereby, to take it. To demystify the governess is only possible on one condition: the condition of repeating the governess's very gesture" ("Turning the Screw of Interpretation," in Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise, ed. Felman [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982], p. 190; original emphasis). The reader who falls into this trap may get out of it by rising to the level of self-consciousness and reflecting about the circularities that make the unmasking interpreter both powerful and vulnerable. The anxiety and confusion induced by this impasse can be an incitement to hermeneutic discovery.

20I take these characteristics from Walter Isid's interesting chapter on The Sacred Fount, in Experiments in Form: Henry James's Novels, 1896–1901 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 209, 218; the following analysis of them is, however, my own.
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On the first point, the novel increases its sense of stasis by interrupting or delaying the action of the story in various ways—as when the narrator stops his account of his talk with May Server in the park by interjecting his lengthy reflections about her trials, or when his final conversation with Mrs. Briss is postponed first by his conversation with Obert and then by his speculations about her motives and plans. Although everyday life is for the most part not especially full of dramatic events, rapid action in a novel encourages an illusion of reality. Because real experience has the character of happening, novels can convey a sense of life by invoking eventfulness in their action and by making the experience of reading a dynamic unfolding. By withholding an effect of happening, however, the static mood of *The Sacred Fount* discourages immersion in a lifelike world and sacrifices representational immediacy. But this in turn encourages contemplation—detached rumination about the various aesthetic and hermeneutic questions the novel raises.

On the second point, because the novel's focus on the present keeps the moment of reading aligned to the moment of the narrator's history, the reader's reflections will parallel his in temporal structure. The narrator's drama of interpretation is anticipatory and retrospective—a "step by step" process (p. 13) where every stage sets up expectations about the next, and where every new moment revises the significance of previous ones according to the principle Mrs. Briss enunciates: "when one has had the 'tip' one looks back and sees things in a new light" (p. 74). As the narrator's collaborators, we as readers participate in his forward- and backward-looking movements of understanding. By keeping the reader in the present tense of the narrator's ongoing investigations, *The Sacred Fount* makes the anticipatory and retrospective structure of interpretation the explicit principle of its own temporal organization.

As the narrator's critics, however, we also engage in a second movement of anticipation and retrospection. We are not only with him as we re-create his constructions; we are also against him as we look back suspiciously to demystify as illusion what we may have earlier accepted as insight, or as we look ahead in the expectation of the catastrophe his failings and extravagances must be preparing. As these two levels of time play off against each other, their refusal to synthesize raises temporality from an implicit aspect of concretization into an explicit question for contemplation. The reader may find these complications a frustrating hindrance to the progressive unfolding of a represented world. Or the reader may find them a
spur to reflection as they call attention in the experience of reading to the anticipatory and retrospective structure of interpretation which the novel itself dramatizes.

This dialectic of anticipation and retrospection is circular, and so is the temporal structure of the novel as a whole. The inconclusive ending of the novel refuses to satisfy the reader’s “desire for finality.” As the novel ends with the narrator’s bewilderment, it implicitly points ahead to his imminent retreat from Newmarch. But this points in turn to the beginning of the novel, since the narrator returns to London to write his story. The process of recollecting and reconsidering the events he narrates does not advance his understanding of what happened to him, however. Telling his story leads not to a recognition of past errors but to a repetition of his bewilderment—a repetition that starts the novel over again in a never-ending circle. By reliving imaginatively his interpretive adventure and the drama of his final collapse, the narrator acts out Freud’s dictum that we are destined to repeat what we do not understand.

For the reader, however, the novel’s circling back on itself has a different effect. The ending of the novel also directs the reader back to the beginning, and in doing so it defies the assumption that “truth” is a fixed and determinate object awaiting us at the close of an inquiry. Instead of finding that interpretation is a temporary passage to a definitive outcome, the reader is implicated in a revolving motion that comes to a close only to begin again—a circle that refuses the notion that meaning is a hidden thing rather than a process and an event. The meaning of The Sacred Fount is not a detachable message. It is, rather, the open-ended experience of participating in and reflecting about the narrator’s hermeneutic trials.

The novel's ambiguity also allows the reader to experience the paradoxes pervading personal relations, a realm that is simultaneously intersubjective and solipsistic. As the narrator’s collaborators, we bridge the gap between our world and another’s. Participating in his inquiry “makes it appear to us for the time,” to recall James’s words, “that we have lived another life.” In re-creating his hypotheses, however, we experience as he does all of the opacities that make understanding the secret sides of others so difficult. Moreover, when we turn from collaboration to criticism, we find ourselves distanced from the narrator himself to the extent that we regard his self-presentation as a pretentious, deceptive facade disguising an eccentric intelligence and a will to power. In this fourth and final dimension, then, The Sacred Fount offers the reader an alternating experience of others as transparent and opaque—an alternation that enacts dramatically in the
reader's own consciousness both the possibility of overcoming the barriers between selves and the impossibility of ever escaping our inherent isolation.

This alternation between self-transcendence and self-confinement is one of the main principles behind Jamesian dialogue. In all of the late works, but particularly in the *The Sacred Fount*, conversation in James both overcomes and asserts the distance between the self and others. Consider, for example, the paradoxical combination of shared vision and playful sparring which marks the narrator's conversation with Ford Obert about Mrs. Server, during their last evening at Newmarch:

"It was your making me, as I told you this morning, think over what you had said about Brissenden and his wife: it was that—"

"That made you think over"—I took him straight up—"what you yourself had said about our troubled lady? . . . But you see what thinking it over does for it."

The way I said this appeared to amuse him. "I see what it does for you!"

"No, you don't! Not at all yet. That's just the embarrassment."

"Just whose?" If I had thanked him for his patience he showed that he deserved it. "Just yours?"

"Well, say mine. But when you do—!" And I paused as for the rich promise of it.

"When I do see where you are, you mean?"

"The only difficulty is whether you can see. . . . If she isn't now beastly unhappy—"

"She's beastly happy?" (Pp. 216-17; original emphasis)

If this exchange typifies Jamesian dialogue, that is not least because it has the qualities of a game. Like players in a game, Obert and the narrator are absorbed in a mutual activity that carries them along with a momentum of its own in a direction that neither can foresee or control. As they adopt each other's phrases and complete each other's thoughts, the dialogue seems to take on an independent life that transcends the separate identities of the speakers. It transports them out of their individual subjectivities and into the "we-subject" of their talk.

James often reinforces this "I-lessness" of dialogue—the game's power to unify its players—by not identifying directly the source of every speech. It is frequently difficult in the late works to tell who is talking because the dialogue itself seems to have absorbed the identity of the speakers. In the quoted passage, some of the exchanges ("Just whose?")—"Just yours?"—
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“Well, say mine”) seem more the result of the game’s momentum than the product of the speaker’s individual purposes.

Nevertheless, even if Obert and the narrator at least momentarily lose their separate selves in the game they play together, Jamesian conversation is also self-conscious and self-assertive, not simply self-transcending. If a game unifies its participants, it also divides them into opposing sides that plan secret strategies and attempt to win it. We saw earlier how complicated and devious the narrator’s motives are in his final conversation with Obert. The repeated interrogations and exclamations in their talk indicate not only lively cooperation in a game of questions and answers but also a mutual opacity that makes each a mystery for the other and can cause emphatic disagreement. Even as they participate in their game, the players retain their individual styles—in this exchange, the narrator’s pedagogical bearing, which claims the right to lead the discussion, as opposed to Obert’s stance as a quizzical, apt pupil who is both appreciative and skeptical. The intricacies of Jamesian dialogue exhibit all of the complications of gamesmanship, and these in turn reflect the paradoxical combination of community and separation which makes others both a resource and a problem for understanding.21

James’s playful experimentation with metaphor recapitulates the hermeneutic implications of The Sacred Fount. The narrator again and again invokes figurative language in his efforts to understand others. Some of his metaphors have a global sweep, like the figure of the sacred fount which I analyzed earlier as a hermeneutic instrument. But he also employs an abundance of local tropes, as in this description of Lady John’s combination of culture and slang: “She was like a hat—with one of Mrs. Briss’s hatpins—askew on the bust of Virgil. Her ornamental information—as strong as a coat of furniture polish—almost knocked you down. What I felt in her now more than ever was that, having a reputation for ‘point’ to keep up, she was always under arms, with absences and anxieties like those of a

21 Not all games fit this model, of course. Solitaire comes immediately to mind as an exception. I rely here, however, on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s argument that “absorption into the game is an ecstatic self-forgetting”—“that the attitude of the player should not be seen as an attitude of subjectivity, since it is, rather, the game itself that plays, in that it draws the players into itself and thus becomes the actual subjectum of the playing” (Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. David E. Linge [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], p. 55; Truth and Method, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming [New York: Seabury, 1975], p. 446). As my analysis of the lingering opacity and the individual styles in Jamesian dialogue should suggest, however, Gadamer goes too far when he argues that the self is completely transcended in games and conversation.
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celebrity at a public dinner. She thought too much of her 'speech'—of how soon it would have to come" (p. 17). And as if all of these figures were not enough to define her, he goes on to compare her to a "clown bounding into the ring" who "turned as many somersaults as might have been expected" in response to his request that she perform (p. 18). The extravagant proliferation of the narrator's metaphors celebrates the creativity of language. It calls attention to the infinite possibilities of semantic innovation which the finite resources of language make available. The narrator's overly abundant tropes dramatize his power to create new meaning by combining old materials in unexpected ways—like a hat and the bust of Virgil, or small talk and furniture polish. Such inventiveness with materials lying ready at hand shows that the pregiven elements of a language are not only a limit to what we can say but also the necessary condition for free experimentation.22

As a result of his creative powers, the relatively ordinary person of a clever, trendy socialite seems transformed into an unusual, even extraordinary, phenomenon. Like the figure of the sacred fount, the narrator's series of metaphors proposes a new way of looking at things—here a revitalized wonder at a social phenomenon the other characters in the novel take for granted. The narrator begins with a relatively straightforward description of Lady John as "pretty, prompt, hard" (p. 17), which seems aimed at something outside his language. But as he adds figure to figure in his ensuing chain of metaphors, she seems more and more a creature of his own making—a product of and testimony to his power to mean. She also seems increasingly fantastic—a public celebrity with the acrobatic skill of a clown, a jauntily hatted Virgil with the strong shine of fresh furniture polish. Like many of the fantastic metaphors in the late James, this extraordinary combination of qualities calls attention to the creative transformation metaphor can bring to the world. It shows how original, surprising metaphors can challenge our patterns for organizing the world and encourage us to see new relations. This metamorphosis of the ordinary into the extraordinary puts on display the capacity of semantic innovation to transform "reality" by violating and restructuring our sense of how parts


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fit together—our sense of what belongs with what and what opposes what. Where the stability of conventional forms of expression makes reality seem fixed, the instability of metaphorical innovation suggests that the world is constantly open to change as new constructs redescribe its similarities and differences.

Nevertheless, the extraordinary character the narrator makes of Lady John should also remind us of his extravagant imagination and his extreme pride about his interpretive powers. Just as his imagination may overextend itself as he projects his many hypotheses, so his fantastic multiplication of metaphors may suggest that he has let himself get carried away by his ability to generate new semantic categories. The narrator’s extravagant invention of figures is an extreme application of the metaphorical process that reflects his idiosyncracies at the same time that it calls attention to the role of metaphor in meaning and understanding.

Some critics have objected that many of the metaphors in James’s late works are strained, abstract, and difficult to visualize. Individually, each of the metaphors in the narrator’s characterization of Lady John is relatively simple and concrete. The figure of a hatted Virgil might seem forced, but its oddity creates an appropriate comic effect. Still, the total result of piling up incompatible figures so extravagantly may be a strain on readers. We may not only expect prose fiction to resort to metaphor more modestly. We may also find that the conflict between the various pictorial images projected by the narrator’s figures prevents us from synthesizing them into a coherent portrait. In this case, however, as with the most successful of James’s seemingly strained and abstract metaphors, these difficulties facilitate his effort to educate us about the workings of understanding. Unlike simply awkward, bungled metaphors, the extremity and abstractness of James’s figures have a purpose. They transform his figures into metaphors about the metaphorical process.

James’s “meta-metaphors” call for reflection about how the invention of tropes can result in semantic innovation and new possibilities of interpretation. Ordinarily, metaphors attempt to encourage acceptance of the new relations they propose by stressing the appropriateness of the similarities they claim to have discovered where differences may have seemed paramount previously. Concrete pictorialization aids this assimilation by making the new connections seem natural and immediate. By straining the reader’s capacity to assimilate them, however, the narrator’s many metaphors call attention to their novelty. By hindering visualization, his series

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of figures discourages a representational effect in order to defamiliarize and foreground aspects of the metaphorical process which immediate pictorialization might cover over in its rush to persuade the reader of the fitness of its image.

Novel metaphors create new meaning by putting together pictures or categories the reader would not customarily associate with each other. With expectations defied about how things cohere, the bewildered reader finds consistency disrupted at the literal level and must move to the figurative level to restore it by discovering new connections. The strangeness and incompatibility of the narrator's metaphors for Lady John call attention to how figures make semantic innovation possible by challenging and expanding our capacity for consistency building. The danger in James's strategy here, however, is that the strain and abstractness of his metaphors can seem frustrating rather than instructive to the reader, who expects figures to help assimilate novelty. By taking the metaphorical process to extremes to expose how it works and what it does, James runs the risk of failing to create convincing metaphors.

A better-known example than Lady John is the image of a pagoda which opens the second volume of *The Golden Bowl* and which has been called a failed figure. The pagoda dramatizes Maggie Verver's first intuition that Maggie finds fault with this image, and his evaluation still has supporters. For example, see Alwyn Berland, *Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7. Yeazell gives a justification of the metaphor, however, which is compatible with my argument (see *Language and Knowledge*, pp. 41–49). The image goes on too long for me to quote it in full, but here is a representative excerpt: "This situation had been occupying for months and months the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish 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 when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow. . . . At present however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedentedly near." Unlike the metaphor of the sacred fount, which is the narrator's product and which serves him as a hermeneutic instrument, it is not clear here whether Maggie or the narrator creates the pagoda. The image may be an interpretive construct that helps her make sense of her situation, or it may be the narrator's vehicle for depicting her confused but emerging awareness. This ambiguity is effective and justified, however. It makes the reader alternate between participation in Maggie's discovery (to the extent that the image conveys her sense of her world) and detached observation of her processes of understanding (to the extent that it is the narrator's device for rendering how her mind is working).
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all may not be well in the arrangement that has thrust Charlotte and the Prince so much into each other's company while Maggie and her father cultivate the intimacy they enjoyed before their marriages. An immediate, concrete metaphor might suggest that Maggie has achieved a sudden, complete revelation, where she is only beginning to grope toward an understanding of her situation. Or it might focus attention on what it depicts—the foursome's peculiar arrangement—instead of emphasizing Maggie's struggle to recompose her sense of their relations. The ornateness and elaborateness of the image reflect Maggie's mystification at the brilliant facade presented by the masterly deceptive Charlotte.

By playing out the image at such lengths, James dramatizes the groping uncertainty of Maggie's first faltering steps toward a full comprehension of the possibility that the foursome's felicity may be a lie. But he also opens himself to the charge of strained overelaboration. At first glance, the foursome seems not at all like a pagoda. But this disparity is a fitting counterpart to Maggie's confusion about what the two couples are like since their formerly familiar arrangement now seems strange and unnatural. Its incongruity is a sign of Maggie's inability to make her world cohere—to fit its parts together in a consistent whole according to simple, straightforward principles of composition. The danger of the mimetic fallacy is, of course, that a disorienting figure about an unfamiliar situation may still seem confusing and odd to the reader. Here, though, the strain is an appropriate comment on the hermeneutic processes of assimilating the unfamiliar to the familiar and of reorganizing one's schemes for composing the world—processes that Maggie is struggling with and that metaphor attempts to assist. The test as to whether any one of James's "meta-metaphors" succeeds or fails is its capacity to promote and sustain hermeneutic reflection in the reader. But even metaphors that pass this test may still show the risks accompanying James's wager.

All of the strategies I have considered aim to make strange what the reader takes for granted about reality, meaning, and interpretation. They make unfamiliar the natural assumptions of everyday life that "reality" is single, external, and stable, that signs refer to an independent object and not to still other signs, and that interpretation is an unproblematic operation. The risk of James's late style, however, is that it may disorient the reader so persistently that it may interfere with the pleasure and instruction its hermeneutic challenge offers. Unusually strenuous in its work of unsettling the reader's epistemological assumptions, The Sacred Fount makes so much strange so tenaciously that it may estrange its readers. This is one
reason why critics and lay readers have again and again found the novel mystifying. What is perhaps surprising, however, is that a novel that has provoked so much exasperation continues to attract critical attention. One explanation is, as I have argued, that the novel's very extremities offer a paradigm of James's late manner. Another is that fiction after James has trained readers to understand more adequately what maddened earlier audiences. Modern and postmodern fiction provides a context for appreciating the novel's disorienting strategies and for assimilating its unfamiliar lessons which it does not always offer on its own. The Sacred Fount seems less bizarre after the challenge of Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett, or Robbe-Grillet, who also defy our everyday convictions about reality and interpretation.25

Even after the challenges of modern fiction, however, The Sacred Fount will still seem strange because the natural attitude will always be with us in daily life. We may suspend our naïve epistemological outlook when we reflect, but we invariably return to it because it provides a sufficient, effective framework for conducting our everyday lives. Because of the persistence of the natural attitude, the modern novel retains a capacity to bewilder, no matter how much its innovations have become conventions. By contrast, works in the realistic tradition may seem natural, even though their worlds are long past, because they welcome our everyday beliefs about the stability and determinacy of objects.

The deepest irony of The Sacred Fount, then, is that the extraordinary intensity of its effort to expose and explore the vicissitudes of understanding may undermine the education it offers. In The Ambassadors and the other great works of his major phase, James lessens this risk by taking a more conservative hermeneutic stance and by moderating the wager implicit in his fictional strategies. In a compromise between James's monism and his pluralism, for example, The Ambassadors allows its world to stabilize sufficiently to give the reader a familiar foothold from which to contemplate the lessons of Strether's bewilderment about the hazards of interpretation and the possibility of conflicting modes of understanding. Also, instead of attempting to isolate the reader's attention almost exclusively on the vicissitudes of interpretation, The Ambassadors depicts the effort to know not merely as an exercise in curiosity but as an experience of achieving greater self-understanding by understanding others. The existential dimension of

25Among the many analyses that have seen The Sacred Fount as an important precursor of avant-garde twentieth-century fiction, see particularly Sergio Perosa, Henry James and the Experimental Novel (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), pp. 77–94, 103–4.
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Strether’s quest for knowledge gives the reader reasons for entering his world which are largely missing from *The Sacred Fount*. It also raises important questions about the relation between ethics and interpretation which are not as prominent in the earlier novel. Nevertheless, like James’s other late masterpieces, *The Ambassadors* is still frequently a bewildering work. The late James can be baffling, as generations of readers have found. And this is because of his delight in deploying the disorienting strategies that *The Sacred Fount* takes to such an extreme in inciting us to hermeneutic reflection.