A Superficial Reading of Henry James

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This book is about “the elaborate, copious emptiness of the whole Henry James exploit.” That phrase is from H. G. Wells’s notorious 1915 attack on James in Boon, the satiric miscellany in which Wells captures with perversely brilliant exactitude the dimensions and scale and governing ethos of the Jamesian novel, which is “like a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string. . . .” All of these images are precisely chosen (even if their fidelity to the Jamesian text is slightly grotesque); taken together, they map out both the properties of the material world in Henry James and the poetics, the rhetorical figures, to which those properties give rise. The egg-shell reflects those fragile collectables—often cracked ones—around which human relationships are so often arranged in James: objects like Madame Merle’s teacup, and Poynton’s spoils, and Maggie Verver’s golden bowl. Then, too, the image literalizes Madame Merle’s insistence, in her great speech on what she calls “appurtenances,” that “every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account” (3:287). The carefully preserved string conjures up those collectors in James who, finding themselves in economically diminished circumstances, fulfill their acquisitive impulses by accumulating the ephemeral, focusing their finely tuned sensibilities on the lowest common denominator of the world of objects; it is the sort of thing that Fleda Vetch’s father in The Spoils of Poynton, who collects pen-wipers, old calendars, and match-boxes, might pick up. (More slyly, Wells’s string suggests the Jamesian concept of the ficelle, literally string or twine but also theatrical terminology James adopted in his comments in the New York Edition prefaces on the role of minor characters.) The dead kitten, suggestive of a morbid investment in a tiny body, outrageously exaggerates the immense amount of meaning carried in James’s novels by vulnerable children (The Turn of the Screw, What Maisie Knew) and a diminutive and dying heroine (The Wings of the Dove).

The kitten, the shell, and the string add up to an “elaborate, copious emptiness,” a cornucopia of insignificance, because for Wells the Jamesian novel focuses too much on too little of the material world: overly refined technique (“intensely there”) is devoted to representing tiny bits of refuse. Indeed, the passage turns the characteristic materials of the Jamesian novel
into trash; unlike the empty vessels of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl*, which serve to symbolize the ways in which forms, empty in themselves, can contain and focus human contents, this eggshell is permanently empty, nothing but rubbish. Like still-life paintings of dinner tables on the morning after, Wells’s version of Jamesian materialism grotesquely magnifies the husks and rinds left in the wake of consumption. While the precious object in James’s texts is often an antique splendidly toned by time, in Wells’s account the Jamesian object is simply used up.

Wells’s critique argues that James is both too materialist and not materialist enough, overly invested and invested in the wrong way in a material world he also largely effaces or ignores. If we consider Wells’s argument not as an evaluation and instead as analysis, we are still faced with a textual problem, an inconsistency or even a paradox in James’s narrative economy. Few things—and no material things—seem more characteristically Jamesian than the teacups and tapestries, the Limoges and Wedgwood and chinoiserie, the portraits and even the pagodas that at moments seem spotlight in the fiction. Such objects give the reader purchase on “the Jamesian”; they offer something like a cognitive handle (they are frequently objects that are meant to be grasped) on the highly, sometimes almost forbiddingly, nuanced surface of the texts and the highly, sometimes almost forbiddingly nuanced surface of the cultures the texts represent. In other words, the golden bowl is the most fungible thing a reader can find in *The Golden Bowl* because its represented material qualities, such as its hardness and its definite form, become cognitive ones the reader can keep in mind.

But if James’s texts encourage a readerly overinvestment in their material surfaces, they also argue that these objects are ultimately inadequate as receptacles of meaning. The texts find closure by contesting the logic of their most central and material image (as in *The Portrait of a Lady*) or shattering that image (*The Golden Bowl*) or burning it (*The Spoils of Poynton*) or burying it (“The Last of the Valerii”). James’s fictions end by largely and often flamboyantly divesting themselves of whatever acquisitions they’ve made along the way. They follow the pattern exemplified by *The Wings of the Dove*, which closes by reducing Milly’s vast wealth to a check, dematerializing it into a slip of paper, one that Densher and Kate neither cash nor return.

Yet as that unresolved bit of almost-dematerialized matter suggests, texts never really *can* cancel images once they’ve introduced them; even a negated possibility must appear within a text in order to be negated, and so it makes its presence felt. Effaced objects in James’s fictions leave behind a residue of shards and fragments; they remain present as a sort of afterimage that shapes our readings of the texts, even though the image itself
has been crossed out. Like the infamous pagoda of *The Golden Bowl*, which exists only in the space of metaphor, such afterimages lend a sense of material immediacy to critical accounts of more serious topics—like consciousness or pragmatism or love—even as their ghostly quality means that questions of materialism need never be engaged. To put in one more way the large ambiguity I am attempting to capture here: spectacularly foregrounded but narrowly framed, finely detailed but ultimately expunged, the material world in James is governed by a variety of impulses that are difficult to read and rectify. Perhaps there is a kind of interdiction against reading that expunged world too closely, inasmuch as a matter like consciousness has been afforded a critical gravity denied to matters like curtains and coifs-

Jamesian criticism has consequently had a difficult time catching hold of this indeterminate matter; James’s critics tend to speak in their least nuanced voices and to shape their arguments into their most rigidly schematic patterns when taking up the work the material world performs in the fiction. Maxwell Geismar’s outrageous assertion, in his hatchet job-cum-period piece *Henry James and the Jacobites* (1962), that “James thought the function of the artist was to teach the rich how to use their money better,” might serve as an extreme example of that line of criticism that critiques James’s commodifying vision, that holds, as Wells did, that James’s fiction is overinvested in the material world or, to cast the point in a more contemporary critical idiom, continuously complicit with the strategies of capitalism and the leisure class. For Geismar, James’s oeuvre is scandalous because it constitutes—and reduces to—“the Book of Good Taste,” a vast manual for the economically prosperous but culturally insecure.\(^2\) Laurence Holland’s *The Expense of Vision* (1964)—as meditative and appreciative as Geismar is outspoken and cranky, and so a period piece of the opposite sort, almost Geismar’s enemy twin—stands at the opposite extreme as it continually brings forward material particulars, only to evanescence these spoils away, taking them as symbols in a drama of Christlike sacrifice, allowing them to evaporate into a timeless realm of “memory and . . . art.”\(^3\) Because it works as a kind of foregrounded cancellation, the material world in James can generate exactly opposite critical views of itself, but in either case the position advanced keeps the things of James’s texts from being read: matter disappears into the abstraction of commodity culture or into an equally abstract plot of what Holland calls “redemption.” If for one kind of critic, a close reading of things runs the risk of recapitulating the commodity fetishism that governs the Jamesian text, then for another kind of critic, a close reading of things runs the risk of contaminating the reassuringly humanist ethos that lies at the center of the Jamesian project, repeating the failure of some of James’s characters to
draw a sufficiently bright line between their relations with persons and their relations to things. In either case, matter emerges as something to be purged, and what looked like an opposition in critical approaches eventually emerges as complementary varieties of antimaterialism, which is why Jean-Christophe Agnew can combine them in a single, highly influential essay, “The Consuming Vision of Henry James” (1983), an essay that argues first for a “visually acquisitive” James who is “wholly complicit” with the world of commodities, and then for a “wholly critical” James who in the late fiction “renounces” that commodity world he has presumably internalized.

Even in more recent, more historicist, and considerably more nuanced studies by Martha Banta, Jonathan Freedman, and Mark Seltzer, the specific qualities of Jamesian material are ultimately abstracted away or treated anxiously and at a distance. In Taylored Lives (1993), her study of narrative and the rise of managerial systems, Banta considers Maud Lowder and Kate Croy in The Wings of the Dove and Charlotte Stant and Maggie Verver in The Golden Bowl as “efficiency experts and modern managers,” female exemplars of the new culture of time-motion studies, employee supervision, and mechanized rationality. Hence for Banta what is of interest is a deeper cultural structure that lies beneath Maud’s “brilliant gloss,” her “perpetual satin,” her silk-covered sofas, her “huge heavy objects” that seem to Merton Densher both uniformly splendid and British, yet somehow various and so not containable within a single “rubric” (19:30, 76, 78). In Banta’s brief analysis, all these materials disappear as a world of things and a text infamous for its ambiguity are breathtakingly abstracted into a parable of modern managerial systems. At least in this instance, ambiguities of the surface must yield to rationality for there to be a critical account at all.

Similarly, in the long reading of The American in Mark Seltzer’s Bodies and Machines (1992), the materials of everyday life can enter into criticism so long as they serve a system of supervision, of disciplinary self-fashioning, of “determinations of the individual.” In the power-centered model of criticism that takes its conceptual core from Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, the sensory details represented in the literary text must ultimately be dematerialized into a diagram (Seltzer indicates that The American is “almost diagrammatic” as it “charts” the “relays” between bodies and objects and between persons and representations) or a “cultural logic” (a term that in Seltzer’s usage is rephrased as “logistics” and so once again identifies materialist studies with the task of delineating a rationalized system). In other words, the welter of objects and the endless moments of contact between bodies and things that make The American so materially rich that its wealth sometimes seems hard for a reader to
manage must in the end give way to the abstraction of a set of logical proofs.

In *Professions of Taste* (1990), Jonathan Freedman begins his delineation of James’s relation to aestheticism with a wide-ranging survey of the movement’s distinguishing characteristics in Britain and its importation to America—a survey that examines changing ideals in home decor, the influence of Ruskin on the itinerary of the Grand Tour of Europe, and the bric-à-brac and cartoons that accompanied Wilde’s lectures in America. But as Freedman’s study unfolds, and especially as it shifts its attention to James’s fiction, this specificity about material objects and processes vanishes, blotted out by a critique of reification. In Freedman’s hands, the concept of reification reduces various styles of ownership and use to an overly capacious category of “objectification” which itself effectively cancels the object as an object of scholarly inquiry. Hence the particular attributes of *The Portrait of a Lady*’s materialism are of little relevance to *Professions of Taste* because close engagement with that materialism is construed as a kind of ethical scandal, a repetition of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond’s error of defining “the self as a mere collection of reified qualities”; thus the critic’s task becomes one of neutralizing the novel’s explicit, even extravagant, interest in “the shell,” in “appurtenances,” in “things,” as Madame Merle calls them (3:287). More specifically, the novel’s complex idiom of surface and pliability, of opacity and polish, is in Freedman’s reading sacrificed to the need to wrest a salutary ethics from a text so immoderately absorbed in the material world.

In making this critique of these three studies, I do not mean to be quarreling with their specific claims so much as I mean to be gaining some analytical distance from a convention that governs the genre of literary criticism, a protocol that ultimately hides from view the layers of the Jamesian text that will be my concern here. The disciplinary mandate I mean is the one that stipulates that material details need to be brought forward but not for too long: the grossly material, the sensing body, the space of touch and texture, the culture of the tabletop and the writing desk must lend their substance to scholarly writing’s claims, but they must also in the end be effaced by the kind of abstraction through which critical writing achieves its own closure. I am suggesting, then, that some of the antimaterialism of earlier studies of James—those of the first wave of Jamesian criticism, which founded themselves on the relatively abstract thematics of “consciousness,” “the imagination,” and “renunciation”—persists in more recent, newly concretized critical practice. There is a micromaterialism of the Jamesian text that criticism has a hard time turning into criticism, an intimate interest in the world of objects and the life of the senses that readers register as a kind of signature for the Jamesian, yet that is ultimately dis-
avowed, dismissed as peripheral to the work of making meaning, discard-
ed like the refuse in Wells’s caricature. A superficial reading of Henry James, it turns out, is not easy to maintain.

The present study is an attempt to make something of such surfaces and such traces of meaning; it is an attempt to capture in criticism the James who is “extremely preoccupied with the concrete,” to employ The Europeans’ description of its heroine. By describing Gertrude Wentworth in that way, the novel underlines the fact that “she doesn’t care for abstrac-
tions,” that she critiques a style of life that cultivates a lack of style (“totally devoid of festoons,” as she terms it), that she preempts a morality—an ethics of interpretation—that dispenses with the material world, finding surfaces a superficial obstruction of true significance (163, 79). The drama of The Europeans is the struggle to liberate surfaces from the abstractions that cancel them out, to pre-occupy thought accustomed to working with capacious terms of moral imperative (“self-control,” “moral grounds”) by waylaying it with material detail (75, 183). At many moments, the novel straightforwardly juxtaposes Puritan rectitude with a life lived according to the desires of the sensory imagination: the material pleasures of curtains and lace, imported by the European cousins Eugenia and Felix (they import both the things and the capacity for taking delight in those things), are in stark contrast to the Bostonian barrenness of the houses of the Wentworth and Acton families. But this opposition blurs considerably in The Europeans’ more radical moments where the novel defines Puritanism as its ascetic but expensive, beautifully restrained material trappings: earnest New England Protestantism turns out in the novel to be the “clean, clear, faded” colors, the “small cylindrical stools in green and blue porcelain,” the “highly-polished brass knocker” of the Wentworth’s piazza (46–47). What might in the work of another writer be understood as articulated doctrine or formalized tenets of belief is instead in James understood as a style of thought, and that style of thought is in turn char-
acterized as a style of things—even if that thought understands itself as inadequately expressed by the material practices that it can hardly avoid. “Extremely preoccupied with the concrete,” James’s cultural analysis in The Europeans defines history as the changing surfaces of the material world; his representation of the postbellum world of things in The Bostonians, with its rapidly expanding economy (“so many objects,” “so many accessories,” Basil Ransom will marvel) and its sharply different sys-
tems of taste, will differ enormously from the native asceticism and imported opulence of the pre-War novel.

In rendering historical change and cultural difference as matters of material style, the Jamesian novel might quite accurately be seen as a fore-
runner to the new materialist criticism of our own time: like Susan Stewart
in *On Longing*, it blurs the difference between philosophical abstraction and quotidian practice, finding in the objects of daily life figures that sustain and reiterate seemingly deeper cultural values; like Naomi Schor in *Reading in Detail*, it performs a “valorization of the minute, the partial, and the marginal”; like the later Raymond Williams of *Marxism and Literature*, it resists the “separation of ‘culture’ from material social life” and collapses the distinction—crucial to Williams’s earlier work—between economic base and ideological superstructure. For all of the theoretical differences and disciplinary distance that lie between them, these critics similarly presaged a turn to the material world in contemporary criticism; while they do not quite share a methodology, their versions of materialism are indeed united by certain habits of mind, especially a skepticism over the distinction between the superficial and the core, the empirical and the conceptual, the detail and the whole. As Williams notes, in commenting on a passage from *The German Ideology*, “‘consciousness’ and ‘philosophy’” are no longer “separated . . . from ‘real knowledge’ and from ‘the practical process’,” as new materialism resists the abstraction of ideology by pulling it into concrete practice. As immoderately absorbed in the quotidian as he is in the consciousness that criticism has kept separate from that world of things, surfaces, and history, James might serve as a means of bringing more particular definition to new materialism even as new materialism provides a way of reading layers of the Jamesian text that have been smoothed out and rubbed away by idealist aesthetics.

This book has three purposes. The one that may seem the most straightforward is that of getting the right historical account of James and the material world, and so of showing how the texts change when the details of their surfaces are spotlighted, conserved, collected, even obsessed over. Each of the chapters of Part II takes as its focus some small interchange between the sensing body and the world immediately adjacent to it, the world that forms the body’s material edge. In chapter 3, the emphasis is on James’s surprisingly strong preoccupation with touch and on his tendency to conceive of domestic spaces as tactile ones; the argument here is that through touch, the categories of social class are transformed into physical identities and so given a seemingly irrefutable bodily basis. Even when, as at the end of *The Spoils of Poynton*, the Jamesian narrative seems to flee from the world of things and all its contingencies and take refuge in the vagaries of isolate consciousness, a material grain and a stubborn physicality remain. Chapter 4 extends these emphases on materiality, interchange, and process into fin-de-siècle narratives of painting: James’s “The Liar,” “The Real Thing,” and *The Tragic Muse*, Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, the aesthetics of Bernard Berenson and Giovanni Morelli, and the suffragist tactic of slashing paintings in public galleries, as well as the depiction of physical exchange within painting.
itself in the case of John Singer Sargent’s *The Breakfast Table*. As it surveys these moments that dramatize the encounter between painted surface and viewing subject, this chapter argues that the space of viewership is a thoroughly dynamic one, rife with material consequences—a dynamism and a materiality that critiques of reification simply cannot account for or acknowledge. Like the chapter on painting, chapter 5, “Bodies, Papers, and Persons,” reveals a set of social principles arranged around the materiality of representations: this chapter takes up the frequent fascination in James's texts with books, manuscripts, and newspapers, and shows how doctrines of privacy are given substance by a conflicted, unstable homology between writing and the body. In its readings of *The Aspern Papers* and “The Birthplace,” this chapter shows how the melding of body and habitat comes to shape conceptions of the self’s presence within the texts it produces and the printed matter—like newspapers or personal libraries—in which it invests itself. Chapter 6, “Adulterous Matter,” brings the center of this book to its conclusion by testing its materialist approach on the abstractions of the late fiction. Beginning with the scene of adultery in the basement of the Soane Museum in *A London Life* and continuing with analyses of bodily and material metaphors in *The Sacred Fount* and *The Ambassadors*, this chapter argues that the displaced, largely occluded adultery plots of James’s last major fictions reappear as an account of the material world. What is radical about the late fiction is that it evolves a materialism without reference, “promiscuous properties” that will not remain affixed to their bodily referents but instead come undone and circulate like museum pieces that are never in situ. Reading the late fiction in the context both of property theory and of fin-de-siècle museum handbooks and histories, this chapter argues that adultery becomes for James a cultural model, a way of conceiving artifacts that fully allows for flux, dynamism, and indeterminate boundaries.

The core of this book, then, limns in James’s practical aesthetics; it charts the flow between persons and artifacts that, for James and his contemporaries, makes up everyday experience. In diagramming that interchange, this book makes several specific revisions to the usual way of understanding the role of the material world in James’s writing: it argues that there is in James a significant interest in the sense of touch and hence in understanding the material world in terms of immediacy and reciprocity, as opposed to the distancing effects of vision; it argues that for James consumption is always reproduction and that stratifications of class are hence defined as various styles of use; it argues for the presence and importance of psychological and physiological theories—especially theories of empathy—which hold that objects become states of mind, and hence that consciousness always has a material grain, a physical character.
One way of generalizing on these claims is to say that this book offers a materialist and historicist rereading of Jamesian ambiguity; it identifies the ambiguity of the limits or edges of the body with grammatical patterns of aporia and indeterminacy both at the level of plot (an argument pursued in chapter 1) and at the level of prose style (chapter 2). Thus the second purpose of this book is to argue that James’s narrative poetics presuppose—indeed, are made from—a specific set of material practices, customs, and objects. More broadly, I propose that the practical aesthetics of daily life detailed throughout this book shape the practices of close reading that compose narrative poetics and literary theory, poetics and theory decisively influenced by James’s writing. In other words, critical ways of reading take a set of material conditions as a norm, an assumption that transcends the difference between critical schools. In chapter 7, I test and specify these claims by staging an encounter between materialist and rhetorical practice, arguing that a particular conception of the house and of the shaping of the body as fin-de-siècle culture conceives them becomes a myth buried deeply within the very opposite-seeming work of Paul de Man and Elaine Scarry. If this argument holds, then the stuff of the Jamesian text—the houses, the teacups, the ribbons, the Limoges—are still molding our conceptions of literary meanings, still giving material shape to our sense of texts.

This book’s third purpose, practiced throughout and focused in the concluding chapter, is to bring clearer definition to new materialism, to make explicit the assumptions and methods that shape what has often seemed more of a critical sensibility than a school or movement guided by precepts and hypotheses. Much more particularly, my goal will be to contribute something to the understanding of the role literary language can play in the study of material culture. Here I would like to preview that closing argument so that the purposes of the approach adopted in the intervening chapters will be clear. In choosing James as the focal point for this work of theorizing, I choose a writer both closely identified with the material world and closely identified with the slippages of language that belie the sense of solidity and location that material world so often seems to promise in contemporary criticism. In the opening paragraph of Bodies that Matter, Judith Butler summarizes the purpose that inaugurated that book as one of trying to hone in on “the materiality of the body,” a purpose that led to the realization that “the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains”: “. . . I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are.’ . . . perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand.” Butler’s observations would, I think, be wholly intelligible to
Henry James, for a similar identification of materiality with movement is what governs Madame Merle’s famous “analysis of the human personality” in *The Portrait of a Lady*: “What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again” (3:287–88). “The body,” William James writes in an almost equally famous passage in *The Principles of Psychology*, is “an abstraction,” because “never is the body felt all alone, but always together with other things” (286).

“Together with other things,” a “flow” back and forth, an “essential” “resistance to fixing”: what I take from these quotations is that materialist criticism must be concerned with the linguistic operations by which substances of different orders—bodies and their objects—are forced together, assimilated, and inevitably split apart. This means not only that materialist criticism must be flexible, mobile, and heterogeneous as it constellates the histories of disparate realms, of incongruous domains of meaning: decor and costume, physiology and painting, philosophy and newspapers (or “a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string”). It also means that materialist criticism will have to be rhetorical criticism as well, will have to concern itself with the similes and metaphors that fold together disparate objects and substances, with the metonyms by which the perceptually ungraspable matter of the body takes on the impress of identity, even with the long paragraph of description that renders the body and its material milieu as indistinguishable (as will be demonstrated in chapter 2). In chapter 8, then, I will conclude with a frankly eclectic and frankly speculative exploration of the material history that lies within rhetoric by arguing that language is successively reconceptualized as a medium according to its analogues in a changing material world.