

# Henry James's Critique of the Beautiful Life

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Henry James, one of the great figures of modern English literature, seems an unlikely source of political insight. In his early novels, published in the late 1800s, the overtly political dimension of man's social and economic existence is hardly present; in the later novels, written just after the turn of the century, it is almost entirely absent. To be sure, midway through his career, James does indeed set some of his work firmly in the political and social movements of his day: The main characters in *The Bostonians* (1886), for example, are full of fervent views about the role of women in society, and the atmosphere of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) is hot with revolutionary ardor. Yet careful readers are hard-pressed to know just what James thinks (or wishes his readers to think) about specific political ideas, and he never names—much less endorses—any particular ideology. As is so often the case in his fiction, the focus is almost wholly inward. James devotes his attention to the psychological effects of reformist ideals and revolutionary commitments rather than the larger social consequences of particular political philosophies. Thus, even when depicting the

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ideological dimension of our social experience, Henry James can seem an almost perversely apolitical writer.

But this impression is insufficient. True, James did not throw political convictions into story form. He was not the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the Gilded Age, nor was he an early instance of the politically committed author that was to come to prominence in the twentieth century. In fact, in his letters James regularly expressed his dislike for the distracting hum of political chatter, as well as the false urgency of the political passions enflamed during electoral seasons. He was, nonetheless, a careful student of the human condition. Perhaps more than any writer of his generation, he captured the remarkable complexity of man's nature—a complexity that inevitably carries over into our political identities. Obviously, we vote our interests. In his novels, however, James helps us see that we also vote our *dreams*. For precisely this reason, the art of Henry James and his intensive focus on the interior lives of his characters offer a critical source of insight into the larger social and political forces that shape our existence.

This surprisingly rich potential for understanding can be found in two of his late novels in particular, *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Here the prose—extraordinarily dense, at times seemingly opaque—evokes one of the most contemporary dimensions of today's political imagination: the dream of existential freedom, the belief that man can cultivate a sense of identity independently of outside determination and influence. In both works, the characters are attracted to an image of life in which they may feel and act as they please, unhindered by social conventions and other pressing moral demands. Yet into these finely wrought fictional worlds of relaxed boundaries James injects a moment of reactionary resistance. At crucial moments in both novels, the inflexible reality of moral truth overcomes fantasies of limitless possibility. The result is certainly not political in the ordinary sense of the term: The narratives remain scrupulously limited to the jewel-box parlor rooms of James's imagination. Nonetheless, a careful, contemplative reading reveals a profound political dimension. The lure of unfettered inner freedom and the hard-edged,

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constraining force of moral truth depicted by James can help today's readers see the clash of dreams that make the "culture wars" of contemporary political life so explosive and intractable.

The dream of existential freedom was certainly in the air during, James's lifetime. The American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom James knew, was the great prophet of individualism. "Imitation is suicide," he wrote in 1841.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we betray our inner spark of the divine when we allow social norms to govern our lives. As Emerson asserts in his characteristically effusive manner, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature. Good and evil are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it."<sup>2</sup> His enthusiasm for the individual was so great that the very notion of moral right and wrong must be subordinated to one's personal genius for life: "If I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil."<sup>3</sup> The goal of the journey of life is to be true to oneself, even at the cost of tossing overboard the baggage of inherited moral norms.

In 1859, the English philosopher and social reformer John Stuart Mill published *On Liberty*, a less rhetorical but more thorough argument for the priority of individual self-determination over the claims of social authority. By Mill's reckoning, genuine personal freedom requires more than just protection from official government coercion. We are social animals, he argued, and we remain vulnerable to the unofficial but quite real coercions of communal expectations. Therefore, in order to undertake what Mill famously called "experiments in living," we need to escape from "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling."<sup>4</sup> The best society is one that sets aside, so far as possible, questions of good and evil, and grants individuals the greatest psychological freedom to decide how to live their lives. Although Mill did not follow the logic of this thought to its conclusion, later progressives have, insisting we should use the power of the state to discourage the perpetuation of a culture preoccupied with moral issues that cramp personal

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freedom. Hence the paradox of modern liberalism: enhanced state power in the service of an expansive view of liberty.

The starched collar of inherited morality is not easily removed, however. As the English author and playwright Oscar Wilde recognized, existential freedom requires stronger medicine than either the earnest moral reasoning of a Mill or the vatic pronouncements of an Emerson. An acquaintance as well as a literary rival, Wilde shared with James an intense devotion to beauty. The best life, Wilde proclaimed, is a work of art, a creative enterprise undertaken for the sake of the potential beauty latent within the individual. Social convention and the dour voice of moral judgment, he believed, can only work against this vision of beauty's sublime possibilities. Therefore, Wilde urged a disposition of cavalier and amused disregard, trumpeting the liberating power of flagrant transgression and frivolous, eccentric individualism as against communal authority. He mocked ordinary views of good and evil, insisting that "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others."<sup>5</sup> As the modern era's most accomplished performance artist, he was as much a subversive provocation as his pen—so much so, in fact, that he eventually came to grief in a series of public trials for "gross indecency" (Edwardian code for sodomy) and imprisonment.

Wilde has become a postmodern saint, celebrated as a martyr for the cause of existential freedom. To a great extent, modern politics and art have followed his lead—although clunky jargon all too frequently takes the place of Wilde's entertaining wit. Nonetheless, the basic agenda endures: We censure those who censure. Words such as "fundamentalist" or "intolerant" or "narrow-minded" bear down upon what were once conventional judgments about good and evil; truth is bracketed with scare quotes. In these and other ways, the postmodern age seeks to neuter a wide range of inherited social and moral norms, in order to expand the cultural space for "experiments in living." If anything, Wilde's triumph gives us good reason to read Henry James closely: His late masterpieces, by cutting against our contemporary dreams of existential freedom, show us that beauty and morality need not

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be existential enemies. On the contrary, he seems to say, there may be nothing more beautiful—and more spiritually liberating—than a life guided by moral authority.

It is not surprising that James ended up chronicling both the allure and the peril of the modern dream of existential freedom. His father, Henry James Sr. was an early instance of a very American type, at home both nowhere and everywhere. Heir to a large New World fortune, Henry Sr. led a transient life, frequently moving his family to Europe in pursuit of culture and educational opportunities for his precocious children. He was also a would-be social reformer and spiritual seeker, of whom the Transcendentalist sage Henry David Thoreau once cynically remarked, “He utters quasi-philosophic dogmas in a metaphysic dress.”<sup>6</sup> Henry Sr. invented himself—or at least, he *tried* to—and Henry Jr. had a front-row seat for the tumultuous drama of self-creation.

Although less spiritually unsettled than his father, Henry James Jr. undertook a similar project of self-creation. In concert with his peculiar upbringing, a largely expatriate existence made James keenly aware of the fluid, uncertain nature of modern human identity. He acknowledged the accumulated weight of social routines, rigid mores, and local habits even as he himself led an interloper’s life. He could, he realized, construct a life of his own choosing—and he did, settling in England, fashioning himself a minor country gentleman, and finally becoming a British citizen amidst the patriotic ardor of World War I. Nevertheless, James retained, alongside the promise of existential freedom, a vivid sense of the deracinating contingency of modern life. To be and become what one wishes: This open-ended dream haunts his late novels, and evokes from James a remarkable if subtle defense of the vivifying authority of moral truth. We see this perhaps most clearly in *The Ambassadors*, where he sets out to provide a strikingly artful account of the role of plain, ordinary moral duty in a truly beautiful life.

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Lambert Strether, the main character in *The Ambassadors*, is a middle-aged widower from Woollett, an imaginary Massachusetts mill town. He has been sent by Mrs. Newsome, the formidable widow of a great industrialist, to recover her son Chad from Paris, where he is living in what his mother assumes to be a state of debauchery. Mrs. Newsome thinks it time for her wayward son to return and run the family business. Who better to send than the man whom, in her fierce rectitude (and vast fortune), she has signaled a desire to marry?

Upon his arrival in Paris, Strether discovers that Chad has fallen under the influence of the unhappily married Comtesse de Vionnet, a *femme du monde* (“woman of the world”) who has guided Chad toward a refined way of life. The possibility of an adulterous romance between Chad and the comtesse hangs in the background, but Strether is so taken by the atmosphere of good taste and discretion that he presumes the best, often insisting that their relationship is “a virtuous attachment.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, intimate contact with Parisian society triggers a latent largeness of life in Strether himself. Thus, after some months in the city, instead of taking Chad in hand, Strether finds himself taking his side, advising him to stay so that he, too, might continue to drink in the city and all its charms. Strether is convinced that Paris offers so much more than America, and certainly than Woollett: more history, more culture, more picturesque scenery. And Paris also offers *less*: less moral pressure, less commercial anxiety.

The clearest expression of Strether’s yearning for something larger and more beautiful than his Woollett life occurs during the garden party of Book Fifth. There, swept up into the magnificence of the scene, he meets the Comtesse de Vionnet for the first time, an encounter that James sums up in the following manner: “Some such loose handful of bright flowers she seemed, fragrantly enough, to fling at him.”<sup>8</sup> It is just at the moment when the comtesse is ushered away that Strether, intoxicated by the aroma of all that exceeds the mean limitations of Woollett, takes one of Chad’s engaging young friends aside. “Don’t forget that you’re young—blessedly young,” Strether tells the friend. “Live all you can,” he advises, “it’s a mistake not

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to.”<sup>9</sup> Strether’s train has left the station, but Chad’s young friend? Strether insists that he can and should get on board.

The narrow horizons of provincial life, the advancing shadows of old age, the cosmopolitan promise, the advantages of youth—these are common themes in literature. But James goes on to evoke a distinctively modern possibility: “The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me,” Strether muses, seeming to accept his finite, constrained identity. “For it’s at the best a tin mold, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness is poured—so that one ‘takes’ the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it.”<sup>10</sup> The implication seems clear enough: Whereas the comtesse and her fellow Parisians have their “fluted and embossed” molds, Strether’s is hopelessly smooth and plain. It is the stamp of Woollett, with its mercantile prosperity, residual Puritanism, and bourgeois proprieties. “One lives in fine as one can,” Strether observes, acknowledging that the “can” is not ours to change.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, remarkably, after seeming to accept the insuperable power of cultural limitations, Strether suddenly swerves. “Still,” he advises Chad’s friend, “one has the illusion of freedom; therefore, don’t be, like me, without the memory of that illusion.” In other words, we can choose our lives, change our molds—or so we’d like to imagine. Thus Strether slides toward an altogether believable mixture of self-knowledge and self-deception. The aging son of Woollett concludes, “I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it [the illusion of freedom]; I don’t quite know which.” But of one thing Strether is sure: “I’m a case of reaction against the mistake.”<sup>12</sup>

Far from mocking our all too human love of illusions, in *The Ambassadors*, James wants us to see that Strether—like the rest of us—can take the illusion of freedom very seriously indeed. So much so, in fact, that soon Mrs. Newsome, sensing that Strether is unable, perhaps unwilling, to complete his mission, sends in reinforcements in the form of Sarah, her daughter, an unalloyed New Englander made in the image of her mother. Sarah suspects

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the adulterous reality of her brother's relationship with the comtesse and doesn't hesitate to pronounce it "hideous."<sup>13</sup> Strether, by contrast, thinks Sarah crudely incapable of recognizing the Platonic ideal of beauty that guides Chad and the comtesse, and refuses to accompany her when she departs in disgust for her archetypically bourgeois Grand Tour of Europe. It is a refusal that symbolizes Strether's renunciation of the possibility of marrying Mrs. Newsome, and as such his rejection of bourgeois life. He becomes a Wildean servant of beauty, in this case giving himself over to the role of defending the beautiful life that Chad and the comtesse have crafted for themselves and their friends.

Of course, the illusion cannot last forever. After a few weeks of empty, languid summer days in Paris, Strether gives himself over to a whimsical trip to the countryside. On the train, in one of the extended metaphors that James uses to such good effect, Strether recalls a landscape painting by the French painter Emile Lambinet that, years ago, he once dreamed of buying in a gallery in Boston. He gets off the train at a stop that suddenly strikes his fancy, abandoning his will to the spontaneity of the moment. And just then—surrounded by the poplars and the willows, the picturesque village and its quaint church, and the river whose name he doesn't know—Strether finds himself inside the remembered painting. The servant of beauty has entered into his reward; the richness of life is fully and immediately available to him. He even feels himself released from the animating duty that had for so long guided his Parisian sojourn: to defend the aesthetic purity of Chad's relationship to the comtesse. The "oughts" and "musts" and "shoulds" have all been silenced. Strether's life has become a work of art, open to all those possibilities that please, without issuing demands.

At precisely this moment of apotheosis, James inserts a contrivance of plot: As he looks up the river, Strether is shocked to see Chad and the comtesse drifting toward him in a boat, the very image of two lovers in the late afternoon sunshine. At every turn, he has wished to see them as "good" and "honorable," serving one another in a way that transcends the narrow,



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moralistic world of Woollett. But now reality breaches the levies of beauty that Strether has so lovingly built around them—and himself. Chad and the comtesse come ashore, and all the characters marvel at the happenstance of their unplanned rendezvous. They put on high-spirited masks of easy repartee, and, with elbows on the table during the evening meal, Strether notes the tone of “innocent friendly Bohemia.”<sup>14</sup> Later, however, when he is alone, he finds himself unsettled: Remembering the encounter and the way in which each had known that the others knew, even as they carried on as if they didn’t, “he kept making of it that there had been simply a *lie* in the charming affair—a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one’s finger.”<sup>15</sup>

James never names the adultery, and not because of a squeamish sensibility, which he apparently did not have. Simply put, as a writer James is not interested in the transgression’s specific moral content. He wants instead for his readers to see what such a transgression, however understood, does to a middle-aged man who has half-knowingly given himself over to the dream that he can distance himself from conventional moral duties and judgments, all in the service of freely soaking up the beauty of life. He asks a question that is as relevant today as it was then: Should a lover of beauty affirm or regret the intrusion of moral considerations into a Lambinet life?

When the modern dream of overcoming the limitations of inherited duties and judgments comes face to face with the reality of transgression, it often seeks to mitigate or redefine the content of the moral experience. One strategy is to take transgression out of the realm of right and wrong altogether, placing it instead into a psychological or sociological frame and expounding, for example, about the socially conditioned nature of sexual mores, or the normal, healthy psychological needs of mature adults. In these ways, we keep the transgression from penetrating too

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deeply into our consciousness and demanding too strong a moral response. Another, more dramatic strategy is to throw the transgression out into the open, holding the moral fact at bay by cowing any who would dare to come forward with a word of judgment. No one, after all, wishes to be considered a simple-minded traditionalist, lacking critical insight into the diverse forms of human culture and the real needs of our common humanity.

Indeed, we have no difficulty imagining Chad and the comtesse saying, “Yes, we know that society calls it adultery. But social mores are artificial rules, and we choose to live otherwise.” After all, earlier in the novel, James has one of Chad’s charming friends confide to Strether an exquisitely modern sentiment: Remarking on the relations between the comtesse and Chad, the friend observes, “Marrying a man, or a woman, either, is never the wonder, for any Jack and Jill can bring *that* off. The wonder is their doing such things without marrying.”<sup>16</sup> And yet, the modern romance with transgression does not govern the final pages of *The Ambassadors*. It had already become a cliché by the time James turned to the topic, a “dreadful little old tradition,” he says dismissively in his preface.<sup>17</sup> Instead, when Strether returns to Paris after his countryside encounter with Chad and the comtesse, “an instinct in him cast about for some form of discipline.”<sup>18</sup> As Strether tries to answer the difficult question of how he should confront the reality of the adulterous affair, James has him revert to his old Woollett tradition, “the one he had been brought up on and which even so many years of life had but little worn away; the notion that the state of the wrongdoer, or at least this person’s happiness, presented some special difficulty.”<sup>19</sup> Returned to himself, Strether can no longer think in purely aesthetic terms. He must ask a moral question: In light of his now clear vision of their relationship, what exactly is his duty to Chad and the comtesse?

In the final pages, Strether’s revitalized sense of duty comes to the fore. He visits the comtesse in her apartment, where at last he sees her true condition. For all her efforts to attain an easy freedom and openness, she is in fact deeply and painfully dependent upon Chad. “With this sharpest perception yet,” James writes, “it was like a chill in the air to him, it was almost appalling, that

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a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited.”<sup>20</sup> The liaison between Chad and the comtesse cannot be understood as the free, natural, beautiful impulses of a man and a woman reaching for an aesthetic consummation. On the contrary, it was little more than the result of basic, urgent human needs given outward refinement by the ornamental, Parisian mold. The young Chad wanted what young men want, and the older woman, estranged from her husband and anxious about the deepening lines on her face, wished to draw a younger man near and keep him close.

As our fallen, vulnerable humanity emerges into view in the person of the comtesse, James portrays Strether as anointed by the felt power of moral obligation. Invigorated, he does not preach about the sin of adultery, but instead tries to throw the chains of duty around Chad. Referring to the comtesse, Strether insists that Chad must “do her justice,” and categorically rules out returning to America. “You owe her everything,” Strether pronounces in his recovered Puritan voice, “very much more than she can ever owe you. You’ve in other words duties to her, of the most positive sort; and I don’t see what other duties—as the others are presented to you—can be held to go before them.”<sup>21</sup> But Chad’s desires have shifted, as human desires always do. The Woollett manufacturing empire and its shimmering allure of money supersede the appeal of the comtesse and Parisian life. Desire, however gilt with aesthetic refinement, turns out to be a fickle guide to the good life.

The novel ends with a scene of temptation that drives home the significance of Strether’s recovered moral identity. As he prepares to leave Paris, his confidante Maria Gostrey offers herself as a paradigmatic Parisian companion, but Strether refuses the opportunity for an affair. Maria, however, sees the irony of her situation, recognizing “all comically, all tragically,” that she finds Strether so attractive precisely because his ample sensibilities are so thoroughly deepened by his fine sense of duty.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Chad heads back to America to build a business empire and the comtesse risks emotional destruction, Strether alone remains beautiful. The reason is simple, and entirely at odds with Wilde’s vision of life as a work of art: Strether has

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awoken from his dream of limitless freedom. He has recognized a moral fact *as* a moral fact. He has stepped out of the Lambinet and back into the sharp, stable outlines of a personality formed by the distinct and determining mold of duty.

James's last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*, is perhaps his most striking and subtle invitation into a vision of moral authority as the vivifying source of an attractive personality. The Rococo prose, the porcelain-pure characters, and the sumptuous settings all work to evoke the dream of a liberated life of aesthetic freedom. Once again, however—and this time with even more intensity, and at much greater length—James depicts a character forced into a rude awakening. A harsh, limiting moral fact interrupts her fantasies. And yet, once again, it intensifies rather than diminishes the beauty of her life.

Adam Verver is a fabulously successful American industrialist and widower who has moved to England to give himself and his daughter Maggie over to a life of aesthetic education and accumulation. Their most prized possession is Amerigo, a relatively impoverished Italian prince of impeccable breeding. Early in the novel, Maggie tells Amerigo, “You’re a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price,” and she playfully hints that he is now part of the family collection: “You’re what they call a *morceau de musée* (“museum piece”).”<sup>23</sup> The rich atmosphere the Ververs have created is not simply a matter of lovely objects and refined manners, however. James also identifies a certain moral polish. They have a superstition of not hurting and, when faced with difficult circumstances, reassure themselves: “One can always, for safety, be kind.”<sup>24</sup> It is this desire to keep everyone happy that moves the plot forward. Maggie feels very keenly her father’s dependence on her for companionship, and after her marriage to Amerigo, the “Prince,” she finds herself torn between her painfully divergent sense of duty as wife and daughter. Neither wealth nor exquisite taste nor even an abundance of moral earnestness can solve the problem.

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Through the eyes of the Prince, James indicates that Maggie is quite unprepared to face this difficulty. Her husband sees that Maggie and her father have an almost childish “romantic disposition.” They imagine life full of “innocent pleasures,” or, as James puts it, “pleasures without penalties.”<sup>25</sup> They believe that all problems can be overcome by a principle of virtuous addition: Everything worth having can be attained, every problem ameliorated, every impediment overcome. Maggie and her father lack the Prince’s Old World sense of limitation, the hard-won awareness that life requires difficult navigation through treacherous waters, and that sometimes, harsh storms require us to trim our sails, even sacrificing precious cargo in order to survive. Put simply, one cannot have everything.

Maggie, however, imagines all her compartments flawlessly designed, safe, and watertight. So, when Charlotte Stant, an old friend, arrives for a visit, Maggie sees the possibility of a new and life-enhancing acquisition. If Charlotte marries her father, then the awkward threesome will turn into a properly balanced quartet. With Maggie’s encouragement, the marriage comes off, and Maggie imagines that everyone will now be happy with the newly engineered arrangement. Predictably, the two-and-two-make-four method fails. For Maggie still wants to be the perfect wife—and the perfect daughter. She continues to direct her emotional life toward her father; indeed, even more so now, since Charlotte may be pushed toward her husband as compensation. But unbeknownst to Maggie or her father, in the remote past Charlotte and the Prince once enjoyed a romantic relationship. They would not marry, however, for bad fortune had denied both financial resources, and neither was willing to live for love if it meant perpetual poverty. But now they need make no sacrifice. They are free to resume their liaison, benevolently endowed by Adam Verver’s great fortune and encouraged by Maggie’s need to make everyone happy.

Midway through the novel, after the adultery has occurred but still remains secret, James unfolds one of his extended metaphors. At the center of the lovely garden of Maggie’s life, he writes, it is as if there stands “some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright

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porcelain, colored and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs.” Lovely indeed, yet Maggie notices “that though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level.” Not only is the beautiful life she has constructed inaccessible, it also takes on the dangerous image of “a Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty.” It makes stringent, even deadly demands: “There so hung about it the vision of one’s putting off one’s shoes to enter and even verily of one’s paying with one’s life if found there as an interloper.”<sup>26</sup> With this daunting image, James shifts attention in the second half of *The Golden Bowl* to the same question that occupies the final scenes of *The Ambassadors*: How will a character living the illusion of existential freedom respond to a limiting moral truth? James evokes the possibility that Maggie will adopt a strategy of evasive self-deception, and pictures her “humming to herself hard as a sign that nothing had happened.”<sup>27</sup> But as the author, James controls the narrative. Maggie must come face to face with the fact of her husband’s adultery, and James contrives a scene similar to Strether’s chance encounter with Chad and the comtesse to ensure this outcome.

On the eve of the Prince’s marriage to Maggie, he and Charlotte had secretly met. The Prince had accompanied Charlotte to various antique shops in search of just the right present for Maggie. Charlotte picked out a golden bowl, but the Prince’s refined eye for quality detected a flaw, so she did not buy it. Some years later, in search of a gift for her father, Maggie goes into the same shop and picks out the same bowl. The shopkeeper knows of the flaw but sells it nonetheless. Later, however, in a fit of remorse, he goes to Maggie’s house to admit the false sale. Upon seeing the photographs in the reception room, he recognizes Charlotte and the Prince, marveling aloud at the happenstance that Maggie knows them as well. This new knowledge—that the Prince and Charlotte knew each other before—breaks through all the restraints that had kept Maggie from seeing the adulterous nature of the bond that had developed (through her own encouragement) between the

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Prince and Charlotte. Like Strether happening upon the comtesse and Chad on the river, Maggie must now reckon with the end of her illusions.

There is not the slightest hint of the Bohemian option in *The Golden Bowl*; there are no Parisian characters here to suggest that sex without marriage is an infinitely more marvelous thing. On the contrary, the entire atmosphere is *haute bourgeois*. As James emphasizes, Maggie remains utterly rooted in “the fact, in all its abomination.”<sup>28</sup> There will be no softening of moral judgment to give fallible human beings elbow room, no therapeutic response that offers understanding in the place of censure. In spite of Maggie’s desire to make everyone happy—a desire that tempts her, invariably, to palliate the circumstances—her conviction that adultery is a deep and profound betrayal of marriage “budded no inch.”<sup>29</sup> Or perhaps Maggie remains utterly convinced of the destructive social stigma of adultery? Again, as in *The Ambassadors*, James need not specify the *content* of Maggie’s experience of intrusive moral limitation. What matters is the felt power of the moral fact, however we choose to parse it.

Yet Maggie differs from Strether, and the difference is what makes *The Golden Bowl* a more pressing and contemporary exercise of the imagination. At the end of *The Ambassadors*, James depicts the emergence of a will reenergized by a sense of duty, and it is this sharply defined existential limitation that gives beauty to Strether’s life. He serves others, not himself. But Strether had already been shaped by the plain, tin mold of New England; he has his “old tradition” to fall back on. Therefore, readers might justly conclude that he has been socially conditioned to be such a man. By contrast, Maggie is a young woman who has always lived in a world of seemingly limitless possibilities. It is all the more astonishing, then, to follow James as he provides an extended account of Maggie’s strengthened will bent to the task of resisting the destructive power of adultery.

In the most important scene in the evolution of Maggie’s morally charged character, she comes face to face with Charlotte, who is agitated by her uncertainty about what Maggie knows of her relationship to the Prince. When Charlotte finds a moment to confront her alone, Maggie exercises

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an iron will over her emotions, refusing to allow Charlotte to draw out any acknowledgment that she is aware of the adultery. This reticence marks the deepest moment of Maggie's self-discipline. As Charlotte presses her, Maggie dissembles and says, "I've *not* felt at any time that you've wronged me."<sup>30</sup> Whether or not this denial is a lie remains shrouded in the fog of James' deliberately oblique approach. Perhaps Maggie does prevaricate, or perhaps from the very day the shopkeeper drew back the curtain on her husband's relationship to Charlotte, Maggie came to recognize that her own illusion of freedom was the more fundamental fault of the two. Her dream of pleasures without penalties was the corrupting flaw in what she imagined would be a golden circle of domestic happiness. No matter how we read this passage, the significance is clear: Maggie sacrifices her earlier, easy commitment to notions of the beautiful, perfect life—good people surrounded by lovely things, all living in free, open, and honest harmony—to her now much stronger, deeper, and fiercer loyalty to the future of her marriage.

As he depicts Maggie's emergent determination, James does not encourage his readers to fall back on dry pieties: "Well, at least she saved her marriage." Instead, he explains, whatever glamour sin might have, Maggie will supersede it and embark on a superior adventure of her own. Strangely energized by the harsh, threatening reality of her husband's transgression, "she was having, by that idiom, the time of her life." "She felt not unlike some young woman of the theater who, engaged for a minor part in the play and having mastered her cues with anxious effort, should find herself suddenly promoted to leading lady."<sup>31</sup> Maggie lives "at concert pitch" with a "heroic lucidity" and is described again and again as splendid and extraordinary.<sup>32</sup> Like Lambert Strether jolted back into his Woollett mold, Maggie's life becomes narrower but deeper, less open-ended but more serious. Indeed, even Amerigo, who has previously been amused by his wife's naïve and sentimental delicacy, finds himself drawn into the commanding power of Maggie's steely emotional resolve. When the novel ends with Adam and Charlotte about to depart for America, Maggie has become so enlarged that Amerigo



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can “see nothing but” her, and embraces her.<sup>33</sup> This image of Maggie cuts directly against Wilde’s desire to be freed from the inhibiting limitations of old-fashioned duties. The acclamations that James so fulsomely spreads through the second half of *The Golden Bowl* ring loud and clear: Bound by the need to respond to a limiting moral fact, Maggie becomes more fully beautiful.

A number of friends have tried to read the late novels of Henry James. The long, ornate sentences chug down twisting tracks and through dark tunnels, and for all the puffing steam of sentiments suggested and elaborated, one often feels as though the stories do not so much move forward as exfoliate in layers of indirect dialogue and elaborate meditation on the interior lives of the characters. Some brave readers labor to the end, but many give up in exasperation. The novels seem willfully obscure, almost an insult to an ordinary reader’s expectations. Yet, it was not as though James were incapable of straightness of style. Although his earlier books are hardly fast-paced, they are certainly much more accessible. We can only conclude, then, that an uneasy, disoriented consciousness is exactly the effect James sought in his final novels. By way of various rhetorical devices—dialogue of the most elliptical sort, pronouns that wander far from their referents, convoluted sentences, metaphors that extend and blend into descriptive and realistic prose, an omnipotent authorial voice that intrudes with diffident observations—James deliberately creates a combination of narrative density and disorientation. This style draws readers into the inner lives of characters palpably real and at the same time utterly elusive. In their dream of a purely aesthetic life free of confining duties, Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver hover on the edge of coherence. For all those shaped by the dream of existential freedom, every experience seems almost accessible, every direction vaguely possible. Little can be sharply defined or clearly stated, because we want so much to remain open-ended and available.

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To this end, the twilight prose of Henry James achieves a profound realism. Characters who seek to expand their horizons, to melt the solid shapes of inherited expectations, cannot be easily pinned down; they cannot be described “straight out.” The circumlocutions that readers find so irritating in James are in truth elaborate, psychologically rich versions of blunt contemporary evasions, ones that go by the names “lifestyle choices” or “value judgments.”

The disorienting effect of the late style of Henry James is even more a triumph of realism when we consider the moral awakening of the main characters in *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver shudder. And who doesn't lose his footing when hit with the full impact of forces that cut to the root of our humanity? The Israelites cowered at the base of Mount Sinai: “Let not God speak to us, lest we die.”<sup>34</sup> The Sermon on the Mount, too, knocks readers off balance: “If your right eye causes you to sin,” Jesus teaches, “then pluck it out.”<sup>35</sup> But Strether and Maggie do not just regain their balance, grimly allowing moral facts to define their lives. On the contrary, moral truth galvanizes their personalities and sharpens the outlines of their characters. Now more solid, more self-possessed, and more *beautiful*, Strether and Maggie are transfigured by the authority of moral truth.

In modern times, men and women can receive such a vision only with great difficulty. In his own day, after all, James recognized that the moral imagination of elite culture was beginning to follow Wilde's lead. Perhaps he knew himself to be tempted like the rest of us. For all the conservative denunciations of moral relativism and urgent defenses of traditional norms, who among us truly believes that the cutting edge of moral authority serves as the deep source of life's nobility, vitality, and beauty? We may *want* to believe in the humanizing power of moral truth and to affirm its constraints—our professions of faith, our marriage vows, our duties to our families and communities and countries. Yet today, a vision of life transfigured by moral truth seems all too elusive. A desire for pleasures without penalties unsettles the traditional consciousness. After reading Marx and Nietzsche and

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Freud and other clear-eyed critics of the pretensions of moral authority, who doesn't find himself tempted to believe that the limiting power of moral truth reflects a false consciousness, or a slavish mentality, or an empty echo of desire repressed? Perhaps, therefore, the muddy uncertainty, the foggy atmosphere, the slippery, ungraspable prose of *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* is revealingly, painfully true to our own disoriented and opaque moral imaginations.

To be disoriented is not to be disarmed, however. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James tells us that his final novel is "but an invitation to readers to dream again in my company." We live on the far side of a cultural revolution, animated by the dream of existential freedom—one from which James instinctively recoiled. But in the mysterious shadows of his late novels, James does more than convey his misgivings. He does not conjure nightmares, nor does he ascend onto a pulpit and moralize, as if repeating old precepts and old principles in an ever-louder voice could overcome the wit and allure of an Oscar Wilde. Instead, James invites his readers into a counter-dream, a very different and more attractive vision of life. Beware a life of experiment, his late novels seem to suggest; beware dreaming of a life of open, unhindered opportunity. Verdant possibility, however alluring in the moment, lacks the sculpting, fixing power of adamantine permanence. Lasting beauty cannot be chosen and fashioned. It can only be received in constraining obedience.

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## Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays: First and Second Series* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 46.
2. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 50.
3. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 50.
4. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), p. 4.
5. Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford, 1989), p. 572.
6. Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), vol. 1, pp. 149-150.
7. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 187, 202.
8. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 214.
9. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 217.
10. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 218.
11. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 218.
12. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 218.
13. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 205.
14. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 262.
15. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, pp. 262-263.
16. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, p. 265.
17. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 1, preface, p. xiii.
18. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 272.
19. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 272.
20. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 284.
21. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 313.
22. James, *Ambassadors*, vol. 2, p. 327.
23. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), vol. 1, p. 12.
24. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 1, p. 187.

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25. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 1, p. 11.
  26. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, pp. 3-4.
  27. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, p. 7.
  28. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, p. 185.
  29. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, p. 186.
  30. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, p. 249 [emphasis in the original].
  31. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, pp. 207-208.
  32. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, pp. 209, 214.
  33. James, *Golden Bowl*, vol. 2, p. 369.
  34. Exodus 20:19.
  35. Matthew 5:29.