Henry James and the anomalous particular case, a study of his technique as revealed in "The Turn of the Screw"

David Clarence Walker

The University of Montana
HENRY JAMES

AND THE ANOMALOUS PARTICULAR CASE,
A STUDY OF HIS TECHNIQUE AS REVEALED IN
THE TURN OF THE SCREW

by

DAVID CLARENCE WALKER

B.A. Montana State University, 1956

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1964

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date
IN APPRECIATION TO:

LESLIE FIEDLER: without whose example I would never have ventured so far into literature--this "Mirror of the Inscrutable,"

and to:

JACOB VINOCUR: whose humanity made me want to continue,

and also to:

SEYMOUR BETSKY: who encouraged me along the way,

with special thanks to OLGA CLARK for her assistance and general good cheer.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td><strong>The Search for Meaningful Illusion</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td><strong>Circumlocution: &quot;The Method at the Heart of the Madness&quot;</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td><strong>The &quot;Anomalous Particular Case&quot;</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td><strong>The Human Propensity for &quot;Involvement&quot;</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL ILLUSION

Three years before he died, Henry James had come to feel that his work was a "tangle of temporal differences that revealed, after all, nothing of the depths; references as fleeting as O. Henry's slang, flavours mistaken for essences, split hairs, not dissected anatomies." ¹

It is pertinent that in James's misgivings here quoted he refers to O. Henry for self-comparison: "O. Henry of the facile tale with the trick ending, tale-teller extraordinary, but artist seldom. For James comes closest to failing as an artist when he seems to be purely a story-teller, a fabricator, a word conjurer who pulls us along hypnotically by the spell of his rhetoric, a writer who merely entertains us, leaving us with no philosophy after the illusion. He comes precipitously close to this in stories like "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Aspern Papers"--tales from which only the discerning reader can draw a deeper meaning. As a story teller James is also like his modern counterpart (in style, not content), William Faulkner, who, on cursory examination, seems to be a carnival charlatan, a clever artist who plays a shell game with his reader, trying to convince him there

is a moral seed beneath the convoluting shell of his story, when (except for the discerning) there doesn't seem to be one there at all.

If James were merely a story teller, a magician who beguiles his reader into suspending his disbelief only so long as his words were effective, he would be suspect as an artist. His technique might be admired, but his creative insight would be questioned. This, in fact, is James's position in literature today. As a craftsman, as a dedicated artist, he is above suspicion. Almost every critic maintains the indebtedness of the modern literary technician to James. But almost every critic qualifies his praise by saying that the world James portrays seems to have too little relation to reality as they see it, particularly the world mirrored in his later works. Critics admire James's portrayals of "fine consciences," but at the same time they imply that these consciences never have existed other than in the concentricity of minds--James's and the reader's; or that if they have existed, they so little reflect a representational world that they can safely be ignored.

It is Joseph Conrad who referred to James as "the historian of fine consciences." In fact, it is Conrad who has said some of the most complimentary and enlightening things about James. Yet despite the fact that James himself often referred to the novel as "history,"

this might have seemed—even coming from Conrad—a limiting tribute, since to James the word "history" had a very particular (even private) meaning. "History," to him was not the "pigeon-holed and documented" chronicle which he associated with Zola, and which he referred to as "experience by imitation." The artistic image "is always," he says, "superior [italics mine] to the thing itself."  

As a historian who diligently imitates the actual (the "temporal," as he calls it in his damning self-evaluation, p. 1), imbuing it with no "essence" of its own, James is purposely not as convincing as he at first seems. Who, for instance, could believe that one of his most "realistic" characters, Christopher Newman, in The American, is at all true to the actual? Such a person, in real life, would have to be endowed with the physical drive and energy of a tycoon, yet be, at the same time, as sensitive as Henry James himself.

Rather, it is because James fails as a historian (in the usual sense of the term) that he succeeds as an artist. He is an historian only to the extent that he convinces us that the individual kind of reality he has captured is not merely fanciful.

Sir Phillip Sidney has said that art is more philosophical than history and more concrete than philosophy. Goethe, the romantic-classicist, said that art gives an illusion of a higher reality; and

---


when he used the word illusion in this way, Goethe was not meaning only
the image art creates by being something other than reality. He was
rephrasing the classical concept that imitation is a creative act.
The artist does not necessarily imitate life exactly as it appears.
Naturalists in American literature, such as Frank Norris, Theodore
Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis did this; and they too often succeeded,
creating in the process what Irving Babbitt has called a "literal
deception," or, as the critic, Yvor Winters, has rephrased the term,
"the fallacy of imitative form." That is, the reality the literary
naturalists captured (Zola and, even, Flaubert being the European
practitioners of the method), a reality which may be literally true,
is still a deception because, for all its pretensions of capturing
"real" life— that is, of evading the "illusory"— it is illusory still,
and it is possibly no less illusory than is an "idealized," classical
illusion, which makes "illusion" an integral part of reality.

The problem, of course, is what is "reality" and what is "illusion"?—
a question anyone would be foolhardy to try to answer absolutely. And
this is just the point. The classicist does not presume to answer it
absolutely. He does not try to get absolutely beyond illusion. With­
out presuming to limit reality (whatever it is) the way the naturalists,
for instance, limit it to its purely objective properties, the classi­
cist uses illusion for whatever value it has as a point of reference
reflecting back to reality. He approaches the problem of reality and
illusion more circumspectly, more indirectly, rather than attempting to evade it by defining it too easily and thus dismissing it too shallowly. Thus he gives to the question of reality and illusion the latitude the problem demands, and, at the same time, he keeps it more inclusive. If he limits it at all, he limits it by insisting that reality is also illusion.

This, of course, is paradoxical; and to approach the problem of paradox is only to draw very near to the core of Henry James's fiction. To examine one is to examine the other. To presume, for instance, that realistic art continues to present reality only so long as it continues to present illusion is to presume that life, as a continuum, is also illusion. And to presume that art should do no more or less than imitate this illusive continuum is to be more paradoxical still. But this--it will be discovered--is exactly what James demands of the artist. Inevitably one is thrown into some consideration of the mystical realm, where the critical mind finds all its disciplines thwarted. For as long as there are contrasts, as long as there is

5 James's method of indirection will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

6 It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine James as a potential mystic (which, by almost any criterion he is not); yet he realizes mystical kind of awareness by some of the same means particularly in his use of paradox, in his attempt to mirror, rather than to eliminate contraries, etc. (to be discussed later). The paradox of the mystical experience, as asserted by all mystics, pseudo or otherwise (by those who profess it authoritatively as well as by those who profess it less authoritatively, perhaps, only because they seem less sure of the artistic means) is that the experience
play of light and shadow, of illusion and reality, paradox will find
expression. The irony of paradox is that it is always as much a
reflection of the beholder’s eye as it is of life itself. Even the
word is only an arbitrary fulcrum by which one balances contraries
which possibly do not exist at all in total reality. Dualistic words
like "good and evil," "beauty and ugliness," etc., manage to halve
the world into contraries which may not exist at all except in the
minds of those who use them; and in this sense paradox may be no more
central than the illusions it opposes. Irving Babbitt, for instance,
says that one of the most "delicate of tasks" is:

... to determine whether a paradox occupies a
position more or less central than the convention
to which it is opposed [and that] a somewhat similar
problem is to determine which of two conventions
has the greater degree of centrality, for one con­
vention may as compared to another seem highly

cannot be truly conveyed, imagistically or otherwise, much less judged
or defined. As Eckhart says, The "unspeakable" quality the mystic
apprehends "hath no image"—a staggering assumption which attacks
conventional conceptions of reality which, by most definitions, are
not averse to imagistic or conceptual translation. What this
means is that all mystics, pseudo or otherwise, who try to communi­
cate the experience (that is, to translate total reality) practice
a paradox no less bewildering than the paradoxes they express.

Mysticism infuriates the critical mind most of all, because
the mystic asserts that he has apprehended a reality of which the
non-mystic is not only unaware (the awareness is the experience;
everyone is a potential mystic at every moment, but is not aware
of it); but furthermore he asserts that even if the experience is
in any way communicated (which, of course, would be, in every case
a compromise with total communication), the experience still cannot
be judged critically. By William James’s criterion of "the
fruits," the mystical experience "words," if at all, only for the
individual who experiences it; and, in every case, the person who
experiences it is the sole judge.
paradoxical.\(^7\)

Babbitt here is not trying to dispose of paradox as a useful entity; he is trying to bring it into perspective. That is, he does not want to permit it to be forced, arbitrarily, out of perspective as a respectable measuring tool, as a useful means of judging illusions.

As long as people are confused about reality and illusion, paradox will find expression in art no less readily than it appears in life. And the more complex the minds that view it, the more complex will be the paradoxes demanded. If a work of art does not, for ironical temperaments, somehow embody paradox, it will itself become, for a large portion of the public, an object of irony. This is the public James was referring to when he said, in "The Future of the Novel":

\[\ldots\text{There is }\ldots\text{ an admirable minority of intelligent persons }\ldots\text{ for whom the very form [of the novel] has, equally at its best and its worst, been ever a mockery }\ldots\text{[a class] }\ldots\text{ beginning to be visibly augmented by a different circle altogether, the group of the formerly subject, but now estranged, the deceived and bored, those for whom the [novel] too decidedly fails to live up to its possibilities.}^{8}\]

Only the most complex (though not, necessarily, the most deeply


\[^8\text{Henry James, \textit{The Future of the Novel}, op. cit., p. 56.}\]
profound) art achieves the illusion of providing a play of paradoxes which is not easily sounded. This kind of art so interweaves the stuff of reality and illusion that even critical minds can temporarily resign to it. What distinguishes this artistic fusion is that the work of art remains an illusion which more effectively escapes irony on the part of the beholder (and admitted illusion is illusion which has been disproved ironically) and more durably remains paradox. It remains paradox because it more expertly balances a vaster combination of opposing entities: the idea and the "picture" (James's dichotomies), the abstract idea and the concrete fact, the symbol and the image, the illusory and the real. Purely imitative art, which is flat and uneliptical, seldom achieves this balance, because its paradoxes are too easily dissolved.

In drama, for instance, our minds are induced into a play by what Coleridge calls the "suspension of disbelief." But because of the opposites which seem apparent between an illusory tale and the very real-seeming situations, our minds are forced to make a choice between the illusion as it is performed and reality as we know it to be. The necessity of choosing is what gives the play any power it has. Unconsciously, intuitively perhaps, we do not want to make this choice. We want to be involved in the illusion. This is the romantic faculty of the mind. We want to be suspended in disbelief. But consciously, rationally, no doubt, we are forced to choose between the real and the illusory. In fact, it is just this critical, ironical faculty of our minds that lets us surrender to the illusion in the
first place. It knows that no matter how realistic or frightening
the illusion may become, it is still only an illusion. The choice
the rational faculty of the mind makes, if the play is bad, is satire
of romance, of illusion, because the play has not had the power to
suspend our disbelief. In that case we become ironists—ironical
critics laughing at our desire for illusion.

If the artist hopes to capture complex minds he must create an
illusion in which the most complex paradoxes reign. His work must
be a consciously controlled attempt to reflect life's paradoxicalness
itself; that is, the greatest mystery of life, which is its ambiguity.
If the work does this, it will involve the reader emotionally as well.
It will involve him emotionally, because if he becomes involved
intellectually in judging illusions, he will have to work himself out
of this mysterious substance to the degree that he is trapped in it.
He will be involved emotionally, in other words, to the degree that
he is in illusion; and to the degree that he is bothered by illusion
and is anxious to become grounded in reality once more, he will be
emotional. And to James to involve the reader emotionally, to "bewilder"
him, is to win more than half the artistic battle.

In this sense, art reflects man's confusion about the difference
between reality and illusion. It plays upon his inclination to think
he knows, at each moment, what is real and what is illusory and can
distinguish between each to the credit of his sanity. Yet it involves
him in an illusion which will cause him to be temporarily confused about
this distinction. If the illusion is responsibly presented, it will
be one which the reader can unravel and which will lead him to a more meaningful illusion beyond it (that is, to a new "transcendant" reality, beyond mere illusory entertainment or literal deception). To the extent that it does this—that it draws him through illusion and out of it again and stands him on his feet again in apparent "reality," it leads him out of paradox; that is, it forces him to realize that desire for illusion at the same time one really desires reality is itself paradoxical.

If the work of art deserts him in a state of paradox, in a state of ambiguity, in a state of confusion about what illusion and reality are (in the particular case); if, that is, it does not stand him on his feet, even if only temporarily, in a new kind of transcendent illusion, the work is itself, finally, paradoxical, and therefore ambiguous. ⁹

A work of art convinces a reader that either reality is ambiguous and paradoxical and contradictory, or that he is. Art thus accepts paradox and demands an illusion which cannot be dissolved. Yet if the paradoxical illusion is responsibly presented; that is, if it is distinguished by a classical propensity for demanding and making distinctions, it will be one which can be dissipated—if only for the purpose of providing temporary respite from paradox and illusion,

⁹A case in point is Melville's, The Confidence Man, in no sense ambiguous in itself. Absolutely misanthropic in that it puts out of mind the light of hope for all man, and thus is internally consistent, it is still paradoxical in that the artist's purpose in revealing this truth to man, that there is no truth in the species, seems contradictory. It begs pity.
generally.

That is, art, besides reflecting life which seems to be illusory, to be paradoxical, provides man with the opportunity of making distinctions, and, classically, presumes that he can. To provide this opportunity for choice is to supply the quality which gives the work artistic "transcendence" beyond mere entertainment or literal imitation. But to provide it does not presume that man can get entirely beyond illusion, altogether, if only because, in itself, art can never divorce itself from the necessity of providing illusion; that is, of providing something other than apparent reality.

The final assumption, of course, is that reality (whatever it is) is part-and-parcel of one's involvement in the act of realizing life, the act of choosing, of making distinctions, of judging between one arbitrary illusion and another, the act of appreciation. It is not an absolute escape from illusion altogether. This point will be examined more closely in Chapters II and III, but, briefly, involvement in making distinctions is presumed to be more central than not making them. "Tell me of what an artist is," James says—trying to define the moral function of art—"and I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his "moral" reference."10 Or as he says more explicitly. "The moral sense of a work of art [is] the amount of felt life concerned in producing it."11

10 James, The Art of the Novel, op. cit., p. 51.
11 Ibid., p. 49.
"The affair of the painter is not the immediate, it is the reflected field of life, the realm not of application, but of appreciation [italics mine]—a truth that makes our measure of effect altogether different."\(^{12}\)

"Art is essentially selection, and it is selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive."\(^{13}\)

James's final stance is that of the discriminating artist, not that of the purely imitative one. "Humanity is what men have in common with each other, not what they have in distinction."\(^{14}\) "The essence of morality is to survey the whole field."\(^{15}\)

Yet James has been criticized, and he criticized himself for not having maintained artistic balance; he condemns himself for being too much of a literalist, of dealing too much in the "temporal," of not capturing the "essences," the "depths." He implies that in his belief that the novel is an "immense and exquisite correspondence with life,"\(^{16}\) he has emphasized the word "correspondence" and has slighted the word "immense"; in other words, that he has been too imitative, rather than "consolingly," "transcendent,"\(^{17}\) he implies that in his desire for the novel to be "history" (since history, he

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 57
\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 20
\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 77
\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 25
\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 23
\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 151.
says, "is also a representation of life"), and in his avowal that its only obligation is that it be "interesting," he has not lived up to his ethical belief that the "essence of morality is to survey the whole field.

Furthermore, he implies that in his concern to be a story-teller and "capture the color of life," and in his anxiousness not to involve himself in his novel by "moralizing" or by authorial intrusions of any sort—philosophically or otherwise—he has been almost too diligent and has sacrificed philosophy and morality altogether.

Finally, he implies that by keeping so religiously uninvolved in his illusion, in order not to shatter or overly influence it, and by being so supremely (almost too-ronically) in control of his medium, he has failed to reflect in himself that most general and classical of human qualities upon which he himself says all art and drama depend: that is, the "precious human liability to fall into traps and be bewildered."  

The answer to the question of whether or not James thinks of himself as merely a historian or merely a story teller is relevant to what G. Mattheissen calls the "specific gravity" in James's work—the quality that gives it balance, which makes it more than a literal

---

18 Ibid., p. 6
19 Ibid., p. 11.
20 Ibid., p. 27.
21 Ibid., p. 56.
transcription of life, more, even, than a "history of fine consciences" (sufficiently "non-literal" though the words "fine consciences," already argue such history to be) . . . . In other words, the quality or "essence" which gives it a "higher reality." But the more general question about James's own personal ambiguity; that is, his apparent refusal to become himself dominated, temporarily, by illusion (but, instead, to remain always ironically aloof from it), at the same time he maintains temporary involvement in illusion to be the most general human condition . . . is relevant to the general human ambiguity regarding reality and illusion—that is, the general human bewilderment about what true morality is, what true aestheticism is, what true irony (meaningful irony) is, what true involvement is.

These distinctions will be examined briefly in the chapter to follow. The purpose of this introduction has been to explore briefly this important distinction between art and raw life and James's own concern with this distinction; but—generally—James's work seems ambiguous because he seems to be an aesthete about good and evil; and in terms of aestheticism his works seem ambiguous because he seems to be a moralist about beauty and ugliness. Instead of being morally introspective (for instance, like Melville or Hawthorne), he is a brooding (that is, morally introspective) esthete. His esthetic concern seems indistinguishable from morality: in him they seem to amount almost to the same thing.

Such confusion might be personally feasible: James, as a person, is under no obligation to be consistent. But as an artist, a classical
artist (which is the only kind he truly admired), he is obligated
to be both entertaining and inclusive; he must provide a meaningful
illusion which is discriminating and causes his readers to be like­
wise discriminating. If, however, he is confused about the moral and
aesthetic implications of his artistic illusions and does not dis­
tinguish at some point between them; if, that is, he is merely writing,
out of confusion, then he loses his readers in a labyrinth of illusion.

It is true, of course, that life itself may be an undecipherable
labyrinth of illusion which cannot be fathomed. James himself implies
this:

... The reason is of course that life has no direct
sense whatever for the subject and is capable, luckily
for us, of nothing but splendid waste. Hence the
opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which
rescues, which saves, and hoards and "banks," investing
and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wondrous use­
ful "works" and thus making up for us, desperate spend­
thrifts that we all naturally are, the most princely
of incomes. It is the subtle secrets of that system,
however, that are meanwhile the charming study, with
an endless attraction, above all, in the question--
endlessly baffling indeed--of the method at the heart
of the madness. ... 22

In this sense, to portray that confusion, as it appears, is not
necessarily artistic falsification; it is merely literal representa­
tion.

It is also true that life, portrayed in an unalloyed state of
confusion, could be presented as a very entertaining illusion for
readers not concerned with making distinctions. James himself said
of this kind of writing:

22Ibid., p. 52.
Zola "pulled it off," as we say, supremely, in that he never but once found himself obliged to quit, to our vision, his magnificent treadmill of the pigeonholed and documented—the region we may qualify as that of experience by imitation.\textsuperscript{23}

In this sense, to capture such an illusion is not necessarily artistic falsification, either; it is merely a good story. But if the artist is fulfilling the classical function of art, which is to make illusion meaningful, he will be neither merely a good story-teller, providing an entertaining illusion, nor merely an historian, accurately portraying a literally true fact of existence; his work will be a combination of the two.

He may, as a person, in other words, as a human being, be unconcerned about the consequences of illusion; but as an artist, as a supremely human (not super-human) entity, he must lead his deluded readers, temporarily, out of illusion, by making some kind of distinctions (whether moral, esthetic, ironic, romantic, misanthropic) between life's ambiguous contraries of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, irony and romance, reality and illusion. It is the artist's success or failure in being consistent at this by which he will be judged.

The artist (and James certainly fits this category when properly interpreted) penetrates to the "ideal" through the welter of the "actual" and succeeds—as Irving Babbitt says: "without ceasing to be individual"—in suggesting the universal.\textsuperscript{24} That is (in Coleridge

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 189. \textsuperscript{24}Babbitt, op. cit., p. 17.
definition of the terms, although not necessarily in Coleridge's practice of that definition), he combines the illusory and the real and tries to make (and cause to be made) distinctions between them. He does not concern himself with one to the exclusion of the other.

As James himself concludes:

... The answer may be after all that mysteries here elude us, that general considerations fail or mislead, and that even the fondest of artists need ask no wider range than the logic of the particular case. The particular case, or in other words his relation to a given subject, once the relation is established, forms in itself a little world of exercise and agitation. Let him hold himself perhaps supremely fortunate if he can meet half the questions with which that air alone may swarm...

... A conclusion which seems to fall back, totally, on the "actual," except for the extensions beyond it gained by the artist's relation to the fact, and except for the extensions gained from the "logic of the particular case"—which (it will be discovered) is the propensity of the particular case for anomalous interpretation.

---

25James, op. cit., p. 53.
CHAPTER II

CIRCUMLOCUTION: "THE METHOD AT THE HEART OF THE MADNESS"

In discussing the artist as a character in James's fiction, R. P. Blackmur says that an artist "comes to life only as he ceases to be an artist; he comes to life, in a word, only when he fails as an artist; and he fails, in a word, only when the conditions of life overcome him at the expense of his art."¹

Blackmur here is discussing James's success, or lack of success, at making fictional artists in his stories appear to be real human beings. This is different, incidentally, from the artist's problem of making ordinary human beings appear to be real, because of the artist's propensity, when dealing with fictional artists, of confusing himself with his creations and thus shattering his illusion—usually by making his fictional artist appear to be overly perceptive, to seem too real, and, therefore, unbelievable as illusions.

This is also different from the problem of the artist who quite consciously intrudes into his illusion, as himself, prodding his illusion along with chummy pats here and there—an obvious reflection on the reader's credulous desire for illusion, which James was seldom guilty of perpetrating.

The second problem: that of making ordinary people appear to

be real in fiction—Jaiaes solved by never dealing too literally with "The Real Thing." In his story by that name, he catalogues the problem of a painter who is unable to use a down-on-their luck "real" lady and "real" gentleman as models for a portrait he is doing of a "typical lady and gentleman," because they are too real; that is, they permit him no latitude for invention. The "real thing"—which they obviously are—intrudes too pressingly upon the transcendent illusory thing he wants to create beyond their factual literalness. To solve his problem he goes out into the street and brings in a lower-class man and woman who can be dressed up to appear like a lady and gentleman and thus provide him free rein for invention.2

This story is relevant to the artistic problem of the artist who is trying to make a fictional artist appear real; because such an artist, also, if he intrudes too obviously upon his illusion by using himself as a model, intrudes in just the way the real lady and gentleman do in "The Real Thing."

Actually, James seldom intrudes in this way because, if anything, he is too self-effacing, too unwilling to reveal himself in any way at all and thus draw to himself the penetrating glances of people

2The fact that the artist in "The Real Thing" cannot (as Walter Clark points out in a recent essay in Chrysalis ["The Writer and the Professor," II(Spring, 1962), p. 60-107]) be taken seriously as an artist is irrelevant to the general artistic problem of dealing with reality and illusion. The artist in James's story is, quite obviously, a romantic, and he over-emphasized the abstract possibilities of life at the expense of the concrete; but he could still, in what James calls the "crystalline" manner (refer to discussion of this topic in Chapter III) portray a real fact of existence and, yet, himself remain in illusion about it.
who search out flaws in artists and assume even self-effacement to be one of them. Self-effacement is actually James’s greatest strength—and his cleverest ruse.\(^3\)

James never lets his feet show behind those of his fictional artist, because when he portrays an artist, the artist is portrayed as an object of irony, and is sure to reveal his own feet of clay in time. Unlike Christopher Newman, James’s business man in *The American*, who is too penetrative to be an ordinary business man, yet not penetrative enough, either, to be James, and therefore is not a literal transcription of life, but an artist’s invention—James’s artists in his stories are more penetrating than ordinary artists, but also not as penetrating as James, himself, and therefore cannot be taken as a literal transcription of Henry James. They are something less—in the sense that he is ironically removed from them, but they are something more, too, in the sense that they are also

\(^3\)A ruse, incidentally, less successfully achieved by Walter Clark in the essay just referred to. Clark—no less self-effacing, personally, than James—tries, in this very "Jamesian" essay, for the same kind of effect—(an effect he fails to achieve, fortunately, in his book *The City of Trembling Leaves*, which is about a young artist trapped, charmingly and naively in young illusions, who finally, like James, comes to accept "the logic of the particular case")—except that Clark, in this essay, is self-effacing for a very different reason: he doesn’t want—since they are obviously very painful to him—his "critical shoes" to show. The virtue of this essay—other than the penetrating light it throws on James—is that it finally publicly reveals how well shod Clark is in this respect—and now perhaps he can return to fiction like *The Track of the Cat* (his best work), where he hides "artistic feet" and "critical shoes" together, and lets only his face show through.
artistic creations.

And, ironically, these artists achieve both stances by being slightly dense. In fact, James solves most of his problems of reality and illusion, in fiction, by making not only his artists, but also each of his characters—even the most penetrating ones—appear to be slightly dense. He does this at the risk of appearing—temporarily—to be slightly dense himself. He does this because, ironically, the reader demands that he be.4

But this facet of the Jamesian technique will be discussed later. What is pertinent now is that Blackmur's declaration, that a fictional artist comes to life only when the conditions of life overcome him at the expense of his art, is even more interesting when applied to the artist in general. In this sense, it seems relevant to James's problem.

Applied to James, it would imply that the conditions of true life, from which James (for many, anyway) seemed to be too far distant, did not often enough overcome his ironic, esthetic sense (the self-effacing James). It would imply that if James himself (disregarding, altogether, James's fictional artists) had been less in control of his illusion, less ironic, he would have been more human, and that

---

4"Therefore it is that the wary reader for the most part warns the novelist against making his characters too interpretative of the muddle of fate, or in other words too divinely, too priggishly clever. 'Give us plenty of bewilderment,' this monitor seems to say, 'so long as there is plenty of slashing out in bewilderment too. But don't we beseech you, give us too much intelligence; for intelligence--well, endangers; endangers not perhaps the slasher himself, but the very slashing, the subject matter of any self-respecting story. . . .""

(The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 56)
the world he portrays would be more human, too, and, therefore, more realistic.

The implication, stated differently, is that the reality James tried to capture seems too stratified; it does not seem truly representative, as classical art demands it be. By limiting his scope to highly critical consciousnesses—or, at least, to people who are highly developed, critically and esthetically—James's work seems unrealistic.  

Blackmur also says that if the artist "sees," his vision disappears in his work, which is the "Country of the Blue"—the "Country of the Blue" being James's term for artistic excellence—or as he calls it, in referring to Flaubert's Madame Bovary—"classical dignity."  

Pursuing the line of "implication" (for whatever distance it provides in developing a general argument), and once more applying Blackmur's quotes, not to James's artists, but to James himself—this last declaration of Blackmur's implies, indirectly, that James as a person (as an artistic person—taking the "classical stance") may, 

---

5This is no different, again, from saying that the works of Frank Norris or Theodore Dreiser, by limiting their scope to consciousnesses less critical—or, at least, to people vastly underdeveloped esthetically or morally, also seem unrealistic, because their work, while implying reality, captures only half of it, since life is made up of both extremes.

6One of the few works of Flaubert's with which James had small quarrel.
himself, reach the "Country of the Blue," but that his works may not—
the broader implication being that art is a discipline which possibly
saves James from himself, but only at the expense of his keeping his
human propensities out of his writing (those propensities by which
the world might overcome him at the expense of his art and thus, by
Blackmur's criteria, make him "come to life"—thereby satisfying
ordinary reader's desire for more "realistic" art).

To be more general, still, this is like saying that a mystic
(with whose discipline James is linked less often than he should be,
since his approach to mystery is nearer this plane of reference
than is generally realized)\(^7\) may once have had a vision of ultimate
reality ("classical dignity" in James's terms), but be unwilling or
unable, to translate it adequately in terms of words or images (which,
of course, are only symbolical approximations of reality), for fear
that if he does translate it, it will be a compromise at the expense
of his personal solvency—the general implication here being that both
the work of art and the artist cannot contain the experience or
knowledge concurrently, that one or the other must be sacrificed.

And this elaborate presupposition is all relevant, because James
does appear to refuse to immerse himself, for whatever greater knowledge
may be found there,\(^8\) in what Conrad has called "the destructive

\(^7\)James as a "mystic"—in method—not in vision, is discussed
briefly in the last section of this thesis.

\(^8\)And what may be found there—-as Kurtz discovered—could be only
"the horror, the horror."
element." Instead, he appears to hold back and create, in lieu, a different kind of reality which seems to contain elements even more compactly complex than life, and paradoxes and ironies, if not more profound, then more ingenious.

As Joseph Warren Beach quotes Herbert Read: "James gives a law to life and submits it to a control more severe than the discipline [which life] herself imposes." In this respect he seems to be a too-discriminatory fabulist; he demands too much.

In reply to just this sort of judgment James himself once wrote (in the preface to "The Lesson of the Master): What does this criticism imply, "but that we have been, nationally, so to speak, graced with no instance of recorded sensibility fine enough to react against these things [self-deception, vulgarity, hypocrisy]. What one would, accordingly fain to do," James says, is "to create the record, in default of any other enjoyment of it; to imagine, in a word, the honourable, the producible core. [italics mine]

And this is what he has done. As F. R. Leavis puts it, James has created a world in which the most highly developed faculties of discrimination could act. "He creates an ideal, civilized sensibility, a humanity capable of communicating the finest shades of inflection

---

9 The "destructive element" concept is from Conrad's Lord Jim.

10 For all its intensity and inter-windings, a "watch-spring" kind of reality.

and implication." He scorned the average, the representational, statistical kind of reality which was the concern of many of his contemporaries.

In this regard, Blackmur, again, says:

James had in his style and perhaps in his life which it reflected an idiosyncrasy so powerful, so overweening, that to many it seemed a stultifying vice, or at least an inexcusable heresy. . . He enjoyed an excess of intelligence and he suffered, both in life and in art, from an excessive effort to communicate it, to represent it in all its fulness. His style grew elaborate in the degree that he rendered shades and refinements of meaning and feelings not usually rendered at all. . . His intention and all his labor was to represent dramatically intelligence at its most difficult, its most lucid, its most beautiful point. This is the sum of his idiosyncrasy.

Was James wrong to do this? And if so, or if not, what does it mean in terms of criticising him?

It means that if he did somehow jack up reality, putting it on a higher plane than that from which it is ordinarily approached, and demanded that the reader develop his sensibility to the point where he could enjoy art at this loftier level, then in order to criticise him, the reader must find a way to judge him on his own plane. As James himself says of Maupassant: "What he leaves out has not claim to get itself considered, till after we have done

---

12 F. R. Leavis, as quoted by J. W. Beach, The Question of Henry James, op. cit., xliii.

justice to what he takes in." 14

But here is the rub, for James has declared in one of his stories, "The Figure in the Carpet," that his secret, the thing which he was most trying to communicate, will never be fathomed. In this puzzle story, the solving of which has been the concern of many of James's critics, James's master novelist, Vereker (whose critics miss the thing he has written his books "most for"), says

Isn't there for every writer a particular thing of that sort, the thing that most makes him apply himself, the thing without the effort to achieve which he wouldn't write at all; the very passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely? . . . There's an idea in my work without which I wouldn't give a straw for the whole job. It's the finest, fullest intention of the whole lot, and the application of it has been, I think, a triumph of patience and ingenuity. . . . It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps someday constitute for the uninitiated a complete reproduction of it, . . . so it is naturally the thing for the critic to look for. . . . It strikes me . . . even as the thing for the critic to find.

This trick, or "exquisite theme," as Vereker calls it, we can be sure, is the same thing as James's "Figure in the Carpet," the "Turn of the Screw," the "Beast in the Jungle." This is the thing about James's works which mystifies readers. And when put into practice James's trick is the cause of what critics consider to be the ambiguity and moral confusion of his later works.

This "Figure in the Carpet" has been variously defined: Vereker

14 The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 202
warns his critics that it is not a kind of esoteric message; and he will not limit it by saying it is something in the style or something in the thought—-an element of form or an element of feeling; but he does say: "What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life."

Actually, this secret of James is so simple that the reader would feel cheated, if James told him what it was, simply. Conrad most certainly knew what the secret was, for he, too, employed it in all of his works; although, as James might have said: "Conrad does not reveal it in the style, but he captures it in the style." The "figure in the carpet" is simply the fact that reality seems to be paradoxical; that, therefore, in order to capture reality, art must likewise seem to be paradoxical. Or, to put it another way: every artist sets out to define reality as he sees it, and all artists have as their goal the development of sensibility; every artist assumes from the beginning that his reader is temporarily innocent of his particular view of truth, or reality—or, otherwise, why would he try to communicate it?

But to communicate it is to make the innocent aware; it is to corrupt him, to destroy his innocence. This is the paradox of life and of art, and it is Henry James's only theme. The world is truly a vicious round in which the innocent seek the knowledge of the non-innocent, and then, when (or if) they are corrupted (that is, if they do not retreat from this knowledge in time), then feed on
the unawareness of the innocent. This is the truth which James communicates; but it does not explain the means by which he himself manages to escape this vicious circle; for James—like no other writer other than Joseph Conrad—insists upon himself remaining innocent—upon himself being neither corrupt, nor a corrupter, upon remaining, that is, uninvolved.

The loophole by which James apparently thinks he escapes this vicious circle is his trick; his technique of circumlocution being the first key. James's truth that truth is paradoxical and illusory is so simple that it had to be circumlocuted to seem like any truth at all.

A writer like James must sometimes circumlocute the truth he is trying to portray just so that, in prose, it will not seem a cliche which the reader will think he already knows. The writer must sometimes recast an old truth in a new mold, so that what seems old will evoke the original response which the truth would evoke in any guise, if the guise itself were not so often false and unoriginal. The writer must proceed by indirection.

A work of James's which illustrates the necessity of this technique more than others is the story, "The Beast in the Jungle," a work which depends entirely upon circumlocution and indirection to communicate a simple idea which James might have revealed in a few lines, if he had really thought the idea could be so easily revealed.

The story is of a man, John Marcher (the name evokes his
action), who spends all of his lifetime waiting expectantly for something vitally remarkable to happen to him, sure, at every moment, that something eventually will, since he has always sensed that he is being "kept" for a fate "rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible." He involves in his expectant waiting a woman-friend, May Bartram, who, unbeknownst to him, loves him, and who also lives for his strange fate to resolve itself.

As it turns out, the remarkable thing that happens to John Marcher, finally, is the fact that nothing does—except for his remarkable involvement in expectation. He does not even have the realization (in time for him to do anything about it, anyway) that his remarkable fate might have been to fall in love with expectantly waiting, May Bartram. For she, meanwhile, has died, after realizing, without telling Marcher so, that the strange fate that is to be his is never to shatter, in time, the remarkable paradox of his ambiguous expectation.

If James had revealed the idea of this story in one line, the reader would have thought it too simple. Even as it is, his tendency is to pause, and say: "But, of course!" Or: "But that's nothing remarkable!" And he tends to look askance and wonder if he hasn't been made a fool of. To which James would have no recourse, but to retort, sadly, like T. S. Eliot's Prufrock: "That is not what I meant at all; that is not it at all . . ."

Because such a dreary response to paradox is not what James meant!
The paradoxical, "trick" idea of the story is secondary to what James calls "the method at the heart of the madness"—the method at the heart of the madness being the "organ of life," which James manages to reflect by being able to embody a paradoxical idea in its own ambiguous substance, so much so that when the truth of the story is finally revealed for what it is, the reader is surprised, not by the idea of paradox, which is not that remarkable, but by his substantiated involvement in paradox. The reader and Marcher thread their way through James's labyrinth together, arriving, after a duel predicament and after a duel kind of expectation at almost a duel kind of realization—the realization that (despite anticipation) nothing remarkable has happened, except a remarkable involvement in anticipation.

James has merely presented a vehicle, a paradoxical labyrinth for a mind to enter and depart from. What we have here is the mystery-detective story broadened and deepened to its fullest capacity, and then something besides.

Obviously what James tried to do (but not do obviously) was to reawaken dulled and corrupted sensibilities to fresh responses again. That a man who has been condemned for his cold and overly-controlled approach to life should have spent his lifetime proving the religious maxim that "lest you become as a child again, you will in no-wise re-enter heaven," is a paradox in itself. James plays the part of an innocent child, leading the reader through mysterious corridors and seemingly endless labyrinths, all for the
apparently naive purpose of springing forth suddenly with a truth which seems new only because it is old. There is always the response afterwards of: "But I already knew that!" Yet James will take this risk in order to open, or revitalize, deadened pores of perception. And he does it by the method of conscious indirection which gives an effect of new reality.

Unconsciously indirect writing, on the other hand—which we see in many of James's imitators—is often false and unoriginal because it does not peel away the issues which would permit the reader to face truth consciously; or, at least, to face the fact that he cannot know the truth. Indirection, like conscious ambiguity (as James always employs it), should not be born of confusion. Ford Madox Ford, who bases his claim for James's greatness on James's gift as an historian, seems to display such confusion (about James's attitude towards circumlocution, if not about the use of the technique itself), when he says of James:

I fancy that his mannerisms, his involution, whether in speech or in writing were due to a settled conviction that [he would never] find anyone who would not need talking down to. The desire of the artist . . . is that his words and his scenes shall 'suggest' far more than they actually express or project.15

Ford adds: "So he talked down to us . . . He was aiming at explicitness, never obscurities, as if he were talking to children."

This statement, though very close, is still far off: it seems to reveal unawareness of James's very conscious technique; for, if anything, James expected far more of his reader, not less. James didn't write down. Ford seems not to realize that the truth James was illustrating is really quite simple, but it could not be communicated simply; and James was not confused about it. To express it James had to be indirect and, apparently obtuse, just because it was so simple. James didn't doubt the discerning reader's ability to understand his truth, only the reader's willingness to admit, from the beginning, that he has temporarily forgotten it, and is in need of being reminded of what it is again.

By adopting the method of conscious indirection Henry James, as a philosopher, is saying that truth is illusory; or, as T. S. Eliot has Prufrock say it: "It is a matter of decision and revision." A mind that refuses to accept surface meanings will always try to overturn the upper surface to see what lies beneath. A mind which embraces paradox insists that there is no surface which will defy this turning. It insists that every first impression is an illusion. The world for such a mind is like two mirrors facing each other which reflect one another endlessly, except that the mind does not immediately see the entire succession of images. It does not see (as the mystic, for instance, maintains that he sees) how the infinite reflections of fact and symbol resolve themselves into a harmonious whole, an order that has meaning because everything in that order is equally significant. The mind which embraces paradox
moves from one image to another, examines it and then goes on to the
next. Such a pursuit is paradoxical in itself, since it searches
for meaning with the presumption that meanings can never be found.
It resigns to a paradoxical approach to life, and it decides that
this image-breaking (or symbol-dissolving, since that is what images
are: symbols of a manifestly incomprehensible reality) is the only
meaningful pursuit there is.

This, essentially, is the kind of reality James mirrors (but
not which he necessarily becomes involved in)—conscious indirection
and ambiguity being his particular way of translating it into litera-
ture.

The danger of this approach, of course, is that ambiguity and
paradox are the language of irony, and irony-for-its-own-sake can
be self-consuming and destructive of any meaning which it ostensibly
intends to convey. It can end up taking nothing seriously, not even
irony. It can become, in other words, what Irving Babbitt (in his
book Rousseau and Romanticism) has called "a pilgrimage in a void."

Previously, Babbitt was quoted as saying that one of the most
delicate tasks is to determine whether a paradox occupies a position
more or less central than the convention to which it is opposed... 16

---

16 Ambiguity and paradox are also the language of the mystic,
but he uses them in a quite different manner—as a compromise, a
concession, to the demands of conventional reality; they are
necessary to translate his vision into terms which can be understood.
His vision, he maintains, is beyond either paradox or ambiguity.
... and that a somewhat similar problem is to determine which of two conventions has the greater degree of centrality: for one convention may, as compared to another seem highly paradoxical.

And Schlegel says that romantic irony is identical with paradox.

Babbitt is discussing here the complacency, almost fervor, with which the romantic ironist (the Laforguian ironist, as Babbitt, and Ivor Winters and Leslie Fiedler refer to him) is affirming the inevit-

ability of such an acceptance.

James himself is not a romantic ironist—if only because he takes himself and his art too seriously (The romantic-ironist, by definition, is often morbidly sensitive about himself, but is always ready to mock at his own convictions)—but James's brother, William, did notice the existence of a "void-like" irony-for-its-

own-sake attitude in James's work, when he says that James's characters seem constructed "wholly of prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space."

This is the way the characters in many of James's works do appear to be formed, and it accounts for the almost excessive ambiguity and the passionate curiosity, as well as for the apparent moral confusion, of some of his characters.

Not only the external world seems to be "void-like," in this

---

17 Babbitt, op. cit.

way, but also the people do, the characters themselves do, every-
thing does. As Andre Gide said: "James's characters never live
except in relation to each other. And Gide stabs vitally close to
what may be James's personal secret when he said that James "had no
mystery in him, no secret, no 'Figure in the Carpet' . . . as if he,
himself, had perhaps nothing to confess."20

This appears to be true. It is the paradox of James, the person.
In spite of his intense curiosity, his almost morbid manner of hover-
ing about in the presence of mystery, he finally seems to indicate
that there is no mystery at all in life, unless it is created.
Reality has no substance for him. Reality is an image in the mirror;
it exists only in the minds of people.

Van Wyck Brooks said:

James presented characters merely in the act of
discovering one another [whose] ruling passion
was curiosity. They tried to discover what went
on in one another's mind and remained in the end
as mystified as they were in the beginning . . .
Everyone watched in James's novels, watched him-
self, watched the others, 'nosed about' for re-
lations, sniffs and pried, and the people were
without consistence . . . they spun webs about
themselves, and in fact they were ghosts without
interests, or attributes, without passions,
hearts or vitals; and they drifted about in a
curious limbo as insubstantial as themselves.21

Brooks here, however, does not seem to realize how vulnerable he

19 Ibid., p. 251. 20 Ibid., p. 252.
is in his apparent invulnerability, nor does he seem to want to give James credit for controlled irony. James only portrayed the world as he saw it. His irony is his realization (and the display of that realization in his works) that this avid curiosity, which is so much a part of his characters, is nowhere mirrored more accurately than in the minds of his readers. For it is just this curiosity on the part of the reader that permits the author to draw the reader through the story.

James's drama takes place largely in the minds of his characters, but he makes the reader one of those characters. The characters and the reader are trying to thrust through illusion, and thus seem to be conducting the narrative as they do so. James presents his people almost without editorial comment; the characters and the reader make all the conclusions that are to be made; and the reader cannot be sure what James himself really thinks, until he stands before him at the conclusion of the story. And he sometimes can't tell even then.

James lets the characters in his novels see the abyss that is between what they know and what they don't know, what they learn and what they never learn about one another. The reader's degree of enlightenment (always limited, even at the conclusion) is always just greater than that possessed by the characters in the story.

22James believed that the common denominator of behavior, which makes man most human, is his tendency to fall into traps and be bewildered: 'If I have called the most general state of one's most exposed and assaulted figures the state of bewilderment...it is rather witless to talk of getting rid of that...highlyrecommended...categories of feeling... (Preface to The Princess Casamassima)
James permits the reader then to grasp the immediate significance of the difference between what he knows and what the character doesn't, but never so much that the reader will lose interest. Nothing is explained, hence the drama. This technique literally draws the reader within the story. As R. P. Blackmur says: "The secret of perception in the readers becomes very near the secret of creation in artists."  

None of James's stories so effectively illustrate his technique of indirection and circumlocution and the ambiguous depths through which an interpretive mind must delve in order to fathom the ironies and paradoxes possible with this technique than his story, "The Turn of the Screw."

The central problem in interpreting this story—as it is in most of James's stories—is to determine which of the characters is seeing things as "they really are." When the reader has finished the story, he still can't be sure which character sees absolute truth; but if he has been diligent in always overturning the upper surface, he can finally disprove the veracity of at least some of the characters, and thus arrive closer to James's particular truth, and maybe even truth as it is generally seen. The story is particularly treacherous, however; because the reader becomes so involved, finally, if he becomes involved at all, that James's final turn of

---

the screw may very well be at his expense.

For more than anything, "The Turn of the Screw" is a story about assumptions. It is a study of the lengths to which a delving mind will go to interpret--falsely, if it must--conditions and events which are not, literally, as the mind desires them to be. Such a mind starts confusing its own desires for reality. Such a mind begins to misinterpret the "literal" facts. It begins to misrepresent the "particulars" which are, themselves, anomalous.
CHAPTER III

THE ANOMALOUS PARTICULAR CASE

Careless readers of "The Turn of the Screw" assume that this is a story about a governess's valiant attempts to keep two apparently innocent children from the corrupting influence of two malevolent ghosts. More careful readers (viz. Edmund Wilson) have corrected this initial assumption, and have discovered that the story is actually an ambiguous tale which can be read in contrary ways. One way, as just indicated, is to assume the innocence of the guardian, to discover, subsequently, the corruption of the apparently innocent children.

The other interpretation, more accurate, is to reverse this view and recognize the governess as the corrupting influence. The latter approach, which takes into consideration the story's ambiguity, is certainly much closer to the facts of the story; but this interpretation, if it rests only at general ambiguity (unconscious ambiguity), as Edward Wilson's reading seems to do, is also misleading, because it does not give James's full credit for conscious irony, for whatever distance is implied by such irony; and because it implies that there is no transcendent meaning to the ambiguous presentation. Unconscious ambiguity leaves one in illusion, instead of bringing one, temporarily, out of illusion; and it does not cause one to realize that involvement in illusion is sometimes the only reality there is.

Involvement in illusion, the attempt to interpret it, can create
a new kind of reality, but it can also create illusion, too. No illusion develops, unless the mind interprets particulars mysteriously, unless it extends to cold, hard actuality, some mystical quality. Reality, James would say, is not just the fact or the object, or even the "psychological picture" by which one gives the fact visual embodiment; reality is also a person's involvement or lack of involvement with the fact. If he does not become involved, he is mysterious in his lack of involvement.

That is, reality is also the personal extensions of the cold, hard, "crystalline" detail—the generalities a person makes or does not make about them. This act of discrimination, or failure to discriminate, is what constitutes reality. This is the "real thing," the "beast in the jungle," "the jolly corner," the "figure in the carpet," the "turn of the screw," the holy or unholy labyrinth.

What delusion consists of, James implies, is a person's refusal to recognize the part played by his involvement or lack of involvement in illusion—the influence it has on his personal make-up, his personal "picture." It is just the refusal of this recognition, James would say, which permits a person (like the governess in "The Turn of the Screw," for instance) to become so involved in literary illusion, in the first place.\(^1\) He can fool himself into thinking he is getting experience, the facts, but is not, thereby, personally affected by them. He can have his cake and eat it, too; or, as the

\(^1\)The governess, of course, does not herself become involved in literary illusion, but in the illusions which come from misrepresenting concrete "particulars."
case may be, he can take his poison and yet not take it, either. He can live vicariously, share doubtful knowledge or overwhelming experience, and yet fool himself into thinking he is not really a part of it. He can presume to innocence or ignorance, at the same time that he is losing it. He can feel insulated and inviolable, because of the multitudinous screens of illusion and delusion which an ingenious artist like James raises between him and the cold fact. And what protects the reader, James would say—the innocence which permits him to play this diabolical game and yet, despite involvement, maintain his moral and intellectual solvency, is his naive belief that the fictional fact is not real—when, James would insist, it is as real or more real than life itself, which has no meaning at all until it is strained through a person's consciousness. He says, in other words, that this relationship to the fact or illusion is reality. "Tell me of what the artist or reader or character is conscious," James says, "and I will tell you what he is." He might as well have said: "Tell me what he is, and I will tell you what he sees."

If the careful reader sticks close to the text of "The Turn of the Screw" (and this is, except for the rebounding critical opinion, all he has to go on, except for one or two illuminating comments about the story by James), he will see that this particular illusion is ambiguous, not because the reader cannot determine who is genuine—the children or the governess. (There is actually nothing ambiguous

---

2 These comments to be brought forth later.
about James's attitude towards her.) Evidence is readily available of how she perverts truth for her own motives (and they may, as Edmund Wilson indicates, be Freudian motives). The apparent contradiction in the story is that this "reporter," who distorts reality, is also, as James says, "the authority." The governess (she who is the one most in illusion) is also the "governor" of the "literary" illusion. She holds "crystaline" in her consciousness "her record of so many anomalies and obscurities" in the life around her. That is, she perfectly and impartially reflects all of the facts to the reader; but in her involvement with the facts, her explanation of the facts, she tends to misrepresent each of them.

Therefore, the reader himself must carefully delve beneath her misrepresentations to unearth the truth which exists, despite her misrepresentation, within the "crystaline" view. As James says, we need not accept the governess's explanation of the anomalies, for that is "a different matter."

The final interpretation is left to the reader's discretion—and this is fortunate or unfortunate, according to the reader's temperament—and potentially ironical, too, in the end, because it can lead the reader into the same illusions the governess faces, and also

---

3 The governess, in other words, imitates the facts perfectly, in much the same way, the naturalists, for instance, imitate life; but then she distorts them.

provide him the same opportunities for misrepresentation. But if
the reader is truly discriminating, he can, at least, eliminate the
governess as an accurate reporter of experience.

This last point needs careful documentation, because, despite
the critical attention this work has received, it is a fact not
enough emphasized. Also the clear light the story casts upon man's
general inclination to fall into and out of illusion, because either
he or reality is ambiguous or paradoxical, is also pertinent to the
thesis at hand. Edmund Wilson, for instance, recognizes the am-
biguity of the governess's response to illusion, and he catalogues
his findings; but he concludes that this reading is only one of the
possible interpretations regarding her. He implies that James, not
necessarily the governess, is obscure; and that he is obscure purely
for the sake of romance, for the sake of illusion.

On the contrary, there is nothing obscure about the governess's
assumptions; she quite obviously distorts reality; and although James
is ambiguous, he is not ambiguous purely for the sake of illusion,
for romance. He is purposely ambiguous for the sake of involvement,
for the act of discrimination such a presentation forces in the
consciousness of the critical reader; in other words, for the "higher
reality" such a presentation achieves by not presuming to be real,
yet by presenting at the same time, a real condition of humanity--
that is man's tendency to fall into traps and be bewildered.

* * *
The governess in "The Turn of the Screw" is a woman dreadfully liable to impression, who admits that she is "easily carried away." "I was carried away in London," she tells Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, referring to her infatuation with her male employer—an infatuation which influences many of her acts and decisions. Sent to Bly, an isolated estate, where she finds herself "strangely" at the helm, in "supreme authority," sent there to educate the young niece of her employer, she is immediately suspicious. At once, she suspects that the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, is on her guard about greeting her fully, although actually the governess's first reaction is pleasure at being greeted so volubly. In a typical way she has of presenting the true detail, and then distorting that detail, she says: "I perceived within half an hour that she was so glad . . . as to be positively on her guard against showing it too much. I wondered even then . . . why she would wish not to show it, and that, with reflection, with suspicion, might of course have made me uneasy."5

This quote shows how James gives the reader a "crystalline" view of events at Bly by working through the mind of a person whom the reader, eventually, has all the reason to mistrust. One such insight makes her seem reasonable and self-aware, but as such impressions multiply, the sensitivity of the governess becomes suspect. We begin to suspect her of being overly acute.

---

5Quotes from The Turn of the Screw from A Casebook on Henry James's Turn of the Screw, op. cit., which includes a printing of the complete story.
This first "turn of the screw" is particularly ironical, too, because for the reader to be so acute as to begin to suspect the governess of being overly acute is very similar to the governess's beginning to suspect the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, of being the same.

The governess's fears are evaporated when she meets Flora, the niece, who is "beatific" and "angelic," although these adjectives spur the reader into making some more assumptions of his own. One more twist of the screw, now, makes him suspect Flora; another twist, later, will make him suspect, even more, the woman who uses such adjectives.

The governess looks forward to her duty, which is to "watch, teach, form" the child, and she arranges that she should have Flora "as a matter of course at night." She feels that one of her duties is to "contrive to win the child into a sense of knowing" her.

On discovering that little Miles, the nephew of her employer, has "dismissed his school"—an event always open to suspicion because the contents of the letter from the school are never divulged, and, as Mrs. Grose later explains, "no particulars given"—the governess tells Mrs. Grose that Miles "is an injury to the others," and "to meet [her] friend the better," she "offers up on the spot" the sarcastic reply that Miles is an injury to "his innocent mates," an ironic twist at the expense of Miles's schoolmates (an assumption

---

6 In its innocent sense, "to watch, teach, form" is also the duty of the classicist.
that Mrs. Grose appreciates "meeting" another mind as suspicious as her own) that the governess will later use in reference to her own pupils.

The governess "fancies" that Mrs. Grose seeks to avoid her. She involves Mrs. Grose in talk about Miles, and she wonders aloud if he mightn't be a "contaminating" influence. In response to this conjecture, Mrs. Grose laughs "oddly": "Are you afraid he'll corrupt you?" she says, a question which gives the governess "an apprehension of ridicule."

Her "apprehension", of course, could be correct, but she does not try to find out on what grounds it is correct; that is, whether or not the "ridicule" is justified.

The following day the governess enquires about the former governess, discovers that she was pretty, and says: "He seems to like us young and pretty"—referring, probably, to her employer, but, possibly, to Miles. Mrs. Grose replies: "Oh, he did," a use of the past tense which is glossed over by Mrs. Grose, and which breeds the first suspicion in the governess's mind that there was possibly, at one time, another male or female at Bly.

Miles comes down to Bly, already under "an interdict," as the governess phrases it, and, like Flora, he is all innocence with a "fragrance of purity," "divine," "incredibly beautiful." She decides to do nothing at present about the school letter concerning his
"dismissal," and, when she tells Mrs. Grose of this decision, she immediately assumes that Mrs. Grose's flicking of her apron and her opening comment: "Miss, if I may use the freedom . . ." are an overture to kissing her, which she permits—feeling then that she and Mrs. Grose are at one. Actually Mrs. Grose's flicking of her apron could be an overture to giving a hesitant reprimand or merely refusing to become involved in the Governess's assumptions.

* * *

To digress a moment: here—in just the "flicking of an apron" by a housekeeper, an action which is construed by another person as an overture to "oneness," as the forming of a "pact" of sorts, we have a "crystalline, anomalous, particular case," which as James would say is "adorably pictoral." The action is simple enough, yet it is so simple that various interpretations can be put upon it.

To James's unique consciousness, "particulars"—physical, psychological, objective, subjective, ruminative entities—are all "adorably pictoral," since they can be strained through the picture-receiving consciousness's of his "reporters," and can even be distorted by them in their own minds. But in themselves the

---

7 The actual word is "dismissed": "he has dismissed his school"—which leaves it open to two interpretations: either Miles did the "dismissing" or he was "dismissed." We can't know which.

8 James, "The Art of Fiction," The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 23.
"particulars" are anomalous in their ambiguity; they perversely deny, in themselves, to be anything more than "adorably pictoral." If they are misleading, the misrepresentation reflects only the misleading minds of those who interpret them. The particulars themselves are all ambiguous anomalies.

According to this logic, even a human being, a Jamesian "reporter," can be a "crystalline, anomalous, particular case." It is possible for the Jamesian reporter to hold "crystalline" in his consciousness "the record of the many anomalies and obscurities of life around him"; he can, in other words, act as a "common denominator" of experience and mirror exactly what he sees, and yet still reflect back associations which are inaccurate, simply because of the anomaly of the particular case; that is, the propensity for ambiguous interpretation always inherent in every fact—whether the fact be a psychological "picture," emanating from a physical object (the way a woman stands thus and gracefully lays her gloves upon a table), whether it is a person, or whether it is a concrete object.

For James the particular case is always the general case, too; it is at every moment the microcosm and the macrocosm; it is, at every moment, like a Chinese puzzle, a set of interfitting Japanese tables, a combination of reflecting mirrors—all of which could be infinite in their potential combinations and interworkings, if the artist could (or wanted to) make them so. But this magical power of the particular case is temporarily shattered when a "reporter's
consciousness begins working on it.  

The "reporter's" consciousness, in other words, reacts innately to the remarkable ambiguity of the particular case by either culling from it meanings which are, in some cases, absolutely unique (unique, that is, in being a "common denominator" of experience); or, in other cases by taking from it meanings which are absolutely peculiar (peculiar, that is, in not being any longer a "common denominator" of experience. Or else the "reporter's" consciousness robs the particular of any extensions beyond itself at all, and remains flatly imitative.

Thus, it is not the experience of misrepresenting or magnifying or underestimating a fact which is uncommon (the general condition of humanity, James says, is to "fall into traps and be bewildered). It is the "reporter's" reaction to that very common experience of becoming involved with and shattering the ambiguity of the anomalous particular case which is potentially explosive. By temporarily

---

9 The classicist—who insists upon refracting some meaning from particulars, if only the act of creating meaning from them, would look upon the temporary shattering as good and necessary, in order to gain some higher meaning. The story teller, the romantic, would also look upon it as fortunate and necessary, in order, as James says of romance, to "cut the string" on the "real" properties of the particular case. The historian, who insists upon merely reflecting, imitating particulars, and insists upon letting the particulars speak entirely for themselves, would call this temporary shattering of "reality," and the subsequent "romanticizing" of the fact, bad.

10 One can't help associating the "particular case," in this sense, with the temporarily "shattered" atom, and man's reaction to that act.
shattering its inherent ambiguity, the reader makes it temporarily something unique for himself (which is all a classicist would ask); but if, in the process of reacting to his unique experience, the "reporter" makes the case so supremely peculiar to himself that it no longer shares bed-or-board with general experience, then it is no longer humanly relevant, and it is not only paradoxical, but destructive of any meaning which it ostensibly seeks to convey.

If this discussion seems to be irrelevant to any pursuit except the classical (which primarily maintains an interest in meaning), it is very relevant to that pursuit; because the unique attitude of the classicist is that he must innately suspect (though may use) a peculiar, an eccentric experience. "Humanity," he says (as before quoted), "is what men have in common with each other, and not what they have in distinction." "Art is selection, and it is selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive." "The essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field."

This demand on the particular case to remain "crystalline" (that is, to reflect accurately the "anomalies and obscurities of life"), yet be, at the same time, a unique reflection of life—whether the particular case is an objective fact, or a "picture" of a person

---

11 This discussion, though admittedly very abstract, at this point in the thesis, is pertinent not only to the classical stance, but to the "mystic" stance as well, which will be discussed briefly, as it applies to James, in the last section of the thesis.
looking at an objective fact\textsuperscript{12} this demand tends, because of the various interpretations of it which are possible, to extend life's reflections, life's "pictures" indefinitely, so that in James's style (quoting Blackmur's description again --which is itself a reproduction of this plasticity of life in general): "The secret of perception in the reader comes very near the secret of creation in the artist."

This is probably why James refers to the novel as "history": "As the picture is reality," he says, "so the novel is history"\textsuperscript{13} an apparent confusion of terms which makes us want to ask of James: "if the novel is history, then what is history?--until we realize that, to James, history undoubtably resembles fiction, because it more visibly, more "pictorially," partakes of the general human condition--which is the liability to fall into traps and be bewildered." History adheres to the particulars; it doesn't usually presume to take in the whole picture at once but plods along, apparently fully occupied, at each moment, in the mystique of each

\textsuperscript{12} The governess in "The Turn of the Screw"--she who "governs" the illusions in this story--is all three: an objective fact, a "crystalline consciousness," and also a "picture" (James's illusion) of someone looking at objective facts; and, therefore, is herself an "anomalous particular case."

\textsuperscript{13} The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 5.
Such fact-for-fact, "chronicled" history, however, is not art, James would say, until a creative consciousness stands back and views it objectively; and then strains it back into literature through a sensitizing, fact-for-fact, "picturizing" human consciousness (which may or may not be objective)--leaving it, still, the fluid, anomalous, complex thing life appears already to be--yet, in

14In itself, of course, there is nothing indefensible about looking at one thing at a time. The mystic, for instance, who assumes that he gets beyond even irony and paradox (though he must use paradox to translate his vision), always looks at one thing at a time, absorbed totally in the mystery of each. But he expects (unlike the supreme ironist) to find something of absolute value thereby. He professes to having had a realization that everything which exists is always, at every moment, somehow a part of everything else. To the mystic nothing is more significant than anything else, and yet, conversely, nothing is less significant than anything else, either.

This equation is not even, necessarily, an affirmation, but simply a statement of fact. If one desires to examine the idea, it can mean (as Ingmar Bergman develops it in his movie "Through a Glass Darkly") that God is a Spider--and mean, thereby, nothing necessarily derogatory to the spider, or to the concept of God, either, for that matter. The significance of the idea depends upon the peculiar or general way a human being has of looking at a fact. If such a comparison tends to nudge one into a state of madness (as it does the young girl in Bergman's movie), this is possibly because one gives the spider, or the concept of God, more significance, more "presence," more "reality," than one should.

The matter-of-fact anomalous "logic" of this "mystic's" equation is that "nothing is more significant than anything else, yet nothing is less significant than anything else, either. This is a cosmically democratic idea which is not likely to catch on generally--or at least until the human consciousness stops magnifying things ("particulars") out of perspective with one another. It's an idea which James himself, who is hardly democratic, would probably look at askance, had he been interested in "ideas."
the meantime, making a comment on life and involving the reader himself in a conscious or unconscious comment on life, too. That is, discriminating, classical art "humanizes," in the form of fiction, "history" or "life" which has "no direct sense whatever for the subject," and refractions it into the stuff of a greater complexity.

James's view of life was, thus, one of cosmic fluidity, a continuous organic transformation and retransformation, in which the artist played

But as T. S. Eliot said of James's "baffling" escape from this sphere of interest: "James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." James was interested in the means of capturing life most fully, not in the ends. If anything, he doubted his breadth of (though not his passion for) detail. He evidently felt he had never fully explored the full possibilities of "the particular case." He admires Balzac most, for example, for having almost lost himself in a labyrinth of detail (an envy which would seem contrary to his suspicion of the naturalistic writers, like Zola, who do lose themselves, except that James would say that Balzac more fully realized them artistically). James says of Balzac:

... Our passages are mainly short and dark ... we soon come to the end of them—dead walls, dead walls, without resonance, in presence of which the candle goes out and the game stops, and we have only to retrace our steps. Balzac's luxury, as I call it, was in the extraordinary number and length of his radiating and ramifying corridors—the labyrinth in which he finally lost himself ... It is a question, you see, of penetrating into a subject; his corridors always went further and further; which is but another way of expressing his inordinate passion for detail ... (from the Lesson on Balzac)

15 "Conscious or unconscious" according to their temperament and habits of discrimination.
a role, not only of moderator, but of creator. To borrow Leon Edel's phrase: the artist is one "who gives a permanent and enduring shape to a life which is evanescent and perishable." Or, as James himself says in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*:

... life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent value, with which alone it is concerned, sniffs around the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone. The difference here, however, is that while the dog desires his bone but to destroy it, the artist finds in his tiny nugget, washed free of awkward accretions and hammered into a sacred hardness, the very stuff for a clean affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructible.

The artist can refine his "tiny nugget" of value, of meaning, from the awkward accretions of life, but he does not, thereby, necessarily know life, or shatter its ambiguous mystery; he simply holds the "happiest chance for the indestructible."

Thus, he is always involved in the question--"endlessly baffling indeed--of the method at the heart of the madness": that is, where to find these affirmative "nuggets" and how to recognize them when they are found. And, as we have already said, James finds them always

---

16 The artistic alchemist does not want only a symbolical approximation of reality, but reality itself, not gold alone, but the ability to re-create gold on his own. He wants to know the full mystery of creation itself.


"in the logic of the particular case":

If life, presenting us the germ and left merely to herself in such a business, gives the case away, almost always before we can stop her, what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong and the right deviation? Such would be the elements of an inquiry upon which, I hasten to say, it is quite forbidden me here to embark. I but glance at them in evidence of the rich pasture that at every turn surrounds the ruminant critic. The answer may be after all that mysteries elude us, that general considerations fail or mislead, and that even the fondest of artists need ask no wider range than the logic of the particular case [italics mine].

It is as though James were saying that life evades no one less than it does the artist who wants to capture it whole; yet it evades no one more than the artist if he does not go at it piece-meal.

This admittedly is a complex artistic approach, despite the apparent simplicity of the particular case; but, then, complex minds demand complex illusions, and, conversely, complex illusions require complex minds to interpret them. James provides both in his works by concentrating on the "particular case," which, in its "crystaline" ability to reflect accurately the anomalies and obscurities of life, seems to be no less rebounding and elliptical in its ambiguities and mysteries than life appears to be.

In the process, what he creates is "the organ of life"--the

\[19\text{Ibid., p. 52.}\]
mysterious entity his fictional novelist, Vereker, in the story, "The Figure in the Carpet," said no one had ever fathomed in his works, but which it seemed to Vereker (and, no doubt, to James himself) he should search for.

No one, of course, could ever fathom the "Organ of Life"; because, although he might discover what James's "Figure in the Carpet" is, he would never know, in any literal way, what the "Figure in the Carpet" reflected. The "Figure in the Carpet" is the Jamesian, convoluted, apparently ambiguous technique, by which he tries to represent life. It is the artistic means by which he tries to recreate life, by involving his readers in what he called "the abyss of ambiguity," the "rein of the great ambiguity," the "human liability to fall into traps and be bewildered."

In other words, it is James's attempt to involve his readers in the immense "Organ of Life" itself—which is life's illusory reality, its mystery, or, if not life's mystery, then in man's paradoxical predilection to assume that life is mysterious and illusive, and—like the governess in "The Turn of the Screw"—to throw himself passionately into it.

* * *

The governess, herself, feels this ambiguous human response to mystery, when, after permitting Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper to kiss her and seal (what she presumes to be) a "oneness" between them, she muses at length on her position at Bly and feels that it is
"fine"—but "perhaps a trap, not designed, but deep---to [her] delicacy, perhaps to [her] vanity: whatever in [her] was most excitable." (italics mine) Later she is to look back on the events which follow this musing as a "change ... like the spring of a beast." But at the moment she muses on her own "discretion," her "quiet good sense," and her "general high propriety"; she feels tranquil and justified; and she has the faith that these merits will "publicly appear" in time.

The governess's musing turns toward romance and toward the hope of meeting someone who would "stand before her and smile and approve." Almost immediately, her "imagination turn[s] real," (italics mine) and at that very moment she sees a ghost upon the battlements who is "not the person [she] had precipitately supposed (not, that is, her employer, as Edmund Wilson surmises)." 20

The ghost stands there "wearing no hat." Later she finds herself hesitant to mention her discovery to Mrs. Grose, although she rationalizes her motive as an "instinct of sparing her companion." The shock of her meeting with the ghost has "sharpened all [her] sense," and she feels Bly has been "subject to an intrusion."

The ghost, of course, is obviously, the governess's wild "imagination turned real"; she is beginning to confuse her desires for reality, and is making (at least for herself) "reality" of her desires; that is, "reality" of her involvement with mysterious

20 Henry James, Casebook, op. cit.
particulars, which, themselves, have been no more ambiguous than "psychological particulars"—that is, a few random remarks dropped by Mrs. Grose, a gesture or two, misconstrued.

A few days later the governess sees the same ghost again, staring in through the dining room window, "a forward stride in [their] intercourse," and she feels she has been "looking at him for years and had known him always"; and, furthermore, she surmises from the ghost's diverted stare that he actually came there "for someone else."

She dashes around, "out of duty" to confront the ghost, finds him gone, but feels that he "was there or was not there; not there if [she] didn't see him." (italics mine)

Mrs. Grose comes upon the scene, and the governess immediately places herself in the same spot where the ghost had stood, and when Mrs. Grose responds to her presence there in the same way she herself had responded to the presence of the ghost, the governess wonders why Mrs. Grose "should be scared." This wonder immediately turns to positive conviction in her mind that she no longer "needs to respect the bloom of Mrs. Grose"; and she now has a feeling that she "must share" her knowledge with the housekeeper.

* * *

In regard to this urge to "share" diabolical knowledge, it should be remembered (digressing again, for a moment) that in the
preamble to the reading of Douglas's handwritten tale about the
governess, when the guests, in the home where Douglas is staying,
have finally convinced him to read his old manuscript, and are
grouped about him for the hearing, the odd tale which calls this
story to Douglas's mind is one told by another guest, about a small
boy who had seen a ghost and who had awakened his mother, "not to
dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter
also, herself, before she had succeeded in [quieting his fears], the
same sight that had shaken him."

The diabolic innocence of the boy is what is interesting, and
relevant.

Also interesting and relevant—although the relevance will not
immediately seem clear—is the coincidence that Douglas, the
narrator of this story [the "envelope narrator" once removed from
the Jamesian "envelope narrator" who is telling the story to us] was
himself, like Miles, once under the influence of this same governess,
when he confronted her at his family's estate (the name of which is
not given), "on coming down the second summer" from Trinity. He was,
at the time, ten years her junior; and like Miles he also had a
sister under her tutelage.

When Douglas is quizzed by one of his listeners about whom it
was the governess was in love with, Douglas is able to evade the
question, which he apparently finds too acute, or too disruptive,
when the Jamesian "envelope narrator" quickly answers for him by
saying: "Time will tell"—to which evasion, Mrs. Griffin, one of
the listeners, says: "Well, if I don't know who she was in love
with, I know who he was."

Mrs. Griffen, of course, is referring to Douglas, who has al­
ready said of the governess: "She was a most charming person, but
she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess."

Now, it would be interesting, and one more diabolical turn-of-
the-screw in this story (that is, one more example of the "stretch­
ing power" of James's anomalous particular case), if it could be
proved that Miles and Douglas were one and the same person (there is
no proof that Miles died at the end of the story, only that the
governess felt his heart stop). By this reading, Mrs. Griffen's
remark: "I know who he was," could mean, not who Douglas was in love
with, but literally who he was (his identity). And to examine so
minutely such an innocent grouping of words is doing no more than
James's expects, because he himself obviously left many such phrases
purposely open to ambiguous interpretations—particularly in his use
of pronouns. It is sometimes impossible to tell, simply by the group­
ing of James's pronouns, who is saying what to whom.

Douglas denies that the initial experience was his own; but,
actually, the initial involvement; that is, the governess's viewing
of her experience was not Douglas's involvement, either. It was
peculiarly the governess's. Douglas says that he took down nothing
but the "impression." "I took that here," Douglas says, very
significantly tapping his heart. "I've never lost it."

James’s "envelope narrator" is the next to ask the question: "was the governess in love?" to which Douglas replies: "You are acute. Yes, she was in love. That is, she had been. That came out—she couldn't tell her story without its coming out. I saw it and she saw it; but neither of us spoke of it."

And then Douglas almost negates this kind of speculation entirely, by saying: "I remember the time and the place—the corner of the lawn, the shade of the great beeches and the long, hot summer afternoon."

Most of Miles’s important encounters with the governess are at night in his room, or, at least, inside the house—except for one; and that is his talk with her outside the church, just before she flees home in confusion, after he and she startle one another with their awareness of the other’s perceptiveness.

It would be impossible to prove this point, that Douglas and Miles are one and the same person; and perhaps not even profitable; but it would be one more turn-of-the-screw, one more example of man’s "precious liability to fall into traps and be bewildered," which is one of James’s chief demands upon a story, since it can only "thicken" or "size up" the story.

These various interpretations, James says, "stiffen the whole texture":

The apparitions . . . are matters as to which in themselves, really, the critical challenge (essentially nothing ever but the spirit of fine attention) may take a hundred forms—and a hundred felt or possibly proved infirmities is too great a number. Our friends' respective minds about them, on the other hand, are a different matter—challengeable, and repeatedly, if you like, but never challengeable without some consequent further stiffening of the whole texture. (italics mine) 21

James is probably as consciously ambiguous about Douglas's true relationship to the governess as he is about Miles's and the governess's relationship. If nothing else, as just indicated, it creates tension; but James seems to be giving us clues by his reference to years in the introduction. The governess was ten years older than Douglas; she had died twenty years before Douglas's telling of the story to the houseguests; it had been forty years since Douglas was told the story by the governess.

But the reader doesn't know how old Douglas was when he came down from Trinity. Was he ten (like Miles), or a young man? And we don't know how old the governess was when she told Douglas her story (only that she was ten years older than he), or how old Douglas is at his telling of the story to his guests, except that she was evidently young enough to stir love in his heart when he was a boy, and he is agile enough, when telling his story to the houseguests, to be kicking logs in the fire.

21The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 67.
Whether Miles and Douglas are, in fact, one, or not, the same
effect is achieved, nevertheless. Douglas is just one more "ghost"
in the long chain of possible misrepresentors of simple fact in this
story. Just as the governess steps into the shoes of Quint, in order
to frighten Mrs. Grose, Douglas (possibly Miles) next steps into the
shoes of the governess by reading her story to his listeners, among
whom is the Jamesian "envelope narrator," who relates it to us.

The ironic twist of this domino-like succession, or concentric
ring, or elliptical series of stories-within-stories is that the
corrupting (or educating) involved is always undertaken out of a
sense of duty or love. Douglas tells his listeners that the governess
would not have told him the story about the ghosts, if she hadn't
liked him; and, ostensibly, Douglas and the "envelope narrator":
[James] tell their listeners [us] the tale for the same reason.
Under the guise of mere story telling, what is obviously felt to be
somehow diabolical, is imparted, on the pretense of duty, or love,
or liking.

This presence of moral ambiguity is the reason for the repeated
question in the introduction: "Who does the governess love?" Douglas
says that the story won't tell, "not in any literal, vulgar way"; and when he is first asked if the story is "beyond everything," as
he described it, "for sheer terror?" the Jamesian "envelope narrator"
feels that Douglas "seemed to say it was not so simple as that." In
other words, he is saying, indirectly, that this is not a mere ghost
story designed to instill shallow, physiological fright. At a loss to qualify it, Douglas says: "For Dreadful—dreadfulness!" (Or, as Conrad put it in "The Heart of Darkness": "the horror, the horror").

The vital question being evaded is: which does the governess love more: good or evil, innocence or corruption? Is she attracted to the children because she thinks them angelic, or because she thinks them demonic.

The answer is to be found in the minds of the reader.

In any event, this searching out of motives, this suspicion of surface meanings, this propensity to exaggerate facts which themselves are mostly ambiguous, and read into them the possibilities one seeks oneself, is just what James expects of his reader, because it puts him in the position of the governess as she stands outside the dining room window, imitating the stance of the ghost she has just seen, and awaiting there, expectantly, the reaction of Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, at whose expense she is playing this diabolic little trick.

When Mrs. Grose surprises the governess by being startled and bewildered by her behavior, the governess immediately assumes that she no longer "needs to respect the bloom of Mrs. Grose" and suddenly wants to "share" her knowledge with her. She suggests that the other has guessed at the identity of Quint.

Mrs. Grose's bewildered response is: "I haven't guessed ... how can I if you don't imagine?"22 She tries to alter the drift of

22 Mrs. Grose's response is exactly what James's himself would be, speaking to the reader.
their conversation by suggesting church. To this suggestion the governess rejoins: "Oh, I'm not fit for church." (italics mine)

Upon which, she sees in Mrs. Grose's eyes, the "faraway glimmer of a consciousness more acute."

Mrs. Grose, who probably represents in this novel the innocence of ignorance—and also the irresponsibility of such innocent ignorance—always avoids ultimate knowledge and tries to disclaim responsibility.

"Such things are not for me," she says of the school letter regarding Miles' "dismissal" (for she can't—the governess assumes—read); and she later tells the governess that the children are not in her charge.

The governess (again, in her "crystaline" manner) describes Mrs. Grose as a "stout, simple, plain, clean, wholesome" woman, "a magnificent monument to the blessing of a want of imagination," and as a woman who had no direct "communion with the source of [the governess's] trouble."

Mrs. Grose plays the same kind of role as Captain Delano in Melville's story, "Benito Cereno"—the unassuming innocent who is saved (but who does not quite save others) because he never assumes the true evil of his position and therefore does not bring destruction upon himself.

Ironically, Mrs. Grose also assumes the role that James himself takes, generally—that of the artist who refuses to become involved in his own illusions, in order that he might remain innocent himself of whatever interpretations are put upon his illusion—who can presume
to innocence at the same time that he exposes his readers to what appear to be diabolical traps; the writer, that is, who remains uninvolved in what he claims is the general human condition, which is to fall into traps and be bewildered.

It is here that James falls under suspicion of being only an imitator of life, or a mere storyteller, fabricating romance for its own sake, who is not interested in making, or causing to be made--distinctions. Actually, this uninvolvment is just another example of his irony.23

The governess describes the male ghost to Mrs. Grose, insists that he "was no gentleman" (probably, because he wore no hat), and Mrs. Grose verifies the description as being like that of Quint, a former valet at Bly.

In this first of the governess's assumptions, which is based on no fact, whatsoever, and which is almost an out-and-out lie, she tells Mrs. Grose that Quint was looking for Miles: "I know, I know!" she cries, although there is no natural, literal way that she could have known. Mrs. Grose admits knowledge of the former close alliance which existed between Quint, an alliance which she tried, unsuccessfully, to sever, but which she couldn't and wouldn't report to her employer, because "he didn't like tale-bearing, he hated complaints."

The employer on Harley Street has become, by this time, almost

---

23To be discussed later.
a symbol of God or Satan, or Ultimate Indifference. The governess answers Mrs. Grose by saying that she herself would have told the master—although later she does no such thing, herself, until she is forced to it later, when a similar situation arises.

The governess again glories in the fact that she is an "expiatory victim" whose duty it is to save the children for the Master. She says: "We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I—well, I had them." This "them" in italics could refer to the children or to the ghosts, for it is used thus ambiguously each time.

The governess begins to watch the children "in stifled suspense"; and soon she notices the children's "charming" way of letting her alone "without appearing to drop her"; and she is amazed by their self-sufficiency; in fact, she feels she "walked in a world of their invention" and (almost regretably it would seem) that they "had no occasion, whatever, to call upon [hers]."

Soon after this, the governess takes Flora to the lake—like the "Sea of Azof" and immediately she senses the existence of another ghost. "There was no ambiguity in anything," (italics mine) she proudly affirms, "none whatever; at least in the conviction I, from one moment to another, found forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes."

There is, of course, no ambiguity, because she has already eliminated the possibility of it, even before she raises her eyes.
She sees the female ghost and also assumes that Flora tries to divert her attention from the ghost with a "morsel," a stick which the child tries to force into the hole of a piece of wood. (The Freudian symbolism of this episode and the use of the hat and lake symbols have been noted by Edmund Wilson) She runs to Mrs. Grose and cries: "They know, they know!"

In response to Mrs. Grose's blank expression, she replies: "What we know!" and she says, "Flora saw!" and, therewith, she immediately declares the ghost to be her predecessor, Miss Jessel, although she has never seen Miss Jessel. To Mrs. Grose's proposal that they verify her finding, by asking Flora, the governess cries: "No, for God's sake, don't... she'll lie!"

The housekeeper surmises that if the child is concealing awareness of the ghost she is doing it to spare the governess. "No, no," the governess declares, like Kurtz in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," there are depths, depths."

In describing Miss Jessel she says the ghost stared at her own eyes "as if they might really have resembled mine" (the second time she associates herself obviously with the ghosts) and she describes the look as "indescribable," a "fury of intention."

The governess then poses a real puzzle of this story, a possible flaw or opaque virtue in its mechanics, when she asks Mrs. Grose how

---

24 I am indebted to Professor Fred Kersten for suggesting the alternative opinion that this apparent "flaw" in the story might be
she could have described the ghost "to the last detail," if she did not really see it. She may, of course, have seen a picture of Miss Jessel; but, if so, the picture is not mentioned by James. Here is that one hole in the illusion, where interpreter and author can look squarely at one another and shake their head wryly at the cleverness

a merit: it being the crucial opaque center of the story which keeps it truly ambiguous, which leaves the story open to the interpretation that the ghosts are to be taken literally, and not figuratively or as figments of the governess's imagination. I tend to agree (see footnote 26), and use the word "flaw" only because (in this one case) I don't give James the credit for having realized (beforehand) the importance of this incidence. If I did, I should have to assume that he did want to have us take the ghosts literally, in which case, he would either have written a mere "ghost" story (which I don't think James ever meant us to believe, despite his tongue-in-cheek avowals of same), or that he meant the ghosts to represent an external force of evil. And with this I would heartily disagree. Evil in Henry James's world is not a force from without (as it was, for instance, for his father), but merely awareness, knowledge, viewed perversely. Evil is the containment, at one pole of reference, of a charged "truth" not accurately (that is, perversely) transmitted. It is the possession of knowledge viewed diabolically by someone without it. Once he possesses the perversely viewed knowledge, that person himself becomes a "repositor" looked at diabolically or enviously, as the case may be. Evil, in James's world is utterly in the eye of the beholder and every beholder is, at some point, temporarily bewildered. When he is no longer bewildered, he no longer transmits; he is no longer alive; he is a dead battery, a lifeless repositor. Life, in James's world, is thus, passionate curiosity. Evil, consequently, is limitation artificially imposed by inadequate knowledge.
of one and the willful duplicity of the other.  

After learning from Mrs. Grose about the former "conspiracy" of Miles and Quint, a finding which she labels "immensely to the purpose," she waits for further developments. "I waited and I waited," she says; and she finds her waiting "so immensely more interesting."

In describing (in her "crystaline manner") the attitude of the children towards her at this state of the story, the governess says something curious which might account for the "vulgarity" which suddenly develops in Flora at the end. The governess says: "Sometimes, indeed, when I dropped into coarseness, I perhaps came across traces of little understandings between them [the children] by which one of them should keep me occupied while the other slipped away.

It is possible that the children were simply devising ways of escaping the governess's "coarseness"—coarseness (the extent of which

---

25 This desire for, yet fear of, illusion and its apparent opposite, reality, is a theme which the arch ironist, Jean Genet develops in his play, From the Balcony. Everyone in this play is after illusion—even the Revolutionary, who most abhors illusion and the bourgeois human need for it; and each manipulates his private, "Whore-house," illusion consummately and demands an illusion which is absolutely consuming in its potentialities. But he also demands, at the same time, one tiny flaw in the manipulated illusion, because only by this concrete proof that he is pretending illusion, can he maintain it and also maintain his belief that he will not be swallowed up in the horror of unambiguous reality: total, absolute, meaningless, nonduelistic actuality which precludes no illusory state into which to flee, once it becomes too oppressive. This, of course, is also a favorite Conradian theme ("The Secret Sharer"), Shavian ("Don Juan in Hell"), Kafkian (The Castle); and one also excellently developed by Ingmar Bergman in his movie, The Magician, not to mention Herman Hesse's treatment of it in The Steppenwolf.
the reader can't know) which may be the source later of Flora's "horrors" in speech that so overwhelm Mrs. Grose.

Soon after this, the governess meets the ghost of Quint upon the stairway. They face each other with their "common intensity." There "was nothing in [herself] that didn't meet and measure him." (italics mine) She returns to her room to discover Flora looking out the window. The child turns to her "in so much of her candour and so little of her nightgown" that, as she says: "I had never such a sense of losing an advantage acquired (the thrill of which had been so prodigious)."

The voyeuristic flavor of this passage is representative of her entire attitude towards the supposed communion of children and demons. When the child tells her that she did not see anyone outside the window, the governess thinks she "lied," and she wonders why she does not just confront the child with her own lie, "give it to her straight in her lovely little lighted face," in the expectation that they both might "learn perhaps in the strangeness of [their] fate, where [they] are and what it means."

A few nights later the governess sees the female ghost on the stairway in a position of woe, which she herself is later to duplicate exactly, even to the cause. She returns to Flora, and this time she is convinced the child is communing with the ghost of Miss Jessel outside the window. The "striking of a match complete[s] the picture," she says. Flora, she says, "was face-to-face with the apparition we
had met at the lake."

What the governess does not realize is that it might possibly be only her own image she sees outside the window—reflected in the window glass—particularly since she says she just before lit a match, the light from which would throw her image forward and reflect it.

She goes towards the boy’s room, but is conscious that someone is moving about outside. She goes into another room, beneath the tower, and looks out into the yard. There she sees Miles and assumes that he is communing with the ghost of Quint, who she supposes is on the tower, although she cannot see the tower, since she is directly under it. Both children might very well be looking out and up at the moon; although it is more probable that they are communing, not with the moon, or the ghosts either, but with one another, playing a game on the governess—Miles from down in the yard and Flora out her window. This possibility gains substantiation when Miles later admits to the governess that his being outside was all a trick between him and his sister to surprise the governess and convince her that he was not just a good little boy.

There is still another possible explanation of the ghost’s appearance, which would be another, more devastating turn-of-the-screw, an explanation which seems to be borne out by one of Miles’s statements later. This is the possibility that the children at no time commune with the ghost of their own sex (if they commune with them at all), but actually with the ghost of the opposite sex. This would explain (if we first agree with the idea of the children’s being
corrupt) why Flora did not see Miss Jessel by the lake (she would only have seen Quint, were he to appear); and it would explain why Miles, later on, does not see the ghost of Quint outside the dining room window, but does seem to expect to see a female, since he asks: "Is it she?"

However, this, again, is falling into the carefully laid trap which James has prepared for us; it is falling into the habit of assuming one's desires for reality. Such a twist of the screw would make the story even more "horrible" in its implications, but, the question is, should one desire such eventualities?

When Mrs. Grose suggests that they inform the Master about the situation at Bly, the governess imagines the contempt he would have for the "fine machinery [she] had set in motion to attract his attention to [her] slighted charms." Later she watches for Quint's ghost "in vain in the circle of the shrubbery . . . But they remain unaccompanied and empty, and [she] continue[s] unmolested; if unmolested one could call a young woman whose sensibilities had, in the most extraordinary fashion, not declined but deepened."

She realizes that the loss of this sensibility would "distress [her] much more than to keep it." She also wonders why the children "never resent [her] inexorable . . . perpetual society," and at this moment Miles confronts her with accusations. He wants more freedom; he also demands a reason why no plans have been made for his return to school, and he wants to have communication with his uncle.

This immediately makes the governess want to get away from the
boy, and instead of attending church with the children (she is outside the church with Miles), she dashes home with the plan of leaving Bly at once. She sits down upon the stairway in the same position and attitude of woe she had formerly seen the female ghost adopt; and when she walks into her classroom, a moment later, she is only slightly startled to find Miss Jessel sitting at her desk, writing a letter, regarding, not her own, but the governess's presence as an intrusion.

Since the children, upon returning from church, do not enquire about her desertion, the governess goes to Mrs. Grose, who now "faces the flame from her straight chair in the dusky, shining room"; and to the governess the housekeeper is a "large, clean, image off the 'put away'--of drawers closed and locked and rest without a remedy." She discovers that the children have told Mrs. Grose that they must all do nothing but what the governess likes. The governess then tells Mrs. Grose an obvious lie—that she returned home to meet a friend.

"A friend—you?" Mrs. Grose replies in evident amazement, to which the governess replies: "Oh, yes, I have a couple [italics mine]." And then she tells Mrs. Grose that she came home to talk with Miss Jessel, although this was not her consciously expressed reason (and, furthermore, there was not even a recorded exchange between her and the ghost). She tells Mrs. Grose that Miss Jessel "suffers the torments," and she says that Miss Jessel "wants Flora."

She agrees then to write to her employer. That night she goes to Miles's room. In equivocal terms they discuss their general
situation once more; she embraces and possibly frightens the boy; and there is an unexplainable draft of cold wind that blows in, despite the closed windows. The boy abruptly asks to be left alone.

The next day Miles approaches her of his own accord and entertains her by playing upon a piano. She is wrapt up in watching the boy that she forgets about Flora; and when she remembers that she has "slept at her post," she surmises that Miles's entertainment was a trick to get her aside so that his sister could slip away from her. She dashes to the front hall and confronts Mrs. Grose. The two of them search the house.

Then, without a hat—because "that woman is always without one"—the governess goes out to search for Flora, accompanied by Mrs. Grose. She has told Mrs. Grose that Miles is upstairs with Quint and that Flora must be at the lake with Miss Jessel. They find Flora across the lake; the child is surprised at the appearance of the governess, without a hat: "Where are your things?" she asks.

"Where yours are, my dear?" the governess replies; and then she asks the child, pointblank, where Miss Jessel is.

Immediately, Miss Jessel appears before the eyes of the governess. This appearance produces in her a "thrill of joy at having brought proof." She discovers that Mrs. Grose does not share her vision, nor does the child admit to doing so. Flora is horrified now, not necessarily by the ghost, but possibly by the governess; and she appears suddenly to have become like an old woman.

"What a dreadful turn, to be sure, Miss!" Mrs. Grose replies;
and she tries to comfort the child into thinking the whole thing is a joke. Flora and Mrs. Grose return alone to the house and the governess sinks down on the grass in despair.

When she returns to the house she finds that Flora's things have been removed from her room; she discovers from the housekeeper that the child now lives in terror of her, and that she has begun to utter "horrors." The governess has the child taken away from Bly, and Mrs. Grose leaves with her, sounding a strange note, by saying to the governess, who plans to stay to work on Miles: "I'll save you without him."

This possibly means that she—having given up on Miles, will save Flora, not the governess. We don't know for sure to whom she makes the remark.

The governess and Miles are left alone together. He had come to her the night before, because, evidently, he finally liked to be close to her; and, the next day, he repeats this direction of his sentiments. The governess tries to draw from him the secret reason for his dismissal from school. She feels "she had nothing more to teach him," but that it would be "preposterous, with a child so endowed, to forego the help one might wrest from absolute intelligence."

She admits to the boy that she stayed on purely to discover his secret: "Well, yes—I may as well make a clean breast of it," she says. "It was precisely for that" (that she stayed).

Peter Quint suddenly appears again at the window, as she continues her probing for Miles's secret; and she feels as though
she is "fighting with a demon for a human soul." Miles admits that he stole the letter she had written to his uncle, because, he said, he wanted to see what she had written about him. The governess instantly feels that the "cause was [hers] and that [she] should surely get all."

As Quint watches them from outside the window at Miles's hack, Miles admits that he "said things" at school, things which were reported, things that he told only to people he liked, things that were told to other people they liked.

The boy's misdemeanor, in effect, is probably no more or less than the misdemeanor of which the various narrators of this story are guilty or innocent: he tells innocent (at least, ambiguous, happenings) which are misconstrued, at will, by people, like the governess, who desire to know the worst.

The governess is exasperated by Miles's innocent reply, which in no way vindicates her. Suddenly, she "springs upon" the boy, ostensibly to shield him from Quint's ghost. She shrieks, "No more, no more, no more!" at the ghost of Quint.

Miles cries: "Is she here?--a question which baffles even the governess, because no female has been referred to. Edmund Wilson assumes that the boy has somehow communicated with his sister, and has learned the circumstances of her delusion; but James does not tell of any such meeting; in fact, he makes a point of saying that the children are kept apart. It may be that James only wanted to draw from the boy an exclamation which would prove, beyond any doubt,
the boy's innocence; although it is just as likely that he used
this means, instead, as a way of maintaining ambiguity—at least,
in regard to the boy.

The governess is staggered by the feminine pronoun. She "sieze[s],
stupified—some sequel to what [they] had done to Flora." Her instant
reaction to this realization, however, is to "show the boy something
better still than that." She would confront him not with the ghost
of Miss Jessel, but with that of Quint. Or else—if her motives are
indeed sincere—she would confront him with no ghost at all, but with
empty space. She repeats the word "she," and Miles answers her
stupification with: "Miss Jessel!"

Now it may be that Miles—if he did see ghosts—saw only the
ghost of Miss Jessel, and here, he is expecting to see her again.
If this were the governess's realization, her horror of what she
has done to Flora is simply her realization that Flora, possibly,
had never seen the female ghost, that the girl was either innocent
of seeing ghosts at all, or, possibly, saw not Miss Jessel, but
Quint, instead. When the governess then tells the boy that there is
something better than Miss Jessel to be seen at the window, Miles
cries: "It's he?" in the form of a question. The governess immediately
pounces for the proof. She cries: "Whom do you mean by he?"

The next exclamation is always assumed to come from Miles but
we can't actually be sure, by the arrangement of the words on the
page, who actually says the words: "Peter Quint, you devil!"
It could be the governess angrily putting words into the boy's mouth, forcing the reply which she wants to hear from him; or, it could actually be the boy speaking. But it does seem more likely that the boy would call the governess a "witch," rather than a devil, whereas the woman would naturally refer to the boy in this manner.

To add to this argument, the next exclamation of the boy's is: "Where?"--a response which, unexpectedly, overjoys the governess.

"I have you," she thinks; and she surmises that Quint has lost the boy forever. She replies: "There, there!" obviously indicating the window at the boy's back, the view of which has been, up to now, cut off from him. Miles turns around and sees--as the governess is led to believe--nothing "but the quiet day."

If she is demonic, she thinks she has taken him away from Quint; if she is good, she thinks she has exorcised the demon. But if the boy is truly demonic, he has simply been cut off from the source of his power and he dies.

The question exists of how, if Miles is innocent, he could know about Quint's ghost, since he possibly refers to him when he asks: "Is it he?" The boy could, of course, be thinking of his uncle, whom he and the governess had just been discussing in regard to the stolen letter. Wilson's explanation is that the boy somehow communicated with his sister, but this would not entirely explain the technical difficulty.

Clearly, the ultimate interpretation is left up to the reader.
James has reached a nearly sure balance. The innocent readers will never see the story as anything more than a ghost story about demonic children (an irony in itself, since it is the innocent who so easily accept the possibility of there being such things as demons), and the more delving, more suspicious, more assuming minds will always stumble upon an ambiguous author at the end of the story, and have to bear the brunt of their own suspicions.

Technically, however, one thing is clear and unambiguous, and that is the governess's reactions. Considering the many assumptions she makes, which are based on no fact at all, one must conclude, finally, that she herself, is either terribly frustrated, or mad. There is the possibility that the children are innocent, but not the governess. In spite of the anomaly that she holds "crystalline" in her consciousness the record of the many anomalies and obscurities on the story, and that she is the "authority," the only one from whom we can get the facts, her "dreadful boldness of mind" finally reveals her peculiarity for what it is although she does not, necessarily, ever realize it herself.

* * *

James's representative works are all this kind of ingenious celebration of contradiction and manipulated ambiguity. As in the "Turn of the Screw," the interpretation of the ambiguities within the work depends upon the temperament of the reader. The final turn-of-the-screw may very well be at his expense. If he wants to
assume the worse, if that is how his mind functions, then James
gives him all the rope he needs to hang himself. The story is itself
consciously ambiguous, in the sense that the final interpretation is
as much a reflection of the reader's mind as it is of the author's.

This means of filtering a story through the sometimes faulty
consciousness of one of the characters—a character who, yet, at the
same time—gives a clear picture of what happens for those who want
to see clearly (and is, in that sense, "crystaline"), demands
conscious adroitness on the part of the writer. To make, as James
says:

[quote]
.. the presented occasion tell all its story
itself, remain shut up in its own presence and
yet on that patch of staked-out ground become
thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly
clear, is a process not remarkable, no doubt,
so long as a very light weight is laid on it,
but difficult enough to challenge and inspire
great adroitness so soon as the elements dealt
with begin to shape up. (italics mine) 26
[quote]

The governess exactly mirrors what she sees at Bly, and in that
sense, she hold "crystaline in her consciousness the record of the
many anomalies and obscurities" around her; but her reflections
upon what she sees, her assumptions about them are her own eccentric
way of evaluating experience, and not, any longer, a common denominator
of human experience. Her "authority," finally, is disproved by irony:
first by James, who gradually lets us see the difference between when

26 The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 63.
she sees and what she reports: then—if the reader is discerning—
by the reader. If the reader is not discerning, then he himself
becomes an object of irony.

This "crystaline" treatment of the "particular case" seems to
extend the "picture" indefinately—as indefinate as are the minds of
all of the readers who will look into it. Or, as Blackmur says of
James's technique, generally: "The secret of perception in the reader
becomes very near the secret of creation in the artist."
A person's disposition to involve and expose himself in illusion—this general human liability to "fall into traps and be bewildered"¹ is the human propensity upon which Jamesian drama (and drama generally) depends. It is upon the ground of this general human predicament that a protagonist stands, and from which he demands our sympathy. In fact, it is only when he succeeds in remaining on this common ground that he gains for himself the name "protagonist". He becomes an "antagonist" when he forfeits his common humanity; to be free of bewilderment.

No one is more sympathetic (even a villain) than when he seems most bewildered, even when he is only bewildered by his own villainy, or by his inability to perceive his own villainy.

In this sense, the governess in "The Turn of the Screw," for instance, is always a protagonist, and, therefore, always maintains our sympathy, even when she is most bewildered. This, actually, is rather remarkable about the governess, because, other than her bewilderment, which takes the form of self-delusion, there is very little else about her that is remarkable—other than that she seems so human. She is one of the most self-deluding creatures imaginable;

¹The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 56.
and yet, so **humanly charming** is her bewilderment, so **perceptive** her mind, so **reflective** her soul, so **crystalline** her consciousness—so generously **ambiguous** her point of view—that not only do we permit her to completely dominate our minds and attention, but we almost permit her to delude us, also.

And this sort of thing, of course, is just what James wants of us. If we weren't liable to delusion, we wouldn't be human; he wouldn't want us to be reading his books; we wouldn't be able to get **involved** in them. His effectiveness lasts only so long as the general lot of humanity is to fall into traps and be bewildered.

Yet in order to expose his readers to "bewilderment," James must be ingenious (complexity being innately, his second nature). He must be ingenious in order to outwit the reader; and it is necessary for him to outwit the reader because the reader ambivalently demands a complex illusion which not only makes him appear to be likewise ingenious (that is, able to manipulate illusion), but also suspends him in illusion—illusion being what the human consciousness has the greatest propensity for.

Ironically, James must appear to do all this at the same time he seems **not** to. He must, in other words, appear **not** to be too ingenious; because if he were too ingenious, he would shatter the mirror, break the crystal, destroy the illusion. He would play havoc with the necessary ambiguous relationship which must exist between the
illusionist and his audience. He would, in other words, appear to be too gloatingly unbelievered; he would appear not to be human, to be either too inhumanly dispassionate or too passionately manipulative.  

Yet the artist, too, no less than the reader, feels a need for total involvement. The artist's natural impulse is to involve himself totally in his own illusion, to display his ingenuity obviously (and thus elicit credit for his illusion) at the same time that he joins the reader in the labyrinth. However, if he is too obviously manipulative he can lose his reader as completely as when he loses creative perspective.

James keeps out of his illusions (at the same time that he seems to be lost within them) by limiting his objectivity, by filtering his "pictures" through the consciousness of his "reporters," his "precursors," his "envelope narrators."

He then reveals his ingenuity more—at the same time that he seems to reveal it even less—by making his "reporters" also seem not to be too ingenious. He does this for the same reason: so that they, too, will not seem to be too ingenious, so that they, too, will seem natural, will seem normal:

...We want it clean, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that

---

For instance, a reader will readily suspend his disbelief for another human, but he looks with fearful distrust upon a sorcerer, since a sorcerer, by definition, has the power totally to involve one. He does not, necessarily, play the illusion game fairly; he might not uninvolve one.
amplifies and interprets it . . . here prodigies, when they come straight, come with an effect imperiled; they keep all their character, on the other hand, by looming through some other history—the inessential history of somebody’s normal relation to something.\(^3\)

That is, so that they, too, partake of the general human propensity to fall into traps and be bewildered.

In other words, \textit{without seeming to}, James, as before said, purposely portrays his people as being slightly dense! Here is the supreme irony of James’s work: that his people who seem to be overly perceptive, and who are subjects of critical derision for just this reason, are cloudy in their knowing, are so overly perceptive that they constantly misinterpret.\(^4\)

And this is just as James wants it; because, despite their higher plane of reference, despite the fact that they seem to breathe air not usually filtered by ordinary consciousnesses, they are even more human in their bewilderment. Even more natural.

\ldots They may not be shown as knowing too much and feeling too much—not certainly for their remaining remarkable, but for their remaining "Natural" and "Typical," for their having the needful communicacies with their own precious

\(^3\)The \textit{Future of the Novel}, op. cit., p. 66.

\(^4\)An irony that almost totally escapes a critic like Maxwell Geismar who, in his nearly hysterical attack on James in \textit{Henry James and the Jacobites} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963) stumbles, absurdly, into almost every trap this writer has laid for critics such as he. Geismar is almost too human. His density compares amazingly to the Governess in "The Turn of the Screw."
liability to fall into traps and be bewildered. It seems probably that if we were never to be bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us; we should partake of the superior nature of the all-knowing immortals whose annals are dreadfully dull so long as flurried humans are not, for the positive relief of bored Olympians mixed up with them. Therefore it is that the wary reader for the most part warns the novelist against making his characters too interpretive of the middle of fate, or in other words, too divinely, or priggishly clever...

What this monitor, therefore, always proclaims James says, is:

... give us plenty of bewilderment, so long as there is plenty of slashing out at the bewilderment, too. But don't, we beseech you, give us too much intelligence; for intelligence—well endangers; endangers not perhaps the slasher himself but the very slashing, the subject matter of the self-respecting story. It opens too many considerations, possibilities, issues; it may lead the shattered into dreary realms where slashing somehow fails and falls to the ground.

James sees in excessive intelligence, not only a threat to the "very slashing," which is what drama is, but also a threat to that primary source of bewilderment which is life's apparent ambiguity itself; or, at least, the human propensity to look upon life as being ambiguous—and then to throw himself eagerly into that ambiguity.

In Jamesian fiction it is of what the artist is conscious, what he reflects; and then, concurrently, what his characters are conscious of and reflect, that make the story. The illusion lasts only so long as the author, his characters, and the reader remain temporarily

\[5\] The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 56.

\[6\] Ibid.
in illusion about the knowledge or experience or critical power of the other.

Most of the ironic burden, therefore, falls upon the "register" of experience, the "reporters," the "precursor," as James calls them. These fictional characters are almost always pegs for the reader's ironical minds to use in working their way through illusions. Thus, if the reader does not see through this purposely dense "reporter," if he remains in illusion about him, he will become, himself, a butt of James's irony, and also a butt of irony for other readers who are more perceptive.

It is when the reader tries to keep up with James's ironical convolutions that the full burden of the story falls upon him. "Tell me of what the artist or character or reader is conscious," James says, "and I will tell you what he is."

But first the reader must participate in the illusion, partake of the drama, and then find or lose himself in it, as the case may be. If his discriminatory powers are as acute as James's—or, at least, as acute as James hopes they will be, the reader will thread his way through the labyrinth of ambiguities and ironies, through the character's involvements; that is—around the James's pegs-of-irony—and finally arrive alongside James at the final stairstep of irony.

What James feared in himself and in his readers (and so disparaged in his characters) is excessive irony, which tends to dissipate all illusion, even that most genuinely presented—even that which life
itself (whatever its impetus) presents. If the artist is too soon seen through, then his illusions will themselves become the stuff of the skeptics, the object of irony, on the part of his audience. His creative power will be dissipated.

The potential villain, therefore, in James's work is not "bewilderment," not "illusion," but excessive irony. Irony may be the only safeguard one has against false illusion; it may be the human liability to humor which offsets the human liability to bewilderment. Yet if a person overworks this liability as much as he sometimes overextends his desire for illusion, his final stance can be one of irony-for-its-own-sake, which is only another kind of illusion. Such a stance is paradoxical, and ambiguous, because it annihilates before it can gain it, any meaning which it ostensibly seeks.

A too highly developed ironist accepts nothing; yet he is so meticulous in his dismissals, so almost aesthetic in his appreciation of nothing, that his dismissal seems a perverse kind of regard. He seems not to be intelligently paradoxical, but childishly self-contradictory.

Such persons, themselves, become objects of irony on the part of artists, who look upon them as innocent--knowledgeable innocents who are revealed for what they are by someone else only a little more or less knowledgeable (or, as the case may be, by someone only a little more or less innocent than they. The artist, or those who view this type of person stand outside, at the mild, bemused stance, bewildered
by such a person's apparent lack of bewilderment.

This is why, in Jamesian novels, it is often so difficult to determine just who is innocent and who is not. Is it the knowledgeable, worldly, unbewildered types, like Gilbert Osmund, for instance, of *Portrait of A Lady*? Or is it the bewildered, open-to-ignorance initiates to life like Daisy Miller? Both types, in a way, seem hardened against self-knowledge; that is they both avoid meaning. The Daisy Millers seem to refuse to see meaning, and the Gilbert Osmunds refuse to look for it. The only type totally immerses herself in life, the other refuses to do anything more than clutch aesthetically to its external objects. And both types, thereby, appear to be innocent to those who are involved, not only in life, but in the search for significance of their involvement. They appear innocent, that is, to those who are somehow both inside and outside life, viewing their involvement at the same time.

James himself—who said, "Much of life is fit only to enrich our stores of irony"—is very nearly guilty of the Osmund-like predilection to aestheticism. Like Osmund he seems to fondle each object or situation or person ironically, the better to dismiss it as not having been worth his perusal in the first place. But, at the same time, he seems to be so fond of anything which he has granted his dismissal, that he cannot seem to bear parting with it.

---

Thus he seems to get no broader a view of the object or of himself than his own ironic opinion of it. Yet he becomes so possessed by objects he denies any propensity to power over himself, that he ends up a prisoner of his own possessive objectivity. He ends up nothing more than a sum of his objects, bound up in a vicious circle of his own object-perusing, self-anihilating being.

James seems guilty of this predilection in such works as "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Jolly Corner," and, even, "The Turn of the Screw"—works which almost fail to escape an irony-for-its-own-sake attitude, works which seem to be literary "playthings."

Sidney Alexander, an art critic, writing for the Reporter, says of this kind of art, which he refers to in its more common name as "abstract art":

... The moment you eliminate subject, the painting (or sculpture) becomes its own subject; that is, it becomes an object, that is, it becomes a thing. Now things that stand for nothing but themselves can only mean the stuff of which they are made. Hence modern arts are obsessed by "thingness"; hence all sorts of materials are inserted into the painting; hence the scratching and gouging and didling of surfaces and hurling of paint and making "sculptures" of junk ... What else is there to do? Philosophically these objects, these things, are not abstractions of anything, internal or external. They communicate nothing but self-consciousness of their own substance.

What saves James (and even his most "abstract" stories) is that his art always refers outside of itself for meaning. It does this by keeping the human consciousness, the human liability for involvement,

---

foremost in the picture. It simply keeps "people" as its objects, as its "field of force"—people who are immersed in the anomalous substance of life.

A Jamesian character who best fulfills this role is Isabelle Archer in *The Portrait of A Lady*, the foil to Gilbert Osmond. Isabelle is also an ironist, of sorts, but she is always bewildered, too, and therefore most human. As James says of her: "The love of knowledge in her mind co-existed . . . with the finest capacity for ignorance."

Isabelle Archer's most human, and also most ironically consuming characteristic is her candidness. She naively assumes that if she can put her problems neatly in words, if they can find verbal expression, they will somehow be solved. She has this same attitude towards all illusions; and because of it (or despite it), the illusive mystery of life envelops her all the more. She is like Adele Quested in Forster's novel, *Passage to India*, who is so sure the right approach, the correct word, the definitive action will dissolve all the mystery of the ages surrounding her and in her—when, in reality the more she seeks to clarify the mystery around her, the more confusing it becomes.

Isabelle Archer, in other words, is the "protagonist"—the "first struggler"—the one most involved in mystery, yet—at the same time—the one least aware of this fact. She is least aware, like Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," that the mystery of her life,
which so awes and involves those around her, is simply her involvement in trying to dispell the mystery of her life. Even her husband, Gilbert Osmund, whose own total lack of involvement is what so mystifies Isabelle, almost finds himself transcended by his wife's involvement. Even Gilbert Osmund is almost pulled out of himself temporarily by observing his wife's involvement.

Isabelle's plunging descent into bewilderment, her "capacity for ignorance," for illusion, for not seeing things as they really are, even when what they are seems so transparently obvious to everyone around her, seems so paradoxical, so supremely ironic, that her involvement in ironies, if not her personal unhappiness itself, draws even the most ironical viewer into her orbit.

And what is particularly ironic is that—like the governess in "The Turn of the Screw"—there is really not very much interesting or mysterious about the woman except this very human involvement in mystery.

* * *

The "universal," therefore, which James has captured is a new kind of artistic reality, in which the pursuit, the involvement, the process is half the reality. No other writer, excepting, possibly, Conrad, has so effectively portrayed the complexity of this pursuit and the labyrinthic convolutions a mind must thread in order to illustrate it.

If this kind of continually "open lid" to reality were not what
the reader looks for and expects, why would he go to art in the first place?

One reason he goes, naturally, is for "vicarious experience."

Or as James asks and answers half the question himself:

*why should the representation be required, when the object represented is so accessible? . . .

The answer . . . appears to be that man combines an infinite cunning to getting it as cheaply as possible. He will steal it whenever he can. He likes to live the lives of others, yet is well aware of the points at which it may too intolerably resemble his own. The valid fable, more than anything else, gives him knowledge, abundant, yet vicarious.*

And James responds to this need, because he, too, "feels himself all in the presence of an abyss of ambiguities, the mutual accommodation with which the reader leaves wholly to him":

... Give us then the persons represented the subject of the bewilderment (that bewilderment without which there would be no quest of illusion or of the fact of suspense, prime implication in any story), as much experience as possible . . . Such, in effect, are the words in which the novelist constantly hears himself addressed, such the pleas made by the would-be victims of his spell and . . . he listens anxiously to the charge--nor again can exceed his solicitude for the economy of interest; but feels himself all in presence of an abyss of ambiguities, the mutual accommodation with which the reader wholly leaves him. Experience, you see, the picture of the exposed and entangled state is what is required . . .

---


11. An important part of the above quote has been excluded—that part concerning the reader's demand that there not be too much bewilderment—but what is meant (as has been discussed previously) by "bewilderment" here is excessive intelligence which tends to dissipate illusion.
What amazed James was not the desire on the part of humanity and himself for bewilderment, for illusion, this perverse desire to be "always in the reign of the great ambiguity:" (If I have called the most general state of one's exposed and assaulted figures the state of bewilderment . . . It is rather witless to talk of . . . getting rid of that highly recommended categories of feeling."\textsuperscript{12} What amazes him is that people will be taken in or be involved in very paltry illusions:

. . . What remains is the interesting oddity of mystery—the anomaly that fairly dignifies the whole circumstance with its strangements: the wonder, in short, that men, women, and children should have so much attention to spare for improvisations mainly so arbitrary, and frequently so loose. That, at the first blush, fairly leaves us gaping. This great fortune then, since fortune it seems, has been reserved for mere unsupported and unguaranteed history, the inexpensive thing, written in the air, the record of what, in any particular case, has not been . . . This is the side of the whole business of fiction on which it can always be challenged.\textsuperscript{13}

Involvement, that is, in illusions which don't meet the philosophical challenges of the form.

In fact, it is the novelist's responsibility not to provide "inexpensive illusions; because, in effect, inexpensive illusions leave the reader in illusion. They cause him to confuse illusion

\textsuperscript{12} The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 32.
with the real thing; they do not cause him to recognize that his involvement or lack of involvement is what is real. They simply, in other words, drown him in illusion.

This is the truth about illusion which the artist must cause his reader to realize. If he does so, he can then lean back in esthetic contemplation of his accomplishment, confident that the moral job has been done, too. Which, incidentally, is the way James expresses his satisfaction with Flaubert's esthetic (not moral) accomplishment in having produced Madam Bovary.

... May it not in truth be said that we practice our industry, so many of us, at relatively little cost just because poor Flaubert, producing the most expensive fictions ever written, so handsomely paid for it? It is as if this put it in our power to produce cheap and thereby sell dear; as if, so expressing it, literary honor being by his example effectively secure for the firm at large and the general concern, on its whole esthetic side, floated once for all, we find our individual attention free for literary indifference.14

Actually, the same praise James lavishes upon Flaubert he deserves himself—and for almost the same reason. James never provides inexpensive illusions in the place of the "real thing"; he is no less concerned than Flaubert in finding the exact detail, just the "right" word—except that he usually thinks in terms of the "picture." In fact, he found the novel of his day to be a failure,

14The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 145. (James, naturally, in no way adopts esthetic indifference, anymore than he adopts moral indifference—although sometimes, because of his conscious use of ambiguity, he seems to.)
"philosophically," in not providing "comprehensive pictures":

There are people who have loved the novel, but who actually find themselves drowned in its verbiage, and for whom even in some of its proved manifestations, it is become a terror they exert every ingenuity, every hypocrisy, to evade. The indifferent and the alienated testify, at any rate, almost as much as the omnivorous, to the ruin of the great ambiguity, the enjoyment of which rests evidently on a primary need of mankind. The novelist can only fall back on that—on his recognition that man's constant demand for what he has to offer is simply man's general appetite for a picture. The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere, it will take in absolutely everything.  

At the risk of repeating: To James's unique consciousness, physical, psychological, objective, subjective, ruminative entities are all "adorably pictoral," since they are always stained through the consciousness of his "reporters" and then refracted, still, as "adorably pictoral" entities through the minds of his readers. And since they are all "particulars" which are, at the same time, anomalous and ambiguous—any novel of which they are a composition is bound to be even more a "comprehensive picture"—"elastic," capable of "stretching" anywhere and taking in "absolutely everything," if the writer keeps them so.

If the artist didn't keep them so, his creations would be merely imitative, since any "particular case" is potentially nothing more than flat imitation. Zola's Dreiser's, Norris's, Sinclair

---

15 The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 33.
Lewis's works are full of such flat particulars—one-sided, quickly scanned and almost as quickly forgotten: topical, not typical entities that blaze out wonderfully for one reading, for one brief reflection, but hold up to no more; because the "picture," of which they are a summation, is not "comprehensive," but merely peculiar—unique for a time, but not unique all-of-the-time which is to be "classically unique." The "anomalous particular case" involves the reader at any time, because it remains, in itself, an "anomalous-ambiguity."

What James seems to be implying (in terms of critical theory) is that—if a work remains "crystalline"—it will not only be unique—an original perception of life or totality, but that it will more directly imitate an absolute which defies finite definition, a totality about which there will always be disagreement.

The implication is that a work of art is a "classic," for instance, in proportion to the number of meanings to be gotten from it. "Heart of Darkness" is an example, "The Turn of the Screw" another. They can be read so many ways; so many meanings can be gotten out of them, or incorporated into them by the readers, that they can appeal to a greater diversity of minds that disagree about life or

16"It derives from its firm roundness that sign of all rare works that there is something in it for everyone": Henry James's essay on Gustave Flaubert, The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 155.
totality. 17

But what appeals is not necessarily unity of agreement about what the work of art is saying about totality, but agreement that it is saying enough about it to satisfy people of all ages who will disagree about life or totality. The balance of artist and reader, therefore, is not a pivotal point where most agree on the artist's perception of totality, but where most agree that he is portraying a totality which defies finite definition. Agreement about an artist's perception of a particular totality (the "naturalist's" world) creates an orthodox, popular work, popular for a particular time; disagreement about an artist's particular perception of a totality that cannot be particularized, creates a classic, popular for all times.

What James does is to realize in his works the significant relationship between the abstract and the concrete, the general and the particular, and he realizes that awareness in terms of each—which, of course, means that he deals in all approximations of each: the symbol, the idea, the image. He tries to give the particular detail, the particular word all of the leeway it needs—a method which actually broadens its possibilities for making distinctions at the same time that it causes these distinctions to be made. The

17 "The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic. It will stretch anywhere—it will take in absolutely anything . . .": James, The Future of the Novel, op. cit., p. 33.
fact that he gives his words "full rein" actually forces one to examine the "particular case" with much more zeal than one might do otherwise. By giving the word full play, he forces one to find out what the particular case (of which the word is a representative) really is, instead of letting one assume that the "word" (its general symbolical significance) is explanation enough of the object's existence.

The essence of Jamesian subtlety is that it frees the consciousness to make its own extensions. Subtlety, that is, depends as much upon what is unsaid as said; it presumes awareness that what is unsaid (or left open to interpretation) is far more effective at times than what is explained away—if only because words limit consciousness at the same time that they facilitate it. By remaining crystaline, in the way that James tries to keep them, words pry up greater meaning by depending upon the total leverage of all that human minds can read into them.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that because James puts so much emphasis upon the free word, on the "representation," on the "image,"—("The image is always prior to the thing itself")—that he looks upon the word or the image or the representation as something more "real" than the fact. It may, in the classical sense, be "superior:" it may be something "more," than reality; but James does not necessarily mean that it is more "real."

James valued "differences," "relationship,"18 the contraries

18. This is the aesthetic's approach, which assumes that reality
of life as much as absolutes. He found in the representation of life real significance, but he did not say they are more real. They might hold life and reflect life and be like life, and even more perfectly realize life than people do; they may even be more paradoxical and bewildering; but this does not mean that life, to James, was any less real because of what the artist's representations can do realer. James did not fall into that trap. In fact the full thrust of his irony, of his knowledge of paradox, of his ability to weave illusion and reality, is directed at this kind of consciousness.

Professing no absolute vision of mystical truth, James still realizes awareness of such by mirroring, not eliminating, contraries. As before stated, a paradoxical condition of life is as much a result of language as of fact. Even the word, "paradox," is an arbitrary

is found not in one's involvement in "facts," or illusions in general, but only in life's representations. It sees truth only in the way something fulfills its obligation as an example—as a symbolical approximation of another example. That is, it finds "representation," generally, to be more real than what it represents; it finds in life's artifacts its only real central and meaningful entity. This kind of consciousness eventually even looks upon itself as purely another representative. It denies itself "classical uniqueness."

To this kind of consciousness, whatever reality is (whether it is a concrete fact or an abstract idea or a classical combination of the two), the symbol of it is far more vital. Such a consciousness seldom touches upon life itself; instead it lives in its approximations, since life for such a consciousness is not itself real. What is considered real is empty symbolism. This is an empty paradoxical position which apparently recognizes no relationship in the symbol to either a finite fact or an infinite idea. The symbol might be referred to as an approximation of one or the other; it might be referred to as an "objective correlative," for instance, but what is meant by such a comparison is that the object or idea more perfectly approximates the symbol.
fulcrum by which one balances contraries which possibly do not exist at all in total reality. Dualistic words, like "good and evil," "beauty and ugliness," "reality and illusion," manage to halve the world into contraries which may not exist at all except in the minds of those who use them. They are symbolical approximations, no more or less, and James must have realized this.

But not to mirror contraries would be not to mirror the world as it appears to the non-mystic; and whatever paradox implies as a total condition, James accepted it, temporarily, as a condition only slightly more central, possibly, than the conventions (illusions) it opposes.

By maintaining, in other words, a propensity towards "classical inclusiveness," James satisfied not only the classicist, but the mystic as well. For what the classicist calls "finding the universal significance in the particular" is very similar (except in degree and intensity of awareness) to what the mystic calls "apprehending the infinite within the finite." Both approaches to reality aim at a union of contraries.¹⁹

¹⁹ The primary difference between these two approaches to reality is that the mystic asserts that--once having had a mystical vision—he knows that a condition exists beyond paradox, beyond, that is, the contraries that paradox implies, a condition in which the abstract and the concrete are inseparably indivisible—whereas the classicist only assumes it, meanwhile hoping to capture a balance of meaning within the limits of paradox itself.
When Van Wyck Brooks, therefore, says of James's characters that they are the "fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in a void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect," what Brooks is really demanding is final moral judgment.

But to give final moral judgments, one has to be an absolutist; and like Conrad and Melville and others of their caliber, James is not a moral absolutist. He is only an absolutist of technique. He merely portrays, diligently, the battleground where good and evil, beauty and ugliness, reality and illusion vie with one another for supremacy, a world in which the innocent seek the knowledge of the non-innocent, lose their innocence when they think they have this knowledge, and then, in innocent ignorance of this knowledge, become innocent again. The truly innocent, as James says of Isabelle Archer, are those in whom "the love of knowledge co-exists with the finest capacity for ignorance."

James evidently felt he himself maintained innocence by remaining out of his stories, by letting the reader make most of the judgments and assumptions needing to be made. His morality, such as it is, is that his characters ostensibly retreat from evil, if they think they have recognized it. The ambiguity inherent is that one

---

21 They are all three moralists, but not moral absolutists.
cannot tell for sure with whom or what he makes ignorance synonymous: ignorance or knowledge, the Americans or Europeans, etc. He implies that the process of recognition warps, if it does not actually destroy; or that if it does not warp, it offers no escape. James's character Searle, in "A Passionate Pilgrim," says: "I was born with a soul for the picturesque . . . I found it nowhere. I found the world all harsh lines and harsh light, without shade, without composition, without the lovely mystery of colour." James went to Europe to enrich his esthetic soul, and he learned there that sensitivity, like knowledge, can corrupt. He approached the beauty and art of Europe as a Puritan would approach the sensuality of Persia. It seemed to hold for him the same kind of fascination, and it always seemed just out of his reach; he was always excluded from the "magic circle." As Blackmur says of James's kind of artist: "he fairly asked to corrupt himself."

But he found like Christopher Newman that "Europe keeps holding one at arm's length." The tragedy of James, as a person, seems that he remained, esthetically and morally, a virgin to the end: he never seems to have felt utterly corrupted himself. He himself is always the inevitable innocent in all his works; as if he never thrust through the mystery whose corrupting and re-generating he witnessed all around him. His morality, as such, is that his hero or heroine try to reject

---

ultimate knowledge, too. They retreat from evil or ugliness (or just plain mystery) rather than remain with it, unless, like Isabelle Archer and Daisy Miller, they retreat too late.

James, as a person, never does seem to lose control—to enter his "The Country of the Blue." He seems to remain always the observing artist and, secondarily, the human being; and although his art seldom falters, his humanity becomes suspect. It does not seem really tested. Because of his highly developed esthetic sense, which would not let him pursue ugliness too far, his morality seems to fall short of real depth (of the kind, for instance, which Conrad reveals by some of the same methods). And because of this, his art finally falls under suspicion, too.

Yet it is quite possible that the evil or ugliness which James suggests—for whatever reasons he does so—more effectively reveal real sordidness than would the most explicit naming of particulars.

James saw himself as a romantic, and he is most often referred to by critics as such. But his manner is too incisive to put up with illusion, except for its own sake. He was more a manipulator of romance than a romanticist. "The Art of the romancer," he said, "is for the fun of it, insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him." James could cut-the-cable on his readers, but not on his own ironic sensibility. He constructed marvelously ingenious labyrinths, "catching" inside the labyrinths those who could be caught, remaining himself always in awe of those who could be caught (the Daisy Millers, the Isabelle Archers, the Maggie
Vervors). He remained in awe, in other words, of those who respond imaginatively and unmechanically to life—those who seem truly mysterious because they are truly involved in mystery. He himself seemed never able to immerse himself in what he considered the real substance of life—which is, ironically, "bewilderness." He could not seem to do, as Conrad insisted one should: "immerse himself in the destructive element."

For this reason James cannot really be considered a tragedian. His heroes, for one thing, seldom recognize their tragic flaw; and when, like Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," they do—no catharsis is there. Even Strether in The Ambassadors, who comes close to seeing himself, never makes the bridge with life which might bring him into a meaningful relationship with the world. Isabelle Archer is the closest of all to being a tragic figure in James's fiction; but, as with almost all of his protagonists (even those women in his later works), her alternatives are not truly tragic.

Nor is James a moralist; his illusions, which appear to delineate between good and evil, fail to do so, and remain ambiguous. And he is not really a mystic either; because he does not see how the infinite reflections of act and consequence resolve themselves into a harmonious totality which is meaningful because everything in that totality is seen to be equally responsible. This is knowledge.

23 Or totally discordant, according to the mystic who sees it—that is, according to whether he is a "white" or "black" mystic.
the mystic begins with; it is knowledge the tragedian approaches; it is knowledge the moralist defends or renounces—quite often arbitrarily. It is knowledge the ironist never completely accepts, one way or the other.

What James is, simply, is an ironist—neither excessively romantic, or excessively misanthropic. He is somewhere between—outside his "Country of the Blue."

But this does not mean that his works are outside it, that they do not see, do not save. They simply avoid absolutes; and in that sense they accurately mirror one aspect of life—the fact that life seems to be ambivalent and paradoxical. And in that sense they seem to be real.

Conrad, discussing James, is most definitive on this point. He says: "James's characters renounce the shadows;" and he says that such a solution by rejection:

... must always present a certain lack of finality, especially startling when contrasted with the usual methods of solution by rewards and punishments, by crowned love, by fortune, by a broken leg, or a sudden death... Why the reading public, which as a body, has never laid upon a story-teller the command to be an artist, should demand for him this shame of divine omnipotence, is utterly incomprehensible. But so it is; and these solutions are legitimate inasmuch as they satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of the earth... 24

Conrad concludes: "One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James's novels. His book ends as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of life still going on."
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals
