1985

Objects of desire

Joy DeStefano

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OBJECTS OF DESIRE

by

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B.A., University of Montana, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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1985

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Date June 4, 1985
The focus of this thesis is *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), by Henry James. What is at issue in the novel is a dispute over a houseful of rare furniture and expensive art-objects. The thesis explores the nature of this dispute by examining the human relations with the "things" which are the center of the conflict.

The method of exploration is a literary theory of inference adapted from that suggested by Kenneth Burke. The method proceeds with an analysis of the novel on the basis of tracking down the recurrence of one term, "thing(s)," throughout the novel, and with the building of an interpretation based upon the meaning, equations, and implications which emerge from the appearance and transformation of that one term.

The meaning of the term "thing" is explored from a phenomenological point of view. The thesis upholds the view that material "things," or objects, have an independent reality and power of presencing that is necessary to, and shared by, but not created by, human consciousness. Human beings exist in a necessary relation to the "things" that constitute the world. The problems that human beings have with each other are directly related to the problems we have living in harmony with the "things" around us.

One of the important implications that emerges from the novel's story of a dispute over "things" is the problem of desire. It can be shown that the novel phenomenologically reveals the problem with "things" in three important aspects of human desire: avidity, idolatry, and sexuality. The factor of imperialism is also interwoven with these three aspects.

The thesis also holds that, through this method of interpretation, James's artistic and moral vision can be shown to be not only passionately attentive to the particulars of human existence but dedicated to a whole and unifying vision that addresses the sources of human suffering and seeks to restore the moral unity that is lacking in our relations with one another and with our world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Robert Johnstone for his friendship, and for his clairvoyant, dialectical criticism. Under his keen and patient scrutiny the thesis took shape and came to life. It is therefore dedicated to him--because he is "in it"--with all my gratitude and admiration. I learned many things from him, about Henry James, about scholarship, and about myself. I regard his exemplary synthesis of reason and passion, knowledge and love, as the finest guidance and inspiration I have received in all my education.

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Thanks also to Philip Maloney, another true Teacher, who gave generously of his time and interest in my project, despite what Henry James said about Russian novels.

And to my husband, Tom Birch, love and kisses for so patiently living through the whole thing with me, and for saying to me on that fateful day, "There's an essay by Heidegger that you might like..."
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epigraph</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Things Themselves</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things and Their Equations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Imperialism and Love of Beauty</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Restoration of Things</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.

T. S. Eliot

That is why so many painters have said that
things look at them.

Merleau-Ponty
"'All that bother about a houseful of furniture,','" R.P. Blackmur remarks, "is the shining indifferent re-
response to *The Spoils of Poynton*, where a more interested
response would have been to exclaim 'What an extraor-
dinary quality of human value Henry James managed to
focus in a houseful of furniture!'"¹

It was that quality, the relations between people
and things, that arrested me in my first reading of the
novel. The story itself is simple enough on its sur-
face, but the telling of that story makes it a remarkable
work of art. The particular key to the novel's artistic
success, that I stumbled upon and that began to fairly
leap from every page, was the phenomenological appearance
of "things."

*The Spoils of Poynton* is fundamentally about "things." But that proposition becomes more complex once we inquire
into the nature and meaning of "things." I have since
found that to discover the meaning of "things" is to
approach the meaning of *The Spoils*, and, conversely, the
novel can be seen as an exploration into the meaning of
"things."

It is the household objects which provide the "bone
of contention," the center of the dispute, which is the
agency of the novel's drama. These objects, enshrined

¹
in the magnificent house called Poynton, are often referred to in the narration and dialogue as "things."
Curiously, one begins to notice that many other things are referred to by the same term, and the suspicion arises that "things" are rather deliberately confused with other possible "things."

The main agents of the drama, Mrs. Gereth and Fleda Vetch, befriend one another on the basis of a shared appreciation of beautiful things, which is also, in the first scene, a shared dismay at the ugliness of the things around them at Waterbath. The mistress of this dreadful place is Mona Brigstock, who, Mrs. Gereth fears, will become engaged to her son, Owen. This is indeed what happens once Mona has seen Poynton, which Owen has recently inherited. Mrs. Gereth is frantic about the imagined fate of her rare collection of things, once they are in the hands of a Philistine like Mona. She acts on her fears, makes Fleda (who secretly loves Owen) her ally, and the battle over things has begun.

As in any similar family dispute, the characters involved become downright ugly, even sinister, in their respective, socially-acceptable ways of abusing and tormenting one another. Only Fleda remains free of such sordid behavior, although she comes close to becoming victimized by the attitudes and actions of the other characters. The motivation and objective of these actions
are the things which are the center of the story.

Because of the commonplace nature of the word "thing" in ordinary usage, it often passes our notice in fictional works. It is not the kind of word that draws attention to itself, or that one would trouble to ponder, as it usually disguises itself in its context. It is a very strange word.

Frequent repetition of the term may serve to bridge various contexts by its appearance in each of them. This is what seems to happen with "things" in The Spoils. In general, the term can be (synchronously) an abstraction, a transparency through which its context is visible (as in "the thing we talked about yesterday"). But it can also become, through frequent repetition, (diachronically) concrete. That is, through repetition in different contexts the term gains an opacity that does not reflect its immediate context but allows it to reflect the larger context created by its own multiplicity.

In the novel what seems amusing at first, but more serious later, is that the term also functions as a pun. The word primarily refers to the household objects, but it also refers to many other kinds of things, and the occasional confusion of referents provides for some humorous and some thought-provoking questions as to what may be meant by such an implicit, or explicit, pun.

Furthermore, the word is gradually transformed from
its empirical reference to other less tangible meanings and equations. What are the implications that arise from a fusion of "things" in themselves with "things" we do, "things" we say, or feel, and "things" which are important and not easily articulated?

The Spoils of Poynton can be seen to be constructed on the repetition, equations, transformations, and implications of the word "thing." In my attempt to form a coherent interpretation based on what I saw as James's intentional "logic" of "things," I found one of Kenneth Burke's suggested methods of literary criticism to be not only helpful, but necessary in my endeavor. No other critical view is as appropriate for the inferential approach which the novel demands.

Burke's method is that of an analysis of a work of art with regard to particular terms, and a tracking-down of those terms in the text. Both the "internality amongst those terms," and their implications extending beyond the text to the realm of shared human experience, allow for a critical interpretation that may be philosophical and social as well as literary.

Burke summarizes his method as (in part) an attempt "to sketch a technique for the analysis of a work in its nature as a structure of organically-interrelated terms." He says this method is "somewhat phenomenological in aim, seeking to get at the psychological depth of a work through
the sheer comparison of its surfaces." The tracking-down of a term, including its equations and transformations, allows us to unearth the deeper implications of the whole work. Since Henry James was very much concerned with matters of art and human actions, and since his aesthetic can be shown to be essentially phenomenological, I have found the application of Burke's method to be compatible, complementary, and illuminating with regard to the art of Henry James.

I have also appealed to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Santayana for their philosophical understanding of the particular human situation that James depicts and dramatizes in the novel. I have tried to weave these philosophical and aesthetic views together in such a way that does not belie their respective differences, or impose upon James's inherent refinement and subtlety. Instead, I have tried to combine these shared concerns for a better understanding of the necessary and peculiar relations between people and things.

I don't claim to have resolved any overwhelming questions about the nature of things. But I think it can be shown, in this approach to understanding Henry James's artistic and moral vision, that The Spoils of Poynton speaks to our existential plight as creatures of desire, and appeals to our appreciation of the importance and meaning of "things"--the objects of our desire.
My first chapter begins with a discussion of "things" as they are presented in the novel and in the Preface to the New York Edition. 5 James's own critical commentary on the novel is important to our concern here for the light it casts upon the necessarily noumenal quality of the Things themselves—a quality which is sustained throughout the work and essential to the ending.*

Partly because of this quality, the Things themselves become translated and transformed into other equations. I show in the second and third chapters how this development is generated by the term "thing," and why this development is central to the whole work. I show this by shifting back and forth between the "internality" of the term's relations in the text, and the implications which emerge from the metaphorical world of the novel to touch and intersect with the larger world of human experience.

*The Dictionary of Philosophy defines noumenon as: "literally, thing known by the mind as against the senses. Kant's alternative term for a thing-in-itself, which we could never be acquainted with, or even in any way know what it was like. But Kant thought that noumena must be postulated, to account for the appearances (phenomena) we are confronted with." 6

Although the Things in the novel can be and are experienced, James creates an ambiguity as to whether it is the objects themselves which are "experienced," or, rather, if it is what the Things mean to the people concerned with them that is experienced. This psychological insight on James's part is absolutely essential to the novel's dramatic development.
Chapter four addresses James's technique in *The Spoils* (and more generally) with particular focus on the formal success of the novel, and how this formal completeness is a moral completeness. The conclusion wraps things up, returning to the premise that is fundamental to the novel, and to the world of things we take for granted: we live in necessary relation with the things around us, and problems of human desire are problems of the objects of desire.
Chapter One
The Things Themselves

First we must look closely at the Things themselves as they figure in the novel. The most obvious point to be made initially is that without them there would be no novel. There is a continuous tension created by, on the one hand, the noumenal quality of the real objects, and on the other hand the powerful agency of these mysterious Things which initiate and prompt every human act, relationship, speech, and consequence. Their "role" as agents in the drama is objectively underplayed and affectively overt. They are not realistically described, but they are certainly real in the part they play and in the passions they arouse.

In his Preface, James recounts the problems he had in presenting (he doesn't say "representing") the Things themselves. What he wanted to do with them, for them, he was prevented from successfully doing (he claims). However, the more he speaks of what he "would have" done, the more we may be tempted to believe this is in fact what he did finally do.

On the face of it the "things" themselves would form the very centre of such a crisis; these grouped objects, all conscious of their eminence and their price, would enjoy, in any picture of a conflict, the heroic importance. They would have to be presented, they would have to be
painted—arduous and desperate thought; something would have to be done for them not too ignobly unlike the great array in which Balzac, say, would have marshalled them: that amount of workable interest at least would evidently be "in it."

(Preface, p.ix)

Although language is capable of presenting things that painting cannot, the reverse is also true. Cezanne's paintings, for example, bear this out; he succeeded in the very place that James claims here to have been thwarted. Cezanne's apples have that look of almost knowing they are looked at; James sought to present the Things—as Things that know they are felt—without having to explain their agency. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees."

James needed, for the novel, a human consciousness to perform the function of understanding that belongs to artistic language—to appreciate, to appraise, to interpret the "things" and "the power in them that one had from the first appreciated" (Preface, p.xiii). He explains how Fleda's consciousness came to replace that of the Things:

For something like Fleda Vetch had surely been latent in one's first apprehension of the theme; it wanted, for treatment, a centre, and, the most obvious centre being "barred," this image, while I still wondered, had, with all the assurance in the world, sprung up in its place. The real centre, as I say, the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged around it, would have
been the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle, the Things, always the splendid Things, placed in the middle light, figured and constituted, with each identity made vivid, each character discriminated, and their common consciousness of their great dramatic part established.

(Preface, p. xii)

James implies that to have presented the Things as conscious would have required "dialogue" (p. xii), and the danger in this would have been to cheapen them by animating or personifying them.

The spoils of Poynton were not directly articulate, and though they might have, and constantly did have, wondrous things to say, their message fostered about them a certain hush of cheaper sound—as a consequence of which, in fine, they would have been costly to keep up.

(Preface, p. xii)

Fleda, he tells us, was "maintainable at less expense" (xii), but the bargain he struck was a technical necessity, not really a choice. If the Things themselves have the capacity to motivate human actions, then how was he to convey this? He was forced to characterize the Things through their being perceived. They could not otherwise be presented without their appearing to be something they were not, or could not be. Instead of having them appear autonomously, they would have to appear as they were apprehended by the other characters. Artistically, this seemed to James to be a compromise, but philosophically, the process through which the Things
appear in the novel is in keeping with the reality of how Things appear to people, what Things mean to people, and what Things do to people.

Yes, it is a story of cabinets and chairs and tables; they formed the bone of contention, but what would merely "become" of them, magnificently passive, seemed to represent a comparatively vulgar issue. The passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would, like that of Helen of Troy, set in motion, was what, as a painter, one had really wanted of them, was the power in them that one had from the first appreciated.

(Preface, p. xiii)

Comparing the power of the Things to Helen of Troy is a cryptic but highly suggestive way to emphasize the agency of the Things. (I will return to this image in Chapter Three.) James is pointing out, here in the Preface, that the human drama of the novel is not independent of the objects of that conflict. The bonding that exists between the Things and the human characters is a bonding that depends as much on the one side as on the other. This reciprocity between Things and people corresponds very realistically to how we, in fact, exist in the world. But more of that later.

Although James may not have succeeded in "painting" the Things as he would have done, he managed to convey them, albeit nonconspicuously, as animated and animating, as characters not living but alive in the drama of the novel. In the final chapter, the tragedy could be said to
be their tragedy, and it is in their smoke that Fleda finds herself, as she had once found herself in the splendor, the "gleam," of their "general glittering presence" (Preface, p. xii). The conviction of their central and powerful agency in the novel, and their reciprocal relation with the mortals around them, is further affirmed by this haunting statement in the Preface:

> The "things" are radiant, shedding afar, with a merciless monotony, all their light, exerting their ravage without remorse; and Fleda almost demonically both sees and feels, while the others but feel without seeing.

(p. xv)

One of the primary ways in which James established the bonding between Things and people is the way in which he extended the transforming presence of things by punning on the word "things." The repeated occurrence of the word "thing(s)" comes to bear a far greater weight of significance (in the unfolding drama itself) than a mere pun. The network of the term's appearance can be seen to be—to use one of James' metaphors—the very string that his pearls are strung on.

The first overt clue to the mileage James will gain from the word is found at the ending of the first chapter and the beginning of the second. Fleda is in transit from Waterbath to London, "and as she came up to town on the Monday what she stared at from the train in the suburban
fields was a future full of the things she particularly loved" (p. 11). Chapter Two immediately resumes with: "These were neither more nor less than the things with which she had had time to learn from Mrs. Gereth that Poynton overflowed" (p. 12).

The fact that this first overt equation of "things" with the Things occurs precisely at a shift in scene, is an example of what Kenneth Burke calls the "Scene-Act Ratio." Burke says: "It is a principle of drama that the nature of acts and agents should be consistent with the nature of the scene." James's theatrical experiments, which ended immediately before the writing of The Spoils, may have contributed to the structural consistency we find in the novel, insofar as the agency of the Things corresponds to the scenic changes and the actions of the characters. The correspondence is a causal one, in that the dramatic action of the characters always follows the appearance or movement of the Things—or, at least some concern with them.*

Even the first scene, which is Waterbath, is developed by the conspicuous absence of the Things at

* One example of such correspondence is pointed out overtly from within the text itself, when Fleda remarks ironically of Mona: "From the moment the house was once more what it had to be her natural charm reasserted itself" (p. 255).
Poynton—an absence that colors Waterbath in negative tones and announces in advance (and thus enhances) the beauty of Poynton's Things by contrast. It is in this scene that the meeting of Mrs. Gereth and Fleda (and all the principal characters, sans Things) becomes possible. It is out of absence that Fleda and Mrs. Gereth are thrown together, but although we are told that Fleda "was in her small way a spirit of the same family as Mrs. Gereth" (p. 11), we find later that their respective sources of suffering the "aesthetic misery" of Waterbath are actually quite different.

Fleda, who appreciates beautiful things, and Mrs. Gereth who possesses and is attached to her own fine things, are united by their mutual dismay at Waterbath. "The house was perversely full of souvenirs of places even more ugly than itself and of things it would have been a pious duty to forget" (p. 7). The notion of piety applied to forgetting the "things" at Waterbath will be reversed in the piety bestowed upon the Things at Poynton. There, Fleda will learn that for Mrs. Gereth "the piety most real to her was to be on one's knees before one's high standard" (p. 30). Santayana's definition of piety is pertinent here: "Piety, in its nobler and Roman sense, may be said to mean man's reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment." We will
come to see how Mrs. Gereth's "piety" is what Santayana describes as a "piratical or desperate venture" as opposed to a "sacred mission."

Fleda's aversion to ugliness is seized upon by Mrs. Gereth at Waterbath, as her reverence for beauty will be seized upon at Poynton. We can thus see how important are the objects of desire or repugnance to the imperious drama played out between the two principal characters of the novel. There is disparity between what the Things really are and how they are perceived—a disparity which provides for the crisis in which all the characters become entangled, in which Fleda becomes victimized, and for which Mrs. Gereth is primarily responsible.

The reader is forewarned from the beginning of Mrs. Gereth's tendency to overrule reality with her own ideas and plans. In the first scene we are told that she has "clutched at the idea that something might be done with the girl before her" (p. 8). Once the scene has shifted to Poynton, Fleda perceives that Mrs. Gereth's "passion" was "not the crude love of possession; it was the need to be faithful to a trust and loyal to an idea" (p. 46). The situation develops into something more serious; when Fleda objects to being "shown off" to Owen, "Mrs. Gereth was secretly surprised at her not being as happy to be sacrificed to the supremacy of a high standard as she was
to sacrifice her" (p. 37).

As the drama unfolds in the presence of the magnificent Things, they seem to diminish, in their actual value, in light of Mrs. Gereth's "high standard" and ideas, as they gain value, proportionately, in Fleda's estimation and appreciation of them. The power of the Things works madness on one and devotion on the other.

The tension between Mrs. Gereth's distorted ideas and the Things themselves is developed into the "eternal vicious circle" to which all the characters (Things included) become "condemned" (p. 57). Through the strange "accidental" mixture of Owen's legal and hymeneal rights, and Mrs. Gereth's obsession (all of which rests on the necessary presence of the Things), the situation becomes hopelessly binding on all concerned. Mrs. Gereth, partly because of her own obstinacy, is forced to select only certain Things. There are existential implications to be read into her "dilemma," which is described as "the odiousness of sacrificing the exquisite things one wouldn't take to the exquisite things one would. This immediately made the things one wouldn't the very things one ought to ..." (p. 57).

The passages that follow suggest that the Things themselves are imperiled by Mrs. Gereth's standards of "piety." The narrative describes their "faces of supplication,"
"these faces, so conscious of their race and their danger" (p. 57). There is then a glimpse of their actual beauty—translated immediately, however, by what Mrs. Gereth sees in them (i.e., herself):

The shimmer of wrought substances spent itself in the brightness; the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance in which the poor woman saw in solution all her old tricks and triumphs.

(p. 58)

The Things in the novel can never be seen for what they are in themselves; they are always translated by someone's appreciation or experience of them. The psychological truth of this phenomenon makes it clear that things are not as they appear, and that the reality of Things in themselves is subordinate to the human means by which they are treated and regarded. It is this situation which is the scene of all the unhappiness in the novel.

The Things may have been collected and possessed by Mrs. Gereth, but they are not safe with her. The reader is alerted to this fact in the first Poynton scene, that although they're "living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand," Mrs. Gereth's passion lies somewhere outside of them:

There's a care they want, there's a sympathy that draws out their beauty. Rather than make them over to a woman ignorant and vulgar I think
I'd deface them with my own hands ...

(p. 31)

This completely contradictory testimony is self-incriminating evidence which discredits her alleged concern for the Things. Furthermore, her speech to Owen only alienates him from her—not only does she denounce his beloved as "ignorant and vulgar," she goes on to prove what a negligible position Owen holds in the pantheon of things that are dear to her:

"The best things here, as you know, are the things your father and I collected, things all that we worked for and waited for and suffered for. Yes...there are things in the house that we almost starved for! They were our religion, they were our life, they were us! And now they're only me ..."

(pp. 30-31)

This parody of clichéd parental resentment permutates the reference of the word "things" to a debased domain.

The mystery surrounding the real Things can be seen as consistent with the mystery surrounding the motives and behavior of the characters. If things are, as Kant proposed, unknowable in themselves and only objects of human design and desire, then what are we to make of Mrs. Gereth's confession of identity with them? The subtlety of James' equation of people and things captures and discloses an experiential problem of human desires and actions. If there is this ambiguity in the objects of desire, does
this not reflect upon the ambiguity of the characters' motives and their relations with one another?

At this point we can depart from the Things themselves to discuss other equations of the word "thing," which will place things in the larger context of their implications.
Chapter Two
Things and Their Equations

In a passage that precedes the "eternal vicious circle" of having to choose the "things" one would take or leave behind, we are told that Fleda's sense of the "dreadful move" to Ricks was that she "had an imagination of drama, of a 'great scene,' a thing, somehow, of indignity and misery..." (p. 56). We can see here, as we will see frequently in the novel, an equation of the word "thing" with some kind of "great scene," or affair, or "matter." The dispute over the Things is itself a "thing," as in "the whole wretched thing" (p. 162), and human actions are "things," as in the sense that Owen "was doing things" that cause his mother so much torment (p. 59). When Mrs. Brigstock says to Fleda, "'There are things that have brought me here,'" "'They can't be things of any importance,'" Owen, to Fleda's surprise, suddenly asserted" (p. 175).

These equations are worthy of serious reflection, especially if we take into account the etymological meaning of the word "thing." Martin Heidegger tells us:

... the Old High German word thing means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter. In consequence, the Old German
words thing and dine become the names for an affair or matter of pertinence. They denote anything that in any way bears upon men, concerns them, and that accordingly is a matter for discourse.\textsuperscript{11}

We have seen how Mrs. Gereth's "high standard" or "idea" signals a disparity in how she perceives Things and how they really are; this disparity is also at work in her manner of distancing herself from the "matter" at hand—a matter in which she has played a great part in creating. This in turn means she becomes alienated from the people around her. The problem with the Things themselves and with "things in general" is thus shown to be, on the one hand, a problem of perception—an aesthetic problem; and on the other hand it is shown to be a problem of nearness and distance, which becomes a moral problem.

Mrs. Gereth's particular form of aestheticism means that she must be near her Things. Yet, as we have seen, she is no closer to them than she is to Owen. The moral consequence of her kind of "nearness" is, in Heidegger's words, "the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent."\textsuperscript{12} Heidegger develops this problem as one of how we live alienated from "things" because of our teleological presuppositions regarding them. He contradicts the Kantian view of things as mere objects of human use, by pointing out the necessity
of a rapport with things:

Indeed, the loss of rapport with things that occurs in states of depression would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still what is as a human state: that is, a staying with things. Only if this stay already characterizes human being can the things among which we are also fail to speak to us, fail to concern us any longer.

We can perhaps begin now to see the larger significance of the novel—it is, really, about how we exist only more or less in relation to the "things amongst which we are." Both aesthetic and moral problematics are mistaken by the characters in the novel as static relations, whereas in fact, as James shows us, they are dynamic relations which are interwoven and which constitute our reality.

The Things in the novel function as a priori relata of human relations, and they provide the fundamental "scene" in which all the human drama is enacted.* The relation between the presence of the Things in the novel (even before we see or know of them) and the human actions inspired by them, is a necessary relation that we are apt

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* By "scene" here I mean more than the dramatic setting. The "scene" provided by the Things is more than a literal representation of their presence; it is, rather, a dynamic scene of the power of the Things to arouse and incite human actions and relationships. The characters are apparently unaware—to their misfortune—of the moral and social implications arising from their relations with and amidst these household objects.
to take for granted in the novel as we take it for granted in our world. Henry James is not the kind of artist to let us take things for granted.

Mrs. Gereth's estrangement from Owen, and consequently her dispossession of Poynton, her home, is dependent upon the priority of her "high standard," which paradoxically has estranged her from the very objects of that standard: the Things themselves. It doesn't really matter what they are; what matters is how they are regarded. No wonder Fleda thinks at one point that "it would have been better never to have had such a place than to have had it and lose it" (p. 44). Her sympathy for Mrs. Gereth begins to wane when she tries to discern what has gone awry in the situation:

... what a strange relation between mother and son when there was no fundamental tenderness out of which a solution would irrepressibly spring! Was it Owen who was mainly responsible for that poverty? Fleda couldn't think so when she remembered that, so far as he was concerned, Mrs. Gereth would still have been welcome to keep her seat by the Poynton fire.

(p. 44)

The more Mrs. Gereth insists on her proximity to the Things, the further she is removed.

The paradox of conflicting subjective and objective values is primarily characterized by Mrs. Gereth in its worst manifestation, but Fleda suffers from a similar
paradox which sets her equally at odds with the world around her: Fleda's problem is that she loves beauty. If Fleda is difficult for us to understand (as the critical debate over her testifies), she is herself confounded by her own understanding of things. What does the love of beauty entail, in a world of inverted values? Furthermore, what is beauty? What is love? Such large questions deceptively arise from the dispute over rare household furniture.

I mentioned before that in the action of the novel the moving of the Things is inseparable from the shifting of the drama—the latter contingent upon the former. The correspondence is also expressed in the shift in terminology that occurs when the Things have been moved from Poynton to Ricks: the word "spoils" makes its first appearance, and the Things hereafter are referred to as such. The change of the nominative has its behavioral complement, as in: "What indeed was her spoliation of Poynton but the first engagement of a campaign?" (p. 78). There is an echo here of an earlier appearance of the verb in a different "case": "The truth was simply that all Mrs. Gereth's scruples were on one side and that her ruling passion had in a manner despoiled her of her humanity" (p. 37). Her humanity had been despoiled, and so had the Things.

There is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that,
for Mrs. Gereth, the Things were never anything but spoils, from other countries, other times. The fact that James changed the original title, *The Old Things*, to *The Spoils*, is pertinent in this regard. It is in Fleda that the spoliation is felt most keenly, as we learn in her first sleepless night at Ricks, with the transplanted Things around her:

She couldn't care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness. In the watches of the night she saw Poynton dishonoured; she had cherished it as a happy whole, she reasoned, and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs. To lie there in the stillness was partly to listen for some soft low plaint from them.

(p. 78)

Again, the factor of scene is very important: Poynton was a whole, greater than the sum of its parts. Crammed into Ricks, the Things have the ambience of being "stolen;" the aesthetic proportions of the scene reflect the moral proportions.

Fleda tried to think of some of the things at Poynton still unappropriated, but her memory was a blank about them, and in the effort to focus the old combinations she saw again nothing but gaps and scars, a vacancy that gathered at moments into something worse.

(p. 79)

The "something worse" is of course the existential (and ultimately cosmic) implications that spiral outwards,
entangling and altering the relationships between people, and between people and the world around them.* Santayana, in speaking of the symbols and objects of human piety, says that things are the "foci of communal life." What happens in the novel is that these objects of household piety become the foci of a distorted, antagonistic communal life.

Regarding the more cosmic implications, Heidegger argues that the way we "preserve" the "fourfold" of our existence—earth, sky, divinity, mortals—is in "dwelling."

How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth, under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather, dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things ... But things themselves secure the fourfold only when they themselves as things are let be in their presencing.17

For Fleda, it is this loss of presencing that is felt in the spoliation of Poynton.**

* It never seems to occur to Fleda that Poynton itself is a version of spoliation on a grander scale, as implied by the title of the novel.

** This is what Fleda's "imagination of disaster" correctly intuits on three important occasions in the novel: at Poynton (p. 56), at Ricks (above, p. 79), and in the train at the end of the novel (p. 262).
The ramifications of displacement, homelessness, and disproportion emerge from the distorted relations between people and things. In the end, Fleda is more homeless than at the beginning; Mrs. Gereth is displaced, dispossessed; the Things are stolen, and then returned only to be destroyed. Owen and Mona, too, at the end are in a kind of exile from "home."

The narrative also brings up other social factors related to the problem of "dwelling." For example, there is "the cruel English custom of the expropriation of the lonely mother" (p. 15), but Mrs. Gereth uses this factor to gain Fleda's sympathy (also on page 49). When Fleda suggests the idea of a common household as a "graceful compromise,"

Mrs. Gereth hailed this question with a wan compassionate smile: she replied that a common household was in such a case just so inconceivable that Fleda had only to glance over the fair face of the English land to see how few people had ever conceived it. It was always thought a wonder, a "mistake," a piece of overstrained sentiment; and she confessed she was as little capable of a flight of that sort as Owen himself.

(p. 18)

There is double-edged criticism here: of English customs and attitudes, and of Mrs. Gereth's easy adaptation of them for her argument. "Fleda's breath was sometimes taken away by the great fierce bounds and elisions which, on Mrs. Gereth's lips, the course of discussion could take"
The social factors thus appear to be a consequence, not a cause, of the displacement or homelessness that occurs because of our inability to "stay with things." The agency of the Things in the novel reflects the agency of the "things" amongst which we have our human being. Things constitute our world.

"Things" were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china.

In the Preface, James speaks very directly of this disjunctive human condition as embodied by Mrs. Gereth:

One thing was "in it," in the sordid situation, on the first blush, and one thing only—though this, in its limited way, no doubt, a curious enough value: the sharp light it might project on that most modern of our current passions, the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and the joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more labouring ages. A lively mark of our manners indeed the diffusion of this curiosity and this avidity, and full of suggestion, clearly, as to their possible influence on other passions and other relations.

Let us then consider more specifically some of these "other passions and other relations" in the reflected light of the Things and their equations.

First, the necessary condition of spatial relations
is an a priori "given" which the artist makes explicit in confronting our habits of taking it for granted. Human social relations rely upon this condition, empirically and psychologically. As I mentioned before, Heidegger finds the problems in human relations to be fundamentally spatial problems—of nearness and distance—literally and metaphorically.

We have looked at Mrs. Gereth's alienation as arising, at least in part, from the disjunction between her "standards" and the real Things, and we have looked at the consequences of that disjunction as dramatized scenically (spatially)—resulting finally in a quite literal alienation from her home, as well as from other people. As Heidegger says, the necessary relations of "nearness and remoteness between men and things can become mere distance, mere intervals of intervening space." Metaphorically and literally Fleda ends up wandering in the emptiness of the moral and spatial "absence" created by Mrs. Gereth's strange relations with Things.

The passion with which Mrs. Gereth endeavors to preserve her "high standard," and to enforce her version of "staying with things," is perhaps best understood in terms of sexuality. As Merleau-Ponty says, in a statement that applies to art as well as to philosophy, an exploration of sexual experience is "an opportunity of acquainting
oneself with the human lot in its most general aspects of autonomy and dependence."\(^{19}\)

The novel explores the engagement of sexuality in the drama over Things as another dimension of aesthetic and moral relations. The pairing of characters is either caused by or altered by the dispute over Things. There is some confusion as to how "close" the characters are to each other, and why they are attracted or repulsed by one another. For example, Mrs. Gereth is somehow estranged from Owen because he has inherited Poynton; Mona calls off the marriage when Mrs. Gereth spoliates Poynton; Mrs. Gereth spoliates Poynton because of the engagement; Owen and Fleda are thrown together by these accidental occurrences rather than through a free expression of love. These are the principal instances of how the paradoxical nature of sexuality becomes unnatural and negative in all the human relations as they are developed in the novel. The natural paradox, which Merleau-Ponty calls "one of the contradictions of love," is explained in his words as arising "from the metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself."\(^{20}\) The paradigmatic example of subjectivity in conflict with objectivity is Mrs. Gereth, who cannot (or refuses to) see herself in relation to others; nor does she see how she is seen by others. She becomes like the Things she idolizes. She
does not see or feel other people.*

Merleau-Ponty asserts that the "primacy of perception" is that it distinguishes human beings from their own "thingness." But the reciprocity between people and things is also found in that "vision happens among, or is caught in, things—in that place where something visible undertakes to see, becomes visible for itself by virtue of the sight of things."21

Mrs. Gereth is an extreme example of someone who is visible to herself only by virtue of the sight of Things. "She couldn't leave her own house without the peril of exposure" (p. 12), is symptomatic of the extent to which her psycho-sexual being is invested in the spoils of Poynton. Her finding herself subjectively in this way complements her blindness to how she is seen by others. Concerning her strange relations with Owen, for example, we learn how she wants to be seen:

The great wrong Owen had done her was not his "taking up" with Mona—that was disgusting, but it was a detail, an accidental form; it was his failure from the first to understand what it was to have a mother at all, to appreciate the beauty and sanctity of the character ... One's mother ... was a subject for poetry, for idolatry.

(p. 49)

* She projects human qualities of feeling, seeing, knowing, onto the Things, instead of letting them be in their own presencing. Nor does she let other people be themselves.
We then learn that she wants to be "idolized" like Madame de Jaume. Perhaps she wants to hold the same power over others as her Things hold over her.

There are other clues in the novel which suggest that Mrs. Gereth's machinations of the dispute are related to her uneasiness with her own sexuality and with her son's. Amongst Mona, Fleda, and herself, the fight over Things often looks like a fight over Owen. If this is true, then Mrs. Gereth wears the most concealing of masks. Merleau-Ponty explains: "Sexuality conceals itself from itself beneath a mask of generality, and continually tries to escape from the tension and drama which it sets up."22 Fleda, of course, is part of that escape; not only is she a pawn in Mrs. Gereth's marriage scheme, she also becomes indicted as guilty in the scheme. When all is lost at the end, Mrs. Gereth blames Fleda for everything, and betrays the very objects of her obsession: "It was your clever sympathy that did it--your beautiful feeling for those accursed vanities" (p. 223).

It seems that a kind of displacement has occurred in Mrs. Gereth's life, which determines her existence in an obsessive relation to Things, and excessively worldly things at that. Early in the novel Fleda sees "the poor lady's strange, almost maniacal disposition to thrust everywhere the question of 'things,' to read all behavior in the
light of some fancied relation to them" (p. 24). Ironically, as I have been arguing, all behavior can be read in light of, and in fact necessarily relies upon, Things—but it is Mrs. Gereth's "fancied relation" that is the problem. Her dependence upon her Things is a pathological, not a necessary, relation. She does directly equate them with herself more than once, and the narration contributes other indirect evidence: "The mind's eye could indeed see Mrs. Gereth only in her thick coloured air; it took all the light of her treasures to make her concrete and distinct" (p. 146). "Fleda reflected that what she 'required' was simply every object that surrounded her" (p. 46).

Fleda, by contrast, has a "healthier," although socially naive, way of standing in relation to things and to other people. Her sense of the autonomy of beautiful things is consistent with her unfortunate but wise insistence that Owen be "free" before she will accept him. "She couldn't care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness" (p. 78). This passage is symmetrical with her refusal of Owen:

"The great thing is to keep faith. Where's a man if he doesn't? If he doesn't he may be so cruel. So cruel, so cruel, so cruel!" Fleda repeated. "I couldn't have a hand in that, you know; that's
my position—that's mine. You offered her marriage. It's a tremendous thing for her."

(p. 197)

James carefully constructed the sexual relations to correspond with the relations to Things; for every pairing of characters there is a third presence, always that of the Things, and at some point each character reveals, or is described in terms of, how they stand in relation to the Things—or the spoils—of Poynton. For example, the moral difference between Fleda's and Mrs. Gereth's aestheticism is developed at some length in Chapter Twelve:

If Mrs. Gereth's apparent determination to hustle her into Owen's arms was accompanied with an air of holding her dignity rather cheap, this was after all only as a consequence of her being held in respect to some other attributes rather dear. It was a new version of the old story of being kicked upstairs ... Mrs. Gereth's passion was keener now and her scruple more absent; the prolonged contest made a demand on her, and her pugnacity had become one with her constant habit of using such weapons as she could pick up. She had no imagination about anybody's life save on the side she bumped against ... Mrs. Gereth had really no perception of anybody's nature--had only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid? To be clever meant to know the "marks." Fleda knew them by direct inspiration... The girl now had hours of somber hope she might never see anything "good" again: that kind of experience was clearly so broken a reed, so fallible a source of peace.

(p. 138)

The other characters, too, are described in moral and aesthetic terms of their standing in relation to "things."
Mona, for example, who appears at the beginning of the novel only to demonstrate her Philistine vulgarity, is characterized thereafter in absentia as "So ugly and vulgar, in the light of this squabble" (Owen's words, p.99). The only important human "event" of the novel--the marriage--is contingent upon where the Things are.

Fleda's unselfish, unselfconscious appreciation of the Things in themselves is what, ironically, causes her trouble. The fact that "she thought of them without a question of any personal right" (p. 235) is naive and aberrant with regard to the whole situation. The betrayal of tenderness and affection and the way spiritual values are belied by the "gross material ravage" (p. 219) that emerges from the world of the novel, are dramatized concisely in the "coincidence" and implications of Fleda's love for Things translated to her love for Owen.

With the shift in scene from Poynton to Ricks, and the moving of the Things from Poynton to Ricks, and the change of terms from "things" to spoils," there is also a shift in Fleda's allegiance--from Mrs. Gereth to Owen--and in her feelings towards Owen. The irony with which this shift is indicated in the narration is also humorous: "She thought of him perpetually and her eyes had come to rejoice in his manly magnificence more even than they
rejoiced in the royal cabinets of the red saloon" (p. 58).*

The overstating of the fact that people become objects of desire for one another is a developmental step in the logic of the story. Since Fleda's perception of "things" is central to our understanding of the human relations, it is doubly important to follow the transformation of her aesthetic appreciation to a sexual appreciation of Owen, and consequently her exiled understanding and helplessness in the face of new developments, within and outside herself.

Fleda, mostly subject, becomes an object of desire for Owen. "To know she had become to him an object of desire gave her wings that she felt herself flutter in the air: it was like the rush of a flood into her own accumulations" (p. 105). The conflicting metaphors of fluttering in the air and being flooded not only express the paradox of sexuality, but intimate a tension of autonomy and dependence that is intensified by the larger scene of the ongoing dispute: is Fleda tangentially an object, like the things? Owen recognizes Fleda's value in proportion to

* The "thingness" of Owen is wonderfully indicated in an earlier passage describing "his impatience shining in his idle eyes as the dining-hour shines in club-windows" (p. 47).
his dependence upon her to get his things back for him.*

Examining the sexual relations in the novel we find they are dependent upon aesthetic relations. The artistic truth of this correspondence may be justified by the fact that, as David Daiches argues, for James "what has aesthetic significance possesses moral significance automatically."23 This kind of interpretation is encouraged, in part, by the mixing of metaphors and suggestive images. For example, when Mrs. Gereth contemplates the threat of Owen and Mona's marriage and proprietorship of Poynton, she thinks in the ambiguous terms of "the horrors they would perpetrate in the house" (p. 19). The sportive physicality of the pair's relationship and their aesthetic Philistinism are, to Mrs. Gereth, the same thing.**

More importantly, the sexual/aesthetic ambiguity is often carried by the word "thing." When Mona puts her "patent-leather foot" down and delays the marriage, Fleda has mixed feelings:

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* Owen's ingenuous duplicity is subtle but astounding. When the Things are moved to Ricks, he claims "'I never knew how much I cared for them'" (p. 88). Then, in the final "love" scene with Fleda, he actually tells her, "'I never looked at you—not to call looking--till she had regularly driven me to it'" (p. 191).

** It is as Fleda once tells Mrs. Gereth: "'You confound, Mrs. Gereth. You mix things up'" (p. 256).
She had guessed the truth at Waterbath and had suffered from it at Poynton; at Ricks the only thing she could do was accept it with the dumb exaltation she felt rising. Mona had been prompt with her exercise of the member in question, for it might be called prompt to do that sort of thing before marriage.

(p. 92)

The mention of the three major scenes of the novel in connection with the sexual pun on "thing" suggests the overlapping agency of sexuality with the scene of the Things.

The punning in this regard is subtle until we pay closer attention to the frequent appearance of the word "thing." Fleda, meeting Owen in London the first time, "noticed on this occasion more things in Owen Gereth than she had ever noticed before, but what she noticed most was that he said no word of his intended" (p. 64). Later, she says to him, "'You see, Mr. Owen, how impossible it is to talk of such things yet!'" (p. 188). Regarding Mona's behavior in the dispute, the pun is extended a bit further, as Fleda thinks: "To have loved Owen apparently, and yet to have loved him only so much, only to the extent of a few tables and chairs, was not a thing she could so much as try to grasp" (p. 107).

The notion of "grasping" is not one associated with Fleda's character, aesthetically, sexually, or morally, but it is apt with regard to the other characters. Daiches
points out that "James was concerned with moral issues as they emerged in social behavior." The grasping social behavior of the other characters can be understood, and is in fact presented by the terms of the novel, as imperialistic. The factor of imperialism is closely interwoven with sexuality, aesthetics, and love, and a closer look at this implication will take us deeper into the logic of "things."
Chapter Three

Love of Imperialism and Love of Beauty

The extent to which the characters' social and sexual behavior is bonded to the objects surrounding them is determined not only by the major scenes and Things at Poynton, Waterbath and Ricks, but also by the minor scenes and minor "things"—at London, in Fleda's father's house, and at her sister's house.* Even the insignificant biscuit on the floor, when Mrs. Brigstock surprises Owen and Fleda, is read as a "sign" of "some scene that the newspapers would have characterized as lively" (p. 169). "For Mrs. Brigstock there was apparently more in it than met the eye."

There is likewise more than meets the eye in the Things as they appear in the novel. It is through them that we perceive the imperialism represented and promulgated by Mrs. Gereth. The Maltese Cross, for example, which is perhaps the most pivotal Thing in the novel, essential to the denouement, is actually a relic of the Spanish Inquisition, obtained under dubious auspices:

That description, though technically incorrect, had always been applied at Poynton to a small but marvellous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period, the existence and precarious

* There are too many examples to quote here, but I refer the reader to pages 145, 153, 157, 195, 237.
accessibility of which she had heard of at Malta, years before, by an odd and romantic chance—a clue followed through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at last unearthed.

(p. 74)

The Maltese Cross succinctly symbolizes the mixture of imperialism and idolatry.

Other pieces of the collection which are specified historically are of the age of Louis Quinze (p. 22) and Louis Seize (p. 104). The Things are referred to as "trophies of her struggles" (p. 71), and in the Preface James calls them "the prize of battle" and compares them to Helen of Troy.

The image, or symbol, of Helen of Troy, is perhaps the most important generative equation to be associated with the novel. "Helen" implies the ultimate of desire, the ultimate object of desire, and the ultimate motivation for destruction. We need only think of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus; furthermore, it is no accident that the first atomic bomb ever exploded, at the Trinity test site, was named "Helen."

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

Her lips suck forth my soul—see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for Heaven is in these lips
And all is dross that is not Helena.
The fact that James equates Helen of Troy with the Things is an unmistakable allusion to the knot of sexuality, imperialism, and destruction which is tied to Mrs. Gereth's character. Kenneth Burke points out that

Where James has used an image to build up a character whose social and moral status is clearly defined in the book, turning things around we can interpret this known status as a hierarchical placement of the image. We thus have the bridging device... that will unite moral and social hierarchies with the natural and artificial objects that James treats as their equivalents.26

James also refers to the dispute as "that 'row,' so to call it, between mother and son over their household gods" (Preface, p. ix), which further extends the Ilium allusion, and he claims that he wished the Things to "suggest the gleam of brazen idols and precious metals and inserted gems in the tempered light of some arching place of worship" (p. xii). Because these equations direct our understanding of the novel in terms of imperialism—with special emphasis on the idolatry of Things—we can't help but see Mrs. Gereth as a distorted parody of Aeneas, who transferred his household gods from the wreckage of Ilium to the foundation of Rome.

In the text, Mrs. Gereth is said to be "the great queen-mother," and "a heroine guarding a treasure" (p. 146). "She trod the place like a reigning queen or a proud usurp-
er" (p. 46). We are told that Mr. and Mrs. Gereth "had saved on lots of things in life, and there were lots of things they hadn't had at all, but they had had in every corner of Europe their swing among the demons of Jews" (p. 13).

Mrs. Gereth is described as "imperious" (pp. 14 and 221), and "perversely and imperiously sociable" (p. 117). The thought of giving Mona the house makes her turn "pale as if she had heard of the landing, there on her coast, of a foreign army" (p. 116). There are many such similes which equate her with imperialism. And we must not forget that the Things are equated with "spoils"--the "translated spoils" (p. 246).

Spoils of conquest, apart from the things they are in themselves, are objects of idolatrous desire and become symbols of domination over other people. Through James's metaphors, we are shown that the dispute over a houseful of furniture is of the same family as national imperialism. Kenneth Burke explains the multi-dimensional power of these equations:

We could not say that his references to "mysteries," "household gods," "place of worship," and the like are merely opportunistic and negligible. Nor should we, on the other hand, treat the material "Things" as though he meant them to be endowed with true divinity. . . Yet clearly these household Things are also Spirits; or they are
charismatic vessels of some sort . . . The quarrel over heirlooms, desired as a testimony of status, attains a higher dimension, as James finds in the objects a glow that can place them in some realm or order transcending the quarrel as such.27

It is unclear whether Mrs. Gereth has internalized a cultural tradition or whether she is the type of individual who makes collective imperialism possible. What is clear is that the specific premise of her ruling passion is aesthetic imperialism, from which all the rest follows. She tells Fleda at the end: "you'll at any rate be a bit of furniture. For that, a little, you know, I've always taken you--quite one of my best finds" (p. 245).

James's focus on the domestic version of idolatrous imperialism casts a strange light on the fact that our social relations are more grossly material than we like to admit (disguising the truth with "high standards"), and that moral or immoral acts may be determined by our perceptions of and relations to empirical reality. "Things," which are so much more than mere objects, come to be regarded as spoils.*

Mrs. Gereth's character is complicated by the apparent validity of her aesthetic taste, which attracts and finally victimizes Fleda. The Things themselves serve to hold

* The rise in property crimes and vandalism in imperial societies like ours is a measure of the fact that the increase in having means an increase of wanting and a decrease in caring for the things we have.
Fleda, even though she realizes that Mrs. Gereth is using her, "not only with the best conscience in the world but with a high brutality of good intentions" (p. 131). Fleda's aesthetic sensibility is exploited for Mrs. Gereth's ends, and when she falls in love with Owen, that, too, is made use of. Mrs. Gereth's delight at discovering Fleda's secret is like "the loud lawful tactless joy of the explorer leaping upon the strand."

She was nothing if not practical: almost the only thing she took account of in her young friend's soft secret was the excellent use she could make of it—a use so much to her taste that she refused to feel a hindrance in the quality of the material.

(p. 131)

Beautiful "things" are transformed into tools of oppression, and "taste" becomes the appetite for power. Santayana describes this tendency in terms of "will":

A want of rationality and measure in the human will, that has not learned to prize small betterments and finite but real goods, compels it to deceive itself about the rewards of life in order to secure them.28

Mrs. Gereth's "aesthetic" hunger is easily characterized as pathological and exploitive, but Fleda's character is composed in such a way that we cannot dismiss the love of Things as categorically imperialistic. "The museums had done something for her, but nature had done more"
For Mrs. Gereth, the world is divided into a dualism of "gimcracks" and "treasures," and people are either Philistines or initiates. But Fleda's sensibility isn't "taste," it is the love of Beauty, which is unqualified by the "question of any personal right" (p. 235). Her poverty of things and lack of avidity is her isolation and her freedom from the willfulness of those around her. Although she has "the sense of being buried alive, smothered in the mere expansion of another will" (p. 209), she retains more autonomy than the others, without forsaking her love of beauty or her moral scruples. In the Preface James says,

the free spirit, always much tormented, and by no means always triumphant, is heroic, ironic, pathetic, or whatever, and, as exemplified in the record of Fleda Vetch, for instance, "successful," only through having remained free.

(p. xv)

Because of the symmetry of Fleda's aesthetic and moral appreciation and vulnerability, it seems that James is seeking, through Fleda, for a way to disclose the love of beauty as the love of goodness, in a context that requires the renunciation of one or the other--which would mean the loss of both.* Mrs. Gereth's renunciation of goodness

* A similar dilemma faces Hyacinth in The Princess
disqualifies her alleged love of beauty.

The novel's overlapping, or intersecting, elements of aesthetics, sexuality, idolatry and imperialism, are the complex constituents of love. As Dante saw it, all sin is privation or perversion of love—but love it still is. The tangible evidence of love and its perversions can be found in the things around us, how we perceive them, and what we do with them. St. Augustine's maxim was that "invisible things are known by the visible things that are made." Things are expressive or symbolic of our passions and desires; or, they are objects of our needs and desires, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill.

James demonstrates (in much of his fiction, but especially in The Spoils) that even our domestic "things" speak to us and about us. From the humble "tea-things," to Owen's "array of arms of aggression and castigation" (p. 59), to "the face of the stopped Dutch clock" at Maggie's house (p. 239), the world of "things" is the scene and the extension of our less material relations and passions.

Casamassima, as he becomes torn between his dual inner nature and the outward manifestations of that nature—the struggles of the working class and the refined taste of the aristocracy. He, like Fleda, cannot renounce either without destroying himself, which he does. The "integrity" of such a being means it cannot be divided and go on living.
When Owen and Fleda happen to meet in London (in Chapter Six), the awkward, ambiguous scene is conducted through the language of things. "He stammered out that it was for her he should like to buy something, something 'ripping,' and that she must give him the pleasure of telling him what would best please her" (p. 63). The motive behind his "incongruous offers" (p. 64) may be love or bribery, and we may wonder as well what it means that she finally allows him to buy her a pin-cushion, of all things.

The expressive agency of things is essential to the novel's ending; Owen sends Fleda a letter in which he offers her a "remembrance" (of what?): "What I want you to take from me, and to choose for yourself, is the thing in the whole house that's most beautiful and precious" (p. 258). The last sentence of his letter, "You won't refuse if you'll simply think a little what it must be that makes me ask," is mysterious to Fleda, "because it might be one of so many things," and she asks herself:

What did it mean, what did it represent, to what did it correspond in his imagination or his soul? What was behind it, what was before it, what was, in the deepest depth, within it?

(p. 259)

Her mode of questioning is that of a critic who would make a formal appraisal of a work of art. (She is,
we are told, an impressionist painter.) The terms of her questions are the terms of a formal appreciation of life; the criteria of meaning, representation and correspondence are used by a person who sees things in their formal significance. "Imagination and soul" are the aesthetic and moral agencies of art and love, and the spatial terms of "before, behind, depth," and "in it," are terms of formal composition. And, of course, for James as for Fleda, formal composition is the objective structure of social and moral composition.

For Fleda, and perhaps universally, the love of Beauty is the love of Form, and form is completeness, in which art allows us to participate as a transcendent refuge from the formlessness of life. If we regard form, technically, as the aesthetic relationships (or arrangements) of entities (shapes, colors, sounds, words, etc.), the psychological complement, to paraphrase Kenneth Burke, is the arousal and satisfaction of desire on the part of the beholder. Fleda's appeal to life requires this completeness of form, objectively and affectively, in the relations she "almost demonically both sees and feels, while the others but feel without seeing" (Preface, p. xv).

Her penetrating insight into the "poetry" of Things is described in aesthetic and spiritual terms. For example, at Ricks, the first time, she sees things that Mrs. Gereth
cannot.

The place was crowded with objects of which the aggregation somehow made a thinness and the futility a grace; things that told her they had been gathered as slowly and lovingly as the golden flowers of the other house. She too, for a home, could have lived with them: they made her even wonder if it didn't work more for happiness not to have tasted, as she herself had done, of knowledge.

(p. 54)

In the penultimate chapter, also at Ricks, her vision extends to include that which is, "as it were, of something sensibly gone" (p. 249). Her vision of the "fourth dimension" provided by loss or absence, as completing the picture, is a reversal of that which is repugnant to Mrs. Gereth. It is also a felicitous letting-go and letting-be of Things without renouncing them. And of course she is speaking not only of Things, but of love and life.

We could say that James has dramatized the love of beauty (and its perversion) not "realistically," but phenomenologically—how things appear depends upon the human experience and appreciation of them. James shows us the how as well as the what.

Merleau-Ponty, in his essay "The Body in its Sexual Being," says: "Let us try to see how a thing or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love and we shall thereby come to understand better how things and beings can exist in general." The Spoils can be seen as an
artistic fulfillment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical intention. To explain the engagement of human consciousness in the objective world is a less difficult task than to make that engagement visible. In the novel's logic of "things," from household objects to "contested matters of pertinence to human existence," James develops a picture of the a priori overlapping of the material world and consciousness, out of which arise our social, moral, and aesthetic modes of being and behavior—in conflict or in harmony with the "things amongst which we are." A discussion of how he accomplished this feat, and the relation between technique and "things," deserves a chapter of its own.
Chapter Four
The Restoration of Things

The editors of James's Notebooks, F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock, remark in their introduction that "The Spoils of Poynton and What Maisie Knew are the works that receive the most extensive discussion in his notebooks, and they also form the pivotal point between his earlier and later methods." There are two major elements in this turning point, both of which initially came together in the writing of The Spoils.

One of these is what we now call his use of point-of-view—the telling of the story through someone's consciousness. Mattiessen and Murdock comment that, in The Spoils, the "drama did not consist in the outer conflict. It had become the inner drama of Fleda's consciousness." They then refer us to the following passage from the Preface:

The progress and march of my tale became and remained that of her understanding. Absolutely, with this, I committed myself to making the affirmation and the penetration of it my action and my "story;" once more, too, with the re-entertained perception that a subject so lighted, a subject residing in somebody's excited and concentrated feeling about something—both the something and somebody being of course as important as possible—has more beauty to give out than under any other style of pressure.

(p. xiii)
The "something and somebody" are the Things (among other things) and Fleda. There can be no love without something to be loved, and there are no objects of love without a subject to love them. This may seem a simple enough proposition, and one that the artist ordinarily assumes (especially in works of "realism"), but it is at this fundamental level of structure and meaning that James was self-consciously working. He did not assume structure for his "fundamental statement;" he allowed it to appear (as in reality it appears) through Fleda's "inner drama."*

The inner drama was one half of his discovery; he had not only found the appreciative consciousness through which the story would be unfolded, he had also arrived, as he said, at "the acquired mastery of scenic presentation," and the rest of his work would illustrate his conviction that "the scenic method is my absolute, my imperative, my only salvation."

(Matthiessen and Murdock)33

The discovery of the scenic method not only provided the world for his subject, it also established the means

* In a notebook entry he writes that it was from his "wasted years ... of theatrical experiment" that he learned "exactly some such mastery of fundamental statement--of the art and secret of it, of expression, of the sacred mystery of structure." (Notebooks, p. 208)
for the relationship Kenneth Burke calls the "scene-agent ratio."

Variants of the scene-agent ratio abound in typical nineteenth-century thought, so strongly given to the study of motives by the dialectic pairing of people and things (man and nature, agent and scene). The ratio figures characteristically in the idealist's concern with the Einklang zwischen Innen- und Aussenwelt.34

James's position in this idealist tradition is unique, however, by virtue of the intensity of the subject's felt appreciation of (which is, for James, participation in) the scene—the objective architecture of the world. Scene becomes the agent's apprehension of it.*

James was now able to avoid the detachment of an outside account given by an omniscient, disembodied narrator. The scenes of The Spoils are united from within, by the presence or absence of the Things, and by Fleda's understanding of and response to the implications aroused by the Things. This is how James, in part, establishes the invisible and necessary bond that exists between

* In the Preface to The Princess Casamassima James is adamant on this point: "Experience, as I see it, is our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures—any intelligent report of which has to be based on that apprehension ... the affair of the painter is not the immediate, it is the reflected field of life, the realm not of application, but of appreciation ... there is no "interest" for me in what my hero, my heroine or any one else does save through that admirable process."
"things" and people. Fleda not only sees the agency of "things," she also feels--suffers--their implications in the other relations around her. The implications, as I have shown, are often generated by the transformation of the word "things," as it bridges or intersects contexts of real Things, building a logic that leads to such ramifications as "the things there is no patching up" (p. 108).

The scenes become such an interweaving of agent, agency, images and implications that they cannot be separated. This is why David Daiches claims that "any story by James ... would be utterly changed, its meaning would be wholly altered, if it were told in any other way," and, that the "story" does "not in any real sense exist apart from the technique."[35]

The diachronic transformation of the word "thing" in the novel parallels, on a smaller scale, the word's historical evolution, its expansion and contraction according to its various temporal and other contexts. This is especially pertinent to our concern here because, as Heidegger's etymology points out, the word means, among so many other things, "that which is at all."

* Or, in other words of Heidegger's, "anything whatever that is in any way." It is illuminating to follow his map of "res, Ding, cosa, causa, chose, thing" in "The Thing," pp. 174-77.
mean many things, and what if the many should mean in their turn only one?" (p. 157).

The word has apparently lost much of this existential import in our common usage of it, but something of its power, its possibility of contextual inherence and elasticity is restored in the novel. James's technique of overlapping subjective and objective realities is especially noticeable in *The Spoils* because of the phenomenological appearance of "things" and the questions they incite as to their significance, such as: are they Things or are they spoils? Does their beauty reside in them, or in what they represent, or in the appreciation of them? Heidegger's philosophical concern with things is similar to James's aesthetic concern:

> When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by means of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls.³⁶

Part of the vigilance of art, to paraphrase Professor Robert Johnstone, is in its power to reconstruct context, in such a way that things and words are restored to their pristine essence, their original power. By making "things" an essential part of the scene of the novel, James allows them to become the scene—they are empowered to motivate
the situations; they stimulate the agents to act. Art, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible."37* Our necessary relations with the "things" around us are usually taken for granted or exploited through ignorance or insensitivity. The consequences of such negligence can have, as we have seen, dire ramifications in our other relations. Merleau-Ponty tells us, "Things are an annex or prolongation of the body itself; they are incrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body."38

Henry James, in The Question of Our Speech, says "all life ... comes back to the questions of our relations with each other." In The Spoils he shows how great a part "things" play, objectively, in the intersubjectivity of our social relations, which are played out in an objective, empirical world, to which we are mainly indifferent, as we are to each other. The underlying paradox of the novel is that which underlies human existence: we are both material and spiritual creatures, angelic or demonic clay; our existence is the story of our passionate selves struggling against and towards the materiality of the world, of

* There is in this statement an Augustinian echo of the meaning of love.
which we are part.

As Fleda provides for our understanding of the story through her appreciation of the beauty of "things" and their importance to human relations, the artists of the world make this kind of appreciation possible, and, in James's case, visible.

Along with Fleda's appreciation of the Things is her sense of foreboding in response to their translation into spoils. She imagines that something objectively terrible will happen, to correspond to the more subtle destructiveness that pervades the scene of the "amputated" Things. The artistic truth of her anxiety prophetically captures the modern anxiousness created by what we now call technological alienation. James, through Fleda, raises the same question Heidegger will raise in the Nuclear Age: "What is this helpless anxiety still waiting for, if the terrible has already happened?" The terrible, for Heidegger and for James, is instantiated aesthetically, in that "everything lumped together into uniform distancelessness ... Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?"* 

* This is consistent with James's belief in "life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection" (Notebooks, p. 138), and his remarks in the Preface about "clumsy Life ... at her stupid work" (p. vii).
The correlation between art and morality is given to us in our capacity to find meaning in our relations with and amidst empirical reality. Art, in this sense of making relations and meanings visible, is profoundly moral. The responsibility of the artist is to all things; the artist is entrusted with the many faces of the world—beautiful or horrible; natural or not. The artist recreates the context inhabited by the things that call to him to be restored. I think James has accomplished this in The Spoils. But then there arises the troublesome question: why are the Things destroyed in the end?

In an early notebook entry, James mentions "the horrible, the atrocious conflagration—which may at any rate, I think, serve as my working hypothesis for a dénouement." In the last recorded notebook entry he writes: "Little by little, as I press, as I ponder, it seems to come to me, the manner of my denouement—it seems to fall into its proportions and to compose." Both the psychological and technical aspects of form are addressed in these remarks. It is possible to see the apocalyptic closing of the drama as the inevitable formal completeness required by the story.

The Things consumed by fire is the novel consuming itself. In the train, Fleda resists her "sudden imagination of a disaster," and, approaching nearer, sees "a
brightness that was the colour of the great interior she had been haunting. That vision settled before her—in the house the house was all ..." (pp. 262-3). Fleda's inner drama is consummately merged with external reality. The house is gone, the Things are gone, the novel ends.

Regarded in a wider context of James's work, the unease with which the reader is left is not unlike the feeling aroused by Christopher Newman's tossing the crucial evidence into the fire, at the end of The American; or worse, the effect created when Milly Theale's unread last words are engulfed by flames at the end of The Wings of the Dove. The precious Aspern Papers share a similar fate. The agency of fire is thus a recurring motif in James's work, but nowhere is it so total as in The Spoils.

The mystery that surrounds the cause of the conflagration as well as its effects on the other characters and their relations, dramatizes the mysterious power of the Things from the beginning. Their noumenal presence throughout the novel now contributes to our difficulty in interpreting their immolation.* What are, what were, these powerful objects which aroused such passion and drama

* The absence of a cause for the fire intimates possible self-immolation. The best explanation given is that of the Shakespearian station-master: "'What has done it is this cruel cruel night'" (p. 265).
around themselves? If the reader's assumption has been that the Things don't really matter to the drama, the ending confronts and tests that assumption. Similarly, the immutability of the Things was assumed by the characters in the novel. They have taken for granted the very basis of the dispute. The disintegration of the human relations has its metaphoric, existential counterpart (or consequence) in the dissolution of the Things over which they fought and because of which they fell apart from one another. The novel thus makes a certain demand on the reader: as one has accepted the premises of the novel's dramatic development through Fleda, now one is forced to accept, with her, the premises of the test with which she is confronted. The drama remains "inner."

To the extent that the fire is an abomination, we feel that the world of the novel has ended disastrously for Fleda. The Things among which the drama grew are now absent, as at the beginning, only finally now. She must face the final absence as she faced the one so full of potential. The ambivalence associated with the objects—beautiful Things of aesthetic value, or spoils of aesthetic imperialism and oppression—becomes a further, subjective ambivalence in their annihilation, for what has she lost? Her response is confounded by her proximity to the disaster which beckons to her and repulses her.
She heard a far-off windy roar which, in her
dismay, she took for that of flames a mile
away, and which, the first instant, acted upon
her as a wild solicitation. "I must go there."
She had scarcely spoken before the same omen
had changed into an appalling check.

(p. 265)

The question of renunciation now reenters the drama with
all the pressure the scene demands:

... she felt herself give everything up.
Mixed with the horror, with the kindness of the
station-master, with the smell of cinders and
the riot of sound was the raw bitterness of a
hope that she might never again in life have to
give up so much at such short notice.

(p. 266)

The paradoxical mixing of bitterness, hope, and reluctant
renunciation, reminds one of some lines in Eliot's

Four Quartets:

The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre--
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

(Little Gidding, IV)
Perhaps James found it impossible to avoid the heroic necessity of Fleda's renunciation of the objects of her desire. Hers will be the looking back

While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable--
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.

(Dry Salvages, II)⁴⁴

Although it is Fleda's sensitive apprehension of the scene that most concerns us, and thus the renunciation which frees her that is most important, we cannot forget that one of the implications wrought by the drama amidst the Things is that, for others, the Things were not only spoils of desire and conquest, but idols of a strange worship.

We have seen that the piety bestowed upon household objects is, in the best sense, a humble externalization of less tangible feelings of love, affection, and security in our dwelling amongst things and people. We have seen how in Mrs. Gereth's case that piety grows into disproportionate worship of the objects themselves, which wreaks havoc in all other relations and distorts "things" into ugly emblems of the appetite for power. The internalization of our inability to "stay with things" creates the need for the externalization of power, enacted through physical
objects used forcibly to alter the scene of all our relations. In this moral context the fire is a terrible purgation, necessary, inevitable, like the burning and sacking of Troy and then Rome. Fleda's appreciation and renunciation render her a helpless spectator of the objective world's manifestation of power and finitude, served out with a monstrous inviolability in opposition to which we dare to hope and dream. Perhaps this is what James means in the Preface by the "'things' ... exerting their ravage without remorse" (p. xv).

The magnificence of this natural, unnatural ending resides in the self-consuming context of the unexpected, and strangely necessary ending of all things. The end has mixed implications of blessing and curse. What do we do with the objects of our desire, and what do they do with us? Fleda's fate remains a mystery to ponder.

It is "in the thick swim of things" that "she saw something like the disc of a clock" (p. 266); she re-enters the temporal world, and goes "back." So the real ending may be a returning.
Conclusion

The Spoils of Poynton is a novel about "things," and by its own logic it is also about love, which includes all things. It is love that implicated Fleda in the drama of the Things; when it comes to the crisis of her finally possessing one of those Things she is thwarted, "saved" by the paradoxical fact that Poynton is not.

... She heard herself repeat mechanically, yet as if asking for the first time: "Poynton's gone?"

The man faltered. "What can you call it, miss, if it ain't really saved?"

(p. 266)

We are wrong to think it can be a matter of "saving" things or people or ourselves from the scenes we have ourselves devised and maintained, without reconstructing those scenes, which means a reshaping of the world we live in. We have made a world in which we cannot live; its unreality is revealed in our strange relations with things and with each other.

The transforming power of love, like that of art, can recreate the context in which we see and feel things; can provide the relations of distance and nearness that more appropriately approximate what it means essentially to be
human, spiritually and physically in harmony with the "things amongst which we are."

The art of Henry James has this quality of the love of beauty as the love of goodness, and he pulls the world apart, without harm to the real things and people, that we may see it in all its wrongness and possibility as it is reconstructed in words that have the power to present a living and lived-in context. This is what can be seen in following the evolution of the one word "thing."

"He might mean many things, and what if the many should mean in their turn only one?" (p. 157)

Accordingly Meister Eckhart uses the word thing (dine) for God as well as for the soul ... Thing is here the cautious and abstemious name for something that is at all. Thus Meister Eckhart says, adopting an expression of Dionysius the Aeropagite: ... love is of such a nature that it changes man into the things he loves.45

* * *
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

(Little Gidding, III)
Notes


9 James L. Calderwood, To Be or Not to Be (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 189-196. The dialectic of "presence and absence" is an important concept in contemporary criticism.


14 Much of the recent criticism I have read on The Spoils focusses on interpretations of Fleda's character—whether she is innocent or neurotic, etc. I think if more attention were given to the importance of "things," this debate would not receive as much attention. Many of the questions regarding Fleda can be answered by a closer look at the Things.


16 Santayana, Life of Reason, p. 182.
24 Daiches, p. 421.
27 Burke, Rhetoric, p. 296.
28 Santayana, Life of Reason, p. 183.
29 Kenneth Burke, "Psychology and Form," in Counter-Statement, p. 31. The passage I have paraphrased is: "...form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite."
Burke covers a wide range of the function and appearance of the scene-agent ratio in literature and drama (and the visual arts). The relation is usually a "synedochic relation...between person and place" (p. 7). There is also a scene-agency relation, as in Seurat's paintings, where "the extreme impression of consistency between scene and agent is here conveyed by stressing the distinctive terms of the method, or medium (that is, agency), which serves as an element common to both scene and agents" (p. 9).

I think this kind of inference is appropriate with regard to the larger scene of the novel, in that James's method provides that element common to both scene and agents.

(Furthermore, Fleda is an impressionistic painter, and James may have consciously fused her sensibility into his method of conveying her "inner drama.")

35 Daiches, p. 421.


38 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," p. 163.
41 James, Notebooks, p. 199.
42 James, Notebooks, p. 256.
44 Eliot, Four Quartets, pp. 131-2.
Further Bibliography


