When I accepted the assignment to "do an essay for our volume, one that will combine theory with practical criticism," I felt no compunctions about undertaking once again a task that thousands of us perform annually: raiding a book for critical purposes. I would simply do a careful "ethical" critique of some major novel. Then I thought over those I would like to read again, chose *The Wings of the Dove*, and began my first re-reading in about three decades of a novel that I remembered as impressive but more formidable than lovable.¹

Long before the middle of the book, however, the reading had forced me to ask how my project would appear to the master of moral subtleties. I had of course promised him that I would try to obey his commands—that I would do my best to surrender to whatever the book demanded of me before drawing back and becoming the professional critic: I would struggle to understand before pursuing any *overstanding*. But of course I was still driven by the assignment to look for my point of critical entry.

The story I found myself meeting, however, threatened to condemn that assignment. The touching account of Milly Theale's betrayal seemed to nag me about the fundamental difference between those like Kate Croy who comfortably use others, and
those like Milly who know how or learn how to find their life by living with and even for others. Whatever I might finally say about this novel, I could be sure that it was not written to be used, to be reduced to a counter in some critical economy—even mine. It was written to be, or to act, or to teach, or to make us see—choose your own critical view of what novels are written for, but do not, if you want to enter Henry James's drawing room, say that his elaborate tales are written to be used a century later by this or that critic with an ax to grind. I was being reminded, in short, that no other moral fault, in James's rich display of faults, is given more attention than reduction of beauty or truth or goodness to market value.

Yet in the way the story is told I seemed to find a confirmation of my project: James-the-old-intruder was inviting me to turn my attention away from the story of Milly and Kate and Merton to attend to his idiosyncratic way of telling it—a way not all that idiosyncratic by standards of our time but radically so in his. As I went on reading, more and more slowly, sometimes exasperated by James's subtlety, deflected from the “story” by his many reminders, explicit and implicit, of rhetorical manipulations, I soon realized that I was caught between two seemingly contradictory demands:

“Don't use me, because like every other thing of beauty I am not to be turned into a commodity.”

“Do use me critically, just as my author ‘uses’ me by calling your attention to his blatantly manipulative way of telling his story.”

Indeed that second demand at times seemed almost explicitly directed to Wayne Booth, the lifetime practitioner of point-of-viewerism. The full strength of this demand will perhaps not be fully intelligible to those who have not read at least one of James's late novels. For any such who happen to have stumbled upon me here, and also for readers who, though they have read The Wings of the Dove, find that their memory of its details is as dim as mine was a few weeks ago, I offer in the appendices two sorrowfully simplified summaries: first of what I shall call “the raw chronology” (what Gérard Genette calls “story” and some narratologists have called
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the fabula, what my mentors used to call the “material plot”) and then of what we can call, adapting James Phelan’s terminology, “the actual progression” (what Genette calls the “narrative” or “narrative discourse”). I assume that many readers will find those appendices simply unreadable, but I am convinced that only in attending to what they reflect can one appreciate both the full powers of James’s “late” way of composing and also the ethical pressures that thinking about such complex powers can exert.

My question thus became, as I carried through with my determination to face James down if he could not answer well: Is your presentation of these seemingly contradictory reading demands of any great value to me, one of your devotees? In the terms I raise in The Company We Keep, are you really good company, in the sense of being my true friend, working for my weal?

The Many Kinds of Reading

To address the question properly, we must back up and underline the complications that make ethical questions about narrative methods extraordinarily difficult.

In the first place, the question as put won’t do. It should not be, “Is this novel, is this implied Henry James, my true friend?” Who but Wayne Booth cares about that? The question should be, “Is this novel, when given its full head, a true friend potentially to all readers who read it with any care?” And that question thrusts us into the facts about diverse readers and readings. Are they not unlimedly various? Can anyone these days deny that the effects of The Wings of the Dove will vary from reader to reader, and for each reader from reading to reading? Do we not hear, as we pursue ethical questions, a strongly ethical demand from several critical camps that we celebrate diversity and deliberately ignore or violate the work’s own demands? Since the phrase “the work’s own demands” is itself absurd, I can hear some critical friends saying, the only ethical stance is to pursue freedom of spirit, or sharpness of perception, or political awakening, all in the name of the deepest of
all truths: there is no fixed truth anywhere, and—even more certainly in an uncertain world—there are no single certain readings.  

Yet if one wants to talk about the ethical value of a work in general and not just about what it has done to or for any one reader, one can hardly reject all concern for what it seems to ask every reader to do—not just “me” but “us”—regardless of how strongly we may want to emphasize what we can do to it. In short, the serious ethical critic is always faced with two tasks, not just the one that earlier ethical critics performed in describing the moral health or disease of any one work. To talk about the ethical powers of a work as being actually in the work, regardless of readers’ differences, is one thing. To talk about a work’s actual ethical effects is quite another. Can the two tasks in any way be reconciled? 

I think they can be, if we distinguish three kinds of reading that we all practice. 

We all engage, at least at times, in readings that I shall call “reading-with”: the reading we do when we simply accept what seem to us the obvious demands of the text. The title is, say, Poirot Investigates, and the author is Agatha Christie. The cover calls her “The Unsurpassed Mistress of Mystery,” and the title page adds a picture that includes some pearls and some blood. We know that a murder will occur, that Poirot will encounter many suspects and some fools who are confused by them, and that the book will end with the murderer exposed. No problem here, unless we are determined not to read-with: we know we have a specific kind of whodunit and we read for the mystery and for the mystery alone. Or let’s say that the title is The New Awakening, described as “A Novel”; the publisher is Virago Press, a publisher noted for its feminist endeavors. In the opening pages a stupid cruel husband is shown mistreating a mousy wife; at the end the wife is—in one way or another—no longer a mouse; she’s awakened at last. Again no problem: we read for that moment of liberation. Or we pick up a book with the title Merovingian Art from 500 to 751, or Plato’s Epistemology, or Cognitive Science: A Synthesis; the publisher is, say, Cambridge University Press, and we find, on reading, that the
title's generic promises are roughly fulfilled. No problem: we read the book in the same spirit shown toward the others; we cooperate. Of course each of these readings will be in one sense entirely different: we “hear” radically different questions and answers. But all such reading is the same in one crucial respect: we never question—if we go on reading at all—the terms of the contract clearly specified by the work’s emphasis on its own genre. We rely—even the least sophisticated and the most critically up-to-date among us rely—on our past experience of genres, slotting in the new work until and unless we bump into powerful violations of generic expectations. We can even say that two readers who read the “same” text in entirely opposed ways, one as a tragedy, say, and the other as a comedy, are still reading it “in the same way,” for our purposes here, so long as each of them thinks the reading is reading-with.

Stories that we read-with (putting aside for now scientific and scholarly and political discourse that is not overtly storied) come in three sub-types: (a) those that so clearly invite a probing of meanings that most or all readers agree that the invitations are “there on the page”; (b) those that so clearly seem to be “just story,” just plain gripping event-after-event, that only highly motivated critics bother to find meanings in them; and (c) those that seem happily to respond both to readers looking for profound meanings and to those who hope for a gripping experience of story. Aesop’s and George Orwell’s tales are of the first kind: they demand, if we are to read-with them, that we think about (and then perhaps talk about) meanings, ideas—the relation of the story to “life.” With or without moral tags attached, readers have to work hard to avoid seeing a moral point in an Aesopian fable. The second kind—“Puss in Boots” and most murder mysteries and thrillers like Jaws—in effect asks us not to worry about meanings: “Just keep moving, if you hope to enjoy me in my primary being.”

If tales all fell clearly into these first two kinds, the life of the critic would be simpler. But most do not. A great deal of our critical energy has always gone into making sense of the third kind (surely the largest pile): those that allow readers to move in either direction
while *believing* that they are reading-with. Nothing the story-centered reader encounters disrupts the story: it all seems to be just “what happened.” Yet everything the meaning-centered reader encounters supports or invites a given interpretation of meanings.

Readers of popular fiction generally read-with; they just assume that they have the second kind of work (type b) in hand, and they suppress all concern for meanings. For them, as for me early in my reading life, that becomes the only kind of reading. They usually do not re-read, and even when they do they are likely to make their second time through pretty much like the first; they—we critics in some of our moods—seek simply to renew the original pleasure. As Peter Rabinowitz and Janice Radway have both argued, this kind of reading has been either ignored or condemned by modern criticism, and the pleasures and profit derived from such rapid, “unreflective” but deeply engaged reading-with have been almost universally underrated by critics while being exploited by commercial authors. It is for some recent critics as if the only way to make reading such works worthwhile is to go to the opposite extreme, what I’ll call “reading-against.”

The reader who reads-against sets out to find in the text whatever it does *not* promise or invite to, whatever its author presumably never intended but unconsciously either allowed in or specifically banned. There are several terms on our critical scene for this fashionable kind of reading: “strong,” “resistant,” “deconstructionist,” “anti-intentional” and so on. For many critics, as I have already suggested, this could be called “the only intelligent” or “the only ethically defensible” type of reading. My central question here can be thus rephrased: As I impose my ethical question on *The Wings of the Dove*, am I reading-against or reading-with?

The third type is not quite a blend of the other two, though it at first looks like that. It is what some of us do when, after having had a rewarding experience that we think of as reading-with (whether simply “for story” or for multiple meanings), we decide to go back and re-read, trying either to deepen or clarify the experience, or to discover how the author managed to achieve the results we love, or why he or she did not achieve such results. We might call this
“critical reading,” were it not that most readers-against see their kind of reading as the only really critical kind. For want of a better term, call it “critical re-reading.”

Such reading again comes in different kinds, depending on our critical interests. For now, we need only distinguish re-reading that probes for deeper meanings and re-reading that probes for an understanding of structure—the principles that determined the author’s act of composition. Re-reading for meanings is often conducted as if the novel might just as well have been written backwards; re-reading for structure, in contrast, cares deeply about every flashback, every foreshadowing, every expansion or contraction of the raw events, every shift of point of view.

Sometimes critical re-reading, whether for meaning or for architecture, can lead us to deplore our having read-with on the first go: we’ve been had. Why did we not see these vile meanings that the author obscured or never suspected, or these structural flaws that the author concealed? But often such re-reading can lead instead to heightened admiration, especially when it is assisted by other readers who see qualities we had overlooked.

Responding to Explicit Invitations

We now have three kinds of stories and three ways that they can be read—with two subclasses of critical re-reading. Whether we find this complexity annoying or not, I would claim that I did not invent it—that it is thrust upon us by the explicit and implicit invitations that various works offer to any attentive reader. Works “try” to tell us, in myriad ways (quite aside from their authors’ statements outside the text) not only what genre to place them in when reading-with, but also whether they will be more rewarding when the reading-with leads us to re-read critically. Note that in this scheme it is in principle impossible for any work to invite us to read-against its full being, however chaotic or anti-intentionalist that being might be. At the most negative, all a work can do is invite us to read-against generic expectations that we mistakenly thought appropriate.
A. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, for example, starts out as if asking to be read entirely "with," as a whodunit. But as Trent's solutions to the crime are successively undermined, even the first-time reader is invited—or could one say "forced"?—to move to critical re-reading: "Just what is the genre here? What have I foolishly taken for granted in reading earlier detective fiction? What, indeed, does this surprise ending, with its explanation of the book's title, say about fiction, about detective fiction, about the relation of stories to life, about truth . . . ?" 8

Though it would be absurd to expect Bentley's novel to invite us to read-against its every stroke, it is not absurd of us to read-against it and ask questions not on its list, most notably questions that are raised in the second kind of critical re-reading, reading for architecture: "Just how did you put this together? What is your architecture here? Did you do the best possible job in ordering the parts, in handling point of view, in expanding or contracting scenes?" To ask those questions of *Trent's Last Case* is to read-against, even when, as I have discovered in this case, to do so increases one's admiration for the writer. The book responds to my questions about its architecture, but it does not itself raise them, just as it invites no questioning of its own ethical value. (Note that most "formal" critics in the past—including me—have assumed that to appraise structure and technique is to read-with. It has taken me decades to realize that to ask *Macbeth* "Why did Shakespeare begin you just this way?" or "Why did he prolong the Porter's scene?" is to read-against *Macbeth* even though Shakespeare usually—not always—stands up brilliantly to such questions.)

*The Invitation to Attend to Architecture*

When we ask of *The Wings of the Dove* first what kind of reading it "wants," and second whether that kind is ethically constructive, the answer to the first question is clear: anyone who has as much as dipped into this novel, reading-with it, will feel as I did a pressure to re-read-critically—that is, to combine the first and third kinds of
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reading. What is more, that pressure will be toward thinking not only about moral and philosophical meanings but to think about construction. Many a fine novel—for example, any one of Jane Austen's—resembles Bentley's in this respect, never even hinting at questions about structure; *Pride and Prejudice* invites critical re-reading, but only the kind that attends to a deepening of moral insight. *The Wings of the Dove*, in contrast, openly demands that we attend precisely to its author's act of composing.

What it does not even hint at is the kind of question I am asking here: Is it really good for us—as readers, as creatures in the world—or even for the art of fiction, to spend hours, days, months, reading—with James's explicit invitations and finding ourselves practicing a highly intricate kind of critical reading, the kind that generations of critics since Percy Lubbock have now exhibited? He never for a moment questions—and he always implies—the superiority of the kind of experience he struggles to provide. In his commentary outside the novels, he does occasionally claim explicit ethical value to what he calls his "method." But within the novels themselves he only implies it, never states it.

But surely we have a right—more clearly in this decade than in any earlier time—to read-against and demand an answer: Have the hundreds of thousands of hours and millions of words spent on the *art* of fiction, fiction as *poetry*, fictions as well-wrought urns, exemplified a kind of life worth living? Many an exasperated reader has answered no, both with respect to such novels and to the criticism they inspire.

If the answer for me were not in some sense yes, I obviously would not waste my time by adding to those millions here. But the details of the answer are not at all obvious. To put the matter as sharply as possible, shouldn't I be spending my time on some more self-evidently worthwhile form of life: working for aid to starving Africans, say, or tutoring deprived children, or—closer to home—becoming a media critic? Here I am, in my early seventies, as sure of my own coming death as Milly could be of hers—though not quite as sure about the timing—and I spend a large slice of my remaining time trying once again to appraise the gift James has
offered to share with me. Does that make sense at the deepest levels of meaning to which we can probe? Why do this rather than enjoying the latest Dick Francis or Sue Grafton romp?

James's Plans in Prospect

In the planning stage of The Wings of the Dove, James not only ignored our present “reading-against” question; for a long time he did not even talk about the “how” of telling. We can never know what really went on in his mind and heart as he worked and reworked his plans in his notebook. But what he said he was up to was not the construction of meanings or anti-meanings, whether metaphysical, psychological, political, religious, or ethical; nor was it about clever play with chronology and point of view and proportions. Rather it was all about finding a powerful story, an action, a plot to be read-with as story. That task for him, as for all story tellers, involved first the discovery of what characters of a given kind would do to one another, and why.

In short, he began not with an “idea” at all but with a “situation.” This was never for James a static picture, a mere “image,” as some have suggested; the words I have put in italics in the following passage show just how much his mind is on the need for action, for narrative movement, rather than on doctrine or how to draw out the right tricks from his copious trick bag:

. . . the situation of some young creature . . . who, at 20, on the threshold of a life that has seemed boundless, is suddenly condemned to death . . . by the voice of the physician? She learns that she has but a short time to live, and she rebels, she is terrified, she cries out in her anguish, her tragic young despair. . . . She is like a creature dragged shrieking to the guillotine—to the shambles. The idea of a young man who meets her, who, knowing her fate, is terribly touched by her, and who conceives the idea of saving her . . . [perhaps by offering her] the chance to love and to be loved. . . . But the young man is entangled with another woman . . . and it is in that that a little story seems to reside. I see him as having somehow to risk something . . . to sacrifice

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something in order to be kind to her... the anecdote, which I don't, by the way, at all yet see [James's italics], is probably more dramatic... on some basis of marriage... marriage with the other woman, or even with both! The little action hovers before me as abiding, somehow, in the particular complication that his attitude (to the girl) engenders for the man, a complication culminating in some sacrifice... or disaster. (Notebooks Nov. 3, 1894)

And on he goes, through pages of planning, toward the discovery four days later (Nov. 7, 1894) that his “little action” requires

the man’s agreeing with his fiancée that he shall marry the poor girl in order to come into her money and in the certitude that she will die and leave the money to him [James’s italics]—on which basis... they themselves will at last be able to marry.

James then tries out more and more possibilities for plot—well over 2,500 words with not one word about anything but “my story pure and simple.”

Three months later, re-reading his speculations, he finds them good—and suddenly introduces for the first time an ethical note that relates to my main point here. This story will do something for him, something that “compensates” him for five years of “bitterness,” “wasted passion and squandered time,” “unspeakable... tragic experience,” “long apparent barrenness,” “suffering and sadness intolerable”: the “story” is “strongly, richly there; a thing, surely, of great potential interest and beauty and of a strong, firm artistic ossature.”

Note that what it will give to him—the gift to his ethos, as we might put it, to stress the ethical note—is the gift of discovering the right “ossature,” the right bone structure for his story: after years of barrenness, he can at last once again tell a story worth telling.

It is hard to tell here whether James is thinking of the compensation as granted by the story emerging—the “what,” the raw chronology—or by the “how,” the lessons he has learned, through the painful years, about the art of dramatic “showing” through scenes in order to create a beautiful “actual progression.” Just what the ossature of any story is can always be hard to determine. But it is
beyond question that the beauty he is probing is the beauty of a well-constructed story—one that will engage readers in an 'ossature' that inextricably combines the 'what' and the 'how.'

*His Plans in Retrospect: The Preface*

That's where his mind still dwells nearly fifteen years later when, fresh from re-reading and revising the work, he writes his long, detailed 'Preface.' He begins as before with the firm bone structure of the action. For several pages one finds, as in the notebooks, nothing whatever about meanings. It is again all about an action, the action of Milly's 'struggle'—of the young woman's 'disintegration,' of the 'act of living,' of the 'battle,' of how the 'process of life gives way fighting,' of how his heroine will be 'dragged by a greater force than any she herself could exert,' 'contesting every inch of the road,' of a 'catastrophe determined in spite of oppositions,' of the 'drama' of her wrestling 'from her shrinking hour . . . as much of the fruit of life as possible,' and of the drama of her opponents' 'promoting her illusion . . . for reasons, for interests and advantages, from motives and points of view, of their own' (5, NY vii–viii).

But he soon shifts to the topic not mentioned in the notebooks: the 'how' of the story's telling, and the effects of the 'how' on the reader. This topic, perhaps even less fashionable in 1994 than the topic of what makes for good raw chronology, he celebrates in loving and prolonged detail, as if to say, 'Just think, dear reader, of the problems I faced, and of the hitherto unimagined solutions they led me to!'

Since my subject inescapably expands itself from the effects of reading 'the novel itself' to the issue of reading and writing the kind of criticism it leads us to, I must dwell a bit on this material that a few critics may still want to call 'extrinsic.' The great point, he says, was that if in a *predicament* she [Milly] was to be, . . . it would be of the essence to create the predicament promptly and *build it up* solidly, so
that it should have for us as much as possible its ominous air of awaiting her... One begins so, in such a business, by looking about for one’s compositional key, unable as one can only be to move till one has found it... [T]hough my regenerate young New Yorker [Milly]... should form my centre, my circumference [those who observe and exploit her] was every whit as treatable. Therefore I must trust myself to know when to proceed from the one and when from the other. (7, NY x-xi; all italics mine except for the word “engaged”)

Then, following an account of how not using serialization set him free to “begin as far back” and as far “behind” Milly’s own story as he wished, James celebrates just what opportunities freedom from editorial constraints granted him. It yielded

the pleasure of feeling my divisions, my proportions and general rhythm, rest all on permanent rather than in any degree on momentary proprieties. It was enough for my alternations, thus, [of point of view and locations in time and space] that they were good in themselves; it was in fact so much for them that I really think any further account of the constitution of the book reduces itself to a just notation of the law they followed.

There was the “fun,” to begin with, of establishing one’s successive centres [in order to]... make for construction, that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty. (8, NY xii; my italics)

There followed from this fun the anguish of not being able to carry out his plan as fully as hoped. He “mourns” at some length, viewing the “gaps and the lapses,” the “intentions that, with the best will in the world, were not to fructify” (9, NY xiii). He specifies the “gaps” (some of which seem very strange to me, since in my reading they were not felt as gaps at all). But then he recovers his confidence: each piece is, after all, “true to its pattern, and... while it pretends to make no simple statement it yet never lets go its scheme of clearness.” After citing proof of his own clever strategies, particularly his consistency with point of view and his tact in withholding intimate scenes that other novelists would have provided, he turns to stronger self-praise, disguised as a criticism of the disproportionate length of the two “halves” of the work:
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that to "read-with" requires critical attention to the pleasures of compositional subtlety.

Asking whether a particular move is a fault, he says, "distinctly not"—not for the careful reader:

(Attention of perusal, I thus confess . . . is what I at every point, as well as here, absolutely invoke and take for granted; a truth I avail myself of this occasion to note once for all. . . . The enjoyment of a work of art . . . is greatest, it is delightfully, divinely great, when we feel that the surface of the work, like the thick ice of the skater's pond, bear[s] without cracking the strongest pressure we throw on it. The sound of the crack one may recognize, but never surely to call it a luxury.) (14-15, NY xx-xxi)

And back he goes to a demonstration of what he wants his ideal reader to do: place the strongest possible pressure on the "thick ice" to discover just why his subtle way of "driving portents home" (15, NY xxi) by transforming raw chronology and point of view will resist cracking under the weight. And he concludes after much more on similar points with a cheerful lament that space does not allow him to say as much as he would like to say about the novel's construction!

The novel itself fulfils James's hopes for this kind of attention—does so, that is, for any reader who is willing to read-with its invitations. So we can now bring our ethical pursuit to a head by asking, bluntly, how we are to value all of what many from the beginning called mere artificiality, fussiness, and even elitist destruction of the true value of "story"? Should we not after all join his brother William, a habitual reader-against, in calling it perverse?

You've reversed every traditional canon of story-telling (especially the fundamental one of telling the story, which you carefully avoid) and have created a new genre littéraire which I can't help thinking perverse, but in which you nevertheless succeed, for I read with interest to the end many pages, and innumerable sentences twice over to see what the dickens they could possibly mean. . . . (Norton 458)
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Or do we allow the master to have his way with us—and then praise him for having offered an ethical gift in requiring us to attend not just to the what of the story but to the how?

"The achieve of, the mastery of the thing"

So far as I can discover, our question has never been addressed except in a most perfunctory way—either in the form of brusque expressions of annoyance like William's or brief praise for the "poetry" of James's novels. What more can one say, other than "I like it" or "I detest it"?

The full effect is of course beyond summary; it can be known only to those who have succumbed to the master's demands and followed his steps as he takes them, with or without the assistance of his guidebooks. Indeed the full effect, for the serious critic, can come only for those willing to follow step by step a detailed comparison echoed inadequately by my appendixes. (Surely I can talk at least one or two of you out there into tackling them?) Only someone who has gone through that can then face the full force of the question: Was that good for you?

My own response to this late, late Henry James, in spite of some frustration along the path of this essay, can best be described as gratitude. I was myself surprised by just how powerfully this great implied author, purged entirely of the daily pettinesses that we know the "real" James was capable of in his "declining" years, affected me. I had spent a lifetime arguing that implied authors are always not only different from but to some degree superior to their makers, purged of whatever those makers took to be their living faults. I was therefore not surprised to find myself engaged with a "James" who was the most "Jamesian" figure I had ever met—even compared with his other late novels. What was a bit surprising was the gratitude I felt for one more experience with the "fussiness."

"James" has invited me to re-create under his tutelage a beautiful structure—not just any abstract structure but a structure of beautifully realized human creatures highlighted miraculously by the
artist. He offers me the chance to pretend, for the duration of my
reading, that I too live “up there” with him, able not only to
appreciate what he has done but to do it myself. Nobody, including
James himself, has ever lived for long in this empyrean: sharing not
just the intensity and depth and wit and wisdom of other fine
artists but the special precise attention to getting it all right—to
creating it all better than anyone else could, even given the same
“materials.”

We can explain something of this power if we examine the more
important steps he took that were by no means necessary, given the
raw chronology he finally arrived at for the story of Milly, Kate, and
Merton. (Readers who have never read the novel might do well to
read my detailed summary in Appendix A.) Their story could be
told in innumerable ways, without violating its factual and moral
intricacy. It could, for example, be told as a simple chronological
melodrama of two lovers plotting for the fortune of a dying woman
and ending with the ambiguities and beauties of this novel’s
ending. Even if we decided to tell essentially the story that James
tells, no longer just the story of Milly that he first planned but with
as much emphasis on Kate and Merton as we now have, we still
could make many un-Jamesian choices.

METAPHORIC EXTRAVAGANCE

Turning instead to what he actually did, we could dwell on his
“choice” (though by this time in his career he could hardly choose
differently) to bestow on all of his main characters a metaphoric
and imagistic gift that is totally beyond what any “real” characters
like Milly and the others could exercise. They all think in elaborate
characteristic metaphor and imagery, and they needn’t have done
so. One could take this book and cut out every one of the passages
that begins “It was for him as if . . .” and one would still have a
readable story (in one sense a more readable one).

Of all the marvels that would be lost in such a cutting, the one
most pertinent here is the effect on the reader of having to sort out
just who is responsible for each metaphor or image. There is a
"dialogue" of different imaginations here, producing a "polyglossia" that makes the effect that Bakhtin attributes to Dickens seem simple by comparison; indeed even Bakhtin might see Dostoevsky as at least rivaled here, if not surpassed. It is a dialogue that requires us to attend to each stroke, alert to the distribution of responsibilities.

That James sees his own allocations of metaphor in something like this light is revealed in a marvelous passage where he plays with three imagists at once: Kate, Milly, and the narrator. It occurs in Venice (VII. ii) when the two women are reveling in their successes among the British socialites and at the same time relishing those moments when they can "put off their harness" and their social "masks," and relax together (I feel uneasy about what the ghost of James will want to say about my intrusive commentary in the right-hand column):

> These puttings-off of the mask had finally quite become the form taken by their moments together . . . whenever, as she [Milly] herself expressed it, she got out of harness.

> They flourished their masks, the independent pair, as they might have flourished Spanish fans;

> they smiled and sighed on removing them; but the gesture, the smiles, the sighs, strangely enough, might have been suspected the greatest reality in the business.

> there is no hint that this image would be used by either of them: it is the narrator's alone

> an image all three share

> the narrator alone again

> clearly this "as" belongs to the narrator alone

> "strangely enough" to whom? we have to ask by now. The narrator
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Strangely enough, we say, for the volume of effusion in general would have been found by either on measurement to be scarce proportional to the paraphernalia of relief. It was when they called each other’s attention to their ceasing to pretend, it was then that what they were keeping back was most in the air.

There was a difference, no doubt, and mainly to Kate’s advantage: Milly didn’t quite see what her friend could keep back, was possessed of, in fine, that would be so subject to retention; whereas it was comparatively plain sailing for Kate that poor Milly had a treasure to hide. This was not the treasure of a shy, an abject affection... it was much rather a principle of pride relatively bold and hard, a principle that played up like a fine steel spring at the lightest pressure of too near a footfall.

seems to hear our question and replies: aha!, so “we” say it! presumably, then, they didn’t get around to measuring? in the air for them? Certainly not in this form, because neither knows all of what the other is keeping back is this metaphor Kate’s? probably not quite possibly Kate’s way of thinking of Milly’s secrets? at last one that is surely Kate’s, her...
Thus insuperably guarded was the truth about the girl’s own conception of her validity; thus was a wondering pitying sister condemned wistfully to look at her from the far side of the moat she had dug round her tower.

“sister” is in fact an ironic metaphor here, because Kate is much more than a “wondering pitying sister”

Kate’s image? Probably not, since Kate would not want quite to think of herself as laying siege to an enemy’s castle; but like all the others, James’s image has become ours, in our pity for the besieged Milly.

Certain aspects of the connexion of these young women show for us,

such is the twilight that gathers about them,

in the likeness of some dim scene in a Maeterlinck play; we have positively the image, in the delicate dusk, of the figures so associated and yet so opposed, so mutually watchful: that of the angular pale princess, ostrich-plumed, black-robed, hung about with amu-

self-conscious picture of what will happen if she presses too close to the truth of Milly’s illness: a steel trap will be sprung; the hunter will become the hunted.

Yes, for us; again the two central characters are shut out!

his and ours, not theirs

ah, yes, we!
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lets, reminders, relics, mainly
seated, mainly still, 
all ours, and possibly Kate's

and that of the upright restless
slow-circling lady of her court
who exchanges with her, across
the black water streaked with
evening gleams, fitful questions
and answers (VIII.iii, 261–62, ours and definitely not Milly's. 
NY II.138–39).

And so “we” go on observing Kate circling Milly ("like a panther"), “with thick dark braids down her back, drawing over the grass a more embroidered train." Under James's tutelage we extend the Maeterlinck play to include Milly's confidante, Mrs. Stringham. "We" come to know more about both of these hearts than either knows, even about herself, and we thus read the relatively literal apologia for Kate that follows with an awareness totally different from what it would have been without the elaborate metaphor (262–63, NY 140–41).

Metaphors by their very nature require greater creative energy in the receiver than straight talk. They risk more; many a reader will just get off the metaphorical boat and condemn the clumsy author. But when they work, they bind us to the author—in this case all three "authors"—with no route for escape.

SILENCES

Another requirement on our creative powers is even more powerful—what might be considered the opposite of rhetorical amplification: suppression, silence, deliberate omission from the narration of crucial events in the raw chronology. The most revealing of these suppressions of what other novelists would have considered essential is his silence about what happens when Densher is at long last invited back to the palazzo for a final interview with Milly. James's friends and critics objected to that omission, just as he himself had rebuked H. G. Wells, decades before, for failing to
dramatize the crucial courtship scene between lovers in the novel *Marriage.* But once one has been tuned to vibrate on James's inimitable wavelength, the effect can be an enormous stimulation of the imagination. I have found myself working over that omitted scene again and again, imaginging the lovely frail girl who has dressed herself up, perhaps for the last time, in order to present to the man she loves a courageous and inoffensive front. I am helped in these reconstructions by the hints Merton later gives to Kate:

“Did she receive you—in her condition—in her room?” [Kate asks].

“Not she,” said Merton Densher. “She received me just as usual: in that glorious great *salone,* in the dress she always wears, from her inveterate *corner of her sofa.*” And his face for the moment conveyed the scene, just as hers equally embraced it. “Do you remember what you originally said to me of her?”

“Ah I’ve said so many things.”

“That she wouldn’t smell of drugs, that she wouldn’t taste of medicine. Well, she didn’t.”

“So that it was really almost happy?”

It took him a long time to answer, occupied as he partly was in feeling how nobody but Kate could have invested such a question with the tone that was perfectly right. (X.i, 362, NY II.328–29)

We have no good critical vocabulary for the ethical effect of having one’s mind preoccupied with all this “perversity” in the telling: piling up obtrusive metaphors, deliberate excision of “essential” parts, to say nothing of obsessive transformations of point of view. How can I express my conviction that it is good for me to be required to go through all this, and to know that if I return with similar attentiveness to the other late novels I’ll be invited to similar—but always fresh—re-creations? I have no doubt about it myself—I who am so much inclined to preoccupations of far less defensible kinds. My ultimate defense, if I could ever fully work it out, would have something to do with what happens to the “back of my mind,” during the waking hours before and after returning to the desk to wrestle with this recalcitrant work. Its scenes and
languages and puzzles form a running accompaniment while trimming my beard and showering, while paying bills, while driving. In other words, it has made me over—in James's direction.

Of course none of this kind of questioning could be considered significant if we once lost the belief that some ways of spending our lives are better than other ways: Why should it matter how I conduct my waking dreams, especially when they are only "at the back of my mind"? But if any value judgments about ways of living make sense, then those authors (and composers, and painters, and so on) who subtly lead us to live moments of high creative intensity even when we are not directly engaged with their works are indeed among our truest friends.

As Milly says to the obtuse and bewildered Lord Mark, "One can't do more than live." "And you don't do anything?" he asks in his confusion. "I do everything," she replies. "Everything's this," she smiled; 'I'm doing it now. One can't do more than live.'" She is acting, she says, under the great surgeon's advice—

the best advice in the world. I'm acting under it now. I act upon it in receiving you, in talking with you thus. One can't, as I tell you, do more than live."

"Oh live!" Lord Mark ejaculated.

"Well, it's immense for me." (VII.iv, 272, NY 155)

It's immense for us too. Though we may not put quite as much emphasis on expensive rococo surroundings as James and Milly seem to do throughout the novel, we live in the greater richness James provides, both in taking in his moral probing of how Milly and Kate and Merton behave and in the discovery that we have been led to create and re-create all that, both while reading and long afterward.

The part of this new life that explicitly wrestles with James's self-chosen constructional task would be described in conventional terms as "formal" and hence "aesthetic." But obviously here the aesthetic task has become deeply ethical. To get the craft of it right, to keep the ideal of the highest excellence constantly before one as a demand to do it better than what at first seemed merely good, so
that those who travel with us—our readers—will get it right too: that is the ethics of craft. It required of James courage, persistence, and a willingness to risk hearing once again from his brother a gentle mocking of his results. It required, in sum, a kind of conscientiousness that fuses morality and the love of beautiful form. And it requires of us an echo of those virtues.

The beautiful thing is that—in contrast with Milly’s luxurious purchases—ours are in unlimited supply: there is no zero-sum game here. Our “possession” of these gems never diminishes the supply; indeed, the more lovers such works find for themselves, the better, since talking with other lovers about the treasures “appreciates” their value.

Are not the hours we spend sharing with James and his readers—at least when we are at our best—hours that James might well have had the surgeon add to the remedy he offers Milly? If she was to live, why did the doctor fail to order her to spend some time reading the novels of Jane Austen or George Eliot, perhaps, or even, in a postmodernist reflexive ploy, The Wings of the Dove?
Until you have tried to summarize the real action of any one of the late James novels, you don’t know just how complex his plots are. When one looks at the summaries provided in any of the reference books, what is most striking is how little evidence they provide about what really happens. The mere outline of how, say, a nondescript “Kate” lies to and seeks the fortune of an equally nondescript “Milly” cannot tell us whether the lie was noble or base, and it thus gives us no notion of what the story is really about—of how we are made to hope for, or fear, or in any way enjoy a given resolution. As Martha Nussbaum insists in her account of The Golden Bowl, the moral meaning of any one choice—whether to lie, whether to seek a fortune—is found only within the full specificity of circumstances and characters, not in any one principle allowing or forbidding lying or pursuing a fortune.

The following summary is only slightly more useful than the kind I have just condemned. But at least it hints at what I think James was striving for in his elaborately ethical probing: How should one live one’s life? What forms of perception and behavior can be justified, in the face of the ultimate fact of tragically early death?

Kate Croy, beautiful and talented and morally sensitive daughter of an impoverished and unscrupulous English gentleman, is urged by her widowed sister,
helplessly poor and burdened with four young children, to cultivate their rich aunt, in the hope that Kate might relieve their poverty both by marrying rich and by receiving some of the aunt’s fortune. Kate at first resists, sensing all the ways in which truckling to her aunt will infringe on her freedom and violate her principles. But after falling in love with Merton Densher, a highly attractive, witty, intelligent London journalist with little income, and experiencing—in a trial period living at her aunt’s—some of the genuine amenities of life that are made possible only by money, she realizes just how essential it is to her not to marry poor. Living with her aunt while Merton is in America on an assignment as a journalist, she meets her aunt’s guests, two Americans, one an orphaned but rich young woman, the beautiful, innocent, generous-hearted Milly Theale, the other Milly’s devoted and intelligent confidante, Susan Stringham, a former schoolmate of the aunt.

Kate and Milly become friends, and we learn that Merton and Milly have met and become friendly in America. Milly and Susan Stringham learn that Milly has an incurable illness, one the fatal effects of which can only be postponed by living life to the hilt—and especially by loving and being loved.

When Kate learns of the illness, she sees the chance both to obtain a fortune for herself and Merton and at the same time to do a favor to the dying Milly: she persuades the reluctant Merton to pay court to Milly, hoping that Milly will leave her fortune to him on her death. To make the scheme work—Merton only gradually realizes the full nastiness of it—they must of course continue to deceive everyone, especially Milly, about their own engagement: the world must believe that although Merton has indeed been in love with Kate, Kate now feels nothing for him and he is thus perfectly free to shift his affections to Milly. The highly intelligent, courageous—indeed in most respects admirable—Kate proceeds on a course of openly lying to Milly, even while acting in every other respect as Milly’s most intimate and loving friend. Merton himself, while attending regularly on Milly, assuages his confused conscience by scrupulously refusing ever to tell an actual lie; he simply exercises his natural charm on her and thus allows the deception to proceed.

For some time their plot seems to be working: Milly becomes radiantly happy as she lives her waning life fully in a Venetian palazzo, courted, as she has increasing reason to believe, by the most charming young man she has ever known. A far less charming suitor, Lord Mark, a bland, empty-hearted moral nonentity who has been one of the vulgar aunt’s candidates for marriage to Kate, arrives in Venice to win her hand. He also has learned of the fatal illness and worked out his own plan to obtain Milly’s fortune through a kind of “death-bed marriage”; he makes his crude proposal to Milly and she politely and firmly refuses him. Meanwhile Merton, who has been “courting” Milly daily, though with no formal statement of intentions, is becoming increasingly uneasy about the various moral issues in his situation: he is doing all this for Kate, assuming her love for him, but what proof does he have of her love? Does she really love him enough to justify the whole plot? He insists that to prove her love she must “come to him,” in his apartments rented specifically for that purpose, and the
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ravishingly beautiful creature, who really does love him, comes, for one night. She then returns to London, leaving him to continue his false courtship until the girl's death.

Lord Mark, having learned that Kate and Merton are in fact engaged, gets his revenge for Milly's refusal by telling her, basely, of the whole base scheme, and Milly is devastated: she "turns her face to the wall," refuses ever to see Merton again, and prepares to die. Susan, her confidante, desperately trying to save her, attempts to persuade Merton to go to her and deny the engagement to Kate, but this is a lie he refuses to tell. ("We are," he later moans to Kate, when she wonders, back in London, why he didn't go ahead and tell Milly that they were not engaged, "We are, my dear child, I suppose, still engaged" [X.i, 323].) He simply waits, day after day, hoping—by now more fully caught up in Milly's beautiful spirit than he can acknowledge to himself without acknowledging that he has behaved like a "brute"—that he might see her again. She finally relents, for reasons we do not learn, and invites him back for one last meeting—which we are not privileged to witness.

The final events—all of book X, considerably more than a tenth of the whole novel and, along with book V, much the longest in the book—consist entirely of Kate's and Densher's wrestling with what all this is to mean for them—how they are to live with what they have done and with what it has meant for Milly. And it is all from Densher's point of view. For several weeks he does not even visit Kate—though he still assumes their engagement. When they do meet he has received a letter from Milly, intended to be received on Christmas Eve; he has chosen not to open it except in Kate's presence. But Kate throws it into the fire, and Merton resists the impulse to rescue it and discover what Milly would say to him at the end. They soon discover, from lawyers, that a part of what she would have said is that she is after all making him, in a splendidly magnanimous gesture (or perhaps an act of revenge against Kate? we are never to know for sure just how much Milly has inferred), her heir. Learning of this, Kate is exultant: their scheme has worked. They have the money they need to marry, and they have it with Milly's blessing. Merton, however, having been awakened to a fully moral perception of the whole experience, tells Kate point-blank (or as point-blank as anyone ever tells anyone anything in this novel) that he will marry her only if she'll join him in repudiating the money; on the other hand, she can have the money—without him. She says that she'll take him, without the money, if he can swear that he is "not in love with Milly's memory." Since he refuses to do that, they separate, aware that the whole experience has changed them both and—we are left to assume—made their marriage an impossibility. We are left to speculate: Will Kate take the money? Will she marry someone as awful as Lord Mark? Has she been morally destroyed or perhaps deeply enlightened by what has happened? Readers have—for reasons that should be obvious—shown much more curiosity about her fate than about Merton's.
Appendix B:
The Story-as-Told
(The Narrative, the Discourse)

These notes might be taken as a step toward that critical act that James hoped some “literary critic” would undertake, “bent on improving his occasion to the profit of the budding artist.” Or perhaps it is only a failed try at demonstrating the “attention of perusal” that he claims he wants, at every point, absolutely “to invoke and take for granted.”

Page numbers are to the New York edition. Italics indicate James’s operations with time scheme and points of view. (Abbreviations: M, Milly; MD, Merton; K, Kate; S, Susan Stringham; L, Mrs. Lowder [Aunt Maud]).

I.1: Inside Kate (K), at age 25, for all of book I. She turns for rescue from her isolation first to her father, after living for one winter with her Aunt Maud (L). Is she already in love with Merton (MD)? (21 pp.)

I.2.: Inside K, living at aunt’s, chronologically before I.1. Sees value of material things for her. Torn by “bond of blood” (32).

After chapter 1, we see, in interview with sister Marian, that Marian is obviously willing to use K (34). Marian warns against MD, because he means poverty for them both.

II.1.: Inside MD. His patient waiting for K, before chief events of book I (back to p. 47). The appeal of his “mind.” We learn that they met before her mother’s death: 4 pages on their first meeting, then encounter on railroad, 54. Inside both K
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and MD, back and forth a bit about courtship; in other words, they are “together” for a while.

Inside K, with L for a while after I.1, about Mr. Croy.

K walks with MD, with point of view alternating again, moving to MD alone (61–74). K tells MD of I.1 and I.2; long discussion of the morality of Mr. Croy and K: K’s self-described “small stupid piety” (71); “I do see my danger of doing something base” (72), but “I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing” (73). They plan to work on L. (27 pp.)

II. Inside MD, waiting for L. Made to see the meaning of wealth (4 pp.). 6 pages of scene with report to K. MD called to America (86). K and MD mixed point of view, long conversations about selves and prospects, leading to engagement (95), then plans for dealing with L, letters, talk about planned deception.

Note that this concludes 100 pages, one seventh of the book, with what, from one point of view, is “only” background! Of these pages, about half are “inside” K, but much of book II is also about her, as seen through MD. Such expansiveness obviously explains James’s lament about his “misplaced middle,” but he understates the effect the misplacement will have in centering our emotions on K.

III.1: Inside Susan Stringham (S). Retrospective account of Milly’s [M] earlier life: as princess, as heiress of all the ages (to 120, 18 pp.). M’s view of the Alps as of the universe (through S’s eyes). S’s view of M’s promise. Note that we’ve had no real scene through this chapter, no developed conversations.

III.2: Inside S still, talking with M about MD. First hints of early dying (134–45). Note that we’ve had almost 150 pages with no inside view of M, who was originally at the center of James’s conception!

IV.1: Inside M for first time, talking with Lord Mark at a dinner party, which actually took place a short time after III.2—time enough for M and S to be welcomed fully by L. M baffled by all the changes. Thinks of K, a “wonderful creature.” Only a very few comments from the author’s own voice (159). M speculates about Lord Mark and K—clear that she herself cannot consider him as a possible mate (163). M accepts herself as a “quantity”—someone whose life has real importance (166).

IV.2: Inside S, speculating on their social successes, with occasional glimpses “inside” M. K and M together shop etc. (point of view mixed, making them seem really together). K is puzzled at not hating M for her money (176). K explains London society to M. M on K: not “brutally brutal” (182).

IV.3: Inside both M and S, though mainly M: they are REALLY together. They discover that the Londoners know MD (185). Inside M (187 and following): M increasingly aware of how much K keeps back. K’s sister warns M about MD (193). Long discussion between M and S about MD and K. (10 pp.)

V.1: Mostly inside M, almost entirely with Lord Mark, S, L, at Matcham: culture laid on heavily, dramatizing M’s “felicity” but also her puzzled speculation
about K and Lord Mark. "She was somehow at this hour a very happy woman and a part of her happiness might precisely have been that her affections and her view were moving as never before in concert" (215-16). We have meanwhile been "told," in various ways that the "concert" is misguided, the felicity doomed.

V.2: Inside M. She is shown a Bronzino portrait said to look like her—"with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck. . . . And she was dead, dead, dead." Thinking thus, M weeps—she is aware of her own mortality, yet feels that she "can never be better than this," that nothing will ever "be so right again" (211). K then probes her about her health, M meanwhile reaching out to K for friendship: "I absolutely trust you." M asks K to go with her to see the surgeon, Sir Luke Strett. (James is hitting hard on the dramatic irony by now, with no character knowing everything that others know.) (12 pp.)

V.3: Inside M. Accompanied by K, she goes to Sir Luke Strett. Interview not shown, but she comes out from it strengthened. 3 pages of speculation about it with K. Then 2nd interview with the doctor (K not in attendance); the doctor is authoritative, sympathetic, but highly oblique: tells her she has a "great rare chance" to live, while implying, quite clearly, that she will soon die. (15 pp.)

V.4: Inside M, 8 pages of interior monologue ("several hours worth" about her situation, about whether K has told S, about why S is not more inquisitive about her health, etc. K rushes to her in the evening to find what the doctor has said; to M she looks suddenly the way she must look when she (K) is looking at MD, and she infers—correctly, of course—that the two of them must have a "connexion" (257). She dissembles her illness to K, saying mainly, "I'm now to go in for pleasure." K makes heavy assertion of her loving desire to help—more dramatic irony. (13 pp.)

V.5: Inside M. L probes her for knowledge about whether MD has returned from America. M further senses that K and MD have a connexion, because she can read in K's eyes that MD has come back from America. (11 pp.)

V.6: Inside M. K instructing M about the ways of the world, claims she is "giving away" everything, including herself. But of course she is not: more dramatic irony. K tells M Lord Mark has shifted his goal from K to M. K: You should drop all of us, including me: "Oh, you may very well loathe me yet!" M arranges for S to learn of her illness through the doctor (286). Intense foreshadowing: M increasingly seen as "dove," with others as predators. (12 pp.)

V.7: Inside M. National Gallery. M surprises K and MD together; K covers brilliantly. M only partially deceived: she believes it is indeed a liaison, but, she thinks, one based on MD's love of K, with K indifferent. Left alone with MD, she slowly works through her feelings for him and her anxiety about what the doctor has told S. Our attention at the end of volume 1 is entirely
on M, a total contrast from opening of this volume, where we were entirely interested in and concerned for K. (14 pp.)

VI.1: Opens with privileges inside both MD and K, moves mainly “into” MD, who is suffering sexual deprivation and is puzzled by K, who says her cleverness has grown “infernal.” He does not know K’s plans. (12 pp.)

VI.2: Inside MD. K still is not telling him her full plan; he is still frustrated about their physical separation. Two long intense embraces, partial physical satisfaction. Long discussion of how to deal with L. K hints at her plan: he should “lead M on,” because K has a “beautiful plan,” which she does not reveal. He wonders why she will not “come” to him. The chapter is all about her plan. (15 pp.)

VI.3: Inside MD. At Lowder dinner, watching the “drama” performed by L and K. A sustained account of gossip about M. Society mocked at length, as they turn M into a “Christian maiden, in the arena, mildly, caressingly, martyred” (42). L needles MD about his time in NY with M. He wonders how much K knows, “though it was not until much later on that he found himself, in thought, dividing the things she might have been conscious of from the things she must have missed” (42). MD’s rising sympathy for M, friendship with S. More foreshadowing about what MD is to learn later: “These things were of later evidence” (46). (16 pp.)

VI.4: Inside MD. After dinner. MD and K discussing M. (10 pp.)! “What you want of me,” MD says, “is to make up to a sick girl.” MD meets Lord Mark (56), but we quickly are with MD and K alone as he puzzles through K’s obliquities, for a full 7 pages. K: you and M are both my “victims.” MD: “Then if anything happens, we [MD and M] can console each other” (63). (Thus an explicit promise of what’s to come.) Briefly MD with S. (23 pp.)

VI.5: Inside MD. Visit to M. MD’s speculation about the rights and wrongs of what he’s doing. (12 pp.)! Then conversation with M. She says she’d “do anything for K.” He is stricken: “He was afterwards to say to himself that something had at that moment hung for him by a hair” — that is, he’d almost blurted out his secret (85).

More conversation, more signs that MD finds M touching and charming. More introspection (2 pp., 88–89). 6 pages of talk between MD and K, culminating with his agreeing that everything must be left in her hands. (27 pp.)

VII.1: Inside M. Long retrospect to luncheon after the National Gallery (far back in V.5), and S’s observations of K at that time, while MD and M were talking. What did the doctor say? S and M “fused” in loving understanding, supported by giving inside views of both and thus fusing point of view (103).

S sees the “light”—M’s chances with MD. (7 pp.)

Inside S: (transition of point of view, 106) to scenes with L, plotting for M and MD. (13 pp.) (total of 22 pp.)

VII.2. Inside S for 3 pages, then inside M with the doctor. (8 pp.) Makes it clear the
doctor thinks her the best person in the world; foreshadowing of Venice. (10 pp. on this: It's puzzling why James spends so long within the doctor's perspective, even though this chapter is comparatively short.)

VII. 3:  Inside MD, settling into Venice, surrounded by women. Then the author's own voice for a bit, with K and M “putting off masks” — but not really. See pp. 116–19 above.

Back to M's point of view, first alone, wandering, then with Lord Mark. (14 pp.)

VII.4: Inside M. Lord Mark's proposal and rejection (20 pp.), concluding with entry of MD.

VIII.1: Inside MD. An entire chapter of MD's moral musing: thoughts about what it means to take private apartments in order to make love to K, and about how she is manipulating him. (16 pp.)

VIII.2: Inside MD. Resentful of getting nothing for all the fuss, he exacts from K her agreement to come to him for a night of love. His thoughts are packed with moral speculation: he knows he is becoming corrupt. (16 pp.)

VIII.3: Again Inside MD. MD's rising fondness for S, love for M. M's big party for the doctor. K for the first time is “wanting in lustre,” in MD's eyes. M a dove. MD and K, with MD still dense about the plan, but he finally realizes “I'm to marry her” and get the money. He agrees, only if she'll “come.” (28 pp.)

IX.1: Inside MD, living with aftermath of the night of love. Musing on his daily visits to M. M (naively? subtly?) tries to draw him out about why he is staying—a fairly long scene between them. (8 pp.) He is visibly trapped between two motives. (16 pp.)

IX.2: Inside MD. MD is turned away by M after twenty days of conversation with her. Long speculations about his moral position. Sees Lord Mark in the square. After 3 days S comes to him. (18 pp.)

IX.3: Inside MD. S pleads with him to rescue M by denying Lord Mark's claim. Scene entirely in direct conversation. MD “moans.” (23 pp.)

IX.4: Inside MD. The doctor comes, tells MD he should now visit M again, at her request; MD says he will. A great burden is lifted. (15 pp.)

X.1: Inside MD, for whole of X. MD and K: Why didn't he lie? (350). He is stupefied. (20 pp.)

X.2: Inside MD. He and L. (No clear function of this final time with L?) MD: “Something has broken in me.” 6 pages with K, she thinking mainly of the cash, of their “success.”

X.3: Inside MD. Longing for news, goes to the doctor's. He has received M's final letter, but has not opened it. Scene with L, coming from the doctor. He goes to Brompton Oratory, to pray (361).

X.4: Inside MD at K's sister's. Lord Mark is back living with L. MD challenges K: “How in the world did he [Lord Mark] know we're engaged?” (12 pp.)
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X.5: Inside MD. Still at sister's, dusk falling, moving to showdown. K answers challenge: Lord Mark figured it out. K on her father. Though main attention is on MD’s rising moral clarity, considerable sympathy is aroused for K, as in book I. K burns M’s letter, MD resists temptation to rescue it. (11 pp.)

X.6: Inside MD. The inverted battle over the cash: his ultimatum, either me or the cash, not both. He’ll marry her still, “as we were” but “We shall never be again as we were!” (14 pp.)

Note that all of book X is from Densher’s point of view. The novel has become his moral battle.

POSTSCRIPT

Such a summary, combined with Appendix A; provides only a beginning on the kind of appreciative analysis that would do justice to the full achievement of James’s creation. But perhaps a comparison of the two appendixes will be enough to suggest my grounds for the following prediction:

If, a hundred years from now, there is any sensitive historian of ideas still practicing, nothing about us will seem more absurd than our repeated undervaluing, with our reading-against, of what great authors do as they create their works. Here we have James working away month after month, at the height of his imaginative powers, making thousands of subtle, highly “personal” choices each day during the hours when he is most alive, most of those choices quite consciously directed to fulfill highly articulated and conscious intentions. And here on the other hand we find a fair number of half-baked critics, schooled in critical dogmas and unschooled in how to reconstruct the vast created edifices built by the great, pronouncing their ostensibly egalitarian dogmas about there being “no such thing as intrinsic merit.” Every lover of the high achievements of any art—of classical music or jazz, of mystery writing or sci-fi, of painting or satirical cartooning—should rise up in anger about the debasement of the world that occurs when people pretend that it’s all one great heap of equivalent stuff.
1. Many readers have found The Wings of the Dove exasperatingly difficult. In this matter, though not in his rather lukewarm final evaluation, William James speaks for us all when he says, in a letter to Henry in the fall of 1902, that he had to read “many pages, and innumerable sentences twice over to see what the dickens they could possibly mean.” I must have encountered fifty moments when I had to stop, puzzled, and then choose for a pronoun the most likely antecedent (Norton 458; in my citations throughout, the first figure will refer to the Norton edition, the second to the New York edition).

2. My pages here could be filled with quotations about “use” versus “living.” Milly’s story is in large part her gradual discovery of how Kate Croy, Merton Densher, Lord Mark, and Mrs. Lowder would use her. As she begins, for example, to experience the lionizing of the clever but vulgar socialite, Mrs. Lowder, “it came up for Milly that Aunt Maud [Mrs. Lowder] had something particular in mind. . . . Mrs. Lowder made use of the moment: Milly felt as soon as she had spoken that what she was doing was somehow for use” (161, NY 263–64).

3. In James’s works it’s not easy to say which is worse, reducing people to objets d’art, as Gilbert Osmond in The Portrait of a Lady uses the wonderful Isabel, finding her “as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm,” or exploiting others for financial gain, as Kate and Densher use Milly here. I wonder whether my “use” of this novel would be more blameworthy, for James, if I were being paid a fortune for it. If the payment entailed my saying what I knew would harm someone I would become one of his worst villains.

4. Melvyn New has neatly exposed the self-contradiction exhibited by many a “proof” of unreadability. His central text is Tristram Shandy, and to me he succeeds in annihilating any interpretation that says: “Tristram Shandy wonderfully undermines all claims to a clear single reading—except mine” (“Sterne and the Narrative of Determinateness”). Of course there are some novels since Sterne’s that do deliberately attempt to frustrate every attempt at a single interpretation, including the attempt to prove that they frustrate . . . , etc. (My favorite example is Nabokov’s Pale Fire—see Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Re-examination of Audiences.”) But their existence does not establish any ethical demand that we should read other works as totally indeterminate.

5. In chapter 4 of The Company We Keep I present a detailed case for the inescapable potential powers of works themselves. In practice not even the most aggressive theorist denies those powers, just as I of course do not
deny that a novel’s powers will fail with readers not prepared to discover them.

6. Janice Radway, “Reading the Romance.” The qualities and dangerous powers of popular fiction, when millions in a given culture “read-with” it, are explored by Claudia Roth Pierpont, in “A Study in Scarlett.” Her chief subject is Gone With the Wind, but she helps explain why other blockbusters—Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Ivanhoe, for example, get themselves “read-with” by so many, while yet others, aimed equally at a popular market, fail.

7. By far the most devoted and persuasive reading of this kind I’ve encountered, addressed to one novel alone, is Gérard Genette’s tracing of Proust’s maneuverings, in Narrative Discourse. To me it is unfortunate that Genette for the most part protects himself from the task of direct evaluation, but implicit in his loving attention is one grand judgment: Remembrance of Things Past is a great achievement. Even though his kind of detailed tracing is not today in the forefront of criticism, a fair number of “narratologists” are practicing the sympathetic attention to structural choices that it requires. I find even more interesting a variety of efforts to combine ideological interests—Marxist, Freudian, feminist, ethical—with the closest possible attention to authors’ achieved forms; in other words, these studies have combined reading-with and reading-against without destroying the works considered. I document several of these—Barbara Foley’s, James Phelan’s, Peter Rabinowitz’s, David Richter’s—in the notes to my “The Poetics for a Practical Critic” (esp. nn. 15 and 29). But others are emerging, especially Mary Doyle Springer’s work on the “feminist” prophecies of Wallace Stevens (a book forthcoming); see also her “Closure in James: A Formalist Feminist View.” Another group of scholars are moving from what might be called the opposite side: starting with ideological questions and finding them best answered by close reading. The most impressive volume I’ve found pursuing this direction, published since completing this essay, is Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure, ed. Alison Booth. All of the “feminist” essays Booth commissioned attend closely to intended forms, most of them in ways that might well have amazed James. The one most relevant here, however, is by Stephen D. Arata: “Object Lessons: Reading the Museum in The Golden Bowl” (199–229). Many of Arata’s points about the ethical effects of reading that great book could be incorporated here. But of course he does not mention the ethical effects on him of pursuing his critical task, or on us of reading the results.

8. A first-class introduction to the conflicts between the ethical demands of given genres and the ethical interests of implied authors is given by Peter Rabinowitz in “Reader, I blew him away”: Convention and Transgression in Sue Grafton,” in A. Booth, Famous Last Words.


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