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Excerpt
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Introduction

There has been a quiet revolution: new readings in the last ten years or so have overturned our perceptions of the erotic in Henry James's fictions. For all the variations in emphasis and the differences in tone, new ways of explicitly addressing the homoerotic in his writing have made themselves quickly at home in our awareness. They seem indeed to have taken up space that was ready and waiting for them. We had needed ways of including something that had been missing from our account of the work (although if we had read the letters it could hardly have been missing from our imagining of James's life); we needed a critical vocabulary to encompass the whole passionate range of this writer whose register of passionate feeling was distinctively not delimited by the conventions of the heterosexual pursuit. Whether we now choose to discuss a James deeply preoccupied with homosexual secrets and 'panics', as Eve Kosovsky-Sedgwick does; or a serene James remarkably 'exempt from alarm, anxiety and remorse' about his 'queerness', as Hugh Stevens does; or whatever other account we choose to give ourselves of what this passionate force means and does inside the writing, the debate has been changed, and all the fictions are illuminated from a slightly different place from now onwards.¹

Inevitably, readings of a homoerotic James have complicated an older and very persistent account of him as an unsexual writer, prudish and allergic to things of the flesh. With new confidence, critics are finding in the work evidence of an imagination deeply stirred by and responsive to the energies of the erotic (Ross Posnock in particular is eloquent on James's 'capacious affective life' and the need to 'dislodge the critical debate from its fixation on renunciation'²). The readings of James's novels that follow grow out of this shift in perspective. They concentrate on the centrality of heterosexual love stories in the *oeuvre* and on James's deep and sympathetic treatment of women: and yet that concentration is not unconnected to the new homoerotic perspectives on the writing. It is

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James's freedom from 'definitional frames' of hetero- and homosexuality that gives him his special purchase on the whole urgent business of gender definition and gender identity in his society, and makes all the more poignant and complex his rendering of the entanglements of his men and women in love.³

The readings that follow will develop an account of an evolution in James's attitudes to sexuality – and to women's sexuality in particular – out of a fairly conventional propriety in the earlier work, through the seismic shifts of perception in the writing of the 1890s, to the liberated rich imaginings of pleasure in the late novels. Perhaps part of the reason why so much criticism for so long insisted upon an unsexual James (or, in a slightly different version, upon a James squeamishly appalled and fascinated by sex⁴) is that James's novels of his middle period do indeed seem to be structured inside a moral framework inherited from his great Victorian predecessors, in which the power of sexuality can only exert itself obliquely and destructively, from the shadowy margins of the work.⁵ In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the framework Isabel is trapped inside (taken over almost wholesale from *Daniel Deronda*, as if James wanted to set himself George Eliot's puzzle) is conceived entirely as an Apollonian conflict of ideals: she needs to be good, and she needs to be free, and she can't be both. The Dionysiac 'comet in the sky' or 'hot wind of the desert' (these formulas come from the 1905 revisions) only touch Isabel momentarily and distractingly when Caspar kisses her: and it is from the power of the Dionysiac that she takes flight at the end, back into her dilemma.

In the novels and stories of the 1890s, James seems to be thinking himself round and beyond the terms of Isabel's dilemma and Isabel's renunciation. He is unpicking them, so to speak, and unmaking their terms, exploring their origins in the complicated double binds of a particular ideal of womanhood. Part of that unpicking and unmaking involves outing the sexual facts from the shadows: insisting upon, rather than taking flight from, the reality of what Osmond did with Madame Merle, the driven promiscuousness of Maisie's parents, the dingy dissimulations over whether Sir Claude has been in Mrs Beale's bedroom, the all-but-spoken unspeakableness between Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, Lord Petherton transferring his predatory attentions from the aunt to the niece. The foreground of these transitional works in James's *oeuvre* is busy with improprieties: all of them rendered, however, with some considerable distaste. *What Maisie Knew* and 'The Turn of the Screw' in particular, whose subject is the legacy for the imagination of a guilty Victorian

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propriety, are themselves uncomfortable in a rather Victorian way, only able to imagine innocence for an unsexual child. There is indeed a squeamishness in James's fascination with soiled secrets in these stories; a distaste at adult sexuality (less so, perhaps, in *The Awkward Age*, which seems more forgiving, more generously reconciled to the susceptibilities of its protagonists).

But James changes his mind.⁶ In *The Ambassadors*, in fact, he rehearses exactly that story, the story of a man changing his mind about propriety and sexuality. Strether not only finally has to stop prevaricating and face the reality of the relationship between the lovers: he also, having held off in his Woollett reticence from even admitting to their physical embraces, allows himself to begin to enjoy imagining them ('he found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things', 468⁷). Imagining them he envies them, he feels acutely his fifty-five years and his missed opportunities. Having come to Paris to rescue a young man entangled in a love affair which was distracting him from his real purposes, he ends up exhorting him to make the love affair his purpose ('Let Rome into Tiber melt...'). This is not only a novel which registers the *power* of sexuality (*The Portrait of a Lady* does that, Osmond and Madame Merle's affair dragging all those brighter lives in its dark tides): it also registers its pleasures.

Strether's story is the story of James's *oeuvre*: from his beginnings in a moralised English-language novel tradition, James makes something like Strether's journey to voluptuous imaginings of pleasure. Any reader who had only heard from critics about James's sexlessness, James's resignation and renunciation, James's interest in alienated observers from life's margins, must have been astonished by opening *The Ambassadors* or *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*, with their ripe worldliness, the passionate and sexual love affairs at their centres, and James's obvious infatuation with the glamour and glitter and stylishness of these beautiful young scions of a *fin-de-siècle* leisure class.

James's attitude does not end, of course, with infatuation, but it is perhaps enlightening to begin there. In re-inscribing James into 'responsibility', as recent criticism has quite rightly wanted to do, with regard to the great issues of his era – class, race, nation – there is always a danger that the work will be made to do penance, as it were, for its pleasures; that readings will suggest a James whose attitude towards the world in his books is essentially disapproving and denunciatory. The interesting question, and the one that will be taken up in what follows, is whether it is possible to offer a reading of the work which yields a

writer at once responsible toward the large ethical implications of his class, his privilege and his age, and at the same time deeply responsive to the possibilities of pleasure that age and leisure class afford. Posnock, for one, is interested in a ‘strikingly different Henry James . . . one who is more like Walt Whitman than Henry Adams in opening himself to incessant stimuli and relaxing the anxious Victorian ethos of strenuous masculinity’.⁸

There is a way of making out the whole history of James’s *oeuvre* in the light of that great release of ripe worldliness in the late novels. Far from reading the development into the late style as a progressive retreat into the ivory tower of art, it is possible to think of the late style with its difficulties, its lofty aristocratic ironies, its rhetorical display, as the way James found for writing himself out of that common-sensical middle-class middle-ground which the English-language novel had made its own: a middle-ground which had always been profoundly ill at ease with worldliness, with glamour, and with sex. In the transitional novels of the late 1890s James wrestled with his writing; with his narrative forms, bent upon displacing that middle-ground proneness to judgemental omniscience; and with his material, as he explored to their very source the ideals of feminine innocence and decency and chastity which haunt *What Maisie Knew*, ‘The Turn of the Screw’ and *The Awkward Age*. As he uncovered the sources of those ideals in a distorting patterning of gender in his culture, progressively he liberated himself to step over the boundaries of the middle ground into the open space outside; to make the journey Strether makes in *The Ambassadors* from a nervous conventional propriety to a grown-up reconciliation with, and honouring of, the sensual side of life.

Inseparable from that journey in the *oeuvre* is the evolution of the late style. J. M. Coetzee in an aside calls James ‘the outstanding exception’ to the following generalisation about the novel form:

The traditional novel is wedded to an ideal of realism that includes not only the representation of the ordinary speech of ordinary people, but the imitation, in its own narration, of a sober, middle-class manner. The poetics of the novel are anticlassical: with exceptions, it does not go in for the aristocratic mode of irony.⁹

James’s late narratives are anything but sober. They break all the rules of that ‘formal realism’ which Ian Watt considers virtually co-extensive with the English novel, with its ‘pursuit of verisimilitude’, its pretence of being

no more than a ‘transcription of real life’.¹⁰ And rather than reading this ‘aristocratic irony’ of the late style as representing James’s retreat from the middle ground of common humanity, we might try to read it instead as his escape from the middle-ground constraints of the English-language novel, from a moralising propriety, from a proneness to sententiousness, from a deep suspicion of pleasure, from a sexual puritanism entangled with ideals of feminine innocence and chastity.

If James virtually ‘invents’ an aristocratic irony for his late style, it can only have a tenuous and oblique relationship with the ‘real’ style of any ‘real’ late nineteenth-century aristocracy. Something in his phrasing and vocabulary and exaggeratedly inflated poise mimics the flair and drawl and slang we might think of as aristocratic; he borrows from the louche arch talk of a smart set whose *moeurs* and attitudes can still be distinguished from those of a ‘respectable’ middle class. Such a smart set certainly had not been much written about in nineteenth-century English novels (Trollope’s ruling class sound so bourgeois); it was not a significant presence in English letters. Unlike the works of the eighteenth-century ironists (Gibbon, Swift, Hume) whose ‘aristocratic’ style Coetzee contrasts with the novelists in his essay, James’s ironies cannot be confidently addressed to an audience of peers, cannot depend upon ‘a bond among the élite who can decode its inverted operations’.¹¹ If James has taken refuge in ‘aristocratic’ ironies it is not in order to recover the security of a supportive élite. There is finally something self-consciously *quixotic* about James’s sustained high style; perhaps his ‘aristocratic’ is as invented as Don Quixote’s ‘romance’, with its impossibly exaggerated refinement? And like Cervantes, perhaps James is making full play of the ironic conjunction of a high style with novelistic realism? Thomas Mann writes about Cervantes’s self-criticising Spanishness: ‘it looks as into a mirror at its own grandezza, its idealism, its lofty impracticality, its unmarketable high-mindedness – is this not strange?’¹²

It would be impossible to discuss issues of passion and propriety in the late nineteenth-century novel without addressing the difference between the English-language tradition and the European one. English-language fiction was still governed on both sides of the Atlantic by a fierce convention of propriety: no matter if one learns that even George Lewes (Prince Consort to the creator of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*) told scurrilous anecdotes in (male) company after dinner, it was not permissible to represent that reality of English social life in fiction. The episode in

The Awkward Age, where newly married, sexually teasing Aggie captures and sits on an ‘improper’ French novel so that she can be pulled off again by a Lord Petherton unconvincingly concerned for her ‘morals’, is James’s ironic rehearsal of the English convention that European novels were improper and forbidden. A man may own a French novel (Vanderbank does); he may lend it to a married woman (he lends it to Mrs Brookenham); but she must find it ‘disgusting’ and should on no account let it fall into the hands of her unmarried daughter (Mrs Brookenham makes sure Nanda sees it and reads it, so that she is spoiled for marrying Van).¹³ As late as 1890 Edmund Gosse, introducing his *International Library* series, felt bound to apologise for it with something of the hot-under-the-collar rectitude of a housemaster initiating a discussion of the birds and the bees:

Life is now treated in fiction by every race but our own with singular candour . . . the [Continental] novelists have determined to disdain nothing and to repudiate nothing which is common to humanity; much is freely discussed . . . which our race is apt to treat with a much more gingerly discretion. It is not difficult, however, we believe – it is certainly not impossible – to discard all which may justly give offence, and yet to offer to an English public . . . many masterpieces of European fiction.¹⁴

This disjunction between the English language and European fiction traditions was something that James himself was always intrigued by, bothered by; in his critical essays, even from the decades when the material of his own novels fitted unexceptionably inside the parameters of an English propriety, James the reader and critic kept returning to those other possibilities outside. The writer who loved Balzac and admired Flaubert had to answer satisfactorily for himself why he could not write about, say, adultery and prostitution in his own novels; and he had to ask himself whether he would want to if he could.

From his first experiences of living alone in Paris in 1876, French culture – its *moeurs*, its talk, its literature – had suggested itself to the young James as an essential counterpoint to his own Anglo-Saxon background. His letters home that year (he was in his early thirties) were full of a slightly uneasy playfulness, teasing and upsetting his family and friends with glimpses of Gallic frivolity and wickedness. His brother William wrote to him to warn him to give up his ‘French tricks’ in his letters: his *bons mots* and rhetorically stylish constructions were antipathetic to the James family atmosphere, whose sense of humour savoured more of the schoolroom than the salon.¹⁵

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Henry wrote to Thomas Perry that he had heard Zola characterise Gustave Droz's writing as '*merde à la vanille*'.

Why the Flaubert circle don't like him [Droz] is their own affair. I don't care . . . I send you by post Zola's own last – *merde au naturel*. Simply hideous.¹⁶

James bristled with defensive critical dissent, but he bristled with consciousness, too, at the forbidden word used so casually and cleverly. Although William's and Henry's letters to one another were preoccupied with their bowel movements to a degree unique, probably, in collected letters, the word *merde* or its English equivalent had never been put on paper between them. Initiated, James would not simply shrink and think New England thoughts: he tried the note out for himself.

To W. D. Howells he wrote:

They are all charming talkers – though as editor of the austere *Atlantic* it would startle you to hear some of their projected subjects. The other day Edmond de Goncourt (the best of them) said he had been lately working very well on his novel – he had got into an episode that greatly interested him and into which he was going very far. *Flaubert*: 'What is it?' *E de G*: 'A whore-house *de province*'.¹⁷

Howells – 'editor of the austere *Atlantic*' – wrote back to thank God he was not a Frenchman.

James wrote home about the emancipated young girl of the Faubourg Saint-Germain who asked him what he thought of incest as the subject for a novel; and about the Turgenev–Viardot gossip. And years later in a letter to Edmund Gosse he recalled one more story; this one presumably he kept to himself at the time:

the memory of a Sunday afternoon at Flaubert's in the winter of 75–76, when Maupassant, still *inédit*, but always 'round', regaled me with a fantastic tale, irreproducible here, of the relations between two Englishmen, each other, and their monkey! A picture the details of which have faded for me, but not the lurid impression.¹⁸

Along with brothels and incest, there must have been plenty of mention in the Flaubert *cénacle* of homosexuality; we have no idea how much of an initiation – linguistic, imaginative – this might have been for James.

James in Paris in 1876 was not of course only interested in 'naughty' stories. There is a wealth of other material in the letters home, more the sort of thing the young American abroad was supposed to be getting out of Paris: the contemplation of beauty and the culture of the mind. But

there are, strikingly, enough stories from ‘Babylon’ (as James teasingly called it in his letters) to suggest a shock of contact for a sensibility neither immune to suggestion nor simply comfortably assimilative. James is nothing like, say, his Chad in *The Ambassadors*; Chad is prompt to avail himself of the opportunity to exchange New World constraint for Old World licence, but that is all. When the time comes for him to return to Woollett Chad will change worlds back again, unscathed.

It is not the exchange of values that interests James, the mere substituting of one set for the other; but the contradictory co-existence of opposed values. Howells’s austerity and Zola’s indecency exist in the same world: what is unspeakable in one language is casual conversation in another. James writes to Howells that ‘you and he [Zola] don’t see the same things – you have a wholly different consciousness – *you* see a totally different side of a different race’.¹⁹ This flexibility of language, that can say in one place what is unspeakable in another, is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls its ‘heteroglossia’:

Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems; within these various systems . . . are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound.²⁰

It does not matter that for our purposes here these different ‘verbal-ideological’ systems are not in fact within one ‘national language’. James’s position in Paris, between languages, trying to communicate blasé Parisian sophistications to New England decencies, is in Bakhtin’s account the very type of the novelist’s interest in and relationship to heteroglossia:

All languages of heteroglossia . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people – first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels.²¹

The disjunction between the *moeurs* of the French and the New England intelligentsia, and between the English-language and French novel traditions, was not simply a matter of the naming or the silencing of taboo subjects. The whore-house and the *merde* were signs of a profound difference

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of attitude in the French novel: sexual impropriety was to be named along with every other reality because it was *there*, because representation for Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant came dragging after it none of the clumsy apparatus of moralisation. James writes about the Flaubert *cénacle* in an essay on Turgenev years later:

What was discussed in that little smoke-clouded room was chiefly questions of taste, questions of art and form; and the speakers, for the most part, were, in aesthetic matters, radicals of the deepest dye. It would have been late in the day to propose among them any discussion of the relation of art to morality, any question of the degree in which a novel might or might not concern itself with the teaching of a lesson. They had settled these preliminaries long ago, and it would have been primitive and incongruous to refer to them.²²

We may suspect that the young James rather wanted to ask that ‘primitive and incongruous’ question about the teaching of ‘lessons’, and that he found the extravagant certainty and impenetrable consensus of the little group infuriatingly narrowly focused (there is plenty of irony at their self-importance in that ‘radicals of the deepest dye’). But what the older James is recording, looking back, is not so much a moment of conversion to what the French writers believe as a moment of liberation from being certain at all; his encounter with precisely their certainty and their consensus gave him a new purchase from outside on the moralising frame of his own English-language fiction.²³ It is possible to write within a quite different frame, and to write well; and before the moralist can condemn he has to answer the sheer persuasiveness of the work of a Maupassant, say, whose sensual, visual, intelligent power sits ‘like a lion in the path’.²⁴

this little group, with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner – its intense artistic life . . . and in spite of their ferocious pessimism and their handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest.²⁵

and:

We are accustomed to think, we of the English faith, that a cynic is a living advertisement of his errors . . . It is easy to exclaim that if he judges life only from the point of view of the senses, many are the noble and exquisite things that he must leave out. What he leaves out has no claim to get itself considered till after we have done justice to what he takes in.²⁶

The juxtaposition of these two different fictional frames of reference becomes a recurrent theme in James’s criticism of the 1880s and 1890s. The English tradition asks questions in novels about what is ‘good’ and

what is ‘right’ (or – at worst – imposes answers to those questions). The European novel asks whether what it writes convinces, whether it feels like life, whether it tells the truth about how life feels (but a dimension is missing – what is ‘good’, what is ‘right’?). Again, James’s position outside the two frames stimulates him, keeps him interrogating, doubting.

He argues in a number of essays, but at length in his 1888 essay on Maupassant and his 1902 essay on Italian novelist Mathilde Serao, that the explanation for the convention of propriety governing English fiction at the end of the century lies in how thoroughly through its history the English novel had been in the control of women: not only frequently and successfully written by them, but also hugely and significantly read by them.²⁷ In a culture (such as that represented in *The Awkward Age*) where certain kinds of information were conventionally proscribed for women, the consequences of such female participation in the novels’ making had to be significant:

if the element of compromise – compromise with fifty of the ‘facts of life’ – be the common feature of the novel in English speech, so it is mainly indebted for this character to the sex comparatively without a feeling for logic . . . Nothing is at any rate more natural than to trace a connection between our general mildness, as it may be conveniently called, and the fact that we are likewise so generally feminine.²⁸

Again, this is not simply a matter of the proscription of certain taboo subjects. The obligatory innocence, or excision of unsuitable subject matters from the material of fiction, tended, James argued, to result in an overall moralising ‘optimism’:

No doubt there is in our literature an immense amount of conventional blinking, and it may be questioned whether pessimistic representation in M. Maupassant’s manner does not follow his particular original more closely than our perpetual quest of pleasantness (does not Mr Rider Haggard make even his African carnage pleasant?) adheres to the lines of the world we ourselves know . . . It must never be forgotten that the optimism of that [English] literature is partly the optimism of women and spinsters; in other words the optimism of ignorance as well as delicacy.²⁹

James writes ambivalently about that optimism. Straddling the disjunction between fictional possibilities, he can see the English-language version as naive and vulnerable beside the better-informed cynicism of, say, a Maupassant; or even (in the case, say, of African carnage) as saccharine mendacity. From both these possibilities he wants to dissociate himself,