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978-0-521-57089-3 - Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics

Edited by Gert Buelens

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Gert Buelens*

On 26 July 1909, Henry James writes to Frederick Macmillan to enlist his publisher-friend's help in a delicate matter. James indicates his wish to direct the then sizeable sum of £100 discreetly to his 'accomplished and greatly valued friend of many years Morton Fullerton', explaining that he 'know[s] something – a good deal, of his personal and family situation, and especially of the financially depleting effect on him, lately aggravated, of the condition of his father, ill and helpless these many years in the US, and to whom he has had constantly to render assistance' (*HJL*, iv, 529). Since Fullerton, the head of the Paris bureau of the (London) *Times*, has just been invited by the firm of Macmillan to write a book on the French capital, it strikes James 'as not unlikely that he may have to write and ask for some advance on the money he is to receive from you, for getting more clear and free for work at his book'. James wonders whether Macmillan would at that point 'be willing to send [the £100] to him, as a favour to me, *as* from yourselves (independently of anything you may yourselves send him?) and with no mention whatever, naturally, of my name in the matter?'

At first sight, James's letter offers touching testimony to a unanimous impulse. Here, we might say, is the sixty-six-year-old James applying, in duly circumspect fashion, such pecuniary and social clout as he has by now attained to the altruistic cause of enabling a younger friend to devote himself to his writing. Or, to put it more programmatically in terms of the present volume's title, here is James briefly emerging from the ivory tower of his art, and using his power to enact an ethical role in history.

Another letter of 26 July 1909 is addressed to Edith Wharton (*HJL*, iv, 527–8). This letter hints at a narrative that is rather different. For one thing, the offer of £100 appears to originate from the munificent Mrs Wharton and not from 'poor impecunious and

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helpless me' (*HJL*, iv, 530), for another, the immediate purpose they are to serve is to enable her lover, Fullerton, to retrieve compromising letters from a former mistress of his. James remains discreet about the less than straightforward reasons he gave Macmillan for his friend's neediness ('I named them a little', he tells Wharton). A missive to Macmillan of 3 August 1909 suggests further complications. It reveals that James's apparent benevolence has caused the publisher to make a generous gesture of his own, inviting James merely to 'become surety' for a publisher's advance of £100 on top of the one that had already been offered to Fullerton, to be paid out at the latter's request only (*HJL*, iv, 531).¹ James's reply, gratefully agreeing to Macmillan's arrangement, also shows that the publisher's letter carried an invitation to the Macmillans' summer home at Cromer, a privilege James had not heretofore enjoyed.²

Taking into account the clues now available, one is led to adopt a diminished view of Henry James's moral stature.³ Not only does he intentionally misrepresent facts to aid a questionable cause (helping a friend give in to blackmail), the effect of his actions is to deceive another friend so successfully as to prompt the latter to show a generosity both to the protégé (offering to advance an extra £100 himself) and to the petitioner (inviting him to Cromer) that seems misplaced under the circumstances. The protagonist of *this* narrative has used his power – a power that resides in the social and ethical reputation he enjoys with his friends as well as in his superior command of narrative (his effective representation of Fullerton's case) – to ends that are ethically dubious, to say the least.

The trajectory through James's biography that we have been following is the classically hermeneutical one of a search for clues, with a generous admixture of moral appraisal on the basis of the biographical evidence unearthed. It is a trajectory much facilitated in the case of James's life by the availability of a large amount of evidence. Not only is there the five-volume biography (1953–72) by Leon Edel that one can turn to, but also the latter's four-volume collection of James's letters (1974–84), just to mention the bulkiest tomes. The reader may thus be excused for entertaining the hope that definitive answers will be forthcoming, that James's life can be fully known.

What, then, could have motivated James to undertake such crooked actions? What was the extent of James's feelings for either Wharton or Fullerton that he did not turn a hair at going to such

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length for them? The friendship between Wharton and James is well documented. In Edel's estimate, Wharton perceived a greater intimacy in the relationship than did James: 'His affection was genuine; his reservations were strong.'⁴ It is not likely that James would have felt called upon to render services of the type outlined for Wharton, if his interest in the other party concerned had not been vivid. Edel is less outspoken in his account of James's feelings for Fullerton, this 'priapean New Englander' who 'had flirted with homosexual love' (*HJL*, iv, xxv, xxiii). James, we learn, 'was from the first much intrigued by him' (*HJL*, iv, xxv), or 'James had always been fond of him.'⁵ But, reading between the lines of Edel's discussion of the blackmail affair, one may discover that James's 'fondness' went deeper and must have been the driving force behind his later epistolary interventions. Responding to Fullerton's revelations, James writes: 'I think of the whole long mistaken perversity of your averted *reality* so to speak, as a miserable *personal* waste, (that of something – ah, so tender! – in *me* that was only quite yearningly ready for you, and something all possible, and all deeply and admirably appealing in yourself, of which I never got the benefit'; this 'clearing of the air . . . removes such a falsity (of defeated relation) between us'.⁶

More explicit than Edel, Fred Kaplan's recent biography finds the relationship to have been charged with 'homeroetic intensity', at least on James's side.⁷ He quotes liberally from the sequence of truly love-lorn letters James addressed to Morton Fullerton around the turn of the century, letters that were drawn on sparingly in Edel's major epistolary collection (*HJL*) and biography, where he characterized them as simply 'affectionate'.⁸ 'Can't you now, oh *can't* you, make your presence here for a fortnight a solid, secure fact?', James beseeches Fullerton in the spring of 1899.⁹ A year later, James complains half jocularly, towards the end of an otherwise brisk and optimistic letter, that his 'life is arranged – if arranged it can be called – on the lines of constantly missing you'.¹⁰ 'Don't exaggerate or morbidise the *difficulty* of being with me for a few days', he adjures his friend in September, 'I am intensely, absurdly convenient . . . You shall be surrounded here with . . . rest & consideration. You talk of the *real thing*. But that is the real thing. *I* am the real thing. I send you a photograph . . . What talk with you I want! I embrace you meanwhile with great tenderness.'¹¹ 'I'm alone', he sighs in a next missive, 'I'm alone & I think of you. I can't say fairer . . . I'd meet

you at Dover – I'd do anything for you.'¹² And a few days later: 'I want in fact more of you. You are dazzling. . . you are beautiful; you are more than tactful, you are tenderly, magically *tactile*. But you're not kind. There it is. You *are* not kind.'¹³

With the discovery of these clues, we would appear to have solved the riddle. Here at last is our explanation for James's 'queer' behaviour – an oddity that turns out to be rooted in homosexual desire. Against some odds, we have discovered that he was hopelessly in love with Fullerton and would truly 'do anything for [him]', even to lie and to collude. Put in more speculative terms, we have managed 'to force that knowledge to *reveal itself*, to reveal itself, indeed, both as cognition and as pleasure'.

Those are the words Shoshana Felman uses to characterize the activity indulged in by James's governess in *The Turn of the Screw*.¹⁴ The parallel between our own situation and the governess's is worth exploring further. When, at the end of James's novella, Miles 'surrender[s]' the name of the ghost that has been allegedly possessing him, 'this ultimate triumph of reading', for Felman, 'remains . . . highly ambiguous[:] the very act of naming, which the governess takes to be the decisive answer to her questions, is in the child's mouth, in reality, itself a question'.¹⁵ Miles does pronounce the name of 'Peter Quint', yet is unable to locate the apparition and asks his governess for help. His final word, before dying in her arms, is 'Where?' As Felman comments, 'If the act of naming does indeed name the final truth, that truth is given not as an answer to the question about meaning, but as itself a *question* about its *location* . . . The final meaning, therefore, is not an answer, but is itself a question, which also questions its own pursuit. In considering that question as an answer, the governess in effect stifles its nonetheless ongoing questioning power.'¹⁶

Reconsidering the 'answer' that we seemed to have hit upon at the end of our biographical investigation, it appears that that answer too was, in fact, a question. Indeed, each of the letters to Fullerton takes the form of a question, whether explicit or implicit, which could be formulated at its most direct level as 'when will you visit me?', at a deeper level as 'why don't you love me?'. However, to most modern sensibilities, the latter question implies a desire for sexual responsiveness that James's eroticism, in fact, steered clear of. Kaplan has persuasively demonstrated that if James, from the 1890s, is driven by a strong interest in the sexual in general, and his own homoeroticism

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in particular, his desire is enacted on a symbolical level; James always maintains the screen of language in between himself and carnal, erotic experience. Yet Kaplan's excellent biography too readily, and too conventionally, assumes that James's 'emphasis on friendship, not on physical consummation' can be adequately ascribed to 'conventional inhibitions', which caused sex to remain 'as dangerous, as threatening, as morally and culturally difficult for him as it had always been'.¹⁷ Eroticism, friendship, passionate letters are, for Kaplan, no more than poor substitutes for 'the real thing' shunned by the fearful puritan, Henry James.

A better account of the relationship between 'real thing' and symbolic approximation in James is implicit in Shoshana Felman's gloss on one of the most intriguing sentences in *The Turn of the Screw*: Douglas's pronouncement that 'the story *won't* tell . . . not in any literal vulgar way'. 'The literal', Felman writes, 'is "vulgar" because it *stops* the *movement* constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution. The vulgar, therefore, is anything which misses, or falls short of, the dimension of the symbolic, anything which rules out, or excludes, meaning as a loss and as a flight.'¹⁸ Sexuality, in the full sense of the word, can only be meaningful if it exceeds the 'literal sexual act',¹⁹ if it, too, participates in the inevitable processes of substitution, loss and flight that constitute any language. As Hillis Miller argues elsewhere in the present volume, the sex act is paradigmatic of a kind of bodily, experiential knowledge (as in 'Adam knew Eve') that cannot, in itself, be narrated but only performed, enacted (Felman's knowledge as 'pleasure').²⁰ In a love relationship, the other may thus be 'known' in a material sense by means of a sex act that is describable in a technical respect, yet whose intimate brand of knowledge cannot be narrated, communicated, or transmitted through language; it can only be striven for anew in a repetition of the act itself. But this performative knowledge, which could be termed 'empty of meaning' from a cognitive, narratable point of view, is only one object of the lovers' desire, is only one aspect of sexuality – though arguably its core. Another is the craving for cognitive knowledge of the other (as in 'tell me all about yourself'). This type of knowledge (Felman's knowledge as 'cognition') is open to narration, yet, as such, becomes subject to the substitutions and ambiguities of language. Sense, meaning, can be communicated here, yet will remain elusive because of the metaphorical nature of

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rhetoric. There is thus always a gap between the conscious (knowing and feeling) subject and an object that can only be known either performatively, by means of a direct and full presence that is itself non-narratable, non-communicable, or cognitively, by means of the indirect and incomplete approximation that can be achieved in language.²¹

The distinction between narratable and non-narratable modes of knowing might seem to imply that literature can only provide access to one of the two. Yet, invoking Felman once more, it is surely true that one of the major distinguishing marks of literature as opposed to, say, scientific uses of language, is 'its reserve of silence',²² its capacity, in other words, to suggest that which cannot be narrated, to appeal to emotion and not just cognition. James's ability to achieve this literary effect was singled out for particular praise by Virginia Woolf: 'Perhaps it is the silence that first impresses us [in *The Turn of the Screw*] . . . Some unutterable obscenity has come to the surface . . . Can it be that we are afraid? But it is not a man with red hair and a white face whom we fear. We are afraid of something unnamed, of something, perhaps, in ourselves . . . still we must own that something remains unaccounted for.'²³ At their most successful, James's narratives enable the reader to experience an 'unutterable', 'unnamed' something that remains 'unaccounted for', cognitively separated from the reader by an unbridgeable gap.²⁴

It is this gap which the usual, hermeneutical paradigm for reading Henry James has sought to fill, attempting to fix meaning, to unearth the truth at the centre of his narratives, in ways that have been insensitive to the *seeking in vain* that is so strongly James's experience (whether as a result of culturally determined inhibitions or because of something more akin to existential perception) and that his fiction invites the reader to repeat. The desire to 'know the truth' will always be frustrated in reading Henry James, because the heart of James's interest – in his fiction as in the biographical narrative we began by unfolding – is formed by a quantity that is unknowable in any observable, verifiable sense. Regarded from the author's perspective, James's fiction may be said to rehearse in fictional form events that, at least at the time of writing, only existed *in potentia*. Edel has thus noted that it seems as if James 'had foretold' the affair between Fullerton and Wharton in *The Wings of the Dove* (whose Merton Densher is simply based on Morton Fullerton but whose Kate Croy was created prior to James's acquaintance with

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Wharton), and as if James had invented in *Roderick Hudson* the sculptor Hendrik Andersen, whom he would meet and love only much later (*HJL*, iv, xxiii).²⁵ Rather than dismiss such convergences between fiction and biography as ‘coincidences’ (*ibid.*), we could consider them as parallel instances of James’s desire for experiential knowledge of the other. In fiction, he rehearses such knowledge vicariously; in ‘real’ life he seeks out and sometimes couples those persons on whom (or on whose type) his imagination dwells most insistently. The reader of the Jamesian text can never get at any ultimate cognitive truth; what he or she can do is to imaginatively relive – ‘like a creature responsive & responsible’ – such unknowable historical events, such experiential truth, as the narrative itself performatively rehearses.²⁶

The phrase just quoted from James, ‘responsive & responsible’, reactivates the ethical dimension that we had considered at the outset. The moral sense that James seems to mobilize here implies a commitment to a course of action whose effect on reality, whose historical impact, is unknown and unknowable at the time when it is embarked upon. If such a subsequent history could be charted, foretold, narrated at the outset, then the act (if it would still merit that name) would belong to the domain of narration or logic – of knowing; not to that of performance or ethics – of doing. This is why the assumption of a true responsibility involves such a heavy burden: it requires a willingness to be held accountable, at a later time, for actions whose effect will only then be measurable, whose knowability, narratability, will only emerge *post factum*.

We can, at this point, make a renewed attempt to invoke the terms of the volume’s title. The history that Henry James’s narratives may be said to enact is that history-as-events that is itself inaccessible to narration or cognition but open to *rehearsal* and *reiteration* at a performative level. The reader’s hermeneutical impulse to gain unmediated access to the events that constitute this history will remain frustrated inasmuch as it is a desire to grasp an object that is essentially elusive. The reader may, for one part, attempt to make such events cognitively accessible by transforming them into history-as-a-narrative, into a knowable and explicable past. Such an attempt, however, may also amount to an escape from the burden of responsibility, in that it tries to substitute cognition for performance. Its success is moreover jeopardized by the fact that turning history into narrative also involves subjecting it to the unstable realm of

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linguistic meaning. For another part, the silences within the Jamesian text invite the reader to enact their ungraspable history, that is to say, to make it one's own by repeating it imaginatively. As such, Jamesian narrative demands of the reader not just an emotional responsiveness, but also an ethical assumption of responsibility for the history that is enacted, for the event that takes place in the process. Here we may recall Virginia Woolf's comment on the power of *The Turn of the Screw* to make us feel morally responsible for the 'unutterable obscenity' that its narrative adumbrates, which we end up by looking for 'in ourselves'. A similar experience was registered by a contemporaneous review in *The Independent*: 'The feeling after perusal of the horrible story is that one has been assisting in an outrage . . . and helping to debauch – at least by helplessly standing by – the pure and trusting nature of children.'²⁷

All of the essays collected in this volume address such questions of knowability, performance, responsibility and narrative empowerment or disempowerment as have here been raised. Winfried Fluck's opening chapter, 'Power relations in the novels of James: the "liberal" and the "radical" version', situates the issues against the background of James criticism, focusing on the output of the past decade and in particular on the controversial issue of James's authorial assumption of 'power'. Fluck exposes the limitations of the two main readings of James: the 'liberal' one, in which James defends universal humanist values, and the 'radical' one, in which he is implicated in oppressive ideologies of gender, power, and representation. He argues instead that both have been blind to the way James himself foregrounds questions of power in language, social and sexual relations, and artistic representation. Of all nineteenth-century authors, James strikes Fluck as probably the most sensitive to aspects of dominance, dependence, and manipulation in linguistic and social relations; at the same time, James is not only unwilling to regard these effects as 'systemic', but also considers the 'work of art', its power to enact history by empowering the reader, as the best antidote to the irresponsibility implicit in the 'systemic' view.

Richard Hocks's chapter, 'Multiple germs, metaphorical systems, and moral fluctuation in *The Ambassadors*', further pursues James's negotiation of the tension between freedom and determinism, between ethical responsibility and systemic constraint. Hocks argues that the performative rhetoric of James's late novel – its poetics of metaphor and motif – allows him to adopt a philosophical stance

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between the traditional competing arguments. Examining the genesis of *The Ambassadors* – its multiple versions from the ‘germ’ recorded in his notebooks (Howells’s imperative to Sturges: ‘Live all you can!’, itself a cognitively ‘unknowable’ statement, which derives its meaning only from the performative force it achieves if acted upon) to the commentary of the New York Edition Preface – Hocks finds that, while James has retained the germ speech as a repository for the book’s central philosophical question (whether or not we act as free agents, whether or not we can choose to ‘be right’), the novel itself enacts an intricately mediating reply to this question.

For Sarah Daugherty, James’s fiction is born from the creative tension between the cognitive drive for knowledge and its performative counterpart. Analysing James’s literary criticism in her chapter, ‘James and the ethics of control: aspiring architects and their floating creatures’, Daugherty shows how, on the one hand, James was attracted to, yet suspicious of, the performative force of romantic fabulation, and, on the other, credited realist writers with an architectural strength derived from their cognitive grasp on reality but criticized them for the cruelly excessive control they exerted over their characters. Daugherty traces James’s attempts in his own fiction to balance the often conflicting demands of his own critical precepts. The concluding pages of *The Portrait of a Lady* and the second volume of *The Golden Bowl* demonstrate that James sometimes could only deal with the corners he had painted himself into by leaving the reader to seek a way out, forced as the latter is to speculate on scenes that take place outside the text. Yet, this apparent weakness may also be regarded as a strength, when one recognizes and comes to share James’s ultimate acceptance of the reserve of silence at the heart of literary representation – that which leaves room for the reader’s enactment of history.

Adrian Poole’s chapter, ‘James and the shadow of the Roman Empire: manners and the consenting victim’, articulates the problematical relationship between James’s protagonists (particularly those of the major-phase novels) and the idea of empire. Poole shows how James interrogates power, questioning the manipulative operations his protagonists engage in; yet James is also keenly aware of the latter’s need to act in history, to assume a role in a reality where power is an inescapable force. ‘Rome’ here serves as a figure for the grounding of cognition in questions of power and empowerment. If the protagonists of James’s late novels are not allowed to choose

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between the illusory alternatives of the assumption of power and submission to it, but have to try and achieve impossible resolutions of contradictions, so, for the reader, the choice cannot be the simple one between submission to the potency of his writing or defiance of it, between entering James's empire of words or staying outside. Rather, the responsibility thrust upon the reader is to reiterate the power moves of James's narrative.

In '*What Maisie Knew*: Henry James's Bildungsroman of the artist as queer moralist', Alfred Habegger examines the way in which *Maisie* enacts James's private history no less than does *A Small Boy and Others*. What we get in both the novel and the autobiography is a hero who triumphs by learning the trick of transforming painful subjection into a highly responsive and responsible kind of living (*Maisie*) or of art (*James*). Yet, as Habegger argues, because the kind of moral act that writing *Maisie* amounts to is one that recapitulates the writer's own formative ordeal, it turns out to be an exceedingly *specialized* moral act, as evasive as it is constructive. It makes a special case for a certain kind of survivor-mentality, and it goes in for smothered raptures and supreme, inward victories. As a moral narrative, it testifies to a sense of history as that which must be read; as a (more ironical) speech act, it bears witness to the fact that history cannot be read or narrated, but only repeated. It is because so much of James's writing leads up to these kinds of fraught moral acts, he concludes, that it is a mistake to regard him as a sound moral guide.

Like Habegger, Michiel Heyns addresses the uneasy relation between the moral sense of Jamesian narrative and its ironical dimension. His chapter, 'The double narrative of "The Beast in the Jungle": ethical plot, ironical plot, and the play of power', shows up the poverty of hermeneutical readings of 'The Beast in the Jungle'. These focus on the narrative's ethical plot, which confronts Marcher with the nullity of his own history and highlights his inability to recognize the romantic feelings May Bartram cherishes for him. A recent variation on this interpretation is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, which posits a repressed homosexual desire as the cause of Marcher's failure. Heyns complicates this hermeneutical picture by devoting sustained attention to the ironical and performative power enjoyed by the apparent victim, May Bartram. In withholding information from Marcher, May effectively punishes him for his obtuseness during her life. The longer it takes him to gain cognitive insight, the