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978-0-521-12717-2 - Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels

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“The Doctor’s Door”



“The Venetian Palace”

These photographs, taken by Alvin Langdon Coburn, were chosen by Henry James to accompany the text of the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove* (see the discussion on pp. 10–12).

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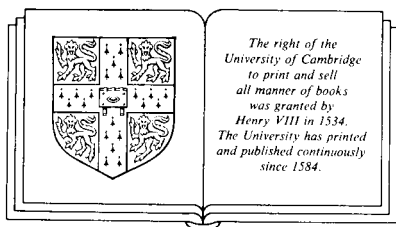
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DESIRE AND LOVE IN HENRY JAMES

A Study of the Late Novels

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University of Pennsylvania*



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521127172

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First published 1989

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

McWhirter, David Bruce.

Desire and love in Henry James: a study of the late novels /

David McWhirter.

p. cm.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-521-35328-9

1. James, Henry, 1843-1916 - Criticism and interpretation.

2. Love in literature. 3. Desire in literature. I. Title.

PS2127.L65M39 1989

813'.4 - dc 19 88-27437 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-35328-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12717-2 Paperback

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“What an immense number of words . . . to say you want to fall in love! I’ve no doubt you’ve as good a genius for that as any one if you would only trust it a little more.”

Henry James, *Roderick Hudson*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project grew most directly – and has been most consistently nourished – out of a deep fascination with the humanly interesting story embodied in James’s unfolding career. My first comprehensive reading of James’s fiction proved to be a strangely discomfiting experience. Increasingly, I found my admiration for his technical virtuosity tempered by reservations about his peculiarly limited sensibility, and particularly by my frustration with his apparent inability to write positively about love, or to grant his characters the power to fulfill their often intensely passionate desires. But in James’s last three novels – *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* – I discovered an unexpected yet unmistakable movement towards a more affirmative vision of life, a movement crowned in the unprecedented embrace of enacted love which he attains with the renewal of Maggie Verver’s marriage in *The Golden Bowl*. My book is essentially an exploration of the sources and implications of James’s belated acceptance of the reality – as opposed to the imagination – of loving. More specifically, I argue that James’s changing conception of love in the late novels is linked to broader shifts in theme and formal strategy which involve a fundamental recasting of his moral and aesthetic assumptions.

In his prefaces to the New York Edition of his work, James repeatedly characterizes his *œuvre* as very much “a *living* affair” (*AN*, 342), as “a thrilling tale” and “a wondrous adventure” (*AN*, 4) in which he could “retrace the whole growth of [his] ‘taste’” – “a blessed comprehensive name,” he explains, “for many of the deepest things in us” (*AN*, 340). And he invites us to join him in exploring “the manifold delicate things, the shy and illusive, the inscrutable, the indefinable, that minister to deep and quite confident processes of change” (*AN*,

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344). But the particular “process of change” which I see unfolding in the pages of James’s late novels is likely to trouble some readers, most profoundly, I think, in its discernment of a deliberate and in some senses limiting movement towards closure in texts valued primarily in recent years for their openness and indeterminacy. Post-structuralist critics have increasingly valorized James’s fiction as the locus of an autotelic, self-generating, endlessly interpretable *écriture*, blissfully detached from the authority of nature, history, and even of the novelist himself. James has thus been celebrated for his exemplification of a “literality” which is “essentially impermeable to analysis and interpretation” (Felman, 207); for his achievement of an “unresolved ambiguity” through which “the possible is rendered impossible” and “the possible becomes impossible” (Rimmon, xii, 235); and for his capacity “to conceive even of time and death as merely our most privileged fictions” (Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, 141). But while I believe, as my reading of *The Ambassadors* will attest, that James *was* drawn toward this radical ideal of an art liberated from the contingencies of a reality he saw as fatally limiting, I also believe that, in the novels of his maturity, he came to understand that the value of a literary work is bound up, inseparable, in fact, from its value, inevitably moral, as an act of life. In *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, through a remarkable drama of realization and self-realization, James consciously withdrew from – or perhaps more accurately moved beyond – an aesthetic which emphasized uncertainty, ambiguity, and textual play to arrive at a recognition of the real, binding, but ultimately empowering choices involved in the act of artistic creation. For fictions, as James would insist in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, are also “literary deeds,” embedded, like all our “innumerable acts,” in “the conditions of life.” And “to ‘put’ things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them, and the terms on which we understand that, belong as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom” (*AN*, 347).

It is only candid of me to acknowledge that my own convictions about the purpose, value and affect of literature closely resemble those which I see James embracing at the end of his career. My most consistent intention and effort throughout this study has been to grant the fullest depth and power and value to the myriad choices – thematic, technical, stylistic, and above all human – enacted by Henry James in

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these novels, and to root the “illusive,” often “inscrutable” surfaces of his texts in the psychological and moral realities of the man who made them. Perhaps the closest analogy to my method is Sartre’s concept of “existential psychoanalysis,” which searches in “each example of human conduct” for the contours of an “original choice” – a “choice of position in the world” through which the individual “makes himself a person” and confirms “the human meaning of freedom” (568–70). If this reading of James’s late fictions admittedly restricts the abstractly infinite possibilities for interpreting them – for every human choice, by realizing some possibilities, renders others inauthentic – it does so in order to find in them the expression of a richer and more meaningful freedom.

In tracing the changing parameters of James’s vision of his art, I have found it helpful to draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives – deconstructive, structuralist, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, and Marxist. No one of these approaches should be conflated with my own. As will be readily apparent, I have benefitted greatly from the extraordinary wealth of prior criticism devoted specifically to James. But if I wished to locate my contribution amongst the welter of critical voices contending for the elusive turf known as Henry James, I would unhesitatingly align myself with those commentators – critics like Laurence Holland and Leon Edel, or more recently, like John Carlos Rowe, Carren Kaston, and Mark Seltzer – who have worked in various ways to free this great novelist from the myth of the master, and from the life-denying retreat into a refined but sterile art which that myth has always implied. While the terms of my discussion here are primarily ethical and psychological, any attempt to restore James’s art to “the conditions of life” – to the social, political, historical and personal contexts in which it was produced – is a project implicitly validated by my own.

Many friends, teachers, colleagues and students have helped make my work possible and rewarding. I can only mention a few here: Kenny Marotta, whose seminar on James at the University of Virginia provided the initial impetus for this study; David Wyatt, whose friendship and sympathetic criticism encouraged me throughout its development; and Robert Langbaum, whose high standards of precision in thought and elegance in expression are, I hope, reflected in these pages. I would also like to thank Robert Lucid, for his confidence in my work and for his support and advice at a crucial juncture, and John

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Gontowicz, for his professional and good-humored assistance in preparing various versions of this manuscript.

My deepest debt is to my family, especially to my wife Ellen, whose sustaining love is woven deeply into the fabric of this book.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Henry James frequently cited in the text are referred to according to the following abbreviations:

- AN* *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937
- CT* *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964
- L* *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984
- LC* *Literary Criticism*, 2 vols. New York: The Library of America, 1984
- N* *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock. University of Chicago Press, 1981
- NSB* *Notes of a Son and Brother*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916
- SBO* *A Small Boy and Others*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913

Volume and page citations (i.e. 22, 186) refer to *The Novels and Tales of Henry James: The New York Edition*, 26 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-09.