

CHAPTER ONE

Henry James and the languages of sex

While reading in Henry James's fiction a critique of modern notions of sexuality, this book examines the privileged role sexuality plays in the constitution of the self, or of 'character', in James's writing. It argues that sexuality is an important component in James's conception of identity, even if his fiction might be seen to critique a social formation in which the sexual has a founding, ontological status for the human subject. James's fiction is read in a context in which two questions are being addressed with increasing urgency. Can the 'political' be founded on the notion of an individuated, autonomous subjectivity, and can 'subjectivity' be located according to notions of sexual and gendered identity? It will be argued that 'sexuality' (or the 'erotic') both *constitutes* the Jamesian character in a crucial sense, yet also that for James sexuality marks a space in which the very possibility of selfhood is questioned. For James there is no 'being' or 'essence' of sexuality which precedes the existence of sexuality; nor can sexuality be understood in terms of stable categories. Sexuality is rather a dynamic process, a performance, a story, a narrative, in which the unstable play of desire and identifications can erode the boundaries of the perceived self.

Judith Butler writes in her influential *Gender Trouble* (1990) that 'the gendered body is performative', and 'has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'.¹ This claim, as Judith Butler's work itself shows, is as resonant and productive for conceptualizing 'sexuality' as it has been for thinking about gender. The 'being' of sexuality is always contingent. 'Sexuality' is not simply 'there' to be represented: it is created in its representations.

The insistence that 'sexuality' is 'performative', a 'product of representation', however, does not mean that it is 'free-floating', shapeless, amorphous. Sexuality still has a shape, and its shape may change historically. Yet the 'history of sexuality' is not a straightforward narrative, against which James's fictional texts can be read. Rather, James's writing is

part of that history, just as that history unfolds in his writing. Both 'history' and 'James's writing' combine to tell a story of sexuality as a problematic category, a story of sexuality as a conflict of stories.

Any inquiry made today into 'sexuality' needs to place itself in relation to the wide-ranging debate between constructionist and essentialist accounts. This debate, however, is not one that can be 'resolved' in advance of textual analysis. As Diana Fuss has argued, 'constructionism' and 'essentialism' have different contours, different effects, and yield different strategic advantages, depending on their historical and cultural contexts;² this applies as well to the very opposition between the two concepts. Indeed, one of the reasons why the constructionist/essentialist debate seems to provide such a useful framework for examining sexuality in James's writing is that in the late nineteenth century this debate had already taken on a decisive importance, in the growth of the social sciences, with their shifting allegiances to ontogeny or to phylogeny, to 'nature' or to 'nurture',³ and in the development of various clinical discourses on the self – psychiatry, sexology, psychoanalysis. We should not expect, then, to find a James who is either an 'essentialist' or a 'constructionist' (thus discovering in his work either an essential, 'pre-textual' sexuality or a sexuality which is determined solely by its cultural place). Rather, his fiction might be thought of as interrogating these very terms. 'What shall we call our "self"?' Madame Merle asks in one of the most famous exchanges in *The Portrait of a Lady*. 'Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear . . . One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self'. To which Isabel Archer replies both that one has an *inner* core or self – which may or may not be expressed – and that one controls one's own self-representations: 'I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!' If Madame Merle has a fault, Isabel thinks, 'it was that she was not natural'; yet Madame Merle does not 'pretend, like some people I've met, to express herself by original signs'. Madame Merle's 'nature spoke not the less in her behaviour because it spoke a conventional tongue. "What's language at all but a convention?"' said Isabel.⁴ Here we see James dramatizing the opposition between surface and depth that shapes different conceptualizations of the self. If he is opposing Isabel Archer's naivety to Madame Merle's sophistication, we should remember that his sympathy lies with Isabel.

Perhaps, as Madame Merle says, we find ourselves expressed in languages and conventions that precede us; but might we not also feel, like Isabel, that there are aspects of our 'selves' which exceed or do not meet these terms? James's fiction returns again and again to this difficult meeting of 'culture' and 'the self', a meeting in which the terms of the construction of a sexed, gendered self are always interrogated, never taken for granted.

Reading 'sexuality' in James is framed by the problematic relation of 'then' and 'now': the vocabulary available to James for describing the body is different from our own vocabulary, yet it is not *entirely* different, and reading sexual nuances in his fiction requires an ear both for similarities and differences. We should be aware that his writing spans the era in which our own vocabulary for describing sexuality is being formulated. When he started to write fiction, the vocabulary which we take for granted today – a vocabulary which individuates according to sexual taste (homosexual, heterosexual, masochist, fetishist and so on) – was increasingly used by specialists, 'modern jurists, psychiatrists, writers on forensic medicine' (as J. A. Symonds wrote in 1883),⁵ but had yet to achieve general circulation; this vocabulary was to become more widely available in James's lifetime.

This is not to say that James himself adopted modern terminology with enthusiasm. In his fiction, James never even uses the word 'sexuality'; only rarely do we even find the older 'sex'.⁶ And, when he does use 'sexuality', in a private context, it is from a standpoint of seeming disavowal. In a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson on 17 February 1893 James writes:

I grant you Hardy with all my heart and even with a certain quantity of my boot-toe. I am meek and ashamed where the public clatter is deafening – so I bowed my head and let 'Tess of the D.'s' pass. But oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile. The pretence of 'sexuality' is only equalled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author's reputation for style. There are indeed some pretty smells and sights and sounds. But you have better ones in Polynesia.⁷

The letter addresses a topic which James certainly finds sensitive, and wavers between precision and verbal excess. In fact, it is the working of the feminine in this passage which undermines James's masculine control and aggression – signalled by the movement of James's boot-toe, presumably kicking Hardy. (James often places himself in a bodily or even fetishistic relation to writers and to their products, most notoriously in his extensive commentary on George Sand.⁸ In an 1876 review of Baudelaire he expresses a painful voyeurism that comes into play when reading *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'what the reader sees is a gentleman in a painful-looking posture, staring very hard at a mass of things from which, more intelligently, we avert our heads.'⁹ The 'sexual passion' of Gabriele D'Annunzio's fiction is

compared with ‘the boots and shoes that we see, in the corridors of promiscuous hotels, standing, often in double pairs, at the doors of rooms.’)¹⁰

Placing ‘sexuality’ within quotation marks, James distances himself from and expresses his own cognitive grasp of ‘sexuality’, which is said, quite strikingly, to be absent from Hardy’s work. Yet Tess’s presence undermines James’s patronizing stance, and tips it over into something resembling hysteria, compromising his aggressive masculinist position. ‘But oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile.’ Is ‘she’ ‘Tess’ the character or *Tess* the book? – the pronoun ‘she’ following ‘Tess of the D.’s’ indicating a slippage between the two. If ‘Tess’ the woman is vile, is James recoiling before the feminine? Or is ‘Tess’ the *novel* vile: is he objecting to Hardy’s *representation* of the feminine (the creative artist rejecting the artistic practice of a competitor)? It is Hardy’s *language* which is an *abomination*, but this response too is more visceral than critical. *Ab-omin-ation*: Hardy’s language as ill omen from which James must look away. Do we stare or do we avert our heads? To turn away from or to face the sexual, to open or close one’s eyes to it: James’s difficulty, even as he disclaims it, has also been a difficulty for readers of James. Do we ‘see’ the sexual, is it not there for us to open our eyes to, or do we keep our eyes closed so as not to see? And how is the sexual inscribed in his work as a *crisis* of seeing, a trauma of perception?

Yet even as he expresses distaste for ‘sexuality’ in Hardy, James is making a claim for himself, marking his turf. If Hardy makes a ‘pretence’ at representing sexuality, can James offer something more authentic? Is the answer to be found in ‘vile Tess’ herself? For what might James object to in what he calls ‘Tess of the D.’s’, if not the equation of woman *with* her sex, the equation so many Jamesian heroines (Angela Vivian, Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, Maggie Verver, to name just four) are anxious to deny? Stephen Heath notes that Hardy is dealing with dominant cultural fantasies of ‘woman’: he writes Tess as ‘the primal, tempting, sexually guilty and corrupting woman’. Although the novel is ostensibly a vindication of Tess, as victim, in its ‘assumption of “sexuality”, . . . she is at fault as woman, the writing moves into the position of her guilt’.¹¹ The passage Heath quotes from the novel suggests a continuity between Tess’s bodily interior and her ‘nature’: her ‘soul’ and ‘spiritual beauty’:

[Tess] had not heard [Angel] enter, and hardly realized his presence there. She was yawning, and he saw the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake’s. She had stretched one arm so high above her coiled-up cable of hair that he could see its satin delicacy above the sunburn; her face was flushed with sleep, and her eyelids hung heavy over their pupils. The brim-fulness of her nature breathed

from her. It was a moment when a woman's soul is more incarnate than at any other time; when the most spiritual beauty bespeaks itself flesh; and sex takes the outside place in the presentation.¹²

In its collapsing of surface and depth, its presentation of the female body as a readable, penetrable collection of signs breathing forth 'the brimfulness' of its 'nature', this passage resonates with the full cultural weight of nineteenth-century medical and psychiatric writing on women.¹³ And James's female body, it will be argued, always resists this weight, this point of view as 'factual'. Although novels like *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) might seem to consist of endless attempts to 'read woman', they constitute woman as illegible, as escaping authoritative cultural narratives.

The relation of James to Hardy cannot be expressed, then, as a relationship of genuine product to falsehood, counterfeit. James's fictional concerns are repeatedly close to Hardy's. However, whereas Hardy describes male perceptions which assume a continuum between 'Tess' and her sex, James's fiction is troubled by the very notion of the sexed self. The question asked by *Tess* appears to be: how is femininity, the woman, treated in a given social formation? By contrast, the question returned to in James's fiction is: how is 'femininity', 'the woman', 'female identity' asserted? And, a question which is not really distinguishable from the one just asked: what of 'masculinity'?

The male characters of Hardy's novel (Angel and Alec) assume Tess's 'sexuality' to be legible, and in harmony with her 'sex': a 'prior' to a social surround which suppresses it, refuses to accept it, punishes its expression. In other words, Tess has for them a 'sexuality' and a 'gender': as readers, we are urged implicitly to distance ourselves from Angel, to accept, admire, love Tess's identity rather than be horrified by it. (James, it seems, is horrified: 'she is vile.') In James's writing, by contrast, there is no easy alignment of sex, gender and sexuality. James's presentations of sexuality are quite radical in scope, but do not involve a division between 'conformist' and 'subversive' sexual identities: rather the very construction of sexual identity according to a fixed object-choice is put into question. Which is not to say that the question of sexual identity is avoided in James's writing: this question is always there, but *as* a question, the question of the *possibility* of a sexual identity (or sexual *identities*). The terms of such a construction, the difficulties, the cost, of such a construction, are meticulously examined throughout his work.

Frequently in James's fiction identity is opaque, difficult to discern: it does not readily present itself to an observer, or observers are prone to

error in attempting to read other characters. In his *Confidence* (1879), for instance, Bernard Longueville and Gordon Wright find Angela Vivian mysterious: they lack the ability Thomas Hardy attributes to Angel Clare, to '[con] the characters of her face as if they had been hieroglyphics.'¹⁴ Yet this 'illegibility' of the body does not place the body outside history: the 'legibility' of the body is both a historical and novelistic concern. James does not aestheticize the sexual, or enclose the sexual in a sealed aesthetic space. Yet his fiction often comes close to an aestheticization of the sexual, if only to retreat from such an aestheticization at crucial moments.¹⁵ The late fiction critiques the aestheticization of sexuality just as it critiques the medicalization of sexuality, discerning in both the difficulty, the risk, of attempting to represent the body, when the terms available for representation are always already tainted. For James sexuality is always *cultural*, and his fiction responds, in various ways, to the proliferation of discourses, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which attempt to 'represent' sexuality, yet are responsible for its very creation.

Writing about 'sexuality' in the late nineteenth century repeatedly comes up against the problem of representation itself. How can one discuss 'sexuality' in James when James himself was so resistant to using this term? Paradoxically, the very *absence* of this term partly demonstrates its importance, highlights its status as that which is difficult to represent. Stephen Heath emphasizes these difficulties in *The Sexual Fix*:

'Sexuality' is the term of our conception and systematization, specific and historical, how we represent the sexual – 'sex' – as an entity, with 'sexology' its study. Sexuality, human experience of the sexual, is as old as language, as old as human being; 'sexuality'[,] particular construction of that experience, goes back little more than a hundred years. One of the difficulties we face is the slide under the same word between these two references: we need the word 'sexuality' in the first sense, but we cannot say or write it today without bringing with it the assumptions, the representation, of the second.¹⁶

Michel Foucault makes a similar distinction, using different terms – he distinguishes between an *ars erotica* in which 'the truth of sex . . . is drawn from pleasure itself', and the more recent, Western, *scientia sexualis*, in which 'procedures for telling the truth of sex . . . are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: . . . the confession'.¹⁷

Given that James is writing in the period in which the *scientia sexualis* is consolidating itself, we would expect to see a certain slippage between terms. Despite this instability, there is still much value in Foucault's conceptualization of 'sexuality' as arising from a formation in which 'erotic'

tastes become important both in the role they play in the deployment of discipline and surveillance, and as markers of the self. Whereas the 'erotic' may be assumed to be pleasurable, the 'sexual' may be subject to distaste.

It is useful to think of James both as an erotic writer, and as a writer whose works are marked by the historical development of 'sexuality'. However, if James is an 'erotic writer', his representations of the erotic are never straightforward. Indeed, it is the very elliptical way in which the erotic is so often figured in his writing which marks its importance. Allon White, in one of the best commentaries on James's obscurity, describes James's narrative procedure as involving the

'sublimation' of the positive, elemental and self-contained 'act of a moment' into a form which generates complexity, interrelatedness, negativity and extension until it has lost its 'baseness'; and 'foreclosure' of sexuality by remaining 'outside' the scene of seduction among the hints and clues – by the process of omission and exclusion which we call ellipsis.

Although James frequently tells a 'story of a compromised and compromising seduction', the

'scene of seduction' constitutes a fundamental moment of obscurity and fascination and is characterized by a strange doubleness. It constitutes what Pierre Macherey has termed a 'determining absent centre' to the fiction.¹⁸

Here White argues that the obscurity of James's representation of the sexual shows its importance, rather than its irrelevance. White's approach is psychoanalytic in making the 'scene of seduction' the 'determining absent centre'; I argue throughout that the determining absent centre for James is not the scene of seduction as such, but the absence of a language which can adequately describe human affections and erotic attachments.

Erotic silence, or vagueness, needs to be read with great care in James's fiction. Certainly it bears a clear historical relation to the late nineteenth century's injunction to *speak*, to *confess*, which accompanies the very 'taboo' on bringing the erotic into discourse. Thus the dignified silences of *What Maisie Knew* (1897) are part of the same cultural formation as the endless, almost nauseatingly graphic confessions of Walter in *My Secret Life* (ca. 1890). Rather than simply 'escaping' sexuality, *What Maisie Knew*, in constituting *sexual* knowledge as knowledge, as the very rationale for narrative, privileges sexuality, in fact *cries out for* sexuality as that which will fill the gaps, occupy the silences, resolve the anxieties of Maisie's hermeneutic enterprise. Yet, silence is never 'filled' by sexuality in a non-problematic fashion: sexuality, like hysteria, is characterized not only by the absence of speech but also by linguistic excess.

James's seeming reluctance to figure the sexual directly cannot be accounted for with reference to a simplistic framework of 'repression'. A novel like *The Wings of the Dove* contains a highly self-conscious commentary on its own methods of figuring the sexual, and exemplifies the sophistication of James's response to the period's discourses on sexuality.¹⁹ There is in James not only a straightforward (and easily documented)²⁰ desire to conform to public standards of acceptability, to ease the reception of his novels (he abhorred the scandal surrounding Wilde and Hardy, for example). There is also a complex reaction to what might be called an *ontology* of sexuality, an equation of sexual taste, or desire, with being. For James, resisting this equation meant keeping open not only erotic but also aesthetic possibilities.

These claims have to be made with a great deal of care, as they impinge not only on our conceptions of the relation between 'high' and 'low' culture, but also on the iconic status of James the elusive aesthetic fabricator of the incomprehensible, James the canonical Master of early Modernism. James's reputation as a 'Modernist' writer is problematic in that his resistance to identity, and his writing's repeated stressing of the *performative* nature of the self, seems to align him to postmodernism. Although this partly reflects the inevitable difficulty of relating the genealogy of Modernism and postmodernism, there are historical pressures informing this 'postmodernist James' (and also the 'postmodernist Wilde' discovered by recent literary criticism).²¹ The very creation of an ontology of gender and sexuality was also an incitement to perform. Resistance is shaped by the 'dominant' discourse in what Jonathan Dollimore, in his recent reading of Wilde, calls the 'perverse dynamic'.²²

The literary movements of aestheticism and decadence can be seen as participating in this general movement of resistance. Jonathan Freedman has recently argued that 'British aestheticism anticipates the postmodern most fully in its sustained critique of the explanatory syntheses of nineteenth-century European thought.'²³ And the mode of discursive pleasure that Peter Brooks, following Barthes, calls a 'perverse textuality' seems to arise in particular out of fin de siècle decadence.²⁴ Writers like Beardsley and Wilde developed what Linda Dowling calls a Paterian 'aesthetic of delay',²⁵ a discursive eroticism in which erotic effects are generated not through the transparency of language and its ability to represent erotic actions, but through language's opacity, through a lingering over the shimmering, wavering instabilities of linguistic effects, through a deferral of cognitive closure.

Such an aesthetic is strongly evident in James's most Paterian novels,

The Wings of the Dove and *The Ambassadors*.²⁶ In the first chapter of *The Ambassadors*, for instance, Strether ‘enjoyed extremely the duration of delay . . . There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference.’²⁷ Just as the activity of the pervert, in the view of late nineteenth-century social scientists, threatens social cohesion by privileging individual pleasure over the demands of the group, in the decadent aesthetic the activities of individual words and phrases selfishly destabilize and undermine discursive coherence. These connections were made explicit in Paul Bourget’s definition of decadence (which was introduced into British literary life by sexologist Havelock Ellis, writing in 1889). Bourget wrote that a society ‘should be like an organism’ made up of ‘smaller organisms, which may themselves be resolved into a federation of cells’, the ‘social cell’ being ‘the individual’. In such a social formation the lesser organisms need ‘to subordinate their energy to the total energy’; otherwise, if ‘individual life becomes exaggerated beneath the influence of acquired well-being, and of heredity,’ an ‘anarchy’ will arise which ‘constitutes the *decadence* of the whole’ (the threat of degeneration). Language is governed by a ‘similar law’, and a ‘style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word’.²⁸

This view of society as the organic whole constituted by a group of groups, each of which is in itself a group of smaller groups or units, a delicately structured pyramid of hierarchical life forms, helps us see the way in which the Jamesian drawing-room becomes a highly politicized forum, just as the relation of James’s characters to marital and sexual life is always resonant with larger social implications. The notion of the organic society was used in a conservative way to underpin existing social arrangements: the departure of individuals from their allotted role in a larger structure appeared to presage the collapse of that whole structure.²⁹ According to Bourget’s definition of the ‘style of decadence’, the relation of James’s novels to what Freedman calls ‘the explanatory syntheses of nineteenth-century European thought’ corresponds to the relation of the individual life to the larger organism – or, in Freudian terms, to the relation of the pervert to the teleology of sexual life. The Freudian pervert, the exaggerated individual life evoked by Bourget, and the Paterian aesthetic of delay and the performative notion of the self developed by James, all chip away at the authority of a larger narrative structure.

James’s fiction then can be characterized as showing an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, a quality which, for Lyotard, is definitive of post-modernism.³⁰ However, this suspicion is not sufficient to diminish the

importance of the metanarrative: the terms of resistance to such a metanarrative are also dependent on that metanarrative. To read James's fiction within a framework of resistance to a régime of sexuality is also to trace the extension of that régime into the personal. If the Jamesian character wishes to escape the ontology of the sexual, this wish acknowledges the movement of sexuality into the private intimate space of self-definition, a space which, for all its 'privacy', is deeply marked by the social circulation of sexual discourse.

Tracing this movement, and resistance to this movement in James's fiction, does not involve, then, an insistence that what is ostensibly non-sexual has a 'deep' or 'true' meaning that is in fact sexual. This is important in that it is frequently charged or implied that to read sexual meanings into James's novels is to vulgarise them. Often it is not clear whether this critical complaint is directed against sexuality or against homosexuality. In some discussions of 'political correctness', James takes on strategic value as the example of the 'great writer' who needs to be preserved against 'PC' lunacy. The British *Observer*, for example, used James to report on the lunacy of the American academy, informing its readers of a student unwilling to take a course on James which would "normalise" James. This meant "teaching him as a great writer, and not as a victim of his homosexuality".³¹ The desire to separate James's art from his sexuality is also seen in John Bayley's review of Fred Kaplan's *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*: 'Was James ever homosexually active?' Bayley asks. 'Did his military and mental gaiety go with his being gay in the modern sense? Fortunately it is a question impossible to answer . . .'³² This 'Fortunately' slides over a number of unstated (and offensive) assumptions. Bayley appears to imply that he would not want a writer like James to be 'gay in the modern sense', and takes it for granted that his reader will share this wish.

However, if one does not regard answers to such questions as 'unfortunate', it is certainly possible to think of James's life and work in relation to modern constructions of sexuality, and, indeed, of homosexuality. Modern notions of sexual identity inform James's writing profoundly. It might jar to talk about *What Maisie Knew* and *My Secret Life* in the same breath (even if we are used to the New Historicist practice of unexpected conjunctions). Yet these two texts are related inversely to one another, in that sexual knowledge and its difficult relation to language is a prime narrative motive in both.³³ Walter continues to recount his sexual exploits at such length precisely because he obtains pleasure from recounting the forbidden; Maisie's knowledge is fascinating insofar as it appears to con-