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Introduction
The Promise of Art

the inner, moral qualities essentially inherent in time itself
Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*

The Promise of the Promise

A dying man stares into the eyes of the fifteen-year-old boy kneeling over him. "My wife, my child. Look after them. Say you will," the man begs the boy. "I promise," the boy responds, even though they are almost strangers. I am describing the central moment in Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's 1997 film *La Promesse*, whose subject is the trafficking of illegal immigrants in Belgium. The man, Hamidou, has fallen from the scaffolding of the house he has been coerced to work on for the boy's father, Roger, in return for forged citizenship papers. But when the boy, Igor, implores his father to take Hamidou to the hospital, his father refuses, since immigration officials are in the middle of a snap visit. Instead, Roger forces Igor into helping him hide the bleeding man. By the time the officials depart, Hamidou is dead. In the days that follow Igor does what he can to help Hamidou's widow, Assita, who has no idea where her husband has gone. Annoyed by her repeated questions, Roger decides to get rid of Assita by selling her into prostitution. A horrified Igor helps her escape, buying her a train ticket for Italy, where she believes her husband has fled. Yet as she is about to board the train, he suddenly confesses. "Hamidou's dead," he tells Assita. "We buried him in cement." Assita looks at Igor for what feels like an eternity, before turning and walking back toward the station exit, followed by Igor. The film ends with the two of them disappearing from view.

Up until Igor's vow, the title of *La Promesse* had appeared to be an ironic reference to the dream of a better life that draws immigrants to Western Europe. Igor's keeping of his word could hardly be said to atone for the failure of this promise. Yet it is nonetheless remarkable. Nothing, after all,

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could be less in his interest than confessing to Assita, since he is "on the verge of escaping undetected."[1] Critics have offered various explanations for his decision: Igor's youth; the shock of seeing his father commit a crime; his sense of guilt; and his fascination with Assita, on whom he has been spying.[2] None of these explanations suffice, since Igor's act feels almost miraculous. Up until this point, *La Promesse* has depicted a world in which no one keeps their word or is expected to keep it. Igor's fulfillment of his promise to Hamidou represents a break with this world of lies and betrayal, in which people are viewed as a means rather than as an end; no wonder one critic regards it as the opening up of "a new moral space."[3]

Promissory obligation is distinct from what are called paradigmatic moral duties – such as the responsibility to tell the truth – because it is owed only to the persons to whom the oath is made. In addition, promising is a public act, dependent on "the presence and acting of others," to quote from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*.[4] In Igor's case, however, no one knows he has promised, and the person to whom he did so has died.[5] But the private nature of his pledge has no bearing on the sense of responsibility he feels. Igor gives his word not knowing what he is vowing to do nor for how long he is to do it. Yet he never questions the necessity of keeping his promise, despite having seen his father break so many. According to David Hume, the obligation to keep our word is produced by the imperative to maintain "the climate of trust" essential to the workings of society.[6] No such climate exists in *La Promesse*. To keep a promise in such a society amounts to a creative act, the attempt to forge a climate of trust rather than to maintain it.

The sense of obligation Igor feels is profoundly connected to his sense of himself. Lauren Berlant argues that Igor confesses to Assita in the hope of attaching himself "to a world that doesn't yet exist reliably."[7] But what also doesn't yet exist reliably is the self that would inhabit this world. Igor's compact is as much with the self he hopes or wants to be as it is with Hamidou. The characters in the work that is the subject of this study, that of Henry James, also attempt to bring into being "a world that doesn't yet exist reliably," one more inhabitable than the one in which they find themselves. And, like Igor, their means of doing so, I will be arguing, is by giving their word – though not always by keeping it. The genteel society in which James's protagonists make and break promises could not be more different from the brutal lower-class milieu of *La Promesse*. But it could certainly not be described as possessing a "climate of trust." According to Robert Pippin, the loss of "cultural authority" at the end of the nineteenth century ensures that James's characters have "little basis even for a

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minimum trust."[8] What then are we to make of the fact that there should be scarcely a James novel – scarcely a tale – without a promise?

The following pages examine a series of promises from across James's entire career, though four in particular will be central to my argument, since they represent the key to understanding what I regard as his most important works: the promise Isabel Archer issues to her stepdaughter Pansy that she will "come back" (*III*, 54) in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the oath to "save" Madame de Vionnet sworn by Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, the vow to love one another "for ever" (*XIX*, 95) exchanged by Kate Croy and Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*, and the pledge to shield Adam and Maggie Verver from knowledge of their affair taken by the Prince and Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl*. On the surface, none of these resemble Igor's vow. Their consequences, however, are just as momentous. These promises make or break worlds, ensure the continuity of the self, destroy fictions, and create them.

For the statement "I promise" to count as a successful speech act, John Searle writes, the following set of conditions have to be met: It must be made in the presence of someone able to register that a pledge has been taken, be done by the person making the promise, commit the speaker to performing something within their power, involve something outside the usual course of events, concern an action to be done in the future, and be desired by the person to whom the promise is made.[9] Bizarrely, almost none of the promises in James's fiction fulfill Searle's conditions. They are uttered in private, or at the wrong time, or to the wrong person; they concern something that cannot be done, or has already been done, or should not be done.

Consider the four listed above: Isabel's pledge to Pansy is so vague she is not sure what exactly she has promised to do; it is not in fact in Strether's power to save Madame de Vionnet; the private nature of Kate and Densher's pledge renders it inoperable; the Prince and Charlotte's vow injures those it is ostensibly taken to protect. How is it then that these promises have such power?

The act of promising is an example of what Bernard Williams calls "thick" ethical notions, those "which seem to express a union of fact and value."[10] James's fiction strips away that union, imagining a series of inexplicable and even immoral promises. The strangest of them all is surely the "vow of the most portentous kind" made to his wife by Tony Bream in *The Other House* – a novel whose initial title was simply "The Promise." That vow is "not to marry again . . . in the lifetime of [their] daughter."[11] Horrifyingly, the daughter, Effie, will be drowned on her fourth birthday

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by a jealous lover in order to release Tony from what James referred to as "this absolutely sacred assurance." And the death does indeed free Tony to marry the woman he now loves, although happily this is not the same woman as the one who kills his child.[12] The grotesque ending of *The Other House* is a result of the fact that James is interested only in the ironic aspect of Effie's death – that it is the result of Tony staying true to his word. Hearing the news of Effie's fate, James writes, his hero "sees the phantom of his solemn vow, his sacred promise rise terribly before him."[13] And what makes this "solemn . . . sacred promise" terrible is the fact that Tony has kept it.

Another promise whose keeping results in death is the "vow of blind obedience" (*VI*, 44) sworn by Hyacinth Robinson to a group of revolutionaries in *The Princess Casamassima*. The form this obedience is to take, Hyacinth later discovers, is the killing of an enemy of the revolution, which is precisely what he does – albeit by committing suicide. The reason his act takes such an ironic form is that the vow he takes has "altered his life altogether . . . changed the terms on which he held it." What has changed are the political views that prompted James's hero to make his promise in the first place. Pledging to commit a revolutionary act has the perverse effect of transforming Hyacinth into a conservative, to the extent that he feels completely estranged from the self that promised, and thus from the promise itself.[14] "Let it come or not come," he says resignedly near the end of the novel, "it's not my affair" (*VI*, 372).

How are we to account for Hyacinth's odd sense of detachment from his own promise? A possible answer lies in the act's peculiar temporal structure. Michael H. Robins speaks of the promise as possessing an "irreducible, *double* indexical, temporal reference: the reference to the time at which we are committing ourselves *and* to the later time we are to honor it."[15] The double temporality of the promise binds together the moment of utterance and of the moment of fulfillment. What "every promise promises," Shoshana Felman writes in her study of speech acts, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, is "*constancy* . . . continuity in time between the act of commitment and the future action."[16] Is it this sense of having handed over his future that accounts for Hyacinth's insistence that the promise, once made, has nothing to do with him? Since to promise is to be obliged to perform an action no matter how one might later come to feel about it, to give one's word is in a sense to give up one's future.[17]

In promising, Jacques Derrida writes, we ensure that "everything will have already happened."[18] This view of the promise was first put forward by Friedrich Nietzsche, who called the act of promising in *On the*

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Genealogy of Morality "the true problem *of* man." In rendering the future "*calculable*, *regular*, *necessary*," the promise, Nietzsche argued, imprisons its maker.[19] Hyacinth, however, is not imprisoned by his promise; he is liberated by it. For although he recognizes that his future is no longer his to determine, he feels for the first time as if his present – that is, the moment-to-moment living of his life – finally belongs to him. The act of giving his word frees him from his sense of what he owes his impoverished past; it discharges an obligation rather than creating one – until, that is, that which he has promised to do must be done.

James's imaginative recasting of the promise is very much at odds with how the form has been viewed by moral philosophers, whose focus has been on attempting to solve the puzzle, to quote Annette Baier, of how "promising now makes me bound later . . . how I get a grip now on a 'remote' future time, the time when I must do what I now promise to do?"[20] The case is made most famously by Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which calls the act of promising

> one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to TRANSUBSTANTIATION, or HOLY ORDERS . . . where a certain form of words, along with a certain intention, changes entirely the nature of an external object, and even of a human creature.[21]

The mystery of which Hume speaks has two parts: Why would a person freely choose a moral obligation, and from where does the obligation come? Put another way: Given that we are not required to give our word, how can it be that, having done so, we are required to keep it? For his part, Hume "cannot readily conceive how the making use of a certain form of words should be able to cause any material difference."[22]

The problem, according to Elizabeth Anscombe, is that the act of promising is "subject to a fatal circularity":

> [It] creates an obligation only if it convinces the recipient of the speaker's intention to do the thing in question. But it can do this only insofar as it gives the recipient reason to believe that the speaker has reason to do that thing. What is this reason? . . . the speaker's awareness of the fact that it would be wrong, having said, "I promise," to fail to follow through. But it would be wrong to do this only if saying "I promise" created an obligation, and it creates an obligation only if it gives the recipient reason to believe that the speaker has reason to do the thing promised.[23]

Hyacinth believes himself obliged to commit a revolutionary act because he has declared before others his intention of doing so; those before whom

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he made this declaration believed him to be in earnest because they regard him as believing himself committed. Each belief depends upon the pre-existence of the other. As H. A. Prichard dryly observes, "an obligation seems a fact of a kind which it is impossible to create or bring into existence."[24]

Although Hume's notion of a "climate of trust" "offers a possible anthropological or psychological account of how people feel about promises," Charles Fried writes, "his is not a satisfactory *moral* argument."[25] Hume himself recognized the problem. Promises, he observed, were "nothing more than mere artificial contrivances" for securing the working of society. We keep them because it is in our interest as a collective to do so. The same reasoning can be found in Immanuel Kant. A world in which people made promises with no intention of keeping them, he declared, "would make the promise and the end one might have in it itself impossible, since no one would believe what was promised him."[26] This is the hellish world of *La Promesse*. It is not, clearly, James's world. But this is not to say that the atmosphere of his work is Hume's climate of trust.

According to his secretary Theodora Bosanquet, James viewed his highly civilized milieu as "a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of doomed, defenseless children of light."[27] Or as Kate describes it in *The Wings of the Dove*, rather less melodramatically, society is made up of "the working and the worked . . . The worker in one connection was the worked in another . . . the wheels of the system [were] wonderfully oiled. People could quite like each other in the midst of it" (*XIX*, 179). Clearly, the "moral sense" so often invoked in James's fiction must be supplied by his characters, since it cannot be found in the society in which they live. The way to supply it is by giving their word.

But doing so does not create obligations in the way outlined by Hume. Rather, promising for James concerns the self who gives her word rather than the person to whom it is given, which is why what matters is less whether these promises end up being kept than the fact that they are made in the first place.

The Continuity of Things

In making the case for the centrality of promising in James's fiction, I risk falling into a familiar critical trap – believing that there exists a secret key to his work. After all, to quote Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "If ever there was a writer who dealt with the secret, it was Henry James."[28] His fiction both concerns secrets and seems to harbor one of its own, some formula that, to quote the writer Hugh

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Vereker in "The Figure in the Carpet," "governs every line, . . . chooses every word, . . . dots every i, . . . places every comma" (*XV*, 233). Vereker's secret – which critics often regard as James's – is contained in every line he writes, so that figure and carpet are the same, not just in material but in extension: The figure in the carpet is the figure *of* the carpet. Or as Sianne Ngai expresses this idea, "the secret of the Jamesian pattern" is nothing less than "*the pattern itself*."[29] Ngai's claim echoes a series of similar ones across more than a half century of criticism, from Philippe Sollers's insistence that "the solution of the problem [in James's fiction] . . . is nothing other than the very exposition of this problem," to Tzvetan Todorov's belief that "James' secret resides precisely in the existence of a secret."[30] Or as Jacques Rancière puts it in *Mute Speech*, James writes "detective stories in which the secret is always the same because it is the fact of fiction itself, its way of constructing a secret."[31]

Since the groundbreaking work of Eve Sedgwick, this secret has often been thought of as sexual in nature. Sedgwick's forceful account of "The Beast in the Jungle," which identified James's protagonist John Marcher's secret "as *the closet*," inspired a number of inventive and persuasive accounts of queerness in James, most notably Kevin Ohi's *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* and Eric Haralson's *Henry James and Queer Modernity*.[32] As for Sedgwick's observation that "time and intersubjectivity are of the essence of the secrets" in James's work, this names the two touchstones of the Jamesian criticism, subjects central to the work of the twin guiding poles of my own study: Leo Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax* and Sharon Cameron's *Thinking in Henry James*.[33]

Before Sedgwick's intervention, the temporal innovations associated with James's fiction tended to be viewed in formal rather than thematic terms. Todorov saw James's work as opposing "circular temporality to linear time," Northrop Frye as representing "not a linear process of thought but a simultaneous comprehension," and Georges Poulet as rendering "the past . . . always present, always spreading out like a drop of oil upon consciousness."[34] Poulet's observation in particular captures something essential about James's work. For it is not quite the case that his characters repeat the past, as they would be condemned to do if Jamesian time were circular in the way Todorov proposes. True, the experiences enjoyed by James's characters often reproduce earlier ones: Strether has been to Paris before *The Ambassadors* begins; Milly Theale has already met Densher in America before she encounters him in London in *The Wings of the Dove*; the Prince and Charlotte were lovers long before they begin their affair in *The Golden Bowl*; John Marcher met May Bartram ten years

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before running into her in the opening scene of "The Beast in the Jungle." The crucial point, however, is not that these second experiences repeat the first but that none of the initial adventures are narrated. We might say of such events what Fredric Jameson says of individual acts in the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre, "It has to be made to happen again for it to have happened at all."[35]

In this regard, James's late fiction could be said to unfold along similar lines to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. That novel ends with Austen's protagonists, Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, pledging to marry one another eight years after their first aborted romance: "They exchanged again those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure everything."[36] The peculiarly repetitive form of *Persuasion*, which seems to abolish the passing of time altogether, suggests that the promises exchanged by Austen's lovers eight years before the novel begins have not been broken so much as postponed. For Anne and Wentworth cannot be repeating the vows they made since promises, like all speech acts, are unique; to repeat a promise is to suggest that the original pledge was somehow insufficient. Instead, we might think of Austen's protagonists as redeeming the pledges they once made, albeit by exchanging them for a second time.

The difference between the situation in *Persuasion* and that in James's fiction is that, whereas the eight years that have passed since Anne and Wentworth first got engaged is the subject of constant reflection and regret, James's characters rarely refer, in either thought or speech, to their previous adventures: Strether almost never reflects on his first trip to Paris, despite having lost his wife and child in the intervening years; Milly and Densher rarely refer to their encounter in America; Marcher, bizarrely, has simply forgotten ever having met May.[37] The past in James is erased, it seems, by the present it makes possible.

This is all the stranger, given that James's fiction is obsessed with the idea, as the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* puts it, of having "your youth twice over . . . a second wind, another 'go.'"[38] But since the first time is only ever seen through the prism of the second, the effect is not that of time regained so much as time remade. "It is ever the second doing, for me, that is *the* doing," James wrote in 1915, three months before he died.[39] He was speaking of his compulsion to rewrite rather than of the subject of his stories. But there is a curious parallel between the content of James's fiction and his method of composition. Like the writer in his 1893 story "The Middle Years," James "was a passionate corrector . . . the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself" (*XVI*, 82, 90). James spent his entire career reading, revising, and redrafting, as if there

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were no difference between his published work and his proofs. A story would typically first appear in a magazine, be amended for book publication in either Britain or America, and then be rewritten again when released on the other side of the Atlantic. The publication of his collected work in the *New York Edition* gave James the opportunity to begin the process over once more, selecting works from his entire *oeuvre* and revising extensively. Yet the prefaces he supplied for these works insisted that the entire notion of rewriting was "a mystery" (*XXIII*, xvi). Instead of revising his works, James claimed merely to be re-reading them, a process he defined in curiously passive terms. "The act of seeing it [his fiction] again," he writes in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, "caused whatever I looked at on any page to flower before me as into the only terms that honourably expressed it" (*XXIII*, xvi). He regarded the changes he made to the work that appeared in the *New York Edition* not as rewriting but as a means of giving his fiction the form it would have had were it to have been written at the moment of republication. The second doing was the doing.

This strange practice of reading as rewriting extended even to the work of others. James admitted in a 1913 letter to H. G. Wells that in reading any novel, whether his or not, "I perform afresh, to my sense, the act of writing it – that is, of re-handling the subject according to my own lights and overscoring the author's form and pressure with my own vision."[40] The term "afresh" suggests that he thought of himself as rewriting even when the work was not his own. For as he told a novelist who had written to him asking for his opinion of her work, "My only way of reading is to imagine myself *writing* the thing before me."[41] In the case of his dead brother William's letters, James did more than imagine, amending selected excerpts for publication in his autobiography. The revised letters, as he saw it, more accurately represented what William would have said – had he been alive to say it – were he to have written his letters at the moment they were published.

James's thinking indicates that he viewed writing as a living form, keeping pace with the present. Such an attitude explains the curious style of his *Notebooks*, which read like a kind of live commentary on the moment-by-moment experience of writing: "I must thresh out my solutions, must settle down to my jobs. It's idiotic, by the way, to waste time in writing such a remark as that!"[42] Or indeed that. But then few writers have been as invested in the present as James, whose imagination, to quote R. P. Blackmur, "was contemporary to an extreme."[43] Although a great admirer of the Romantic poets, the poetry that most moved him was by Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. James read Shakespeare with

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pleasure, but it was Henrik Ibsen's plays that most fascinated him. True, the models for his fiction were provided by the generation before – Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, and Nathaniel Hawthorne – and he read and admired Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray. But the work to which he compared his own was done by his friends and contemporaries: Ivan Turgenev, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

True to his literary taste, James sets his fiction entirely in the present day. The signal exception is *Washington Square*, a text I briefly take up below. Even *The Turn of the Screw*, the action of which can be dated to the 1840s, could be said to take place in the present, since James incorporates its telling within the tale. And although James rarely made explicit use of this technique, Ohi notes that "the blurring of narrative temporalities" in so much of James's late fiction "make it difficult to distinguish the narrating from the remembered 'I.'"[44] This is a result of what Bersani refers to as James's "tendency to extract all events, as well as all perspectives on them, from any specified time, and to transfer them to a beforeness or an afterwards in which they are de-realized in the form of anticipations or retrospections."[45] The Jamesian present is represented as continuous with past and future, to quote from the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, "the continuity of things is the whole matter" (*I*, vii). As a result, James's fiction involves very little narrative *anachrony*, Gérard Genette's term for what he identified as "the various types of discordance" between the *fabula* (the events in chronological order) and the *sjuzet* (the events in the order they are presented in the narrative).[46] With the exception of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James's fiction performs few of the leaps forward or backward we associate with modernism. Even *What Maisie Knew*, which, like Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* or Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, narrates events in the order in which Maisie comes to know them, unfolds chronologically. The difficulty raised by a work such as *What Maisie Knew* is not a matter of working out when something happened, as it often is in Conrad and Ford, but rather to whom it happened, or whether it happened, or the consequences of its having happened.

The reason why we do not find in James the complex chronological structure so familiar from the modernist novel is because his fiction contains surprisingly few reflections on the relation between the present and the past. Almost never in his work does a character recount what has happened or reflect on the difficulty of expressing what they have experienced; instead, what we find is a perpetual present.[47] When the past *is* recalled, it is treated as if it were the present – as if, that is, the past could

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