

HENRY JAMES AND THE PROMISE OF FICTION

What is the relation between the novel and ethical thought? The answer to this question, Stuart Burrows argues, lies not in the content of a work of fiction but in its form. *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction* explores the relationship between James's ethical vision and his densely metaphorical style, his experiments with narrative time, and his radical reimagining of perspective. Each chapter takes as its starting point a different aspect of an issue at the heart of moral philosophy: the act of promising. Engaging with a range of moral philosophers and literary theorists, most notably David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida, *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction* proposes that James's formal experimentation represents a significant contribution to ethical thought in its own right.

STUART BURROWS is Associate Professor of English at Brown University. His first book was *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1839–1945* (2008). He has won the American Literary Society 1921 Prize in American Literature and *The Henry James Review* Leon Edel Essay Prize.

HENRY JAMES AND THE PROMISE OF FICTION

STUART BURROWS

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The task is . . . the rendering—I perceive it now clearly—of the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth’s surface; conditions not easily to be understood, much less discovered in the limits of a story, till some key-word is found; a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages; a word which, if not truth itself, may perchance hold truth enough to help the moral discovery which should be the object of every tale.

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*

Perhaps it’s a preference for the letter P!
Henry James, “The Figure in the Carpet”

In Heaven there’ll be no algebra
No learning dates and names
But only playing golden harps
And reading Henry James.
Anonymous

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My daughter Molly complained a few years ago that in our house it was “Henry James all the time.” I hope that sometime soon she will play her part in continuing to make this the case. As for my wife, Michelle, I can do no better than quote Lambert Strether’s description in *The Ambassadors* of the woman he loves: “she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet.”

Note on Text

References to *The New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James* (24 volumes; New York: Charles Scribner's, 1907–9) appear in parenthesis, citing the corresponding volume number.