ENACTING HISTORY IN HENRY JAMES

Narrative, power, and ethics

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CHAPTER I

Power relations in the novels of James: the 'liberal' and the 'radical' version

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In James-criticism, 'demystifying the master' seems to have become the main agenda.[1] In spite of the fact that the work of James, as that of other major representatives of the established canon, has by now been repeatedly unmasked as being 'compromised to the core',[2] revisionist critics keep coming back to James. The reason is not hard to find. Because James continues to be one of the culture heroes of liberal modernism, the authority and dominance of that cultural system can best be undermined by revealing James's limitations of awareness and his unwitting complicity with a social system which his work claims to distance or even transcend by art. If it can be shown that the master was not so masterful after all, but in the grasp of hidden anxieties about his lack of success in the market-place, his masculinity, or his class status, that he was, in other words, not in control, but himself 'controlled' by desire or certain discursive practices beyond his own comprehension, then the modernist myth of aesthetic transcendence could be exploded most effectively.[3] The charge of an unwitting complicity with the system (of consumer capitalism, patriarchy, or society's disciplinary practices) – in an extreme form, even the claim of a 'criminal continuity' between cultural practice and social regimes[4] – has become one of the main strategic moves of the new revisionism because it is ideally suited to undermining the liberal claim for a supreme oppositional potential of art.[5] Where the charge of complicity is considered too strong, on the other hand, another route of revision is taken, namely to point to covert, submerged aspects and operations of his texts which reveal James to be really a poststructuralist *avant la lettre*, a reluctant feminist, or even a latent Marxist.[6] In this way, all schools of contemporary theory have come to claim James as one of their own.[7]

No matter, however, whether the new revisionism takes the form

of 'complicity-criticism' or 'theoretical kinship-criticism', what unites these otherwise different approaches is that they constitute themselves in the critique of a liberal myth of James as master craftsman and supreme practitioner of a liberal theory of art and society. In their critique, they draw attention to the way in which the James we have come to know was created by a post-war liberalism as it re-emerged in the US after the collapse of Marxist thought. In American literary criticism, this rediscovery and reappreciation of James played an essential role in repositioning the liberal tradition itself. Important examples are provided by Lionel Trilling's seminal essays 'Reality in America' and 'Manners, Morals, and the Novel'.[8]

Throughout Trilling's essays his revolt against a left liberalism compromised by its uncritical fellow-travellership with Stalinism is coded in the contrast between Dreiser and James, the one regarded as bad writer, but good realist by left liberalism, the other habitually dismissed as escapist and failed realist: 'Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.'[9] In this contrast, the work of James becomes the focal point for redefining the social responsibilities of the writer. James, 'the moral mind with its awareness of tragedy, irony, and multitudinous distinctions'[10] is heralded as exponent of a moral realism designed to serve as protection against 'the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes' and grandiose moral passions:

> Perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism ever been so much needed, for at no other time have so many people committed themselves to moral righteousness . . . Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination.[11]

Ultimately, the function and social use of James's moral realism lies in its ability to complicate our view of reality, and thereby also to prevent our 'moral fervour' from becoming dogmatic by acknowledging difficulty and social difference, disagreement and cultural conflict as an inherent part of social reality.

For Trilling, one criterion of a successful complication of our perception of reality lies in the aesthetic dimension. For him, it seems, the aesthetic emerges when the mind meets difficulties.

Literary form is thus not a mere clothing of thought; it is in itself a characteristic and instructive way of appropriating reality. Dreiser's lack of art (and the tacit liberal indulgence of that lack) is a scandal, not because Trilling is an aesthete or a formalist, but because the artistic quality of a work is a measure of how 'deeply' the artist was willing to penetrate reality.[12] Art and the social function of literature are thus inextricably intertwined, and the novel is the literary genre best suited to bring the two together. In a time of dangerous ideological simplifications, this is the reason why Trilling put his hopes on the novel as 'the most effective agent of the moral imagination' within the last two hundred years.[13]

Because of his own almost exclusive interest in the 'political' novels of the middle period, Trilling remained too narrowly focused to occupy a place at the centre of James-criticism. However, the case he makes for the importance of James is not only exemplary in its clarity, it is also representative of the liberal defence of James, including its reconceptualization of art as an eminently social activity.[14] This, I take it, and not a vaguely defined formalism, lies at the basis of the liberal rediscovery and 'reinvention' of James after World War II. Formalism in itself is not an intellectual framework, it is the (rather broad and unspecific) designation for a certain approach to, or method of, interpreting cultural objects. Without a broader context of ideas about reality and the function of art within social life, it must remain meaningless. This broader context was the immense usefulness of James for a redefinition of the relation between art and life, aesthetics and social meaning in which art would gain renewed importance, even priority – not, however, at the expense of disregarding questions of moral and social commitment, but in the attempt to complicate them. For an international group of scholars, James became a major figure, not because his work suggested a separation of art and life, aesthetics and society, or because it seemed to support an ontological claim for the autonomy of the work of art, but because it allowed critics to focus on the problem which had become crucial for the liberal redefinition of art and its function after World War II: the question of what difference art makes in the creation of social meaning. Should James's complication of moral issues be finally revealed to stand in the service of a flight from commitment, then the hope invested in the saving powers of art would collapse and another turn towards a more forceful and explicit social commentary would be in order. If it could be

characterized as successful, on the other hand, the authority of the master could serve to bolster the case for a heuristic separation of the aesthetic and the social in order to prevent them from becoming identical and thus easily interchanged. What stands at the centre of the current debate between liberal and radical versions of American literary history is, in other words, not a disagreement between one position that denies social meaning and function to art and another one that reaffirms it, but a struggle between two different versions of that relation, and, linked with it, a fundamental disagreement about the potential and function of literature.

In terms of intellectual history, this struggle can be described as a conflict between a liberal consensus emerging after World War II and a new cultural radicalism that begins to constitute itself in the critique of that liberal consensus in the sixties. This new form of radicalism manifests itself in a wide and, at first sight, seemingly irreconcilable variety of different approaches, ranging from poststructuralism to such explicitly political approaches as cultural materialism, the new historicism, and recent forms of race, class, and gender studies. Different as these approaches may be in their views of language, reality, and the text, they are strikingly similar in their theories of society, power, and the role of culture (hence the frequent use of the umbrella term 'critical theory' to characterize them collectively). By the term cultural radicalism, I thus want to designate all those forms of literary study after the linguistic turn which have replaced earlier forms of 'left-wing' or political radicalism. While political radicalism placed its hope of radical change in a Marxist political theory and analysis of capitalist society, subsequent disappointment over the lack of acceptance by the 'masses' pushed radicalism towards the analysis of 'systemic effects' of the social order. The various forms of cultural radicalism, in one way or another, all emphasize fundamental systemic features (such as the state apparatus, the symbolic order, a discursive formation, logocentrism, or 'Western' thought) which pervade all acts of sense-making and thus also determine political attitudes because they constitute the very concepts and modes of experience through which the social order is understood. This is true to such an extent that even oppositional gestures must be considered mere effects of the system and the promise of reform its shrewdest strategy of containment. In this situation, experience loses its power as a source of knowledge. Only (critical) theory can reveal the 'absent cause' of that which organizes the system. Art can only do so where it

can be shown to possess a 'theoretical dimension', that is, where it can be interpreted allegorically as unwitting re-enactment of contemporary theory. From this point of view, all positions that argue for social change within a framework of political pluralism, based on the idea of a citizen who is able to 'know' his or her own interests, become part of a liberal tradition (whether 'left' or 'conservative', like Trilling's version, no longer matters) for which art holds the (illusory) promise of individual development and an increase in self-awareness.

The redefinition of power as structural effect (*strukturelle Gewalt*) is the founding assumption of the new cultural radicalism. As long as political power is equated with force and actual repression, arguments about the repressive nature of liberal democracies are not terribly convincing. Cultural radicalism severs political power from its equation with force and broadens it as a concept to include all forms of coercion by language, symbolic systems, and discursive practices.[15] Power does not rule from the outside, but is embedded in language and discursive practices. In this way, culture becomes the actual source of domination and supreme disciplinary regime within the system. It is this redefinition of power as discursive practice which informs Mark Seltzer's provocative study of James, for example. Again, following a pattern of 'complicity-criticism' established by Carolyn Porter and, above all, Walter Benn Michaels, the starting assumption is that of a deep-seated, hidden complicity:

> Questioning the traditional assumption that James is essentially a non-political novelist, I explore the ways in which James represents social movements of appropriation, supervision, and regulation, and examine how both the content and the techniques of representation in James's works express a complicity and rigorous continuity with the larger social regimes of mastery and control that traverse these works. I want to suggest that art and power are not opposed in the Jamesian text but radically entangled . . . Put as simply as possible, the art of the novel is an art of power.[16]

The Jamesian text, critics like Seltzer have argued, 'resists the imposition of power in the name of a radical (literary) freedom'. Instead, Seltzer wants 'to suggest that James's art of representation always also involves a politics of representation, and one reason for suspecting this link between art and power is that James works so carefully to deny it'. It is this 'criminal continuity between art and power and the ways in which the novelist and critic – through an aesthetic and theoretical rewriting of power – have worked to disown it that I want to examine'.[17]

One of the most striking applications of this revised perspective in reading James is Seltzer's interpretation of *The Golden Bowl*, where he sees 'a power of *normalization*' at work, 'a disciplinary method that induces conformity and regulation not by levying violence, but through an immanent array of norms and compulsions . . . an immanent policing so thoroughly inscribed in the most ordinary social practices that it is finally indistinguishable from manners, cooperation, and care' (61). This 'policing' through thoroughly internalized forms of behaviour explains the basic paradox of the 'well-policed character' of the novel: '*The Golden Bowl* is a novel about power – conjugal, commercial, and imperial – but throughout the novel power is represented in terms of "mildness," "harmony," and "calm." More precisely, the name that James gives to the exercising of power in *The Golden Bowl* is love' (62).[18] Supervisory functions have thus been 'comprehensively taken over by other less obtrusive, less "shameful" networks of surveillance' (63). Traditionally, in James-criticism the two terms love and power have been kept apart: 'But I have begun to suggest that *The Golden Bowl* displays precisely a criminal continuity between these terms. Far from being opposed, love and power in *The Golden Bowl* are two ways of saying the same thing' (66).

James's skilful 'dispersion of the political into the most ordinary and everyday relations' affects other aspects of human relations as well (67). It seems, in fact, to affect all aspects of human relations, including sympathy, empathy, caring, schooling, learning, and, also, the creation of aesthetic structures: what 'appears on the level of social and vital organization as a power of normalization reappears on the aesthetic as the rule of organic form' (87). Thus, at 'one extreme, *The Golden Bowl* articulates its dismissal of the punitive and policing apparatus; but at another, the novel traces a widening of the orbit of this apparatus to include the most positive administrations of care' (75–6). Seltzer's extension of the meaning of the term power – including its unmistakably melodramatic connotation 'policing' (which largely contradicts an emphasis on the enabling dimension of power which he dutifully, but somewhat inconsequentially mentions at another point of his argument) – is so all-embracing that it must ultimately include all forms of intimacy, of inner-directedness and psychic self-regulation, and, in the final analysis, all forms of social relation. The exertion of power is so thoroughly inscribed in the most ordinary and everyday relations that it becomes finally

indistinguishable from social interaction, because social interaction must always contain a certain degree of 'appropriation, supervision, and regulation', must always imply a certain demand for co-operation and consensus, and is usually based on a desire for love and on expectations of social support.

Seltzer's reading is not a 'productive' interpretation of James's work in the sense of a concrete and detailed explanation of the text and its strategies. In accordance with the 'revised' role literature plays in 'critical theory', its basic mode of interpretation is allegorical, drawing its inspiration and main arguments almost exclusively from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* without ever acknowledging the particular and problematic position of this book in the development of Foucault's thought. Still, in its redefinition of power through the concept of social network, Seltzer's argument has the merit of carrying the radical approach to James to a logical extreme and thus revealing a good deal of its underlying premises. In the final analysis, in the new cultural radicalism the concepts of power and domination comprise all forms of inequality and 'asymmetry' in social relations, so that power is redefined as any kind of social or symbolic coercion. Coercion manifests itself in all forms of dependence, in all claims on the self by others, including those valued most highly by liberalism, like love, care, familial and marital bonds. This radicalization of the concept of power has as its own tacit norm a utopian egalitarianism based on the promise of a complete dehierarchization in social relations (or, where absolutely unavoidable, asking for only temporary and short-lived hierarchies). And the same principles apply to the level of literary form and textualization: wherever meaning is created and skilfully represented, there is also already an element of coercion at work. This point, in fact, is one of the genuine insights of the new radicalism. It introduces a heightened sensitivity to the presence of constant power plays in language as well as in social relations; to the tyranny one person can exert over another by inserting and trapping him or her in certain roles; to the way in which spectatorship, including that of the narrator, is never innocent, but is always a mode of intruding into another person's life; and, finally, to the way in which sympathy and care can also function as impositions, forms of possession, and modes of disciplining through intimacy.[19] What it does not acknowledge is that this is also one of the major insights and experiences in the work of James.

Of all nineteenth-century writers, James is probably the one who

is most aware of the permanent presence of manipulation and the constant re-emergence of social asymmetries in relations. Deceiving and exploiting others is the major crime in his fictional world, and it is part of his historically remarkable achievement that, in contrast to the unmistakably melodramatic roots of his work, these instances no longer manifest themselves in overtly melodramatic fashion, but are traced to often almost unnoticeable nuances of the most 'civilized' forms of social interaction. Asymmetries in relations – whether between representatives of Old World and New World, or in class and gender relations, between family members or members of the same social group, or between self and other – form the dramatic nucleus (or, to use his favourite term, 'germ') of his fiction. For James, social interaction is thus always potentially also a form of manipulation. His fiction offers a virtual inventory of the various forms such asymmetries and manipulations can take, as well as the complications resulting from them.[20] In fact, it seems that without them there simply would be no Jamesian fiction. James's fiction abounds in constellations of dominance and dependence, deception and duplicity, only to set such constellations in motion and test the possibilities of awareness and response they provoke. Moreover, by dramatizing the fact that seeing, the imagination, and the synthesizing activities of consciousness all play their own part in constituting experience, James links these various 'creative' faculties to the power plays which he considers social interaction and manipulation to be. Altogether, his fiction relentlessly investigates the fortunes and fates of social relations in all their possible states of imposition and coercion ranging from victimization to triumphant counter-manipulation.

Despite claims to the contrary, the work of James thus offers the most comprehensive study of social relations of any American writer of the nineteenth century (if not the twentieth century as well).[21] This heightened social awareness, which greatly surpasses that of his contemporaries and fellow realists, Howells and Twain, is tied, I think, to James's particular version of what could, in a wide sense of the word, be called the realist project. Such a link can, in turn, help to clarify the notoriously difficult status of James's 'realism'. Clearly, there is a tendency to narrow his realism down to a literary programme derived from, above all, French and Russian models of the period. In this limited sense, James became a (tentative and short-term) realist when he set out to imitate French models of

realism, based, above all, on the 'reality effect' of verisimilitude.[22] After his 'realist' novels *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* turned out to be failures, he gave up realism and returned to new experiments in the art of fiction which ultimately led to the modernist breakthrough. There is a broader, more comprehensive possibility, however, of defining the term realism, namely as an epistemological claim in which the perception of reality and the acquisition of knowledge are put on a new epistemological basis (and, as a consequence, linked with new literary strategies). What unites otherwise different writers of the realist period in American writing, such as Stoddard, Twain, Howells, and James, or the female local colour writers of the Northeast, is obviously not a common literary programme based on 'objectivity', 'representativeness', or 'verisimilitude', but a new epistemology in which experience replaces metaphysical speculation as the primary source of knowledge. In order to provide valid knowledge, however, this experience has to be socially shared and shareable. As long as individuals draw conclusions from their own experiences alone, they will always be in danger of falling prey to their imagination and thus remain 'transcendentalists'. It is social experience, then, which provides a 'test' of individual perceptions, as well as a need to give coherent shape to one's own impressions so that they can be communicated and compared.

One interesting point in tracing the history of American realism is to see how realist writers defined this element of social experience quite differently. For writers like Stoddard or the female local colourists, the social encounter is a source of 'unnameable' suggestions that initiate self-knowledge and self-development. For Twain, only the spontaneous, humorously charged social encounter provides knowledge, because the social is the site of the conventional, and hence needs to be 'defamiliarized' by humorous discrepancy or a collision of different worlds. Confrontational encounters therefore stand at the centre of his work; where the discrepancy in knowledge becomes too great, however, the result is an ultimately self-destructive solipsism. For Howells, knowledge emerges out of a carefully worked out system of conversations in which an event can be retrospectively discussed and assessed in its meaning.[23] What James shares with Howells – his close friend and fellow representative of the 'new American school' – is a reliance on the idea of social interaction as an act in which knowledge is not only exchanged, but literally

created in the process of communication; what separates him from Howells, is his much greater awareness of the elements of domination and manipulation that are at work in these 'endless conversations' of social life. If social experience is pervaded by strategies of domination and coercion, however, then knowledge is constantly threatened. This, I think, is the reason why James so persistently screens social relations in search of elements of deception, coercion, exploitation, and victimization, and why he organizes his novels and tales around a whole phenomenology of social manipulation, ranging from breach of contract to the 'acquisition' of another person as part of one's own collection of precious objects.

So extensive is the connection between knowledge and social manipulation in James, in fact, that one eventually has to place him at the opposite end of Howells. For Howells, genuine knowledge emerges where social interaction is successful, so that, as Heinz Ickstadt has pointed out, the success of a social event such as a dinner conversation, or, more generally, the failure or success of courtship and marriage, can become his basic criterion for the possibility of communication – and thus of a consensus about social change – in America.[24] Where such communication fails, one result is a radicalization of Howells's views and of his work. For James, on the other hand, 'asymmetries' in social relations do not endanger knowledge, but become a driving force in the pursuit of knowledge and, in the process, a crucial source for the development of imaginary activities, the emergence of social awareness, and, through the refinement of consciousness, of the aesthetic sense. Although painful, experiences of manipulation can function, in other words, as an impetus of creative imaginative work and are, in this sense, 'productive' in unexpected ways. This is also the reason, I think, why James's stories are never mere melodramas. As a rule, they draw much of their gratification from a gradual rehierarchization of balances and symmetries in social relations. But the final triumph is not, as in traditional melodrama, the result of a transcendent law of moral retribution. It is 'earned' by the initially victimized individual in a painful process of growing awareness and expanding consciousness: because it is thus literally a triumph of a creativity provoked by social manipulation, this triumph – much to the chagrin and irritation of many, and especially of the younger readers of James who respond to the story of melodramatic victimization according to its emotional logic – has to remain 'mental' and

cerebral in order to emphasize the elements of creativity over those of vengeance and retribution. Thus, Isabel can return to Osmond because the act of returning can signal the highest form of triumph over her melodramatic impulses.

Many of James's most interesting novels are centred in a recurring pattern in which the point of departure is that of a national or social asymmetry, in which the possibilities of deception and manipulation emerging from this constellation drive the narrative, and in which a promise of rehierarchization provides its conclusion. The starting-point is a character constellation James inherited from the genre which stands at the beginning of his career as a novelist, the domestic novel. One of its main elements consists of a male figure who acts as appointed or self-appointed guardian of a young and innocent (i.e. inexperienced) woman. In this recurring scenario, James's first novel *Watch and Ward* already establishes a pattern to which he returned time and again, although with interesting variations in plot and character relations. In each case, the courtship-and-marriage motif provides the basic narrative frame, not because James failed to liberate himself from outworn conventions, as an influential segment of criticism on American realism has it, but because, for James (as well as Howells), courtship and marriage illustrate the formation of a new, yet nascent social unit and dramatize the ensuing problems of choice, adequate perception, and the possibility of deception and dependence most forcefully. In *Watch and Ward*, for example, the young heroine, Nora, has to choose between two representative suitors, a virile, but morally crude Westerner, and an effete and dishonest Easterner. She reveals a lack of adequate knowledge of reality by failing to realize that her devoted, though unspectacular guardian, Roger Lawrence, is the only man in the universe 'who has a heart' and therefore the only fitting companion for her. Roger, however, although clearly in possession of superior moral insight, cannot further his own course, because this would constitute an act of manipulation. The heroine has to go through her own experiences, and she is left to do so because 'adequate perception of reality' in a domestic novel like *Watch and Ward* can only mean recovering one's own innate moral sense after a temporary flirt with passion. 'Experience' thus leads to a reaffirmation of the superior moral authority of the guardian-figure.

What makes *Watch and Ward* still an interesting novel, in spite of

its thorough conventionality, is an early acknowledgment of self-interest and desire even in the representative of moral authority. When the frequently frustrated suitor, Roger Lawrence, adopts the orphan, Nora, he soon decides to raise her so that she can become his own bride when she comes of age. In the world of domestic fiction, this fantasy of possession can only be realized, however, if this 'selfish' wish is hidden behind a complete and unfailing show of unselfishness, which, as a consequence, becomes the domestic novel's privileged, because morally legitimized, mode of social manipulation. Already in *The American*, this possessive urge is acknowledged more openly, however, in the suitor and collector, Christopher Newman, who is attracted to Mme. de Cintré as the 'real' embodiment of culture in contrast to all the bad copies sold to him. Still, Newman's boisterous, good-natured pride of possession pales in comparison with the manipulative power and evil selfishness of the Bellegardes, so that this confident would-be guardian becomes the victim of a power encoded in social forms which he can hardly grasp. *Watch and Ward* and *The American* thus offer early versions of a narrative to which James returned again and again, above all in *The Portrait of a Lady* and his late novels *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is again the courtship pattern which serves as a testing ground for the possibilities of acquiring knowledge through experience. Experience in itself, however, is not enough. It only becomes productive when Isabel begins to process her observations by means of her imagination in her famous midnight vigil in chapter 42 of the novel. This is the moment when she begins to develop from a passive, incompetent reader of reality to a reader of heightened awareness – a gain which, in turn, is the basis for liberating herself from the manipulation to which she has been subject, so that, in the end, she can try to become the author of her own life.

There is a fourth figure in *The Portrait* who is already present in *Watch and Ward*, but has now changed her function completely. In place of an unselfish elder confidante, Mme. Merle has been transformed into a social competitor and the supreme manipulator of the novel. With this transformation, James has the character constellation for his late novels in place. From the point of view of the development of the guardian-figure, some of his well-known novels of the middle period offer fascinating experiments in rearranging the relations between guardian and ward. While in *The*

Bostonians, both of the potential guardians of Verena turn out to be equally possessive and 'overpowering', *The Turn of the Screw* presents an ambiguous conflation of guardian-figure and developing subject in the person of the governess who, depending on the reading of the tale, is either an intruding, possessive guardian or a developing subject cut off from social experience and thus victim of her own overheated imagination. It is in the late novels, and especially in *The Golden Bowl*, however, that all the elements of social interaction with which James experimented throughout his career, are finally brought together. In this return to a basic theme and concern of his work, *The Wings of the Dove* establishes a basic shift in emphasis. The benevolent guardian becomes a remote, shadowy figure, while the scheming Old World couple gains in prominence so that the novel, in large parts, becomes the story of their manipulative skill, but also of their trials and tribulations. This does not take anything away from the innocent American, however, who not only reaches a 'breakthrough' in the awareness of the manipulation to which she has been exposed, but also acts on that knowledge in a way that, for the first time, constitutes a subtle imposition in reverse. By turning the tables on Densher and Kate Croy, Millie Theale reasserts the power of her own imagination and entraps them in an exceedingly clever and 'creative' scheme of her own.

These new elements in the 'spiritualized' melodrama of power relations in James are brought into a new symmetry in *The Golden Bowl*, where the benevolent guardian and father figure, Adam Verver, is moved back to the circle of actors; Kate Croy and Merton Densher have extremely skilful successors in Charlotte Stant and the Prince, and the American heroine finds a new life in a Maggie Verver who, for the first time in the history of that recurring character in the work of James, not only elevates renunciation to a high art, but lives up to Old World standards of social manipulation without losing her superior moral status. This, in fact, is the actual drama (and 'art') of *The Golden Bowl*: There are no longer any 'innocent' characters who are forced by experience to renounce their own part in the world. Instead, there is a circulation of social energies, set in motion by the assertion of social power through manipulation, which may 'corrupt' the innocent but, through their response, also provides a kind of moral regeneration to the manipulators. As a consequence, binary oppositions of good and evil, corruption and innocence, possession and freedom lose their explanatory power.[25] Instead, James unfolds

an ongoing process of social interaction in which such moral oppositions remain open to semantic transformation by the constant possibility of a change of positions in the endless power game between the main characters of the novel.

This new reciprocity and exchange of semantic qualities has become possible because the main characters are no longer primarily moral representatives, but defined by social relations. As moral representative, a character may be part of a social network and be exposed to an ongoing series of social experiences; since the 'given' of these social encounters is an idea of the moral self that 'responds' to society, however, the awareness of being manipulated by others can only either result in acts of revenge or retreat, or lead to a melodramatic scenario of the corruption and 'fall' of the moral self. Where the self constitutes itself in, and through, interaction, on the other hand, the term 'manipulation' must lose its moral force and melodramatic connotation, and become part of the act of social interaction itself. Inevitably, to interact also means to manipulate. Seltzer is right: a radical redefinition of social interaction as, in the final analysis, inevitably manipulative and inherently possessive can thus also include expressions of love and caring. But, ironically enough, Seltzer is not as radical as James, because he retains a latent moralism in his tacit, unacknowledged equation of true knowledge with radical theory. Thus, in Seltzer's version of the social network as a disciplinary regime, the concept of the disciplinary carries unmistakable connotations of moral condemnation and implies the necessity of radical liberation; in fact, the clever claim that James and other major writers were unable to achieve such liberation is the whole point of the new historicist endeavour. For James, on the other hand, forms of imposition and coercion unfortunately, but inevitably, exist even in the most benevolent forms of social relations and are part of a network of exchange that literally 'creates' society. For Seltzer, theoretical awareness of the 'absent cause' might have liberated James from his apparent reproduction of the disciplinary practices of nineteenth-century realism; for James, Seltzer's book and his use of theory could only present the highly fascinating and hence admirably 'dramatic' spectacle of yet another 'power game', this time by means of 'critical theory' and Seltzer's constant appeal to a theoretical 'guardian-figure' named Foucault.

The long-established, endlessly repeated accusation of James's flight from moral and social commitment into the aestheticism of the

late period stands at the beginning of Seltzer's challenge to James. The Jamesian redefinition of power relations in terms of 'moves', 'strategies', and 'power games' comes dangerously close, in Seltzer's view, to a reconceptualization of power relations in terms of performance, and thus, to an aestheticizing of social relations. For Seltzer, the aesthetic is not a separate realm distinct from the political, but only another, cleverly 'disguised' mode of it. Again, I think, however, that James is much more radical and aware of the problem than Seltzer is willing to acknowledge (because he wants to claim superior oppositional insights). One of the consequences of the sweeping redefinition of power in terms of subtly coercive and manipulative forms of social interaction must be that the aesthetic and the 'political' (in the sense of any exertion of social power) become inextricably intertwined. For, if social interaction is 'always already' potential manipulation, then it must be distinguished by the various forms and modes this manipulation takes, by how it is executed through form, in short, by the 'art' of manipulation (or, to use Seltzer's title, by the 'art of power'). James is very much aware of this 'contamination', so that *The Wings of the Dove*, but especially *The Golden Bowl*, are also, to a large extent, books about the 'art' of manipulation that, in the hands of Kate Croy, Charlotte Stant, but also Millie Theale and Maggie Verver, almost reach the level of a cultural accomplishment.

However, although James clearly sees (and repeatedly emphasizes) the close proximity of the aesthetic and the political, he never conflates them. Whereas Seltzer assumes a hidden identity, James insists on a difference, not because he wants to make a case for the 'autonomy of art', but because he does not want to give up the idea of the creative potential of interaction and, thus, of exchange. For the new cultural radicalism, art is the allegory of an 'absent cause', or systemic effect;[26] for James, it can also be an exemplary source of awareness that holds the promise of a liberation from victimization. It is this link with the possibility of awareness and, hence, with the possibility of a defence against coercion (and not a vague 'formalism') that explains James's increasing focus on the aesthetic dimension in fiction and makes his work one long, increasingly subtle meditation on the forms that would be best suited to fulfil the promise and function of the aesthetic.

As I have tried to show in a different context, in this ongoing reflection the relation between guardian and developing subject not

only serves as a model of social relation, but also as a *mise en abyme* of the function of fiction, and, linked with it in James, of the aesthetic.[27] As long as the guardian-figure is defined as a moral authority exerting social control through 'ostentatious unselfishness', the implications for the novel must be to act as a guardian of the reader by giving plenty of room to a whole range of 'guilty pleasures' only to harness them the more effectively through a melodramatic sequence of imaginary indulgence, the threat of a loss of moral identity, and a final salvation by moral revelation. Where 'experience' becomes the main source of knowledge, on the other hand, as it does in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the novel must take back its own guidance and manipulation of the reader and expose him or her to a series of hypotheses that are then tentatively addressed by the novel, only to raise new questions and hypotheses and so on and so forth, so that the experience of 'reality' becomes, in tendency, that of being exposed to an open, ongoing process of interpretation. In order for this process to produce knowledge, however, the various sense impressions and individual observations have to add up to a coherent structure which convinces the observer of its representative nature and truth value by the 'rightness' of its shape and ordering power, that is, in the final analysis, by its aesthetic quality.[28] Paradoxically enough, James's 'demelodramatization' of reality and his opening up of the concept of reality through the idea of its processual character must thus also result in an increased importance of the idea of aesthetic structure as a criterion of knowledge. This transformation of the concept of reality from an initially moral definition to an ultimately performative one also explains why seeing and knowing are closely related in the work of James.

The increased importance of the aesthetic in James thus does not signify a growing retreat from life to the ivory tower. Quite the contrary, it is logically tied to the relentless self-investigation at work in his novels and tales which led him to first transform the domestic novel into the realist novel, as demonstrated in the transition from *Watch and Ward* to *The Portrait of a Lady*, and then, not in a break with the realist project but in a rigorous radicalization of its basic premises, to broaden the realist novel into the proto-modernist complexity of his major novels of the late period. This development has its own consistency: where, in contrast to domestic fiction, moral knowledge can no longer be secured through the moral authority of a guardian figure, it must be authorized by experience; experience,

however, must be social experience, in order to provide a common ground of knowledge; social experience, in turn, must be processed by consciousness in order to make sense; finally, the *gestalt* in which this ordering takes shape must become a criterion of the adequateness of perception, so that knowledge acquires an increasingly performative, aesthetic dimension. This 'aestheticization', however, always remains in the service of the search for an adequate perception of reality. It does not present, in other words, a flight from the complexity of reality, but provides a new chance of intensifying one's awareness of it. And the same applies to questions of power: 'aesthetic transcendence' in James does not at all mean that one can avoid manipulation or asymmetry in relations by retreating to the ivory tower of artistry, but that the development of an 'aesthetic sense', that is, an expanded consciousness capable of linking isolated observations, is the only mode of perception 'creative' enough to realize the full extent of this manipulation. Hence, it is also the only form to provide the basis for a defence against it.

The fact that the 'aesthetic' thus becomes an essential criterion of knowledge for James does not mean that the aesthetic stands outside of power or transcends it. The aesthetic is not only an inevitable part of the ongoing power plays in social interaction, but also is especially useful for them. If the 'aesthetic sense' provides a version of reality that convinces by its *gestalt* quality and promise of an equilibrium, then such impressions can, in turn, be manipulated. In *The Golden Bowl*, 'symmetry' is a pattern that is repeatedly used by the characters to position the social actors within roles they have not sought for themselves and would rather escape. The 'beautiful symmetry' of the initial arrangement is a trap, a clever construction designed to deceive. Although they are indispensable for making social life possible, social and aesthetic forms are thus also potential forms of imposition. As many critics have shown, the novel is filled with intimations about affinities between economic practices and the aesthetic sense. But, in contrast to the new historicism, James also retains a sense of the aesthetic as 'intense creativity' in social life that redeems its manipulative potential, because it can also serve as a model of creative and productive self-assertion. When the symmetry of the original arrangement is reinstalled at the end of *The Golden Bowl*, its participants have been transformed as a result of an ongoing process of imaginary anticipation, creative response, and

social rearrangement. 'Arrangement', as a word in which social and aesthetic goals coalesce, no longer refers to a static design, but suggests possibilities of reshaping and creative transformation.

The difference between these two possible functions lies in the definition of what constitutes the aesthetic for James: as long as the aesthetic is identified with a particular form or structure, such as symmetry, or a certain type of pattern, so that it can be recognized and used as a ready-made criterion of differentiation and hierarchization, it is reduced to taste and thus to a collector's definition of the aesthetic. This reduction of the aesthetic to taste is part of a system of dominance, illustrated in the figure of the collector Osmond and continuing to shape social relations at the beginning of *The Golden Bowl*, where the Ververs 'buy' Amerigo as precious addition to their Old-World collection. The 'aesthetic' way in which this entrapment is overcome and transformed, on the other hand, does not have a particular appearance or pattern to which it can appeal for authority. Rather, it is a mode of processing reality, and thus an activity within the social realm, not a beautiful object or structure standing apart from it. In its characteristic mode and indulgence of 'interminable elaboration', *The Golden Bowl* therefore acts out its own resistance to the manipulative potential of form.[29]

In this sense, the 'liberal' interpretation does more justice to James than the radical revision of recent years, which has effectively obscured his awareness of the close link between art and power in order to be able to put up a claim for superior oppositional insights. The difference between the Jamesian view and that of cultural radicalism does not lie in the denial of a relation between art and power, but in the different definitions of this relation and in the conclusions to be drawn from it. In order to define this difference as one between 'formalism' and a new historicism, cultural radicalism must trivialize James's aesthetics. It has suppressed any acknowledgment that the aesthetic in James is not tied to one particular form and function, but constitutes a creative social activity whose changing manifestations are dependent on the situation to which they respond. Interdependence, however, is not identity. In the binary logic of the new cultural radicalism, which can only admit an all-pervasive power, on the one side, and illusory counter-worlds such as love, desire, or art, on the other, the aesthetic is automatically trapped in the position of that which pretends to be non-power, so that it becomes an ideal object for unmasking invisible power effects.

Such a reconceptualization of art as power effect is a response to a certain kind of liberal appropriation of James, which has tried to legitimize the aesthetic by turning it into a superior source of moral philosophy centred around redemptive values such as 'depth', 'complexity', 'tragedy', 'love', 'the promise of life', 'mature self-awareness', and the 'fusion of form and idea'.[30] It is in the demystification and problematization of the liberal rewriting of James in terms of such naïve, essentially metaphysical concepts as humanity, universality, or love, that the radical revision has its strong point. In this sense, both approaches to James are complimentary. However, such an analysis of the liberal and the radical version of James in terms of potential reciprocity would point not to the need for another demystification of James, but to the full recovery of his insights.

NOTES

1 Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 'Demystifying the Master', *American Literary History*, 5 (1993), 314–25.

2 The formula 'compromised to the core' is taken from Frank Lentricchia's review of Carolyn Porter's *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), which was one of the first books to signal a new revisionist approach to the major American writers: 'Porter's interpretation reveals this wholly absorbing drama: major American authors earn their titles by writing penetrating radical critiques of our society even as those very same critiques show distressing signs of being compromised to the core by the society which they would alter. In other words, the force of Porter's book is political' (*American Literature*, 54 (1982), 445). This type of 'complicity-criticism' became the basic mode of procedure for almost all interpretations of the new revisionism in American literary history.

3 What Yeazell says about studies of James by Freedman and Posnock can be applied to the new revisionism as a whole: 'Both writers strenuously resist any attempt to understand the artist as somehow transcending the forces of his culture, a mystifying move that they identify with the triumph of high modernism' ('Demystifying the Master', 315).

4 Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 24.

5 Initially, such studies focused, with varying degrees of acrimony, on James's ambivalent relation to the literary market and the newly emerging consumer capitalism. See, for example, Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Marcia Jacobson, *Henry James and the Mass Market* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1983); Jean Christophe Agnew, 'The Consuming Vision of Henry James', in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 67–100; Michael Anesko, *'Friction with the Market': Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Daniel Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1990). These studies bent on 'rehistoricizing' James were quickly out-radicalized, however, by readings inspired by the new historicism, which had their first and most radical manifestation in Mark Seltzer's study. See also Richard Godden, *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel From James to Mailer* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Susan M. Griffin, *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991): 'Because he sees historically, James participates, despite himself, in the very commodification of America that he condemns' (22); and Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (University of Chicago Press, 1993). In a review of some of the current studies of James, Lynn Wardley summarizes the recent development: 'James's essays and fiction were resituated within the context of politics of early twentieth-century race relations, commodity fetishism, and class interaction' in an attempt 'to gain distance from the critical phenomenon of "the Master"'. In this revision, 'one project being launched is to look again at familiar topics in James criticism . . . through the critical lenses provided by gay studies, feminism, and the new historicism . . . This is to say that recent work departs from a model of Henry James as the worldly intellectual on whom nothing is lost to construct a Henry James whose consciousness, and that of his protagonists, is structured by the cognitive rules and suppositions of an historically specific discourse' ('Henry James in the Nineties', *New England Quarterly*, 67 (1994), 142).

6 See John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). For recent feminist readings, cf. Elizabeth Allen, *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), Lynda S. Boren, *Eurydice Reclaimed: Language, Gender, and Voice in Henry James* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), Peggy McCormack, *The Rule of Money: Gender, Class, and Exchange Economics in the Fiction of Henry James* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), and Priscilla L. Walton, *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James* (University of Toronto Press, 1992). As a rule, these readings see James consciously and subconsciously subverting patriarchal values, whereas Alfred Habegger finds James's work infused with anti-feminism and patriarchal ideology and tied to an 'elusive male

authoritarianism' (*Henry James and the Woman Business* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7, 26). For Ross Posnock, James pursues a politics of non-identity by dissolving the stable oppositions that define selfhood as a discrete and intelligible entity (*The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103). Generally, one may say with Dietmar Schloss: 'The works of Henry James provided a feast for the critical avant-garde of the seventies and eighties' (*Culture and Criticism in Henry James* (Tübingen: Narr, 1992), 1).

7 Schloss, *Culture and Criticism*, 1.

8 Both essays can be found in Trilling's collection *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), 1–19, 199–215. Within American intellectual history, these essays were crucial in the attempt to dissociate liberal thought from the authority of V. L. Parrington and the left liberalism exemplified by his monumental *Main Currents in American Thought*. For an interesting discussion of personal and social reasons for the importance of James for Trilling, see Jonathan Freedman, 'Trilling, James, and the Uses of Cultural Criticism', *Henry James Review*, 14 (1993), 141–50.

9 Trilling, 'Reality in America', in *The Liberal Imagination*, 8.

10 Ibid., 9.

11 Trilling, 'Manners, Morals, and the Novel', in *The Liberal Imagination*, 213, 215.

12 Metaphors of a 'depth' that contains a hidden truth are thus shared by liberalism and the recent forms of radicalism. The difference lies in what the two positions want to find in that subterranean fundament of reality: while the liberal post-war vision looks for 'tragic' manifestations of humanity, the new radicalism looks for an 'absent cause' that generates structures of power. For the one, art is the privileged mode of access to that depth, for the other, critical theory.

13 Trilling, 'Manners, Morals, and the Novel', in *The Liberal Imagination*, 215.

14 Similar arguments can be found in readings of James by other well-known exponents of American liberalism of the time, such as Philip Rahv or, later, Irving Howe. See Philip Rahv, 'Attitudes to Henry James', *New Republic*, 15 February 1943, 220–4; Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon, 1957), 139–56, 182–200. In a less politically minded way, focusing more on the affirmation of universal human values, Blackmur and Matthiessen contribute to the same liberal argument. See R. B. Blackmur, 'Henry James', in *The Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert Spiller *et al.* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1039–64; F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).

15 In doing so, it takes its cue from Herbert Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance, which had re-emerged in Sacvan Bercovitch's argument about the shrewd containment effected by a liberal rhetoric of consensus (*The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993)).

16 Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power*, 13–14.

17 Ibid., 15, 16, 24. All further references to Seltzer are given parenthetically in the text.

18 The Jamesian may note here a reference to two classical liberal interpretations of James. As early as 1957, Frederick C. Crews had written of *The Golden Bowl*: 'The subject of the novel, in my opinion, is power' (*The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry James* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 85). In typical liberal fashion, Crews, however, had looked for the 'true motivation' of the characters' power games in a detailed discussion of their different social conditions. 'Love', on the other hand, evokes Dorothea Krook's reading of *The Golden Bowl* as 'a great fable – one of the greatest in modern European literature – of the redemption of man by the transforming power of human love' (*The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), 240).

19 On this point, see Richard Brodhead's analysis of the domestic novel as a disciplinary strategy (*Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 13–47).

20 For an excellent discussion of social relations in James see Paul B. Armstrong's chapter on *The Golden Bowl* (*The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 136–86).

21 This may look like a bold claim in view of the fact that James usually focuses on a narrow, exclusive social circle and hardly deals with the working classes. Indeed, James starts out at a much more elementary social level, the moment when society emerges out of the need of the individual to establish social relations – which is also the moment of potential manipulation, deception, and subtle coercion. In the description of this process of 'socialization', James offers something like a comprehensive phenomenology of social relations. Thus, 'what James calls "the fundamental fewness" of his characters acts more as a help than a hindrance for exploring the relation between Self and Other, because this very economy emphasizes the variety of problems and possibilities inherent in that relation' (Armstrong, *Phenomenology of Henry James*, 136). In comparison, novels dealing with the working classes are narrowly focussed in their descriptions of social relations, because they usually restrict themselves to two types: class oppression and class solidarity. From a Jamesian point of view, however, social groups created by ideas such as solidarity are as endangered by processes of deception and manipulation as are groups engaged in other relations. If socialist intellectuals had not suppressed this knowledge, they might have saved themselves from the fate of becoming unwitting accomplices of such practices.

22 Cf., for example, Richard Brodhead's 'James, Realism, and the Politics of Style' in his otherwise excellent book *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 140–65.

23 I am referring to the description of the Howellsian novel by Heinz Ickstadt:

> It seems therefore possible to rephrase Howells' theory of realism in terms of a theory of communication. To be sure, it was the business of the novelist to make people 'understand the real world through its faithful effigy of it' but also 'to arrange a perspective . . . with everything in its proper relation and proportion to everything else'. To represent reality (i.e. 'life as one has *seen* and *known* and *felt* it') was to reveal in the experience of it an innate 'perfect principle' – a principle that Howells variously identified as shared tradition, as shared ideal of conduct, or as belief in human nature 'that . . . is the same under all masks and disguises that modern conditions have put upon it.' The very experience of reality is thus based on common faith and confirmed by consensus. It is a consensus established *in* the novel through conversation and debate, and *by* the novel in the act of reading which was to help people know themselves and one another better, so that they might all be 'humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity'

('Concepts of Society and the Practice of Fiction: Symbolic Responses to the Experience of Change in Late Nineteenth Century America', in *Impressions of a Gilded Age: The American Fin de Siècle*, ed. Marc Chénetier and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: Universiteit Amsterdam, 1983), 85).

24 Cf. Ickstadt's lucid characterization: 'The inner space of communication, for Howells, always has ideal implications. Where it works democracy is experienced in the free exchange of opinions, right conduct affirmed or redefined in rational discourse, experience reflected in dialogue. When conversation deteriorates or collapses, a deeper crisis is always indicated – many of his novels are centred in such catastrophes of communication' ('Concepts of Society', 86).

25 The more Maggie triumphs, the more complicated our attitude towards her becomes: 'In the second half, as she increasingly becomes the most knowledgeable character in the drama, our feelings for her undergo a strange transformation. We both respect her more (because she's intelligent) and pity her more (because she perceives she's been betrayed); but, as she begins to use this knowledge to alter her situation, we also begin to draw back from – what to call it? – her exercise of power, her manipulation, her emotional tyranny' (Wendy Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking At Women Through Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 102–3).

26 On the crucial role of the idea of an 'absent cause' in the new cultural radicalism, see the excellent analysis by Wolfram Schmidgen, 'The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism', *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 11 (1995), 371–403.

27 See my essay 'Declarations of Dependence: Revising Our View of American Realism', in *Victorianism in the United States: Its Era and Legacy*, ed. Steve Ickringill and Stephen Mills (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992), 19–34.

28 Cf. Sergio Perosa's characterization of James's view of the potential of the novel: 'If art is for him essentially form, construction, architecture, and composition, it aims at something other than the mimetic and, ultimately, at the non-representative. It does not reflect or represent life but transforms it, fixes it into something different. Art involves the coherence of parts, life fluidity' ('James, Tolstoy and the Novel', *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 57 (1983), 364–5).

29 Significantly, in the case of *The Golden Bowl*, Seltzer must base his new historicist argument that power and literature resemble and reinforce each other as cultural practices through a homology of form on the vague concept of 'organic form'.

30 For a helpful survey of the critical reception see R. B. J. Wilson, *Henry James's Ultimate Narrative: The Golden Bowl* (London: University of Queensland Press, 1981), 13–39.