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The Limits of Doubt:

A Critique of Representational Scepticism in the Late Novels of Henry James

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the epistemology of poststructuralism, particularly deconstruction, in order to explain and defend the implicit epistemology in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*. Although James is recognized as a master of indirection and ambiguity, these novels stress the importance of accurate interpretation and the dangers of suppressing our ability to represent the truth. James here criticizes anti-realist scepticism as absolutist and self-serving, and the target of his analysis bears a consistent and telling resemblance to deconstruction. The first chapter argues that a deconstructionist epistemology was historically available for James's scrutiny because its arguments are essentially those of traditional scepticism, recast in the language of a theory of representation. In the hands of Derrida and his followers, this translation results in a dynamic form of idealism, according to which any claim to ground interpretation in the pre-textual is an illegitimate attempt to escape representational mediation and stabilize the inherently disruptive forces of signification. Deconstruction can generate its explosive interpretative effects, however, only by clinging to the necessity of an absolute standard of certainty, a standard that can never be realized, and by exaggerating the applicability of its text-metaphors. James's own position is critical realist—an epistemological stance similar to William James's pragmatism, but wary of its tendency to assume subjectivist, constructivist forms—in contrast to the anti-realist orientation of both deconstruction and the sceptics and exploiters in James's novels.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical viability of a critical realist epistemology through an analysis of deconstruction's fundamental assumptions about the nature of perception, time, and the interpretative flexibility of experience. These topics are also addressed from a perspective arising from debates in the philosophy of science: particular use is made of evolutionary theory, which permits a recuperation of the notion of linearity—an essential structure of intelligibility underlying our experience of the world, not a spurious construct of debunked Enlightenment science. Perception can then also be understood as a fallible but reliable method of access to objective conditions that is not necessarily, as it is on the Derridean textual model, overdetermined by the powers of representation.

After considering the influence of deconstruction on contemporary readings of James's last three completed novels, Chapter 2 argues that although James, in *The Ambassadors*, certainly counters a rigid rationalistic epistemology with one that is more fluid and open-ended, the latter perspective, thought by many critics to be compatible with poststructuralism—and endorsed because of this compatibility—is itself finally rejected as too extreme. Strether reads Chad's transformation correctly only he realizes that Woollettian linearity and causality underpin the texts of Paris. Chapter 3, on *The Wings of the Dove*, uses Derrida's account of metaphor to characterize the exploitation of Milly, whose translation into the present/absent centre of a society defined by its scepticism and its rapacious desire is the key element in James's denunciation of extreme doubt as a strategy of domination. Chapter 4 reads *The Golden Bowl* as a double game of epistemological subversion: Charlotte and the Prince deconstruct the Ververs' "miraculous forms." but their idealist challenge to the idealist system prepares the ground

for Maggie's full exploitation of Verver representational power. The inversion and revision of Adam's structure results in tyranny.

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Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

“The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way” (Preface to *The American*).

I

Henry James’s last three completed novels—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* (the novels of the “major phase,” as Matthiessen called James’s mature period)—represent not only the crowning achievement of his own oeuvre, but also the highest pitch of formal complexity in the development of the novel prior to its more extreme radicalization in the modernist period. Joyce, Woolf, Beckett, Conrad, and Lawrence seem, to many readers, to have been writing fiction of an entirely different order than James had been; but, on the other hand, James is also recognized as their necessary predecessor with his serpentine language and subtle handling of ambiguities: Joyce’s and Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing, for instance, owes something to James’s intensely involved analysis of the subtle shifts of motivation and impression. And there is little denying that James helped usher in a new level of self-consciousness to the craft of fiction. But with the wave of post-structuralist or postmodernist criticism of the last twenty or thirty years, a serious effort has been afoot to accommodate James’s novels to post-metaphysical theory, and no wonder, given James’s highly wrought, densely written texts, which seem to emphasize a kind of radical uncertainty not only in their subjects, but even through the fabrics of their construction. A writer of such agonizing qualification and acrobatic syntactical ingenuity, and of such keen formal awareness, yet also with the caution to be an explicit enemy (so far as James ever pronounces himself to be anything so vulgar as an “enemy”) of those who would prescribe “rules” to the players of representation (after noting, in “The Art of Fiction,” the “laws of fiction” Mr. Besant

proposes in the essay that is the occasion for James's own, James remarks: "They scarcely seem to me to have the quality that Mr. Besant attributes to the rules of the novelist—the 'precision and the exactness' of the 'laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.' They are suggestive, they are even inspiring, but they are not exact, though they are doubtless as much so as the case admits of: which is proof of that liberty of interpretation for which I have just contended" (Norton 461)—such a writer could hardly fail to attract the attention of the avatars of radical doubt and linguistic absolute relativism.

James's singular place in the history of the novel gave him, however, a perspective that should not be so quickly assimilated to the theories of the contemporary avant-garde: nor should his texts be condemned as failing to finally acknowledge the "truths" those theories give us (or, to use terminology less likely to raise the hackles of those unwilling to associate themselves with the language of judgment, James need not be read as struggling against but ultimately succumbing to the irreducible aporias of language). I do not intend to undertake a literary-historical analysis in this study, but it is worth noting that, whether postmodernist theories emerge from or are a radical break with their modernist predecessors, it is undoubtedly true that they derive their energy from the modernist preoccupation with contingency and language, whether or not the modernist writers finally resolved their dilemmas through recourse to a higher principle (a transcendental signified: a "presence" beyond the text; an ideological "solution"; a fundamental, dark, sexual energy; an ultimate, elusive negation—whatever). The Victorian novelists—in this version of literary history, they are the naive realists, seduced into playing the game of mimesis with a straight face (and the face of a straight text, however comic)—were spared, whatever else they were tortured by, these deepest questions of language and being (or the usurpation of being by language from the beginning, so that we must say there was no beginning). Dickens, Thackeray, even George Eliot, did not question the viability of their own media; they did not labour under the anxiety of the text, a kind of alienation, not only from self and society (or *of* the self and society), but also from language and communication themselves,

an alienation that cuts across and through all the lines that had previously been drawn and seemed so troubling, now themselves troubled in the undermining even of the “tool” used to approach them: what if language is not a tool, or is more than a tool? What if it is all we know and is irrevocably, originally flawed, or at least “flawed” according to the standard we now must admit is lost?

Such is not the Victorian anxiety, but it is the abyss facing both the modernists and the postmodernists, and certainly the poststructuralists (if there is a slender distinction to be made there), who derived their manifesto-readings from interpretations of key modernist works (Derrida’s readings of Mallarmé in particular stand out for their enormous influence, but his readings of Joyce and Kafka are significant as well, as is his declared affinity with Beckett). James stands in between these two grossly defined periods, and his novels, as I will show, question this very position and, most particularly, the emergent anti-epistemology of doubt, though his examinations do not simply revert to the old certainties. The rise of the modernist world was underway and evident (at least to those upon whom “nothing was lost”); the crashing descent of the medium-saturated world—the world of signs without firm reference, without any meaning at all—was already on the horizon. James’s “in between,” however, is not that of the Derridean poststructuralists who argue for the aporetic undecidable at the heart of all reasoning, all attempts at intelligibility, as a source for renewal: Derrida argues, as I shall demonstrate, for the site of dissonance at the dividing line between everything and nothing, total success and total failure, the juncture between absolutes, itself an absolute juncture, a divine middle. James’s last three great novels struggle to articulate, to story forth, an image of an ambiguity grounded but not totally determined by what can still be called, in the Jamesian universe, however beset with uncertainty and doubt, the facts of the matter. He was enough of a Victorian, one could say, to believe in them, but enough of a modernist to realize that these facts were not everything. Or we could say that he was enough of a post-postmodernist not to be seduced by the call of scepticism in the face of the failure of rational certainty. For—and this is the

quality that leaps out at the reader of James prepared not to be scandalized by it—the three novels of James’s maturity (and others as well) are concerned with both ambiguity and the uneradicable facts of the matter. These stories explore uncertainty in the light of, not total certainty, but of limited collections of facts about which his characters could be certain if they had the courage to face them: fascinated by the truth, they play the game of knowing, but, fearing self-exposure, obscure the truth beneath “beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements” (*Wings of the Dove* 440). Ambiguity is not tamed or made “easy” by these facts, but the desire to erase them and subsist in their total absence is also, as these novels suggest, of ethical and aesthetic consequence.

My goal in this study is to examine this interplay in the three novels between interpretative freedom or conventionality (seeming opposites) on the one hand and the limits of interpretation on the other—limits imposed by what I will call the pre-textual or the pre-semiotic—and thereby extricate these novels from the grip of poststructuralist readings;¹ and, further, I wish to demonstrate that this extrication is the result of James’s sophisticated handling of the same issues such critics pursue and not the regressive consequence of a kind of literary naiveté.² The so oft-repeated assumption that the kind of provisional foundation James’s texts argue for is a simple naiveté, a terrified flight into the arms of a spurious faith and away from the hard truths theory has now established, will be countered by argumentation that seeks to establish that James’s position is nothing of the sort, and that a kind of disillusioned faith is in fact the source of charges such as these. I will first, therefore, discharge the debt of challenge by arguing that the theoretical assumptions and arguments upon which Jamesian poststructuralist critics base their readings are unsound. My particular focus will be on the thinker who is the most significant authority for these arguments, Jacques Derrida (for reasons perhaps obvious, but nevertheless made clear in Chapter 2), but I will also stray somewhat afield in order to cast a wider net around the sources of inspiration for my target group of Jamesian critics. To critically substantiate or legitimize what I detect in the novels—a wholly laudatory

commitment to pre-linguistic reality (and a consequent resistance to linguistic constructivism and relativism)—I will in Chapter 2 draw upon elements of contemporary evolution theory (only in abstraction—I am not concerned, obviously, to argue that genes made James, or even Strether, do it) and chaos theory, bodies of thought that strike, it seems to me, a fruitful middle ground between the empirical sciences and humanist reflection. My reading of *The Ambassadors* relies on the broader thesis argued in my second chapter—that poststructuralist scepticism is as absolutist as its rationalist counterpart and that only an observance of the constraints imposed by our physical condition permits recovery of a true middle ground between the two extremes of doubt and certainty—and my readings of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, although intimately indebted to that central thesis, narrow the focus again to Derrida; with respect to *The Wings of the Dove*, I consider Derrida's account of metaphor to illuminate the transformation of Milly into a sign without origin (which entails the erasure of her physical being), and with respect to *The Golden Bowl*, I consider Derrida's key tactical strategy—inversion and re-vision—to explicate what I consider to be the fundamental pattern of the novel: the construction of a self-contained, unified system; the elaboration of that system's subversion; and the final, terrible triumph of the original system's architect and agent. My argument here is that the deconstruction of the Ververs' idealist system—the clash between idealist unity and idealist dissonance—resolves into a factless world of values in which value-power (money) finally imprisons, consumes, the powerless representatives of physicality.

My critique of deconstruction (and poststructuralism generally) serves another very simple purpose. James's novels are themselves, I am convinced, critical responses to poststructuralist-like arguments; these novels look at the interplay between facts and values, between interpretative freedom and constraint, primarily through a *critical* analysis of the emergent epistemologies of doubt.³ The intimate connection between poststructuralism and traditional scepticism (which I argue for in Chapter 2), and the emergence of the modernist

world of the signifier to which James was sensitive,⁴ combined to make representation-based anti-epistemologies an “alive,” if not formally explicit, concern for the novelist dealing with fictionalized concrete problems of knowing.⁵ My own critique of Derridean poststructuralism is thus meant to carry out on the theoretical level arguments that are implied or assumed by these James texts. Chapter 2 is, then, to a significant degree, cast in the negative: I seek to show the deficiencies of the deconstructionist epistemology, to set out its stance, its essential assumptions, its strategies, in order to make clear its fundamental flaws, because the James texts are also addressing these issues by way of critique. The outlined epistemology with which my Chapter 2 ends is in large part a product of the criticisms mounted against deconstructionist scepticism, and James’s own implicit epistemology is also to a great extent an implied result of his examinations of the folly of absolute doubt. Indeed, while *The Ambassadors* is more explicitly “positive”—it sets up two sides of a debate, exposes weaknesses in both, and then tentatively resolves the issue in a middle ground—the later two novels become increasingly concerned with critique, with voicing a negative response to the negation of scepticism, the “positive” alternative response becoming more and more muted. In effect, then, my arguments in Chapter 2 will try to make explicit in theoretical terms the folly so adroitly exposed by James in novelistic terms.

II

I will here briefly discuss a few representative poststructuralist Jamesians in order to catch the flavour of the criticism I am challenging. My dispute with them does not turn exclusively on their particular readings of the novels, but with the assumptions they bring to bear on their interpretative tasks. My own readings are developed out of a criticism of these assumptions, and so I do not intend to indicate here the many subtle variations in results achieved from such analysis (since, being assumptions, the results do not significantly differ from application to application). Instead, I will only indicate how these

deconstructionist assumptions leave epistemological issues unconsidered, or, to put it a different way, how such critics do not consider that James himself offers a challenge to Derridean thought. It may, though, seem that I am challenging an epistemological perspective that is no longer dominant. Julie Rivkin, in her recent (1996) Derridean reading of James, *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fiction*, acknowledges that “[i]t may seem oddly anachronistic, at a time when literary criticism has taken so marked a turn to cultural critique and various historicisms, to express a preoccupation with such an apparently formalist concern as a representational method or technique,” but she further maintains that since “[c]ulture is form” (5) her approach is justified (I comment further on Rivkin’s response to this problem in Chapter 2). While it may be true that the kind of textual analysis I undertake is no longer ascendant, I would argue that the cultural criticism to which Rivkin alludes is not nearly so distanced as she implies (in order to appear to be offering a challenge) from the positions argued for in Derrida’s earlier writings and the literary criticism that drew on its authority: the *epistemology* is still dominant, though the effort to prove that literary texts conform to it (perhaps unwittingly) is no longer made. In other words, the move to cultural criticism and (some) historicisms is made on the assumption that Derridean scepticism is philosophically *correct*, and that therefore *only* historical textualization and cultural criticism (subverting the texts of oppression by introducing dissonance and difference) is valid. As I shall argue, a “close reading” approach *is* valid because the epistemology of Derridean analysis, itself the product of close reading, is *not*. We can know the literary text in a non-absolute way without fundamentally relying on our own political or cultural agendas; indeed, it is my implicit argument that our political concerns can be legitimately advanced only on the strength of accurate interpretations of whatever is external or internal to those concerns.⁶

It will be useful, I think, before sketching in this preliminary ground, to keep in mind the following passage from “The Art of Fiction,” which, although directed toward certain puritanical tendencies in the novel-reading public of James’s day, has uncanny

pertinence as well in a critical climate that assumes that the artist's integrity is best preserved if he strips his fictions of the pretensions of realism and foregrounds instead the fictionality, the constructedness, of the text:

[Fiction] must take itself seriously for the public to take it so. The old superstition about fiction being "wicked" has doubtless died out in England: but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke. Even the most jocular novel feels in some degree the weight of the proscription that was formerly directed against literary levity: the jocularity does not always succeed in passing for orthodoxy. It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a "make-believe" (for what else is a "story"?) shall be in some degree apologetic—shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life. This, of course, any sensible, wide-awake story declines to do, for it quickly perceives that the tolerance granted to it on such a condition is only an attempt to stifle it disguised in the form of generosity. (Norton, 457)⁷

John Carlos Rowe's *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (1984) was a groundbreaking work in many respects, gathering together as it did a variety of critical approaches and demonstrating their applicability or relevance to James's work (Rivkin refers to Rowe's book as providing "the most sweeping post-structuralist reading of James" and testifies to its continued pre-eminence: *False Positions* 204). His qualified approval of many of these critical trends (Rorty's humanistic conversations, steeped in irony, for example) is a result of his own adherence primarily to Foucault; Rowe, that is, calls for interpretations that actively promote social criticism of the Foucaultian slant, sensitive to the material constraints of production (this is Rowe's counter to the incipient idealism in some American post-structuralism). His primary concern is to establish James—and through James, the project of literary analysis as a whole—as a figure (not as an author/authority) or as a site for disruptive, radical analysis. As he remarks, "my labour of socializing Henry James is also a task of returning literary theory to its proper subject: the ways in which literature serves or subverts the culture's complex arts of self-representation and self-preservation" (28). He assumes, however, that this "proper subject" can be undertaken without further clarification of the epistemological assumptions

that make it possible (assumptions that are also part of “our culture”). Social criticism should perhaps not be permanently delayed by an incessant self-questioning of standards. but it is also true that Rowe’s formulation of his subject pretends to close off further consideration of epistemological issues altogether because, he insists, they are all well settled. Rowe takes poststructuralist sceptical doctrines of language as absolutely true, gulping them down (to recall James’s complaint about uncritical readers of novels) without pausing for breath. He discusses Todorov and Iser in these terms:

Todorov has formulated this essential linguistic arbitrariness or difference in James’s narratives as the absent truth or origin, which by virtue of its absence “sets the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion. This motion is double and, in appearance, a contradictory one (which allows James to keep beginning it over and over). On the one hand he deploys all his forces to attain the hidden essence . . . ; on the other, he constantly postpones, protects the revelation. . . . The absence of the cause or of the truth is present in the text—indeed, it is the text’s logical origin and reason for being. The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being. The essential is absent, the absence is essential.”⁸ Wolfgang Iser discovers a similar ‘figure in the carpet’ as the primary motive for the reader to engage with the Jamesian text. Iser introduces *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* by reading ‘The Figure in the Carpet’ as a parable designed to criticize a theory of interpretation that relies on explanatory models and referential systems. (5)

Rowe’s response is this: “Nevertheless such linguistic undecideability hardly begins to tell James’s own story; this is merely the *donnée* of writing, an inescapable situation that barely deserves James’s comment” (5). It is thus, for Rowe, a simple given that James knew and totally accepted Iser’s and Todorov’s conclusions. I will also argue that, in effect, James “knew” such views, but that he endorsed them is entirely another matter, and not to be so brusquely set aside. Rowe nevertheless moves forward on the decidedly Derridean “thesis that there is no perception, no impression in the ocular or present sense possible in James’s epistemology” (202), and he means by perception a “pure perception” (201) entirely outside the will to meaning or the codes of social discourse. And since James is already an unshakable adherent of the views Derrida extracts from Husserl (“there never was any ‘perception’” (*Speech* 103)), Rowe finds it plausible to consider that

James offers us a beginning for such an investigation of the impression as the origin of language (an origin that must not be understood as onto-

historical, in any generic or linear sense) because he acknowledges so cheerfully and readily the textuality of 'consciousness.' . . . The central symbols, like James's central consciousnesses, are always texts to be interpreted, undecideables whose reading by other characters (by narrators, by readers) constitutes a certain danger of self-betrayal and incrimination: the complicity of reading. In the novels and tales, interpretations may masquerade as visual impressions, but there are no impressions that are not always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations. (194)

Rowe here holds the term "impression" to an impossibly strict definition; or, he expands the term "text" to include everything, thus making it of no particular critical use. Why cannot "impression" denote a kind of experience—certainly not transcending all other experiences (which all these other "texts" are—they are contexts, or explanatory categories, for kinds of reflection about ways of being or thinking)—that foregrounds one kind of experience to the "shock" or transformation of the others? Expectations (created by culture) can be suddenly undermined by the "text" of an impression received from a source that previous contexts could not anticipate. Why cannot a "visual" text be the source of this "shock"—if impressions are texts too, then, fine, "text" covers everything and the question Rowe must field is then: why are no discriminations possible within textuality for different kinds of textual experiences? Rowe's textualism encourages a forgetting of distinctions in its hurry to move away from (ironically enough) the text.

In a similar vein, John Landau, in his much more recent book *"A Thing Divided": Representation in James* (1996), forthrightly claims that "the world James projects in his late novels can best be described from the vantage point provided by the concepts that poststructuralist rhetorical criticism has made available" (15). Landau is, however, clearly concerned that his adoption of poststructuralist reading strategies and assumptions may open him to the charge of deploying a "radical scepticism" that would undermine even his own critical work. He thus observes that the intense self-reflexivity of James's last novels—"the hypertrophy of the dialogue, the overwhelming extent of the characters' convoluted self-conscious meditations, the impenetrability of the syntax itself" (18)⁹—poses a double problem, or a problem with two aspects:

[A]lthough James's characters and James's readers may doubt the capacity of representation to reflect reality adequately, they also need to confront the possibility that it may indeed do so. Precisely because we can never close the gap between the representation and what is represented—after all, we only have access to “it” in representation—we do not give up attempting to authenticate our experience. Although James's fiction appears sceptical about the possibility of telling its own truth, it nevertheless tries to do just that: its truth is that the struggle to distinguish between representation and reality is unending. A paradox, then, is implicit in James's novels: He appears to suggest the illimitability or impossibility of representation, yet as his novels successfully represent the confusion we feel as a result of our entrapment in the endless chain of representation, he succeeds in undermining his own project. Insofar as his fictions “work,” his very success is an indication of his failure.

Landau thus permits the possibility that representation may not only subvert our access to the real, but may also accurately reflect it. But he permits the latter possibility only because, on his assumptions, we essentially do not know whether “representation” is connected to “truth” or not, and without this knowing, we also cannot know that truth is excluded. This is a very tenuous commitment to an anti-sceptical foundation—in effect, he tries to avoid scepticism by placing even scepticism in doubt. But, in the midst of this hand-wringing, Landau is nevertheless confident enough—and assertive enough—to proclaim “All we have is the network of representation” (17), a term that has at this point been thrown over almost every possible aspect of experience and thought—“language, art, manners, social forms, and norms”—except, not surprisingly, but damagingly, the physical, the bodily, which is forgotten.

Landau seeks to introduce his reading method by drawing a parallel between the following passage from *The Golden Bowl* and insights to be gleaned from the work of Derrida. The passage from the novel issues from Charlotte's point of view when she and the Prince realize that they have found themselves in a situation that offers extraordinary opportunities:

There were hours when she spoke of their taking refuge in what she called the commonest tact—as if this principle alone could suffice to light their way; there were others when it might have seemed, to listen to her, that their course would demand of them the most anxious study and the most independent, not to say original, interpretation of signs. She talked now as if it were indicated, at every turn, by finger-posts of almost ridiculous prominence; she talked again as if it lurked in devious ways and were to be

tracked through bush and briar; and she even, on occasion, delivered herself in the sense that, as their situation was unprecedented, so their heaven was without stars.

Landau comments that

the issues shadowed by the absence of stars in Charlotte's heaven can be illuminated by reference to the work of Jacques Derrida whose work, so central to post-structuralist rhetorical criticism, is relevant here. For Derrida, Western metaphysics is a metaphysics of presence, and logocentrism, the term which he uses to describe this metaphysics, has according to him hypostatized the theoretically untenable dichotomy of presence/absence. The absence of stars in James's passage signifies Charlotte's sense of the absence of an originary term which would guide her actions. . . . The passage dramatizes the need for some transcendent sign, some term that is not contingent, some categorical imperative that would sanction and stabilize the system. Charlotte's sense of the independence of her situation expresses both the lack of such a principle and the consequent need for it.

Derrida's description of the text as instantiated and inhabited by *différance* provides a means of understanding the contradiction implicit in Charlotte's problem. . . . Through Charlotte, James emphasizes the necessarily arbitrary, and thus tendentious, and thus anxiety-provoking aspect of representation. . . . In James's late novels, the situations are always unprecedented and the heavens always starless . . . (23-25)

I do not wish to anticipate unduly, but my own view, worked through in Chapter 5, is that, while this juxtaposition of Charlotte and Derrida is fruitful, Landau entirely obscures the narrative context by, in effect, conflating Charlotte's position with that of James himself, or with the functioning of the entire text. Landau ignores the story. Charlotte is indeed in a "deconstructionist" world, or has succeeded in placing herself in one, but the novel's concern is to examine the very effects—the consequences—of that placement. One cannot claim to account for the text and overlook the facts that, first, Charlotte *wants to believe*, at this point in the story, that her sky is empty, and, second, that eventually, at the end of the novel, Charlotte's sky is only too horribly dominated by one central star.

The empty center of *The Wings of the Dove* provides many critics with an opportunity to draw comparisons similar to Todorov's that Rowe considered. Milly is said, for example by Sheila Teahan, to "resist representation. She is aligned with the unspeakable itself; as the narrator says, 'she wondered if the matter had not mainly been that she herself was so "other," so taken up with the unspoken' (*Wings* 177)" (Teahan

204). Nicola Bradbury maintains, in her piece “‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’: The Celebration of Absence in *The Wings of the Dove*,” that “Milly is . . . vindicated, her consciousness validated . . . through the paradox of absence, in which Milly (and all she stands for) is more powerful, pure and true, than in mere presence; she has moved out of time and transcends the working world” (87). Milly, to return to Teahan’s account, is said to be the present/absent center of representation, the “truth” that is an abyssal mystery. Teahan, after making this rather typical observation, relies on Densher for her justification. She notes that Milly’s death allows her to become a “reflective center that ceases to reflect,” and that nevertheless Densher, who thinks himself “in the presence of the truth that was the truest about Milly,” can only conjure up the image of the “impenetrable ring fence” (207) (this image is indeed a crucial one). Again, however, the problem with this kind of reading is that it destroys James’s narrative contexts. Teahan’s quotation about Milly being “taken up with the unspoken” simply cannot be relied on for the idea that Milly resists representation. Milly, when this thought occurs to her, has been watching from her balcony Kate’s approach to the house, and Kate has at this point acquired, for Milly, an air of mystery, of “otherness” (176), because Milly is now aware of Kate’s alliance with Merton. She is also acutely aware that the alliance has not been spoken of by Kate, who, upon learning that Milly has met Merton in America, would have mentioned their common friend in the ordinary course of conversation if there was nothing to conceal. Milly, that is, here realizes, in a minor key, that she is surrounded by secrets, entangled in unspoken relations. The great irony of this passage is that Milly transfers Kate’s “otherness” and duplicitous silence *to herself* and considers that perhaps she is herself so “other”: Kate’s plot to make Milly nothing more than an absent/present center has already scored a subtle victory. Merton’s inability to “really” approach the truth about Milly must also be contextualized, but let it suffice to say that Merton’s failure can be taken as that of the text only if we ignore the clear implication that Merton has, at that point in the novel, succumbed to a crippling, hallucinatory solipsism.

Critics also commonly read *The Ambassadors* from the strictly Parisian point of view.¹⁰ Strether's immersion in the world of signs without sure reference, in the world of surface and appearance, is—it is true—rendered by James in terms that call for poststructuralist-style consideration. For example, in “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*,” Julie Rivkin argues, after a lengthy discussion of Derrida and the logic of the supplement, that

what Mme de Vionnet comes to reveal is that behind representation there is no firm ground. The supplements that make up representation, delegation, and ambassadorship are potentially infinite. Indeed, she confirms what Strether had already begun to learn from Maria Gostrey—that property (as the self of proper names, the wealth of family, the propriety of behaviour, and the presence that stands behind representation) is itself an effect, a product of the interplay between likenesses and likelihoods, the intersubstitution of representations. In Mme de Vionnet's world, there are no final authorities of the sort Mrs. Newsome claims to be; there are only ambassadors. (829-30)

Moreover, Strether's final gesture—apparently refusing Gostrey's proposal—is read as a final testament to the victory won by the de Vionnet representation-economy over Mrs. Newsome's. Similarly, Maud Ellman, in her “‘The Intimate Difference’: Power and Representation in *The Ambassadors*,” argues that the novel “reveals that representation means the death of origins. In the realm of power the monarch [Mrs. Newsome, who is also cast in the role of “origin”] is unseated by the very instruments of tyranny” (111). Ellman assumes that the Woollettian perspective has been overthrown for the more subtle, though dangerous, power-representation nexus operating in Paris, Mrs. Newsome's tyranny undone by its own (suppressed) textuality. Mary Cross also argues: “*The Ambassadors* is a story of signifiers, a narrative of the process of denomination by which words categorise the world. The names for things, especially for his experiences, give Strether . . . great trouble. . . . It is his triumph, eventually, ‘to find the names,’ only to discover that they do not settle anything; the signifiers are in motion and the process of denomination keeps coming undone” (100). In another vein, Richard Salmon, in his “The Secret of the Spectacle: Epistemology and Commodity Display in *The Ambassadors*,” concludes his discussion with the observations:

As a character in a book that is also prospectively subject to commodity display, Strether is simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the scene of his own representation. The situation of Strether within the text exemplifies all the uncertainties of perspective and perception that, I have argued, structure the world of commodity display. The artifice of Strether's representation, which would underlie the mimetic surface of a 'realistic' narrative, is itself open to textual play. (52).

The difficulty again, however, is that one can conclude that this Parisian aspect of Strether's education—including his undecideable position both within and without his representations of himself (which, from a mundane view, is not all that surprising, unless one expected self-representations to be either totally accurate and comprehensive, or utterly false and illusory)—is dominant, indeed, is the final "triumph," only if we ignore the effect upon Strether of the final "revelation" of Chad's and de Vionnet's "virtuous attachment." As I shall argue, Strether must do more (or less) than learn the Parisian Babylonian tongue: the "mimetic" epistemology of Woollett has not been entirely refuted or rejected. Ruth Yeazell's astute observation about the Jamesian style and the world of his fiction in general is particularly pertinent with respect to the epistemological concerns of *The Ambassadors*: "To allow [James's] style fully to work on us is to find ourselves in a world where the boundaries between unconscious suspicion and certain knowledge, between pretense and reality, are constantly shifting—a world in which the power of language to transform facts and even to create them seems matched only by the stubborn persistence of the facts themselves" (3). In fact, the danger is to overstress the former and erase the latter.

Finally, criticism of *The Golden Bowl* is often divided on the issue of how to assess Maggie in Book II. Even poststructuralist critics will play this game (as will I). Priscilla Walton, who claims that "the discourses in *The Golden Bowl* conform to the linguistic processes post-structuralist feminism has defined" (145), objects to critics like John Carlos Rowe, Leo Bersani, and Mark Seltzer who, although agreeing with her that Maggie is a "textual reviser" and that Book II, written from her perspective, "manifests her revision of Book I," mistakenly denigrate the aesthetic/political value of Maggie's revisions. Walton asserts the contrary—that "her revisions constitute her means of opening

up the closed text of Book I. Indeed her methodology is in accord with the tenets of poststructuralist feminism since her revisions disrupt the masculine referentiality of Book I by privileging the pluralizing nature of the feminine Other in Book II. As such, she feminizes the script written by the Prince, her father, and even Charlotte” (145). Tony Tanner characterizes the dispute (throwing Adam in for good measure) in more traditional terms:

There are those—many—who see Adam and Maggie as almost allegorical saviours and restorers of the crumbling relics of and structures of European civilization, but that to me is too happy and facile a reading. There is too much awareness of the ambiguity of those forms which may be as ghastly as they are necessary . . . ; too much awareness that the new rearrangement rests on a felicitous deceit and a potentially ruthless power; too much sense of concealed evil, ‘the horror of the thing hideously *behind*,’ behind so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness. (121).

My own view is that, while it is certainly fruitful to view Maggie as a “reviser” whose “methodology is in accord with the tenets of poststructuralism,” it is grossly simplistic to regard Book I as a “closed text” of (masculine) referentiality that is thereafter “opened up” by the presumably liberating methods of revision that Maggie deploys. Tanner’s comments reflect, I think, a more accurate sense of the novel’s final chapters, when Charlotte and the Prince meet their terrible doom. Moreover, Book I is only in a preliminary sense scripted by the Prince and Adam. Charlotte, I will argue, is the true force of the first Book, which is anything but “closed” or referential; it is, at its conclusion, *already* thoroughly undermined (there is more than one proto-poststructuralist player in this text). I therefore take John Auchard’s view, that *The Golden Bowl* “makes a definitive retreat from the word” (117), and that at the end of the novel, “[u]tterance . . . hovers between them [the Prince and Princess] with grotesque irrelevancy” (152), as accurate in description but inaccurate in intention. For the sake of his readings of James, Auchard pushes poststructuralist thinking toward a kind of mysticism which, though not blind to the effects of the ferocious power struggles that inform the novel, nevertheless affirms Maggie’s actions. Taking poststructuralism rather unproblematically on board, he reads the “retreat from the word” and the “irrelevance of utterance” as hard-won wisdom, as confrontations

with structural and philosophic necessities. The damnation at the end is thus read as truth rather than bitter critique.

My reading of the theoretical assumptions that guide these and many other Jamesians will begin, but not remain, with a consideration of Derrida's reading of Husserl's phenomenology of time. I would thus like to conclude this introduction with a long passage from the Epilogue of Paul Armstrong's book *The Phenomenology of Henry James* in which he articulates, in some respects but not in others (I leave the distinction to be clarified by the chapters ahead), the position I will be arguing for, although by way of a different path:

Henry James and phenomenology respond to the modern moral crisis by turning to the structure of experience. For them, experience itself provides a foundation that, without idealistic transcendentals, rests on nothing but itself and that, unlike nihilism, allows us to discover and justify purposes and values to guide our lives. In the words of William James: "All 'homes' are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope for salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies." Experience is a foundation that does not give us the stable security Derrida attributes to all ways of positing a ground. As Henry James's works show, nothing guarantees that we can know with certainty or imagine wondrously and without risk. There is no assurance that we can discover invigorating possibilities within the limits that bind us, or establish care over conflict by making ourselves mutually transparent. Nor can we foresee an end to the battles for power that disrupt social harmony. These are justifiable goals, however, that can claim as their basis the structure of experience itself. (211)

The poststructuralist challenge to Armstrong's view would deny even this tentative foundation, but it does so by ignoring, in effect, the depth of our experience¹ and, ironically, the power of language.

¹ Although my approach is theoretical and textual rather than historical/contextual, I would like to note immediately my indebtedness to the long tradition of debate on the question of the conflict evident in James's texts between literary realism and romanticism. James famously observed that "[i]t is as difficult to trace the dividing line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south" (Preface to *The American*), and critics have studied the tension between the two tendencies in his fiction ever since. James's first great champion, W. D. Howells, was also, of course, the first great American

proponent of realism, of the imperative that the novel “picture life just as it is,” just as he was also a critic of the “romanticistic novel” which traffics in extremes for the sake of effect, “revel[ing] in the extravagant, the unusual and the bizarre” (*Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading*). Howells claimed James for the realists, though James himself could hardly be said to suppress deliberate artistry, the cultivation of a unique style. Whether Howells’s realism is in fact incompatible with “deliberate style” or not, it certainly has been taken so by some. Michael Bell, for example, in his *The Problem of American Realism*, argues that Howellsian realism is deeply opposed to conspicuous literariness, a concern for “art for art’s sake.” The debate on James and realism is indeed significantly enriched by a consideration of James’s response to the British Aestheticism movement of the last decades of the nineteenth century, particularly as practiced and espoused by Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde (aestheticism has, of course, clear antecedents in romanticism). Jonathan Freedman argues in his *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* that James in his “major phase,” and particularly in *The Golden Bowl*, “accepts with increasing confidence and assurance the *entire* burden of the aesthetic movement—internalizing and deploying not merely its praise for a highly pitched and mobile consciousness, but also its ambivalent acceptance of the commodification of that consciousness” (201). Leon Chai also argues, in *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature*, that James moves from an “aesthetics of consciousness” to an “aesthetics of form,” a shift most clearly defined by *The Ambassadors* as exemplary of the former and *The Golden Bowl* as exemplary of the latter. He thus takes Strether’s “awakening” as commensurate with Wilde’s desire to assimilate nature to art, and views Maggie as a Jamesian artist figure who succeeds in demonstrating “the possibility of assimilating life into form and the redeeming significance of that form” (131). The trend among these critics is thus to stress James’s *acceptance* of the aestheticism movement, and to distance him from realism. My own view is that James’s last three completed novels argue for a position *between* realism on the one hand and romanticism or aestheticism on the other, but I make this argument with reference to poststructuralism and critical realism, the latter naming the “in between” and poststructuralism serving as the contemporary correlative of aestheticism. I argue that *The Ambassadors* most clearly articulates this middle position, while *The Wings of the Dove* (which Freedman calls “the ultimate decadent text”) criticizes the dangerous seductions of aestheticism, and *The Golden Bowl*, although it does indeed move to a consideration of forms and the forces that disrupt them, ultimately condemns both as they are used for attaining power: I see no redemption in the novel’s conclusion in which the challenged form re-emerges as more powerful and oppressive than ever. It may be difficult to “trace the dividing-line between the real and the romantic” or between representations that reckon with facts and representations that issue from desire alone, but James is not for succumbing to the difficulty nor for refusing to make the distinction.

² I will argue later for the plausibility of the claim that James considers these issues in terms compatible with those of Derridean poststructuralists, but it is worth recalling here that when James returned to novel writing after the *Guy Domville* humiliation his aesthetic was greatly influenced by dramatic techniques: his use of the “dramatic scene” and his determination to structure his novels, for the most part, around a “center of consciousness” represent key themes in the history of James criticism. Both techniques limit the use of the “telling” narrator and favour the methods of “showing,” and to many critics, and indeed to James himself as the prefaces attest, these post-theatre novels are thus intrinsically concerned with the problem of representation: how does a novel “show” as a performed play “shows”? The contemporary answer to this problem is, quite simply, that it can’t. Genette argues, in *Narrative Discourse*, speaking of James, that “the very idea of *showing*, like that of imitation or narrative representation . . . is completely illusory: in contrast to dramatic representation no narrative can ‘show’ or ‘imitate’ the story it tells. All it can do is

tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, 'alive,' and in that way give more or less the *illusion of mimesis*—which is the only mimesis for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating" (163). Representation is indeed the issue, and James, with a renewed commitment to the novel's form after leaving the theatre, was well aware of it. But it should also be noted that, besides Genette's dogmatic fervor on this point ("no narrative can," "single and sufficient reason," "a fact of language"), he seems strangely committed to a crude reverse essentialism regarding showing: language can't do it because no matter how you read a novel's language, you'll *never really be there in the world of the fiction* or really be there *to see* it as you would in the theatre (of course, if theatre doesn't "show" either, or if life never is "showing," then Genette's point—about novelistic "showing"—is trivial: there would be none of it available anywhere anyway). An important question would be—showing *what*? A novel can't show a tree in the way our eyes can, but perhaps it can "show" dialogue—including internal dialogue—relatively directly. The medium of perceptual reception is different (eyes rather than ears), but the vehicle—language—is the same, apart from variations in inflection. In fact, if *seeing* is the only permissible sense of "showing," the reader who sees dialogue on the page is shown it and the spectator in the theatre is not. James's most extreme experiment with this kind of showing is, of course, *The Awkward Age*.

³ Merle A. Williams argues, in *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing*, that "James's novels enact a predominantly phenomenological approach to human phenomena, but one tempered by Derridean reservations, and interspersed with deconstructive digressions" (11). I agree that a Derridean consideration of textuality is present in James's fiction, but will argue that, particularly in the novels of the late phase, James's project is critical of the textual usurpation of human experience.

⁴ James's literary analysis of what I refer to here as the "modernist world of the signifier" has been addressed in terms of the rise of commodity culture and the aesthetics/ethics of consumption by critics such as Ian F. A. Bell, in his *Henry James and the Past: Reading into Time*, and Richard Salmon, in his "The Secret of the Spectacle: Epistemology and Commodity Display in *The Ambassadors*."

⁵ As I shall also argue, William James's pragmatism and the early criticism it received offer a significant precedent.

⁶ Political agendas are best served when adherents admit that their interpretations of specific contexts and events may be wrong, not just because all interpretations are, in an absolute sense, less than the Truth, but because the facts do not support the interpretation. This kind of falsifiability encourages rigorous analysis of contexts and events rather than mere ideological purity. Without respect for empirical facts, thinking something makes it so, and interpretations become essentially infallible—protected, say, by the label "belief system" so that factual inconveniences are easily dismissed as elements in an *alternate* belief system. Facts can both condemn and protect. Without them, though, your ideological opponent can convict you of anything.

⁷ Rowe counters James's denunciation of self-exposing and apologetic fiction by claiming that James himself "always exposes his fiction . . . in the fundamental assumption of the textuality of experience" (71). Even if it were true that James makes the Derridean assumption, Rowe fails to distinguish between, on the one hand, textuality as a literary theme or philosophy, and, on the other, the kind of deliberate foregrounding and undermining of the fictionality of fiction that James here rejects and that is practiced by postmoderns. James as author almost never steps forward in the late phase novels to

highlight the machinery of his works: his textuality—worked through by way of metaphor and narrative situation—is thus a prompt for a reader’s reflection; the anxious author who tells the reader “I’m just writing a story, this is all made up, what do you think so far?” imposes the textuality thesis as a foregone conclusion.

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Secrets of Narrative,” in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P., 1978), p. 195.

⁹ Note that James’s syntax is here called “impenetrable” although it certainly is not: it is difficult and broken, but it can with attention and effort—indeed even without a great deal of effort once one becomes accustomed to James’s voice—be understood. This tendency to convert difficulty into impossibility is also a subject of James’s fiction, as I will discuss, particularly in my chapter on *The Ambassadors*.

¹⁰ This is a poststructuralist predilection. James criticism has, from the first, considered “the international theme” by, in part, comparing American and European cultural values (during the course of which mention is frequently made of James’s comment that America lacks a tradition, or at least the institutions of a formal tradition), and translating America and Europe into their metaphorical significances. European “experience,” “decadence,” or “sophistication” and American “innocence,” “naïveté,” or “forcefulness” are frequently invoked rough heuristic identifications made to characterize the clash of “opposites” (this word must be qualified) in these novels. While the history of James criticism betrays no decided preference for one side of this binary over the other, Derridean or poststructuralist critics inevitably champion the Parisian world view. See Tony Tanner’s *Henry James: Modern Judgments*.

¹¹ As Armstrong observes, for both Henry and William, *experience* is crucial; it is an open foundation. While Landau and Alberti, for example, read James’s definition of experience—“our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures” (Preface to *The Princess Cassamassima* in *The Act of the Novel*, 65)—as confirming their view that for James consciousness and value systems shape experience, I think we should not overlook the significance of the term “creature”—it plays, I think, a similar role as “animal” does in Aristotle’s definition of man: the rational animal. I will comment on William and pragmatism in Chapter 2, but it should be noted here that a notion of experience is the key to my arguments against Derrida and poststructuralism, although I do not rely to any great extent on phenomenology to explicate that notion. I will also argue in the novel readings that Henry acknowledges the depth of our experience by placing that foundation in great jeopardy, testing it in the fires of representationalist scepticism.

CHAPTER 2: “IN SOME MEASURE ACCORDING TO ITS MEASURE”

I: Introduction

The Jamesians discussed in my introduction rely on contemporary literary theorists who challenge the value of reason and rationality and unproblematically affirm the omnipresence of representation—they combine scepticism with anti-realism. Drawing mainly on the work of Derrida, but also on that of Foucault, Barthes, and Lyotard (among others), poststructuralist critics have aligned reason with oppression, hyperbolically labeled it the supreme propaganda weapon of the state (capitalist, communist, national socialist), and identified it as the enforcer of spurious social conventions and their empty “moral” norms. Logocentrism—reason’s discourse of “containment”—is also philosophically conservative and uncreative, setting limits, drawing up rules of thought—such discourse rules *over* thought, as a tyrant. To combat these forms of oppression, the anti-humanist intellectual asserts that reason is, besides being historically culpable, metaphysically ungrounded. Any rule of reason, we are reminded, is constructed on a void, on the abyss of the *mise-en-abyme*; at best it must appeal to itself for justification, setting up an infinite regress of question-begging assertions. In light of reason’s failure to locate its absolute foundation, the critic concludes that all argumentation is simply a rhetorical display of power, a game in which “truth” is the most powerful marker: it demands assent from all others and silences dissenting voices. For some, like Foucault, refuge from oppressive discourse can be found in the body, conceived of in a Nietzschean manner as the source of the wild, inherently uncivilized energies of instinct. (At other times, Foucault argues that the body is the blank slate on which the discourses of power write their texts of conformity.) Extreme experiences may be celebrated for releasing transgressive forces of the unconscious that destroy the logocentric myth of the “self”: for the self or individual

subject is revealed to be a culturally engineered fabrication encouraging a desire for mastery, and the desire to master permits one to be mastered. The self sets limits and permits domination, but to set limits is to agree to have limits set.

Derrida is more cautious. For him, reason is the sustainer of logocentrism, the language of the metaphysics of presence, and it can never be overcome, nor should we desire its final destruction. To imagine that we can finally escape limits, reasons, and order is a delusion that has no more legitimacy than the notion that Reason is the true story of History. But to display logocentrism's failure to secure its own ground is the essential task of deconstruction, which stresses the a-rational "foundation" of reason, the shifting linguistic drift of arche-writing, the movement of "différance" that is always already at work in reason's structures, ready to undermine them. For Derrida, too, deconstruction is a project against totalitarian Reason, which, though it can never be defeated, must always be unsettled. But by working at the absolute limits of reason and finding there the dissonance of dissemination, Derrida finds no way of returning to the more mundane level of practical action and ethical choice without dragging that dissonance with him.¹

In this chapter, I want to set the stage for my own reading of James's most self-reflexive novels by focusing primarily but not exclusively on Derrida, whose work is widely considered to be the most philosophically sophisticated of the poststructuralists, and who most directly addresses the issues of epistemology, in order to gather together some of the essential threads of that field of thought; with these in hand, I will mark my distance from its radical scepticism and develop the epistemological position that will be the main concern of this study of Henry James's last three novels. I will argue for the theoretical validity of moderate critical realism and its companion fallibilist, though non-sceptical, epistemology, both of which are operative in James's texts, though they have been obscured or ignored by pre-poststructuralist Jamesians and been made to seem utterly implausible by poststructuralists themselves.

The key point I will try to bring out in my discussion of Derrida, as well as of other poststructuralists, is his reliance on an absolute epistemological standard, which, once shown by him to be impossible to realize, is *still retained* in order to generate sceptical effects. The absolute standard is relied on (in reverse—as the condition of *impossibility*) in Derrida’s founding gesture: his deconstruction of Husserl’s phenomenology, during the course of which he tries to demonstrate that representation is at the heart of all experience and thought. In my discussion of this deconstructive reading, I focus on Derrida’s implicitly atomistic conception of time and argue that, if the absolute standard is rejected, we can retrieve the notion of a pre-constituted time which would thus also grant legitimacy to a kind of perception that is prior to representation in Derrida’s sense. The differentiation between representation and perception for which I argue is *not* one between representation and an immediacy that provides apodeictic certainty; it is instead the difference between representation as socially constructed semiotic (or conceptual) codes on the one hand, and perception as a more primitive (more reliable but far less powerful) mode of access to environmental information on the other. Derrida, in effect, allows the latter to be consumed by the former because of his adherence to an absolute standard. Important in this context is thus the over-extension of the terms “text” and “representation.” I will try to demonstrate that while it is naïve to think that Derrida’s famous remark “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” means that everything is language or representation in the sense of marks on the page or sounds uttered, it is also true that using these terms to designate by way of metaphor our non-verbal experience is either misleading or without epistemological significance. With these issues in hand—the question of the standard, the viability of temporal realism, and the return of the question of perception—I try to demonstrate that Derrida’s materialism of the signifier—a weapon he wields against idealist philosophy—is still an illegitimate idealism that occludes the generative importance of pre-semiotic experience. My purpose is not to revive Husserl’s phenomenology, but to recognize the realism in that stance and then to begin fleshing out the viability of the distinction between representation and perception

that forms the basis for the epistemology I will describe later in the chapter. The crucial feature of this epistemology is a reliance on a version of the classic theory of truth (whose primary contemporary defender is perhaps Donald Davidson) which holds that a statement is true or false in virtue of the state of the world. I will argue that Derrida's position rejects such a theory on grounds that are in fundamental accord with the arguments of traditional scepticism.

To challenge these arguments, I offer an account of critical realism that rejects the absolute standard yet affirms the viability of reasoned argument constrained by the "facts" of the world (or, more precisely, the statements we utter can be confirmed or disconfirmed by the world). My reliance on a notion of factuality will be defended by glancing briefly at contemporary philosophy of science in order to argue that science does indeed have a grasp on its objects of inquiry and that the implicit constructivism of pan-representational Derridean poststructuralism is thus untenable. I will also draw on contemporary evolutionary theory to make clear that perception has a pre-semiotic, non-absolute legitimacy, and that the ability to compare our statements with the world does not require our escaping both language and the world to assume a god's eye-view (an absolute view) to conduct the comparison. In advancing my own epistemological position, I will also foreground the ethical consequence of scepticism and critical realism; the tie between epistemology and ethics, so deep a concern in James's novels, is crucial to my philosophical position, which denies an absolute separation between fact and value. or that there is an unbridgeable gap between the worlds of representation and judgment and the worlds of materiality. Since the notion that we must act on what we know, even though we may not know it for certain, forms a central part of the epistemology, action must be thought with ethical questions in mind. Action, that is, is at the intersection of epistemology and ethics. By surrendering authority—and thus responsibility—to the negative absolute of *différance*, Derrida's stance is essentially passive, although still a pose of sophistication against the so called naiveté of the upholders of logocentrism. Since my

discussion of James's novels will focus to a great extent on their critique of a representation-derived scepticism, my arguments in this chapter will try to highlight the tactics of doubt.

II: Derrida's Reading of Husserl: The Absolute Standard, Atomistic Time, and Representation's Conquest of Perception

We all know that Derrida deftly deconstructed—turned their own principles against them—Husserl's phenomenology of presence, Saussure's lingering phonocentrism, and Heidegger's nostalgic yearning for origin in the voice of Being. Perhaps the most devastating and influential of these critiques, though, is his reading of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*, for in this text, Derrida establishes his double method of inversion and displacement, and develops his most potent weapons against the metaphysics of presence—representation, repetition, writing and différance. In examining Derrida's deconstruction of Husserlian presence, we can flesh out two central points that critics of Derrida's readings often make: his reliance on an opponent that is made to adhere to impossibly high standards of epistemological certainty (essentially, his straw-man tactics), and the claim that Derrida's reduction of experience to textuality is, despite claims to the contrary, a residual attachment to idealism, achieved by willfully collapsing abstract and concrete planes of presentation.

Husserl, in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, is concerned to account for the experience of duration, the consciousness of an object as having a continuity from moment to moment, the awareness of change within a recognizably enduring identity. In the course of his analysis, Husserl elaborates his notion of the "living now," a present that is given to consciousness as a whole, a relatively stable unity of duration (or longitudinal intentionality) that has meaning before the processes of deliberate reflection and explanation are made operative. This living now is not understood according to an atomistic conception of time, which would require an act of consciousness to synthesize its disparate points into a constructed unity, but is taken to be itself given as a unity, passively received by the mind as a perception. In this sense, Husserl insists that idealistic interpretations of time (Kant's and, later, Heidegger's) are incorrect, for time is,

to borrow Derrida's terminology, always already there before the operations of consciousness. Implicitly, Husserl must adopt a realistic view of temporality, for if the mind does not actively synthesize discrete points of time (whether consciously or unconsciously), but receives an already-unified temporal duration from outside itself through perception, then that temporality is the structure of a meaning not created by any constituting subject but inherent in the world itself.

The living now is the key to Husserl's analysis of time and the focal point for Derrida's attack. Husserl argues that this "thick" now is composed of a triple-intentionality: (i) the now as the source point of impressions; (ii) retentions, which are called "primary remembrance"; and (iii) protentions, which are expectations for the future now and which establish a weak link with the future flow of temporal events. In retention, we have a quasi-immediate contact with the just-past now, the present as it is modified from its original givenness to its lingering hold on the perceiver in an experience of duration prior to deliberate construction. Retention is the comet's tail of the "specious present," the falling-off of the intensity of the initial presentation. It is also, thus, a modification within a scheme of continuity that is prior to the difference between perception and non-perception. In Husserl's theory, retention must be sharply distinguished from representation, since the former is continuous with perception and the latter is not; representation as recollection, or secondary memory, is broken off from the stream of primary temporal duration, and is the product of constructive consciousness, whose structure is one of repetition. Recollection repeats and reproduces the more immediate occurrence of retention at a greater temporal distance. The problem, which Derrida exploits, is the double distinction, first, between retention and representation, and second, between retention and the source-point now. There is undoubtedly an ambiguity in Husserl on the issue of the now. On occasion he refers to it as a "source point," suggesting that the now, the present in the strictest sense, is an absolutely secure instant—a "point"—of temporal attachment to the object of perception, without margin for error. If it is the case

that Husserl must rely on the present as an unshakable point of certainty, and that this is called “perception,” then, as Derrida argues, every other phase of the continuity must be considered the antithesis of perception: “The difference between retention and reproduction [representation], between primary and secondary memory, is not the radical difference Husserl wanted between perception and nonperception: it is rather a difference between two modifications of nonperception” (Derrida, *Speech* 65)—on this account, perception itself is usurped. That is, under the requirement of punctual certainty, retention is pushed away from presence, and becomes its other: retention is uncertainty, lack of pure evidence, the risk of repetition. In other words, from the perspective of the punctual now, there is no way to distinguish between retention and representation, for both threaten the immediacy of presence by mimicking it in the re-play of its re-turn. If, following Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena*, we then admit that presence is really a construction of retentions-protentions, and that the punctual now is an abstraction that can never be experienced (remember that Husserl is concerned to defend a non-atomistic conception of time and duration), then the living now is built out of non-presence and repetition, and the moment of certainty is a chimera produced by its other:

This pure difference [of repetition], which constitutes the self-presence of the living present, introduces into self-presence from the beginning, all the impurity putatively excluded from it. The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace. It is always already a trace. (Derrida, *Speech* 85)

These considerations set the agenda for much deconstructive analysis, but the underlying assumptions that generate them are not commonly acknowledged. As I have tried to indicate, the lack of a rigorous distinction between representation and retention is made possible by assuming the perspective of the punctual now, the point-like instant of absolute presence, pure, risk-free certainty.² From here we must regard both primary and secondary memory as the “other” of perception, and identify the structure of each as being that of repetition. So, standing on the point of perfect union with the origin of sense, we see the impertinence of privileging a perceptual lingering as linked to that origin over the

so-called derivative acts of representation that are said to be lesser imitations of that favoured mode of connection. In other words, representation is made to be a copy of a copy; but if retention is also a copy, a re-tention that is other than absolute presence, by what principle can we give it priority over representation? The transcendent instant is used to deny the possibility of finding that principle, and then, the relevant distinction destroyed, the “other” of presence returns to claim the instant itself. Representation is made to be the condition of possibility of presentation. We see here the structure of Derrida’s argument against Saussure (and Plato). Speech and writing both depend on the instituted structure of the sign, which constitutes identity only through reference to a Platonic Form above the instantiation of each; however, identity just is the repetition of the same inscription in infinitely different contexts, and the Form does not constitute Identity so much as it is constituted. In that case, to privilege speech is indicative of a desire to efface the errant materiality of the signifier in order to preserve a place of dominance for the “spirit” of the signified, the thought that does not need its signifier.

But this reliance on the materiality of the signifier grants deconstruction a weak defense against the charge of idealism, for it merely asserts that thought cannot proceed in absolute privacy; it is “always already” in the social domain of the institutions of language. And although deconstruction can be credited with disturbing idealist philosophy and some of its political manifestations, a more materially-minded critic would argue that this does not go far enough,³ for deconstruction grants omnipotence to the infinitely flexible field of writing (its endless capacity for graphing, citation, contextual manipulation) and demotes to virtual irrelevance the less flexible, less easily manipulable field of the body and physical experience: is there indeed no distinction to be drawn between the text of the material world and the texts of language (the macro-version of the distinction between retention and representation)? Or is the distinction granted but on the operating assumption that both are “texts”? If so, what advantage is won by subsuming the two categories under the larger term? Indeed, can we simply apply the metaphor of text to all orders of experience without

attempting to preserve the distinctions that can be made between those orders while at the same time acknowledging their inter-connectedness? It is possible to lift any text from its present context and twist its implications by inserting it into another, and this says something about both the fecundity and the dangers of thought. But can I, while experiencing, say, pain or hunger, merely re-contextualize these “representations” until they entirely lose their generative significance? To a certain extent the meaning of such experiences can be transformed, even radically, from that which a positive interpretation would yield to that which a negative one would. Pain can be read as either corruption or corrective, just as the *pharmakon* is both poison and/or cure. But the body’s demand for food, say, is not erased, however the cultural significance of the unnourished body’s deterioration is determined—the ineluctability of the physical fact orients all interpretations generated from it. Recontextualization in such a case can create a meaning that is superimposed on the prior physical experience, but the underlying experience is not lost in substitution. The mundane fact of a gun-shot wound, say, is not exchanged for something else, say the absence of any physical mark; rather, the wound is a constant that generates varying interpretations. Derrida’s logic of the supplement—also a crucial deconstructive lever, derived from the thesis worked out through the reading of Husserl—is inapplicable here, for it is clearly a logic entirely enclosed within representation: “the supplementary difference vicariously stands in for presence due to its primordial self-deficiency” (*Speech* 88). This means that pain must be read as a presence that lacks completion without the supplementation of representational designation. With this we may have little argument—since pain can be said to be always a social or political matter as well as a private one. But Derrida allows his argument to empty that foundation of any generative significance, for supplementation is said to involve a function of “substitution,” the ““in the place of” structure which belongs to every sign in general” (*Speech* 88): the pain is nothing more than a sign. For the person bleeding, the use of signs (of whatever accuracy or expressive intent) places that sensation in the social medium of language and entails the adoption of an

interpretative stance towards that experience; but the words do not “take the place of” that experience. For the listener, who has access only to the text uttered or written, the pain is perhaps a purely social phenomenon, and the text stands for what can never be experienced in any greater immediacy: no matter how closely the text is scrutinized, the pain’s presence could never be appropriated. But this, of course, is Derrida’s key anti-metaphysical doctrine: the referent can never be absolutely reached. If it is true that the sufferer requires language to “complete” his/her pain, is it also true that both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader are equally removed from the referent? Only from a rigorously maintained transcendental point of view. We are all readers of experience. But in some cases, we both experience—as acting and suffering agents (Ricoeur’s phrase)—and read that experience at the same time.

Again, this is not to argue that “empirical experience” demands a univocal response, that it will yield only one proper interpretation, or any other specifically delimitable set of interpretations. Still less is this to argue that our total experience of pain is representation-free, unaffected by any or all possible cultural contexts.⁴ The argument is, however, that we must make the distinction, perplexed as it will always be but necessary nonetheless, between fact and value, as the most simple observations can remind us. If I am shot and killed, that may be a good thing or a bad; it may trigger, cause—or, let us say, open the space for—an indeterminate number of later events or meanings whose value can never be finally known; the value of my death, the interpretation given it, can never be finally determined. But the fact of my death is the constant occasion for all these acts of interpretation—even diametrically opposed interpretations: good or bad (corruption or cure, cause for celebration or mourning), I am dead—without which there would be no struggle to position its factuality in the endlessly shifting structures of representational value (and this struggle cannot be avoided, representation cannot be denied). To ignore the factual trigger is to surrender all interpretation to the codes of convention, or the procedures of their disruption. The “fact,” as I will argue, is not, however, a cipher, a silence, a mere

occasion. To anticipate briefly, the fact of my death is open to investigation, which can guide the interpretation we attempt to make of it. For example, if you wish to apply a criminal law interpretation to my death, you would be guided by an examination of my corpse and the various narratives that can be reliably attached to the fact of my death. These narratives are “representations,” undoubtedly, but you would sift through them, analyze them, in an effort to determine what probably happened. And if the conclusion most plausibly reached—perhaps very confidently reached—is that I committed suicide, then my death would be the occasion for interpretations of a very different valence than would be the case if I had been slain by irate, striking union workers, whose picket line I had crossed. This is to say, then, that the factual, as we can best determine from the evidence, empirical and otherwise, will set certain non-absolute limits on the kinds of interpretations we propose, although it will certainly not absolutely impose any “correct” interpretation.⁵ Again, to hold otherwise, to say that the fact of the matter is not the issue, that deconstruction’s only concern is with the instability of the sign system we use to interpret the fact, is to embrace a kind of dualism that would deny the relevance of the thing (however broadly defined) interpreted to the interpretation.

Derrida’s method, then, is suspect because he has denied the possibility of affirming a more concrete materialism by conceiving deconstruction’s task as a vigilant watch over the claims of absolute knowledge; but his vigilance keeps his analysis pressed against this ever-receding epistemological limit. And it thus forces him to stand just next to absolute knowledge as its negation. With Husserl, he forces the issue by maintaining that the latter’s conception of the triple-intentionality of the living now, the thick now of experience, cannot support the desire of his phenomenology to yield absolute certainty in the presence of the present, in the now as a point-like instant. But if the source of perception within the duration of the present is understood as a “thin” now rather than a pin-point or an atom of time, we understand that the instant (of certainty) is an abstraction that can never be experienced. The source of perceptual awareness is not an absolute origin

granting perfect epistemological access, but the emergence of new information against a background perceptual field. We reject the need to characterize this “new” information as absolutely new, purely original, but merely grant it relative novelty with respect to that which it displaces (the continual pushing back of the now into retention). From this perspective, where the instant is not permitted to dominate the field, retention can be seen to be continuous with perception, while recollection can in a strong sense be held to be non-perception.⁶ By superimposing the need for presence as uncontaminated security and his own view of time as a flux of discrete points, Derrida can then conclude that “signification is formed only within the hollow of *différance*: of discontinuity and of discreteness, of the diversion and the reserve of what does not appear” (*Grammatology* 69). The living now, in this interpretation, is cut apart and read as an unstable construction built upon the single-dimension succession of atomistic nows, tentatively bridged by the repetitive structure of representation. This succession holds out the possibility of perfect stability in presence (because the pure instant standing alone would provide that stability, and the temporal structure promises to deliver this founding point *by virtue of being composed of points*), but never permits it to ultimately arrive, because every point is linked to every other, pushes forward to the next. On Husserl’s account the abstract now is indeed a construction—and hence always subject to the Derridean instability—but the living now of perception is its generative source, and its durational resistance to “deliberate” manipulation establishes its structural difference from the processes of signification even as it constrains them.

The thesis of time as duration⁷ allows us to reject Derrida’s reading without falling into a spurious Platonic foundationalism (at least, as Plato is routinely characterized by postmoderns). Idealities are acknowledged to be fragile constructions of language (community and consciousness), but their connection to empirical experience is understood as contingent (non-absolute) rather than arbitrary (reason-less; on the doctrine of the “arbitrariness” of the sign as it has been widely [mis]understood by literary theorists, see

Raymond Tallis's defense of Saussure in *Not Saussure* against the over-hasty appropriation of the latter's famous description of language as a "system of differences without positive terms"). The present of perception does not reduce to the presence of absolute authority. Does Husserl's text support this doctrine? If Husserl's exposition of internal time consciousness seems suspect, if there is an ambiguity in his analysis of the source point, and if we wonder about its reliance on "dubious" metaphors like the "thin now," we can turn to the famous "principle of principles" of phenomenology to discern the epistemological criteria with which Husserl is working and the margin of error he permits within presence—why the now is "thin" rather than a point. Husserl, in S.24 of *Ideas*, insists on the distinction between perception on the one hand and recollection, imagination, and expectation on the other: "The experience that is presentative of something originarily is perception. . . . We have originary experience of concrete physical things in 'external perception' [this phrase is qualified, because here perception is being used in the wider sense of "intuition" to include all that is given to thought, rather than being constructed by thought], but no longer in memory or forward-regarding expectation" (xx). This originary experience is undoubtedly privileged, but the question remains as to whether it grants a knowledge that is in principle immune to any outside criticism. He then goes on to state the principle:

No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the *principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily (so to speak, in its "personal" actuality) offered to us in "intuition" is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.* (Evans 109)

That the originary intuition is a "legitimizing source" suggests simply that this intuition *provides* legitimation, but not that its warrant is impervious to doubt. In this sense, the intuition is the self-grounding origin of cognition, the source from which active thought must proceed. It "is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being" because, by definition, it is so accepted in the course of thought: any particular instance of cognitive construction—an interpretation, a recollection, an assertion or decision of any kind—

springs from a prior commitment that cannot, in the course of that particular act of cognition, be called into question. A thought that held all of its presuppositions in hand, that did not finally draw upon a legitimizing basis at some point, would be the infinite thought of God. To call a specific foundation into question is clearly legitimate; but such an examination, unless it pretends to stand on the point of absolute knowledge, must originate in an originary intuition of its own. Moreover, any theory that denies that principle itself, in its entirety, is “absurd” for Husserl because the denial must necessarily spring from a thought that wishes either to be exterior to all possible positions and all possible commitments, or which holds that only the perfectly grounded cognitive act has any claim at all to legitimacy. Husserl does *not* grant the originary presentive intuition divine infallibility; its validity is secure “only within the limits in which it is presented there,” and the most important limit arises from the fact that thought can never exceed all limits.

Husserl lays great emphasis on the fallibility of this intuition, which eventually leads him to stress the necessity of a thoroughgoing examination of the nature of evidence:

Not to assign any value to “I see it” as an answer to the question, “Why?” would be a countersense—as, yet again, we see. Moreover, as may be added here to prevent possible misinterpretations, that does not exclude the possibility that, under some circumstance, one seeing conflicts with another and likewise that one *legitimate* assertion conflicts with another. For that does not perchance imply that seeing is not a legitimizing basis. . . . It does say, however, that perhaps in a certain category of intuitions . . . seeing is, according to its essence, “imperfect,” that of essential necessity it can become strengthened or weakened, that consequently an assertion having an immediate, and therefore genuine, legitimizing ground in experience nevertheless may have to be abandoned in the future course of experience because of a counter-legitimacy outweighing and annulling it. (109)

Reducing Husserl to a naïve “picture theory” of meaning is not possible. The “I see it” assertion of the principle does not imply that truth can immediately be read off the surface of the world. Instead, the assertion maintains that one’s intellectual position will always be supported by evidence that has, for that person in that context, the character of necessity: what is seen is that which refuses to be overlooked, that compels attention and

interpretation. The self-evident nature of the intuition, this passage makes clear, is linked both to the conviction derived from the experience and to the imperfect nature of this mode of givenness. Thus the principle of principles, which Derrida repeatedly claims will stand or fall with the ability of the source point to maintain its integrity and repel difference, is explicitly connected not with absolute certainty, but with the possibility of error, or at least with inherent revisability.

The major distinction to be noticed here is that for Derrida, this possibility “always already” undermines the conviction derived from present experience, while for Husserl, such convictions are subject to correction, but will not yield until superior evidence (reasons, perceptions, interpretations—other intuitions that prove more compelling, that seem to spring from a greater necessity) is brought forth. As J. Claude Evans notes, the corrigibility of the originary intuition leads Husserl to revise his earlier position that there is a “core of adequate evidence in phenomenological reflection,” and to begin the task of working out a “critique of transcendental self-experience” (110). In the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl’s thinking cuts its ties with Cartesianism and the quest for subjectively guaranteed certainty, and develops the notions of inter-subjectivity and the life-world (Liebenswelt) that influenced Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. In this later text, Husserl works *from* the principle of principles, not with its rejection, toward the conclusion that evidence must be assessed by a community of inquirers attempting collectively to revise and challenge the intuitions of the individual subject of reflection. But this corrective-context could never challenge the principle itself, for each member of that community must work from his own conviction—from the assertion that “I see it” (famously the crux of many of James’s texts, a pivot for his characters that is not a moment of pure specularly, but a release from analytic delay into the realm of action)—until contrary evidence presents itself to undermine one’s confidence in the original (prior) position. This places the intuition in a context of risk, where the possibility of refutation always exists, but does not from the start annihilate the convictions

of each inquirer. For Derrida, the fallibility of the intuition immediately renders it false: possibility is collapsed into actuality, and again this is achieved from the vantage point of a thought that always maintains itself at the transcendental level which knows in advance that no cognition is immune to error. All thought *now* is false because all thought stands subject to correction. As A. J. Argyros puts it, “deconstruction wrongly conflates falsifiability with an inherent and atemporal internal falsity; to describe the position in its most abstract form, deconstruction equates the possibility of error with the necessity that truthful statements be impossible in principle” (109). It is Derrida, not Husserl, who detemporalizes through atomization the development of thought.

With respect to the distinction between retention and representation, a thought that preserves their difference by reference to the living now of duration—that places modification before differentiation⁸—rather than using the now point to conflate them, is not committed to the dubious claim that we can experience theory-free perceptions, nor to the claim that science—as the pre-eminent field of careful, supposedly “objective” observation—is untainted by prejudice, self-interest and politically suspect motivations. Rather, the position is one that, as Husserl began to see at the end of his career, must reject the absolute authority of thought. As Peter K. McInerney argues, the doctrine of the longitudinal intentionality of the living now must acknowledge the validity of temporal realism; which is to say that the experience of the individual perceiver is, in part, determined by the temporal features of the experienced object. The unity of the experience of duration, if it is not actively produced by the intentionality of consciousness, presupposes a unity brought forth from without—the reception of an already constituted temporal unity. Retention, as a passive experience of time linked with perception, never stands absolutely free of the representations (recollections, imaginings and expectations) that overlap that more primal process—indeed, this layering effect accounts for the metaphor of the “thick” now as against the one-dimensionality of the succession of linked now points. Representations intertwine with the “more primitive” flow of perceptual,

retentional experience, “supplementing” them as Derrida says, making perceptual information a source upon which human significance is built, but not “replacing” or substituting for them, after the manner of the endless slippage of the linguistic chain (at least according to the bastardized Saussurian linguistics adopted by the poststructuralists—see Pavel).

III: Everything is Text: The Metaphor that Consumes the World

In this section, I want to examine the extended use to which the term “text” has been given, a use which is supposedly justified by the argument that representation is the condition of possibility of perception (and all experience). My argument is that this extended use obliterates crucial distinctions and results in an extremely narrow view of the nature of human investigation of the pre-human world. The inevitable consequence of such a use of the metaphor is a kind of cultural solipsism that reduces science to human monologue. If we acknowledge the legitimacy of science, we take an important step away from post-structuralism’s representationalism; we would then either accept the text metaphor but insist on making crucial distinctions within it—there is the perception-text and the language or semiotic text—or confine the terms text and representation to our culturally-created semiotic codes and characterize perception as a pre-semiotic experience.

Language is opaque, we are often reminded, but such gadfly stings only alarm those committed to the complete transparency of words to things or ideas. The non-transparency of language assures us that a final one-to-one correspondence between representation and represented without remainder is impossible. But to hold that representation is the only source of thought and experience is to commit what David Novitz calls the Occlusive Fallacy, a fallacy, he says, that is “common to a romantic and an empiricist epistemology, and in both cases, it inclines those who commit it to what is commonly, perhaps mistakenly, regarded as an antirealist metaphysic” (56). Novitz

regards Nietzsche, Derrida, and Rorty as subject to this charge, which must also be levied against Kuhn and Feysabend. He defines the fallacy as follows:

It is supposed, first of all, that our experience of X, where X is the world and its objects, can be explained in terms of a favoured entity or process Y. From this it is inferred that we *really* experience only Y, and that X is no more than an inference from, or a construction out of, Y. Ys are believed to form a “veil,” a “barrier,” between experiencing subjects and the Xs that were previously considered to be the bona fide objects of their experience; and sometimes the Ys even come to be regarded as the ultimate constituents of reality. . . . The fallacy is obvious. It involves accepting the explanation of what it is to experience the world in order to show that we do not, after all, experience the world—and hence in order to reject the explanation on which this conclusion is based. Put yet more plainly, the rejection of the explanation presupposes its acceptance. If the invocation of Y really is an adequate explanation of our experience of X, the Y or Ying is just what it is to experience X. If, on the other hand, we do not really experience Xs, so that our invocation of Y is not an explanation of what it is to experience X, then there is no need to take the invocation of Y—the “explanation”—seriously, and *a fortiori* no need to regard Y as the sole object of our experience. (56-57)

Derrida, for one, who moves from the temporal point to the indistinction between retention and representation—and thus to the omni-presence of writing (arche-writing)—commits the fallacy by presupposing that the indispensability of language or representation for the construction of communicative meaning (a Y explanation) means also that the thing, or person, or worldly state of affairs (Xs) that is explained cannot be rigorously distinguished from the explanation, once we realize that both are experienced as subject to the same structure. All perception depends on differentiation (noticing shades, contrasts, and the fundamental distinction between figure and ground), and language, following Saussure, is a structure of differences without positive terms. Arche-writing, a term derived from an extension of Saussure’s definition to include any dynamic system of differences, can then capture both X and Y. and we slide to the position that Y, language, the source of Derrida’s model, occludes X.

But this move requires that we first accept the notion that the two structures of differentiation are sufficiently the same so that their union under the larger category of writing-in-general does little injustice to each considered separately. From the standpoint of arche-writing, no such distortion is introduced because both perception and language are

fallible and potentially inexhaustible, and are dependent on context for the generation of meaning. But if the two “systems” of perception and language are considered *before* making the Derridean leap, it could hardly be argued that any specific perceptual act undecidably both depends on and constitutes a general, conventionally established system of perception in the same way that *la parole* and *la langue* are undecidably mutually implicated. To say that no perception can take place in the absence of representational overlay, and that the conventions of representation or language thus constitute the general system to which perception is related, is to beg the question. For the question is: Do both perception and language share a differential structure such that any specific act of either (a particular perception or a speech act) both draws upon and constitutes a system of such acts, a system in the sense of a conventionally established stock of past acts and rules for relating them? If both perception and language share this structure, we may then legitimately unite them under the larger category of arche-writing in order to designate this previously established similarity. In the case of language, we may relate the speech act to the linguistic structure (Saussure’s *la langue*); but in the case of perception, we relate the specific perception to—what? The invocation of *la langue*, representational convention, to fill this position by analogy and complete the essential parallel between perception and language is quite obviously to rely on the conclusion for which this parallel is to be the argued support. Alternatively, acts of perception could be said to stand against the background of the world of all possible perception. But at this level of argument, to invoke the world of perception that both determines and is determined by particular acts of perception is, curiously enough, to accede to a moderate realism. For in this case, one of the criteria we are using to determine whether each separate structure can be drawn together under a single larger structure—the criteria of previously established conventions and rules of association—would be fulfilled by the “conventions” and the “rules” (or, less mechanistically, the regularities or patterns) of the real world, existent prior to the constructions of consciousness. Such real-world “conventions”—the meaning in the world

before language creates its meaning—would both shape and be shaped by particular acts of perception. But in that case the argument is compelled to admit that the shaping power of individual acts of perception is constrained by the opposite power of the world's influence over those acts. And the deposited stock of “systematic” perceptions would reside in the world as the interventions of accomplished action that would remain part of that stock only if the action either conformed to, or found a way to manipulate, those pre-established regularities or patterns. Just as no individual can change the linguistic structure or its vocabulary without the cooperation of the language community over time, so perceptual shaping of the perceivable world would be dependent on the latter as a support system for its interventions.

Thus, the required symmetry between the perceptual and the linguistic constitution of their respective systems (world on the one hand, and *la langue* on the other) could only be asserted by first affirming that we do experience the “conventions” of the non-linguistic world; without that move, the parallel falls apart. And in that case, to claim that language and its conventions are only arbitrarily connected to such non-linguistic experience—if arbitrary means something like the free imposition of an act of will (the privilege of institutions or other powerful bodies to “make” linguistic reality according to their interests and prejudices)⁹—is to suppose, for one thing, that such experience is irrelevant to linguistic reproduction (an absurdity), and further, to destroy the entire rationale for the argument, since its point was to gather the essential structural characteristics of both perception and language under a single arche-principle. To jettison pre-semiotic experience on the grounds that it is irrelevant or impossible is to dismantle the argument itself by removing the required fourth term of the parallel. Instead, with respect to the interpretation of the perceptual world, we must conclude that the conventions of language, however riddled with error throughout our history, are the result of a tension developing from two sources: what has been thought in the past and the thing or state of affairs that has been thought about.

My argument, then, is that the text metaphor is legitimately extended to characterize all aspects of human experience (as it must be extended for the metaphor to be philosophically potent) only if we acknowledge that there are regularities in the pre-semiotic world—that it is intelligible. But whatever the force of the *logic* of the argument I have just made, its conclusion is rejected not only by Derrideans but by some philosophers of science, those who reflect on the discipline that, more than any other, purports to grapple with the pre-semiotic world. If the postmodern philosophers of science can debunk science's claim to objectivity and reduce their knowledge claims to the status of "fiction," then the Derridean thesis would, of course, be supported: representation would be shown to determine presentation, and the text-metaphor would appropriately name our deep uncertainty.¹⁰ The question of science is thus brought to the fore.

Thomas Kuhn's paradigm-shift theory of the history of science (a theory often cited by postmodern scholars concerned to relate their work to contemporary developments outside the humanities) responds to this question by arguing that rather than "natural regularities" constraining investigation, it is only convention in the linguistic sense—institutional controls, methodological constraints and preferences, in short, orders of representational expectations and requirements—that determines the nature of scientific "truth" or validity. Successive scientific models—say, the Newtonian and the Einsteinian—represent distinct, incommensurable paradigms or language games, and that the shift from one such model to the next, rather than indicating "progress" or "modification" is simply the emergence and triumph of the rhetoric of the new theory over the old. For Kuhn, the lack of an independent ground from which a continuity from one paradigm to another can be discerned precludes the possibility of recognizing anything but a series of discrete units of theoretical work, the Einsteinian model utterly distinct from its predecessors except by virtue of historical accident. Postmodern theorists of culture, concerned with the textual "construction of meaning," the "incommensurability of diverse language games," and the "gap" between distinct frames of reference across diverse

historical, geographical or cultural contexts, find that their work is compatible with Kuhnian views of science precisely because Kuhn's transgression of the science/humanities boundary is strictly one-way: science collapses into the humanities, or the field of the sociology of knowledge, at the expense of the former's claim to any epistemological validity. No one should question the important correction this shift has brought—the refutation of the positivist's conception of a completely objective, prejudice-cleansed inquiry into the operations of the natural world. Undoubtedly, all investigation is conducted by humans and is thus subject to a vast array of potentially distorting influences. The Enlightenment may have been excessively optimistic about the ability of Reason to free us from our prejudices; but the other extreme is equally suspect, that all such investigation is so utterly saturated with personal and institutional interests that we can conclude that all attempts to reason to the best explanation are strictly contained within those very sharp conventional boundaries. The lack of connection between paradigms, the “break” or “rupture” from—to invoke Foucault's terms—one episteme to another, depends heavily on the two connected theses I have been examining here in relation to Derrida: first, that time is an unintelligible structure of pure succession, subject to the “will” of representation; and, second, that what would prima facie appear to precede investigation and the construction of viable models of cognitive import—the pre-existing fields of mind-independent reality open to scientific inquiry, or the perceptual-retentional mode of experience underlying representation “reworking”—are made to collapse upwards, as it were, so that representation dominates perception—creates even its possibility—and theoretical speculations alone “produce” the world which the theory intends to explain.

Under such assumptions, for example, if theorist A ascribes the characteristics “heat-producing, light-giving, heavenly body revolving around the earth” to the object it designates as “sun,” and theorist B ascribes “heat-producing, light-giving, heavenly body at the centre of the solar system, about which the earth revolves” to the object that it designates as “sun,” we are urged to resist the temptation offered by the coincidence of the

same term across the theoretical boundary to think that the same object is being described by both. The crucial difference in the third characteristic—the relation of the “earth” object to the “sun” object—testifies to the radically distinct nature of the objects being constructed by each discourse. Instead, we must determine the meaning of the term exclusively in relation to its particular theoretical context because no exhaustive definition of the term can ever be obtained against which to judge the relative accuracy of each distinct occurrence. Having no “essential” definition, the term “sun” has only its “situated” definition, and at this level, we have no warrant for transferring its meaning in one context to another in order to postulate some “transcendental signified” to which they both refer. On the other hand, the overlap in the distinct theories between characteristics associated with the “same” term (gives heat and light, is a heavenly body) merely indicates the historicity of all acts of signifying, the “movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes ‘historically’ constituted as a fabric of differences” (*Differance* 141). The term “sun” is exclusively code-determined, and those codes change with time. At this level, where we are aware of the movement of language and concepts as the endless tracing processes of *différance*, the “situated” definition is a momentary arrest of the general drift of linguistic usage and convention, each such context never being finally determinative.¹¹

The similarity and difference between theory A’s and theory B’s sun provide an illustration of the doctrine of “iteration,” which holds that identity is the product of repetition, a repetition which always introduces variation and which can thus never yield a unitary self-present identity transcending the series of occurrences of the term. But this quasi-transcendental view, as well as the paradigm view that demands definition strictly within the scope of its theoretical context, converts a thesis about the impossibility of exactly duplicating the properties of the object under investigation in theoretical terms and definitions—the thesis that no reference has a one-to-one correspondence to its object, and that no model exhaustively defines the features of its object of study—into the much broader thesis that the model has only sociological relevance and cannot possibly be

“attached” to non-linguistic phenomena. Such “attaching” would be an appeal to a transcendental signified deployed strategically to stop the temporal re-generation of successive re-definitions.

This extension of the thesis is only viable, however, if we have conceded that all observation is thoroughly overdetermined by theoretical preconceptions, that representation produces perception, and that all experience is purely a matter of conceptual coding and systems of reference. If these conclusions were valid, appealing to non-linguistic experience would indeed be a fraudulent strategy, since no such experience exists. Again, though, the choice of criteria and the selection of standards determine our ability to mark—and thematize in theoretical reflection—distinctions between modes of experience that may nevertheless always be inter-connected in lived experience itself. The criteria establish not only the relative security of the distinction made, but also indicate the epistemological goal that orients the investigation or the critical reflection. We thematize an aspect of experience, say, the ability to judge perceptual depth, and examine its functioning for the purposes related to that field of study—perhaps an attempt to determine whether depth perception is learned from “cues” in the perceptual field, or if this ability is innate to our perceiving apparatus. Such work is not radically undermined by acknowledging that no such perception could take place in the absence of a variety of conditions that make the study and the functioning of the apparatus possible. For example, the experimenter will likely need financial assistance from an institution, and the experiment-subjects must have, besides the target perceptual abilities, an adequately performing respiratory system. Similarly, perception and representation are always interconnected in experience, but we also know that observation can correct or overturn previously given descriptions—a “naïve” fact that is only naïve once we have accepted the conclusion that “there never was any ‘perception’” (*Speech* 103). If we expect legitimizing observation—our commitment expressed in the claim “I see it”—to grant us an experience that, as Richard Rorty puts it, is “plain, unmasked, naked to our gaze” (Novitz 53), then nothing can be legitimized and there is no

such thing as “observation”; any particular claim—theory B’s claims about the sun, for example—must be a false appeal to such a transparency experience, or is blind to the historical conditions of its own utterance: the history of the usage of its major term (“sun”). would undermine the truth of B, since that history is always one of change, and change signals not truth but fiction. In the absolute sense, the inevitability of change vitiates the conclusiveness of any constructed cognitive model, but such change signals “fiction” only according to that standard; if the standard is not one of apodeictic certainty, change may imply a much larger array of conclusions: that theories are necessarily vulnerable to personal and institutional prejudices, but also that subsequent theories improve on their predecessors by their greater accuracy (the quality of observation) or by the wearing away of prejudices that obscured observations in the past, or by the recognition of the crucial implications of phenomena related to the object-field but formerly held to be of little significant influence (if, for example, it were discerned that depth perception is better understood—superior models of its functioning accounting more reliably for its behaviour—once the influence of the respiratory system was factored in). In this case, change indicates not the autonomy of thought, or of the culture within which thought, personal or institutional, takes place, but the embeddedness of thought and culture in the larger context of the physical world. Such a position would surrender the need for absolute knowledge in order to acknowledge both the inexhaustible context of that world and what Peter Dews calls the pre-reflective aspect of our experience (*Limits* 96-99).

Contrary to Kuhn, then, thought, or even culture as the entire universe of discourse, communicates, as it were, with that which is not thought, each influencing the other.¹² With respect to scientific investigation, such a position accepts a moderate-realist stance which avoids the latent anthropocentrism of deconstruction and affirms the otherness of nature. The “natural” (that is, the pre-human) world is neither completely beyond our inquiry, nor solely determined by the conditions and interests of the scientist and his/her institutions. As Ilya Prigogine says, science undertakes a “dialogue with nature,” a

dialogue that depends on the responses of nature to our inquiries—it can confirm or disconfirm scientific intervention, whether we “read” that response correctly or not. If science were merely a human monologue, we would be hard pressed to explain its cross-cultural efficacy—the fact, say, that the inverse square law of gravitation applies everywhere on the planet. Of course, this is not to claim that such cultural boundaries *should* be trampled in favour of technological advancement, but to acknowledge that the two questions—applicability and desirability—are distinct. This realism attempts to clarify the difference between these two questions by holding to the notion that representation need not overwhelm the field of perception, that it is not a necessary, transcendental law that theory radically overdetermines perception or experience.

These considerations have important consequences, on a much smaller scale, for the relationship between the individual and his/her own cultural environment, and the value of rationality within a fallibilist framework. If the atomistic now is used to destroy the distinction between perception and representation, then, as M. C. Dillon comments:

Theoretical room is opened to allow limitless work upon the re-presentation prior to its appearance. Dreamwork, political work, the work of archaic and metaphysical structures—all this and more can infiltrate the system of signifiers bequeathed to us by history and work upon the re-presentational matrix through which our experience is always already filtered. And it can do this without the counterbalancing influence of the perceptual presence which would compel us to see a thing or a person or world in some measure according to its measure. (“Temporality” 206)

Dillon argues that if “one rejects the standpoint of eternity, and adopts the viewpoint of finite worldly unfolding, there is a necessity to the vantage of the present that is not accidental” (207), an observation it will be well to bear in mind when we consider Strether, Merton, Kate, and Maggie. Dillon’s remarks have their source in his reading of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, but the epistemology that Dillon draws upon and develops, with its counter-balancing value of present perceptual experience—in the space and duration of the present understood as “a theme emerging from the background of global time” (*Merleau-Ponty Vivant* xxviii)—against the memory, expectation, manipulation, or transformation of the world effected in representational modeling, has clear affinities with

empiricism's emphasis on the priority of perceptual experience over rational constructions in the acquisition of knowledge. Dillon's empiricism, however, does not reduce knowledge to that foundation; rather, it refuses to permit the rationalist-idealist (Kantian) or the a-rationalist-idealist (Derridean) to dispense with the category of experience by subsuming its meaning within the categories of the transcendental understanding, or the play of the quasi-transcendental différance-structure of representation. The text-metaphor runs rampant and writing usurps all experience and thought only if the present of experience is ignored or considered to be no different (or somehow *inadequately different*) than any other textual marker. But if science is not our collective dream, if the present can resist what we think about it, the text-metaphor must be rethought or restricted.

IV: Critical Realism and Scepticism

In the preceding sections, I have already begun to outline some of the crucial elements of the epistemology I am here trying to defend: a realist, non-atomistic understanding of time, the viability of the distinction between retention and representation, the illegitimacy of the constructivist, pan-representationalist version of scientific inquiry. I have also begun to emphasize the fact that Derrida's position relies on an absolute epistemological standard as do those anti-realist theories of science that convert the fact of change and error in the history of science into a broader thesis about the "fictionality" of scientific knowledge. I will now expand on these themes to define critical realism and set it against Derridean scepticism, which, as I will try to demonstrate, is heavily indebted to the arguments of traditional scepticism.

The power of sceptical arguments derive from their appeal to the Absolute they deny. The supreme principle—precisely because of its negative cast—paradoxically confers great authority on those who espouse sceptical arguments because they seem to surrender themselves to the power of that (negative) Absolute. Scepticism must also, then, be called to task for its impossible ethical position. In the course of my response, I will also draw on evolutionary theory in order to strengthen my argument for pre-semiotic experience and to give shape to my insistence that a "vertical" or "depth" component of epistemology cannot be eliminated by its "horizontal" or "surface" component; the latter is over-stressed by Derrida and other poststructuralists. In the result, I will propose a definition of the "present" at odds with Derrida's preoccupation with "presence"—a present of ethical and epistemological decision.

The critical realist epistemology that emerges from a resurrection of the relevance of a pre-semiotic experience (including perception) is one that has also been called by scholars in the field "critical rationalism," or "fallibilism," or "reliabilism."¹³ Its position is staked out, as I have been showing, by undercutting the opposition between dogmatism and

scepticism—Derrida’s Husserl and Derrida—through a strategy of retreat from the goal of securing an absolute foundation for knowledge. This retreat yields to the sceptic his arguments against certainty, but does not collapse into sceptical passivity, undecidability, or “a-rationality” because it holds on to the need for a reasoned critique of any knowledge claims and argues as well that the pre-semiotic world can confirm or disconfirm our assertions. Briefly put, the relation between foundationalists and their sceptics, and thus the battle between rationalism (that is, the belief in the possibility of knowledge through reasoned endeavour—either grounded in the self-evident axioms of the rationalists, or in the direct experience of the world through perception as argued by the empiricist) and irrationalism, turns on their both accepting the premise that a belief is reasonable if and only if it is certain and justified. Foundationalists accept this premise and then attempt to find the grounds for reasonable belief. The sceptic accepts the premise as well, but proceeds to show that the required certain justification is impossible to realize.

The critical rationalist denies the premise, and thereby seeks to escape the all-or-nothing arguments between sceptics and dogmatists. The principle of rationality is given the alternative formulation: “a belief is reasonable if and only if it has withstood serious criticism” (Musgrave 281). Clarification is obviously required here—what is “serious” criticism? is this merely a form of relativism, or a purely subjective standard of rationality?—but before seeking to outline its implications more fully, we should be aware that the criterion of “withstanding serious criticism” is flexible rather than absolute, and directs the sceptic away from all-purpose sceptical arguments towards the more difficult task of supplying specific criticisms or refutations of a particular belief or assertion. Empiricists remain challenged on the broad grounds that perception could always deceive us: perceptual mistakes are always possible; indeed, we may be dreaming or hallucinating (having non-veridical perceptions). The problem arises as to how to characterize any given perceptual experience—that is, in general how do we distinguish between true and false perceptions? Locke, Berkeley, and Hume all developed a response to this problem that

depends on what can be called the doctrine of idea-ism, a doctrine with clear affinities with contemporary representationalism. A brief look at these thinkers, part of the western tradition, certainly, but never discussed by Derrideans anxious to use the “metaphysics of presence” as a target, will reveal deconstruction’s deep links to a tradition that demanded absolute certainty but culminated in a full-blown scepticism. According to the doctrine of idea-ism, we have immediate access either to external objects (naïve realism) or to ideas about them (sense-data, impressions, primary and secondary properties). But since direct contact with external objects seems to be refuted by the fact of non-veridical perceptions, then we must only have such contact to ideas; and here the occlusive fallacy is committed. Here is Locke’s version:

Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasoning, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them. (1960: iv, i, 1)

Berkeley extends Lockian analysis by insisting that the lingering materialism in the latter’s doctrines must be jettisoned because it kept the door open for sceptical attack: that is, if a distinction between appearance and reality were at all preserved (here, the distinction between the sense-data idea of a tree, and the tree itself), then the sceptic could reassert the argument of non-veridical perceptions to challenge the possibility of any knowledge.

Berkeley wrote,

All scepticism follows, from our supposing a difference between things and ideas, and that the former have a subsistence without the mind, or unperceived. It were easy to . . . shew how the arguments urged by sceptics in all ages, depend upon the supposition of external objects. (*Principles*, Part I, 78-9)

Berkeley firmly closed that door by collapsing all experience into the realm of ideas, by denying the distinction between appearance and reality in favour of the appearance:

I do not pretend to be a setter-up of *new notions*. My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth, WHICH WAS BEFORE SHARED BETWEEN THE VULGAR AND THE PHILOSOPHERS: the former being of the opinion, that *those things they immediately perceive are the real things*: and the latter, that *the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist only in the mind*. Which two notions put together, do in effect constitute the essence of what I advance. (Third Dialogue: 262)

For Berkeley, God is the eternal perceiver who maintains order in the world of perception, allowing for a form of objectivity in perception not dependent upon the whim of the individual observer.

Hume adopts idea-ism, but rejects Berkeley's development of the doctrine into rational idealism, instead using it to undermine the validity of reason itself. Berkeley's conjunction of the views of the "vulgar" and the "philosopher" yield not a unity but a profound irrationalism. If the only "real" things are perceptual "ideas," and there are no grounds for supposing anything outside of this realm ("il n'y pas hors de texte"), then all the presuppositions of synthetic reason—for example, the principle of cause and effect, on which Berkeley relied to place the security-granting figure of God in the position of super-perceiver—are fictions, constructs built out of the mere contiguity or "accidental" association of ideas. Philosophical reflection, which "informs us that every thing, that appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted and dependent on the mind," and which exposes the error in the belief of those who "confound perceptions and objects" (193), compels us to acknowledge that both practical rationality and the common-sense of the "vulgar" are, properly speaking, irrational products of mere habit, a flight, however natural and necessary, from the conclusions of rigorous analysis. Hume uses the primacy of sensation as sense-datum ideas to restrict human cognitive efforts within an extremely tight circumference, philosophy not challenging these boundaries, but revealing them. For Hume, we are "imprisoned," if not yet in language, or representation and its effects (presence), then in the stream of impressions and ideas:

Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chace our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appeared in that narrow compass. (*Treatise*, I, ii, 6; 67-8)

This view moves from the trivially accurate point that no human experience can be anything other than *human* experience—we cannot perceive as humans without possessing the requisite human cognitive capacities, and we do not see the world through the bodies of insects—to the view that “we never really advance a step beyond ourselves” in the sense that the capacities and the apparatus used to investigate the world are fixed, determinative and self-enclosing. According to Hume, all we can ever think about are our own ideas and impressions: they are “really” the subjects of our contemplation.

Thus, the sceptical argument from non-veridical perceptions, which prompted the response that we have immediate experience only of “ideas,” eventually led from Locke to the absolute idealism of Berkeley, and finally back to a scepticism of a new variety, Hume’s. The connection between these three thinkers and poststructuralist theory is evident once the essential doctrine of the former group is made clear. Indeed, Hume’s position—where the thesis of “direct perception of impressions and ideas” is used not to combat scepticism but to confirm it—is especially compatible with much postmodern work. Superficially, it would seem that poststructuralists would be the first to contest any claim that the mind has “immediate” and “direct” contact with ideas since for them the signifier is never a transparent window to the signified. But the challenge posed by the contemporary to the advocate of Humean “immediacy” relies on the play of the signifier as a material cultural instrument, transgressing the limits imposed by any particular text, generating meanings not imagined by any writer or speaker. Relative stability is achieved by virtue of the controls embedded in conventional usage, imposed by institutional standards and expectations, and carried along in cultural history. But the epistemological position achieved is only a revision or an extension rather than a rejection of Humean doctrines, for the poststructuralist *accepts* the notion that ideas and impressions—or rather, representation and the effect of presentation—*constitute the fabric of experience*. Indeed, Robert Merrill makes the connection clear, opting for the vocabulary of perception, and then linking it to aesthetic experience under the assumption that no distinction is possible between the two

levels of construction in experience: “Our perceptual categories give the only shape to whatever is called ‘real’ that it can ever have, and thus our response to the real is no different in nature from our response to art” (Dillon 1988, viii). On one level this is of course true: observing a landscape painting and the tree in the backyard are both, by definition, acts of observation, requiring selective attention and interpretative decisions. The implication, though, that our response to the two experiences is identical is suspect, relying as it does on the unstated premise that perceptual categorization and deliberate interpretative endeavours are the same, and thus that the perceiver constructs “reality” in precisely the same fashion as the artist, and as the reader similarly “constructs” a reading. Once it is granted that we never experience the “external world”—or that all experience is built on a single principle which disallows the drawing of significant distinctions—then the world and its meaning is an internally generated construct, whether by perceptions in the Humean sense or by representations in Derrida’s sense.

In Derrida’s case, the materiality of writing is a force of dissonance within the above-mentioned stability-granting forms of convention, but the play of order and disorder is nevertheless held within human systems of reference. The double-strategy of deconstruction—to invert an existing metaphysical hierarchy and then demonstrate the prior generative power of the formerly subordinate term to show that its structure in fact determines the nature of that conceptual field—yields in this, the most famous case, the conclusion that representation is both the condition of possibility of, and the constructing force for, the appearance of presence: presence is inscribed as “presence” within the field of representation. The result is that there is no immediate experience of any kind because representation, as a code or system of reference, always escapes the mastery of any speaker, writer, or institution. But this lack of immediacy due to the open-endedness of systematic referencing is predicated on the prior notion that all experience, all thought, is built on a(n) (indirect) contact with representations, not external objects. As with Berkeley, Derrida denounces the distinction between appearance and reality, but where the former did

so to refute the sceptic and found he could only do so by relying on God's will, Derrida replaces God with "text" (an anti-God, God's mirror image)¹⁴—the play of *différance*, presence and absence, on the plane of representation—thereby permitting the re-incorporation within the idealist's frame of reference the most traditional of sceptical arguments, as well as an adaptation of Humean conclusions about personal identity (fragmented, incoherent, formed from habit or the random association of impressions now characterized as the drift of the signifier), and the validity of cognitive constructs (fictions, temporary, pragmatically formed from processes of association).

The sceptic's argument from the permanent possibility of non-veridical perception is replayed by Derrida as the permanent possibility of the lack of intuition accompanying the signifying act, indeed the structural necessity of this possibility of non-coincidence for the functioning of signification.¹⁵ Reading is fraught with difficulty because we can never discern within the signifying unit—say, Nietzsche's sentence, "I have forgotten my umbrella"—conclusive marks of the intention governing its production. Nietzsche could have been joking, lying, arguing, citing, or perhaps he didn't even write it. Similarly, the ancient sceptic could always argue that any particular perception could be a dream, an hallucination, the jest of an evil genius, or, in more contemporary terms, the result of computer input wired into a brain floating in a vat of electromagnetic fluids. The time-lapse argument against the naïve realism of pre-idea-ist empiricism is also resurrected. This argument claims to show that since there is always a time-lapse between the source of information and the interpretation of that information, and since the source may have ceased to exist during the interval, then, because it is absurd to hold that we experience something that does not exist, we must only experience the sense data. You touch the tactile sense-data of your pen, not the pen itself; you taste gustatory sense-data of your drink, not the drink itself. This argument appears in Derrida both to confirm an idea-ist philosophy and to undermine the notion that there is any existing "present" "source" of information outside this movement of temporal delay. *Différance* is both to differ and to defer: the delay of

deferral is the necessary correlate to the discerning of difference, a delay which never permits the marked differences to remain stable.¹⁶ The time-lapse never closes.

Derrida's re-activation of classic sceptical arguments against empiricism undertaken within an implicitly idealist trajectory of thought—the doctrine of idea-ism as it culminates in Berkeley and Hume—is matched by his use of familiar techniques of suspicion and refutation against the rationalist. Here too the pivot on which all of this turns is the assumption noted above that only beliefs that are certain or justified can be deemed reasonable. The rationalists, from Descartes to Kant, appealed not to the indubitability of sense experience but to self-evident axioms given to the rational understanding as a foundation for certain knowledge. From these axioms, further, less immediately evident truths could be built, secured as they were by their tie, through a rigorous process of reasoned proofs, to the founding axioms. Without pursuing here the various candidates for this role as axiom—Descartes's cogito, Kant's synthetic a priori (dependent on the incorrigibility of the fundamental laws of mathematics and of mathematical physics)—the response always open to the sceptic is that the axiom can indeed be doubted, that it too must be justified, or that alternative and inconsistent axioms may be proposed. The self-evidence of the axiom—for example, Descartes refuting the sceptic by drawing off from the certainty of the cogito the characteristic that assured this certainty, that it appeared to him “clearly and distinctly,” and then seeking further truths under the guidance of this characteristic—is always suspect because the criterion is inescapably subjective and thus context- or culturally-relative. Indeed, Derrida's “always already” argument, modeled in the realm of language and text, is a modern re-tooling of the ancient problem of the infinite regress of justification: any criterion that is held to provide us with the marker of certainty must itself be justified—how do we know that this criterion performs the function assigned to it? If the justification appealed to by the criterion is something other than that criterion, then the criterion itself is undermined—it is no longer foundational since the justification of the criterion is prior to it. Of course, this first justification itself requires justification, as

will the next, and so on. Cutting the cord, stopping the regress at any point, necessarily opens the charge of irrational commitment to the ground on which one has chosen to stand because that ground is where one refuses to seek further justification. The axiom is not argued for and is therefore itself “irrational.” In much the same way, Derrida argues that language or text will always slip away from us, never grounding itself in “presence” or a “transcendental signified,” both of which are understood as the grounds of pure certainty or final justification. The functioning of a text always calls upon other texts, other “reasons” that are associated with but “willfully” rather than “rationally” suppressed in the particular text; the argument in the latter achieves its authority only by attempting to ignore “textuality”—the endless run-off of meaning, or the further string of justification—and locate its meaning solely within itself.¹⁷

On the other hand, if the rationalist attempts to avoid the infinite regress problem by appealing to the criterion itself as its own justification, the argument becomes viciously circular. In Derrida’s and much postmodern thought, this strategy is replayed ironically, the emphasis on self-reflexivity used to demonstrate the *mise-en-abyme* created where a text loops back on itself in a vertiginous desire for an ever-receding ground of truth. A logocentric text falls into the abyss unawares, attempting to justify its arguments by appealing to the conclusions those arguments would support, or by relying on a framing mechanism to delimit the truth-claims of others but then falling itself subject to that framing device; in the latter case, the all-inclusive “frame” is language, the formal play of presence and absence, and thus the arena of the arbitrary and not of Truth. The logocentric text attempts to speak the Truth from outside, while delimiting its opponents within, language, but is forced to appeal to it as its only method of both attack and construction; its arguments thereby turn against itself by appealing to the same criterion that it would both challenge (in others) and justify (for itself). Postmodern texts, or texts deliberately at odds with the metaphysics of presence—though an absolute separation is impossible—consciously exploit these two forms of sceptical attack in order to advertise their own resistance to the

project of absolute justification. Infinite regress: intertextuality, quotation, citation, pastiche, grafting, absence of narrative closure, fragmentation of text, plot, structure, and page design (to suggest that there is always *more* than is given), and word splicing (to suggest that the meaning of the word is never exhausted in a single use). Begging the question in order to secure a foundation: textual self-reference, meta-fiction, self-consuming artifacts, looping plots, characters and narrators drifting between planes of “reality” and “fiction,” writers writing texts about writing a text about writing a text . . . the anxiety of representation turning back on itself and providing not self-evident grounds of knowledge but the abyss of the lack of any such foundation. The textual vertigo of self-reference can combine the two sceptical arguments by suggesting the infinite regress—the unstoppable looping or spiraling revision—lodged in the heart of self-justification.

The fallibilist or critical rationalist makes an important concession to the sceptic by renouncing the desire for absolute truth and certainty, but does not concede that this forces us to adopt some form of a-rationalism, relativism, or constructivism. The strength of sceptical arguments is always exactly commensurate with the strength of the claim made by the dogmatist. The retreat into idea-ism, which led to the idealism of Berkeley and the more damaging scepticism of Hume, was undertaken to secure a source of infallible knowledge, as was the rationalist search for and dependence on foundational axioms for the construction of truth systems. The fallibilist avoids the slide into either irrational empiricism or the dissonant idealism made possible by the defensive postures assumed by the dogmatists by rejecting the initial premises that (a) an incorrigible source of certainty must be uncovered, and (b) either experience or knowledge is constructed according to a single structural principle (ideas, sense data, self-evident axioms, a priori conceptual categories, or the structure of linguistic representations). As mentioned, reason is neither exalted nor humiliated—the inevitable oscillation between foundationalists like Descartes and (to use Ricoeur’s phrase) masters of suspicion like Nietzsche; rather, a belief should be characterized as “reasonable” if it has withstood serious criticism. This view of rationality

does not seek final justification or absolute grounding, but rather judges belief and knowledge with respect to determinate problems and tasks, and regards statements as having achieved the status of “justifiable knowledge” if testing—experience and/or conceptual examination—has *failed to refute them*. This “criterion,” developed by Karl Popper and others, relies on the adequacy of the hypothetical model to the task at hand, and regards the conclusion postulated in the model not as impervious to criticism but as defensible within a context of criticism directed against that model’s claims of adequacy. Actual refutation is regarded as disproving the hypothesis—for example, the bringing to light of contrary evidence, or the demonstration of the internal inconsistency of the provisions of the hypothesis—while general sceptical doubts about the possibility of knowledge in general, scepticism turning on potential sources of doubt, are deflected by the acknowledgment of this ineradicable presence of error in any theoretical model, and the demand returned to the sceptic for specifically disconfirming reasons and/or evidence rather than the mere insistence on their potential existence. The threat of infinite regress of justification, rather than forcing the maker of the hypothesis into founding axioms, structures, or sources of information, is defused by being incorporated as a feature of the hypothesis in the character of its *falsifiability*. Most importantly, this criterion, adopted as the risk inherent in making any assertion about the world rather than remaining paralyzed by the need for absolute justification, shifts the burden of proof onto the radical-sceptic, whose own position assumes a metaphysical cast precisely because it attempts to remain free of assertion and thus from the possibility of refutation.

Indeed, the observation that deconstruction is always there before its critics, that it knows and plays with all possible sources of doubt, is itself cause to doubt it. Commenting on Derrida’s response in *Limited Inc.* to Searle’s criticisms of deconstruction, and on those who have defended Derrida’s apparently aggressive (playful? ironic?) tone in that work, Michael Fischer notes that Derrida has created for himself a position from which he “cannot lose.” If Derrida is seen as chastising Searle by relying on standard notions like

intent, context, and the rules of interpretation, then Derrida can return that such notions are never finally eradicable from language, as his theory of writing demonstrates: if it is held that Derrida forbids Searle the same interpretative liberties that he permits himself, then Derrida can claim that all such rules of interpretation are arbitrary, as his theory of writing shows. Conversely, if it is said that Derrida undermines his own serious criticisms in the earlier part of his essay with later ironic qualifications, then this self-parodying is the acknowledgment of the baselessness of such “criticisms,” again, as his theory of writing holds. In effect, Derrida surrenders his text to his own theory—or rather to “writing” as he understands it—in order to remain immune to criticism. Fischer concludes his account with the following:

In my view, the very fact that we cannot question Derrida’s theory makes it questionable, if not false. Again, he cannot be refuted because he can attribute to language whatever we say about him, arguing that we are not using language to make our point but language is using us to make its point [or, rather, Derrida’s point]. But because Derrida’s assumptions about language cannot be denied, neither can they be tested or corrected, “testing” implying the possibility of failure and “correction” vulnerability to error. He is locked in an airtight, static view of language that he cannot verify.
(42)

This self-surrender to language or writing is also a stance that confers a great deal of power.¹⁸ As Tobin Siebers observes, Paul de Man’s challenge of Derrida’s reading of Rousseau—essentially that Derrida adopts an imperious critical view that refuses to recognize that Rousseau already knew of the deconstructive power of language—“underbids Derrida in the process of deconstructive marginalization” (*Ethics* 106) by stressing the “resistance” to theory already built into language, and Rousseau’s negative insight into this condition which forecloses the possibility of demystifying his text. De Man “wins” by identifying with Rousseau, specifically, the impotence of Rousseau, and both never claim “authority” and so cannot be deconstructed, since each deconstructs himself. De Man’s theory of language as self-destruction yields to its creator both an epistemology of “failure” and an infallible method:

Technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable. They are also totalizing

(and potentially totalitarian) for since the structures and functions they expose do not lead to any knowledge of an entity (such as language) but are an unreliable process of knowledge . . . they are indeed universals, consistently defective models of language's impossibility to be a model language. (*Resistance* 20)

They are irrefutable because resistance—criticism, challenge, the possibility of error—is internal to the theory:

Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes. Yet literary theory is not in danger of going under: it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. (20)

As Siebers argues, de Man's position is like Freud's, whose psychoanalysis is "proven" by resistance to it: dissenters are always already captured by the theory they would seek to challenge.

The "serious criticism" standard of fallibilism turns such notions on their head. It too adopts error as internal to itself, but it does so to avoid full sceptical assault and not in order to make error its irrefutable foundation—the latter being a position that requires, indeed longs for absolute certainty to refute it. Instead, the error internal to the hypothesis-based procedures of the critical rationalist leaves it open to specific criticism, but in the absence of such reasons, assumes that the generated model possesses adequate reliability. "Serious criticism" is a concept that must ultimately be understood within the sphere of human action, the need to decide and make choices, to stand with conviction in the duration of the present. Reason is held in a critical tension between the need for justification and the need to perform or think within a given context for specifiable goals. The focus in this epistemology is neither to establish certainty and banish the arguments of the sceptics—the danger here is smug self-assurance and a resistance to criticism—nor to yield to the sceptics so completely that all "knowledge" is merely the ideological weapon of the ruling forces. The reduction of truth to rhetoric and convention can be, contrary to those who consider relativism a doctrine of tolerance and a peaceful alternative to the imperious demands of Truth, a legitimation of the implementation of force to command assent to one's views. If

truth is just a matter of what I or my institution or culture prefer to believe because it is good for us, and if my opponent's views are similarly "grounded," then, in the absence of any truth of the matter in question, and thus the absence of a common ground upon which we may then proceed to argue for our respective positions, there must inevitably arise the temptation to force my opponent to submit to my will. In this sense, while a critical regard of one's views is essential for keeping discussion open, the view that all "truth is fiction" already submits the question to the military, since only will and force make right.

Critical rationalism preserves a separation between linguistic representation and observation, not by granting epistemological priority to the latter as a pure source, but by acknowledging bottom-up constraints on the formation of theoretical models. The pressure from "below" the realm of human representation and intentionality—thought, rationality, linguistic play—is exerted from the material base of existence, or to put it differently, the evolutionary pre-history of physical and biological systems. All human thought is embedded within cultural contexts, but culture itself (as James never forgot though his characters sometimes do) is embedded in the physical world. Paisley Livingston argues that to refuse this separation of perception and representation on the basis of the priority of the latter, and to thus "liberate" thought from its embodied condition, is to

engage in a thoroughgoing romanticism or transcendental idealism whereby it is not only 'the human' that soars above the sphere of nature to constitute its own autonomous world but 'life' or 'spirit' as a whole. . . . [C]ulture is basically conceived as a detached and autonomous realm of idealities, of meanings and visions that bear absolutely no necessary relations to any nonidealistic conditions. Following this basic premise, it is the task of the natural sciences to deal with the realm of necessity, where it is possible to trace an event back to its governing conditions; the humanist, on the other hand, is concerned with the free play of a separate domain of expression, interpretations and values. (*Literary Knowledge* 132-33)

Theorists who stress the body as a source of exit from convention and ideological oppression are right to the extent that the body and its functioning are not solely determined by such social constructions; but they err if this "exit" is held to be a passage to a realm outside all epistemic reference or cognition.

In fact, the embodied nature of thought implies the pertinence of science to humanist (and anti-humanist) theorizing in so far as it provides evidence, not of blind mechanistic functioning irrelevant to the social world of value and conjecture, but of the organization of physical systems that may resist ideological re-writing. Neither physical reductionism nor biologism is necessarily entailed in the view that science has some contribution to make to, for example, theories of mind and personal identity. Livingston writes that

insofar as such capacities as perception, cognition, and intelligence are thought to be part of what is essentially human—or at the very least necessary (but not sufficient) for its full development—the natural sciences do indeed have a hold on the subject; for it is only within their framework that the origins of sentience receive anything approaching a coherent and well-based explanation. (*Literary Knowledge* 134)

This “hold on the subject” is not an exclusive one, but it counters the excessive stress on strictly sociological consideration. The two cultures of science and the humanities need not be collapsed into either the one or the other: analysis of the social pressures on scientific research should be complemented by the recognition of scientific considerations in the formation of social or cultural theories.

A first step towards this recognition is offered by Husserl, whose distinction between representation and retention must eventually commit him, as Ricoeur has shown, not to a philosophical impasse but to a rejection of Cartesianism. The distinction is made on the basis of “objective” temporal features—features drawn from outside human consciousness, from the temporality of the physical world. Retentional perception, Peter McInerney explains, offers a way out of the temporal idealism of Kant, Heidegger, and Sartre, by locating an experience of time that draws upon already constituted temporal features: these features are experienced as something “imposed upon us in perception”: “Our lack of conscious control over what we perceive does not prove that the sensory information is actually received, but in the absence of contrary evidence it does provide good grounds for believing that it is” (207). These good grounds, held in the absence of specific countervailing arguments, hold open a view of the human that is not dualistic—

mind/body, or even undecidably both mind and body and neither. Granting perception a mode of operation distinct from but connected with that of representational consciousness begins to reposition the human within a more Aristotelian ontology. Aristotle, it is commonly observed “is not a dualist but a quaternist: he treats the issues of thought and perception not within the dual categories of mind and matter but within the fourfold scheme of natural bodies, living things, sentient animals, and rational animals (i.e. humans)” (Kahn 359). A similar understanding of the human is advanced by contemporary evolutionists, who argue that the embodied nature of human thought implies a “view of the human mind and human culture as a palimpsest of their evolution” (Argyros 179; see also Dennett), a hierarchical overlapping of the systems of information exchange specific to each layer of evolutionary development. On this view, the bottom-up constraints on human thought are also the passageways of communication with the rest of the natural world. Perception is “more primitive” in the sense that its information is less flexible than that generated within linguistic representation, and is therefore far from adequate for the purposes of human existence; but the relative fixity of perception’s information processing implies that it also has less room for radical and systematic error. Living in the hypothetical—that is, organizing and representing the present within a wider range of long-term goals, an ability evolved from the inadequacy of the mere present, although itself a kind of achievement—entails, besides incalculable benefits, an increased risk of error.

As I have noted, resisting Derrida’s temporal atomism and the reduction of presence to representation does not commit one to the thesis that observation can be innocent, completely free from prejudice, expectation, or interpretative selection and formation of information. Instead, renouncing the epistemologies of the atomistic now—either as securing certainty or as endlessly deferring it along a chain of such instants—requires that we acknowledge the intertwining of perception and representation, but not their singularity. With respect to the empiricist arguments examined above, the fallibilist must acknowledge the force of sceptical attacks that refute naïve realism, but refuse to be drawn into the

defensive posture evident in the doctrines of idea-ism or sense-data foundationalism. The realism advocated here affirms that we do indeed experience objects of the external world—trees, not sense-data or representations of trees—but that such experience is always mediated and thus subject to error, correction, or refutation. The distinction to be drawn is that between experiencing (a) a representation of an object and (b) a represented object. Position (a) leads us toward idea-ism and the occlusive fallacy, while position (b) accepts mediated access to the object, an object that is not a static “presence” but which terminates the intentionality of the experience at the limit of the capacities of the specific apparatus called upon. “Tree” is the limit object of a particular act of human perception, an object not “constituted” by human intentionality but understood through the mediation of cognitive expectations and the abilities and limitations of the perceiving system—prosthetic devices push back these limitations, but do not undermine the externality of the object experienced in the absence of such devices. The mediation of representation is omni-present in human experience, and indeed perceptual access is itself not immediate and secure, especially if the criterion of immediacy is absolute identity between perceiver and perceived without remainder. Both levels of experience are corrigible, but the superior power of representation—experience formulated in linguistic models, hypotheses fixed in a symbolic system—arises from its distance from the objects presented in the more rigid “interpretative” schemes of perception. This distancing permits the rectification of error through the reformulation and testing of its hypotheses, while perception, an experience of “imposition,” is, by virtue of its *relative* immediacy vis-à-vis conscious representation, compelled to remain within restrictive informational parameters; its truths are relatively impoverished. But perception is also a guardrail against speculative, ideological, or cultural constructions that flatly contradict the information provided by the senses. Perception is indeed theory-laden—guided by our interests—but it can also counter those interests since it is subject to the constraints of an evolutionary program that precedes all

such representations, permitting us to see something in “some measure according to its measure.”

As these remarks indicate, the indispensable companion to critical rationalism is evolutionary theory (which also provides a subtle undercurrent to James’s texts, particularly *The Wings of the Dove*, and to which William James was also attracted), which resists full-blown scepticism regarding the trustworthiness of the senses by claiming that organisms without reliable sensory and perceptual apparatus would never be selected in the struggle for survival. Unless an animal can adjust its behaviour according to the actual circumstances or conditions of its environment, react defensively in the presence of predators, eat food that is available and appropriate, then it will be replaced, as Fred Dretske puts it, “by more discriminating competitors” (*Seeing and Knowing* 89). Dretske points out that the reliability of sensory information requires neither exhaustive accuracy (selectivity of perception, or indeed of representation, does not necessarily entail error) nor infallibility with respect to the range of information open to the specific organism, but that the margin of error within that field cannot exceed the requirements of the organism to negotiate the contingencies of its environment, and this implies the important link between the reliability thesis and the imperatives of action:

I take it that nature has equipped us with something like this disposition—the tendency to believe, indeed a difficulty in *not* believing, and thus a preparedness to *act on*, the “evidence” of our senses. There would be little point in equipping an organism with reliable belief-generating mechanisms (which I take the senses to be) unless there was, as part of the package, an “actionable” quality to the beliefs so generated. (*Seeing and Knowing* 100)

From this evolutionary perspective, sceptical hypotheses like Descartes’s evil genius, the ancient insistence on the omni-present possibility of doubt, or Derrida’s *différance*—language as an autonomous, automatic machine of doubt—lose their pertinence within the field of action, where “belief”—something like faith or what Ricoeur calls “attestation”—is not a flight into intellectual comfort, the resolution of all conflict, but rather the support upon which we stand in order to act in response to a conflictual situation. In the more fully human sense—where we do not consider the “senses” in isolation from our intellectual,

political, and personal projects—these “beliefs” are rationally held and justified because they are not simply propped up on the void of absolute uncertainty and judged from that perspective: instead they are held in the tension between preparedness to act and the need for a rational critique of the grounds of decision. We believe the evidence of our senses in the performance of some act unless we have or are given specific reasons to doubt them. Similarly, principles are held rationally if they can withstand serious criticism, if the evidence has not refuted them, though no evidence can support them absolutely. The burden of proof is shifted to the sceptic to show why the justification offered for a principle is inadequate with respect to the purposes and tasks—the practical context—for which those principles serve as an enabling grounds. These purposes and tasks, and the principles that enable them, are not simply given or self-evident in an absolute sense: to claim that they are would be to refuse the pertinence of any criticism whatsoever. The tasks and principles are always, necessarily, open to critique—this is the valid concession to the sceptic’s arguments on the absolute plane—but they are not presumed to be false, wrong, or entirely inadequate until they are shown to be so. The resulting cognitive stance is a kind of provisionality that awaits investigation—is always open to it—and does not self-immolate at the mere *prospect* of refutation.¹⁹

The appeal to evolutionary theory, and the viability of natural science in general—that they have a hold on their subject—is not undertaken here in order to introduce a series of specific hypotheses drawn from those fields, but to ward off broad-scale perceptual scepticism and conceptual idealism, and to insist that the realm of the physical is neither mechanistic and thus irrelevant to cultural concerns (the Laplacian version of the sciences is long dead) nor a source of irrational escape from such conventions. Evolutionary theory reminds us that the natural world and indeed our own bodies are sources of thought and the conditions of possibility upon which we achieve any kind of action, but are not “constituted” by thought, though we have access to their intelligibility.²⁰ To invoke evolution as support for a reliability thesis places the sceptic in a difficult position; for if

evolution is rejected, as of course it can be, one is immediately committed either to a flagrant Cartesian dualism, an idealistic position that holds the irrelevance of bodily experience in the formation of social values and personal belief, or to a radically constructivist position that would appear, in this context, to challenge the basic Darwinian position that the real world existed before any human interpreters did, and to embrace the opinion that “the real world” is only what we say it is. It is a trivial observation to say that any of the facts of evolutionary theory are only known because humans have stated them—this amounts to saying that in the absence of human inquiry or the existence of human beings, humans would not know anything. The question is whether we are the sole creators of those facts. To reject evolution is to become a linguistic creationist.

To accept evolution and its companion, critical rationalism, is to recover, as Ricoeur does, the theme of Spinoza’s *conatus*, which designates “the effort to preserve in being, which forms the unity of man as of each individual” (*Oneself as Another* 316): “Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being” (*Ethics* 109). This effort of self-integrity, of survival, is essentially a power of self-animation and productivity. The notion that “life” is a power, a dynamism—that evolution gives support to an ontology based in Aristotelian *energeia* and the principle of *conatus*—does not entail a social Darwinism, which prescribes a dubious self-interested pursuit of individual satisfaction. On the contrary, as David Levin has argued, the subject as embodied agent is already committed to the pro-social order of the body, as well as to its own integrity—hence Ricoeur’s careful formulation which stresses the unity of the species (our connectedness with the entire human order) and the unity of the individual. The power of existing—productivity—does not, on the other hand, displace the necessity of considered critique, of deliberation. In Ricoeur’s view (drawing again on Spinoza),

We should not . . . forget that the passage from inadequate ideas, which we form about ourselves and about things, to adequate ideas signifies for us the possibility of being truly *active*. In this sense the power to act can be said to be increased by the retreat of passivity tied to inadequate ideas. . . . This conquest of activity under the aegis of adequate ideas makes the work [Spinoza’s text] as a whole an ethics. Thus there is a close connection

between the internal dynamism worthy of the name of life and the power of the intelligence, which governs the passage from inadequate to adequate ideas. In this sense we are powerful when we understand adequately our, as it were, horizontal and external dependence with respect to all things, and our vertical and immanent dependence with respect to the primordial power that Spinoza continues to name “God.” (*Oneself as Another* 316)

The “horizontal and external” dependence is the conscious recognition of the social connectedness of all human beings, and the “vertical and immanent” dependence can be understood not as “God” but as the hierarchical layering of evolutionary growth—the deeper aspects of our embodied being that participate in the levels investigated by physics and biology.

Inadequate ideas are, as Ricoeur suggests, inhibitive—they do not reliably account for the situation (object, person, state of affairs) and so do not permit action that is truly responsive—and responsible. Ricoeur here unmistakably strikes the fallibilist note in stating that

it is precisely by renouncing the idea of ultimate foundation (which hermeneutics will confirm by its insistence on the finiteness of justification) that we are invited to follow the inverse path from that of justification. . . . [following as well] the progressive path on the level of actual practice. (*Oneself as Another* 283)

Argumentation is valued but constrained by the demands encountered along the progressive path. A reflective equilibrium is sought, a balancing of practical action and critical reflection. Rather than opposing the two fields of thought and action, Ricoeur places them in productive relation: what is held as “sufficient justification given the task at hand” is not blinding tradition nor arbitrary and self-serving convention, but conviction:

Argumentation is not simply posited as the antagonist of tradition and convention, but as the critical agency operating *at the heart* of convictions, argumentation assuming the task not of eliminating but of carrying them to the level of “considered convictions.” (*Oneself as Another* 288)

Ricoeur maintains that the principle of conatus, which permits a recognition of our power to act under the guidance of adequate ideas, yields as well a double sense of responsibility and a dialectical understanding of personal identity. In one sense there is a responsibility directed towards the past as the struggle to understand what has been and act according to a

sense of debt to that which precedes and calls to us, and to what claims us as our own past actions—in short, to “see” clearly and accept the responsibility issuing from what is seen and for the fact of seeing (the self in terms of sameness). In another sense, there is responsibility as directed towards the future, of accepting the consequences of one’s convictions, and being accountable for the actions undertaken by their guide (the self in terms of selfhood). Undoubtedly with the intention of opposing deconstruction, Ricoeur writes:

These two acceptations of responsibility, prospective and retrospective, join together and overlap in responsibility in the present. But this present is not the instant as a break, the point-instant of chronological time. It has the thickness that the dialectic of selfhood and sameness gives it, in connection with permanence in time. Holding oneself responsible is . . . accepting to be held to be the same today as the one who acted yesterday and who will act tomorrow. . . . But this responsibility in the present assumes that the responsibility of the consequences to come and that of a past with respect to which the self recognizes its debt are integrated in this nonpointlike present and in a sense recapitulated in it. (*Oneself as Another* 295)

Ricoeur’s understanding of the present—not reducible to presence—is similar to that proposed by evolution and chaos theorist Alexander Argyros, whose work draws on many sources in the field of the philosophy of science, particularly Ilya Prigogine, Douglas Hofstadter, Charles Lumsden and Edward Wilson, Frederick Turner, James Crutchfield, and the critical rationalist Karl Popper, as well as the maverick philosopher of time, J. T. Fraser. According to Fraser, the present is an emergent feature of the evolution of the universe, appearing for the first time with biogenesis; with the emergence of life “comes a present, or ‘now,’ a temporal dimension whose absence in more primitive levels of cosmic evolution prohibits the attribution of an arrow of time to any prebiotic entity” (*Time as Conflict* 261). Fraser’s wide-ranging explorations of the problem of time yields the thesis that time is not an unchanging abstract fabric, against which measurements can be made (time as the Cartesian coordinates of either the universe itself or our construction of it), but is itself subject to evolutionary change. He argues that time is better modeled as an evolutionary hierarchy of increasingly complex temporalities nested within each other, each also correlated with levels or stages of physical organization as characterized in

contemporary cosmology, and particularly in the schema proposed by Popper. Popper (in some ways like Aristotle) recognizes three distinct but hierarchically related ontological levels (the aforementioned palimpsest structure): the world of physical objects, the world of subjective experiences, and the world of the products of the human mind (Popper and Eccles, 1977). Each “world” is subdivided into smaller categories of greater refinement: for example, moving from the “bottom” level upwards, Hydrogen and Helium, and liquids and crystals in the first; living organisms and sentience (animal consciousness) in the second; and so on, with the works of art and science at the zenith. Each of these levels exhibits increasing structural complexity and a correspondent temporal density: at the “eotemporal” level, the “astronomical universe of massive matter,” time is deterministic, a matter of pure succession—the Newtonian physicist’s time t : but in post-biotic time, a temporal vector appears such that “before” is clearly distinguishable from “after” and the notion of irreversibility becomes applicable. Time, in Fraser’s view, is a structure of conflict since increasing ontological complexity is also a movement away from the determinism of succession and towards the possibility of self-direction and choice. In (very) short terms, sentient life acquires a relative liberation from mechanical processes by possessing, as Spinoza would say, an internal principle of self-preservation, connected with which arises the necessity-ability of negotiating in a non-automatic manner the contingencies of potential conflict, since “behaviour” is less hard-programmed and more open to variation. The emergence from pure succession on the sentient level implies the ability to distinguish between before and after, and this temporal vector is gauged according to a more sharply defined present.

Argyros seeks to conciliate between Fraser’s view that the present emerges *sui generis* from prebiotic states, and the opposite view (held by process philosophers such as Alfred Whitehead) that time is asymmetrical for even the most basic physical processes. But Fraser, Whitehead et al., and Argyros all hold that the more traditional scientific view—held by Einstein, for example—that time is essentially reversible (that is, having no

temporal direction [lack of asymmetry] and accordingly no meaningful “present”), and thus that asymmetry is merely a human illusion or construction, is untenable²¹. The specifics of Argyros’s conciliation are not pertinent to this discussion, but the general thesis is, and will be a significant guide throughout the rest of this study, particularly in my consideration of *The Ambassadors*. The critical rationalist position that I have been trying to support and set in contrast to Derridean and poststructuralist theories of meaning and its sceptical epistemology, holds to the view that reason is valuable not as a supreme guarantor of Truth, but as a kind of dialogue with the Other—nature, the other person, tradition(s), in short, that which is not entirely constituted by the interpreting subject or community—that permits the action springing from such reasoned deliberations to be in part determined by the objects of investigation, the others it struggles to understand. The doctrine of the temporal asymmetry of sentient life, an asymmetry which pre-exists but is complexified within human consciousness, prompts the thesis that critical reflection is not an oppressor, a constraint on our powers of self-determination and on the possible achievement of a more equitable social structure, but is, on the contrary, a fallible method of inquiry that positions the reasoning individual at a fecund crossroads between the demand for justification and the demand for action/response. Ricoeur, writing on the subjects of personal identity and ethics, calls this dialectic “moral judgement in situation” (*Oneself as Another* 280). Reason, on this reading, is not the negation of desire, its abstract tyrant, nor is it, as Derrida suggests in *Speech and Phenomena*, the (ultimately unbeatable) enemy of poetry, imaginative letters, and spontaneous, creative action.²² Instead, the critical rationalist, grounded in both an evolutionary epistemology and a non-atomistic and non-ideal view of time, views reason as the abstracting principle which, if not disembodied and reified, permits a response to “situations” that is both centred in the context of action and decentred from that narrow perspective by virtue of reason’s ability to lift that context into a self-critical arena where the possibility of refutation is omni-present. In this sense, reason is socially oriented, pulling the agent from immediate demands into the wider field of rational

discourse, but not extracting the agent entirely from that origin. To reason is to submit oneself to the threat of scepticism, to the potential infinite regress of justification, and to the apparent groundless circularity of self-grounding principles: this is the risk that accompanies the offering of any justification at all—that it may be criticized, refuted, or utterly dismissed. But to abstain from what Gillian Rose calls “the trial of reason”²³ in order to escape the sceptic, or, indeed, to find a “space” outside the world of sterile “convention,” is to yield oneself to a diminished self, to act and to assert on the authority of one’s own desire alone. Such an actor rejects the mediation of argumentation, which alone enables the creation of a language that may adequately map the features of the context in question. Consensus is not the condition of possibility for such adequacy, but, as the theorists I have been discussing here argue, critical scrutiny—the “decentering” at the heart of conviction—is.²⁴

The examination of phenomena, a process always open to refutation—and, indeed, invites it simply by virtue of terminating in assertions that are buttressed by non-absolute justification—is not a strictly institutional endeavour: truth by committee. As the history of science shows, radical theories and observations have often emerged from maverick outsiders defying established practices and assumptions, and such efforts should not be silenced by appeal to immutable standards. But someone like Feyerabend takes these historical examples as evidence of the uselessness of all reasoned justification: according to him, scientists have succeeded in building science only “because they did not permit themselves to be bound by ‘laws of reason’, ‘standards of rationality’, or ‘immutable laws of nature’” (*Against Method* 190-91). But, as Larry Laudan argues, Feyerabend’s conclusions are radical because they are radically suspect. Feyerabend misunderstands the function of scientific methodology, in its rule-formulating capacity, by construing it as the establishment of certainty criteria which provide the *only* means by which the ends of science can be promoted; he also sees such rules as *necessarily* blocking innovation, rather

than doing so contingently, as the historical record shows. Laudan counters this position in saying that

when we endorse a rule, we are asserting our belief that following that rule is more likely to realize one's goals than violating it will. What makes a rule acceptable as a rule is our belief that it represents the *best strategy* we can imagine for reaching a certain desired end; but it need not be, and commonly will not be, either a necessary or a sufficient condition for reaching that end. (304).

Moreover, the problem of innovation (the development of rival theories in a context determined by already accepted ones) is not solved by the abolition of rational methodology, since, if "anything goes," so does the continued suppression of rivals. But these rival theories, inevitably less supported by evidence by virtue of their novelty, need not be evaluated solely on the absolutist grounds of "accept" or "reject"; within a fallibilist framework, a variety of cognitive stances is available. They can, for example, be tentatively considered as hypotheses worthy of exploration, "entertained" and tested for their adequacy within the theoretical/practical context they attempt to establish. The innovator is thus not compelled to conform to etched-in-stone methodologies and assumptions, a requirement that would undoubtedly stifle scientific inquiry and progress. But a Feyerabendian anarchy is held in check by the demand that a new position must at least offer justification sufficient for the purposes of its own endeavours; that is, that it can show itself to be the best strategy to achieve the (explanatory/instrumental) goals it sets itself. Established theories do not "rule," but rather provide *prima facie* legitimation for certain approaches which can themselves be contested, and not just by rivals proposing cosmetic alterations but also by large-scale, revolutionary approaches at odds with the establishment. The innovator is not silenced, but neither is s/he granted admittance by way of the wholesale destruction of the "exclusionary" edifice of rational justification. Novel theories gain access by being more than simple assertions (or rhetorical trickery)—they need to be open to genuine criticism in order to be accepted, indeed to be themselves the generators of the terms of criticism. Anything less is either the imposition of an utterly personal "vision" or the exhibition of the sheer hubris of claims to infallibility.

V: Critical Realism, Pragmatism, and James

My readings of James's novels will attempt to extend this analysis of scepticism and critical realism into the field of narrative fiction. The epistemology of critical rationalism characterizes not only my own stance with respect to the readings I undertake (which, I think, goes without saying, and so will not be the explicit subject of further commentary), but also, as I shall try to show, James's own implicit view, and the correspondence between critic and text that I thus rely on is itself defended by the arguments informing them. My goal is to read the three novels in an effort to come to grips with James's literary response to the issues outlined in this chapter: that is, I take James to be "arguing," in literary fashion, against the assumptions that I have here drawn out guiding Derridean poststructuralism. The apparent anachronism of my argument is relieved if we briefly consider a figure to whom I have as yet given little attention, but who cannot be ignored in this context: William James.²⁵ Pragmatism is, of course, the philosophical tradition that most closely resembles the position I have tried to outline above and it provides the most immediate contextual means of legitimizing my contention that Henry James's texts argue against scepticism and for critical realism.²⁶ After all, as has been often noted and discussed by his critics, Henry, in 1907, wrote to his brother after reading his *Pragmatism*: "I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have (like M. Jourdain) unconsciously pragmatized. You are immensely and universally *right* . . ." (Letters, 2:83); and later wrote, in response to William's *The Meaning of Truth*: "all you write plays into *my* poor 'creative' consciousness and artistic vision and pretension with the most extraordinary suggestiveness and force of application and inspiration" (Letters, 2:141).²⁷ But what must be made clear is that Henry James's texts are, according to the readings I will conduct, directed against what has become the present version of pragmatism developed by Richard Rorty and more compatible with that of Hillary Putnam,

although that compatibility is developed primarily by way of a critique of Rortian thought. The distinction between Rorty and Putnam which I will try to outline can first be located, however, in a crucial shift in emphasis in the works of William James himself, specifically an acknowledgment he makes in *The Meaning of Truth* in response to criticisms of *Pragmatism*. In the latter, William emphasizes many of the themes I have invoked in this chapter. James Kloppenburg writes in *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* that William James, with Dilthey, Fouillée, and Dewey,

repudiated the idea shared since Descartes by Locke and Leibniz, Hume and Kant, Russell and Husserl [I would want to qualify the inclusion of Husserl in this list—see, for example, Richard Stevens’s *James and Husserl: The Foundations of Meaning*], that philosophy, however it is conceived, should be understood as the quest for certain knowledge. Instead, these radicals concentrated on the contingent quality of our most basic categories of thought, and instead of envisioning epistemology as foundational they judged it imperfect and open-ended. . . . They understood more fully than their predecessors, and many of their successors, that modern philosophy’s search for apodicticity is fruitless. Instead, they articulated a new conception of immediate lived experience,²⁸ which shattered the links binding philosophy to Cartesian mind-body dualism and acknowledged the continuity of consciousness, the experience of freedom, and the provisional quality of truth itself. They conceived of knowledge as an unending experiment whose results can be validated only in activity rather than reflection, and whose conclusions are at best provisional and subject always to further testing in practice. (64-65)

In his *Pragmatism*, James developed these themes—the impossibility of achieving absolute certainty, the importance of putting theoretic hypotheses to the tests of either practical action or intellectual advantage (concerning metaphysical disputes, he counsels that we ask “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (37)), and the primacy of lived experience—but came very close, in his consideration of freedom and belief, to suggesting that truths are *made* in the sense that they are constructions independent of objective reality and are ultimately subject only to the test of a kind of personal satisfaction. This last claim drew considerable heat from William’s critics, most notably Dewey, who, in Kloppenburg’s words, “criticized James for underestimating the coercive force of objective conditions on personal belief” (92).

James responded in *The Meaning of Truth* by insisting that he never intended to deny that truths entail “agreement with reality” and thus re-asserted, albeit within his schema of belief coherence (that new statements must fit the existing system of beliefs, which could require adjustments to both the system and the statement), and personal satisfaction (that new statements must yield some kind of cognitive or practical advantage), a correspondence theory of truth.

The question remains, however, whether William’s pragmatism could so easily accommodate the “objective” with the “subjective” conditions of truth. The “agreement with reality” constraint could put an unbearable strain on the possibility that a statement could also provide “satisfaction,” especially if satisfaction is diluted to mean “in accord with desire” rather than James’s more austere notion of cognitive advantage. This tension is resolved, as it were, by Richard Rorty’s version of pragmatism, according to which “[e]lements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ penetrate so deeply into what we call ‘reality’ that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers of something language-independent’ is fatally compromised from the start. Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere” and that we should therefore “accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world—and, for that matter, some interests and values—as better than others” (these are actually Putnam’s words from *Realism with a Human Face* which Rorty quotes with full approval in “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” at 444. In later work, Putnam moves away from the position here expressed and adopted by Rorty. Rorty’s and Putnam’s debates about realism are particularly interesting with respect to representation/reality issue central to this chapter of my study). In Rortian pragmatism, objective reality is first erased under the sign of language or mind, and we are then thought able to do nothing more than commit ourselves to values and interests grounded in desire: “[For] Nominalists like myself . . . language is a

tool rather than a medium, and . . . a concept is just the regular use of a mark or a noise. . . . Nominalists see language as just human beings using marks and noises *to get what they want* [my emphasis]" ("Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" 144-145). Rorty's pragmatism responds to the dilemma facing William James by completely rejecting the notion (which is, after all, just a regular use of marks) that our statements sometimes do and sometimes do not "agree with" or "correspond to" or "represent" a reality outside ourselves and instead adopts wholeheartedly the doctrine that truth is a matter of practical benefit alone.

Putnam's response to the Jamesian tension between the objective and subjective constraints of truth, on the other hand, is much the same as that for which I have argued: he stresses that the pragmatist's emphasis on "satisfaction" must be understood with reference to the ordinary usage of words and not to any metaphysical pretensions that are read into to them by some philosophers; as well, "satisfaction" is not reduced to desire, but is understood by way of the notion of an accord: a statement's potential agreement with reality which, however open-ended that agreement may be, "plays an essential role *within* language and thought themselves and, more importantly, within our lives" ("The Question of Reality" 297). The idea of "utility" at play here—"expediency" is James's term, which has often been mis-read as meaning that a statement must have "good effects"—reaches beyond the individual or his or her interests to encompass the very functioning of thought and language in our lived experience.²⁹ Putnam thus asks, in a manner similar to my own questioning of Derrida: "why is Rorty so bothered by the lack of a *guarantee* that our words represent things outside of themselves? Evidently, Rorty's craving for such a guarantee is so strong that finding the guarantee to be 'impossible,' he feels forced to conclude that our words don't represent anything. It is at this point in Rorty's position that one detects the trace of a disappointed metaphysical realist impulse" (299; the "metaphysical realist" demands incorrigible, immediate contact with the absolute real). Derrida's similar

“nostalgia” for the absolute expresses itself in his insistence that we can never escape the metaphysics of presence. Putnam’s own position is evident in the following:

It is statements (not abstract entities called “propositions”) that are true or false, and while it is true that the sky would still have been blue even if language users had not evolved, it is not true that *true propositions* would still have existed. If language users had not evolved, there would still have been a world, but there would not have been any *truths*. But recognizing that fact—and it is an important one—does not require us to say that the sky is not blue independently of the way we speak. . . . We make up uses of words—many, many uses of words—and the senses of “agree” in which our various sentences “agree” with reality, when they do, are plural indeed. Yet for all that some of our sentences *are* true, and—in spite of Rorty’s objections to saying that things ‘make’ sentences true—the truth of “I had cereal for breakfast this morning” *does* depend on what happened this morning. (302)

The assertion that truth is a matter of language is here understood to mean that truth is (or can be, depending on the type of statement) a relation between language and not-language: it is *not* to say, with either the Rortians or the Derrideans, that truth is entirely *internal* to language, or that language (representation) occludes (though endlessly promising but endlessly deferring) truth. In other words, to say that without language users there would be no truth is simply to point out that without one of the two poles of the truth relation, the relation could not exist; we could also say, then, that eliminating the not-language pole would also destroy the relation. The pragmatism that emerges from Putnam’s writings is one that stresses the balance between the objective and the subjective, and that acknowledges the fallibility of our thinking while also resisting scepticism. Putnam contrasts this Jamesian pragmatism with Derridean thought:

To Derrida, any idea that we have access to a common external world is a return to what he calls a “metaphysics of presence,” to discredited ideas of incorrigibility and a preconceptual given. It is precisely the fact that James’s emphasis on what he called the “plasticity” of truth, on our role as “coefficients of truth on the one side,” is balanced by the insistence that we share and perceive a common world, by the insistence that “we register the truth which we help to create [the balancing in the phrase “help to create” is crucial],” which distances him from all forms of scepticism. Indeed, from the earliest of Peirce’s Pragmatist writings, Pragmatism has been characterized as *antiscepticism*: Pragmatists hold that *doubt* requires justification just as much as belief (Peirce drew a famous distinction between “real” and “philosophical” doubt); and by *fallibilism*: Pragmatists hold that there are no metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly-held beliefs will never need revision. That one can be both

fallibilistic *and* antisceptical is perhaps *the* basic insight of American Pragmatism. (“The Permanence of William James” 20-21)

The difficulty of being both fallibilistic and antisceptical is precisely the problem to which I think Henry James’s texts are ultimately addressed. I have not couched my arguments in terms of contemporary pragmatism, using instead the contextual frames of Derridean poststructuralism and critical realism, in order both to resist in deconstruction’s own terms the deconstructive appropriation of James, and to bring out the remarkably original way in which Henry James’s novels address the questions of truth, doubt, and action, and, in *The Golden Bowl*, the problematic of system and subversion. The critical response to William’s *Pragmatism*—that his epistemology had lost sight of the need to acknowledge the power of the objective world—and William’s own emphatic denial in *The Meaning of Truth* that his pragmatism implied any such erasure of the objective world signals, I believe, in a way particularly available to a novelist extremely sensitive to the problems of representation as a matter of literary form, that pragmatism’s attempt to balance fallibilism and anti-scepticism would inevitably turn on the issues of representation and reality, desire and knowledge. Henry James’s novels thus take on the challenge of pragmatism’s critics,³⁰ but by doing so, resist what pragmatism was, in some quarters, to become.

These readings, then, are not “against the grain” of the texts they interpret. Instead, they offer resistance to a predominant trend in critical theory. And this theory has often insisted that literature is a destabilizing practice, a domain of writing not radically Other to philosophy but displaying a certain power of textuality that challenges philosophy’s claim to speak the truth. Also common is the notion that narrative, like philosophy, struggles to suppress the force of Writing through the imposition of falsifying linear-directed plots. It is, of course, a caricature to designate philosophy as logocentric and literature as deconstructive since that binary, like all others, is the product of logocentric categorical pretensions and so is itself subject to deconstruction. Nevertheless, literature has of late been frequently charged with the task of demonstrating, wittingly or not, deconstruction’s sceptical arguments against logocentric presuppositions.³¹ As I have mentioned, the

techniques either pointed to by the critic or deliberately exploited by the writer (intertextuality, self-reference) are taken as exhibiting the radically destabilizing power of language, a power to which literature has, perhaps, superior access, and its producers and readers increased sensitivity. On the other hand, some critics, like Frederick Jameson, bring a deconstruction-influenced sensibility to bear on a text which is assumed to be ideologically complicit in some important respect (or “proven” to be—especially on the principle of exclusion: what is not written in the text is what the text is really about because it tries to keep that outside out, marginal) in order to use that text as an opportunity for a politically oriented criticism, often designed according to the desire to “speak up” for the silenced, marginalized figures, topics, and concerns that the critic champions. If all canonical works are inherently “complicit” with an oppressive system, then the only stance to take with respect to the literary text is an oppositional one, a stance working from the outside in: in these cases, the epistemological standard is the critic’s own, who recognizes the potentially infinite spiral of justification that a formalist reading can generate, and seeks to halt that slip into vertiginous speculation by grounding the reading in a political imperative. Post-colonial critics also affirm—in a manner somewhat similar to my own—that action and conviction form a resistance to the lure (indeed the seduction) of “interminable” analysis; they seek to scrutinize texts from a perspective grounded in the need for both political action and theoretical liberation: here is where the critic stands, where s/he stakes a claim and assumes responsibility for her/his cultural past and for the effects of her/his own discourse.

I mention these alternative approaches because, although my own brief exploration of a possible post-deconstructive epistemology leads me to a similar conclusion with respect to the problems of criteria, foundations, and the relationship between justification and action, I do not feel that the ideologically-oriented critic’s route out of poststructuralism (if I can characterize their work in this manner) is a necessary one. Those approaches assume that since interpretation is always an uncertain endeavor one must adopt a standard

of one's own in order to produce an interpretation that has value as a piece of social criticism, whatever its accuracy as an account of the aesthetic object may be—"accuracy" is still the "naïve" term. It may be assumed that one can make anything of a given text, and so it is only just to "make" of it something that has political leverage against oppression. On the other hand, it may be held that canonical texts are not nearly so ambiguous as all that, indeed that they are often blatant attempts to legitimize tyrannical regimes and institutions, and should be denounced as such. In some cases this latter approach may be valid, but here the critic has left epistemological issues entirely to one side in order to practice cultural criticism (those issues are not left behind, of course, if a thorough-going cultural relativism is advocated or implicitly relied upon; as it should be plain from my discussion above, I am suspicious of such an epistemology because it detaches culture from a materialist base, allowing "culture" to become the sole identification context of human personality). The fallibilist, realist approach that I have attempted to account for here holds, contrary to the textualist approach, that epistemological issues can be investigated from within the text, rather than settled entirely from without by the critic; that although certainty is lacking, reliable access to objects, states of affairs—texts—is possible, and that therefore the "standard" of the critic—though never out of play—is not, or need not be, solely determinative. As readers, we can attempt to discern the implicit epistemology of the text in question, and such is my goal in these readings of James. Though our readings will be influenced by our own "imperative," it need not *dominate* them, and indeed will most likely do so only if we have already assumed that such is inevitably the case.

Narrative, I maintain, is not simply hoisted onto the void of absolute uncertainty and contingency, leaving it the purpose of either satisfying our desire for escape from the evil closures of the social world, or exposing the groundlessness of all knowledge. Narrative can also be the communication of a struggle with precisely the epistemological problems I have dealt with in this chapter: the need to balance justification and action, to

find adequate models for experience, to adjust one's goals in the face of sceptical questioning, and to find the true character of the present, when perception and representation are distinguished on the basis of responsibility to oneself and to the Other. These questions are not apolitical, but they are also not collapsed into the political.³²

The three James novels I want to discuss—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*—are all concerned with the problems of knowledge, desire, and action (moral action and decision, the need to convert belief into practical intervention) but strike very different notes in their handling of the interconnectedness of these issues. In the preface to *The Ambassadors*, James famously observes that Strether's "Live all you can" speech to Little Bilham in the Fifth Book occupies the central position of the text and represents the originating idea of James's composition. He draws the reader's attention to the fact that in Strether's outburst "the word mistake occurs several times," and that the questions generated for Strether by virtue of both the fact of the mistake (specifically, the mistake of having "missed too much" in life) and its explicit recognition as provoked by his experience in Paris are answered in the sense that "he now at all events *sees*": James defines his own project as "the demonstration of this process of vision (xxix-xxx). While it is true that Strether's speech marks the culmination of his intellectual movement away from Woollettian restrictiveness—its moral security and, indeed, its epistemological certainty—the process of vision to which James alludes is only terminated with Strether's discovery of the true nature of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet. After the Book Eleven revelation, Strether does indeed "see" and realize the depths of his mistakes, but this final intellectual shift marks a significant recovery of something he had rejected in attempting to adopt Parisian values and epistemological perspectives. The novel may pivot in the Book Fifth speech, but its main concern is with this process of vision, that is, with the demonstration of Strether's acquisition of what Richard Foley describes in *Working Without a Net* as a non-defensive attitude towards epistemological scepticism, an attitude that entails the rejection of absolute standards of either certainty or doubt, and

resurrects the pertinence of the linear (realist) time of cause and effect and of youth and maturity. Strether, in effect, as I shall argue, finds a middle ground between a priori knowledge which is supremely conducive to decisive action, and a sceptical empiricism which incessantly undercuts such decision—a scepticism which is enlightening as against smug rationalistic certainty, but is equally inhibiting as a ground upon which responsibility to oneself and others can be discharged. James attempts to find this equilibrium through the course of the work, which culminates with a subtle synthesis of opposites that yields the possibility of action with conviction, but also with acknowledged risk.

The Wings of the Dove shifts attention to a consideration of what could be called, ironically appropriating the term from deconstruction, an erasure. Milly Theale's death, the spring of the story, the occasion for the plots written by the conspirators, is itself an erasure of a kind, but James doubles the process back, as it were, by examining the effects an erasure of this erasure has upon the characters attempting to script even the process of her death out of the real. At issue here is the construction by Kate and Merton of a narrative that wants not to be a narrative, that wishes to proceed as though the desire generated and sustained text of exploitation need take only a "textual" account of the source of its expected windfall. James's own strategy is to observe with maximal scrupulousness the seductions and ethical implications of what I have here discussed as Derrida's overwriting of retention by representation and as the Occlusive Fallacy. In *The Golden Bowl*, the stakes are raised. Its structural pattern permits a significant expansion upon the epistemological resolution of *The Ambassadors*, and the relatively contained problematic of *The Wings of the Dove*. Here, Maggie Verver's primary uncertainty is definitively settled in the fourth part of the novel's six-part structure, and the remaining two sections are reserved to examine the consequences of her discovery. In *The Ambassadors*, the revelation in the French countryside hastens a quick conclusion to the novel, Strether acting relatively swiftly and with the air, still, of a detached observer; but the detachment, though costly and strained, is not developed in the text beyond a recognition of consequence. In

The Wings of the Dove, the destruction of Merton's and Kate's relationship under the shadow of the now truly metaphoric Dove is the result of the collision between acts of misrepresentation and the represented betrayed. James's last novel, however, significantly rearranges the pattern of quest (for knowledge), acquisition, and subsequent action (according to the found truths) by resolving the problem of acquisition early and expanding the problem of subsequent application. Maggie, in that Fourth Part, is given a kind of empirical evidence that her husband, the Prince, and Charlotte, her father's wife, have known each other in the past and are currently involved in an adulterous affair. Following this revelation, which merely confirms her suspicions, the novel focuses on Maggie's struggle, in light of her reliable knowledge, to satisfy her desire to protect her father and save her own marriage. Here, knowledge becomes much more entangled with the conflicting forces of desire, and the action achieved on the basis of adequate evidence is rendered far more tragic in light of a new context: the conflict between the agents of dissonance and the members of a subverted system, fully conscious of the challenge.

¹ To anticipate—but also to introduce—the arguments I will be making, I will here note that Peter Dews argues in *The Limits of Disenchantment* that Derrida is forced to acknowledge in more recent work—the essay “The Politics of Friendship,” for example—that “even the most elementary allocution depends upon a primordial co-appurtenance: ‘We would not be in a sort of minimal community—but one which is also incommensurable with any other—speaking the same language, or praying for translation within the horizon of same language . . . if a sort of friendship had not been sealed before any other contract. . . .’ Furthermore, Derrida states: ‘this *anterior* affirmation of being-together in the allocution . . . can no longer be simply integrated, above all it cannot be *presented* as a being present . . . within the space of ontology, precisely because it opens this space’ (632-644, 637). In other words, an affirmation of being-together here plays the role of precondition of the space of ontology which was formerly allotted to *différance*, but it is clear that such an affirmation is something radically other than *différance*. For what is at issue is not the quasi-sceptical reduction of every mode of being to a trace or ‘re-mark’ but, rather, the acknowledgment of a *mode of being* (and, indeed, of a ‘together’ of proximity and belonging—and thus of the *proper*) which is prior to all presence—to all objectification of entities. Such co-belonging surely constitutes an ‘out-of-bounds shelter which watches over the field of language’ (*Of Grammatology* 7). Since it can be neither brought to presence nor shattered by *différance*, it is fundamentally comparable in its structure to what I have here been calling the ‘lifeworld’” (108-09). I will characterize this ‘life-world’ somewhat differently than Dews, but his perception of the contradiction in Derrida's work between his earlier, more strictly textualist analyses, and his later, ethically and politically oriented critiques is telling. At this point of my argument, it is also worth observing that the conflict between the claims that “there is not a single signified that escapes, even if

recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitutes language,” and that writing “reduce[s] all the strongholds, all out-of bounds shelters which watched over the field of language” (*Of Grammatology* 6, 7) on the one hand, and his acknowledgment of a primal co-belonging on the other when questions of ethics and politics come to the fore (in other words, in the face of the necessity of political critique—active “intervention” against conditions that should not be allowed to “escape” unknown and unchallenged), cannot be resolved by claiming that these are two distinct orders of discourse for which different rules of justification apply. Such a saving gesture would not only commit deconstruction to a crass dualism—we have philosophical thought on the one hand, and the practical, political world on the other, and never the twain shall meet—but would also strangle the possibility of a philosophical politics. Only by abandoning the dissonance that Derrida creates in his earlier work—contradicting that work—is he able to avoid dragging it back, as I’ve called it, to the mundane world.

² See also Patrick Bourgeois’s article “The Instant and the Living Present” in which he argues that Derrida ignores the fact, while Ricoeur does not, that “the instant is an abstraction from the continuum, or at best, as Husserl uses the term, merely the occasion for the beginning or starting point of something in experience; and the ‘unity of a temporal present’ is precisely constitutive of the living present, not of an instant which as such does not exist” (35).

³ Or, that it does not go deep enough—into the realm of the pre-semiotic. Peter Dews has argued that “Derrida’s response to this collapse of Husserl’s philosophical project is *not*, like that of Adorno or Merleau-Ponty, to move ‘downstream’ towards an account of subjectivity as emerging from and entwined with the natural and social world, but rather to move ‘upstream,’ in a quest for the ground of transcendental consciousness” (*Logics of Disintegration* 19). It can be argued as well that Derrida’s insistence that any appeal to a reliable perceptual access to the world is a mere relapse into the metaphysics of presence is a version of Kant’s transcendentalism which rejected the idea that we can ever know things in themselves. Derrida substitutes the transcendental structures of the understanding for the mobilized structures generated by *différance*. Dews’s language, I shall also note, invites one to consider not only Merleau-Ponty and Adorno, but William James, for whom the “stream of consciousness” model of experience also serves as a repudiation of the idealist project. I will say more about William James at the conclusion of this chapter.

⁴ I will be arguing, however, that there are evolutionary levels of representation; the sense of touch, for example, provides, relative to linguistic representation, primitive access to environmental information, but what this order of sensory data lacks in complexity and depth is compensated by a concomitant increase in relative reliability within its informational sphere. And since thinking, a process and action at higher information-processing and interpretative levels, always, though in varying degrees, relies on the more primitive levels—we must, for example, touch, see, or hear the texts, bodies, things, or events we read—they (the sensory orders) provide a kind of guardrail for our thinking, interpretative endeavors. Complexity and potency is won, in evolutionary terms, at the price of a greater risk of error. Derrida argues that the phonocentric prejudice blinds us to the fact that, with the “advent” of writing, we need not see or hear the person speaking to read his text, and that therefore the text operates in the absence of the referent, even demands the possibility of the absence of the referent. No doubt. But the physical absence of the speaker or the referent does not eliminate another kind of physical presence: that of the reader to the written text, which must still be seen or touched or heard for it to operate as a text. The statement “A dog is outside your window” will function as a unit of signification whether or not such is the case, indeed, whether any attempt at confirmation is at all possible. But whether I can or cannot investigate the statement’s truth by comparing

its meaning to the texts provided by a visual and aural investigation, for example, of my backyard, does not eliminate the fact that I am in a different cognitive condition if I heard or read this statement, not as above, but as “I have lost my umbrella” (see Derrida’s discussion of this sentence in *Spurs*). A basic perceptual accuracy is assumed even by the arguments Derrida uses to introduce dissonance into the “heart” of all representation, and once that primal accuracy is acknowledged and reckoned with, Derrida’s dissonance begins to lose some of its cogency.

⁵ This obviously implies a rejoinder to the postmodern version of history since I am arguing that facts, though partially determined by interpretations, are also capable of delimiting the class of possible interpretations. Umberto Eco makes this argument as well in his *The Limits of Interpretation*, where he counters the imagined sophisticated student in linguistics, hermeneutics, or semiotics who concludes that a message in a bottle that reads “Dear Friend, In this basket brought by my Slave there are 30 Figs I send you as a Present” can mean *everything* with the argument that, even setting aside the constraints imposed by the historical context in which the message was likely produced, the preliminary lexical meaning must be considered before, not after, various interpretations are applied to the message (5-7). I would also like to follow Christopher Norris and offer the following passage from Perry Anderson’s *Zones of Engagement* in which he responds to the question, “what are the limits of a historical representation of Nazism and the Final Solution?”:

Firstly, certain absolute limits are set by the evidence. Denial of the existence of either—of the regime, or its crimes—is plainly ruled out. No such issue arises in this case. Counter-factuals are also subject to control by the rules of evidence, which will eliminate some of them, as they do in this case. Narrative strategies, to be credible, always operate within *exterior* limits of this kind. Secondly, however, such narrative strategies are in turn subject to *interior* limitation. On the one hand, certain kinds of evidence preclude certain kinds of emplotment—the Final Solution cannot *historically* be written as romance or comedy. On the other hand, any generic emplotment has only a weak determinative power over the selection of evidence. [A historian] could legitimately depict the end of Prussia as tragic; however, that choice, permitted by the evidence, did not in itself dictate the series of particular empirical judgements that make up his account of it. There is a large gap between genre and script. Other, divergent accounts could be written of the same events—and these would not be incommensurable forms, or so many fictions, but epistemologically discriminable attempts to reach the truth. The typical measure of such discrimination is not the presence of *suggestio falsi*, very rare in modern historiography, but in the degree of *suppressio veri*—that is, representation omitted rather than misrepresentation committed. In history, as in the sciences, the depth of a truth is usually a function of its width—how much of the evidence it engages and explains. (Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* 116).

⁶ John Brough comments: “With regard to time’s structure, then, one might put the following suggestions before the deconstructionist: There may be plural times and concepts of time, but they share certain fundamental features; these times may not fit the pattern of a single, unified, linear time, but they do presume the conception of such a time in certain respects; finally, the possibility of an all-embracing time should not be foreclosed by an a priori conception of what is metaphysical and what is not” (535). Perception as linked with retention can be understood as sharing in this more fundamental—or, let me call it “primitive”—time.

⁷ The non-atomistic experience of time to which I am drawing attention should not be understood in terms of Bergson's *durée*. William James certainly expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for Bergson, who also appealed, as I will, to evolutionary theory; I will discuss William's pragmatism and its relevance to my readings of Henry's novels in the last section of this chapter. But what I am arguing for is more compatible with Dilthey's understanding of time which, as Kloppenburg notes, "contains a concrete progressive quality [and thus, I would add, an intelligibility] missing in Bergson's celebrated idea of *durée*" (79). According to Dilthey, "concrete time consists in the indefatigable progression of the present in which what is present immediately becomes past and what is future becomes present. The present is a moment of time being filled with reality. It is a lived experience in contrast to the memory of it" (quoted by Kloppenberg 79). To anticipate somewhat, I will point out here as well that Bergson also argued that since language should be viewed as a product of evolution, our statements and verbalized thoughts are, as Putnam characterizes the Bergsonian view, "tools which enable us to survive *as opposed to* correct representations" (307). Evolutionary theory should not, however, be reduced to a mere survival theory: on the contrary, the distinction that can be drawn on the basis of evolutionary arguments between the pre-semiotic and the semiotic, and the accuracy thesis that the survival model presupposes, allow us to assert that language can indeed provide correct but non-final interpretations.

⁸ See Ricoeur on the significance of the word "still": it provides an alternative framework to the "is/is not" frame (*Time and Narrative Vol I*)

⁹ The "arbitrary" connection between signifier and signified, the argument poststructuralists *explicitly* make, must also imply, if the notion is to have any philosophical significance, the arbitrary connection between the sign and the referent, for if the latter relation is *not* arbitrary—if it is in part determined by the resistances of the referent—then the sign is not simply a matter of conventional determination and thus the signifier's arbitrariness vis-à-vis the signified would only imply the instability of writing as against the relative stability of thought: "writing" would again mean the external cloaking of interior, imperial thought. If the signifier is to have leverage, its instability must disrupt thought's essential movement: admitting that the referent is non-arbitrarily related to the signified already concedes the realist's argument. We can safely, then, translate deconstructionist rhetoric about the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified into the idiom used here. In effect, deconstructionists must take the step I here impute to them or admit irrelevancy: but to take it is to admit absurdity.

¹⁰ Lyotard, for example, reduces all knowledge claims to narratives that cannot be legitimized by meta-narratives or theories of universal application; science is thus no more than a game, a game of disruption, of "paralogy," and not a game of knowledge: *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii-iv and 5.

¹¹ See "Signature/Event/Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

¹² James's exploration of the theme of the clash of cultures or the disengagement from a "home" culture and transposition into a "foreign" one—the so-called international theme—also, as I shall argue, involves a reckoning with nature as a third, epistemological term, a term too frequently overlooked by connoisseurs of Jamesian "fine consciousness" or self-reflexivity.

¹³ Musgrave, Foley, Livingston, Argyros.

¹⁴ Habermas's observation that "Derrida, all denial notwithstanding, remains close to Jewish mysticism" (PDM 183) strikes me as apt: *différance* is the essentially unknowable absolute condition of possibility.

¹⁵ Derrida considers it a decisive move against Husserl to note that "The absence of intuition—and therefore of the subject of the intuition—is not only *tolerated* by speech; it is *required* by the general structure of signification when considered *in itself*" (*Speech and Phenomena* 93).

¹⁶ See Derrida's "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

¹⁷ Derrida describes the operation of dissemination as being more "explosive" than the mere recognition of ambiguity or multivalency; dissemination reveals what is hidden by logocentric discourse: "If dissemination, seminal *différance*, cannot be summarized into an exact conceptual tenor, it is because the force and form of its disruption *explode* the semantic horizon. The attention brought to bear on polytheism or polythematism doubtless represents progress in relationship to the linearity of the monothematic writing or reading that is always anxious to anchor itself to the tutelar meaning, the *principle* signified of a text, that is, its major referent. Nevertheless, polysemia, as such, is organized within the implicit horizon of a unitary resumption of meaning. . . . Dissemination, on the contrary, although producing a nonfinite number of semantic effects, can be led back neither to a present of simple origin . . . nor to an eschatological presence. It marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity" (*Positions* 45). The generative effects of such readings radically throw into question the authority of the prime referent, the source, according to Derrida, of meaning.

¹⁸ And the combination of "passivity" and power informs James's depiction of Charlotte and the Prince at their moment of triumph, as well as Milly's posthumous influence over Merton.

¹⁹ To re-iterate, for Derrida possible failure is always prior to any "empirical" success, throwing the very notion of success into doubt. "Signature Event Context" makes it clear that Derrida will only account for the occurrence of successful performatives if they are first placed under the abstract category of event or happening: "Such events [making bets, launching boats, etc.], it appears, have occurred. I will say 'perhaps.' Here, we must first agree upon what the 'occurring' or the eventhood of the event consists in" (*Margins* 326). Derrida is unwilling to address the singular event without first submitting it to the absolute rigour of its conceptualization, at which level, by virtue of iteration, the eventhood of the event will lose its singularity, its self-identity. Derrida thus diffuses the difficulty of accounting for success by turning to the abstract level to show that, in the absolute sense, there is no success. In light of this strategy, Derrida can be said to reject even the limited adequacy theory I here outline.

²⁰ My focus on the *intelligibility* of the pre-semiotic world available to us as embodied subjects, a condition that establishes both our connection with and separation from the natural world, distinguishes my position from that of Foucault (and other postmodernists like Deleuze and Guattari) who, after he had shifted his attention from an historical analysis of the ways power writes the body in *Discipline and Punish*, adopted a thoroughly Nietzschean view of the body as the site of self-creation; Foucault's aestheticization of the self serves his view that power and desire are primary, and again submits the body to our creative practices: "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (*Foucault Reader*

351). This self-creation without recourse to knowledge erases the limitations that are imposed on us by the body that *is*, in an important sense, given to us: the self is certainly not a given, but the bodily aspect of the self, the irreducible distinctness of persons, also imposes certain constraints which we can come to know. If the body is essential to the self, and if, as I have argued, scientific inquiry, as the most extreme example, is a legitimate attempt to know materiality and is not a mere *construction* of the physical world, then self-creation can only properly proceed in concert with our knowledge of the body that is, with respect to our creative activity, a given—given in the sense that it may resist our attempts to write it otherwise. On the most mundane level, however much I may wish to make my life a work of art, I cannot live the story or the genre of “world-class grand prix driver” if I am blind. I also know that whatever genre I can play, it had better include a subplot involving the acquisition of food and shelter; in fact, for most, that may be the most important theme in the entire narrative.

²¹ *Blessed Rage for Order*, chapter 5

²² “The efficiency and the form of signs that do not obey these rules [Husserl’s “normalcy” rules, on Derrida’s reading], that is, that do not promise any knowledge, can be determined as nonsense only if one has antecedently, and according to the most traditional philosophical move, defined sense in general on the basis of truth as objectivity. Otherwise we would have to relegate to absolute nonsense all poetic language that transgresses the laws of this grammar of cognition and is irreducible to it” (*Speech and Phenomena* 99). Derrida here permits no middle ground. On the contrary, however, there can be relative objective-ity (language attempting to recognize the pre-existent) against which we understand the variations proposed and imagined by poetic discourse that need not be defined as nonsense.

²³ *Dialectic of Nihilism*. See also her “Of Derrida’s Spirit” where she writes: “Since to establish demarcations [which Derrida warns against in a passage Rose analyzes at length] is coterminous with conceiving as such, [Derrida’s] reasoning disqualifies all thinking, including its own. It prohibits any and all political discrimination between inclusive and exclusive political ideals, and forecloses any perception or judgment that inclusive political promises may presuppose and perpetuate exclusivity: in short, it destroys the possibility of *critique* and leaves only “thematics,” which amounts to *listings*” (452).

²⁴ Habermas’s consensus model of truth is inadequate because, although it holds to the continued value of rational disputation, the foundation upon which we can rely to achieve agreement is said to be language: “not every linguistically mediated interaction is an example of action oriented to reaching understanding,” but “the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the *original mode* of language use” (*Theory of Communicative Action I*, 287-88); “Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus” (*Knowledge and Human Interests* 314). Habermas, finding the possibility of uncoerced agreement in language itself, converts “understanding” into an original “agreement” or “consensus.” But his account reduces agreement to a kind of formal equivalence and thus suppresses the possibility of an “agreement of judgments” and the externality that judgment implies. If, however, as I am arguing, the common ground upon which we stand is pre-semiotic, then agreement is possible, but so is genuine disagreement: even universal consensus does not eliminate the possibility that we may be wrong since, as I have been arguing, there are more than conversational constraints on inquiry. Acknowledging our shared participation in the pre-semiotic allows us to view truth claims as subject to *both* cultural (conventional) constraints *and* the constitution of the world. Habermasian theory, and all consensus models of truth (including those of a certain kind of pragmatism such as Rorty’s), focus exclusively on

those forces which distort our “conversations.” See J. B. Thompson’s “Universal Pragmatics” in *Habermas: Critical Debates*.

²⁵ Ross Posnock observes in his *The Trial of Curiosity*, a searching contextualist/comparative study of Henry James as culture critic, “For anyone seeking to place Henry James within an intellectual context, it is not long before William James’s priority, which Henry found ‘proper and pre-appointed,’ asserts itself” (x).

²⁶ It is important to note that Husserl’s analysis of the living present, which Derrida attempts to deconstruct (as I discuss above), may owe a great deal to William’s own definition of the present as “a saddle-back, with a certain breath of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time” (*The Principles of Psychology*, vol 1, 609). See Evans, *Strategies of Deconstruction*, 102.

²⁷ Richard Hocks gives a thorough account of the relation between Henry’s literary practice and William’s philosophy in *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought*, although I find his thesis that Henry’s fiction is a kind of embodiment of William’s pragmatism rather extreme given the well-documented rivalry between the brothers and the strong possibility of irony in Henry’s letters such as the two I have myself quoted. Posnock also argues that “Henry’s own views reflected decisive temperamental and philosophical differences with William’s philosophy. A careful reading of Henry’s epistolary responses reveals his concern to distance himself even as he lavishes praise on his brother’s pragmatism” (92). I comment below on Posnock’s thesis about these philosophical differences, but let it suffice to say here that I share his desire to avoid completely identifying Henry’s thinking with William’s. Nevertheless, the complement to Henry’s definition of the real which I used as an epigraph to this study is this famous passage from William’s *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*:

The best definition [of the real] is that which the pragmatist rule gives: ‘Anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way.’ Concepts are thus as real as percepts, for we cannot live a moment without taking account of them. But the “eternal” kind of being which they enjoy is inferior to the temporal kind, because it is so static and schematic and lacks so many characters which temporal reality possesses. Philosophy must thus recognize many realms of reality which mutually interpenetrate. (101-102)

²⁸ The use of the word “immediate” will immediately ring warning bells for poststructuralists for whom immediacy can mean nothing other than source-point of certainty and the elimination of all mediation. William James’s understanding of experience—the original unity of subject and object from which the abstractions of self and other are then derived—does not in the least entail a certainty thesis (See “Experience” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 95). I have followed James to a certain extent by appealing throughout this chapter to lived experience, but have tried to characterize that experience with reference to evolutionary theory (as did James, but for different purposes). On my account, lived experience is layered: it involves, in a sense, our entire evolutionary history; the “physical” aspects of experience trace their past beyond the specifically human. I have adopted this tactic, in part, to ward off the feeling that William’s appeal to experience solves the problem of dualism by simply *defining* experience as the original unity. Although he certainly never used experience as a way to ground certainty, his terminology, besides tempting poststructuralist criticisms, seems to me to run the risk of narrowing the hierarchical spectrum of experience and thus over-estimating the extent to which representation shapes the truths of certain kinds of statements. The depth model I use to help define experience has the advantage of stressing both the permanent necessity of

representation and the relative stability of the relation between (some) statements and the world to which they refer. Henry James's novels are also, of course, deeply interested in "experience," Strether's "live all you can" speech, as well as "The Beast in the Jungle," being the most famous examples of the Jamesian imperative that one should not sacrifice life to thought alone (or to expectation). The temptation to reduce experience to thought or to representation is, of course, a key subject in my readings of his last three novels.

²⁹ Putnam, in his "The Permanence of William James," glosses James's definition of the expediency of truth as follows: "It emerges that different types of statements correspond to different *types* of 'expediency'; there is no suggestion that an arbitrary statement is true if it is expedient in any way at all (even 'in the long run'). For example, the view often attributed to James—that a statement is true if it will make people subjectively *happy* to believe it—is explicitly *rejected* by him [in "The Meaning of Truth," presumably in response to criticisms of *Pragmatism*]. In the case of paradigm "factual" statements, including scientific ones, a sort of expediency that James repeatedly mentions is usefulness for prediction, while other desiderata—conservation of past doctrine; simplicity; and coherence ('what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted')—are said to apply to statements of all types" (9-10, footnotes omitted). My own view is that the temptation to reduce the pragmatist conception of truth to meaning nothing more than "use," and to understand "use" entirely within the parameters of desire, is pragmatism's perpetual critical problem, as the history of its interpretation confirms, and as the need for the explicit rejection of the primacy of that doctrine in *The Meaning of Truth* acknowledges. Rorty's postmodern version of pragmatism converts the temptation into the view that it is impossible to think otherwise, just as Derrida, as I have argued, converts the impossibility of immediacy and absolute certainty into a thesis about the a priori inevitability of error. The difference between Rorty and Derrida on this question is that while Rorty tries utterly to renounce certainty only to embrace the doctrine of certain impossibility (of knowing whether words agree with reality), Derrida's insistence that we can never escape the metaphysics of presence amounts to the claim that the absolute epistemological standard is necessary even though it can never be met. Rorty's unacknowledged "craving" is Derrida's doctrine.

³⁰ I do not wish, however, to make a strong assertion about Henry James's deliberate intentions. Although I obviously do not subscribe to the now-dead "death of the author" thesis, I also do not want to attribute entirely to Henry's calculation the conjunction of forces present in the novels—their examination of the temptations to convert pragmatism into anti-realist scepticism and to rely for the purposes of that conversion on arguments stressing the omni-presence of representation. It is enough to note that the form of the temptation was historically available and to suggest that the temptation's conversion to the "language" of representation was congenial to a writer of supreme literary/critical sensitivity.

Ross Posnock makes a similar argument (though he is less cautious, perhaps, about James's deliberate intentions), but arrives at the opposite conclusion: that James, like his contemporary Georg Simmel, "believes in the primacy of form and representation as constraints that give meaning to human conduct" (97), and that "[f]or all his renown as a psychological novelist, Henry James conceives of the representation of consciousness not as a descent into psychic depths in search of truth [“or [as] a questing for the unmediated”] but as a dissolving of the stable oppositions—depth and surface, inside and outside—that define outside and intelligible entity. Thus, his most lucid reflectors—Maggie Verver and Strether, for instance—have the most permeable, emphatic selves: 'I seem to have a life only for other people,' typifies Strether's sense of non-identity (*Ambassadors* 160)" (103). I will argue that while this account accurately reflects James's concern to challenge those

who pursue absolute truth, it ignores James's critique of scepticism and the way his novels ultimately undermine both Strether's excessive "openness" and Maggie's hyperbolic sense of power—a sense generated precisely by Charlotte's and the Prince's "deconstruction" of her identity. James's questioning of transcendental truths does not entail his adoption of pan-representationalism.

Nevertheless, Posnock does, I think, convincingly demonstrate that Henry James found fertile material in William's pragmatism and, most importantly, in the conjunction between William's work and that of his critics:

In distancing himself from William's subjectivism, Henry anticipates a significant reaction against pragmatism and *Lebensphilosophie* in general that began in the 1920's. It is observable in Dewey's important work *Experience and Nature* (1925), which both continues William James's critique of intellectualism (the proposition that "all experience is a mode of knowing") but tacitly rejects its irrational worship of flux for its own sake. . . . Dewey's critique and reconstruction of subjectivism represents an intriguing heterogeneous strategy that performs, in Henry James's phrase, a whole revolution: it retains life philosophy's valorization of dynamism and rejection of stasis without veering into the subjectivism of Bergson (whom Dewey sharply critiques) or of William James's pluralism. Dewey's stress on the subject's embeddedness in a preexisting object world emphasizes the primacy of interaction—"the one unescapeable trait of every human concern." (93-94, footnotes omitted)

It is characteristic of poststructuralist critics—and Posnock follows suit on this point—to assume that the "subject's embeddedness in a preexisting object world" means nothing more than that the subject is written by the texts of culture—that there is no context that is not entirely constructed by human endeavor (the phrase "by human interpretations" is, strictly speaking, inappropriate since it still implies something anterior to representation). Julie Rivkin, for example, in her recent Derridean analysis of Henry James, argues:

[T]echnique is never simply technique; rather as a *tekne*, the mechanism for not only rendering visible but also constituting cultural meanings, it is an essential component of cultural meanings and of history. I am alluding to the distinction Derrida makes between *physis* and *tekne*, essence and mimetic representation, where *tekne* is traditionally treated as the debased artificial supplement to a primordial natural matter. But if *tekne* is the medium through which *physis* not only becomes apparent but also comes to exist at all, then there can be no interpretation of the matter of culture or history except through its techniques and forms. Culture is form, and social history is the record of the various techniques that have been used to fabricate the values, institutions, and roles that are read as social reality. (5, *False Positions*, footnote omitted)

Rivkin asserts that representation (*tekne*) "constitutes" cultural meanings, that it actually brings *physis* into existence, and that the "primordial natural matter" is really the product of representation. We are thus told (she is *certain* of this, it's well settled, we've all moved on) that "culture is form" and that our "values, institutions, and roles" are fabrications. Well, they may be questionable, but it is a little too easy to say that they are mere fabrications: some of them are the result of pressures exerted by a world that did exist before there were any human techniques. We didn't fabricate water. And it's safe to assume that water has influenced the shape (not to mention the location) of culture and its practices. If that's true, then cultural representations are at least in part a *response to* and an *interpretation of* conditions that are prior to those representations. Some of them cannot be

changed simply by a universal shift in representational preferences. Even if we all decide that water is evil, we had better harmonize that decision with some substitute practice or we'll all be dead. In other words, the pre-representational pressures must also be dealt with. We are also, then, "embedded" in *that* pre-text object world and it is *this* context that Dewey did not forget, nor did Henry James; his novels, one could say, hold pragmatism to this anchor.

³¹ Rivkin concludes her introduction to *False Positions* with these comments:

What is the version of Henry James that emerges from such a study? It might be tantalizing to argue that if James's fiction can be read as destabilizing gender and class identities in addition to problematizing the narratives that secure those identities, he is really, under that tightly buttoned waistcoat, an unacknowledged political radical. But such a claim would constitute a wild misrecognition. Instead I would argue that James's traditionalism, his attraction to the old world as well as the Old World, exists in quotation marks, since his fiction acknowledges the representational nature of such apparent cultural stability and tradition. Revision, the hallmark of James's compositional practice, might be claimed of his cultural stance as well. What such a position emphasizes is that it is through issues of representation that a writer like James comes to read his culture, and thus through what I've been calling a new formalism that we come to read not only James but also the culture whose mechanisms of self-construction he so ably described.

It may be a "wild misrecognition" to call James a political radical, but it sure is "tantalizing." The more radical the better, I suppose. But, no, he is just a revisionist, which means, apparently—since the term is transposed from James's compositional practice—that culture, like prose, could always use a good editor and a bit of polishing because it is never *perfect*. Since, for James, tradition is not stable—it can be changed and is hence never final, eternal, and set—his traditionalism is "in quotation marks." This kind of argumentation would, however, make every so-called traditionalist, save absolute fundamentalists (who claim to know the word of god—deconstruction's only real enemy[and friend]), a "traditionalist." Nevertheless, considering the close fit Rivkin finds between poststructuralism (particularly deconstruction) and James's fiction, it is somewhat telling that she feels obliged to withhold from James the ultimate critical accolade—radical. Perhaps poststructuralism is itself a tepid revisionism, and perhaps James's fiction sees through it.

³² The narrative experience I'm referring to implies a complex, layered temporality that nevertheless has as a minimal condition of possibility an underlying linearity and intelligibility—but that does not imply the possibility of any final meaning. Millicent Bell, in *Meaning in Henry James*, writes that "the danger of seeing the text from a *fixed point* [as Barthes recommends—my italics], our state of mind after reading it through, is that it falsifies our adventure as readers. That adventure has consisted of disappointments and unanticipated pleasures. We have experienced a succession of states of mind, each different, linked thought they are by recollection and prediction. Criticism has tended to emphasize something different in finding in James and other writers what is called 'ambiguity' or even 'undecidability,' a condition of possibilities of interpretation among which it is impossible to make a *final* choice. But in any extended fiction, things happen one at a time—despite all devices to give the effect of simultaneity—because they have an order in the telling. At any particular moment of importance, choice *is* possible" (7-8). If "reading" is this linear (with complications) experience of understanding, and "interpretation," on the other hand, speaks from the "fixed point" of second and subsequent readings (narrative surprises are no longer surprises), then my own project is to "read"

James's texts as well as acknowledge both the readings and the interpretations that are in them.

CHAPTER 3:
EXTREME TEXTS AND CLOSED BOOKS
in *THE AMBASSADORS*

I: Absolute Delegations

In *The Ambassadors*, the truth is ambiguous, but must, at least narratively, be found out: whatever Strether's disposition, the novel moves inexorably to the unveiling of the depths that can be named "a virtuous attachment." Strether's mission—to urge Chad to leave Paris and its temptations and return home to Woollett where a great business opportunity awaits him—is quickly transformed into the much more complex problem of negotiating the terms of settlement between Chad and Madame de Vionnet on the one hand, and Mrs Newsome, Chad's mother, on the other. Each side expects adequate, or more precisely, profitable representation of its own interests to the other side, but Strether's position becomes increasingly anxiety-ridden because of the nature of the information with which he must deal, and the intellectual disposition he is capable of adopting towards it. The Newsome position, for which he is initially the only representative, demands and seems to enable, by virtue of a pact of almost legal agency, a very definitive set of actions on Strether's part, which he swiftly finds inappropriate and so delays until finally declining; the game played by Chad and de Vionnet, on the other hand, is built on suggestion, ambiguity, and the subtle manipulation of intention. If Strether is Newsome's mere (legal) agent—in the sense that the authority and intentionality are strictly hers, and only the performing capacity is devolved onto the "employee" Strether—under de Vionnet's more delicate touch, Strether is made to feel himself an almost autonomous agent, possessed with the power not only to translate desire into personally determined action, but also to accomplish the far more grand project of "saving" de Vionnet—and the

religious overtones of this task are not underplayed. Towards these conflicting charges of duty, Strether can adopt only the extreme responses of acceptance or rejection, and both create distorted reflections of the power of agency and the capacity to adequately model the true conditions that underpin—and form the assumptions for—the two charges. Strether moves from (assigned) God-like knowledge, certain, pre-determined action, but feeble personal initiative (an action which is firm but not his) under the Newsome agency, to the opposite extreme of supreme epistemological ambiguity, indeterminate vision of alternatives for action, but divine capacity to effect a positive result under the Vionnet agency.¹ The complex movement of Strether's response to these warring perspectives depends on his understanding of Chad's condition. Appropriate to the character of her brief to Strether, Newsome pretends to know it absolutely; the Parisians imply that it is essentially unknowable. What Strether is led to discern is that these extremes, which, in light of my discussion in the second chapter, can be characterized as the difference between rationalist dogmatism and deconstructionist scepticism—a difference with a fundamental, crippling similarity—must both yield to an intermediate view that holds to the possibility of accurate discovery as against the sceptic's position, but ambiguous—and therefore ethical—interpretative implementation as against the rationalistic one of Newsome: Strether finds action in what Ricoeur calls "considered conviction" (*Oneself as Another* 288) or in the dialectic of the thick present where "two acceptations of responsibility, prospective and retrospective, join together and overlap" (*Oneself as Another* 295) rather than in certainty or doubt.

The absolute rigor of Mrs Newsome's vision of Chad that she attempts to pass to Strether is questioned from the first words of the text ("Strether's first question . . .") and the success of her perspective in adequately defining the terms of the relationship between her son and Paris (and "bad" women) is almost immediately dismissed by the narrative voice; the subtle trap here, however, into which poststructuralist critics typically fall, is that the certainty of Newsome's conception, which presumes to account for a limited set of

evidence (lack of written correspondence from Chad, his lengthy stay in Paris when wealth, position, and family await him back home) with a definite conclusion, is itself subjected to a most summary dismissal—the kind of rejection that signifies in James inadequate consideration, a lack of imagination. Strether immediately swerves from what he considers more sober courses of action by falling in with Mrs Gostrey, an event and a relation which he assures her will cost him his past—“in one great lump” (31): the feeling of separation, disjunction, dislocation is extreme—a complete break with the past is immediately announced and eventually effected in no uncertain terms with Strether’s request to Chad in Book Sixth that he remain in Paris rather than leave. Much later in the text—in Book Eleventh, just before the final revelation—Strether offers this assessment of the nature and quality of Mrs Newsome’s assignment, and the character she puts forth through it:

That’s just her difficulty—that she doesn’t admit surprises. It’s a fact that, I think, describes and represents her; and it falls in with what I tell you—that she’s all, as I’ve called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there’s no room left: no margin, as it were, for any alteration. She’s filled as full, packed as tight, as she’ll hold, and if you wish to get anything more or different either out or in— (376)

Gostrey completes this thought by noting that any alteration would require a complete “make over” of the woman herself, to which Strether offers the definitive assertion, “What it comes to . . . is that you’ve got morally and intellectually to get rid of her” (376). The disruption that the opening pages of the novel begin to trace is Strether’s retreat from the intense figure of Newsome’s compact conception, his sense that he could not be “booked by her vision” (379) in the face of Parisian impressions. But the extreme nature of both Newsome’s interpretation and the reaction against it that Strether here asserts (one must “get rid of her”) signals a curious parallel between the rejected version and the newly accepted one in Paris—a parallel ignored or downplayed by critics who characterize Strether’s Parisian education in deconstructive terms and who endorse without reservation his new sensitivity to the radical instability of signification. Strether’s reversion to Parisian

values, by virtue of the similarity evident in his submission to extreme orientations with respect to the understanding of experience, is no less insecure, though its perspective seems radically open to “surprises” and hence to be the reverse of “find cold thought.” Despite the overt rejection of Newsome’s book (which, though the implications of Strether’s refusal to remain bound by her vision are examined throughout the text, is practically achieved the first moment Strether meets Chad: to read the novel from the Parisian perspective is, curiously, to read it statically), we must consider the extent to which the text recuperates that book—the extent to which Newsome is *right*. She correctly foretold that a love interest holds Chad in Paris, that, in effect, material, linear causality still obtains in Paris and thus that Chad is available for explanatory discrimination, that his transformation is intelligible. While more traditional critical commentary has acknowledged the dashing of Strether’s romantic excesses, it did not fully address the epistemological implications of this apparent reversal—in fact, the “correction” of Parisian excess is prepared for very early on, the undercurrent of degeneration counterpointing Strether’s mental liberation: far from being a sudden turn around, the correction terminates a subtle critique of extreme epistemologies. While I thus think that poststructuralists are right to foreground epistemological issues and to read Paris under the sign of Derrida, they, unlike the traditionalists, neglect, as I’ve said, to give due weight to James’s critique of doubt as well as of certainty.

II: Subverting Causation and Linear Time:

Woollettian Continuities and Parisian Ruptures

The reversion to Parisian values occurs most shockingly in Book Third with Chad’s unexpected late arrival at the theatre: he enters the box occupied by Strether, Gostrey, and Waymarsh and has a profoundly unsettling effect on Newsome’s wayward agent. The passage is worth examining in some detail. James underscores the dramatic

character of Chad's sudden appearance by aligning it with the rising of the curtain and the fall of the theatre crowd's hush, signaling a performance both below on the stage and above in Strether's theatre box; at both locations, a moment of revelation, an unveiling, is occurring, the folding forth of a moment of aesthetic effect.² Chad's presence, protected and made awful by the "decorous silence" of the crowd attentive to the other stage, occupies the absolute centre of Strether's own consciousness, and holds command there by virtue of the enforced absence of conversation. Unlike the Newsome "book," which sustains itself through the mediation of letters sent across the Atlantic and the employment of agent representatives, Chad himself here creates a startling effect by relying on a purely visual scene of almost overwhelming impact. Strether's sensibility is assaulted by an absolute incongruity which defies cognitive access, utterly destroying the pretensions of the Newsome prediction in a single moment of alterity:

He was in presence of a fact that occupied his whole mind, that occupied for the half-hour his senses themselves altogether. . . . The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself in the connexion, *without margin* [my emphasis—note that this phrase is echoed in Strether's later description of Newsome's rigid expectations] or allowance. . . . He asked himself if, by any chance, before he should have in some way to commit himself, he might feel his mind settled to the new vision, might habituate it, so to speak, to the remarkable truth. But oh it was too remarkable, the truth; for what could be more remarkable than this sharp rupture of an identity? You could deal with a man as himself—you couldn't deal with him as somebody else. (96)

The hyperbolic effect of this experience of Chad as radically other—as almost absolutely outside and exterior to Strether's preconceptions as well as the totalizing control of Mrs Newsome's book—is also achieved by his physical appearance, for his black hair is now streaked with grey, and his face betrays no connection with his Woollett origins: "It would have been hard for a young man's face and air to disconnect themselves more completely than Chad's at this juncture from any discerned, from any imaginable aspect of a New England female parent" (99). The language employed here may for the contemporary reader recall the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who attempts to articulate a thought that would escape the closure and totalizing tendencies of a philosophy of representation which

always, he claims, reduces the Other to an aspect of the Same and so defies its otherness: for Levinas, an escape from this internalization and neutralization of the Other is available in radical experiences of alterity, an epiphany of the face as Other that signifies an absolute exteriority transcending and destroying the solipsism of the Same. Representation, on this account, is idealistic and solipsistic, a mode of access to the not-self that ultimately imprisons one in, as Ricoeur characterizes it, the “stubbornly closed, locked up, separate ego” (*Oneself as Another*, 337).

What interests me here, though, is that in the James text, where Chad’s appearance is indeed rendered as an epiphany, a revelation of disruption and disconnection with the past, the context provided for the epiphany—and the further developments of Strether’s understanding of Chad and his connections in Paris—implicitly challenges the extreme ethics and epistemology that such forceful intrusions into consciousness are meant to exemplify and legitimize. The Levinasian position is, from the Jamesian perspective, a corrective to one extreme (Newsome’s transcendental rationalism—its imperviousness to disconfirming or “surprising” experience), but a danger in its own right. The omni-representational perspective of Derridean deconstruction, on the other hand, which is surely not solipsistic but which, as I’ve argued, does tend towards idealism because of its reliance on the vulnerability of an absolute standard of knowledge and on its unwillingness to tolerate a distinction between representation and retention, is also implicitly challenged by the evolving context that James provides for Strether’s experience.

The radical separation that Chad’s appearance evokes for Strether achieves its hyperbolic effect precisely because of the equally extreme vision of Mrs Newsome which had set the stage of his expectations. Undoubtedly, the closed-world sterility of the woman’s vision immediately encourages flight, indeed an immersion into an opposite world dominated by fiction, ruled by desire, and sharp with the sense of possibility. Before the Book Third turn of events, Strether sees the Newsome “book” performed on the stage in the form of a drama in which “there was a bad woman in a yellow frock who made

a pleasant weak good-looking young man in perpetual evening dress do the most dreadful things”; Strether finds himself drifting into a “certain kindness . . . for its victim” (36). The implication of the stage doubling of the pre-written Woollett version of Chad’s affairs is that the certainty provided by Newsome is in its “fine cold thought” already the companion of an imagination suited for the melodramatic stage; such a thought is not the opposite of the lurid imagination, but its correlative. Strether’s immersion in Parisian “aesthetic life” presents itself as radical break, but is in a crucial aspect a *continuation* of the same, although in a different register. Indeed, Newsome’s book and Chad’s revelatory appearance are both said to leave Strether upon initial confrontation in a position and state of consciousness “without margin” (see quotations above). Chad’s explosive appearance replays the Newsome book as visual stage rather than documented truth, but depends upon a strictly parallel though inverted principle: what is presented here cannot be doubted. Woollett certainty gives way to a certain doubt about that previously held certainty—a dogmatic scepticism.

And indeed, despite carrying Newsome’s brief with him to Paris, he has also arrived equipped with one capacity entirely suited to appreciate Chad’s dramatic performance: an ability to live or think outside the confines of his immediate context. During his first conversation with Gostrey at the station, after she jests that he may be terrified of meeting again his old friend Waymarsh, he replies that he wants “out,” and explains:

Oh no—not that [out of waiting for Waymarsh]. . . . But out of the terror. You did put your finger on it a few minutes ago. It’s general, but it avails itself of particular occasions. That’s what it’s doing for me now. I’m always considering something else; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror. I’m considering at present for instance something else than *you*. (13)

If Newsome’s certainty makes her (and her perfect representatives, one of whom Strether proves himself not to be) blind to radical variations beyond the book of her expectations, Strether implicitly recognizes that whatever element of Newsome’s perspective he carries with him implies a deflection of attention from present objects of intentionality—the over-

arching, transcendental intention dominates to the point of erasure the actually present. Certainty, that is, obscures the qualifications evident in the present. His “terror,” his obsession with the “other thing”—what he will find, what Chad will turn out to be—is also an incessant looking ahead, waiting for confirmation of what has already been decided. This is not Newsome’s own understanding of her vision, but Strether, weak transporter of that view, extracts from it its functional character, and it accords perfectly with what Chad needs to achieve his effect. Strether’s terror will no longer be of his own alienation from the present, but of his sudden confrontation with and absorption in the present—or rather, the “present,” the moment, only as the “other thing” itself, the Other made manifest. Chad’s alterity is terrifying and attractive at the same time because it seems, at this stage, to confute and destroy Strether’s alienation and deliver him over to a present that is more than simply the thing itself: Chad is shockingly there (Strether’s attention diverts not in the smallest degree; he considers during the performance nothing else) and, at the same time, so completely not there by virtue of his difference. The perpetually “different” of Strether’s “something else” which threw his consciousness forward to the next thing or away to abstraction and expectation becomes, through and in Chad, lodged in the present itself as perpetual self-difference. Chad is not, then, as Rivkin suggests, the representative, for Strether, of absolute experience (*False Positions* 76) since Chad’s shattering presence/absence breaks experience itself. The secret compatibility of Newsome’s certainty and Chad’s performed scepticism lies in their shared exploitation of obsession: the former denies the present in its yearning for the a priori, the latter clutches desperately at the present in order to sever rational connections (the tendrils of its enemy) and insinuate dissonance into the heart of experience. The Other and the One are companions.

The artfully displaced connection between these two versions of intellectual domination—Chad’s possession of Strether’s consciousness cannot be tied so closely to Newsome’s similar claim until the far distant moment in Book Eleventh—permits a suspension of judgment by the reader (as is the case with Strether) of the epistemological

standards of Chad's and de Vionnet's Paris until after those standards have been thoroughly examined, and especially until after Strether's own Parisian immersion is replayed for him via the attempted seduction of Sarah Pocock of the second delegation. The re-examination offered by this doubling then leads to Strether's assessment that Newsome's book is "without margin," and the preparation for the final revelation is complete: the flaw in Chad's own closed book is finally exposed. Newsome had posited, in effect, an absolute continuity from Woollett to Paris: a continuity of authorship—mother as son's unquestionable source of identity and of moral, social, and financial security; and a continuity of temporal connection in causation—Chad must be as he was, or an intervening cause has usurped the mother's role, an interruption that must be of comparable force to a mother's authorship. Chad's text purports just the reverse, not continuity but break, radical change, temporal disruption. His grey-streaked hair indicates his dislocation from Woollett time and his occupation in a world where time obeys and represents the quality of experience rather than marking its own autonomy. Chad becomes a sign of the confutation of linear temporality in favour of self-defined temporal flow that is the creation of the subject or subjects who wear its effects. Chad is never given credit for absolute self-definition, but the cultural scene of Paris, with de Vionnet as its prime symbol (in Strether's mind) *is* accorded such status. And the defining characteristic of this cultural world, as is often noted by critics, is its devotion to the surface and show of social life, the aesthetic creation of the terms of all meaning. The flaw, as I've called it, is revealed after much delay, and it is the assumption of autonomy, the assertion of relation without foundation, and the attempt to subordinate absolutely the constraining effects of time to the desire of time without direction. The Newsome book cannot be utterly rejected because, although in an extreme fashion, it did have intellectual purchase on the subject of its inquiry by virtue of recognizing its own confinement within transcendental time.

But Chad, de Vionnet, and Paris must first exert their necessary caution against the domination of the *a priori* determinations of Woollett. The first encounter with Chad in the

theatre box immediately challenges Strether's authority to act according to his office, defined by Newsome, since that authority relied as well on his own mature age: before presenting his arguments to Chad, Strether realizes that the effect of Chad's dramatic self-presentation—connoting social grace, tact, and experience—serves to reverse their relative age relation and consequently subvert this basis of Strether's agency. Strether feels that “if he was himself moreover to be treated as young he wouldn't at all events be so treated before he should have struck out at least once. His arms might be pinioned afterwards, but it would be left on record that he was fifty” (101). The impact of Chad's feigned age and social maturity had, in the theatre box, made Strether feel himself stunned into a state of powerlessness and youth, indeed had converted him into a passive observer of Chad's performance, which he watched “like a schoolboy wishing not to miss a minute of the show” (98); time is out of joint. Later, confronting Chad with Newsome's ineffectual reasons for departure, Strether exhausts the terms of his Woollett contract and begins his education in Parisian aesthetics and its implicit epistemology. Strether recognizes the assumption defining both of these disciplines almost immediately, noting that with respect to Chad “what it came to was that with an absolutely new quantity to deal with one simply couldn't know” (105). Mrs Gostrey, earlier, had asked Strether the identity of the objects produced in Woollett by the Newsome industry, but the latter had refused, promising to satisfy her curiosity later; the postponement prompts this intrusive comment from the narrator:

But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the sequel never was to tell her. He actually never did so, and it moreover oddly occurred that by the law, within her, of the incalculable, her desire for the information dropped and her attitude to the question converted itself into a positive cultivation of ignorance. In ignorance she could humour her fancy, and that proved a useful freedom. She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnamable—she could make their abstention enormously definite. (42)

Gostrey's “cultivation of ignorance” and her conversion of the unnamed to the unnamable permits an imaginative “freedom” precisely by forcing, even in this so trite (but indicative) case, epistemological questions to the side: it is not known, and so cannot be known—on

this assumption, “fancy” has its widest play. Strether adopts this attitude with reservations—he continues to speculate about Chad’s “type”—but in the face of Chad’s transformation, explanations are deemed not only inadequate, they are regarded as either irrelevant or as mere constructions for the sake of personal convenience, just as time itself is reduced to being little more than an accoutrement of style. Chad and de Vionnet, it is implied, play upon a sensibility inclined, like Gostrey’s, to convert the unspecified into the absolute absence of grounds.

The epistemological abyss signaled by Chad’s appearance leads Strether in two directions, each sustained by the assumed irrelevance of Newsome’s perspective and its claim to “know” Chad and Paris (Sarah later remarks that she “knows Paris,” a comment provoking derision, if not from Strether, then at least from the reader utterly seduced by the aesthetic education vicariously achieved through him). With de Vionnet outside the Notre Dame church, in the pleasure of her company and in his satisfaction at escaping his affairs with Chad, Strether reflects that, in London, things had “struck him as requiring so many explanations . . . but it was at present as if he had either soared above or sunk below them—he couldn’t tell which; he could somehow think of none that didn’t seem to leave the appearance of collapse and cynicism easier for him than lucidity” (213). Indeed, the destruction of Woollett certainty provokes either delusions of grandeur or fantasies of tremendous impotence, both issuing from the avoidance of explanations that could at all reconfirm the connection Chad has with the Newsome world. Strether’s extreme self-constructions suggest that he is still bound within traditional rationalist and sceptical thought about the subject, philosophies that Ricoeur criticizes as being confined “within the problematic defined by the search for a certainty that would be an absolute guarantee against doubt” and as resulting in either the “exalted subject” of the Cartesian tradition—according to which the subject is the source of certainty, the god prior to God (able to “save” us from the evil genius of doubt)—or the “humiliated subject” of the equally hyperbolic Nietzschean tradition—according to which the self is a mere “grammatical

habit,” an effect, not a cause, of “signification” (*Oneself as Another* 16). Interestingly, however, James’s text suggests that the humiliated subject of scepticism can also become the exalted subject since, with the burden of certainly utterly destroyed so that even fallible knowledge is renounced, the mere “grammatical” subject may just as well be a god (everything) as a cipher (nothing)—the absolute criterion flattens everything into equivalence, including the opposition between rationalism and scepticism.

Gloriani’s garden party, at which Strether unleashes his “live all you can” speech, is crucial in this regard, for here James defines the essence of Strether’s aesthetic education as a submission to glittering appearance and the play of surface.¹ The party puts on display the “vast bright Babylon” of Paris where “differences [were not] comfortably marked”—a city that could “take one’s authority away” (63). At Gloriani’s, an “assault of images” produces an almost religious seduction of the senses, the “young priests” dazzling and mysterious in a world that “had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression . . . too thick for prompt discrimination” (137). With discrimination and explanation undermined by the richness of potential reference, the only basis for interpretation is an empirical submission to sensation, rationalism undermined by the flux and breadth of shifting surface. Gloriani himself, master-artist (or, at least, poseur-aesthete), wears a “medal-like Italian face, in which every line was an artist’s own, in which time told only as tone and consecration” (138), his body so conforming to the principle of surface, itself lit, as it were, by the “special flare, unequaled, supreme, of the aesthetic torch,” that time itself, the marker of both progress and decay, the foundation from which we recognize empirical distinctions, is no more than a shade of his color or a tone of his note, subservient to aesthetic effect: Little Bilham tells Strether in short, almost (for James) fragmentary sentences, that Gloriani “has some secret. It’s extraordinary. And you don’t find it out. He’s the same to everyone. He doesn’t ask questions” (140)—Gloriani’s mystery depends both on the creation of a known secret (knowing that the secret exists, but not what the form contains) and his own avoidance of

inquiry—and he (Bilham) continues the game by also blocking further inquiry from Strether as to the true cause of Chad's transformation by saying, "I can only tell you that [a virtuous attachment is] what they pass for. But isn't that enough? What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know? I commend to you . . . the vain appearance" (142). Strether later observes that "you've all got so much visual sense that you've somehow all 'run' to it. There are moments when it strikes one that you haven't any other" (145). And indeed, James suggests that not having any other is tantamount to eliminating *being* altogether—being (or presence) erased by the omnipotence of representation and seeming. The irony in Bilham's recommendation is self-protecting; it does not qualify the statement so much as preemptively ward off serious criticism, and Strether's capture in the coils of these self-reflexive games makes him wonder whether inquiry itself is appropriate. a false note: "Was it after all a joke that he should be serious about anything? He envied Miss Barrace at any rate her power of not being. She seemed, with little cries and protests and quick recognitions, movements like the darts of some fine feathered free-pecking bird. to stand before life as before some shop-window" (143). Of course the meaning of the first sentence here is that Strether envies Barrace's power of not being serious, but the syntax of James's sentence creates the flickering image of Barrace simply not being, of her power to not be. And the impression is re-enforced by the opening two words of the next sentence (its subject, with its verb so long-delayed that the subject is isolated, suspended, attaching, in effect, to the conclusion of the previous sentence which itself depended for completion on an absent phrase["serious about anything"]) so that the reader, reading over the sentence-appearance, ignoring for the moment the rule of the period, finds the meaning. "Barrace has the power not to be; she seems." The aesthetic scepticism here (dis)embodied and that seduces Strether is thus based on the rejection of the possibility of gaining a conceptual grasp of underlying principles (or causal foundations) and on an acceptance of the force of experience—defined primarily in terms of visual perception—as the primary ground of meaning. The meaning this visual experience yields, though, is not meaning at

all from the rationalist perspective which would require firm distinctions and careful discriminations; this is “meaning” as the flow of interconnected, endlessly shifting appearances, the movement of “signs in the air,” and the realization that, as Strether says, “everything [comes] as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else” (348).

The capacity to act under the jurisdiction, as it were, of Newsome’s book is thus destroyed, and Strether either lapses into or ascends towards—this is the double result of the aesthetic scepticism—a state of perpetual delay. His predisposition to postpone drawing conclusions or making hasty decisions is seriously exacerbated by the final abandonment of his previously held definite plan. The sense of urgency he felt after the first shock of Chad’s theatre appearance, an urgency prompted by the anticipation of the loss of future opportunity to “strike out,” is replaced by a desire for luxurious postponement and the fanciful exploration of possibility. At the Notre Dame church, his mind full of romance and Victor Hugo, Strether fantasizes a sweeping dramatic context around the image of a lone woman he observes sitting forward in the shade of a chapel. It turns out that the woman is de Vionnet, but the initial attraction for him, which triggers his idle fancies, is the effect of her “supreme stillness” and “prolonged immobility” (207), her quiet posture of prayer and meditation in the “sacred shade” (208) of the grand church where judgment is forbidden: “Justice was outside, in the hard light, and injustice too; but one was as absent as the other from the air of the long aisles and the brightness of the altars” (207). These centres of dark inaction, these aisles filled with “figures of mystery and anxiety” (207) craving a world with only one discrimination (the light of the priest’s stage against the shade of the audience’s domain where, if both justice and injustice have no hold, then action and consequence are made irrelevant) attract and encourage Strether’s imaginative play, but push further away the reality of the present and the possibility of effective initiative. He soon argues for stasis—Chad should remain in Paris—and writes letters back to Newsome that are devoid of meaning and barely qualify as genuine acts of consciousness:

[H]e was of course always writing: it was a practice that continued, oddly enough, to relieve him, to make him come nearer than anything else to the consciousness of doing something; so that he often wondered if he hadn't really, under his recent stress, acquired some hollow trick, one of the specious arts of make-believe. Wouldn't the pages he still so frequently dispatched by the American post have been worthy of a showy journalist, some master of the great new science of bearing the sense out of words? (237)

The "new" science defies "sense" and relies on flash and show; the "new" Chad destroys the sense brought over from Woollett; the Old World cultivates such novelty and "make believe," while "New" some clings to definable meaning, the substance in the hollow, and the preservation of maturity's authority over youth. Her writing, unlike Strether's, is suspect because it is so utterly saturated with clear intent; indeed, her pure intentionality sustains itself, even flourishes, when unconstrained by the support of any medium: when she does *not* write, her presence is all the more commanding:

It struck him really that he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed. He walked about with her, drove with her and dined face to face with her. . . . and if he had never seen her so soundless he had never, on the other hand, felt her so highly, so almost austere, herself: pure and by the vulgar estimate "cold," but deep devoted delicate sensitive noble. (238).

The force of Mrs. Newsome's personality depends not on the play of surface or the shock effect of display, but on a sustained "sameness" even in its "idiosyncrasies." The "sacred hush" that permits this essential Newsome to make itself present for Strether, a counterpart to Waymarsh's "sacred rage" for distinction (the one effortlessly asserts superiority and seems beyond the need for any particular form of expression, while the other struggles to define and insist upon his great worth through the mediums of purchase) obviously calls forth religious connotations, yet in such a fashion as to render them utterly secular: this disembodied spirit from America walks, drives, and dines with Strether, a sacred figure not by virtue of church sanction or aesthetic trappings (as de Vionnet assumed the role), but because of her supreme singularity. The extraordinary conclusion of the passage quoted above—Mrs. Newsome is "deep devoted delicate sensitive noble"—accumulates adjectives and alliterates the "d" to uncanny effect: the elimination of commas denies separation of the

words, blurring them all into one overarching term of praise, the rhythm of the triple d's subsiding into the slide of the "s" and the role of the "o." We notice less what is said by each of these terms than the intention of praise animating them: Mrs. Newsome's intentionality replicates itself through Strether who, unable to write anything but senseless words, nevertheless imagines poetic phrases of uncommon depth.

Sarah's perfect translation of Newsome's intention—she carries over the woman herself, the "whole moral and intellectual being or block" (376) so that Strether can feel, after lengthy conversations with Sarah, that it was "as if he were dealing directly with Mrs. Newsome" (284)—and her defiant resistance to the seductions of Chad and his circle, provide a telling counterpoint to Strether's own initiation into the Parisian sensibility. She brings with her an intention well prepared to make (hasty) discriminations, Mrs. Newsome's message to Strether telling him, in the first letter or telegram actually quoted in the novel despite the flurry of correspondence sent in both directions across the ocean, "Judge best to take another month, but with full appreciation of all reinforcements" (237): that first word—"Judge"—places its author outside the protective hush of de Vionnet's church where neither justice nor injustice may speak. While Strether's writings seem vacant of intention or authority and are left unreported by the narrator, the Judgment telegram of Mrs. Newsome lifts the injunction, breaks through the narrator's veil of silence cutting the reader off from the characters' own writings, and asserts Newsome's own written, authoritative voice. She has the power of delegation and "direct" representation, whether her "presence" requires the support of a medium or not: she will be heard and read, her text will not be erased. Sarah is little more than that telegram, that voice, given new formal embodiment, the "substance" of Newsome's chosen medium, given the certainty of her intention, as arbitrary as all discriminations or conclusions are for the members of Babylon, given the priority there accorded to the medium of expression.

The party Chad throws for Sarah gives to Strether and his companion Miss Barrace a vision of the American as a woman pressed-in and crowded by the display of social

graciousness and accomplishment, “packed so tight she can’t move”: Barrace comments that “[s]he’s bricked up, she’s buried alive!” (330)—images that recall Strether’s immobility in the presence of the Chad apparition at the theatre. If Sarah escapes suffocation under the weight of Chad’s brilliance and his glittering companions, she does so, it seems, merely by refusing to yield her approval, as Strether did, to the force of Chad’s “new” personality—she will not mark that radical difference, except to designate it as “hideous” (352). For Strether, and the reader, Sarah’s blindness to Chad’s improvement stands decisively against her capacity for vision and judgment, an indication of her own inability to accommodate variations from a preconceived book of expectations. But, contrary to the usual critical dismissal of Sarah as a mere foil for Strether’s awakening,⁴ she also indicates, in the terms of her rejection, a fatal flaw in Strether’s own perception of Chad and Paris that begins to accumulate significance. Strether has referred to Chad and de Vionnet as sources of profound “revelations,” as shattering epiphanies of alterity. Sarah bristles at such a characterization and the use of the word in reference to de Vionnet, thinking it implies a criticism of her own mother (350). She rejects the notion of “revelation” as she does the claim to “transformation” as obstacles to the line of conduct and judgment required by duty. Her blindness is, in fact, also a clear-eyed rejection of a religious (absolutist) conversion experience, a refusal to enter the church of Paris and the party world of Gloriani and his “priests.” Her extreme denunciation of the pleasures of Paris and its effect on Chad turns her into the margin-less book of moral authority, but provides her with an insight withheld at this point from Strether himself, which will only be confirmed in Book Eleventh’s final “revelation” whose primary shock is achieved through an abrupt reduction of the transcendent value Strether had attributed to Chad and de Vionnet. Indeed, afterwards, Strether admits to Gostrey that he “moved among miracles. It was all phantasmagoric” (420).

With the sensuous usurpation of rational conjecture, Strether loses the ability to act directly, but finds himself charged with other duties—primarily to de Vionnet—that are

even more imposing in their form, since they are cast in terms consonant with what Sarah implicitly denounces as “religious” Paris. He promises at her request to report favourably of Chad’s associations to Mrs Newsome, thus committing himself to “save” de Vionnet from disrepute and from Chad’s possible abandonment: the word is “exorbitant” (180) as Strether recognizes, and implies an onerous responsibility—a promise to fulfill a contractual obligation analogous to Newsome’s own demand that Strether act as her ambassador to Chad, but pitched to the key of de Vionnet’s Catholicism. After meeting her at the Notre Dame church, Strether reconfirms his promise and realizes that the connection thus ratified places him in the service of one whose seriousness outweighs Mrs Newsome’s own (219-20). The obligation is a “golden nail” of commitment, binding him deeply and irrevocably, however gilded, dazzling, and rich the instrument of affixation. Importantly, though, the agency thus conferred on him with such seriousness counters the Woollett contract in its granting of autonomy to the agent. De Vionnet insists, after Strether demurs that the whole thing is “not my affair,” that since he has once taken it up, he is indeed still intensely implicated in the outcome, and in shaping Chad’s and her own destiny (219). He submits and affirms her characterization of his role:

“You can’t in honour not see me through,” she wound up, “because you can’t in honour not see *him*.” . . .

He took it all in, he saw it all together. “No,” he mused, “I can’t in honour not see him.”

Her face affected him as with an exquisite light. “You *will* then?”
“I will.” (219-20)

Newsome relied on the recognition of loyalty and duty alone, providing for Strether a clear plan of action, which Sarah eventually fulfills with greater success. But of course she does so by submerging her own identity in that of Mrs Newsome, to the point where she is little more than a perfect substitute, a transparent medium for her principal’s intent. Critics have noted that the Sarah-Mrs Newsome relationship is paradigmatically logocentric, for the latter’s book is a vehicle of certainty, and its present marker (Sarah representing the absent author Newsome) ideally vanishes at the deliverance of the author’s inviolate intent. But if such a parallel is plausible, it must similarly be noted that Strether’s adoption of the duty

given him by de Vionnet involves him in the opposite condition, linked to a scepticism based on undecidable difference, of extreme self-assertion: "I will."

Since, however, as we have seen, in Paris the possibility of intelligibly directed action is for Strether almost eliminated, his "I will" is radically dissociated from the "I can" of meaningful decision, as affirmed by a materially grounded critical rationalism or by a body-anchored ontology of the type developed by Ricoeur. Instead, Strether's will is left to spiral in a whirlpool of conjecture, and tempted to focus exclusively on the patterns of relationships, the symmetry of their construction, and the implications of the complex maneuverings of the members of the various interacting parties—all without endeavouring to discover the inner spring that has launched the entire Parisian drama: the secret of the relationship between Chad and de Vionnet. His inaction is defined by the context of this drama-world, where one moves "in a maze of mystic closed allusions" (198). Trying to recover his past sense of decisiveness, Strether encourages Little Bilham to marry Mamie, remarking that

I want . . . to have been at least to that extent constructive—even expiatory. I've been sacrificing so to strange gods that I feel I want to put on record somehow, my fidelity—fundamentally unchanged after all—to our own. I feel as if my hands were embued with the blood of monstrous alien altars—of another faith altogether. (323)

But the strange gods of Paris provoke in Strether his own version of the "sacred rage," more pronounced than Waymarsh's, to appear somehow "better and different" (31-32). Rather than leading him to perform a decisive action, his will and rage catapult him into semi-divine status, where indeed he could effect the saving of de Vionnet despite his "pinioned" arms on the corporeal level. He tells Gostrey, "I'm extremely wonderful just now. I dare say in fact I'm quite fantastic, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if I were mad" (232), and later, "I think of everything" (284). His confidence wanes, of course, since his intellectual superiority is a negative one—against Sarah, his knowing is that he does not know—but the assumption of transcendence, tied to material incapacity, is finally thrust upon him as the "hero of the drama" (332), the one upon whom all the consequences

will fall. He will suffer for the others: “Yes, he should go to the scaffold yet for he wouldn’t know quite whom. He almost, for that matter, felt on the scaffold now and really quite enjoying it” (337). The sacrifice (the word resonates throughout the text) of his interests (primarily financial, with the removal of Newsome’s patronage) is explicitly connected with Strether’s emerging centrality—achieved not through a “logocentric” domination of affairs, but precisely through his rigorous lack of specific knowledge and his negative realization that he knows either nothing (372) or everything (284). Strether’s power is dependent on his practical immobility and his certain scepticism. And the virtual elimination of his powers of judgment has permitted the ascendance of that kind of desire that Strether identified as a potential seduction in the early days after his arrival in Europe. Walking with Waymarsh and Gostrey through shop-lined streets, wondering about the persistence of his own Woollettian virtue, Strether felt that

his previous virtue was still there, and it seemed fairly to stare at him out of the windows of shops that were not as the shops of Woollett, fairly to make him want things that he shouldn’t know what to do with. It was by the oddest, least admissible of laws demoralizing him now; and the way it boldly took was to make him want more wants. These first walks in Europe were in fact a kind of finely lurid intimation of what one might find at the end of that process. (27)

In one sense the disappointment registered here is Strether’s lament over his lack of desire: the goods on view through the window do not attract him. But the second sense is that he feels the pull of a more abstract and self-referential desire, one that feeds on itself and is self-generating without limit: the desire for desire. This kind of desire is necessarily self-defeating and satisfaction-proof, since no matter how great the desire actually achieved (the power of attraction generated), that “quantity” itself becomes the target of scrutiny of a meta-desire that demands further expansion of the desire, and so on. Desire itself (as an abstraction of the sum total desire of a specified set of desiring consciousnesses or bodies) may never be extinguished (unless the set is destroyed), and specific wants may be only temporarily appeased by immediate feats of possession, but this self-reflexive desire bursts the bounds of both these extremes by virtue of its disconnection from any specific (whether

empirical or abstract) object of desire, and turns instead upon itself. The two meanings that I have noted that this passage bears are not disconnected. Strether's reflections here are the result of his essential indifference to the objects available to his gaze through the window. He reads this indifference as internal deficiency, as an indication of self-inadequacy, despite also realizing that the objects he does not want, if he did obtain them, would leave him wondering what he should do with them. The self-reflexive desire that then becomes a temptation (and which later overtakes him, for a time) emerges, then, from disconnection, from rejection of externality in favour of a self-scrutiny undertaken under the assumption that the self must compensate for the perceived inadequacies of the external world: if the purported objects of desire do not in fact ignite desire's flame, then desire, confined to both itself and the Self, will generate its own desire-world. The self and its constructions, usually subordinate to, supplemental to, the externally present object-environment upon which desire acts and from which it emerges, here usurps its master and becomes the bound(less) context and author of itself. But, as even here we are made to realize, this sacrifice of externality is bought at the price of action. Not only would Strether not know what to do with the objects if he wanted and obtained them, but the objects themselves become irrelevant to the pursuit of more desires. This self-reflexivity chokes action. And the "finely lurid intimation of what one might find at the end of that process," emerging out of this tantalizing self-reflexivity, begins to confound linear time by transposing the end to the beginning, the orders of a process succumbing to the unaccountable irruption of intuition born from disconnection.⁵

III: What Strether Knows: "Things Must Have a Basis"

Time, though, reasserts its linear aspect, and with it returns the muted efficacy of linear causality, the un-eradicable but qualified foundation that material embodiment provides, and the conceptual clarity that is provided by all three. Strether's "school-boy"

youthfulness before Chad's Book Third performance cannot sustain itself for long, and the play at age reversal and manipulation—the game of simulated youth—begins to lose its appeal. Gostrey has told him, “you are . . . youth,” and he has replied,

Of course I'm youth—youth for the trip to Europe. I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that's what has been taking place ever since. . . . Chad gives me the sense of it, for all his grey hairs, which merely make it solid in him and safe and serene; and *she* does the same, for all her being older than he, for all her marriageable daughter, her separated husband, her agitated history. Though they're young enough, my pair, I don't say they're, in the freshest way, their *own* absolutely prime adolescence; for that has nothing to do with it. The point is they're mine. Yes, they're my youth: since somehow at the right time nothing else ever was. (240-41)

But with the erosion of Chad's sudden theatrical effect, subjective time created through the staging of personality gives way to the time of the body, the “real” time that marks both the accumulation of experience and the “menace of decay” (336). The gradual resurrection of linear temporality signals the emergence of the necessary separation between present empirical experience on the one hand, and memory, imagination, and representation on the other, which had so confusedly merged with one another for Strether in Paris (I discuss these distinctions in Chapter 2 in terms of the difference between representation and retention, and between representation and concrete experience). At the height of his fantastic, “mad” state of mind, “it was the way of nine-tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined” (208); but the show given to him (by Chad, de Vionnet and the others), and the dramas he writes himself (dead letters to Newsome, romantic fantasies about de Vionnet), lose some of their power to enchant when viewed not from the spectator's position, nor from the author's, but from the critic's. Chad's miraculous transformation into an accomplished older gentleman of Paris is played again for Strether's scrutiny by de Vionnet and the hopelessly vulgar sensualist Jim Pocock. Barrace tells Strether at Chad's party for Sarah that de Vionnet has resolved to do “everything” for Chad's cause by seducing the approval of Jim, and disengaging him from the main circuit of activity. To do this, she makes herself “about twenty years old. . . . as young as a little

girl” (334). Strether does not immediately draw the correct conclusions from this opportunity, discerning only the depth of de Vionnet’s “care” for Chad—going no further—but the incongruity of the performance leaves a mark and finally strikes home in Book Twelfth, after her secret is revealed. With adequate knowledge of her situation, he “could think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented, and the possibilities she betrayed. She was older for him tonight, visibly less exempt from the touch of time. . . . and he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man” (409). Her display of feigned youth for Jim is revealed as being not only a device for manipulating the latter’s response, but also as a method of self-deception inducing a debilitating acquiescence in the constructions of fantasy. Such youth is indeed “faked,” as was Chad’s maturity, and the breakdown of the veracity of Chad’s own self-definition before Strether is an implicit acknowledgment of the inauthenticity of the assumed radical break with Woollett, Mrs Newsome, and her epistemology of rational certainty. Once the “show” is revealed as an appearance *covering over* an underlying persistent reality, the Parisian epistemology of doubt built on surface begins to lose its power; for there is something grounding those “names in the air.”

And that grounding is recognized only from a distance, a critical distance that resists the conflation of experience and reflection. Just before discovering Chad and de Vionnet in the country together, Strether reflects on his own lost youth, and the opportunity that Paris has given him to recapture it:

He could have explained little enough to-day why he had missed it or why, after years and years, he should care that he had; the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed—a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. It was in the outside air as well as within . . . (354)

In this passage, Strether moves from considering the representation of his loss, which brings it “within reach”—a locution signifying the approximation of the represented

experience to the reality, which yet remains ultimately inaccessible—to a most emphatic assertion of actual possession of that lost reality: the loss becomes a concrete presence that *is* in reach, which he can directly “handle, taste, smell.” The confusion or the slide from representation to bodily experience—the phantasmagoric, miracle world of Paris seen as providing an “affair of the senses”—superimposes imaginative reconstructions over physical time until the distinction is utterly broken: the “concrete presence” is not illusory because it presumes escape from the play of Parisian surface and signs. but, on the contrary, because it effects the total absorption of physical time into the time of desire. memory, and imagination. The “immediate” recovery of Strether’s youth is achieved only through granting representation exclusive power to form experience. Abstractive critical reason, however, *recovers* experience *for* reflection, indirectly accessing, and then interpreting and judging, what is more directly experienced at the physical level. The distinction between the two levels (in this case) is not dissolved by asserting the autonomy of either, or merging them indistinguishably into a single, fluctuating flow; it is maintained through a critical vigilance which regards conceptual modeling as neither absolutely determinative or infallible (as Newsome did), nor utterly detached and irrelevant (as Strether begins to believe in Paris). The reassertion of physical time, reducing de Vionnet to a creature caught in time rather than its master (the deep traditionality of her home and property which initially helps to create her impression on Strether later reinforces the sense of her desperation), and reminding Strether as he climbs the stairs for his last meeting with Chad that he feels old, and that he will, according to the primitive law of succession, feel even older the next day (424), is fully achieved when the Newsome book, previously rejected as totally unresponsive to conditions in Paris, is shown, by virtue of its excessive abstraction, to contain a premise that cannot be ignored; her book becomes relevant to Strether’s interpretation of Chad, a relevance that necessarily places in question the claim to absolute alterity made by Chad’s and de Vionnet’s Parisian text.

The revelation of Book Eleventh, central to any critical discussion of the novel, is, compared to the revolutionary epiphanies preceding it, more properly thought of as an anti-revelation, a dynamic shift that gives the lie to the pretensions of transcendence implicit in both the radical rationalism of Woollett and the sceptical empiricism of Paris. But with the Parisian sensibility uppermost in Strether's consciousness, the shift is most drastically away from the intensely "fictional" and ungrounded epistemology of Paris.

Poststructuralist critics emphasize the fact that James's account of the scene and its immediate aftermath is awash with metaphors of self-reflexivity, but miss the larger critical context within which these metaphors operate. Strether does indeed transform a leisurely day in the French countryside into a virtual absorption within a long-remembered Lambinet painting, and the sense that fiction, imagination, memory, and desire are inextricably linked with—indeed determinative of—his experience is incessantly underscored; the possibility of distinction seems hopeless:

For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture—that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the characters had, without his knowing till now, peopled all his space for him, and it seemed somehow quite happy that they should offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability. . . . Not a single one of his observations but somehow fell into a place in it: not a breath of the cooler evening that wasn't somehow a syllable of the text. The text was simply, when condensed, that in *these* places such things were, and that if it was in them one elected to move about one had to make one's account with what one lighted on. (386-87)

Strether's fantasy of luxurious satisfaction, framed by the Lambinet painting, depends upon the notion that this "stage and scene" harmoniously connect the worlds of nature and of his own desire; that the "flow" of sensation, though never yielding knowledge, is harmonious in its singularity; indeed, the feeling is achieved by the transference of Strether's sense that time "slipped along so smoothly, mild but now slow, and melting, liquefying, into the happy illusion of mildness" (385). But the "sharp arrest" provided by the appearance of Chad's and de Vionnet's boat on the barely rippling river water represents, though poststructuralists fail to acknowledge it, the intrusion of definite

discrimination into the field of smooth, liquid indeterminacy, and James's affirmation that embodied, concrete experience is at the heart of knowing.⁶ The incredible coincidence that Strether should meet them in this compromising circumstance is attributed to the fact that "fiction and fable *were*, inevitably, in the air, and not as a simple term of comparison, but as a result of things said" (393). Indeed, "surface and sound" (391) help them to negotiate the extremely awkward social occasion, but the significant difference realized by Strether is that, though within the realm of "things said" fiction could not be compared to "reality," the disjunction between what is said and what has presented itself has become crucial. Unlike the other revelations which were designed and controlled by the actors involved in order to achieve a certain effect, this incongruous appearance of the boat has an intelligibility which cannot be controlled by any of its spectators. De Vionnet slips into a French so studded with "idiomatic turns" that Strether cannot follow her, and she conducts a "comedy" of indirection to help them smooth over the sense that the encounter is "quite horrible" and that a scene of violence has just been averted. But now, the fiction cannot substitute for the physical event that will not be displaced. This "miracle encounter" (390) generates not awe and fascination or childish passivity before an unyielding doctrine or sensation; instead, a tremendous "amount of explanation is called into play" (390).

This resurgence of the need for explanation is the resurrection of Newsome's rationalistic conception of Chad's state of mind and affairs in Paris: she understood that the only force capable of superseding her own physical authorship of her son would be an authorship operative at an equally fundamental, physical level; and it is de Vionnet, the older woman, creator of Chad, and the "mother" of his transformation in Paris, who proves to fulfill this function and provide a reference for Newsome's prediction. In this light, Newsome's book is vindicated, for the sense of fiction dominating after the "revelation" is no longer controlled by desire as method, frame, and style of perception; instead the fictionalizing is orchestrated as a response to the ineluctable fact of de Vionnet's authorship, that fundamental connection, whose meaning is traceable back to Woollett.

The spring of this play is known and defines its quality: at the heart of the show is the “deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (396). And this is the sense to be drawn from the incessant underscoring of the fictionality of Strether’s experience in the countryside. The intimacy had not been named but it is namable; it is not exterior to the capacities of representation, requiring a (Levinasian) radical break or epiphany, nor is its truth simply “constructed” (as poststructuralists would have it) by Strether’s aesthetic method of conceptualization, itself designed by Babylon Paris. The text turns in on itself so that desire—the physical desire that connects Chad and de Vionnet—becomes the subject of the text rather than its only operating principle; the result is a mixed text of both interpretation and explanation. The risks of endless reference, infinite regress, and bottomless appearance, all indicative of Babylon Paris, are themselves inscribed within an explanatory framework—the frame of the Lambinet is itself framed by the “book”—that yields to its sceptical criticism to avoid smug dogmatism, but also controls it through an intensification of its own practices. The fantasy of representational omnipresence gives way to critical realism as soon as that fantasy is itself caught in the practice of evasion.⁷ Strether’s eye mirrors the play of mirrors, redoubling the mimetic intensity, but grounds it in the process by forcing the other mirrors to assume their corporeal form. This transformation is the definitive one: the mirrors are revealed as bodies.⁸

After Strether realizes the true nature of the relationship between Chad and de Vionnet, which he had purported to represent accurately to Woollett, he also understands that his cognitive failure was sustained by a childish fear of assuming the role of authority granted him by virtue of his age and advanced experience. The elaborate “make-believe” manipulations of Chad and de Vionnet may have bottomed out in a crisis of “revelation,” laying bare the lies that so disagree with Strether’s “spiritual stomach” (396), but his own role has also been essential: he has been willfully passive, or assertively unassertive; he has clung to a dogmatic form of scepticism that presumes that it is necessarily true that nothing could be known about the object of his inquiry. The “school-boy” Strether, sitting before

Chad's play at the theatre box, has never progressed into the mature, reflecting adult. He has remained a child: "it was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll" (396). The rejection of explanations is also understood as being an *effort* to secure the absence of reasons, an action or force of will that turns against itself in order to render itself impotent, irrelevant, childish: "he recognized at last that he had really been *trying* all along to suppose nothing" (396. my emphasis). As Gostrey observes to Strether after he has been shocked back into his actual age, "things must have a basis," a foundation commensurate with what is built upon it: to "dress up . . . the virtue" so that it is disconnected from an "intimate" and physical ground is to be either "grandly cynical . . . [or] grandly vague" (419).

A failure to acknowledge this kind of foundation is also to understand agency and authority in purely absolute terms, as though they could be exercised only under the guarantee of total certainty, or equitably reaffirmed only under the presumption that independence arises from total scepticism. Strether does not "swing back" (416) to the principles of Woollett—certainty and moral inflexibility guided by a maturity that is beyond experience—but he also does not accede to the type of "independence" exemplified by Chad's initial appearance of self-definition, or assigned to him by virtue of the quasi-divine task of saving de Vionnet. The inadequacy of Newsome's conception needs little comment, for Chad has indeed "improved" in a manner incomprehensible to his Woollett observers. But Strether also now understands that the opposite extreme, created by de Vionnet, has entrapped her, its prime author, as well; the terms of agency promoted by de Vionnet are untenable because they too are dependent on notions of transcendence which ultimately destroy the possibility of genuine, mature action:

With this sharpest perception yet [that de Vionnet fears Chad's desertion], it was like a chill in the air to him, it was almost appalling, that a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited. For at the end of all things they *were* mysterious: she had but made Chad what he was—so why could she think that she had made him infinite? . . . The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order, and in short

it was marvellous that the companion of mere earthly joys, of comforts, aberrations (however one classed them) within the common experience, should be so transcendently prized. . . . The real coercion was to see a man ineffably adored. (408)

De Vionnet betrays herself and acts as a “maidservant” by holding to the infinite value of her creation. Strether sees through the extremes, recovering, too, from the experience of the “miraculous” Chad, and finally takes up the mantle of decisive action. His identity mediated through the dialectic of selfhood and sameness, responsibility to the future and to the past,⁹ he will intervene on de Vionnet’s part and urge Chad to remain in Paris, in this way both confirming his loyalty to the argument of Paris—that the quality of life cannot be delimited by the hard certainties of Newsome’s book—but doing so with a style of firm intent derived from his Woollettian sense of the value of dealing “straight” (in linear time, as it were; Strether has always preserved a sense of de Vionnet’s worth that could not be entirely accounted for by Parisian values. When Barrace tells Strether that de Vionnet is “just brilliant, as we used to say. That’s all. She’s various. She’s fifty women,” he replies, “Ah but only one . . . at a time” (187), thus allowing for the variety, but ordering it serially: the line of succession—from one woman to another—preserves the integrity of each de Vionnet “sign” in the duration of its appearance: Strether dealt “straight” with her as he now urges Chad to do).

If “real coercion” is based in transcendence—that of either Newsome’s Reason or de Vionnet’s romantic aesthetic of the “ineffable”—then to act with authority and on judgment is not *necessarily* coercive, although the risk is omnipresent. Strether’s decisive action curiously takes the form, as he later calls it, of a “curse” (437), a superstitious form of intervention that tries to grant to the enunciative act a compelling power over the intentions and actions of others. Chad’s restlessness becomes apparent to Strether, who fears that Chad will undervalue the benefits he has had under de Vionnet’s romantic tutelage, grow “tired” of her, and move to the next center of profit. Indeed, Chad’s enthusiasm for advertising, which he declares “an art like another, and infinite like all the arts” (431), and which thus evokes the highly aestheticized Parisian epistemology,

threatens to become the total principle of his consciousness. Strether recognizes the threat in this appeal of the “infinite” and draws the crucial link between the “art” of advertising, where surface radically usurps intrinsic value, and the principle of rational trade, where substitution is carried out for the purpose of an endless accumulation of wealth, goods, or properties, each in itself both infinitely valued and infinitely disposable; he tells Chad: “Advertising is clearly at this time of day the secret of trade. It’s quite possible it will be open to you—giving the whole of your mind to it—to make the whole place hum with you. Your mother’s appeal is to the whole of your mind, and that’s exactly the strength of her case” (431). The “whole of his mind” is at stake, a kind of possession without margin that Strether had himself succumbed to. The bizarre outcome of this conflation of surface appeal and the lusts of commerce is a kind of “beastliness” (429), a reduction of thoughtful, critical abstention before or within but not preventing action that Strether has achieved, into the mere question of appetite. If Strether struggled to find a way to hold in subtle dialectical balance the verticality of discriminating rationalism and the horizontality of interconnecting surface and sound, he has also found that an entirely different, more corrupt union between Paris and Woollett is possible, which is again offered to his view by Chad, who seems to combine his aesthetic appreciation of convincing presentation with the abstract formalism of market manipulation offered by his mother in a new passion for advertising. In fact, this other union is the final confirmation of the implicit co-dependence that the two extremes of dogmatism and scepticism have hidden all along: the certainty of both their positions is achieved through a conflation of levels, the flattening of distinct orders of existence and thought; thus Chad equates physical passion with economic desire, advertising with art, identity with the status of “master” (431).

In this light, faced by the two-headed beast of commerce/art or rationalist-dogmatism/empirical-scepticism, Strether is himself apparently forced into an extreme. He calls on the sacred: he tells Chad, “It’s not a question of advising you not to go [i.e., leave Paris] but of absolutely preventing you, if possible, from so much as thinking about it. Let

me accordingly appeal to you by all you hold sacred” (427). This speech plays a subtle reversal on the religious undertones of before. Strether can only turn knowledge into an appeal, a question: What does Chad hold sacred? What is his standard, his place of conviction? The power of the curse that Strether utters is not derived from a fantasized exclusive authority to determine what Chad thinks, but from his understanding that Chad must himself judge and make discriminations according to a foundation that he can affirm. De Vionnet is such a foundation, not absolute but apparently inexhaustible. Strether suggests that Chad not leave her until her value for him has been exhausted, an event which may never occur; the gross economic terminology overlays a more basic epistemological principle which suggests that de Vionnet in her person provides a grounds for judgment and conviction until the contrary is forcefully demonstrated. The mere recognition, in general, that such a commitment is dangerous in light of future infinite possibility is not sufficient to undermine her value now, nor will it in future until a cogent reason has presented itself in the form of something other than a vague possibility. In this sense, the “curse” is Chad’s, his duty to judge or to lose, in effect, his humanity, and Strether’s ironic reliance on such a mode of action—cursing, as though the word determined the action of another—while also acknowledging Chad’s evident restlessness and likely disregard of advice, marks his faithfulness to what he has seen and known and at the same time converts his own agency into the attempt to promote a similar faithfulness in Chad. Strether acts by transferring the responsibility to act and judge to Chad and by offering to him a model of commitment to the facts of the matter. Strether cannot determine Chad’s action, as they both know, but the vehemence of Strether’s warning, expressed in the language of debt and obligation with an appeal to Chad’s own deepest standards (“all you hold sacred”), gives to Chad a model of the Woollettian sense of fidelity to connections established, reformulated for the contingencies of Parisian experience.

In this sense, Strether has adopted a double strategy with respect to his own agency in Paris. He feigns complete self-control of Chad’s behaviour by invoking the strongest

possible terms of characterization if Chad should ignore him, but recognizes in the transference of standards to Chad himself that action as well as inquiry involves the surrender of absolute autonomy and a more fallibilistic understanding of knowledge and action as contingent on our ability to have access to the relevant data, and our ability to rely on the background framework of understanding that makes possible more local inquiries. In Strether's case, the "background" framework is the viability of rationally accounting for Chad's behaviour under the presumption of a continued connective link between apparently distinct, utterly "different" sets of conditions: Chad in Woollett versus Chad in Paris. That framework was destroyed by Chad's miraculous appearance at the theatre, leaving Strether unable to conduct the local inquiry into the true state of Chad's relationships: indeed, the presumption arose that no causal basis could be ascertained at all. The appearance of Chad's and de Vionnet's boat resurrected the legitimacy of acceding to the framework, despite the fact that its specific conclusions in this case have been shown to be inadequate: Chad is not "depraved" and the woman with whom he is implicated is not "bad." The framework is fallible, but not to be utterly dismissed, on pain of terminating the possibility of specifically oriented inquiry. In other words, Strether recognizes that the pursuit of global questions about the ultimate justifiability of rational inquiry is as unwarranted as the utter dismissal of more direct perceptual experience as being incapable of disconfirming a previously established theoretical conclusion (as Newsome's book maintained). Instead, the Parisian criticism of rationalism must be restricted to the specific question involved: is Newsome's characterization of Chad accurate? A negative reply occasions further inquiry, not its total abandonment.

Working under the authority of his own inferences of the meaning of the countryside encounter does not entail the re-establishment of a Woollettian agency, based as it is on an authority-in-absence, and the ideal of purely autonomous action: the elements of luck (that they should all meet at the same place) and risk (the violence averted) that so defined the moment of rationalistic recuperation underscore the notion that background

frameworks are neither disposable nor guarantors of cognitive success. The framework maintains its relevance—hence the encounter is described as “inevitable”—but did not produce its own conclusions: the encounter is a fortuitous, accidental coincidence; the Newsome frame, in this sense, is combined with the frame of the Lambinet which seemed to be solely responsible for the structure and content of Strether’s stroll in the countryside, and the former pushes attention away from the signs as signs and re-directs attention towards what they indicate. Thus, Strether’s final determination to act on his own conviction is also based on the sense that his own explanation of Chad’s debt to de Vionnet is unquestionable, that there is no compelling reason to doubt the truth revealed both in and through the Lambinet, coupled with the sense that this knowledge confers not guaranteed success in determining a future course of action based on that knowledge, but that it can provide Chad with an instance of one who has looked not only at the signs of Paris but through them as well; the efficacy of the transfer of responsibility depends ultimately on the future intentions and existing standards, unknown to him, of Chad. Strether’s action is thus neither abstract and autonomous, nor utterly determined by the complex play of surface. He acts according to his own understanding and explanation with an ironic sense that, although he is right, there is no way to compel another to recognize the superior pertinence of the particular basis of debt (de Vionnet) over the Pyrrhonic passivity related to the conflation of formal duty and private gratification, the reduction of serious examination of one’s responsibilities to others to the order of mere preference of appearance; this superior pertinence cannot be argued for, but only recognized as necessary if rational action is undertaken, and the dispositional change that it requires is achieved: a secure confidence in one’s cognitive efforts in the face of risk that comes not with a simulated youth, but from the passage from youth to maturity. Chad is not in this position and, as such, his reaction to this new Strether-model is comic (he dramatically kicks away the imaginary bribe that advertising promises) and inconclusive. Strether is left to speculate

with Gostrey about the young man's plans, and this time, with the subject of inquiry hidden in the future, his doubts are more aptly held.

The novel ends in this essentially unexplored uncertainty. Strether's agency is discharged according to his own perception of things—Chad's and de Vionnet's relationship, the quality of Newsome's book, Chad's character if he should refuse to honor his debt to de Vionnet—but the effectiveness of his action is left in suspension. Indeed, Gostrey's last-page offer to Strether that he remain in Paris with her is refused in preference for a return to Woollett and “a great difference,” yet the novel closes on the refrain “there we are,” Strether about to leave, perhaps, but not yet gone—suspended by the narrative between action and stasis, signaling Strether's complete rejection of any economy of mere exchange.¹⁰ In a sense, the issues of Strether's own disposition toward the necessity of combining reason and experience, and of his eventual acknowledgment of a primitive, though not absolutely determinative, causal connection, are resolved, but Strether's own desire to ignore these conclusions was never stronger than his essential intellectual curiosity. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the struggle between these two motives—curiosity and desire, to provisionally set them apart—becomes much more intense; in that novel, Merton and Kate lose the battle Strether has won, and the effects of their defeat are examined—in a sense, *Wings* offers a reverse image of *The Ambassadors* in this respect. Moreover, the problem of implementation, of acting upon the ascertained fact—the problem only touched upon here in the first novel of the three—becomes much more problematic within a more complex, less fluid, system.

¹ As mentioned in the Introduction, I take issue with critics who read *The Ambassadors* from a strictly Parisian perspective—“Parisian” as poststructuralist—and thus champion de Vionnet as a figure of difference. I will argue that such a reading overlooks James's critique of Parisian extremes and thus fails to account for the significant correction the Parisian view is made to suffer in the novel's final chapters. I've mentioned in the introduction Maud Ellman's “‘The Intimate Difference’: Power and Representation in *The Ambassadors*”; she argues that “Madame de Vionnet presides over a world of rhetorical as well as moral transformation, for she differs from her self in the same way that metaphor daintily deranges definition. . . . The characters whom she refashions resemble metaphors themselves, for a trope is a rhetorical ambassador, hovering between two categories

without contracting the Atlantic that gapes between them" (105). Ellman concludes that Mrs. Newsome, who represents rhetorical strategies and principles entirely opposed to those of de Vionnet, is utterly vanquished by de Vionnet's Parisian explosion of firm distinctions and stable signifier-signified unities: "*The Ambassadors* reveals that representation means the death of origins. In the realm of power the monarch [Mrs. Newsome] is unseated by the very instruments of tyranny. . . . Her letters supplement her living representatives, for deputation is form of writing, as writing is a form of embassy. Both rebel. The play of difference unbinds the signifier from the despotism of the signified" (111). Mrs. Newsome's fearsome "despotism of the signified" is not, however, so thoroughly overthrown. She may no longer, at the end of the novel, command with total authority (in fact, her authority is in doubt on the opening page), but her views still possess a stubborn, intransigent significance, as I shall examine.

² Nicola Bradbury notes that "when the [first meeting between Chad and Strether] finally takes place, it is in contrast with the kinetic tension of the preparatory movement, with its series of other, less important interviews, that this, with its curiously static quality, stands out" (*Henry James* 49). Indeed the static quality of the scene signals an intensification of the present moment, as well as its explosion as radical difference; time, for Strether, pivots on this moment and seems to reverse itself.

³ While this speech is indeed central to the novel's concerns, it should not be taken as unproblematically affirmative, a simple declaration of James's over-riding theme. In the narrative context, the plea that one should live all one can is interwoven with a notion of life that is entirely ephemeral.

⁴ Sarah is routinely characterized as one of James's mere "fools," as he calls those "fixed constituents of almost any reproducible action who minister, at a particular crisis, to the intensity of the free spirit engaged with them" (*The Art of the Novel: Preface to The Spoils of Poynton*, 129). For example, Christopher Butler comments that "Since she has not read *The Ambassadors*, Sarah Pocock can be implicitly reproached for not liking her brother 'as he is', and certainly gives herself away by saying that Chad's lover isn't 'even an apology for a decent woman'. She fails to see that intellectual and emotional relations 'stop nowhere' (*The Art of Fiction*, p.5)" (*The Ambassadors*, xvi). Butler comments that because of this failing, Sarah must be gotten rid of for the novel to continue, but we should note that Butler begs the question somewhat by thinking of Sarah from the perspective of a second or subsequent reading, and not in its linear unfolding. Sarah's hasty, puritanical moral judgment obscures her accurate epistemological one—that Chad does indeed have a lover. When Sarah denounces de Vionnet, Strether does not yet concede this key fact of the Chad-de Vionnet relationship, and so the revulsion from the moral judgment tricks him (and the reader, perhaps) into rejecting Sarah *tout court*.

⁵ The fact that Strether assumes almost "monstrous" dimensions in a world where doublings proliferate, desire turns back on itself, and the hero sacrifices himself for the sake of preserving the social order (designed by matriarch de Vionnet) certainly attracts Girardian interpretation; and indeed, the Lambinet revelation scene has strikingly Gansian features. We will find similar echoes in *Wings*.

⁶ Paul Beidler wisely avoids the predilection I've already noted of reading *The Ambassadors* from an excessively Parisian point of view, arguing instead that "the Lambinet chapters . . . portray Strether's greatest triumph of the novel, for it is here that Strether finally breaks free of the destructive Paris aesthetic" (80). He denounces the Paris aesthetic on the grounds that its main premise is inaction: "Action is vulgar under the Paris aesthetic, and beauty is found in one's potential, not one's endeavors" (88). Although I

think this is accurate, Beidler downplays the damning similarities evident between that aesthetic and the underlying assumptions of the Derridean analysis that he undertakes. He reads the post-Lambinet Strether as finding a synthesis of Woollett and Paris, but by reading this binary strictly in terms of ethics and aesthetics, respectively, he allows the Parisian *epistemology* unchallenged supremacy. He thus concludes: “Strether has left the oblong gilt frame behind now and has re-entered the drama of Paris as an active participant, an entity now to be reckoned with. The difference is that Strether now knows, as the others do, that he is acting in a drama, a fiction in which everyone has, like Chad and de Vionnet, ‘something to put a face upon’” (91).

⁷ This most dramatic of shocks to Strether’s expectations suggests something as well about the function of James’s key narrative technique: his adherence to a single point of view, a center of consciousness, through which, albeit in free indirect discourse rather than first person narration, the world of the novel is unfolded. An important issue in James criticism—indeed Stanzel, in *A Theory of Narrative*, in order to challenge the view that James’s adherence to the center is faithfully and rigorously maintained, carefully combs the text to spot moments where James the author *does* slip out from behind the mask to comment in his own voice—the “center” can be read (as Landau and Rivkin read it) as James’s rejection of the Victorian omniscient narrator in favour of a perspective that, as the reader’s only authority for information about the novel’s world, stresses the mediate nature of all experience—we can never compare Strether’s version with accounts from other sources. James, however, rejected the most extreme technique that could have foregrounded this kind of unreliability—first person narration (as he used for *The Sacred Fount*)—in favour of a subtle middle position. Strether *focuses* the novel’s presentation of its world, but Strether is *not* in control of this narration or the representation of that world. The reader is *with* Strether but not confined to him: for example, although in first person narration the speeches of characters other than the narrator may be distorted by the narrator, readers of *The Ambassadors* have no reason to doubt that dialogue is “accurately” transcribed: we *do* have non-Strether access to the world of *The Ambassadors*. And the fact of this delicate relationship a reader has with Strether—this tie with but distance from the Strether center of consciousness—is most forcefully brought home in this revelation scene where Strether realizes the timidity of his thinking. The reader too close to Strether is also “corrected”—put on stage, placed in the distancing light of fiction until the “center” as mediator is forced to realize the contrary pull of the mediated.

⁸ Landau’s reading of *The Ambassadors*, a novel that, according to him, “reveal[s] aberrations in the representation or mediation of things, which themselves become indeterminate and, perhaps, ultimately inaccessible [a novel that thus] engages the radical impossibility of apprehending experience directly” (56), stresses the Parisian disruption of the Woollettian representational economy, but utterly ignores Strether’s sudden, shocking realization that Paris obscured what, in a limited way, Woollett knew about Chad’s transformation. Landau quotes at great length the passages leading up to the crucial reversal (“For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture—that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage . . .” and so on for almost half a page), but has nothing to say about Strether’s revulsion at having avoided explanation, or his realization that things must indeed have a foundation. Instead, Landau concludes his look at the Lambinet scene this way: “Here all the terms and modes through which experience is mediated merge and meld. It is as though this interpenetration and the overwhelming evidence of the mediated aspect of experience is the very condition which from the outset was in the nature of Strether’s embassy. Pictures, play, nature, art, texts, all combine to contribute to Strether’s sense of well-being, his general confidence. The representative from Woollett has finally recognized that the distinctions he had come to Paris to make must disappear in the network of interpenetrations in which he has perforce to function. . . .

The multiplicity of codes in the symbolic order is *the thing* he became aware of, and it is thus impossible to represent parts of it without implicating the whole” (76). Yes, but Strether soon after this grand ironic set-up loses his confidence and feels he has been a fool. The Woollettian distinctions are curiously resurrected right in the heart of the Lambinet, where all this fictionality suddenly bottoms out.

⁹ See my discussion in Chapter 2 of Ricoeur and the dialectic of identity, the counterpart to the exalted or humiliated subject that we are given by rationalism and scepticism. Newsome presumes that her ambassadors are totally prescribed within the continuity of sameness, while de Vionnet interjects the openness of the future, but attempts to “teach” Strether a self-hood *without* sameness.

¹⁰ After observing that, for Strether, truth and beauty are not of the order of the eternal, Bradbury, commenting on the novel’s last page, writes: “The final movement for Strether must be onwards and alone, not because he has been deserted, nor because he has abandoned his fellows, but because in his near-tragic stature, he has no fellows: there is no one else in the novel who ‘can’t do anything else’ but acknowledge and be ruled by what is ‘dreadfully right’. In his final words, there is no uncertainty, but a reassurance to Maria, an approval, an almost existential acceptance of the order of things: ‘Then there we are’ Coming out of the development of the novel, comprehensible only within the terms set up there, and in return, lending direction to the flow of the whole, Strether’s last words carry the two qualities of stillness and movement, that characterizes the vanishing point” (*Henry James* 70). I also find Strether’s last words a powerful affirmation of the novel’s epistemological concerns: “Then (implying sequence and causality) there (grounding in place, but also a place not simply “here”) we (stressing commonality, the shared condition unbreakable by absolute difference) are (culminating in presence as the overlapping in the thick present, as Ricoeur describes it, of the temporal, the spatial, and the ethical).”

CHAPTER 4:
VICTIMS OF METAPHOR
in *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE*

I: Dead Center

The second of James's last three novels, *The Wings of a Dove*, is the most intensely ironic of the three for in it James's concern is to successfully dramatize failure—ethical failure, failure of insight, and, intimately connected with the first two, failure of action.¹ The novel's premise, its "idea," as James in his prefaces describes it and is never reticent to set out, "reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamored of the world" (35). James observes that the aesthetic problems that such a subject creates for the author are many, not least of which is that, when one's central protagonist is "sick," one may succumb to the temptation to exploit the menacing presence of death, the "very shortest of all cuts to the interesting state," and plunge the project into hopeless vulgarity. For James, aesthetic success depends on avoiding the ready-made pathos of such a subject and instead using it not only as his own subject, but as the "central" subject—centrifugal force—of the world of the text. In other words, Milly Theale in *Wings*, the doomed figure wealthy beyond limitation yet without that "single most precious assurance" (38) that would permit that freedom to find expression, becomes not only James's creation, object of concern, and center of reflection, but also such an object and center for the other characters in the novel. James notes that "our young friend's existence would create rather [he realizes during the planning stages of the novel], all around her, very much that whirlpool movement of waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing

eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighboring object, makes immersion inevitable” (39). The dangerous attraction of James’s subject, which threatens to suck him into cliché, is also—and this is what extricates James from his own danger—the “force of suction” with which the characters in the novel must contend. There is certainly a tantalizing self-reflexivity here—James displacing his problem of writing onto the contents of that writing so that the “life” of the text depends on, not the ostensible “subject,” but the interplay between Writer’s writing and writing’s writing, a process that both depends on yet essentially excludes the center (absent Milly, in more ways than one).² Indeed, deconstructionist critics typically read the novel in this light, taking Milly as the present/absent center, the paradoxical essence under erasure that gives rise to but is also constructed by the texts around her. For some, Milly is both redeemed and redeeming as this quasi-transcendental signifier, “her consciousness validated” beyond the mundane pretensions of the temporal word (Bradbury 87), her “truth” released as an “abyssal mystery” beyond conceptualization (Teahan, 207), a “truth” that pushes Densher into a stark but necessary and ultimately rewarding realization about the limits of knowledge. James, however, does not take this, I would call it “easy,” way out.

The difference rests in James’s recognition that his subject is not, in fact, death, or Death, or any romantic conception of it, but rather resistance:

This fact [“inspired resistance”] was the real issue, for the way grew straight from the moment one recognised that the poet essentially *can’t* be concerned with the act of dying. Let him deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle. The process of life gives way fighting, and often may so shine out on the lost ground as in no other connexion. . . . [T]he last thing in the world it [the project] proposed to itself was to be the record predominantly of a collapse. (36, 37)

The “act of dying,” redefined as a “collapse,” suggests a process, a movement towards death and disintegration. But the risk becomes that the result of that process, if viewed in the terms James here resists, will dominate the movement towards it and reduce it to its own finality. Instead, the poet, not from some lack of nerve, grants the result, the end, its directional force, but concentrates on “the act of living” that precedes it: the poet’s business

is to displace (but not erase) the subject of death so that it is itself subject to life. The displacement is indeed a matter of concentration and discrimination. James here suggests that life before death is not “dying”; it is, rather, living in knowledge of death—the knowledge that final “failure” characterizes the process but does not absolutely determine it since the process is itself its own primary fact. This distinction permits the poet to represent the interplay between the result and the process from a perspective not dominated by the pull of the abyss: he determines not to be himself caught in the whirlpool that feeds into oblivion. James, contrary to the romantics he here and elsewhere resists, and contrary to the tendency I’ve marked in postmodern and particularly deconstructive theory, insists that the poet—a post-romantic novelist claiming that title is itself a kind of challenge—cannot vainly pretend to speak from absolute ground, either for or against it, nor, conversely and perhaps more importantly, can he produce “himself” and his texts from that inevitable failure.

The displacement means, however, that James’s subject is not Milly alone for the questions open out. All the characters in the novel live in the knowledge of death, and not abstractly nor as an existential condition, but as a question or test of ethical import: Merton and Kate, for example, are not seen *through* Milly, a Milly made, by the inexorable logic of the text, into an absent center, but are unfolded as they respond to a figure whose (anti-)ontological status is not settled in this way. In fact, as I shall argue, Milly is translated into an emblem of the deconstructed center by these “peripheral” figures anxious to justify their exploitation of it, a translation that allows James to criticize the impulse to submit life to abyssal mystery in order to liberate appropriating desire. Merton and Kate fail the ethical test, and, in a sense, we witness their failure precisely because the text does not mirror itself, permit itself to be, self-defeatingly, primarily about its own production: it does not succumb to the temptation of infinite, self-reflecting, self-canceling caution in the face of an “impossible” but necessary task. Or, to put this another way, *Wings is* about its own production—James’s address to his text’s subject becomes the characters’ to the “same”

subject—but the difference I’ve indicated places the quotation marks around the “same.” James’s production successfully represents the failure of representing Failure as Success. While Rivkin asserts that, like *The Ambassadors*, *Wings* “might . . . be said to dramatize the relation between the two economic models . . . associated [in *The Ambassadors*] with Woollett and Paris; that is, a restricted economy that emphasizes preservation and gain and a general economy that produces both immeasurable gains and endless losses” (*False Positions* 83), the novel’s focus on the failures and the reasons for them itself offers the possibility, not for Success (*immeasurable* gains), but for success, which means avoiding the failures represented, if not all possible failures (*endless* losses): the stance is steadfastly critical of absolutes—it is fallibilist and realist. James critics at one time would remark that James’s texts spend far too much time pre-occupied with the *idea* of life at the expense of a convincing demonstration of it, embodied and passionate. Strether’s famous “live all you can!” speech at the centre of *The Ambassadors* is frequently cited as an empty call to nothing in particular from a character who himself rouses little passionate interest. Such complaints are off-base, however, and, with respect to *Wings*, suggest a failure to recognize James’s displacement of his subject: *ideas* of life are precisely at issue here, and they are all failures because they do not displace in the manner that James himself manages. James wins his own game by having his characters play it for him, allowing himself the leverage to play at the play. The extra turn represents escape—not final or definitive, but escape from the errors awaiting the players within the internal game.

The key to James’s strategy is the dramatization of the process of a de-realizing translation: the reader is given the critical distance to observe the *positing* of a transcendental figure (constructing Milly as an absolute center) and the re-writing of the figure deconstructively (Milly becomes a metaphor of metaphor). The plot to extract the figure’s value (her money—as a figure in a chain of infinite substitution, Milly’s value is thought to be transitory, formal, and entirely exchangeable) is primarily Kate’s and Merton’s, but is also encouraged or enabled by their social milieu. Lord Mark is nothing

so assertive as a translator, but his empty pre-eminence in “the London economy of proliferating mediations” (Rivkin, *False Positions* 100)—a kind of society figure-head—defines the context which Milly is made to rule (as prime metaphor and as the metaphorical dethroning of primacy). And Mark’s social power—utterly fabricated, a matter of deferral and image—relies on the erasure of discriminations and the sceptical rejection of the possibility of knowledge as well as the deep problematization of effective action—acting with conviction. This social world defined by Milly and Lord Mark produces for Merton a vision of civilization as an arbitrary, a-rational pursuit of consumable images, a vision that mocks any pretensions of cognitive insight and implies the triumph of de-racinated desire. Once posited as the center and then erased there as an arbitrary sign, Milly, that is, is shown to rule a debased world of appetite and competition—*this*, I will argue, is James’s view of “the London economy of proliferating mediations.”

These movements—Milly translated, made “ruler” of “civilization”—are, though essential, preliminary, context-setting elements in James’s critique of a deconstructionist epistemology. At the center of *his* concern is not Milly as center but the relationship between Kate and Merton: more specifically, I concur with critics like Fogel who see Merton as the subject of the novel’s main, explicit development (Fogel 57), although I will argue that, far from being redeemed by his experience with Milly, Merton is destroyed at the hands of Kate. The relationship between the two plotters in pursuit of Milly’s (money) value narrates as well the deconstruction of “thought” by “life,” or rather, the usurpation of thought by the machinery of textuality masquerading as life: Merton’s Husserlian attempt to reach life itself, the things themselves, is thwarted by Kate, who would provide immediacy but instead yields Derridean difference and deferral and the scare quotes around “the real thing”. Merton’s processing in Kate’s textual world culminates, ironically, in his paralytic, logocentric worship of an empty image, the absolute sun of his dreaming obsession. We feel the force of James’s critique of Merton’s intellectual collapse in the careful elaboration of Merton’s degeneration—his search for life resulting in his rejection of it—and, most

strikingly, in this novel's version of *The Ambassadors'* Lambinet "correction" revelation: here, Milly, suddenly, briefly, re-emerges as an emblem of embodied, pre-textual experience, as the "specified," the until now suppressed half of the metaphor—the literal, which both protects and remembers the self before it is over-written by the texts of desire.

II: Milly as Derridean Metaphor

Milly is quickly positioned for exploitation. Shortly after her arrival in London, she considers herself lost in a labyrinth of alien motives and complications, the most mysterious of which seem to be indicated by the way she has herself become such a smashing success. Although her own view is that she is "in a current determined, through her indifference, timidity, bravery, generosity—she could scarce say which—by others: that not she but the current acted, and that somebody else always was the keeper of the lock or the dam" (230), Kate tells her, shortly after Milly articulates for herself this sense of dependence, "You're an outsider, independent and standing by yourself; you're not hideously relative to tiers and tiers of others" (235). Kate's view of Milly is her pretext for later applying the image to her friend that also gives the novel its title: she tells Milly that she is a dove, and the effect on Milly is profound:

[Hearing it] she felt herself ever so delicately, so considerately, embraced: not with familiarity or as a liberty taken, but almost ceremonially and in the manner of an *accolade*; partly as if, though a dove who could perch on a finger, one were also a princess with whom forms were to be observed. . . . It was, moreover, for the girl, like an inspiration: she found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given to her. She met it on the instant as she would have met revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she had lately walked. That was what was the matter with her. She was a dove. Oh wasn't she? (236)

The "matter with her" is partially the result of her recent visit with Luke Strett who has confirmed, in however ambiguous terms, the fragility of her health. But the name here "ceremoniously" given her, a "revealed truth" and an "inspiration" that not only clarifies her condition but, for the moment, for Milly, defines her being ("She was a dove"), signals a

translation so total, a transformation so complete, that the name itself appropriates Milly's condition.³ Significantly, the metaphor functions, for Milly, in what could be called a lateral fashion. Its power arises from its ability to refer to another image of Milly's condition: her assumption of the role of the "dove" means that she is also "a princess with whom forms were to be observed," and "observed" must be given a double valence—both followed, adhered to, and recognized as grounding necessity.

In fact, if the "dove" image is here ascendant by reliance on its referral to the "princess" image, the latter eventually gains supremacy. Earlier, shortly after Milly's and Susan's first dinner at Lancaster Gate, Susan appreciates the rapport that has quickly developed between her young traveling mate and the astonishing Kate, who, for Susan, anxious for discoveries suitable for her own fictional writings, strikes her as a "handsome English girl from the heavy English house [who has] been as a figure in a picture stepping by magic out of its frame" (164). Susan considers appropriate the connection established between the two women since it unites figures of roughly equivalent ontological status:

[Susan] had lost none of her grasp, but quite the contrary, of that other conceit by virtue of which Milly was the wandering princess: so that what could be more in harmony now than to see the princess waited upon at the city gate by the worthiest maiden, the chosen daughter of the burgesses? It was the real again, evidently, the amusement of the meeting for the princess too; princesses living for the most part, in such an appeased way, on the plane of mere elegant representation. (164)

This view is Susan's, but it corresponds to that held of Milly by virtually everyone else in her world: she is transcendent (yet exploitable), untouchable (yet seducible): Milly's "reality" is her image. Indeed, she lives on the "plane of mere elegant representation" (James's own reserve indicated by the insertion of "mere").

The dove is a princess, and the princess is herself a figure or marker in the field of possibilities of representation. Milly's eventual occupancy of an unreal, de-materializing Venetian palace—it is said to hold "its history in its great lap, even like a painted idol, a solemn puppet hung about with decorations" (337)—subordinates the dove to the generating image (princess), and is itself momentarily displaced by images even more intent

on suggesting Milly's total absorption into the realm of the metaphor: she roams her palace "slowly to and fro as the priestess of worship"(337). These three are then yoked together to create a version of Milly so image-ridden as to be less a representational marker than an empty site across which such markers can chaotically flow, and, it is important to stress, James here pulls the narrative focus away from the consciousness-frame and instead draws the reader to the narrator's view; that is, the culminating fusion indicated by this triple image is not available to anyone within the text's world:

Certain aspects of the connexion of these young women [Kate and Milly] show for us as, such is the twilight that gathers about them, in the likeness of some dim scene in a Maeterlinck play, we have positively the image, in the delicate dusk, of the figure so associated and yet so opposed, so mutually watchful: that of the angular pale princess, ostrich-plumed, black-robed, hung about with amulets, reminders, relics, mainly seated, mainly still, and that of the upright restless slow-circling lady of her court who exchanges with her, across the black water streaked with evening gleams, fitful questions and answers. (339)

The princess is here not just a dove, but, comically, an ostrich, and she wears black robes of worship over-laden with the trinkets of history. Milly is so entirely erased by the accretion of images that James allows the two verb phrases "mainly seated, mainly still" to waver between activating reference (actually, de-activating, since the phrase's content is "seated" and "still") to the princess figure and to the amulets and relics that she wears: she or what she wears is almost immobile. The distinction is destabilized because it is made virtually irrelevant—the wearer and the worn are both mere images.

The reduction of Milly to a mere attractor of images, site for the ceremonial play of forms or for the observance of such forms, subjects her, then, not merely to a dominating metaphor or a series of such metaphors, but to the operation of metaphor itself—metaphor understood to function in a particular way.⁴ Derrida's famous analysis in *White Mythology* of philosophy's reliance on or immersion in metaphor theorizes the operation to which James's character is subject. Derrida's investigation proceeds by demonstrating that Western Metaphysics' desire for total mastery (to say the one thing, the only thing it can say and not speak the nothings of the sophist—[*Margins of Philosophy* 248]) depends on

the suppression or sublimation of original “sensuous” meanings for the construction of “intellectual” abstractions that, despite the sublimation, rely on the ostensible authority of that original sensuousness. This process of metaphor Derrida calls “usury,” an image used to link the process of wearing away (erosion of the sensual) and “profit,” the latter indicating the philosophical gain won in exchange for that process. Derrida here draws out the implications of usure:

The value of usure also has to be subjected to interpretation. It seems to have a systematic tie to the metaphorical perspective. It will be rediscovered wherever the theme of metaphor is privileged. And it is also a metaphor that implies a continuist presupposition: the history of a metaphor appears essentially not as a displacement with breaks, as reinscriptions in a heterogeneous system, mutations without origin, but rather as a progressive erosion, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted exhausting of the primitive meaning: an empirical abstraction without extraction from its own native soil. (*Margins* 215)

Derrida himself endorses the view of metaphor as a “displacement with breaks, as reinscriptions in a heterogeneous system, mutations without origin.” but his position is derived from that which he deconstructs. It depends, that is, on what he imputes to Western Metaphysics:

Now, if metaphor (or mimesis in general) aims at an effect of cognition, it cannot be treated without being placed in a relation to a knowledge that bears on definitions: on what the thing of which one speaks is, properly, essentially, or accidentally. Certainly one may speak properly or improperly of what is not proper to the thing, its accident, for example. Here, the two values properness/improperness do not have the same locus of pertinence. Nevertheless, the ideal of every language, and in particular of metaphor, being to bring to knowledge the thing itself, the turn of speech will be better if it brings us closer to the thing’s essential or proper truth. The space of language, the field of its divisions, is opened precisely by the difference between essence, the proper, and accident. (247)

The ideal of language—to bring us closer, indeed to presence, the essence, the proper—is sought by way of metaphors which draw upon the primal, the original, the literal meaning of words but which must also, in philosophy or the discourse of knowledge, efface that origin at the same time as the lost “immediacy” is relied on to legitimize the ideal. Abstractions destroy the origin in order to deliver the intelligible essence and eliminate the accidental that obscures that essence in the referent’s instantiation, but they also call upon

the power of that un-interpreted referent. The literal, proper, meaning, in Derrida's account of Western thought, is, if not the referent itself, an Adamic first language, a field of representation that is nevertheless a field of presence or is, in its totality, secured by presence (the transcendental signified). The foundation of Western thought as well as its account of metaphor depends on this literal meaning at one with its natural origin.

Derrida's deconstruction of this view of metaphor turns, in part, on his account of the heliotrope. He first isolates the sun as the primal literal object of philosophy, the securing origin of all metaphors guided by the ideal (sun as origin of the metaphor of seeing for knowing) and demonstrates that this first "literal" meaning is in fact thoroughly metaphorical: "There is only one sun in this [Aristotle's] system. The proper name, here, is the non-metaphorical prime mover of metaphor, the father of all figures. Everything turns around it, everything turns toward it" (243). But once the proper name is available for metaphorical transformation, "alien names" can be introduced, as indeed can "negative additions" which may deny the origin its proper attributes, and

this procedure can be pursued and complicated indefinitely. . . . No reference properly being named in such a metaphor [the alien name], the figure is carried off into the adventure of a long, implicit sentence, a secret narrative which nothing assures us will lead us back to the proper name. The metaphorization of metaphor, its bottomless overdeterminability, seems to be inscribed in the structure of metaphor, but as its negativity. As soon as one admits that all terms in an analogic relation already are caught up, one by one, in a metaphorical relation, everything begins to function no longer as a sun, but as a star, the punctual source of truth or properness remaining invisible or nocturnal. (243-44)

This "carrying off," Derrida argues, is the inevitable though repressed consequence of the metaphysical conception of metaphor. The absolute literal foundation of metaphor—the first literal "standard" against which the detours and deviations of metaphor are intelligible (the heliotrope)—is itself metaphorical and so the "origin" is already "caught up" in an "analogic relation": metaphor is not grounded in literal truth, but in fact precedes truth, generates it.

Derrida's metaphorization of the literal is possible, however, precisely because his strategy is to isolate the "essential" first metaphor (turning on the heliotropic literal), and

then, against the standard of presence (imputed to western thought), demonstrate that it fails to ground itself in the authority of the sensory. The Sun itself is often not present to view, it moves about the earth—moves beyond us, escapes our sensory knowing; in fact the intensity of its presence precludes direct view, burning the eyes that want to know it. The result is the undermining of the sensory, primitive literal that was to anchor the heliotrope. Moreover—and this is the crucial move—all metaphors in the service of knowledge, under the guardianship of the Sun, are “caught,” are unmoored and sent adrift—in search, it seems, of the lost “punctual source of truth.” Derrida, as he makes clear—but to rather little effect I think—in his debate on the nature of metaphor with Ricoeur,⁵ does not endorse the “erosion” explanation of metaphorical meaning. His tactic, however, is such that he must assume that that explanation is the only one possible within Western Metaphysics or the discourses of reason, for his conclusion is not that this view of metaphor is self-defeating and so should be abandoned for some other, better account: on the contrary, there can be no other account. His “alternative” is nothing more than the result of the failure: Derrida’s “success” is the representation of metaphysics’ failure.⁶

Ricoeur, on the other hand, and James implicitly in the construction of his narrative, endorse a view of metaphor that is neither a recuperation of the metaphysical one described by Derrida, nor a surrender to the exploded, deconstructed view that Derrida eventually produces. Ricoeur counters Derrida by dispensing with the assumption that metaphor can only be conceived within the realm of knowledge or—since Ricoeur is also sensitive to the dangers of positivistic reduction, not to mention political manipulation—by reference to an essential first meaning. The distinction between literal and figural can be drawn without reliance on “the illusion that words might have in themselves a proper meaning, that is to say, primitive, natural, original” (*Rule of Metaphor* 290). As he explains: “We have certainly admitted that the metaphorical use of a word can always be opposed to its literal use; but literal does not mean proper in the sense of original, but simply current, usual: the literal meaning is that which is lexicalized” (290-91). Metaphors

operate by virtue of a tension between the lexicalized and the novel meanings simultaneously present in the image. This tension—between “tenor” and “vehicle,” or “focus” and “frame,” or, more fundamentally, between “is” and “is not”—in fact defines the difference:

The only criterion of metaphor, in fact, is that the word gives two ideas at once, that it contain both “tenor” and “vehicle” in interaction. By contrast, this criterion can serve to define literal meaning: if one cannot distinguish tenor and vehicle, then the word can be provisionally regarded as literal. . . . But, in this case, literal meaning has nothing to do with proper meaning. Furthermore, literal language becomes extremely rare, outside the technical language of the sciences. (81)

For Derrida, an absolutely non-metaphorical (literal—and therefore truthful) distinction between literal and figural is necessary for metaphor to serve truth; if the distinction is not so grounded, truth itself is subverted, held hostage by the “lies” of the figural (a characterization which is itself derived from the absolute standard). Ricoeur’s view, on the contrary, is that metaphor expands upon the already-thought, the “usual” embedded in language; metaphors break open the expected. There is no reason to assume that metaphors are lies subverting, in fact, surreptitiously generating, the “truth.” Ricoeur stresses the exploratory power of the figural, the ability of metaphors to provide self- and conceptual-clarification. The process can never be complete, of course, for even the assumption of potential completion resurrects the truly dogmatic perspective of final presence.

I would argue, however—and this is the view that emerges from James’s text—that Ricoeur is yet too cautious. The identification of the literal with the usual or with the absence of tension between tenor and vehicle tends to reduce the literal to the conventional, and although Ricoeur certainly does not equate the conventional with the false (such an equation would commit the error of assuming that disruptions of the usual in fact explain the totality, an error Derrida falls into by elevating *différance* to a “quasi-transcendental” concept), he does seem to assume that the conventional has no genuine tie to the sensuous or the physical: yoking the literal in this way to an empirical base comes dangerously close—this, I think, is the fear—to the erosion theory of metaphor that Derrida both relies

on and deconstructs. Nevertheless, the danger can be risked because if the literal is not necessarily false, and is not by definition dependent on grasping the “essential”—the final, total truth of its object—then there is no reason to assume that the exploration made possible by metaphor may not also concern conceptual clarification of empirical objects or, from the perspective I’ve argued for in Chapter 2, objects given to thought that precede thought’s construction, though they are always already subject to that constructing power and can only be thought as they pass through it. Such exploration, inherently possible given the terms of Ricoeur’s characterization of the function of metaphor, entails viewing the literal as something more than the “conventional” in the sense of the merely stagnant.

The literal is also—and this applies in the case of any metaphorical exploration—that which preserves or protects. It represents not an absolute standard of “Truth,” but the senses of language that resist the loss of what history—indeed, time—has produced. The novel figure can articulate the new, but the new will be tethered by the pressure of the established, and there is also no justification for assuming that the new is always the true or the good. The undecideability here does not lead to *différance* unless we remain at the punctual site of what Ricoeur calls the simultaneously “pertinent and the impertinent” (*Metaphor* 290). The value of the new will be tested in the course of its narrative history by the courts of language, usage, and project, all of which demand fertile expansion or the furtherance rather than the hindrance of the exploration (the new can open the old in order to block more firmly than had the old the emergence of a new new). If the object is pre-linguistic or pre-semiotic, the literal can be seen both as the preservation of the “usual view” regarding it, and also as the protector of its reality *as* pre-linguistic or pre-semiotic: this is not the return of Derrida’s “sensuous, primitive, original” literal, understood as the final and first meaning; instead, the literal is recognized as the protector of a permanent question, a marker pointing where to look, what to explore, what to confront. The literal—Ricoeur also calls it the “is”—reminds thought, in the case of the empirical, of what does not wholly belong to thought and which thus always resists final appropriation even as it

calls us to its attention. The Sun does escape our vision, “our sensation fails us” (*Margins* 250), and yet we name it Sun to remind us of our hope for its return though we are powerless to determine its course. Even at night, the word invites our reflection.

Milly, consumed by metaphors, serves, for the other characters in the novel, as the heliotrope, the center of attention, attractor of desire, life-giver of their world. Or, rather, she both is and is not the heliotrope, and the undecideability is precisely the cause of her final eclipse. About the young American woman who has scored such a great social success in London, Kate tells Merton, during a party at Lancaster Gate which, as Susan has announced upon her arrival, Milly, the guest of honour, is unable to attend: “You’re right about her [Milly] not being easy to know. One *sees* her with intensity—sees her more than one sees almost anyone; but then one discovers that that isn’t knowing her and that one may know a person better whom one doesn’t ‘see,’ as I say, half so much” (276). For Kate, Milly severs the usual connection between seeing and knowing, and this effect is created, as it were, because of Milly’s intense visibility: she is at the limit of the visible, she is the extreme, the “sensory model of the sensory” (Derrida, *Margins* 251) that subverts its own propriety and destroys, it seems, its essential companion attribute: one doesn’t know her—perception as a concrete mode of experience, of information reception is here eliminated in favour of the object’s metaphorical significance. And Milly’s absence from the party is the occasion for Kate’s (anti-)insight, as though her removal from the immediate presence of sensory confirmation—Kate cannot see Milly at the moment she asserts that “One sees her with intensity”—permits the realization that sight is in fact the obstacle: Milly is deconstructively known when she is not a physical presence, when she is within representation and without primitive, natural reference so that, the Occlusive Fallacy triumphantly committed (see Novitz 56, discussed in Chapter 2), “theoretical room is opened to allow limitless work upon the re-presentation prior to its appearance” (Dillon “Temporality” 206). What is known about her, though, is that she evades being known, or perhaps, in Kate’s view, a view that would comfort her since it eases her conscience. Milly

is simply unknowable. How can such a figure “possess” anything? Infinitely exchangeable, she is the coin of metaphor; she is money. The plot may proceed.⁷

III: From Perpetual Error to Inaction:

Civilization’s Gentlemen Beasts

Merton’s response to the metaphorized Milly is (almost) entirely in keeping with the implications that can be drawn from Kate’s latent nihilism, despite the fact that, to him, Milly is not the bright reverse-sun which can be looked at but does not yield knowledge, but is rather the arbitrary and temporary center of the random movements of desire that trace the shape of civilization. His scepticism draws its strength from the vision of the Milly-image, but positions him as an unwitting mirror image of Lord Mark, a deratiocinated society figure without origin, and the result of the accidental alliance is a subversion of ethical, purposive action. Merton’s reply to Kate’s assertion of Milly’s influence on the crowd is to dismiss the reality of both the influenced and the influencer:

The huddled herd had drifted to her blindly—it might as blindly have drifted away. There had been of course a signal, but the great reason was probably the absence at the moment of a larger lion. The bigger beast would come and the smaller would incontinently vanish. . . . [It] was a sign of the season, a feature of the time, of the purely rough-and-tumble nature of the social boom. . . . Anything was boomable enough when nothing else was more so: the author of the ‘rotten’ book, the beauty who was no beauty, the heiress who was only that, the stranger who was for the most part saved from being inconveniently strange but by being inconveniently familiar, the American whose Americanism had been long desperately discounted, the creature in fine as to whom spangles or spots of any sufficiently marked and exhibited sort could be loudly enough predicated. (277-78)

Milly brings out for Merton the inherent falsity (though the tone of disgust suggests, of course, his resistance to the reliance on such centres: they are the “tricks of fashion” (278)) of what he will still call, ironically, civilization. He thinks, however, that Kate dismisses the irony by silently assuring him that this is not civilization but “only a poor silly, though quite harmless, imitation” (278).

The list of the “boomable” that Merton considers consists of subjects about whom attributes are identified then quickly dismissed, or posited despite their lack of connection to their true qualities. The beauty who is not a beauty, the stranger who is not strange: the contradiction seems to turn on the difference between the appearance and the reality, and society is condemned for its hunger after the superficial. However, Merton’s understanding of the “real,” by the light of which he privately mocks the mob, is curiously empty. The stranger is not “really” strange, but all too familiar; the beauty is in fact no beauty at all. And the author of the ‘rotten’ book is improperly revered—the author, not the book, is singled out, Merton still displacing the latter. He regards the mania to create the new out of the usual as radically misguided, not because the usual—the literal—is betrayed, its value or truth lost by obscuring images. He rejects the image because it is not true to the subject’s real absence of value. Civilization’s images are representations of error because they assume correspondence with what is not, in fact, present. Merton ends up almost denying the place of his own resistance: the subjects in the list are gathered together in the term “creature,” a word that, in its dismissive, blank comprehensiveness, tends to annihilate the qualities upon which genuine images could be built. A creature could provide the grounds for a metaphor, but not an image, for images of the type he here considers operate by focusing on and emphasizing an already recognized or intelligible quality. Images of creatures can only be metaphors, the transformation of the unarticulated into the articulated, the identification of what was unrecognized but recognizable into the actually recognized. Merton’s metaphors would not, however, yield such communication—not True but true, valuable exploration—because the creatures, the potential sources for metaphorical examination are without qualities: it is not that they are unarticulated, they are un-articulate. There is no beauty, no book; there is nothing and nobody beyond the “heiress,” the stranger is the dead, stupefyingly familiar. Society may predicate according to false assumptions, but Merton here is close to thinking that predication is itself the error.

The error of thinking, thinking as itself the error—this is a view that, although Merton has not entirely embraced it, his analysis of the whims of fashion and the causes of Milly's success takes a crucial step towards accepting. The blind, huddled herd surround the biggest available animal, and the occupier of the center, once replaced by the next "sufficiently marked and exhibited" bearer of false qualities, "vanishes." Merton, too, thinks of Milly as someone who attracts a kind of fascination that defeats knowledge, or who is subject to—not the authority of—a blind attention fueled only by desire. The weaker animal centre of Merton's metaphor vanishes at the appearance of the new and greater beast, the implication clearly being that the old centre is not merely discarded by fashion, but literally consumed by it, devoured either by the now hungry and rebellious throng or by the new empty champion, one of the "heavy horrors," to recall Merton's earlier dismissal of the world, represented by Aunt Maud, "that could still flourish, that lifted their undiminished heads, in an age so proud of its short way with false gods" (105-6). The substitution of the one center of meaning for the other, or, more accurately, the one center of appetite for the other, reduces the idea of the supplement to brutally stark terms: if the movement of social thought is directed by the process suggested by Merton's metaphor, then, as I've argued in Chapter 2, the supplement's usurpation of the origin—substitution rather than addition, correction, refinement, or any of the other ways that the relation between what precedes acts of thinking and the process of thinking itself can be described—is a violent, self-canceling and self-perpetuating one, a game played and ruled by the strong champions who know the deception and exploit it, or accidentally "won" by the weak, blind herd whom it so utterly dominates as to reduce them to mindless beasts responding to the "signal," the whistle, or the dinner bell. Even for Merton, who resists Kate's conversion of knowledge into ignorance, or her uneasy conflation of seeing and unknowing, the Milly-metaphor signals the arbitrary, the confounding of thought, perpetual, futile error—meaning made to mean violence. Society, on this view, is a-rational at best, a mere conjunction of chaotic appetitive drives.

Merton's rival—or "rival," the quotation marks being required by the ironies of James's plot, ironies that in fact ridicule the marks rather than the words imprisoned within them—Lord Mark (and the significance of the name must be noted) represents this sociological nihilism at its most extreme, but does so in a manner apparently the reverse of that which Merton's characterization would seem to require. Lord Mark, of course, appears to be anything but a beast slaving after false gods, but his sophistication is a mirrored reflection of the appetitive motivation Merton recognizes in the guise of hypersensitivity. For Mark, too, society is powered by ignorance.⁸ His attitude does not, however, despite the fact that his depiction of society is remarkably similar to Merton's, betray the sense that such a condition is the result of failure. On the contrary, ignorance, he feels, is the necessary consequence of rich complication:

[T]here was no such thing to-day in London as saying where anyone was. Every one was everywhere—nobody was anywhere. He should be put to it—yes, frankly—to give a name of any sort or kind to their hostess's "set." Was it a set at all, or wasn't it, and were there not really no such things as sets in the place anymore?—was there anything but the groping and pawing, of masses of bewildered people trying to "get" they didn't know what or where? (150)

From Milly's perspective, we are told that Lord Mark never follows through with any of his speculations and does not help her to any "discriminations: he spoke as if he had given them up from too much knowledge" (150-1). Indeed, Milly accuses him of being "*blasé*, but . . . not enlightened[,] . . . familiar with everything, but conscious really of nothing." He has, she says, "no imagination" (158)—James's most severe condemnation.

The "sets" Mark speaks of are the semi-cohesive social groupings by which one would understand one's place and by which a stranger would take her bearings. In Mark's speech, by the link he almost explicitly makes between such cliques and both self- and other- recognition, sets assume epistemological implications, analogous to the Jamesian "type." In this novel, reliance by a character on a type—a generalized expectation about an other's character, in the extreme case causing a gross under-estimation of possibility, a reduction to flat stereotype—signals, for the most part, a lack of perception or a

susceptibility to deception. For example, Aunt Maud rejects Merton as a possible suitor for Kate because she “had fallen foul of his very type, his want of the right marks, his foreign accidents, his queer antecedents” (114). But, despite Milly’s essential inability to penetrate Kate’s and Merton’s real motives, her initial connection with Kate is understood by her as stemming in part from her recognition that “[t]his woman’s type had, visibly, other possibilities; yet here, of its own free movement, it had already sketched a relation” (149). The suggestion is that using “types” is not an inherently faulty move, a block in itself to greater understanding: rather than the type being some kind of betrayal of openness—a constraining “label”—it is the instrument by which Milly understands that Kate is something far beyond what is here dimly grasped. The type is the framework of a relation, a guide to cognition, a category—a generalization that can generate insight and spur further inquiry; only if the type is held to be utterly conclusive, as it is in Maud’s hands, is it ridiculed. Indeed, the type can be a crucial element in a moment not of intellectual closure but of radical renewal: Susan finds Milly sitting alone in the mountains and the vision of her young friend had the “character of a revelation”:

During the breathless minutes of her watch she had seen her companion afresh; the latter’s type, aspect, marks, her history, her state, her beauty, her mystery, all unconsciously betrayed themselves to the Alpine air, and all had been gathered in again to feed Mrs. Stringham’s flame. (136)

The part of self that is amenable to the type or the category is foremost in this list of bursting qualities, but there is no sense that it dominates or restricts access to or expression of the others, of Milly’s mystery, for example.

Lord Mark, on the other hand, totally dismisses the viability of the set, of the categorical as an instrument of knowledge or insight. The boundaries by which such tools of the mind work—boundaries that can be iron brackets forbidding the new or the refinement; permeable postulates, hypotheses that guide and question but do not determine: or at the extreme opposite to the first, so transitory as to seem mere clouds of smoke distinguishing nothing—are in Lord Mark’s exposition rank impossibilities, not boundaries at all. The possible members of the set are so randomly dispersed across the social field

that they seem to occupy no possible or designatable set all: they are “everywhere” and “nowhere,” false gods, perhaps, in their mock omnipresence, or, since Mark’s words distinctly echo Merton’s formulation of this kind of insight—“Oh—everything! “Everything’s nothing” (99)—self-canceling ciphers. If the elements vanish, the intelligence that would understand them is left with nothing as well, so that the sets, much more than simply disintegrating, cannot even be named—they cease to exist as even a memory of technique.

Lord Mark’s cynical scepticism is made to play an ambiguous role in the narrative for, although he is a relatively minor figure, he serves as the catalyst for Milly’s ultimate destruction, and this despite the implication attached to him that his cynicism (however general the condition he most explicitly presents) is precisely the quality that prevents him from being the source of significant action. The intimate but very complex connection made in the novel between knowledge and action is elaborated most broadly, perhaps, through Lord Mark. The narrator, aligned here with Kate’s consciousness (and this perspective is of course telling given Kate’s own sense of purpose) wonders at the value Aunt Maud and the London wealthy place on Lord Mark’s presence:

[W]hat they best knew him by at Lancaster Gate was a thing difficult to explain. One knew people in general by something they had to show, something that, either for them or against, could be touched or named or proved; and she could think of no other case of a value taken as so great and yet flourishing untested. His value was his future, which had somehow got itself accepted by Aunt Maud as if it had been his good cook or steam-launch. She, Kate, didn’t mean she thought him a humbug; he might do great things—but they were as yet, so to speak, all he had done. (169)

Lord Mark lives on his future to such an extent that it seems he has nothing to show (thus eluding vision), leaving nothing that can be touched (eluding physical contact) and nothing to be named (eluding intelligibility). He trades on the value-to-come—the delayed, deferred expectation of ultimately great things, although what those things may be also cannot be named. Interestingly, the syntax of the last clause quoted above attempts to turn the vague unrealized into a concrete particular: the future “great things” seems to be the antecedent of “they,” but the predicate “were all he had done” would mean that those things

to come have already occurred—Mark’s ambiguity here becoming aporetic, subverting temporal distinctions. Instead, the phrase attempts to mean that Mark has succeeded in making the *expectation* of great things his great accomplishment. But to Kate the aporetic triumphs over the implied but subverted intended meaning:

[Lord Mark] had been a short time in the House, on the Tory side, but had lost his seat on the first opportunity [his surface-value is thus restricted], and this was all he had to point to [“this”: once having held the seat, or failing to keep it?]. However, he pointed to nothing; which was very possibly just a sign of his real cleverness, one of those that the really clever had in common with the really void. (169)

The comic identity between the void and the clever here turns on the ability of the clever to feign total blankness—a tactic for averting expectation. But even this feint requires that Lord Mark “point to nothing” so that, whatever his tactic, whether he really is the one or the other, the ambiguity is achieved only by the accomplished negation of indication. He can point to no definite actions in the past by which to justify his worth or by which others may know him, but, even more, the nothing that he relies on is a form of disconnection, a result or a cause of random, wayward wandering: a mark without reference.

Kate later tells Merton after the latter has met Lord Mark for the first time that the latter’s genius is “Universal”: “I don’t know at least . . . what else to call it when a man’s able to make himself without effort, without violence, without machinery of any sort, so intensely felt. He was somehow an effect without his being in any traceable way a cause” (289). He is the trace of a mark without origin but always already an effect and affecting. His presentation is so polished, all hint of effort—of *purpose* or *conviction*—silently eliminated, that he is “felt” or “experienced” in a way radically disconnected from intelligibility. His personal resources (both financial and personal), whatever they may be, are thought to be beyond qualification—his genius is universal (though to the reader he is a “fool,” as James in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* calls his enabling characters). And yet, as Milly discerns during her penultimate meeting with him at her Venetian palace, “it was one of his merits, to which she did justice too, that both his native and his acquired notion of behavior rested on the general assumption that nothing—nothing to make a

deadly difference for him—ever could happen” (352).⁹ She does this justice to his merit because his elimination of “happenings” permits her rejection of his (entirely self-interested—the really void are also the really greedy) proposal of marriage to pass by without difficulty and awkwardness. He can turn even failure into blankness. His causelessness in fact eliminates difference by its universal application.¹⁰

Nevertheless, he is the agent of Milly’s destruction because he, we learn but do not see, informs her of Merton’s secret engagement to Kate. Milly, Susan tells Merton, has “turned her face to the wall”(421) after Lord Mark’s last visit, an image not so much of self-entrapment as of deliberate refusal of vision and of self-eclipse. Susan confirms that Mark “doesn’t know what he has done to her. Only we, you see, do that” (432). Merton, however, rejects Susan’s defense of him saying in a moment of lucid self-knowledge that innocence claimed through ignorance and a “good conscience” amounts to culpable blindness, the sign of an “inevitable ass” (432). Lord Mark, who does not permit himself to recognize a self-implicating deadly difference, “causes” just such a difference for the spectral figure on the “elegant plane of representation” who, according to those who have put her there, controls that field. The central figure is dethroned, in the end, it would seem, not by the “bigger beast,” the more imposing creature who, even though by virtue of falsely attributed false qualities, would then take up the royal centre until being herself replaced. Instead, the centre is erased by the universal trace without origin—the lord mark—who does not perpetuate that system of social attraction at all, but finally, for these characters, thoughtlessly disperses its elements and destroys it.

Susan does not judge the truth of Mark’s account to Milly, or force Merton to speak his version to her; instead she tells him: “What I believe will inevitably depend more or less on your action. You can perfectly settle it—if you care. I promise to believe you down to the ground if, to save her life, you consent to a denial” (437). Susan’s romanticism deforms judgment into something unfamiliar. Instead of action providing a grounds for judgment and interpretation, Susan here offers Merton an escape from his own moral

compromise by agreeing before the fact to judge entirely by the effect and not the cause. Merton can have done what he did from whatever truth and from whatever motive, but if he will act now to save what Susan holds dearest, he will have shown he “cared”—a saving substitute, she believes, for the truth. But Merton’s position is an impossible one. Susan requests an outright lie, and Merton, for all his scepticism, clings to the notion that deception of so direct a kind would be a violation of his primary rule, a rule of public behavior and social decorum:

The single thing that was clear in complications was that, whatever happened, one was to behave as a gentleman—to which was added indeed the perhaps slightly less shining truth that complications might sometimes have their tedium beguiled by a study of the question of how a gentleman would behave. (367).

But if Lord Mark is the “successful” gentleman, or if society is a mindless consuming herd, to *be* a gentleman is to be a man without a place; and how should one behave if behavior itself, which implies definite responses to specific contextual problems, is made, in Mark’s world, to seem almost impossible? The tedium of complications is thus only beguiled by an even larger question, one that has disconcertingly contradictory yet similar answers. To know how a gentleman would behave, one need only observe the ultimate gentleman, Lord Mark—but he seems not to behave at all; on the other hand, the question itself implies the vague, remembered standard of acting rightly according to what one knows. Merton, however, has acted according to Kate’s plan, which has meant that he has not acted at all—or does it? He wants to believe that he hasn’t acted because that would save his conscience, but does one succeed in not acting if acting requires some degree of knowing, and one has acted so as *not to know*? Merton may by trick of circumstance be aligned with, mirrored by, Lord Mark—they are both, if intentions are ignored, eventually positioned (the passive construction is necessary) to seduce Milly’s money from her (“a monstrous supposition” (436), Merton says, trying to distance himself from his seeming double)—but Merton’s dilemma is far more complicated (in fact Mark doesn’t have a dilemma since oblivious self-interest without discrimination cannot generate the tension

required to create one) since he is dimly aware that action must, in some way, proceed from an appreciation of the facts. The irony is sharp when James's lost and wandering would-be gentleman tells Susan upon hearing from her that Lord Mark has punctured Milly's romantic fantasy (if in fact she was in one) that "[h]e can only have acted—it would have been his sole safety—from full knowledge" (433). Merton feels certain that a daring and cruel strike against Kate's plan could only be launched from secure ground since Milly herself, or at least her money, was at stake. Lord Mark, of course, required no such certainty, as we discover in Book X when Kate plausibly denies confirming Mark's suspicions. He will "act" on chance, from tenuous supposition, and he has by chance communicated the central truth about his rival seducers. But after Merton has lost admittance to the palace, he realizes that his own game has also not been secured from risk: "The common wisdom had had its say to him—that safety in doubt was not action; and perhaps what most helped him was its very commonness" (475).

This is a crucial distinction. Lord Mark acts without knowledge, knowledge which, Merton thinks, would provide safety; Merton himself sought safety in doubt, but is ultimately devastated. Merton's assumption is, then—despite his near rejection of predication—that one can act safely with knowledge or one can safely *not* act in the absence of knowledge, protected by doubt. The severity of the distinction paralyzes him, however, and even this paralysis cannot be extricated from the field of direst consequence; indeed, it may be that Merton's causelessness is the cause of such consequence (he knows that his effects will be "traceable," at least by himself, to a cause). Milly's dependence on him cannot be denied:

Anything he should do or shouldn't would have close reference to her life, which was thus absolutely in his hands—and ought never to have reference to anything else. It was on the cards that he might kill her. . . . What had come out for him had come out, with this first intensity, as a terror; so that action itself, of any sort, the right as well as the wrong—if the difference even survived—had heard in it a vivid "Hush!" the injunction to keep from that moment intensely still. (410)

Merton's predicament is that action is forbidden—to properly act he must not act—if he is not to betray his conflicting duties to Kate and to Milly. Here we have the result of Kate's design: Merton faces the possibility of his own complicity in murder. And the extremity of his situation seems to erase the distinction between the right act and the wrong, and leave in its wake an absolute, incalculable responsibility, the kind that denies support from any precept or precedent and that requires a radically aporetic response—"her life . . . was thus absolutely in his hands—and ought never to have reference to anything else." This responsibility is such an immense, indeed, impossible burden that the only response is not to respond. Kate's plan has deconstructively pushed a target notion to its extreme limit (for Derrida, the present means *presence* and perception entails immediacy) where it teeters on the brink of extinction.

Pressed against this limit, defined against something that has been made the singular possible truth, action, for Merton, has no middle ground—it is either nothing or everything. Merton cannot, under this immense conceptual pressure, find refuge in intense immobility because he cannot not act. Long before his self-reduction to this paralyzed subjection to the isolated princess (her court of flatterers departed for London), he acknowledged that although he may wish to escape duplicitous action, he is simply unable to do so ("doing" meaning "not-doing"), unless he commits himself to the truth, which, he fears may be even more destructive:

[I]t didn't take him far to remember that he had himself as yet done nothing deceptive. It was Kate's description of him, his defeated state, it was none of his own; his responsibility would begin, as he might say, only with acting it ["Kate's design"] out. The sharp point was, however, in the difference between acting and not acting: this difference in fact it was that made the case of conscience. He saw it with a certain alarm rise before him that everything was acting that was not speaking the particular word. "If you like me because you think she doesn't, it isn't a bit true: she does like me awfully!—that would have been the particular word; which there were at the same time but too palpably such difficulties about his uttering. (299)

The case for conscience and of the gentleman has been erased because it resides in a difference—should one act or not, does one act in this way or in that—that has been collapsed for Merton in the Milly-metaphor world. Everything but the word is acting and

acting against the truth: conscience is eliminated with the exhaustion of choice in the realm of mundane action and its complete absorption in that of mis-representation, where it (choice) is transformed into inevitable “moral” failure. For if everything but the word is acting wrongly, only the word is not so acting; the word, however, evades utterance, which means that Merton, because of Kate’s positioning of the central truth as the central impossibility whose possibility persists at every moment, cannot not act in conformity to a duplicitous text of exploitation.

The anxious gentleman is thus the *opposite* of a gentleman: he “behaves” wrongly no matter what he does, which is the same as saying he does nothing at all. His hesitation before the word he may not speak defines his behavior in terms of fear and desire alone, his “action” as inevitable lie.¹¹ And if mis-representation has claimed action, it has done so for the sake of “wearing” another name, a name that should designate an embodied, desiring and knowing relation but instead masks its absence:

[Kate] looked it well in the face, she took it intensely home, that they were lovers; she rejoiced to herself and, frankly, to him, in their wearing of the name; but, distinguished creature that, in her way, she was, she took a view of this character that scarce squared with the conventional. The character itself she insisted on as their right, taking that so for granted that it didn’t seem even bold; but Densher, though he agreed with her, found himself moved to wonder at her simplifications, her values. Life might prove difficult—was evidently going to; but meanwhile they had each other, and that was everything. This was her reasoning, but meanwhile, for *him*, each other was what they didn’t have, and it was just the point. (94-5)

Kate and Merton are “lovers” but they are not lovers, not yet. The design has been undertaken, in Merton’s case more urgently, to effect a translation and remove the quotation marks: to actually have the “real thing.” But held off by the forbidden word, he is also trapped in the mere word as his reward. Bracketed by empty verbal compensation on the one side, and a “particular word” the utterance of which would be murder on the other, “Milly”’s representational realm is tainted by an inherent lifelessness of its own—Milly’s disease has also been translated into the metaphors written to consume her.

IV: Thought Consumed by Text

The translation of Milly, underwritten by Lord Mark's social economy of arbitrary signification, pulls Merton into his impossible position, but the more direct and specific cause is, of course, Kate's plan to evade Aunt Maud's conditions of patronage and secure her relationship with Merton on financially stable ground; and it is through this plan and Merton's relationship with Kate that Merton is finally undone: in the dramatization of this relationship, James's novel suggests that legitimate philosophical or cultural attempts to connect thought with life may be undermined by a textuality that masquerades as vital, passionate life. Kate's plan converts Merton's quest for life, the thing itself, into a pursuit of something quite different, and indeed, at the end of the novel, he has nothing but a dead (girl's) name and a repugnance for what he once sought. Kate's motivations are, considering her ostensible desire to provide a viable social context for sexual intimacy, curiously infused, as we are made aware right from the start, with language-based obsessions. Her father's scandalous behavior—what he did, she says, “must be some particular thing,” “known—only, thank God, not to us” (99)—has engendered her own fear of disgrace and her need to resurrect her family name:

She didn't hold herself cheap, she didn't make for misery. Personally, no, she wasn't chalk-marked for auction. She hadn't given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, *would* end with a sort of meaning. . . . It was the name, above all, she would take in hand—the precious name she so liked and that, in spite of the harm her wretched father had done it, wasn't yet past praying for. She loved it in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound. (57)

The startling image here again twists the function of metaphor into a groundless lateral movement of name retrieval for the sake of the name. Her father has damaged the family reputation (the name-representative no longer refers to and preserves the family's dignity), and she will set it right—that is the implied meaning. But through Kate's consciousness, this meaning is displaced, if still identifiable, in favor of an image that almost eliminates the practical consequences of such social shame—and her sister Marian is acutely aware of

these, impending starvation being the most feared. For Kate, the name itself bleeds, suffers the wound and calls for tender love; the name itself is the (dying) sentence betrayed by the knowable but preferably unknown actions of her father (a proper name no longer proper has, in its “damaged” state, usurped representation). The sentence that carries that living word has been broken but will be repaired by her own writing in the text that houses them all. Her aggressive pan-textualism thus transfers the metaphor (the name) into the literal (preserver of the pre-text) which is itself projected along the field of representation. It is to be guided, however—or so she here intends—by the structure of the sentence—a sentence dominated by its deferred last word (“if she was . . .”).

Kate’s radicalization of metaphor in *Book First* casts a dim, qualifying light on Merton’s understanding of the attraction between himself and Kate, the hidden battery powering the plot against Milly. James’s narrator offers this description of Merton:

He was in short visibly absent-minded, irregularly clever, liable to drop what was near and to take up what was far; he was more a prompt critic than a prompt follower of custom. He suggested above all, however, that wondrous state of youth in which the elements, the metals more or less precious, are so in fusion and fermentation that the question of the final stamp, the pressure that fixes the value, must wait for comparative coolness. (86)

Merton’s flexible elements, awaiting an inscription or the emergence of the final stamp, and his restless intelligence (he frequently wanders “seemingly at random, from alley to alley: he stopped for no reason and remained idly agaze” (85)) connote freedom of thought, of course, but also a sense of dangerous, volatile confusion, an energetic mind seeking direction and containment. He represents his lack to himself by reference to Kate, with whom he is connected by virtue of “the famous law of contraries” according to which one seeks, not so much one’s opposite, as the cliché has it, but one’s supplement—the lovers are to make up for each other’s deficiencies so that each is incorporated into the other and becomes the more whole. Merton thinks that he represents for Kate the intellectual world, the world of culture and philosophy, “the high dim things she lumped together as of the mind” (87), and she for him is vitality, life:

Having so often concluded on the fact of his weakness, as he called it, for life—his strength merely for thought—life, he logically opined, was what he must somehow arrange to annex and possess. This was so much a necessity that thought by itself only went on in the void; it was from the immediate air of life that it must draw its breath. So the young man, ingenious but large, critical but ardent too, made out both his case and Kate Croy's. (88)

Of course, this analysis must issue through Merton's intelligence on the assumption that Kate's power of life could not be the source for such reflection. Kate's role, he thinks, is to free him from the void of aimlessness, to ground his thought in the immediate—to provide the pressure that will remain fast in the fusing elements of his nature.

The analysis seems in part vitiated, however, by its own conclusion. If his thought is without life, constrained by the boundaries of the void so that life is its other, then the conclusions drawn by thought while still in this condition—and he is very aware that Kate's gift of life's breath is not consummated so long as their relationship is forbidden by Aunt Maud—are themselves groundless. Only when he grasps what he thinks is required can he say with some authority that what he sought was what was needed; before the "success," he is locked in failure. And, indeed, the equations "Kate equals life," and "Merton equals thought" can function independently of the general proposition that thought and life (however one may wish to refine these terms—theory and praxis, for example) must supplement each other. The specificity of the equations "grounds" the proposition (narratively and for the character), but also opens it to risk of error, and a realized error can question not only the equations but the functional relation implied by that specificity between the terms of the proposition. That relation is implied already in Merton's wish to "annex and possess" his other: radically isolated thought, or rather thought which takes itself to be radically isolated, will seek total appropriation of that which will destroy its "isolation."

James's set up is comically contradictory, the clues quickly brought forward. The man without firm qualities—awaiting, desiring them—is said a mere ten pages later to bear marks—branded signs—of fortune's intent. That he will never be rich is a truth "he knew

. . . to be absolute, though secret, and also, strange to say, about common undertakings, not discouraging, not prohibitive" (95), and this truth he wears as a "mark on his forehead" (96). The other mark represents the ease with which he "handles everything": "He was quite aware how he handled everything; it was another mark on his forehead: the pair of smudges from the thumb of fortune, the brand on the passive fleece, dated from the primal hour and kept each other company. He wrote, as for print, with deplorable ease" (96). These "smudges" (the odd word is repeated later at a moment of crucial realization) denote the exception to his metal's plasticity and both marks are severely tested in the process of clinging to the other pressure provided, he thinks, by Kate. A portion of "the mass of money so piled on [Milly's] back" (123) is transferred to him, and his easy handling is undone even by Milly's attendant, Eugenio (414). The instantaneous shift in the above passage from mention of Merton's social aplomb to his ability to write with "deplorable ease" signals as well his unreal comfort in the plane of representation. His writing too, however, is soon also swept aside (for a time) when he, while in Venice, ceases to write for his newspaper, or at all, and is brought to the point of using a non-existent writing project as an excuse to Milly to account for his continued presence in that city after the rest of the Londoners have returned home. Or rather, on this score, the game of representation is intensified to such a degree that the writing, now so difficult, becomes a representation about a representation that does not exist. In any event, the existing "smudges" approach either total erasure or hyper-realization precisely in the attempt to obtain their like, even though they are themselves denied in the assessment of the need.

Kate's life force cannot but activate such "thought" in a manner unexpected by it. She transforms Merton's sense of the supplemental "law of contraries" into a power of the supplement that he does not expect, though his own wish for annexation is itself indicative of the more radical function. She may provide what he lacks—the energy of life, the breath of the decisive—but her strength is not subordinate to his own, but replaces it, usurps it, overtaking his "originality." Her conquest is initiated by her apparent submission to the

field of her adversary-lover and then consummated by a re-writing of that field according to her own terms, previously thought alien to or subordinate to that field: she deconstructs Merton, overtaking his thought that would appropriate life with her own textuality. Merton's desire for life, besides being a craving for direct concrete experience, is also a desire for sexual intimacy with Kate (physical possession of the missing life, victorious foray into the alien), but that desire, thwarted, forces him to accept instead Kate into his world of thought (where, we know from Chapter One, Kate is already an adept—she may accept Merton's characterization of their attraction, but she is already deeply implicated in the figural). They do not become lovers; instead, they defer real physical contact and flourish in a private language of substitute freedom:

It had come to be definite between them at a primary stage that, if they could have no other straight way, the realm of thought at least was open to them. They could think whatever they liked about whatever they would—in other words they could say it. Saying it for each other, for each other alone, only of course added to the taste. The implication was thereby constant that what they said when not together had no taste for them at all, and nothing could have served more to launch them, at special hours, on their small floating island than such an assumption that they were only making believe everywhere else. (97)

The unreal make-believe world outside their own intimate discourse is the world of constraint, the dull, conventional world of expectation and manner; attempting to duplicate (before the fact) Milly's own supposed freedom from complication, her almost angelic occupancy above the toils of the mundane as a result of enormous wealth, the "lovers," actually trapped in such toils which prevent them from realizing their passion in the physical, turn to secretive conversation for fulfillment and escape: but the escape becomes the real—it "tastes" of the true and vital.

Kate's plan, though—to have Merton marry Milly so that when the rich American dies she will pass her wealth to Merton who would then possess every possible advantage and be proof against Aunt Maud's reservations (and thereby heal the bleeding name)—saps vitality and depends instead upon Merton's total submission to Kate's will—thought becoming no-thought (thoughtless, inert, and ungentlemanly). He must proceed according

to the guidance she gives him—not so much act as she instructs, but merely persist in the appearance constructed for him. He becomes a marker in Kate’s strategy, someone to occupy the space designated by the necessity of the game. She commands him because he admires her “pure talent for life, as distinguished from his own, a poor weak thing of the occasion, amateurishly patched up” (362), but his annexation by the life-principle (the reverse of what he had wanted), not only makes him wonder “whether he had really no will left” (363), but also forces him to consider whether his own world of thought has been annihilated. Her force of the immediate—really a power of desire, “the greatness of knowing so well what one wanted” (395)—was to rescue his thought from groundlessness and give it direction, and he stubbornly clings, except in fleeting moments of insight, to the idea that Kate’s design and his love for her have given his thought such substance. He sacrifices his will to Kate, since the will belongs to vital life, but still, for a time, thinks that he does “everything” and she nothing (363). He soon realizes, however, that he may be acting, but he is acting in defiance of thought—what he was (thought) has been consumed by the plot to capture the power of the ultimate figure of representational (self-)consumption (doomed possessor of the key to all pleasure):

He was acting for Kate—not, by the deviation of an inch, for her friend. He was accordingly not interested, for had he been interested he would have cared, and had he cared he would have wanted to know. *Had he wanted to know he wouldn't have been purely passive*, and it was his pure passivity that had to represent his dignity and his honour. (380, my italics)

The swift moral logic here utterly inverts Merton’s thinking in a matter of two sentences: action (for Kate) becomes pure passivity (for Milly), and wanting to know becomes vain, useless honour. Finally, of course, these reversals strike home, and the qualifying difference in the references (for Kate or for Milly) that seems to save Merton, in his own mind, from outright contradiction, is erased. The destruction of his thought is accomplished in the closing sections of the novel, but first any pretension to acting at all is swept away. The fine taste of discursive freedom is replaced by a keen sense of real immobility:

He had thought, no doubt, from the day he was born, much more than he had acted; except indeed that he remembered thoughts—a few of them—which at the moment of their coming to him had thrilled him almost like adventures. But anything like his actual state he had not, as to the prohibition of impulse, accident, range—the prohibition in other words of freedom—hitherto known. (438)

After discovering that Lord Mark has revealed his and Kate's secret to Milly, Merton has "a taste in his mouth of what he couldn't do" (438), the verbal echo suggesting that the delicious taste of romantic language finally becomes not only a taste of failure but also of the corruption of the mouth, of the discursive nature of the plot. Merton's thought has been severely compromised by the plan not because he has surrendered to life, but because Kate's plot has been to mobilize the freedom of Merton's and her private language, to make it itself the power of its own saving. The plot was not a foray out of that language, that intimacy, for the sake of its survival; on the contrary, Kate has attempted to annex her entire context within its operation. And the "knowing what one wants" is not the desire of "life" but the procedure of a text committed entirely to its own representation.

Merton, though entranced by Kate's design, will-less and willfully blind, experiences a kind of schizophrenic tension between commitment to Kate's text and a constant need to have its reality verified for him: he, throughout, has nagging, at times urgent doubts about a world of "lovers" without love. The proofs he receives, however, are so startling that they neither confirm the viability of the text, nor undermine it entirely: instead, they push Merton deeper into a much more powerful textual machine. He is constantly reassured by Kate with a simple touch or embrace, but the effect doesn't last and so Merton finally insists that Kate visit him alone in his rooms. He launches his own "plan," and when it works, when he succeeds in winning genuine physical pleasure rather than a conversational-intimacy substitute, he is struck by the potency of translating thought into action:

It had simply *worked*, his idea, the idea he had made her accept; and all erect before him, really covering the ground as far as he could see, was the fact of the gained success that this represented. It was, otherwise, but the fact of the idea as directly applied, as converted from a luminous conception into an historic truth. (399)

Merton here recognizes the genuine, dangerous power of action, of acting according to an idea, making that idea a definite historic truth. But that power, of course, entails responsibility—he cannot find safety in doubt when he has executed his plan.

The physical seduction of Kate, although certainly Kate allows herself to be “seduced” (the quotation marks are always between them) for the betterment of her own design, represents Merton’s one most definite act since his entanglement in the plot against Milly. The act, and its unshakable connection with knowledge, pushes Merton into a state of terror:

Never was a consciousness more rounded and fastened down . . . [by] the oppression of success, the somewhat chilled state—tending to the solitary—of supreme recognition. If it was slightly awful to feel so justified, this was by the loss of the warmth of the element of mystery. The lucid reigned instead of it, and it was into the lucid that he sat and stared. He shook himself out of it a dozen times a day, tried to break by his own act his constant still communion. It wasn’t still communion she had meant to bequeath him; it was the very different business of that kind of fidelity of which the other name was careful action. (401)

Merton may possess something of Kate’s lucidity, but if Kate’s is employed in actively deconstructing, as it were, that which would resist her plans, Merton, otherwise without will, here experiences the success of his will as the falling away of the comforting “warmth of the element of mystery.” and as the resurgence of responsibility. But his response is to treat the fact of the lucid, the accomplished, as itself a mystery: he de-realizes it, transforms it into a fiction, not controlled or given by Kate, but underwritten by a desire for timelessness, an absolute. Kate’s visit becomes a self-referential representation of bliss, mirroring away Merton’s culpability:

No other act was possible to him than the renewed act, almost the hallucination, of intimacy. Wherever he looked or sat or stood, to whatever aspect he gave for the instant the advantage, it was in view as nothing of the moment, nothing begotten of time or of chance could be, or ever would; it was in view as, when the curtain has risen, the play on the stage is in view, night after night, for the fiddlers. He remained thus, in his own theatre, in his single person, perpetual orchestra to the ordered drama, the confirmed ‘run’; playing low and slow, moreover, in the regular way, for the situations of most importance. (400)

No other act is possible because the immediacy of the love act has left nothing but its repetition behind; its originary significance—the lost ground, now, for all meaning—replayed to capture in fleeting representation the power of totalization. Life within time, the layered folds of temporality, which includes as well the linearity of action, of gain and loss, of risk and decision, is banished from the stage of representation. For Merton a past source is summoned again, but the play of images is constrained by its unbearable origin—he, manipulated by Kate’s textuality, emerges here as a profound fundamentalist, stupefied by the awful vision of complete fulfillment. Ironically, though, the passage through the inner-text back “out” has not only strengthened the need for the delayed, the deferred source, but also made the result utterly representational (in the anti-textual sense), a parody extreme of submission to his logos. Kate “acts” because she knows what she wants, and Merton assumes that Lord Mark dares reveal the plot’s weakness because he is certain of his grounds. Such is the presumption: that certainty, blind “assurance” enables effective action since it blocks out complications that question and perhaps subvert the definite act.

But even within his hallucination of re-iteration, Merton finds no active role: he cannot participate even in his own fantasy of supreme self-realization. Instead, he becomes the “perpetual orchestra” to the re-run drama, inarticulately emphasizing—underlining the “feel” of—the “situations of most importance.” Exiled from the Book and convinced that to participate is to strategize, to find out what is at stake and play for and with it, to arrange appearances, Merton here takes the only option seemingly available—he imagines himself as a kind of totally subservient commentary. The orchestra does not criticize or intervene, cut up and analyze, sift for connections and meanings, intended or not, in the drama it accompanies; nor does it re-present the drama in another form, taking and re-making its elements, as illustrations would of a text. The utterly clichéd music, playing in the “regular way,” declines representation in order to become a slave undertext, no inherent intelligible connection evident between it and its master than what can be ascribed to arbitrary convention. Merton’s hallucination plays the game of referent-less representation by

invoking an ultimate reference and then submitting to it while at the same time obeying the hidden law of the strategy of textuality which demands ignorance or erasure of ends and grounds. The collision between the two is fleeting—Merton soon hereafter wants “to know why things were as he felt them” (410)—but its effect is profound. The power of reference, here felt both positively and negatively, is re-asserted.

**V: The Specified and its Sign: Return of the Pre-Text
and the Triumph of the Absolute Image**

James's decisive, critical moment, this novel's version of Strether's Lambinet revelation scene, occurs when Merton finally, though briefly, recognizes what has been lost in the imaging of Milly. The princess is more than—or not equivalent to—her social value: she is also the deep material referent of the exploitation text. Before looking at that moment, however, it is worth examining another passage which anticipates it, a suggestive account of one aspect of Kate's manipulation of Milly, who, for Kate, is essentially "Milly" (just as she with Merton are "lovers"). In the passage, James's narration steps back and unsettles the view that Milly represents her wealth, or, even further, "that . . . to be really rich. . . . had to be *the* thing you were" (133). Kate wants the princess's freedom, to be the thing Milly represents and is (really rich), and so, to bring Milly into her textual weave. Kate encourages her to share a sense that all their social encounters in Venice are trying pretenses that can only be endured "on the theory of intimate confessions, private frank ironies that made up for their public grimaces and amid which, face to face, they wearily put off the mask" (338-39). Milly has been led to believe that she with Kate occupies a discursive reality superior to the false, mask-wearing one that the two must suffer in the presence of others. Kate's text-world with Merton, which rejected the unreal outside in favor of the limitless inside freedom of privately saying anything, here attempts to consume Milly, offering her a similar freedom and a similar rejection of the outer or pre-text.

But the narrator, at this late stage, marks a clear and crucial difference:

The putting off of the mask had finally become the form taken by their moments together. . . . They flourished their masks, the independent pair, as they might have flourished Spanish fans; they smiled and sighed on removing them; but the gesture, the smiles, the sighs, strangely enough, might have been suspected the greatest reality in the business. Strangely enough, we say, for the volume of effusion in general would have been found by either on measurement to be scarce proportional to the paraphernalia of relief. It was when they called each other's attention to their ceasing to pretend, it was then that what they were keeping back was most in the air. There was a difference, no doubt, and mainly to Kate's advantage: Milly didn't quite see what her friend could keep back, was possessed of, in fine, that would be so subject to retention; whereas it was

comparatively plain sailing for Kate that poor Milly had a treasure to hide.
(339)

The text offers freedom within its confines, even though, on theoretic principle, the text itself is without limits or boundaries (freedom of saying). The implication here is that Kate wishes Milly to reject with her the mask of outside engagement and enter the “real” world of “intimate confessions and private frank ironies”—the romance of soul-mate friendship and dissolving borders of converse. The line between these two worlds is marked by the act of flourishing the masks as they are removed, the gestures, smiles, and sighs performed upon entrance into the isolated world of intimacy. James’s narrator observes, however, that this line, the acts that define it, are in fact the “greatest reality in the business,” not the consciousness available once it has been crossed, when they “call each other’s attention to their ceasing to pretend.” The suspected reality of this line is thus poised between the mask-wearing unreality of the social and the inner-text’s unreal promise of representational freedom based on a “ceasing to pretend”; the line’s primary status is achieved not because here the “performance” or play of images is pre-dominant—that is the mask side of the line—nor because “discourse” here liberates itself from necessary reference—that is the internal, private side of the line. Its reality is “greater” because it is here, at the border between two kinds of fictions, that the difference between what Kate knows and what Milly knows can be identified. The line is not a space of positivistic “fact” where hard truth is fully evident in its appearance. It is, instead, a space at which neither fictions—not Fiction, but fiction defined by its purpose or function—dominate but instead themselves become objects of thought, a thought that does not disengage absolutely, but is merely disengaged from the purposes of the two projects for its own purpose of questioning those, particularly the inner-text’s, purposes. This self-reflexivity aspires to further insight—James’s move out towards his own voice signals this shift—and the criterion is knowledge, rejected in Lord Mark’s London. When the performance of not performing but about to perform is underway, when gesture and smile and sigh—physical acts in-between intentions and interpretations—mirror each other in momentary bodily harmony, the

narrator recognizes, for us, that the inner-text's freedom and intimacy is undermined by Kate's leverage against Milly: she knows that Milly's "secret" need not be spoken, could not be spoken about, because it is not hers to speak of: Milly belongs to the money

Kate's simplifying lucidity, her ability to judge in advance, her mockery of the American inability to deduce conclusions without being "led up and introduced to each aspect of the monster [English society, for example], enabled to walk all round it, whether for the consequent exaggerated ecstasy or for the still more (as appeared to this critic) disproportionate shock" (232)—these rationalistic qualities are really in the service of that acquisitive text that writes everything into itself in order to disconnect it from its pre-text anchoring. In the text of romance, Milly's death should cause Kate and Merton no guilt at all because they merely saw to it that Milly had her love, her life, before she died. Kate tells Merton:

She never wanted the truth. . . .She wanted *you*. She would have taken from you what you could give her and been glad of it, even if she had known it false. You might have lied to her from pity, and she have seen you and felt you lie, and yet—since it was all for tenderness—she would have thanked you and blessed you and clung to you but the more. For that was your strength, my dear man—that she loves you with passion. (458)

The plot is justified because Milly is eased gently away from what made Milly worthwhile in the first place. To Kate, Milly's death is almost unreal, a mere separation of metaphor from metaphor, princess from her coin, the profit of which is not realized through usury, but from endless, analogical circulation: why should it not go to Merton and Kate, the former the "lover" and the latter the "intimate confessor" of the deposed dove-princess-priestess?

However, Merton, as I said, for a moment—a moment the significance of which James underscores—glimpses the intellectual and ethical failure inherent in metaphorical transformations and relays at the expense or the disavowal of the literal. Milly is not "Milly," a metaphor of a metaphor. She is a literal meaning as well, part of the usual, and the usual is not devoid of its own meaning and integrity: as I've argued, the literal preserves and protects, precariously, sometimes failingly, the pre-text. Milly's pre-text

may not “ground” the metaphors, but it provides their occasion, their generating question which, if lost, produces answers that are only self-serving reflections of the self. There *are* facts to be reckoned with, but they have been cleverly driven from the stage. Milly is dying, she is not alive/dead, one or the other, both or neither; alive now, but valued because of later death; dead later, her riches still alive; riches fleetingly attached to here now, but to there later. The corrective moment is worth quoting at length because its key image requires its supporting context and because recent critical comment has either not caught the significant shift in both “argument” and tone that the passage marks, or has not dealt with it at all (for example, Rivkin’s thoroughly Derridean reading of the novel, in her *False Positions*, completely ignores the passage):

He hadn’t only never been near the facts of her condition—which counted so as a blessing for him; he hadn’t only, with all the world, hovered outside an impenetrable ring fence, within which there reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking; but he had also, with every one else, as he now felt, actively fostered suppressions which were in the direct interest of every one’s good manner, every one’s pity, every one’s really quite generous ideal. It was a conspiracy of silence, as the *cliché* went, to which no one had made an exception, the great smudge of mortality across the picture, the shadow of pain and horror, finding in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consented to reflect it. ‘The mere aesthetic instinct of mankind—!’ our young man had more than once, in the connexion, said to himself; letting the rest of the proposition drop, but touching again thus sufficiently on the outrage even to taste involved in one’s having to *see*. So then it had been—a general conscious fool’s paradise, from which the specified had been chased like a dangerous animal. What therefore had at present befallen was that the specified, standing all the while at the gate, had now crossed the threshold as in Sir Luke Strett’s person and quite on such a scale as to fill out the whole precinct. Densher’s nerves, absolutely his heart-beats too, had measured the change before he on this occasion moved away.

The facts of physical suffering, of incurable pain, of the chance grimly narrowed, had been made, at a stroke, intense, and this was to be the way he was now to feel them. (440-41)

This is the return of the “smudge,” before used to indicate Merton’s certainty that fate had marked him for ease but not wealth, now indicating the dis-figuration of mortality, of suffering and incurable pain. The plot that was to erase Merton’s mark of poverty has instead veiled the mark of dying; and Milly is not thereby reduced to “dying girl” and nothing further, but her otherness is more expansively understood when that fact is not

ignored. Instead, they—Merton and Kate and the others of Lancaster Gate—built an “impenetrable ring fence” around it, and the builders do not occupy that inner-text; they, with Merton, hover outside it, at its perimeter. The fiction of “expensive vagueness”—for a writer so notoriously “vague,” this novel is remarkably dense with passages ridiculing the false comforts of mystery and self-serving obfuscation—does not shut out the awkward facts so that those who are within are, for the duration, protected by the “priceless arrangements” from the hard weight of reality; the writers of “beautiful fictions” cling to them but are never inside them, however much they attempt to derive their identities from them. The fictions of factlessness create their own impenetrable walls that forbid genuine entry by those who are also constrained by the facts the fiction disallows. The writers “hover” outside; they cannot enter their own creation, though they project themselves into it, and yet they are no longer “grounded”—not secure, settled, certain, but in harmony and conflict with, engaged with and aware of—in the world from which they turn. James’s image is quintessentially “realistic”: the totality of the lifeworld, which resists total articulation, is the necessary presupposition of fiction, which is contained within it: our perspective, whether reader or writer, emerges from that totality-question. We cannot read the world from within our fictions alone as though the world emerges from them: the lifeworld is the pre-text, it is not a textual effect. And fictions that presume the reverse in fact radically diminish us to the terms of their own limits.

Milly, too, is not at the center of the ringed fence, so that her personhood is the hidden core beneath the inscribed images. Such an image would re-write Lord Mark’s and Merton’s idea of the randomly moving mass of observers hunting for the next king-beast, now revered, later devoured. By subtle transformation—and this is the expansion of the title metaphor that explains vertically rather than laterally, as it were—Milly the dove here becomes “the specified” that has been “chased like a dangerous animal” from a “fool’s paradise.” Milly and the “specified” have been separated so that the Milly-image resides within the border as the object of representation and erasure, and the dangerous animal

mortality has been banished. The writers are barred entry to the charmed world beyond the fence—literally, the Lancaster Gate crowd has returned to London, and Merton is no longer allowed within the palace walls having been revealed as a deceitful courtier—but the broken referent can destroy fiction’s barrier. The implication is that the specified is not one of the images within the fiction, on a par with them, interchangeable. The central but hidden specified would be a point in a succession of interchangeable points of reference, each admired then consumed in serial fashion. The revealed internal specified may “ground” the fiction but it would also emerge as a product of it—the revelation the result of the inner-contradictions of the text which breaks apart to serve up its core. Such a process inevitably suggests that the core meaning is, despite its purported status as “center,” really the product of the text’s own disintegration and so a textual product itself: an image of centrality beneath the images of centrality. This kind of specified would quickly take flight in and from the world that revealed/created it, becoming a fleeting image among images, soon passed over.

Here, however, the split referent of the fictions transforms the inner-text by a reunification achieved through a collision between inside and outside. The specified is not “revealed” within the inner-text; it bursts through its fence as an attack from outside. It was “always already” ready to subvert from without the text that referred to it but banished it. Milly-the-image is nothing more than an image inside the fence; but the image calls beyond itself, calls beyond its entrapping fiction: it always calls other images, and hence the accumulation of metaphors attaching themselves in series to the princess. But it calls also to an image from the pre-text: a literal image—still an image, not a “proper and original meaning,” but an image that protects a question from obliteration. Milly, the specified, the dangerous animal: this series of images haunts the others; they are their spectres, and they point to questions about Milly that must be addressed, though cannot be finally answered: what does she mean for us given the facts of physical suffering, of incurable pain?

The “outrage even to taste involved in one’s having to see,” the scandal that seeing creates for “the mere aesthetic instinct of mankind” so that the “shadow of pain and horror” can find no place in the representations of Milly’s admirers—in Lord Mark’s causeless, void- world, or in Kate’s appropriating heliotropic fiction—are not avoided in James’s text: his esthetic surface does not avoid seeing these facts, despite the fact that it does not present a record of decay and suffering, the actual process of physical disintegration, things with which the poet, essentially, cannot be concerned. Their presence in the novel, as I have argued, is indirect: the effect of erasing them, the failure that results from the erasure, being the primary subject of James’s handling of Kate, Merton, and the others. But Milly herself is the occasion for their plot, and the novel’s exploration of the plot’s effects on the plotters depends on an awareness of the shadow—the discrepancy between what they do and how they re-write their subject and what we know about it. The facts of Milly’s condition are not detailed since such focusing would position them at the center as essential but disposable attractions; the production/revelation conundrum would subvert the centrality, and the serialization risk that such a tactic would introduce would commit in reverse the fashion-error of the merely curious. James’s text must reflect the shadow—account for it “directly,” but not present it and thus reduce it. This is the key difference between Kate and James, although some liken the two “designers” in their creative powers and delicacy of avoidance.¹² Kate’s plot relies on Milly’s death only to the extent that it provides an opportunity of detachment and extraction (of wealth from possessor), while James’s plot considers the processes of extraction from the standpoint of awareness of the specified. The question of Milly’s mortality is ever-present precisely because it is not charted as an answer to James’s own aesthetic dilemmas: the dangerous animal bursts through the fence and destroys the “conspiracy of silence” because for those “beautiful fictions” the shadow of death is the shadow of a shadow—a metaphor of a metaphor without specific reference. James’s shadow is of Milly, whose character-existence depends upon but is more than the facts of her condition, and the Books undertaken through her consciousness are

explorations of the question fully acknowledged. Milly's eventual removal from the novel's direct presentation—we do not see her final interviews with Lord Mark and Merton, nor, of course, is there a Dickensian death-bed scene—is not the removal of the smudge from the picture, but the movement out from that disfigurement so that it washes over the entire text: the game played by the plotters becomes nothing less than an ambiguous murder (“it was in the cards”) so that Kate and Merton's figural erasure of Milly becomes literally true both in their text and ours and the question rebounds on them, or at least on Merton, with terrible force.

Merton finally recognizes the great evasion by watching the specified “cross[] the threshold as in Luke Strett's person,” and Strett has, by this point, been made to represent (despite the comedy of exaggeration to which the character is subject) James's own perspective; he is not Kate or Milly, but the great observer who knows the question, acts accordingly, but never presumes to speak it: it is instead always reflected in his concern for Milly, a concern careful not to descend into pity (which centralizes and thus reduces the subject to its essential fact: the fact is necessary but not all). Identifying James with Strett tempts the reply that, if that is so, the artist is then trying to borrow the authority of science while maintaining a decorous aesthetic distance; the “truth” is propped up on the back of empiricism's representative. Such a reply is only damning if one has already presumed either that science and art are separate and distinct, so that the latter cannot legitimately call upon the former without self-betrayal, or that art (defined in an anti-realist, constructivist fashion) consumes science—science is well within art—so that an appeal to science from art is a deluded gesture hoping for “outside” authority but really trapped within itself. Both assumptions are absolutist: there is either no difference or unbridgeable difference. The figure of Strett is in between, and his effect on Milly is the result of his occupancy in the two worlds at once. Before Milly's first visit to him she does indeed wonder whether she is “launched in some current that would lose itself in the sea of science” (202). But her view of him is that while he knows “literally everything” about her, he has come to this

knowledge not from “information” and testing, but from a “relation” (206)—the connection so “beautifully created” through conversation of even short duration. He “had found out simply by his genius” all about her—a “romantic version” (206), no doubt, but one emphasizing Strett’s intuitive, non-scientific (defined positivistically) perception. Much later, Merton, suffering from his banishment from the palace, recognizes as well the intuitive grasp that supplements Strett’s awareness of the physical facts so that he is also sensitive to Merton’s so very strained conscience and his predicament. Recrimination from the doctor would be devastating:

He was being let off; dealt with in the only way that didn’t aggravate his responsibility. The beauty was also that this wasn’t on system or on any basis of intimate knowledge; it was just by being a man of the world and by knowing life, by feeling the real, that Sir Luke did him good. (444)

Milly, too, feels the beneficial effects of dealing with someone who knows and takes account, but does not thereby reduce:

Now she knew not only that she didn’t dislike this—the state of being found out about; but that on the contrary it was truly what she had come for, and that for the time at least it would give her something firm to stand on. She struck herself as aware, aware as she had never been, of really not having had from the beginning anything firm. It would be strange for the firmness to come, after all, from her learning in these agreeable conditions that she was in some way doomed. . . . If she was now to be held up by the mere process—since that was perhaps on the cards—of being let down, this would only testify in turn to her queer little history. *That* sense of loosely rattling had been no process at all; and it was ridiculously true that her thus sitting there to see her life put into the scales represented her first approach to the taste of orderly living. Such was Milly’s romantic version . . . (206)

Strett gives to Milly what “science” can provide, and also an introduction to a process that re-integrates the end result within itself, reconstructing random variance as, not so much orderly living, but simply living with purpose. Strett’s prescription to Milly that she “live by option, by volition” transforms death into self-reflexivity that is neither absolute nor self-defeatingly mirroring. Strett communicates the truth of Milly’s health to her—she knows she’s doomed—but it serves as a force for re-focusing. Mortality reflects living back upon itself, but at a “higher” level, a renewed perspective: Strett’s communication provides not only the foundation of an intelligible process (integrated termination providing

“character” to the process), but the specific insight that her life is not pre-determined to be random. Milly’s life may yet be directed by volition; she faces questions of purposes, ends, and means.

The emergent question destroys Merton. Milly eventually dies from—we assume, but do not know—betrayal, but Merton is undermined by the overwhelming force of a death made alive in an image that is itself beyond life: Merton escapes into the absolutely figural, the hallucinatory effect of the night alone with Kate in his rooms returning now in Milly’s image with even greater force since the referent itself is permanently protected from specific living reference: he will be Milly’s “lover” always and never her lover. The movement through the textual—the design provided by what he thought was life, which he so yearned for, through the passage of imagined central reference in the successful seduction of Kate, to the awareness of the necessary specific—finally reduces Merton to a figure dominated by a ghost, utterly passive, a kind of Hamlet in reverse: rather than struggling to find the right reasons to act, questioning the authenticity of the ghost’s authority, and finally purging indecision and exorcising the spirit, if only at the cost of his own death, Merton works his way into total passivity and moves into the arms of the Milly-ghost, where he “dies” but does not die. The letter Milly has written to Merton, which likely informs him of her great gift, will not be opened, and what he holds most dearly lost is not the content of that letter—what she has done—but the possibilities contained in the “turn she would have given her act”; his imagination fills them out and brings them to an extraordinary life:

It made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes—his pledge given not to save it—into the fathomless sea, or rather even it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. This was the sound he cherished when alone in the stillness of his rooms. He sought and guarded the stillness, so that it might prevail there till the inevitable sounds of life, once more, comparatively coarse and harsh, should smother and deaden it—doubtless by the same process with which they would officiously heal the ache in his soul that was somehow one with it. It moreover deepened the sacred hush that he couldn’t complain. He had given poor Kate her freedom. (503)

The lost text becomes a “sentient and throbbing” reality, and not even the text’s purport but the hidden how of the what that is done. The deflections multiply, but the reality Merton provides for them usurp the importance of the “life” that he once sought: the man of thought is here reduced by the power of Death into worshipping an image as though it were alive and dismissing life as coarse, harsh, and smothering: he is here in the void that he wished to avoid, seduced into it by the power of a totally referent-less image. All he has left is a “sacred hush,” the “hush” that before gave the injunction against action here elevated into a divine edict that dare not be denied.

Kate’s bleeding name is not, it seems, resurrected, but for Merton, Milly’s name ascends to a transcendental significance. The ascension is not the cause or the result of discourse presuming its contact with the truth; it is the result of traversing the field of textual strategies in deliberate ignorance of the truth and then confronting the lack that was denied: disillusioned textuality remaining textual but incorporating the transcendental signified. That lordly signified is, paradoxically, the result of taking the textual plunge: only a pan-textualism would, upon recognizing its own aporia—the specified—incorporate it into the text itself where it then commands: as an external pre-text, it provokes but cannot control the text since it resists the incorporation, the “annexation,” that control requires. Merton dies at the hands of the image produced by death, a death that was made external only to return and conquer from the inside. Milly, thinking of her condition, wonders: “Strange were the turns of life and the moods of weakness; strange the flickers of fancy and the cheats of hope; yet lawful, all the same—weren’t they?—those experiments tried with the truth that consisted, at the worst, but in practising on one’s self” (341). Merton’s experiments have left him nothing.

¹ The questions of waste and profit, or of failure and success, are usually addressed by poststructuralist Jamesians as questions that lead to a consideration of the failure of the realist representational project. Rivkin, for example, argues that the plot against Milly is designed to wrest from loss a supreme gain: “Can this waste of life also be made to turn a profit” (82); and she concludes that “the death of their [Kate’s and Merton’s] relationship serves simultaneously as a figure for the absent Milly’s death and an effect of her

metaphoric survival: she had died and yet she lives on in them as her representatives, producing this deathly copy of life (and vital copy of death) for the novel's own termination" (121). The "novel's own termination" is not, however, the wreckage of James's own desire to find profit from the central loss, nor is it the embrace of a deconstructionist epistemology; instead, his text examines the attempt to play an absolute-sum game and to find compensation in the seeming paradox of real death and representational survival: a paradox that tries to equate two very distinct orders of "life." To succeed, James's critical realist representational project itself refuses the play of absolute profit and loss in order to watch those who accept it.

² Is Milly, then, the heroine of the novel? Krook and Anderson thought so, while Fogel, for example, considers Merton's transformation from a state of innocence through experience to a "transcendent, informed innocence" (57) the central focus of the novel; others like Yeazell champion Kate, or like Bersani and Mitchell argue that the novel has no central figure. Although I reject Krook's notion that Milly is a figure of redemption as well as the view that Milly is the present/absent "center" of the novel (defining as such the condition of the novel's world), I do argue that the *translation* of Milly into a signifier of the absent center is the novel's key structural principle and that Merton's fate is James's most significant critical weapon against this kind of erasure: Merton is *destroyed* by the Milly-signifier.

³ Milly's translation recalls Chad's miraculous theatre appearance to the dumbstruck Strether; these extreme descriptions are Jamesian signals that caution is warranted though the appearance itself is invigorating.

⁴ Millicent Bell, in *Meaning in Henry James*, writes: "[L]et us consider the image of Milly Theale in her status as the 'dove' of the novel's title. This association and other images connected with Milly suggest that religious tradition is being invoked—but there is no need to see allegory in the novel. Milly is not Christ, but James wanted to introduce the powerful vocabulary of the tradition which insists on the immeasurable value of the spirit and the ethic of generous love in the place of the modernism exemplified by Kate and Densher" (294). The Milly-as-Christ identification is, of course, common in the commentary, but Bell is right, I think, to ward off the allegory. I would stress the process implied in the fact that "other images [are] connected with Milly" and the "centrality" given this process.

⁵ Ricoeur responds to Derrida's "White Mythology" in *The Rule of Metaphor*.

⁶ We also see here the outlines of familiar deconstructionist strategies: relying on yet denying satisfaction of an absolute standard, understanding truth as necessarily "punctual" or "atomistic," and making failure itself count as success.

⁷ Bell suggests that "[i]n Kate James created a representative of . . . modern pragmatic consciousness" and that her "philosophical materialism and pragmatism" is evidenced in her extreme "practicality" (305). I am arguing that this is true if we understand "pragmatism" in the Rortian sense and not as Putnam characterizes it; Kate does indeed reduce the Jamesian (William's and, I think, Henry's) notion of "expediency" to mere desire and satisfaction—the perennial critical problem, I have argued in Chapter 2, of pragmatist thought.

⁸ If *The Ambassadors* is read from an excessively Parisian perspective, poststructuralists like Rivkin read *The Wings of the Dove* from an extreme London point of view. Rivkin, who characterizes this novel as dramatizing the relation between a restricted and a general

economy of representation (as these metaphors are explained by Derrida), says of Lord Mark: “Milly first begins to understand the London economy of proliferating mediations through the character of Lord Mark, her self-appointed social guide, whose link to representation is suggested by his name. The ‘Mark’ he bears functions as a kind of X, a pure sign, indicating nothing but that it stands in for something else. Like the ‘matter’ with Milly, then, the ‘Mark’ is not substantive but dependent on other terms to acquire some sort of meaning or identity or value” (*False Positions* 100). Rivkin affirms, though, the Mark economy (apart from his expectation of “profit”) by reading Merton’s final absorption in the Milly image as a kind of philosophical breakthrough. She ignores, however, both the novel’s many critical comments about Mark, and, most importantly, the crucial passage in the novel where James deals with the re-emergence of the specified, and she generally assumes that the novel’s critical elements can be safely packaged together as the restricted economy that is ultimately subverted *by the principles of Derridean theory*; if the text doesn’t itself support this view, we merely have further evidence, Rivkin supposes, of James’s struggle to resist the inevitable.

⁹ Things happen, events occur, but what *is* an event? “Such events [making bets, launching boats, etc.], it appears, have occurred. I will say ‘perhaps.’ Here, we must first agree upon what the ‘occurring’ or the eventhood of the event consists in” (Derrida, *Margins* 326). If events are absolute singularities, origins of meaning, then, perhaps, no, nothing ever happens. Wanting that kind of event, waiting for it, would leave one thinking that all life is a deferral of the promised but never arriving Real. “The Beast in the Jungle.” of course, is James’s most explicit examination of this theme.

¹⁰ The parallel drawn between Merton and Lord Mark, the former reading civilization as founded on violence, a struggle to satisfy appetitive desire, and the latter representing a rigorous avoidance of action, of direct conflict of any kind, may recall, for the contemporary reader, the intimate difference between Girard’s and Gans’s theories about the foundation of civilization and the origin of language: according to Girard, the violent release of aggression achieved in the killing of the scapegoat is the hidden principle of human community, and according to Gans, only conflict deferral can account for the gesture of the first sign. Both theorists are profoundly influenced by Derrida’s work, and both push Derrida to the very close next step, although they do it anthropologically—they convert deconstructionist thinking against the origin (flipping it over, as it were) in order to *define* the origin. Derrida’s “quasi-transcendentals” of doubt become anthropological universal certainties.

¹¹ According to Gans, the first true sign, which marks and is the origin of language, occurred when a group of primitive hunters, surrounding an object of appetitive desire, collectively hesitated before attempting to possess the object, fear of violent competition for the object causing the hesitation-movement which constituted the first sign; the consumable object, because of this process, attained a sacred power as the center of meaning (See *Originary Thinking*). I do not intend to examine Gans’s fascinating hypothesis here, but Merton’s predicament strikes me as offering it a provocative comment, as the hypothesis also comments on the predicament. Suffice it to say here that Merton’s absorption into Kate’s text (also of consumption), depends on his acting which is not acting (a kind of hesitation) with respect to a metaphorized central meaning about which he knows nothing except what desire compels. The gentleman is reduced to his absolutely primitive origin, one could say.

¹² John Bayley, for example, makes this point in his introduction to the Penguin edition, and Yeazell, in *Language and Knowledge*, maintains that “to decide Kate Croy is simply a

hypocrite and a liar is to ignore her power as an artist—her power to reshape the world according to the demands of her imagination” (82).

CHAPTER 5:
SYSTEM AND DISSONANCE
in *THE GOLDEN BOWL*

I: Inversion and Revision: Deconstructing the Naïve

The complexity of *The Golden Bowl* is the result of James's handling of the problems of action and knowledge, reason and desire, aesthetics and epistemology in the context of a highly wrought system. The most outstanding feature of James's last completed novel is the manner in which he constructs the terrible system of inter-relations between the characters and then contemplates the functioning of that system given, first, its initial premises and, second, the force that radically alters if not its outward appearance of function then certainly the inner mechanisms of its subsistence. Adam and Maggie, father and daughter, are aligned with Charlotte and the Prince, the former Adam's wife and Maggie's old friend, the latter Maggie's husband; the Prince and Charlotte were once lovers, and become so again, so that, to choose one point of reference, Maggie's mother-in-law and husband are romantically linked. The extraordinary "form" of their relations, the structure of these inter-connections, provides James with an opportunity to examine his characteristic problems at a higher pitch, as it were, of implication while also permitting him to adopt a narrative strategy unique to this novel among the last three in the late style.

Strether's quest for enlightenment and balance in Paris forms the relatively linear trajectory of *The Ambassadors*; the seductions of rationalism and scepticism, of "self-fashioning" and the revelations of unprecedented experience, are brought within the boundaries of reasonable probability and expectation, within as well the unavoidable burden of linear time, by the sudden realization of the truth of Chad's and de Vionnet's relationship. Strether's balance is achieved, in part, by finally escaping a crucial deception.

seeing, in fact, the foundation that generated the mystery whose effects he at once appreciated. The truth of the relationship brings the narrative to its resolution, however ambiguous that resolution may ultimately be. In *The Wings of a Dove* deception is again at issue, but the narrative voice is attached primarily to the consciousness of the deceivers: once the truth of the plot is exposed to Milly, the princess herself is removed from the scene—her consciousness is closed to us. The truth's effect on Merton and Kate—the banished “specific,” the reference that orients the metaphors that were so capable of de-substantiating the subject of the plot—is James's primary concern since the erasure of Milly as a being and her emergence as dominating image is completed, in Merton, after her death. Milly's own reaction to the deception is suppressed to heighten the effect of this transformation and to test, by the way, I think, the reader's susceptibility to the new seduction: is Milly to be regarded after death as Merton's “savior,” a kind of moral icon, or, despite the wrongs done her, is she, or at least her image, his doom?

In *The Golden Bowl*, James, for all his characteristic obliquity and qualification, nevertheless deals with his characters and the system he designs for them with uncommon directness and clarity; he also plays his games of deception in full view of the reader—what the characters subject themselves to is never, really, a mirror image of the reader's condition. With Strether we await the truth of Chad's transformation, and with Merton, primarily, we consider the implications of deceiving and perhaps destroying Milly without knowing her own reaction. In this last novel, with the shift of perspective to Maggie in the second volume, we participate in and reflect upon the effect of deception from the point of view of one of the persons deceived, and watch as she plans her retaliation. Charlotte and the Prince do not know the effect of their hidden alliance, but the reader does. We are given Maggie's view where we were not given Milly's, and we linger with and examine the effect of knowledge where we were only led up to it in Strether's case. James begins his preface to this last completed novel by saying, “Among many matters thrown into relief by a refreshed acquaintance with *The Golden Bowl* what perhaps most stands out for me is the

still marked inveteracy of a certain indirect and oblique view of my presented action; unless indeed I make up my mind to call this mode of treatment, on the contrary, any superficial appearance notwithstanding, the very straightest and closest possible” (19). The indecision in evidence here can be accounted for by distinguishing between, on the one hand, the complexity of the system and its operation, which is viewed indirectly from the point of view of the several participants, but the “straight” presentation of the various motives and actions that account for and generate the actual operation of that system.

Deconstruction’s disruption of system is pertinent here since its dominant strategy can be seen at work in James’s novel, although—and this is the significant difference available to James through the narrative structure here in play, whereby the deception is uncovered and the consequences of the resulting realization are made a significant part of the literary treatment—James subordinates that strategy within a larger narrative form and a nuanced consideration of its effects; that is, for James, the effects of a deconstruction are themselves available for critical examination. If *The Ambassadors* narrates the finding of a middle ground between two extreme epistemologies and *The Wings of the Dove* criticizes the de-realizing, desire-driven world of the signifier without material anchoring (a dramatized version of what I’ve called in Chapter 2, following Novitz, the occlusive fallacy), *The Golden Bowl*, I will argue, is a critical dramatization of the methodology of extremes—the oppression implicit in the forms of both total order and of deconstructive subversion—as well as a dire meditation on the forces released when idealist systems are challenged with idealist weapons. I have examined some of deconstruction’s key assumptions and tactics in Chapter 2, but it will be useful to have in mind during the course of this study of *The Golden Bowl* an abstract “model” of its type of analysis. Derrida himself describes the “general strategy of deconstruction” in the following terms:

[W]e must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple, what I called in “la double seance,” a double science. On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of *overturning*. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical

philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. . . .

That being said—and on the other hand—to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new “concept,” a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included within the previous regime. (*Positions*, 41-42)

To explain the emergence of the new “concept,” Derrida then invokes his most notorious example:

[T]his holds first of all for a new concept of writing, that *simultaneously* provokes the overturning of the hierarchy speech/writing, and the entire system attached to it, *and* releases the dissonance of a writing within speech, thereby disorganizing the entire inherited order and invading the entire field. (42)

The tradition of Western Metaphysics, that grand generalization and unification which provides the opportunity for Derrida’s deconstructive effects, is said to depend on this speech/writing hierarchy in that its articulations of truth and meaning strive for the suppression of writing’s dissonance within the text of philosophy. The medium of speech is the ideal because it seems to abandon mediation itself. The signs of speech vanish with the breath of the voice so that speech can be taken as expression of thought that partakes of but persists beyond and is essentially not constrained by the play of signs, the presence/absence of the system of signs without positive terms. Philosophy wishes to exist in this vanishing book, its thought free from the disruptive force of signification and its destabilizing (anti)systems. Revealing the writing within speech is, first of all, to subject the books of philosophy to their own textual system, to prevent them from seeming to ignore the textual conditions of their own possibility. Derrida’s own strategy, as I have already indicated, is inherently wedded to the books he deconstructs; deconstruction does not advance a “position”: it is, as the “general” strategy he outlines in the passage quoted above makes clear, a practice of introducing “dissonance” within a pre-existing field,

releasing, perhaps, a force hidden within that field, but certainly not prescribing any significance to that force since such an effort would entirely conform to the system's pre-deconstructed kind of purpose. Since, as Derrida has always claimed, there is no way simply to jettison the metaphysics of presence because the seductive guarantees of stability and absolute certainty provided from the anchoring of presence are a permanent condition of thought and will always, even if unintentionally (a highly qualified term in this context of course) be relied on, the task for deconstruction is always, ceaselessly, to disrupt the presumptions inscribed on the basis of metaphysics, to read (and act) with vigilance against complicitous discourses (usually, as is implied in Derrida's own rhetoric in the passage above, complicity with metaphysics is the same as complicity with oppression—introducing dissonance is introducing a measure of "freedom," however much that term is also qualified). According to the deconstructionist's own tenets, then, the operation of deconstruction relies upon the continued operation of its "other": this "other"—logocentrism, a system supposedly governed by a transcendental signified, reasoned in the light of and at the guidance of an absolute foundation—is the necessary context from which can be derived the emergence of dissonance. The tradition must continue, but it must be continually re- or dis-organized.

In the example of speech/writing, the effectiveness of Derrida's readings is of course dependent on the premise that the book under scrutiny is blind to or struggles to suppress its own textuality; from the deconstructionist's viewpoint, the tradition is essentially naïve, innocent. It is unaware of, or it denies or hides, the anxiety implicit in its own medium. Writing or the signifier is a "conceptual" lever that disrupts the working order of the inherited field, rewriting it otherwise. A critical reading of this kind does not introduce a term or concept foreign to the field it analyzes: the speech/writing hierarchy is said to be explicitly operative in the texts of metaphysics, explicitly by virtue of direct theoretical consideration (Plato being the prime example), or through discernible practice and statement (for example, Husserl's denunciation of writing in the course of reflection on

perception). Deconstruction picks up what is already there, there in the “lower” hand, and demonstrates how the entire system is in fact dependent upon a (suppressed) generalized form of its operation—representation, as we’ve seen, is re-written as the source of perception and presence, not its derivation. The hierarchy of reason/unreason is disrupted by taking it, as it were, at its word, but pushing the dichotomy to its limit until reason is seen as the product of a generalized unreason, a precarious construct out of the forces of the irrational. Deconstruction is a kind of hyper-reading, a reading in extreme, working from within until the system’s own premises undermine it. The generalized previously subordinate terms are not meant themselves to assume a transcendental status (although they inevitably do), but to both preserve and undermine. Just as metaphysics as a tool of thought is indispensable, so the books of metaphysics are never to be banished, but only read, continued, otherwise.

James’s literary exploration of these kinds of tactics is not, of course, undertaken in the conceptual framework employed by the critics, but his novel does represent a thinking through of the implications of these strategies by offering a concrete presentation of just such a struggle between a system and its dissonance—and by “concrete” I mean a thinking that works with different tools, and does so with extraordinary precision and care. His tools are character, plot, and narrative structure, and they provide him with a perspective that is only available through literary discourse; it is a perspective that is the contrary, one could say, of the kind so usually ascribed to literature after the eruption of deconstruction on the literary landscape. Of course, the focus has shifted to political issues, but the emphasis is still on literature’s inherent ability to disrupt or confirm the powers of containment. Literature can certainly be used as a force of dissonance, or can be criticized for its complicity, but James’s novel is, as I shall try to show, neither “radical” in this way, nor simply “conservative.” He examines, without needing to sacrifice the tools of prose literature in order to take up those of a radicalized theoretic discourse, the dangers carried in both of these two opposed forces.

I will argue that James's examination of an essentially deconstructionist strategy of subversion is developed first by subtly aligning the Ververs and their system of interrelations with the fundamental principles of what we now call logocentrism. Adam Verver is positioned as a quasi-divine figure, a center of meaning, whose power is used to subordinate or suppress the mediations necessary for the construction of his empire: unlike Milly in *Wings*, Adam intentionally assumes his sun-hood and attempts to consolidate his pre-eminence by warding off the intrusions of representation. His personal "economy" elevates controlling reason over art, desire, and passion; the self and its own over what is other and acquired. Representation (represented by the art pieces in his collection and, most significantly, by American City) is subservient to a prime goal, firmly held within the confines of a plan or an idea. Also in a subordinate position in Adam's binaries is his own (real) economic power, which is made to be nothing more than the (unsavory) means of his expression, the mere transitory vehicle of his divine creative intent (he speaks rather than writes his meanings). In the First Volume of the novel, this system is deconstructed by Charlotte and the Prince, whose tactics resemble to a remarkable degree those of Derrida outlined above: disrupting from inside, inverting and converting, and, most strikingly, marking the irruptive emergence of a dissonating new "concept," derived from a term that was previously "low" and is then made "high," in order to re-write the system—their marker/"concept" is the "sacred." I will argue that the two lovers, the fact of whose relation is poised to challenge the Ververs on materialist, experiential grounds, instead translate their union into the realm of the ideal, turning it into an idealist weapon against idealism, a signifier to bring down the mythology of Verver reason. Charlotte's and the Prince's deconstruction of the system, however, by relying on the explosive potential hidden within the subordinate terms of that system (art, desire, representation and mediation), ultimately undermines them because the particular form of mediation and representation that assumes final power is the one that truly does belong to the Ververs: money. The deconstruction of the Verver system releases exchange-power in all its force.

James's examination of Maggie's interventions—she is “born” after the deconstruction—stresses the emergence of this exchange power as she herself plays at deconstructing the new arrangement of the system's form. I will argue that although Charlotte and the Prince, by re-directing the lines of influence in the system, may have succeeded in making mediation and representation ascendant, they have also, by subverting reason, left the field wide open, as it were, to desire and a-rational faith—faith, the epistemological companion of the sign according to which the lovers themselves found the aporia in the Verver's form—the sacred. Maggie's faith in her divine figure (Adam) preserves the logocentric impulse in the heart of the deconstructed world, while she is also released from the constraints of epistemological accuracy (a different kind of adherence than faith) to play the games of mediated power with the weapons made available by her opponents. If reason was supreme and representation subordinate under the Verver arrangement, now Maggie can exploit the manipulative potential available in the play of forms when reason is the shadow of desire and suspicion. In the context of this kind of play, James suggests, *narrative* illumination (contingent, preserving the explanatory power of linearity) will be misread, as it is by Maggie, as absolute proof, a proof so miraculously beyond form—secure beyond any challenge (beyond reason or argumentation)—that mediation, already “activated” by the previous deconstruction, becomes nothing less or more than a coercive tool in the service of the private Absolute. Maggie finally achieves her goal by pushing the deconstructive game to *its* limit: she completely erases truth from the text of her action. The games of deconstructive subversion, first played with embodied experience placed under erasure, then conducted entirely on the level of representation, result in nothing less than tyranny.

II: Logocentric City

In the first volume the system is built and then undermined. The intricate structure of relationships between the four characters—so artfully constructed that Maggie later tells Fanny that she lives “in the midst of miracles of arrangement” (401)—is built from good intentions, perhaps (Fanny herself calls the arrangement a “vicious circle,” noting that “it’s their mutual consideration, all around, that has made it the bottomless gulf; and they’re so embroiled but because, in their way, they’ve been so improbably *good*” (316)), but the principle of its construction is a kind of reason: the rational fulfillment of plan, the containment of passion or desire within the boundaries required by formal symmetry. The Ververs acquire the Prince as Maggie’s mate for the sake of his social value, the prestige he can add to the Verver collection of objects, and the Prince himself views his impending marriage, not as a romantic alliance (despite the professed romanticism of both Adam and Maggie (49)), but as means of reclaiming his family’s good name, its exploits so carefully documented in archives that contain the Prince’s “written self” (47). This self-text, almost buried under mountains of debt, is not a radical one, a text of subversion; on the contrary, the Prince’s name will be resurrected through submission to the “machinery” of Verver acquisitiveness—a transformation effected by money and a strange kind of objectivity or detachment. The Prince’s project of reclamation is to be achieved by “allying himself to science, for what was science but the absence of prejudice backed by the presence of money? His life would be full of machinery, which was the antidote to superstition, which was in its turn too much the consequence, or at least the exhaltation, of archives” (52). The superstition that breeds in the accumulation of texts finds its antidote in a “scientific” marriage, the originating intention for which betrays no “prejudice”—the enlightened alignment makes no concession for prejudice—unreasoned preference—even in the case of a form of attachment that most usually calls for exactly that disposition between the partners. The objectivity guiding the match will resurrect Amerigo’s name to its original

prominence, and it is the name, as Fanny observes, of the “make-believe discoverer” of America (as was then thought), that is the “the sign” by which the Prince “will conquer” (95). The significance of the name here is generated by the power of tradition, the authority of history’s attention—the name signifies not only the discoverer (whose lack of genuine right to the title in no way vitiates for them the glory of the connection), but the mere fact that historical knowledge can attach to the aristocracy: about no one but a Prince could it be said, as it is of him, that “the history of such people is known, root and branch, at every moment of its course” (95-96). The Prince’s power over—or rather his power to attract—the Ververs is in part attributable to the connection possible between him and documented certainty. He is a “rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. [He’s] not perhaps absolutely unique, but [he’s] so curious and eminent that there are very few others like [him]—[he] belong[s] to a class about which everything is known” (49). The high price paid for him is justified because the Ververs are also buying an image of knowledge, an image figured by a powerful, conquering name that also signifies (the interconnections create a kind of equation between the attributes) discovery of the place of origin. The Prince, “Amerigo” of the known, sustains the authority despite suspicions about the validity of the ancestor’s claim because, it seems, the name *itself* has gathered the means of self-sustaining legitimacy. The rich Americans respond to him because, in a sense, he represents an abstracted truth about the origin itself, as though the suspicion eliminates the specific reference in the phrase “discoverer of America, our place of origin,” so that it has the force of “discoverer of our origin.”

The Prince’s alignment with science, certainty, the Name, and the origin—the pillars of logocentrism, the subversion of which enables deconstruction to insinuate an anti-realist epistemology—is not a fanciful projection of Maggie alone, but, by force of implication, also a matter of vital concern for her father, Adam. It is for him more than Maggie, in fact, that the marriage contract has been struck. The Prince recognizes this, thinking far less, just before his visit with Fanny at the beginning of the novel, of his future

bride than of his future father-in-law. Adam (again, the connotations of the name cannot be overlooked) is himself a figure of the origin, and also of the center; indeed, those making up the circumference of his social circle are said to “represent [for him] by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached” (130). And to live in the focal point of these “concentric zones,” hoping as he does for a white vision of nothingness—the blank page without difference (without *différance*), the sight of such light that vision itself is cancelled, or at least the discriminations of finite vision are superseded for the infinite—such a life is to invite (and perhaps think of oneself as deserving) the attribution of divine status; Adam seems a god, with godly powers. He has the cares of a divine father:

His greatest inconvenience, he would have admitted had he analysed, was in finding it so taken for granted that as he had money he had force. It pressed upon him hard and all round assuredly, this attribution of power. Every one had need of one’s power, whereas one’s own need, at the best, would have seemed to be but some trick for not communicating it. (133)

Whatever his own need for his power, his trick is to abjure communication of it, to forbid the intrusion of any media that would tie him to it: if he seems without need of such power, he is, himself, beyond it, or at least he would be taken so. He is “treated as an infinite agent,” and there is, to his own thinking, justification in the perception since

his eyes. . . . showed him what he *had* done, showed him where he had come out; quite at the top of his hill of difficulty, the tall sharp spiral round which he had begun to wind his ascent at the age of twenty, and the apex of which was a platform looking down, if one would, on the kingdoms of the earth and with standing-room for but half a dozen others. (133)

Surveying the kingdoms of the earth as a king of kings, Adam has chosen the Prince—Amerigo the name, the certain, the originator—for his daughter, as a kind of erasure of his own dubious past, before the spiral had been conquered. The “years of darkness [that] had been necessary to render possible the years of light” (142) provide the grounds for a private mythology of ascent, but embarrass his current vision of his relation to origins: the money-source, the story of the money, must be suppressed. Again, specific reference is

suppressed in favor of an abstract, universal one: Adam's origin in darkness, in "forging and sweating" (142) in the "monotonous" "world of affairs"(131) is replaced by the *notion* of Adam and the origin of civilization itself (an extension of the anthropological speculation entertained by Merton). It is this Adam and this new mythical "past" that sees value in acquiring a Prince who, by virtue of his name and the documents of archives, is the discoverer of origins.

Adam's plan to build American City, a "museum of museums, a palace of art" is nothing less than an attempt to make concrete, to justify almost without qualification, his status as infinite agent. His aspiration to mimic the god of creation is comically unambiguous:

It hadn't merely, his plan, all the sanctions of civilization; it was positively civilisation condensed, concrete, consummate, set down by his hands as a house on a rock—a house from whose open doors and windows, open to grateful, to thirsty millions, the higher, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land. (142-43)

From the peak of the spiral, or from the center of concentric zones of intensity, he envisions civilization (and it seems that by his mere sight, it will come to pass—Adam's power is exercised simply in the intention as though his money works silently, invisibly, expressing his deep design; the City is discussed nowhere else in the novel. It is simply an idea that of its own accord is taking place), and it is civilization "condensed," reduced, certainly, but also abstracted, made from a "plan" and as a form. The form, however, is an image of its maker/master for we are told that Adam "cared that a work of art of price should 'look like' the master to whom it might perhaps be deceitfully attributed; but he had ceased on the whole to know any matter of the rest of life by its looks" (144), the qualification "perhaps deceitfully" introducing a slight shade of doubt; but in this rarefied context, "images" are not representational in any usual sense. The city must "look like" Adam, or rather, the two will share some conceptual affinity; but just as Adam ceases to judge by appearances, so the City is not a place of appearances.

Indeed, Adam is a creature in opposition to representation itself, beyond it perhaps, and so, by his own theory, the City is as well: it is form as ideal intelligible reality, the true reality that is in fact debased by the image experienced by its historical inhabitants. The reversal of image and reality—so that American City is the truth of the actual, which should itself be understood as the former's image—is also the “image” of Adam's inability to mimic, to make images, except in privacy as a kind of play or diversion—a marginalized distraction. He escapes from the circle of his dependents (his flock) to indulge in “the *imitation* of depravity—which for amusement, as might have been, he practiced ‘keeping up’”(130), although for the Prince, for example, Adam “would have figured less than anything the stage-manager or the author of the play, who most occupy the foreground: he might be at best the financial ‘backer’, watching his interests from the wing, but in rather confessed ignorance of the mysteries of mimicry” (160). Adam's power (significantly, the Prince sees it in far less grand terms, recognizing its true source in what will much later be called “a rare power of purchase” (574)) is conveyed by his ability to almost vanish from the realm of appearance altogether. This vanishing, for the Prince, suggests that Adam may be nothing more than “a small spare slightly stale person, deprived of the general prerogative of presence” (160), a realization that will eventually enable the Prince and Charlotte to deconstruct the four-personed system constructed around this illusory presence. But it is also the “trick” that sustains Adam within the circle. It comes over the Prince, thinking about the form within which his life has been written, that

his remarkable father-in-law was the man in the world least equipped with different appearances for different times. He was simple, he was a revelation of simplicity, and that was the end of him so far as he consisted of an appearance at all—a question that might verily, for a weakness in it, have been argued. It amused our young man, who was taking his pleasure to-night, it will be seen, in sundry occult ways, it amused him to feel how everything else the master of the house consisted of—resources, possessions, facilities and amiabilities amplified by the social legend—depended, for conveying the effect of quantity, on no personal ‘equation’, no mere measurable medium. (267)

And this estrangement from appearance and mimicry is complemented by an idiosyncratic use of language that blocks communication, or even the dissonance of possible

misinterpretation, by the use of designating terms comprehensible to no one but himself. Adam in his role of first man (as first god of civilization) names the creatures of his garden, and the names, for him, perfectly denote the essence of their referent. The Prince is dubbed, as it were, “non-angular,” a term denoting the truth of his value but of significance only in the system of Adam’s private language. The Prince, already known by history, must also be known by his new creator:

The one prime fact was that the Prince, by good fortune, hadn’t proved angular. He clung to that description of his daughter’s husband as he often did to terms and phrases, in the human, the social connexion, that he had found for himself: it was his way to have times of using these constantly, as if they just then lighted the world, or his own path in it, for him—even when for some of his interlocutors they covered less ground. (136)

The term is self-enclosed but perfect, a figure in the church of his own denomination. “figur[ing] for him clearly as a final idea, a conception of the last vividness. He might have been signifying by it the sharp corners and hard edges, all the stony pointedness, the grand right geometry of his spreading Palladian church” (137).

Adam’s attraction to the term is epistemological—it is a “final idea”—but it is also aesthetic, as befits the great art collector who fancies himself to have an “affinity with Genius, or at least [with] Taste” (140). James immediately qualifies Adam’s aesthetic sense by tightly linking it to the project of amassing an unparalleled collection, a plan the purpose of which, no doubt, is to benefit from art’s prestige value (Adam is buying European culture for his own City). But Adam is more than a comically crass American consumer of the “best available, whatever that may be.” His attraction to art, or at least to the visual arts (there is no mention of him reading), is made part of his intellectual system: his sensitivity to aesthetic objects is genuine—the charge of vulgarity pure and simple would not stick—but it is subservient to a higher principle, as though Verver, in miniature, and despite his personal incapacity to represent or fashion an appearance, mimics in his soul, by James’s design, the Platonic City of *The Republic*. Plato banishes certain forms of poetic discourse (those that would undermine the hierarchical system of respect and

control; the gods, though a fiction, are at the apex and must not be represented in any light that could challenge their dignity, and, by extension, the dignity and authority of the City's rulers), but he also allows the possibility that these dangerous arts could be readmitted to the City if they conform to the City's principles; indeed, dramatic artists who do not purport to adopt a voice other than that of the narrator are allowed to remain because they obey the law against false appearance—such artists are themselves, like Adam, ignorant of mimicry.¹ Adam, Plato's brother city-builder, incorporates art into his sphere, but only in so far as it does not usurp the primary authority of reason. Art is within, but it is contained, controlled: the entirely excluded is always more dangerous (such a system believes) because its development proceeds unchecked. James fashions a startling image, which he tells us has only a "rough negative value"—a curious, partly ironic qualification, since it tends to conform to the Verver (and phonocentric) principle by erasing the image just presented—to convey the restrictions to which Adam's aesthetic sense is subject:

It was all at bottom in him, the aesthetic principle, planted where it could burn with a cold still flame; where it fed almost wholly on the material directly involved, on the idea (followed by appropriation) of plastic beauty, of the thing visibly perfect in its kind; where, in short, despite the general tendency of the 'devouring element' to spread, the rest of his spiritual furniture, modest scattered and tended with unconscious care, escaped the consumption that in so many cases proceeds from the undue keeping-up of profane altar-fires. Adam Verver had in other words learnt the lesson of the senses, to the end of his own little book, without having for a day raised the smallest scandal in his economy at large; being in this particular not unlike those fortunate bachelors or other gentlemen of pleasure who so manage their entertainment of compromising company that even the austere housekeeper, occupied and competent below-stairs, never feels obliged to give warning. (179)

The aesthetic principle is "planted," but it *burns*, a conjunction that suggests a fiery flower (a burning bush?); it feeds on material, but the material is an "idea" that has a "plastic beauty." The perfection of the food of this "devouring element" is itself somehow responsible for preventing the fire's spread to the rest of the spiritual furniture—the fire-plant is now comically mundane and domesticated, potted somewhere next to the dining room table perhaps, at the same time that it is made spiritual. James's rejection of the

image's positive value is no doubt a backward way of underlining the obscene, unnatural mixture of elements at play in this complex image, the mingling of the orders of the universe: earth, vegetable, animal, human, spirit. The point of the image is exactly the reverse of the principle apparently guiding its construction. The unruly mixture is made to mean total containment. The aesthetic principle in Adam, confined to his "own little book" and subject to the "economy" governing the whole, is finally no more than an entertainment requiring no one's alarm, not even ruffling the feathers of the hired help (the social order is here farcically invoked—the housekeeper "below stairs"—to suggest that Adam's passion for art could disrupt not even the hierarchies of the home).

Adam's purchase of the Prince and his acquisition of Charlotte conform to this tendency to subordinate aesthetic figures to the domination of planning reason. The final solution to his dilemma with Maggie—she believes that her own marriage to the Prince has caused a rupture in her relationship with her father, and he wishes to see the dissonance made harmonious—is to bring Charlotte into the fold. The realization that Maggie's friend can, as his wife, allay Maggie's fears while also warding off other claimants from the fringes of the outer circles, strikes him as so perfect an answer to the problem that the problem and the solution appear to be essentially connected. The word "marriage" takes on, as the word "angular" did, symbolic resonance, but its resonance is primarily epistemological: "It wasn't only moreover that the word, with a click, so fitted the riddle, but that the riddle, in such perfection, fitted the word" (186-87). Marriage resolves the difficulty and at the same time defines it. Critical attention to either is made impossible since the relation between the two elements is destroyed—the circularity of riddle and word is self-justifying. The recognized/created perfect unity provides the grounds for Adam's proposal of marriage, the fulfillment of his "majestic scheme" (188). Out of the perfect circle issues a plan:

He was acting—it kept coming back to that—not in the dark, but in the high golden morning; not in precipitation, flurry, fever, dangers these of the path of passion properly so called, but with the deliberation of a plan, a plan that

might be a thing of less joy than a passion, but that probably would, in compensation for that loss, be found to have the essential property, to wear even the decent dignity, of reaching further and of providing for more contingencies. (188-89)

The essential consideration is that contingencies can be conquered when passion is made servant to designs authorized by the golden light of Adam's own reflections. Passion may be unruly, a fever of spontaneous impulse, but the form it conventionally adopts—marriage itself a binding of passion into a socially accepted structure—is here made to seem an insufficient guard against its agitating force: if people marry for passion, they consent to adopt the form in order to preserve the reality of the desire; Adam, however, who asks Charlotte, "Isn't a man's idea usually what he does marry for?" (197), adopts—or rather, purchases—the form for the sake of the form, for the symmetry and for the idea.

III: Deconstructing the System

Charlotte, who will become the subversive analyst of the ideal system, is, the Ververs think, "great" (Maggie repeats the accolade in an "absolute tone" (168)), and, according to Adam, she is also unambiguously "real," so real in fact that "Mr. Verver grew in time even a little amused at the amount of machinery Mrs. Assingham had seemed to see needed for pointing it" (182)—from the Prince's external view the mysteries of the infinite agent seem the result of machinery, but to the central figure himself, the vision of the real requires no mediation. The absorption of Charlotte within the Platonic City, as it were—for the structure is the externalization of Adam's intentionality, as is the City, and the "perfection" of both implies their equivalence—this absorption, which is desired because of her profound "reality" (and for Adam, this term, again, is reserved primarily for questions of form: Charlotte will be the Verver's social ambassador, answering the demands of those on the circumference that the center offer forth some appearance of itself) obscures the distinctions of Charlotte's own character, the appearances she wears for various occasions.

The figure meant to supplement the Verver's form, to provide the secondary but still useful function of serving as a conduit to the mundane world of social representation, becomes the supplement that usurps (for a time) the system itself, re-writing it in her own image. She is not simply "great" and "real"—terms that obliterate difference; she is, in fact, a connoisseur of difference.

To the Prince, Charlotte is a "sharp, sharp fact" (72), and "if when she moved off she looked like a huntress, she looked when she came nearer like his notion, perhaps not wholly correct, of a muse" (73). As a muse, she would be rebellious aestheticism incarnate, an agent of the "devouring element" that Adam has thus far been able to contain. But, as with Adam, she is not simply a representative of the fury of sensuous, aesthetic desire; in her, the platonic soul-hierarchy is reversed. She may be "doom[ed] to arrange appearances" (75), and her strength of mind may "never interfere with the play of her extremely personal, always amusing taste" (72), but she is also capable of playing the games of reason, of appearing to rely on reason's laws. Asking the Prince during the secret visit to the shop where they first discover the golden bowl if he will accept a memento (a "ricordo") from her, and receiving instead his own similar offer, she refuses by replying, "But logic's everything. That at least is how I feel it. A ricordo from you—from you to me—is a ricordo of nothing. It has no reference. . . . You don't refer . . . / refer" (116). Charlotte's mastery of reason is here displayed precisely in her ability to employ it from the "superior" vantage point of (aesthetically informed) desire. She *says* that logic is everything to her, but since their very presence in the shop is the result of her desire to have again the Prince's full attention, and perhaps to dislodge him from the Verver machine (as the Ververs, in effect, always see it: the infinite agent is for the two subordinates, a mere effect of appearance-buying power), the very context of her utterance undermines its assertion.

Moreover, she subtly suggests that the process of reference itself, which is usually the stabilizing assumption of a rationalistic or scientific metaphysic, securing the stable

relationship between thought and world (Adam's naming and the things or people he names, or plan and effect—Charlotte's plan prefigures the Verver's), is, in truth, a process of destabilization, a play of dissonant relations emerging not from reason but from desire. The Prince does not "refer" because his impending absorption within the Verver system disables his ability to mediate through tangible signs anything to anyone external to it—signs seeming to issue from him in fact issue from nowhere, mean nothing (if not for his engagement to the Ververs, he could refer, though that reference would not be underwritten by money; with the money and the Ververs' name, however, he is, ironically, completely "silenced"—he simply cannot send to her any sign that could throw into question his suitability for his new part). Reference, according to Charlotte, is possible for her because (at this point) she is not within the divine orbit. She could give the Prince a sign, transfer to him a signifier capable of falling into Maggie's hands (signifiers always being wayward, but also always capable of bearing a "justifying" interpretation), because desire *can* infiltrate the self-willed absolute system. This is the rigor of Charlotte's logic. She does not spurn it; she toys with it under the authority of her own premises. If the aesthetic principle prevails, then, by logic, it has the power of "real"—not empty—reference: but reference, according to lawless law, is not the guarantor of stability, but the agent of subversion. Her signifier would, however convincing an interpretation could be given Maggie to explain its appearance, signify "not nothing," the very ability to generate reference, when, as the Prince has been told, the official system can be nothing but self-contained silence, a blank page.

Knowledge for her is still crucial, but only as a strategy against the threat posed by false absolutes; real doom may strike from the powers hidden within false perfection. The golden bowl, seemingly a "perfect crystal" (119) and a product of a shrouded tradition, a "lost art," must, insists the Prince, in fact be cracked: there must be a line of imperfection, a flaw hidden to the inattentive gaze. Charlotte observes, "Thank goodness then that if there *be* a crack we know it! But if we may perish by cracks in things that we don't know—!"

(123). The only defense against this kind of peril is a vigilant pursuit of the flaw; indeed, Charlotte immediately removes the conditional that qualifies her fear (*if there be*) and states an iron law about giving: “We can never then give each other anything” (123). The implication is that so-called perfection which hides an unknown crack (and the shop owner points out that a flawed crystal could be smashed on a marble floor: the crack represents the inherent possibility of converting unity into disunity, a whole into fragments, the single into the multiple) is a deception vitiating the entire process of giving, as though gifts must be of the absolute or they are entirely impossible. The only protection is destroying the gift, exposing the flaw and instead living, exchanging, within the economy of the known error—the assumption that everything is always already flawed.

Knowing of the flaw, living in the knowledge of the real vulnerability of purported perfection, becomes for Charlotte and the Prince the criterion of their own superiority and the leverage they use against the Ververs and their system. The Prince has disputed in his own mind whether Adam has, despite his power and wealth, the prerogative of presence (the Prince writes Adam off by subsuming him into his effects) and he further holds that Adam and Maggie are essentially oblivious:

They knew, it might have appeared in these lights, absolutely nothing on earth worth speaking of—whether beautifully or cynically; and they would perhaps sometimes be a little less trying if they would only once for all peacefully admit that knowledge wasn't one of their needs and that they were in fact constitutionally inaccessible to it. (274)

“These lights” refers to the inherently dangerous context into which the Ververs have sent their spouses: the Prince and Charlotte alone together at Matcham, Maggie again so trusting the two of them that the Prince is “thrust, systematically, with another woman” (275). And at Matcham,

What any one ‘thought’ of any one else—above all of any one else *with* any one else—was a matter incurring in these halls so little awkward formulation that hovering Judgement, the spirit with the scales, might perfectly have been imaged there as some rather snubbed and subdued but quite trained and tactful poor relation, of equal, of the properest, lineage, only of aspect a little dingy, doubtless from too limited a change of dress, for whose tacit and abstemious presence, never betrayed by a rattle of her

rusty machine, a room in the attic and a plate at the side table were decently usual. (272)

The Ververs do not know that such a condition can obtain—the absence of moral Judgement, or rather its virtually inoperative presence—and so their intellectual ignorance is the result of a blindness to moral ignorance: no one here thinks of any one else—thought itself declines to settle on any specific referent or form any definite conclusions. Not knowing that not knowing or not thinking is possible represents the Verver's true failing. The Prince and Charlotte know that at Matcham the principles holding the Verver system together are without authority, that the systematic handling of the two of them (being thrust together) is a systematic exposure to risk; for the two soon-to-be lovers, knowing the flaw and knowing that Judgement is in suspension provide the freedom to work against the ignorance of the system. This is, indeed, a strategy to undermine naiveté.² After the subversive affair is consummated, Charlotte tells Fanny that when Maggie rushes off to spend time with her father, the two of them are “like children playing at paying visits” (218); their innocence is their vulnerability: “Moreover, as one has so often had occasion to feel, and even to remark, they're very, very simple. That makes,” Charlotte observes to the Prince, “a difficulty for belief; but when once one has taken it in it makes less difficulty for action. I *have* at last, for myself, I think, taken it in. I'm not afraid” (258).

What she means by action, though, is not direct conflict or confrontation. The system of innocence and naiveté is not simply to be overturned or brutally inverted, although there is also inversion. The success of the lovers depends on their knowing better than the designers of the system exactly their position. Charlotte is both telling the strict truth and utterly lying when she tells Fanny that she could never be insulted by insinuations that she has betrayed her husband because “Nobody could [so offend]. For it belongs to my situation that I'm, by no merit of my own, just fixed—fixed as a pin stuck up to its head in a cushion. I'm placed—I can't imagine anyone more placed. There I *am*!” (220). She is “placed” and “fixed” by the system, and, if one is not aware of the hidden

mechanism of her romantic affiliation with the Prince, the system seems to function exactly as its designers intended. Charlotte's triumph in Book Third is the result of recognizing what she calls "the truth of the matter," that "Maggie thinks more on the whole of fathers than of husbands" (221), and acting in seeming perfect consistency with that truth: the great deal of time daughter and father spend together requires, by, as Charlotte implies, logical necessity, that the Verver's spouses must be alone together as well. The system continues, but is itself, if one is sensitive to the *media* of its operation—the way the form of the tight four-person structure automatically permits lines of relation, already existing, to alter their character, to draw on the signifying force thought to be reserved for other of its lines—the cause of its own deconstruction: no external, entirely "other" force need be applied.³ The prior relationship between the two lovers, which failed for want of money, has been unwittingly re-written by and into the Verver system, which presumes to control or know all four of them; what had been a dead secret has been revived, activated—appropriated—by Verver money and planning (and, indeed, Charlotte and the Prince are very well aware that their success fundamentally depends on their being in the Verver system). Nor is the sexual vitality between the two (transformed though it will be) an element entirely "foreign" to the system: its primary, "official," and "authorized" lines of relation—Maggie and the Prince, Charlotte and Adam—presume a sexual aspect (are forged in part for its sake). What has happened, of course, is what the system never really considered possible—that the "sexual power" (I qualify the phrase because Charlotte and the Prince themselves do so, as we'll see) it was designed to control would migrate, as it were, to another line of relation, to another link (the subordinate link) of the system. Charlotte tells the Prince, "Isn't the immense, the really quite matchless beauty of our position that we have to 'do' nothing in life at all?—nothing except the usual necessary everyday thing which consists in one's not being more of a fool than one can help" (243), prompting James's narrator to interrupt with an ironic comment:

Nothing stranger surely had ever happened to a conscientious, a well-

meaning, a perfectly passive pair: no more extraordinary decree had ever been launched against such victims than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid. (244).

To say that they had done “everything to avoid” the relation that could deconstruct the Verver system is an exaggeration since of course they both provisionally accepted that system upon entry.

But the “perfectly passive pair” are not “actors”—particularly not actors of conventional drama or fiction. The fictionalization of the system has been bred from within. The Prince reflects that “one had never to plot or to lie for them; he might humorously have put it that one had never, as by the higher conformity, to lie in wait with the dagger or to prepare insidiously the cup” (261). The dagger and the cup of traditional confrontation or overt deception are unnecessary when “the magic web had spun itself without their toil, almost without their touch” (250). The Prince and Charlotte need not plot because the plotting has already been accomplished by the Ververs: plot itself, so carefully wrought and self-contained, undermines itself by generating a generalized third term, an extrapolation and mutation of the subordinate term within (just as representation usurps presence and writing speech in deconstructive theory). Adam’s aestheticism, contained by his planning and his care for controlling contingencies, blossoms under the guidance of the lovers to become an aestheticism of a “higher” (quasi-transcendental) order, capable of preserving yet utterly transforming the dynamic of the system. When the two realize their opportunity, the Prince and Charlotte exchange single words, attempting to characterize the “freedom” discovered in the very heart of the structure of capture. The Prince calls it “wonderful,” she replies, “It’s too beautiful,” and then the Prince settles on “It’s sacred”; she repeats the word, and the system is broken⁴:

“It’s sacred,” she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. (259)

Under the authority of this sacred—a “new concept” that “can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (Derrida, *Positions* 41)—they kiss, “seal[ing] their pledge” and confirming for the first time their ability to introduce an aestheticised subversive dissonance into the form of their relations.

But the sexual force of this “passive pair” is oddly de-realized and disembodied—hardly a vigorous assertion against the Ververs of the validity of carnal experience. Later, before embarking on their first private excursion to visit Gloucester, a “cathedral town,” the Prince again becomes entranced by a name, or rather a meaningless “name”:

[I]ts name to him half the night through, and its name had become but another name, the pronounceable and convenient one, for that supreme sense of things which now throbbled within him. He had kept saying to himself ‘Glo’ster, Glo’ster, Glo’ster,’ quite as if the sharpest meaning of all the years just ended were intensely expressed in it. That meaning was really that his situation remained quite sublimely consistent with itself, and that they absolutely, he and Charlotte, stood there together in the very lustre of this truth. (291)

There is little doubt that in Gloucester the Prince and Charlotte will sexually confirm their illicit union, but they efface the physicality of the expected encounter by moving “upstream” to the transcendental,⁵ converting it into a matter of signs and names—names that confront the idealist’s system with an idealist challenge. The would-be lovers’ anticipation of this final “betrayal” (of the Ververs and of their own love), so appropriately to occur in a cathedral town (it also reminds them of “the tomb of some old king” [292]) that derives its very identity from the dominating towers of the house of the sacred (trumping, as it were, Adam’s City of Reason, but also overwhelming the significance of sexual pleasure), inspires the Prince to chant the town’s name, not in invocation of its reference, but as a kind of blurred word-image of the consistency that is also the disruption of consistency; “Glo’ster” gathers the sharpest meaning at the same time as it releases the force of another meaning not yet known at the dawn of the rewritten text. The system, the form, will be theirs thereafter, theirs to run, Maggie and Adam now to be “managed.” The Ververs will think themselves still sheltered by the comfort of their ideal design, but the real

force of the form emerges from the margin—de-substantialized “passionate desire.” aestheticism, the sacred. But the Ververs cannot be simply discarded since they represent, in a sense, the condition upon which the radical relation can persist: not underwritten by Verver wealth, the romance would fail as it did before.⁶ Indeed, the inversion and revision of the Verver system entails not only the new ascendancy of “higher” aestheticized desire, but also the recuperation of that other subordinated term: the mediating power of money that Adam (naively) considers buried within his primary philosophical ambitions (like the breath of his voice). The sacred thus actually operates not from the center, nor yet from the margin (where mere aesthetics had been). Rather, it is in both places at once, unlocateable.

In any event, the force of the “sacred” does not issue from the present as a less de-realized love would have done. The revival of romance from within the system that would forbid it but has in fact made it possible in a way it never was before has occurred elsewhere in time:

The sense of the past revived for him nevertheless as it hadn't yet done: it made that other time somehow meet the future close, interlocking with it, before his watching eyes, as in a long embrace of arms and lips, and so handling and hustling the present that this poor quantity scarce retained substance enough, scarce remained sufficiently *there*, to be wounded or shocked. (249)

Expectation and desire insubstantiate the present (the site of concrete experience, of desire more physical and less ideal) to release the hidden potential for the subversion of limits: past and future, despite appearing to be founded on the present, here conspire, the Prince finds, to make the present their victim. In fact, when the affair is consummated, the “present” is defined by the pact reached between the other members of Time's triple structure. In the second volume, the characters play entirely on a present-less field.

IV: Thinking in the Deconstructed System

The shift of attention to Maggie allows James to examine the effect of a deconstructed system on one of its elements, a character who had been, if not the prime designer, at least one who had relied on the integrity of the now undermined logocentric system. Indeed, Maggie was its beneficiary: the Prince was ostensibly acquired for her, and Adam decided to marry Charlotte in order to calm Maggie's concerns about him so that she would believe him to be fully within the social circle (Adam, though is not *of* the circle, as we have seen). Her world seemingly altered by hidden alliances, Maggie tries to shore up the old lines of force by using strategies that mirror those of the two lovers. Where Charlotte's "reality," "greatness," and reason masked her desire-defined purposes, Maggie the actress, deconstructed, covertly acts according to a supreme reason which she converts into a kind of faith, just as love for Charlotte and the Prince became sacred (the opposed but parallel strategies are linked by the transcendentalism of their leverage "concepts"). Poststructuralist critics like Rowe, Walton, and Landau who read Maggie as a "textual reviser" and stress her deconstructive powers of manipulation fail to recognize that Maggie, as I will argue, revises an already deconstructed text and does so for the sake of reconfirming the supremacy of her transcendental signified.⁷ Her goal appears to be precisely the opposite of that of the subversive lovers in the first volume of the novel—and in a sense it is—but she also shares with them the desire to undermine the integrity of the present. From her point of view, the past, as it is for the lovers, is crucial since the miracle of the system is that "she had been able to marry without breaking, as she liked to put it, with her past" (328); and while Charlotte and the Prince think of the past as being in a conspiracy with the future for the destruction of the present, Maggie considers the persistence of the past so powerful that the present is its mere shadow. Marriage has not broken the tie with her father, a tie that is much more than that between daughter and father: the two try to gather, almost incestuously, all possible relations into this one relation, and preserve them all despite change. The multiplication of figures around them is meant to reinforce this central, immediate tie.

But with the media of the structure turned against it—the possibilities latent in the system’s lines of relation released—the system’s originator (Adam) acquires, in perfect consistency with the new order of things, an agent: Maggie is not the infinite agent, but his representative. Her dawning consciousness in the second volume—the reader is almost entirely outside her mind until the system has been compromised—enters the world as a though newly born, and she must play in a world fallen. Fanny prepares the transition for the reader by telling her husband that in light of the apparent shift in the functioning order, Maggie, if she is suspicious, “has begun to live” (307), and living means being aware of dissonance, which Fanny calls evil:

[Maggie’s] sense will have to open. . . . [t]o what’s called Evil—with a very big E: for the first time in her life. To the discovery of it, to the knowledge of it, to the crude experience of it. . . . To the harsh bewildering brush, the daily chilling breath of it. Unless indeed . . . unless indeed, as yet (so far as she has come, and if she comes no further), simply to the suspicion and the dread. (310)

Consciousness is this awareness of suspicion and dread, the shedding of naiveté. If the Verver’s structure was composed by, as the lovers call them, innocent children, and their innocence is characterized by an inability to recognize the threat inherent in the medium, in the form that their intentions take; and further, if the form could be deconstructed because of that naiveté; then Maggie’s birth marks a coming to awareness of form, of image and of play—and these not as diversion but as foundation (to Fanny, the reverse of innocence and naiveté is, of course, Evil).

The famous pagoda image that opens the second volume marks the shift:

This situation [her recognition of a difference] had been occupying for months and months the very center of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs. (328).

This center image (center as image—the role assigned to Milly in *Wings*) significantly expands upon and transforms the suggestion made much earlier in the novel that Maggie

expresses herself in images “drawn from vast modern machineries and facilities” (51), from the elements of the industrial world seemingly owned or conquered by her father before he discovered an interest in art collection. His money was, in effect, the foundation for Maggie’s powers of expression, but the images were secure, intended security (indeed, Maggie tells the Prince, “I’ve divided my faith into water-tight compartments. We must manage not to sink” (51)), and were underwritten by the instrumental reason that brought their subjects to Maggie’s attention. Now, however, the pagoda at the center, a “sacred tower or temple”—the Prince’s and Charlotte’s term has usurped control of the garden—represents something forbidden and foreign (it quickly displaces the more readily recognizable, the almost domestic, ivory tower). She seeks entry, and to do so she must play the game of images, immerse herself in it, and not merely draw upon images as an expression of power achieved through other means. Her naiveté is lifted the moment she recognizes that her life is indeed governed by an image, or by a form that is irreducibly an image:

They had taken too much for granted that their life together required, as people in London said, a special ‘form’—which was very well so long as the form was kept only for the outside world and was made no more of among themselves than the pretty mould of an iced pudding, or something of that sort, into which, to help yourself, you didn’t hesitate to break with the spoon. (344).

The form is more than outward show; it is the inner reality of their structure, and it is under attack.

Aware that form is at stake, that it must be played, but not yet knowing how the form has been transformed (and indeed, “knowing” may be impossible in a world of “chance airs”), Maggie becomes what her father was said incapable of being—a mimic. The agent of the system compromised by a deconstruction, alive now to the necessity of the medium, begins to acquire (at least to herself) a deconstructed self:

Maggie went, she went—she felt herself going; she reminded herself of an actress who had been studying a part and rehearsing it, but who suddenly, on the stage, before the footlights, had begun to improvise, to speak lines not in the text. It was this very sense of the stage and the footlights that

kept her up, made her rise higher: just as it was the sense of action that logically involved some platform—action quite positively for the first time in her life, or, counting in the previous afternoon, for the second. (348).

This improvised acting is a mimicry without firm boundaries, a straying beyond the authority of the text. Maggie plays the war of appearance in the second volume by adopting the strategy of her opponents who also know their part, adhere to it, but go beyond it; but she does so while guided by a central intention that is not, for her, challenged by the system's darker currents. She will be an actress, and will burst the lines of the system as it was written, even vary her own plans for manipulation, but through all of this she will be Adam's agent in the fallen world. She undertakes the project of repair on his behalf. The medium, the form, is itself the issue, the means of victory, but the intention has not been dismantled (Maggie's "small variations and mild maneuvers [are] accompanied . . . [by] an infinite sense of intention" (331)).⁸ Her sense of duty to her father—she has never been his agent before, he has never needed one—is fiercely active precisely because the system is threatened:

She was keeping her head for a reason, for a cause; and the labour of this detachment, with the labour of her forcing the pitch of it down, held them together in the steel hoop of an intimacy compared with which artless passion would have been but a beating of the air. (423)

Reason acting for a cause (acting for itself; shoring up its destroyed foundation—fighting for its certainty in the realm of the medium, of the uncertain) is more formidable than reason serenely confident; desire, "artless passion," the subordinate term made grand under the aegis of the sacred, may now truly be a victim. The adherents of the logocentric world can also work the deconstructing game.

Like Charlotte's and the Prince's sacred running of the magic web, Maggie's plan needs to maintain apparent consistency (she must remain in her place, yet exploit that position in a manner not originally envisioned) and also generate a difference. The very fact of her suspicion has altered the system as the Prince and Charlotte know it and by which they have altered it. Maggie's alteration, her difference, must, however, be hidden

so as to bring about the recovery of form. Maggie's plan is

to bring about a difference, touch by touch, without letting either of the three, and least of all her father, so much as suspect her hand. If they should suspect they would want a reason, and the humiliating truth was that she wasn't ready with a reason—not, that is, with what she would have called a reasonable one. (348).

Suspicious but without proof, reasons hidden or illusory rather than substantial and promptly given (as Adam gave them to Charlotte), Maggie must act covertly and prevent anyone from becoming suspicious of her suspicions. The duplicity of her position—maintaining the innocent, unknowing front, suppressing her own difference—may encourage her to adopt the stance of the actress straying beyond the line, but her desire to see the system repaired without Adam becoming aware of the change (a god should never know that the circumference has rebelled and the center has been displaced) encourages an arranging of appearance so that she may appear to be utterly passive. Maggie, feeling flush with a new kind of power (she is accustomed to the money-granted kind), tells Fanny. "I make [Charlotte and the Prince] do what I like" (404). She senses her mastery, but, exactly as the lovers did, declines to accept responsibility for any overt "doing," for acting against them in any conventional sense of that term. She imagines that her success will be by *their* action: "Yes, this is by every appearance the best time we've had yet," she thinks of telling her father, "but don't you see all the same how they must be working together for it and how my very success, my success in shifting our beautiful harmony to a new basis, comes round to being *their* success, above all; their cleverness, their amiability, their power to hold out, their complete possession in short of our life?" (376). The lovers thought themselves blissfully caught in a magic, sacred web, and Maggie, too, thinks, "Everything that has come up for them has come up, in an extraordinary manner, without my having by a sound or a sign given myself away—so that it's all as wonderful as you may conceive" (404).

It is wonderful, in part, because Maggie's interventions are, prior to her acquisition of the shop owner's story, based on something much less than certain knowledge of the

conspiracy—as is fitting in a context where reason has been overthrown. Acting on mere suspicion, feeling herself in “miracles of arrangement” (401), Maggie’s actress self, despite her secure intention to serve her father, has been “born” into the undermined system and she has a kind of post-deconstruction coherence. Her free-floating doubt, not yet subject to compelling proofs or the need for demonstration, operates beyond the realm of reason, the world she is trying to defend; or rather, reason has, on the level at which she struggles to manage the medium, been pushed to the margin, becoming the circumference of a new kind of circle: as Maggie understands, “There she was, all round, imprisoned in the circle of reason it was impossible she should give—certainly give *him* [Adam]” (398). The sense of imprisonment issues from a voice committed, in the practical realm, to the new rule of aesthetic play, even though her own supreme reason and cause must, in the end, trump the cards dealt out in the game. The bifurcation of worlds—Adam’s of reason and order (vanquished, except, for Maggie, as an ideal), Charlotte’s and the Prince’s of desire and representation—allows Maggie to draw inspiration from the former, while remaining entirely in the latter; indeed, she considers the intrusion of the former (reason) into the latter (desire) an impertinence if not a potential catastrophe (one must not destroy the system one deconstructs).

In her view, the form’s energies, to protect the higher center (the displacement outwards is also, as I’ve argued, for Maggie a movement upwards or “upstream,” to use Dews’s term: her god, whose system is undermined, is receding beyond the reach of ordinary reason), must flow according to the higher standard:

That was at the bottom of her mind, that their equilibrium was everything, and that it was practically precarious, a matter of a hair’s breadth for the loss of the balance. It was the equilibrium, or at all events her conscious fear about it, that had brought her heart into her mouth. (336)

Her fear that the equilibrium will falter is a fear of reason’s intrusion—of the direct intervention of some kind of certainty. In the more stable world of *The Wings of the Dove*, the erased “specific” finally, and to Merton’s shock, exerts its authority, however

momentarily, only thereafter to usher in the mind's final collapse; here Maggie is consciously aware that the definite must be kept out of play:

It made her but feel the more sharply how the specific, in almost any direction, was utterly forbidden her—how the use of it would be, for all the world, like undoing the leash of a dog eager to follow up a scent. It would come out, the specific, where the dog would come out; would run to earth somehow the truth—for she was believing herself in relation to the truth!—at which she mustn't so much as indirectly point. (383).

From the perspective of the deconstructed world, the specific is the wild, untamed beast (a beast image is again applied to the definite, but this time to its pursuit rather than its reality: the "truth" is instead aligned with "scent," the definite inhabiting the lower realm only through its indefinite breath—it "speaks"), and while Charlotte insinuated to the Prince that the workings of logic are paradoxically incapable of reference, Maggie here senses that reference to the truth by the deconstructed system is impossible: James's ironic qualification subtly turns on "relation": Maggie's relations—her in-medium play—is, at best, tenuously connected to the real.

The preservation of Maggie's reason-directed but aesthetically-enacted play permits, as I suggested, a kind of self-coherence beyond the breakdown of manifest logocentric control, and this is a result of her ability to isolate her intention and her certainty from the rigor of reasoned argumentation, things fallen in the aestheticized, deconstructed system. Fanny tells her husband that Maggie's "knowledge" (her "relation to the truth") requires no proof:

It isn't a question of belief or of proof, absent or present; it's inevitably with her a question of natural perception, of insurmountable feeling. She irresistibly *knows* that there's something between them. But she hasn't 'arrived' at it, as you say, at all; that's exactly what she hasn't done, what she so steadily and intensely refuses to do. She stands off and off, so as not to arrive; she keeps out to sea and away from the rocks. (416)

The blurring of the distinction between "knowing" and "feeling," coupled with her certainty of intention (it requires no justification), results in a Maggie who is a "mistress of shades" (423), a kind of occult goddess of representation; indeed, Fanny has predicted that Maggie would, under the pressure of her suspicion, become "audacious and impudent—learning to

be so as to gloss things over. She could—she even will, yet, I believe—learn it, for that sacred purpose [she works in the lower world under Charlotte’s and the Prince’s authorizing sign], consummately, diabolically” (318). Absence of proof, of the “vulgar” means of verification, liberates the sense of self-certainty otherwise unavailable. The only resource upon which Maggie can draw within the deceptive shades of the medium is her intuition which tells her of the Prince’s and Charlotte’s affair; standing off and off—actively deferring, or delaying and avoiding possible confirmation—her “insurmountable feeling” is exalted into a foundation of knowledge, or, perhaps more accurately, an unchallengeable perception: who can disprove what cannot be proven? Maggie is “right” if she wants to be.⁹ The imprisoning circle of reasons preserves an inner aesthetic “truth,” a liberating self-confirming certainty, as did, in *The Wings of a Dove*, the “impenetrable ring fence,” protect for a time the “reign [within of] a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions” (440).

The irony here is that, unlike the fictions used to obscure the truth in *Wings*, Maggie’s proof-proof intuitions, as the reader well knows, are true and well-founded: she *is* right. The difference lies, this novel suggests, not merely in what you know, but how you know it: that is, knowing is not really knowing if it occurs by chance or without “the argumentation . . . at the heart of conviction” (Ricoeur *Oneself as Another* 288). The correspondence between Maggie’s idea and what the reader must call the facts of the situation (obviously not a perfect match—omniscience is not the standard) is almost entirely arbitrary, a matter of sensitivity, perhaps, but also very much a matter of chance. The reader watches the birth and development of Maggie’s consciousness in a world where genuine “truth”—correspondence between conception and reality—exists, but only at the whim of a kind of aesthetic intuition, an unreasonable connection. That is, we know Maggie is right, Maggie “feels” that she is right, and thinks it a kind of knowing, but we also know that she knows only by indirection and that her mastery is generated by a knowledge inverted and revised: the foundation of Maggie’s knowing is not knowing (just

as for Derrida the “foundation” of presence is non-presence—representation). James’s subtle maneuver here is to force a comparison between the reader’s view and Maggie’s. Is the novel reader’s means of knowing utterly beyond the grasp of one of the novel’s characters? Is this comparison, this difference, achieved only by virtue of a confusion of levels, an imposed and then, by implication, withdrawn absolute difference—that between narratorial freedom and character confinement?

V: Miraculous Descent of Proof

The arrival of the golden bowl suggests an answer: James's epistemological criticism of Maggie's new strength under the protection of suspicion is not launched from across an impossible divide. The fact that the object embodying Maggie's proof also provides the novel with its title implies that the bowl is less "symbol" than self-reflexive comment. Through Fanny, for example, the narrator comments that "[t]he golden bowl put on, under consideration, a sturdy, a conscious perversity; as a 'document', somehow, it was ugly, though it might have a decorative grace" (438); and the Prince observes, after hearing the story accounting for the bowl's mysterious materialization in his and Maggie's home, that it is "the sort of thing that happens mainly in novels and plays" (459). But the bowl represents a fictional document—and James's fiction in particular—in a sense of the aesthetic that is different than what could ordinarily apply to the figures and pieces that Adam collects, objects for collection and for (rather mute) admiration. The bowl, on the contrary, is an aesthetic object in its *broken* figuration—but how its fragments are to be taken is open to question. Poststructuralist critics typically read the bowl's fragments as indicative of the broken sign at the heart of the text,¹⁰ but I will argue that the shattered bowl underlines Maggie's fundamental adherence to logocentrism and her suppression of the underlying narrative explanation that the bowl offers. The fragments mock both the "sacred" lovers and Maggie's extreme epistemological position, but do not, for the reader, place "under erasure" the story that has both brought the bowl to her attention and summoned the Prince to a confrontation with Maggie—a confrontation that forces Maggie to tell her own story of discovery. She, however, deconstructively adept, finds in the silence or in the gaps of the story she tells her husband (in the spaces between the fragments) the means to conquer him. Indeed, Maggie's final cruel triumph over Charlotte also turns on her exploitation of the silence and space between the fragments—her lie will re-assemble the golden bowl as an absence.

Shortly after the bowl's reappearance, however, Fanny attempts to destroy it by smashing it against the marble floor, but its destruction as ornament (as member on the mantelpiece of Adam's artifacts and token of Charlotte's and the Prince's aestheticized union) releases a more potent force. Indeed, looking with the Prince at the bowl's broken pieces, "Maggie's sense accordingly in his presence was that though the bowl had been broken her reason hadn't; the reason for which she had made up her mind, the reason for which she had summoned her friend, the reason for which she had addressed the place to her husband's eyes; it was all one reason" (452); she tells her husband, "Its having come apart makes an unfortunate difference for its beauty, its artistic value, but none for anything else. Its other value is just the same—I mean that of its having given me so much of the truth about you" (455). For Maggie, who has labored under the apprehension that "[k]nowledge, knowledge, was a fascination as well as a fear" (422) so that knowledge and fear became synonymous—"[t]he aggravation of fear—or call it apparently of knowledge—had jumped straight into its place as an aggravation above all for her father" (437)—the bowl is nothing but an emblem of truth, of her knowledge, of fear conquered: it represents "the proof" (436), and it "explained: fully, intensely, admirably explained. with nothing really to add" (439). The fear has turned to absolute triumph; what had been banished from the system as she understood its workings under the signs of suspected betrayal, and what she thus feared as that world's "other," could only intrude, she seems to conclude at this point, as an alien conqueror, a force unprecedented.

That her reaction to "the outbreak of the definite" (441) (echoes, again, of *Wings*) is extreme¹¹ is made evident in this extraordinary passage rendering Maggie's reaction to the Prince's sudden entrance into the room after Fanny has smashed the bowl: Maggie senses that her husband needs time to gather his wits:

There it was that her wish for time interposed—time for Amerigo's use, not for hers, since she for ever so long now, for hours and hours as they seemed, had been living in eternity; with which she would continue to live. (452)

The bowl generates for Maggie a kind of certainty that almost literally transports her into timelessness; in her case, the bowl's destruction means absolutely nothing because it has conveyed the total truth: the "aesthetic" value of the bowl, its form, the medium of its existence, is utterly irrelevant. We could have no better fictional account of a character adopting so whole-heartedly the phonocentric conviction of the superiority of the vanishing or self-canceling medium for the expression of truth. The great irony here, however, is that Maggie's adoption of that stance has been prepared for and made possible by her immersion within and mastery of the deconstructed world of suspicion: the "truth" seems like the descent of God, the incarnation of the infinite agent, the transcendental signified.¹²

She misses, it seems, a key distinction. The bowl may be "proof" and it is broken, but it has not vanished, and, as James's plotting makes clear, the sound of its striking the floor is responsible for the Prince's unexpected entrance into the room occupied by Fanny and his wife. Maggie planned to leave the bowl on display for the Prince's observation—she would allow him to draw his own conclusions. With its breaking, however, and the Prince's appearance, Maggie does what she otherwise would not have done: she tells him the story of her search for a birthday present for her father, and relays as well the story told to her by the shop owner. The bowl's true value is thus its narrative potential: its communication of information about the working of the system she inhabits—that her husband and Charlotte knew each other in the past and kept that relationship secret. Maggie has tried to marry and arrange her father's marriage in such a way so as to preserve the past in the present: her relationship with her father was not to change, the present was to perfectly mirror the past. Charlotte and the Prince, on the other hand, as we have seen, tried to erase the present in favor of a mingling of past and future—re-iteration of the old romance in the promise of a new, rich, context, undermining that context at the same time. The shop owner's tale, however, represents the intrusion of a different kind of past, and the authority of a different kind of memory: the kinds that correspond to what Ricoeur calls the temporality of narrative. According to Ricoeur, narrative achieves the reconfiguration

of preconfigured time, the plotting of continuity within discontinuity and contingency, as well as the latter within the former. The past is preserved but transformed for the present (reconfiguration), and the present is contingent, pregnant with possibility, yet also connected with and constrained by what has gone before (the preconfigured)¹³. The shop owner's tale is triggered by his chance observation of the pictures of the two lovers, and it demands no particular response from his listener, but it does, of course, uniquely transform Maggie's present: he brings forward Charlotte's and the Prince's past and almost literally attaches it to the present workings of the system so that Maggie has the opportunity of recognizing that her and her father's form is not merely their own, or even their own undermined by the migration of forces within it, but a form that has intersected with another, unfinished, story, that of Charlotte and the Prince. The Charlotte and Prince pre-text, unknown to the Ververs, and assumed by the two lovers themselves to be operative only as it has been re-written into the Verver realm (their relationship, they pretend, the result of Verver positioning and value and of its "sacred" re-writing there) is here given its pre-Verver authority, even as it is attached to that form. Maggie is, in fact, within that larger double narrative, not a mere manipulator of elements within an abstract, perhaps compromised formal structure. In other words, the implication is that, contrary to her belief (and that of Derrida) the narrative preceded the text; the text of their forms is not the "original" generator of all forms.

Moreover, the shop owner's story was made possible because the two lovers, while in his shop, were betrayed by their cover: they assumed that their conversation in his presence was protected by language: that he could not understand Italian, that misinterpretation (or the impossibility of accurate interpretation) was inevitable and would protect them. The shop owner's penetration into their discourse further subverts Charlotte's ironic conviction, stated in the shop, that only she could refer. Once the story is told to Maggie, it becomes clear that the true force of reference resides with the shop owner, or rather, that language as deception or cover can be converted into the language of

reference and unveiling. His story to Maggie is a communication generated by the terms of the deconstructed system—the strategy of dissonance played on the margins of the system (outside the Verver orbit)—but emerging from outside that system (as it conceives itself—it is an inverted four-person structure; no one expected that it could include a narrative delivered by an outsider) to rearrange its terms. The bowl is thus a story about the system from the outside, “true” because of its inadvertent contact with the players of the game. The play of forms inaugurated by the subversion of the infinite agent could not guard against the intrusion of the story that could reveal the workings of the system to itself: in a sense, the shop owner, and the golden bowl, represent the self-undermining of the deconstructing system. Maggie’s own doubling of the story—her gift-buying trip mirrors that of the lovers—also underlines the formal coherence that can emerge without conscious intention from a system that desires only the equilibrium of ignorance. Charlotte and the Prince required the continuing operation of the system, but only insofar as it supported its own continuing subversion in their favor: without the Ververs, as I have noted, their illicit affair collapses from want of (financial) support (the mediation “foundationalism” suppressed under Verver, exalted by Charlotte and the Prince). Maggie desired the preservation of the play of forms but only insofar as it enabled her own mastery of the field and the surreptitious protection of her unknowing father. Neither of these objectives—involving displays for the other members of the cast—could outlaw a duplication, or a repetition, that calls forth a kind of *retention*: a memory of a story, an explaining narrative. Maggie’s repetition of the shopping trip made the shop owner’s actual telling of his story possible.

The bowl’s narrativity is available to Maggie just as it is for the reader—in a sense, she is given a version of our own Book First, Chapter Six. Nevertheless, she, as noted, takes the bowl itself—or rather the broken bowl—as confirming merely her idea, the bowl’s aesthetic value no longer relevant. And her failure to respond to the story implicates both her primal intention (adherence to her father) and her adoption of the world of

unknowable mediation. The correspondence between her suspicions and the fact of the affair was arbitrary, but the chance occurrence that brings the story to Maggie and gives her the opportunity of knowing from within a reconfiguring narrative is lost on her (this is a kind of knowing that is not simple certainty, of course; it is, rather, a knowing that acknowledges the real force of a relatively definite past, but does not make the rudimentary error of assuming that the past or its patterns impose a definite, unalterable shape on the future). Maggie instead, for the moment, substitutes one kind of arbitrariness for another: her idea is, she thinks, firmly and finally attached to the “truth.” But now her vindicated consciousness is only tenuously connected to her exterior, acting self: the actress beyond the text has an arche-text to guide her, but its value is all conceptual, totally abstract. Strangely, although the script is guaranteed by an absolutely certain premise, the terms of the text are even less stable than before—Maggie senses the freedom to act beyond any constraints whatever (beyond good and evil):

[F]or what it came to was that seeing herself finally sure, knowing everything, having the fact, in all its abomination, so utterly before her that there was nothing else to add—what it came to was that merely by being *with* him [the Prince] there in silence she felt within her the sudden split between conviction and action. They had begun to cease on the spot, surprisingly, to be connected; conviction, that is, budged no inch, only planting its feet the more firmly in the soil—but action began to hover like some lighter and larger but easier form, excited by its very power to keep above ground. It would be free, it would be independent, it would go in—wouldn't it?—for some prodigious and superior adventure of its own. What would condemn it, so to speak, to the responsibility of freedom—this glimmered on Maggie even now—was the possibility, richer with every lapsing moment, that her husband would have on the whole question a new need of her, a need which was in fact being born between them in these very seconds. (453)

The knowledge (here called conviction) that infuses the logocentric loyalist who plays in the deconstructed world here unmistakably intensifies and transforms Maggie's role as the mistress of shades, of subtle, almost undetectable manipulative touches; she may not be Adam (the otherworldly lord), but she begins to conceive of responsibility as a matter of power and domination constrained by no higher principle nor grounding necessity. Her certainty (her misunderstanding of the narrative as simple certainty) liberates action to do as

it will (the passive construction—action will act freely, not Maggie will act freely—emphasizes the abstraction away from concrete embodiment) precisely because what she “knows” is, in her mind, the founding principle of forms: the system of four, not grounded in Adam’s origination and no longer an arena of manipulation based solely on desire, has become a medium operating by virtue of a secret. And it is a secret, discovered “there in silence.” in the gap of the story she tells the Prince, that she can wield against the others. The deflation of action’s hovering freedom, its return to a sense of connection and responsibility, is the result of her recognition of need: the need for her supremacy. The mistress of shades merely played the game of representation, but this Maggie *owns* the game, and the Prince will be hers as well:

It had operated within her now to the last intensity, her glimpse of the precious truth that by her helping him, helping him to help himself, as it were, she should help him to help *her* [Charlotte]. Hadn’t she fairly got into his labyrinth with him?—wasn’t she indeed in the very act of placing herself there for him at its center and core, whence, on that definite orientation and by an instinct all her own, she might securely guide him out of it? (454)

She will help, but he will be hers to guide: she occupies the center of the labyrinth, is at its core, and her possession of the maze is so complete that she needs nothing more than a kind of metaphysical “instinct” to shine the way out.

Ironically, the twist to the game is that despite Maggie’s *sense* of responsibility for the Prince (and even, as the above quotation suggests, for Charlotte)—a sense that is to reconnect action with conviction through the medium of need (and power)—she finds herself engaged more than ever “acting” under the burden of that responsibility but also against or in apparent contradiction to the conviction. Action guided by the truth becomes at the same time action which hides the truth:

Humbugging which she had so practised with her father, had been a comparatively simple matter on the basis of mere doubt; but the ground to be covered was now greatly larger, and she felt not unlike some young woman of the theatre who, engaged for a minor part in the play and having mastered her cues with anxious effort, should find herself suddenly promoted to leading lady and expected to appear in every act of the five. She had made much to her husband, that last night, of her ‘knowing’; but it

was exactly this quantity she now knew that, from the moment she could only dissimulate it, added to her responsibility and made of the latter *all* a mere question of having something precious and precarious in charge. (469-70)

The abyssal logic here is that Maggie knows the truth, but must hide it to protect her husband (as well as the others, especially her father), and this hiding also intensifies the sense of responsibility—which, in turn, necessitates even greater dissimulation, and so on. And Maggie knows this. So, she knows that the more she hides what she knows, the more she knows that she must hide what she knows. The effect of these vortexes of reason is that Maggie, owner of the game, holder of the key to formal knowledge, but also deceiver and pretender, vacillates, at the center, in the roles of the lead actress, the focus of attention (indeed the provider and source of meaningful performance) on the one hand, and sacrificial lamb or passive victim, though still of central significance, on the other. As logocentric defender of the truth, she will finally succeed, will arrest this spiral of knowledge, action, acting, and responsibility, by creating a perfect simulation—by acting a text that utterly blocks access to the truth, that denies it and herself, and that eliminates even the trace of truth. She must offer the perfect lie. The absolute truth and the center thus isolated and protected, the texts of action can operate on representational power alone. And the Ververs, as Charlotte's deconstruction has made evident, control mediation: the "economy" of representation is theirs in the literal sense that they have a "rare power of purchase."

This odd dynamic, and its development out of Maggie's sense of possessing total knowledge while at the same time being forced to feign ignorance, culminates after the night bridge party scene in Book Fifth, Chapter Two with Maggie's perfect lie and her apparent total abasement which, in fact, gives her final, absolute victory. The three others and Fanny play cards while Maggie wanders around them observing, tracing a circumference, but also feeling herself to be the true center: the players, she thinks, are really concentrating on her—"Erect above all for her was the sharp-edged fact of the

relation of the whole group, individually and collectively, to herself—herself so speciously eliminated for the hour, but presumably more present to the attention of each than the next card to be played” (486)—their eyes making appeals “deeper than any negation”(487). Maggie’s “objectivity,” her sense of power, is absolute; she is actress, perhaps, but also author holding in her pocket “the key to the mystery” (488) of their futures—indeed, “she might sound out their doom in a single sentence, a sentence easy to choose among several of the lurid” (487). Her sense of power is in direct conflict (but essential harmony) with her responsibility, the latter, in effect, defined solely as a restraint or check on the use of power; the battle between them is fierce and the outcome precarious, but it offers no challenge to her knowledge:

She found herself for five minutes thrilling with the idea of the prodigious effect that, just as she sat there near them, she had at her command; with the sense that if she were but different—oh ever so different!—all this high decorum would hang by a hair. There reigned for her absolutely during these vertiginous moments that fascination of the monstrous, that temptation of the horribly possible, which we so often trace by its breaking out suddenly, lest it should go further, in unexplained retreats and reactions. (486-7).

The vertiginous interplay that forces contemplation of “the monstrous”—yielding to the temptation of simple action, allowing action to have its high adventure (of destruction)—also triggers Maggie’s recognition that what the others want from her is that she assume the role of “the scapegoat of old” (487), a teiling realization which later guides her to her total victory.

Charlotte’s sudden appearance on the balcony and the strategy she employs allows Maggie to adopt the scapegoat role to powerful effect, winning by losing. Maggie’s power seemed beyond challenge when she stood at the window observing the card players by herself, but looking again through that window under Charlotte’s direction, she passes through—for the first and only time—a moment that questions the security of her certainty, or at least the value of that certainty: she confronts relativism:

Side by side for three minutes they fixed this picture of quiet harmonies, the positive charm of it and, as might have been said, the full significance—

which, as was now brought home to Maggie, could be no more after all than a matter of interpretation, differing always for a different interpreter. As she herself had hovered in sight of it a quarter of an hour before, it would have been a thing for her to show Charlotte—to show in righteous irony, in reproach too stern for anything but silence. But now it was she who was being shown it, and shown it by Charlotte, and she saw quickly enough that as Charlotte showed it so she must at present submissively seem to take it. (493-94)

The truth, here, seems to belong to the one who controls the showing, or there is no truth, but only perspective and interpretation: the frame is everything¹⁴. But the moment passes. Charlotte fails to make her vision substantial, or even to make its mere possibility—its difference, in other words—undermine Maggie’s superiority, because she (Charlotte) is reduced to direct and unequivocal (single voiced, not multivalent) inquiry: she asks Maggie, “Is there any wrong you consider I’ve done you?” (496). Charlotte, the sewer of dissonance, must ask this question because she needs to know how the system is, in fact, functioning. She requires direct knowledge—knowledge of the type that Maggie has herself been given. The “exploiter,” the destabilizer, must understand, or presume to understand, the system she would transform (or undermine from within)—this is a uniformly true law of the perspective (Derrida, as I have noted, *must* presume to catch the truth of Western Metaphysics under the rubrics of logocentrism and presence as a first step toward its deconstruction). Charlotte cannot continue to play her game without knowing what it is that Maggie knows, the premises upon which she acts. Her uncertainty partially mirrors Maggie’s before the bowl’s appearance, the distinction being, however, that while Maggie could enter the game of the medium without ascertaining its “true” operational principle, Charlotte is paralyzed unless she knows the terms she intends to subvert: the agent of uncertainty desperately needs certainty. Her direct question allows Maggie to reassert the superiority of “knowing” (as she thinks she does) precisely by *not* “*by a hair’s breadth deflecting into the truth*” (498, my italics). Victory is won because Charlotte admits, against her own power to assert the relativist perspective, the ultimate value of knowledge; if Maggie denies this possession, Charlotte’s “cage” will close upon her,

making her “hemmed in and secured” (490). Maggie’s denial is her sacrifice, her assumption of the role of powerlessness—only the powerful can be undermined—and of the scapegoat. She recalls the Prince’s example (adopting in her moment of triumph the strategy of repetition) and wins by apparent abject failure:¹⁵

He [the Prince] had given her something to conform to, and she hadn’t unintelligently turned on him, ‘gone back on’ him, as he would have said, by not conforming. They were together thus, he and she, close, close together—whereas Charlotte, though rising there radiantly before her, was really off in some darkness of space that would steep her in solitude and harass her with care. The heart of the Princess swelled accordingly even in her abasement. (498)

Later, reflecting on the embrace that concluded Charlotte’s and her confrontation and the effect created by the sudden interruption by the others, who observed the scene’s finale. Maggie, we are told, “*felt* in all her pulses Charlotte feel it [the significance of the encounter], and how publicity had been required, absolutely, to crown her [Maggie’s] own abasement” (517). The “abasement” repeated here (and recognized and deployed as a strategy in the mirror of a repetition) is Maggie’s sacrifice of acting according to her knowledge, but preserving from communication the secret she possesses; it’s lying, as only those who know the truth, or think they do, can lie. And the tactic finally turns the key on Charlotte’s cage. The last private encounter between the two—it takes place in the garden, where Charlotte thinks she can find refuge (but of course, the garden is Adam’s realm, after God himself)—concludes with Charlotte’s question, “You recognize then that you’ve failed?” and Maggie’s response, “I’ve failed,” when the latter well knows that her friend is lost:

Maggie had come out to her really because she knew her doomed, doomed to a separation that was like a knife in her heart; and in the very sight of her uncontrollable, her blinded physical quest of a peace not to be grasped, something of Mrs Assingham’s picture of her as thrown for a grim future beyond the great sea and the great continent had at first found fulfillment. (540)

The scene is again generated through doubling, Maggie’s pursuit of Charlotte into the garden “a repetition more than ever then of the evening on the terrace” (539) when

Charlotte was the pursuer; but now doomed Charlotte's grim future is assured by Maggie's "failure"—ostensibly her inability to preserve the old relation with her father, but in fact her success in excluding Charlotte from the bowl's narrative (exiling her from *The Golden Bowl* as well—the trip to America with her husband finally breaks the system and concludes the novel).

Charlotte's doom is to be denied "the last grace of any protecting truth" (535) and to be so afraid of knowledge that inquiry itself becomes an impossibility. Maggie imagines her father leading Charlotte about on a "long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck" (523) and telling his daughter:

Yes, you see—I lead her now by the neck, I lead her to her doom, and she doesn't so much as know what it is, though she has a fear in her heart which, if you had the chances to apply your ear there that I, as a husband, have, you would hear thump and thump and thump. She thinks it *may* be, her doom, the awful place over there—awful for *her*; but she's afraid to ask, don't you see? just as she's afraid of not asking; just as she's afraid of so many other things that she sees multiplied all about her now as perils and portents. She'll know, however—when she does know. (524)

If she ever does know. Charlotte's total destruction is achieved by reducing her consciousness to almost nothing but a state of fear, a fear that is devoid of even the comfort of definite reference. She *suspects* that where Adam will lead her on the leash will finally crush her, but she cannot be sure even of that, nor can she do anything whatever to focus the point. She is stretched, tormented, within a destabilized binary, and Maggie hears from her "the shriek of a soul in pain" (526); Charlotte's fear of both asking and not asking generates nothing but increasing terror and a kind of indecision or indeterminacy that Maggie identifies as "agitation" (519). Action is here not canceled so much as constantly self-canceling, spiraling without end between the poles of her fear toward her doom. Maggie had equated knowledge and fear, but her safety even then was the assumption that there may not have been a truth available—nothing really to be known except the necessity given her by her prime intention. Action became possible for her in the realm of the medium once she became aware of the nature of the game. Charlotte's torture—the images

of her suffering permit no other word for it—is the result of a deconstruction not simply at the level of the four-person system (the effect of which gave “birth” to Maggie’s consciousness), but at the level of the very terms of thought and the conditions of action. Maggie felt the break between conviction and action after the bowl’s truth arrived, as well as the tenuous reunion of those two principles once her power over the Prince became apparent; but her self-“abasement” and secrecy, her dissimulation and deferral, has produced a text for Charlotte that makes everything—both action and thought—contingent upon power.

When Adam and Charlotte pay a last visit to the other two before departing for America, we are told that:

Mrs Verver and the Prince fairly ‘placed’ themselves, however unwittingly, as high expressions of the kind of human furniture required aesthetically by such a scene. The fusion of their presence with the decorative elements, their contribution to the triumph of selection, was complete and admirable: though to a lingering view, a view more penetrating than the occasion really demanded, they also might have figured as concrete attestations of a rare power of purchase. (574)

The Prince and Charlotte may be reduced to mere “human furniture,” objects of aesthetic completion, but the sign of truth reigns in secret; indeed, Maggie has told her husband: “It isn’t a question of any beauty . . . it’s only a question of the quantity of truth” (566). And this truth is wedded to the “rare power of purchase,” here revealed not merely in its economic sense, but in its ability to convert the exterior into the interior, to appropriate the other and control the terms of thought and action: the lovers sit and abjectly play their part, puppets knowing nothing, doing what has been written for them, mere forms of the Ververs’ game. There is, for them, nothing outside the Verver text: indeed in the novel’s last paragraph, the Prince tells Maggie, “I see nothing but *you*,” the woman who, he thinks, is possessed of unknowable intentions, ultimately mysterious, and the very figure of his prison (and—the ambiguities and paradoxes for the Prince unstoppably proliferate—the prison is his “by his own act and his own choice” [559]).

Maggie's use of repetition (mirroring unconsciously the secret excursion of the lovers, doubling the Prince's lie to Charlotte, repeating—with a difference—Charlotte's balcony pursuit) marks her as the most astute player of the game, casting not merely appearances into the arena, but deploying images that speak *as* images; she manipulates the very form of form (which, according to deconstruction, is imperfect repetition) and directs dissonance at her one target. She, too, relies on the naiveté of those she subverts. Charlotte's "ignorance" (557) providing her with the leverage she needs (if the Prince had told his lover about Maggie's possession of the bowl and what it represents, Maggie's defeat would have been inevitable). And her success has meant that, for the Prince, who is closest to the source of power, meaning and responsibility have become, at least as those terms emanate from the Ververs, highly unstable concepts: Charlotte, he knows,

was in pain, Charlotte was in torment, but he himself had given her reason enough for that; and, in respect to the rest of the whole matter of her obligation to follow her husband, that personage and she, Maggie, had so shuffled away every link between consequence and cause that the intention remained, like some famous poetic line in a dead language subject to varieties of interpretation. (563)

The lines of reason have been utterly broken; with the relation of cause and effect destroyed, and the links between events made indeterminable, only intention remains, but intention on such a grand scale as to dwarf any that could be attributed to human agency. Intention here, as when the Prince can see nothing but the inscrutable text of Maggie, is so thoroughly dissociated from any possible connection to responsibility (are the Verver's responsible for Charlotte's departure? Does Maggie hold him prisoner?—the Prince cannot say) that it assumes the impersonality of a structural principle. But it is a poetic principle, or a poetic structure, subject only to interpretation, not final discernment. The question of interpretation that threatened Maggie when she looked through the window at the card players under Charlotte's authority here returns, not as the question of relativism, but as the question of the sacred, revived. The term that emerged from the inversion and re-writing of the Verver system (when they were innocent) descends again (by implication) to spell

the Prince's demise: the sacred's power to rewrite has become for him a transcendental term of universal application. The man who once said, "I can do pretty well anything I see. But I've got to see it first" (61)—his existence, acting and thinking, determined by his vision (not, obviously, restricted to the perceptual)—now sees nothing but Maggie, nothing but the "romance" of the famous poetic line.

And this new "sacred" has, indeed, a god, the one scoffed at before, now imposing, triumphant, and distant—indeed, shot from vision entirely; for if Maggie dominates the scene/seen, Adam, returning to the cradle of civilization (American City), will soon be beyond approach. As Maggie reflects on her own behalf as well as the Prince's (who can see only what she shows him—the supplement displacing the original, or the original as supplement becoming the original again via supplementarity),

[Adam] positively, under the impression, seemed to loom larger than life for her, so that she saw him during these moments in a light of recognition which had had its brightness for her at many an hour of the past, but which had never been so intense and so almost admonitory. (513)

Larger than life he may be, but that "larger" is, in fact, the step beyond life and into death. The famous poetic line is, James interposes to indicate, grand and impersonal, the emanation of forces unknowable since untraceable through the lines of simple human causation, written in a "dead language." The clash between the organizing system, founded upon a kind of divine security of possibility (the "infinite agent"), and the agents of dissonance, of inversion and exploitation, has finally resulted, not in liberation or productive instability, but in a tyranny more crushing than would have before seemed possible. Adam may have become aware of the subversive impulses at work in the system: but, as Fanny observes, any such speculation may also be a cover: "[H]e may be, for all I know, too inconceivably great. But that's not an idea. It represents only my weak necessity of feeling that he's beyond me—which isn't an idea either. You see he may be stupid too" (418). Either mysterious in his wisdom or utterly beneath respect (recall that Fanny has told her husband: "I'll call you stupid if you prefer. But stupidity pushed to a

certain point *is*, you know, immorality. Just so what is morality but high intelligence?" (101); Adam's possible stupidity is also his possible immorality, his sailing above or beneath questions of responsibility), Adam is now, by the effect Maggie has finally brought about, somehow transcendent, beyond the grasping of mind, the containing of ideas. Even those who dare, albeit only in private, to question his glory, must succumb to his power, or at least the power exercised in his name and through his representative.

Maggie emerges as the system's operative force only because of the challenge posed by the secret lovers who presumed to rely on the continued innocence—despite the power and influence at their command—of the system's designers. Her deconstructed consciousness—in both the sense that she has herself been made other than herself, and in the sense that her consciousness exists because of a deconstruction; its strategies are hers because that context is her mind's origin—represents the shedding of the naiveté upon which Charlotte and the Prince so desperately depended. Her triumph is more than the revenge of the logocentric upon its enemies; it marks the appropriation of deconstruction's strategies in the service of the absolute that those strategies hoped to dissonate. The lover's sacred union in the magic web—*their idealist weapon against an idealist opponent*—confirmed even as it challenged the system's authority—confirmed and strengthened it in a manner more direct and dangerous than mere complicity or opposition could have done. Maggie, her prime allegiance unshaken, mirrored the lovers' play, then was given a secret more powerful than their own. *Her* "sacred" rewrites the system: the new text is double, and truth has been finally reduced to a matter of power. Maggie has the Prince; Adam has Charlotte—two systems, two texts, different and the same. The narrative—the story that connects them, the story marked by the bowl and told by the *Bowl*—itself cracks and is over. The couples disperse, the cages, prisons, and ropes in place, the texts of the medium revealed as texts of domination, written in a dead language.

¹ See Book III and X of *The Republic* as well as Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion of these issues in his "Typography," especially at pages 74-83.

² Deconstruction's subversion of Western Metaphysics depends, as I have argued, on its essential naiveté.

³ Derrida "releases" dissonant forces from the texts he reads; he does not explicate and reject, and no external conceptual frame is opposed to those of his target texts—he enables those texts to write against their speech.

⁴ See Richard Harland's *Beyond Superstructuralism* in which he argues that poststructuralists are able to explode textual meaning because they inappropriately focus on single words—the paradigmatic axis of language—to the exclusion of the sentence—language's syntagmatic aspect (and this preference for the "atoms" of language is analogous to Derrida's understanding of time as a loose composition of points). Well before Harland, however, Ricoeur made this argument in the course of his analysis of metaphor. Also of significant interest in this regard are Yaov Rinon's two articles on Derrida's rhetoric, in which he demonstrates how Derrida's readings of Plato achieve their effects by a game of word isolation and condemnation; essentially, Derrida condemns Plato for choosing to use a limited set of meanings for words—"pharmakon," for example—rather than all meanings possible. "Deconstruction," Rinon observes, "is based upon the deferral of choosing; this is its great strength, but also its great weakness. One can always, like Bartleby, 'prefer not,' but one can not prefer not for text which is, by definition, preference and selection" (I: 382-83).

⁵ I'm again invoking Dews's comment: "Derrida's response to this collapse of Husserl's philosophical project is *not*, like that of Adorno or Merleau-Pony, to move 'downstream' towards an account of subjectivity as emerging from and entwined with the natural and social world, but rather to move 'upstream,' in a quest for the ground of transcendental consciousness" (*Logics of Disintegration* 19).

⁶ Nor, according to Derrida, can the metaphysics of presence be left behind.

⁷ Landau, for example, writes: "James's attempt to reconcile the semiotic and the moral reaches its climax in the character of Maggie who, despite her eventual realization of the absence of grounding essences, successfully asserts the possibility of effective action without jettisoning moral categories" (125). On the contrary, Maggie responds to the collision between the semiotic and the moral by elevating her morality into a transcendental principle (a grounding but detached essence) that she can serve by exploiting the forces of the semiotic field as she wishes.

⁸ Maggie's intensified devotion to Adam in the post-deconstructed world suggests that the subverted system has "released" an overpowering faith—that reason undermined leaves the field open to a kind of religious fanaticism. Yeazell characterizes Maggie's devotion in similar terms, emphasizing as well Maggie's suppression of reasoned analysis of her father: "Like some oriental deity in western dress, Adam Verver sits inscrutable. In his mysterious immobility he may, like the deity, know and understand all—or he may simply have fallen asleep. Maggie wonders, and then return to her rooms in silence; she makes no attempt to determine the real state of her father's consciousness. She prefers to leave the enigma of Adam Verver undisturbed, to worship, but not to question him too closely. . . ."

Maggie's response [to him] is not a question, but a declaration of faith: "I believe in you more than any one" (119-121).

⁹ Sharon Cameron, like G. L. Hagberg and other James scholars who use relational or "non-identity" models of the self, maintains that James's texts are fundamentally anti-psychologistic. Cameron, following Bersani, argues that the problematic of Jamesian consciousness must be located "outside character and outside the psychological" (173) if we are to account for the way James uses realistic techniques to generate issues of consciousness that cannot be explained with reference to those techniques (the plot, for example--9), or for the way consciousness is treated as a kind of resource—*having* consciousness means another character will *lose* it, and having it is inseparable from having power. The focus on *this* relationship—consciousness and power—pushes the question, according to Cameron, away from character and toward the more essential issues of thinking and speaking. Cameron admits that the issues she targets simply cannot be discussed in isolation from the realistic elements of the text (12), but she insists that her move is legitimate because it is *impossible* to make sense, in terms of those elements, of Maggie's decision "not to speak" about the adultery. She thus resolves the difficulty by moving to a higher level of abstraction: we cannot understand why this character should think and act in this way (not speaking), so what must be important is "thinking" and "not speaking" *themselves*, as philosophical problems that burst the boundaries of the vessels which gave rise to them. Cameron also takes care to distinguish her position from that of the poststructuralists:

An account of consciousness as psychologized understands consciousness as a phenomenon associated with subjectivity: as internal, centered, circumscribed, fixed. Conversely, a poststructuralist account (the dominant critical alternative) critiques and dismisses the idea of such a center, conceptually replacing the structure of consciousness with the structure of the sign and then proceeding to deconstruct that. In the chapters above, I read James against the traditional account of consciousness as psychologized, arguing that consciousness in James's novels is not internal, not centered, not associated with subjectivity. But consciousness is not as a consequence dismissed or subverted. Thus I suggest that in James's representations of consciousness, psychology is subverted. But the consequence of that subversion is not the deconstructive replacement of consciousness by signification, or by language more generally. It is rather revised or reconceived so as to be shown in excess of the circumstances, mental or material, that produce it. (171)

My own view is that it is far from certain that it is impossible within the "confines" of character to understand Maggie's refusal to speak. The ascendancy of her consciousness must be understood as a *critique* that stresses the disastrous consequences of strategies (plot lines) that, in effect, deconstruct the oppositions knowledge and desire, structural confinement and structural subversion, to release new forms of domination. Maggie's power increases as she moves from being a passive participant of the closed world of certainty to assuming the role of "mistress of shades" in the desire-charged world of suspicion; she eventually becomes master of that world when knowledge (the suppressed, the erased possibility) descends on her and on no one else. The extremely subtle manipulations of the various terms of James's critique can only be understood through close attention to the shifting movements of the plot. The hypertrophy of Maggie's "consciousness," which permits Cameron to assert that consciousness leaves Maggie behind, as it were, is not the conceptual *result* of James's analysis, but an important step in the process of his critique: Maggie, or Maggie's consciousness, begins here (416) to

escape the boundaries of reasoned justification and to assume an almost pathetic “omnipotence.” This transformation will be complete when Charlotte and the Prince, who helped create the context that made the transformation possible, are destroyed. Moreover, if “psychology” and subjectivity are made, as they are by Cameron, to mean “internal, centered, circumscribed, fixed” *and* those terms are made identical to literary “character,” it is really not too surprising that the novel’s problematics exceed these bounds. In fact, Cameron’s definition of “character” more accurately describes “caricatures,” one-dimensional parodies or comic devices. Cameron may want to distance herself from the poststructuralists, but she insists, with them, that the definite, the specific, is inadequate. Call it “the structure of the sign” or dislocated consciousness, in either case, the “enemy”—centered subjectivity—is subverted by going upstream, as Dews calls it, into a kind of transcendence.

¹⁰ Expanding on Matthiessen’s analysis of the symbolism of the golden bowl (the thread of images of containers), Landau links the bowl with “the poison in the cup of Borgias” and then to the novel’s many images of violence; from here, he can then add to the chain Charlotte’s wail of agony, which he characterizes (it is the last line of his reading of the novel) as a cry “of mourning for lost unity, the price to be paid for the ‘knowledge’ of self and otherness” (135). In other words, the bowl is a member in a long chain of metaphors that confirm the novel’s deconstructive epistemology. Interestingly, this necessity also entails the necessity of Charlotte’s destruction—and she cries not just for “lost unity” but also for a new oppressive unity with Adam, the money man.

¹¹ As noted before, in James’s texts extreme moments are signals of caution for the reader, signals of blindness. Strether’s extreme reaction to Chad’s sudden, dramatic appearance in the theatre is first of these that I’ve discussed.

¹² The argument, discussed in Chapter 2, that correspondence theories of truth are incoherent because they expect one to step outside either language or the world to conduct a comparison between statements and their referents, implies, of course, that certainty would entail an incomprehensible stepping away or the miraculous decent of a divine presence. If mediation generates doubt, and if truth can only mean the absence of all mediation (the premises of the Rortian, Derridean position), then the possessor of a truth is either naive, or is god. Maggie leans toward the latter. Yeazell registers the discomfort readers feel about Maggie’s presumption by noting that “if the Princess is a heroine who disturbs us by knowing too much, there is another sense, paradoxically, in which her consciousness proves inadequate to the world in which she rules—a sense in which we feel ourselves wanting to know more than she does, and are made uneasy by our desire” (117). My argument is that her inadequacy springs from her assumption that she knows “too much.”

¹³ See *Time and Narrative*, especially volume one.

¹⁴ See Paul Beidler’s *Frames in James*. He takes moments like these to be definitive.

¹⁵ I discuss in Chapter 2 Tobin Sieber’s remark that De Mann and Derrida attempt to “underbid” each other, to win by losing. By stressing the fact that Maggie achieves victory by assuming the role of the scapegoat, I am also, of course, once again recalling Girard. The scapegoat does not himself “win” by losing, since he dies to release the violence on the periphery; but Girard himself “wins” through the scapegoat theory. James brings out the ethical implications of this winning-by-losing strategy, suggesting that it depends on an absolute certainty that is both claimed and utterly denied, and that the tactic convicts all others of corrupt action or “mere” naiveté.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

I first came to this study wanting to account for the delicate balance I see in James's last three novels between, to put it simply, interpretative freedom and constraint, and for his examination, in particular, of how the apparently liberating power of representational variation must eventually confront the resistance of the facts to be interpreted. This balance, along with his critique of the seductions of perpetual doubt, has been far too often, it seems to me, obscured by critics eager to wave the banners of representation and obscurity, and thus unwilling to deal with the James of clarity and of restraint. They fail to account adequately for what in these texts are, despite the tangled labyrinths of motive, analyses, and language, the singular facts that generate the complexity: Strether must come to know that Chad and de Vionnet are lovers, Kate and Merton are plotting to win the dying Milly's money, and Maggie's suspicions about Charlotte and the Prince are irrefutably confirmed for her with the discovery of the golden bowl and upon hearing the shop owner's story. James stresses the importance of these facts in a variety of ways, but none is more telling than his subtle exploration of the methods his characters concoct to make these facts seem insignificant by hiding them beneath plausible fictions, to eliminate them altogether—or, in Maggie's case, to misread them as final, absolute, all-empowering truth.

James's late-phase novels are indeed subtle, complex, evasive, and ambiguous, but they are also examinations of these things in the light of ineluctable facts, facts the narratives partially obscure and which are certainly open to varieties of interpretations (even opposing ones), but facts which must, nevertheless, in some way be reckoned with. Indeed, the novels are self-reflexive in the sense that they do not simply create these "effects" of what can be called evasion, but are about them, and their creation, as well. They are about doubt and its ways, its power, its benefits, its harms. The self-reflexivity is achieved by making plots and characters tools of analysis so that what may be said to be

James's manner is also a deliberate expression of the cognitive condition of the characters, immersed as they are in the intricacies of circumstance and design. More than simply telling us about his character's confusion, James's late style submits itself (up to a point) to its characters in a way unique to the novel prior to the modernist attempt to abandon completely the "external" view.

What distinguishes James from both the modernists to come and the Victorians before him, however, is the balance he finds between the two views—external and internal—which allows him a critical distance from the extremes of both narrative certainty and anti-narrative doubt, and yet also permits him to draw on the legitimate strengths of each. James's last three novels implicitly argue that, while supreme narrative confidence must submit to the challenges offered by the complexities of consciousness and its conflicting interpretations, as well as by the dark motives of the unconscious, entirely to abandon narrative is to assume conclusively, without warrant, that what narrative represents—the force for which its structures are a surrogate—is illegitimate. And that force can be characterized in Ricoeurian terms as the force of cosmological time as distinct from phenomenological time, the former embodied in fiction, not as God's eye view, but as the tenuous recognition of a sequencing that we individually do not make—it persists as a constraint and as a question. Narrative, qualified in this manner, does not rule the text as the author's divine plan for his or her characters, and it does not avoid this "tyranny" by simply foregrounding the contingency of any design that emerges or is merely "played"—by, for example, making the "characters" aware of their fictional status (which, it seems to me, so easily converts into a metaphor of control by a providence now not divine, perhaps, but master nevertheless) or by underlining the arbitrariness of all meaning by yielding the text to the force of textuality, of writing itself. Such tactics are, from the Jamesian perspective, not questioning at all; they betray a certainty of the most rigid type. They assume that the "world" has no rules of its own to which we must pay heed, even if we refuse to obey them or decide to try to change them. They assume, in effect, that all

contexts are ours, or language's, whose possession of both us and the world still delivers the world over to us under language's authority alone.

The premise James works with is that if we grant that people exist (possessing a coherent, centered self or not) in complex inter-connections with others, in a setting mixed with both liberties and constraints (the latter of which is, at minimum, the result of the multiple inter-connections among people), then to account for these relations and these aspects of experience narrative must survive as the tentative voice of the not-self from without, as much as it must surrender its authority to the not-self from within. Poststructuralist theory, and Derrida's work in particular and most forcefully, offers a compelling and enlightening critical perspective with which to address James's novels because the theory articulates what I consider to be the central thread of James's late work, and does so in language, terminology, and imagery commensurate with that work. This thread does not represent, however, as many of James's critics maintain, either the premise or the conclusion of James's literary analyses, nor the condition to which his text must ultimately submit. Instead, James's texts examine poststructuralist-like strategies and assumptions as maneuvers of action and perspectives of interpretation within the narrative field, itself transformed by those operations. That is, the language-derived scepticism anticipated in James's work is deployed within a critical (and self-critical) narrative frame that forces it to operate from a localized position and in conflict with others. Abstracted theory becomes a style and practice as well by being attributed to specific characters—characters who act and think according to analogues of its procedures. The effect is to deny those theories the ability to remain entirely in the realm of the general, the abstract, or the absolute, and instead to force them to take up the challenge of action and responsibility where generality and interpretation must contend with the pressures exerted by the specific and the interpreted. The survival of the narrative frame gives James this leverage against the theory, or to put it another way, permits a distance from it so that its explanatory power can be tested. This "reduction" of theory to a set of character motives, strategies,

presumptions, and desires opens it out into realms that may not be its own but which it, as a kind of a priori, claims to underwrite (or to “know”). The resulting fiction animates a struggle of interpretation that makes pertinent too the interpreters themselves, and thus the contexts in which they operate. The question James asks, though, is not whether such contexts relativize the interpretation, but whether they limit its relativity, its undecideability.

James’s strategy is of course a legitimate literary tactic, but it is also well supported. I have tried to show, on theoretical grounds. Derrida’s opening deconstructive volley, against Husserl, attempts to undermine the distinction between representation and retention in order to subvert the authority of presence and re-write its possibility as an effect of representation. He can do this, however, only by relying on an absolute point of reference, and by assuming that temporality must be conceived on a model that posits atomistic “points” of time that are precariously linked together to form constructed unities that are always susceptible to reconfiguration since these “atoms” have no necessary connective tissue. If we acknowledge, however, that Derrida’s reading depends on this absolutist stance, illegitimately introduced into Husserl’s thought (at this stage of his writing), then the distinction between retention and representation—and thus the character of the present (not abstracted as “presence”)—becomes again a viable differentiation of the elements of experience; the questions of representation and the present are re-opened, and we are granted a new perspective on the seductions of omni-representationalism. My own turn to materiality and factuality, through contemporary evolutionary theory and chaos theory, as well as the philosophy of science in general (and in brief), is a response to this difficulty with Derrida’s strategies, and is primarily used to argue that certain other distinctions, similar to that between retention and representation, cannot be dismissed. Even if representation is understood as always already “present,” so that there is no immediate access to the immediate, which is itself a mediation, we must still draw a distinction between the kinds of representation that inform our experience—experience understood as encompassing both our bodily and our mental selves (a distinction itself used only

provisionally). If this distinction is not made, we have no way of accounting for the apparent difference between our experience of pain, for example, and our telling of it to someone else, or, indeed, our mere reading of someone else's pain; representation itself would become so abstract and universal a concept that it would carry very little conceptual significance: *différance*, which would "name" its mode of operation, becomes a platitude about impermanence and the impossibility of transcendence, with no real interventionist power at all. And of course if the distinction *is* made—between, say, linguistic and non-linguistic representations—one immediately begins to wonder what conceptual progress has been made by subsuming the two categories under the umbrella term: why not remain with the distinction between representation and represented?

In either case, as I have argued, the various orders of our experience are indeed inter-connected, but the implication to be drawn from this is that interpretation must account for its crossings and re-crossings of these various levels. The almost exclusive focus on self-relation, which deconstruction insists will reveal the undoing of any theoretic endeavor, is unnecessarily, indeed distortingly, narrow, since it converts the representation-thesis into a more specifically linguistic-representational one, and eliminates the role of evidence external to the text, which may itself undermine the theory, throw it into doubt, or even confirm its plausibility and its value.

The struggle of interpretation, and of interpretation to acknowledge its own constraints, is of course at the heart of all three James works I here deal with. Strether must determine how best to read the new Chad, and decide how he, as reader, should respond to what appears to be a radically new text; the drama consists also, however, in his dawning recognition that his interpretations must account for the "what" behind the Chad-text, must consider the causal link—the tether to the physical—that grounds the apparently free-floating openness of Chad's meaning.¹ When that meaning threatens to annul itself by refusing any ties at all (its drift refusing loyalty to anything of even passing permanence, signaled in the text by Chad's late turn to advertising), Strether, through a chance encounter

that makes chance a kind of necessity, discovers that no text can operate without the primal connections obtaining. The “virtuous attachment” is a sexual one, of course, and it is also a kind of mothering—Chad is born into his Parisian self through de Vionnet’s ministrations—and the doubling back toward generation re-establishes the pertinence of Mrs. Newsome’s suspicions; the one mother recalls the other, the differences between the two suddenly yoked together under the sign of the similar. Of course, it need hardly be added that Newsome and her more literal-minded ambassadors interpret the value of Chad’s transformation incorrectly, but their view that such a metamorphoses necessarily involves some kind of direct working-over is proven valid, despite the insistence of the Parisian interpreters, who are indeed more sensitive to Chad’s value, that there is no fact beneath the transformation that could possibly shed light on it. The fact revealed, however, does not determine the value—it is far from a forgone conclusion that Strether must act in the way he does after the chance discovery; but to ignore it, to pretend even that no such fact could possibly inform the shape of interpretation, is also to ensure a kind of blindness that mirrors that of the Newsome camp (and neither blindness is an a priori necessity).

The re-emergence of a heavily qualified but still crucially necessary Woollettian perspective also resurrects, in a similar fashion (that is, recognizing both necessity and qualification), the companion conceptions of linear time and definite action. The Chad explosion in Book Third seems to demolish Strether’s age—his place in time—as well as his (lightly held) expectations of what Chad will be, and in his temporally disrupted state, Strether’s sense of self and of his capacity for action are greatly undermined. Strether must re-assume the mantle of his age and experience, and what they can mean, although, again, they need not mean what they did before. Strether is called an ambassador, and eventually loses his position, but what he turns into—or recognizes that he should also have been—is an investigator: even in the dense subtleties of motive and desire, questions can be answered more or less accurately.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, James turns his attention from the pursuit of truth (or more accurately, from an examination of one who is positioned to pursue truth but chooses for a time to believe that there is no truth to pursue), to those who, both deliberately and not, obscure the truth as it resides, humbly, without fanfare, as a fact or a “specific” in a wider context of value that could not be more a-glow with beguiling attractions. Milly’s terminal condition, as vaguely presented to and by the characters as it is—in fact, almost obliterated from the first two-thirds of the text—is unquestionably the occasion for the plots that swirl around her. Instead of needing to know this key fact, the characters need *not* to know it in any sense other than one that will facilitate their schemes. Milly is thus transformed into an ungrounded, insubstantial metaphor, made a mere site of value; she is made to be the temporary signifier of her wealth, itself a signifier susceptible to the flow of fiction: if she has been loved by her false prince, Milly’s money may properly reward him, her meaning no more properly with her than with others in the fiction that would write her differently. With this text, James considers the power of language to transgress and obscure, while at the same time, at the level of narration, insisting on the other power of language, so often denigrated by poststructuralists as a kind of slavery, to elucidate the complexities of what can be known, even the self-serving duplicities of absolutist doubt.

The Golden Bowl takes this kind of analysis to the next level of complexity by exploring the key questions of the other two novels in the context of a system. The “system” metaphor is particularly apt for describing the four-person relationship that is at the core of the novel, since, as the four characters themselves attest, the form they constitute is virtually self-contained and self-sustaining. And this form, according to its original designers, will be ruled by reason, although, as in Plato’s *Republic* and Adam’s *American City*, art, so long as it is non-threatening, will be allowed to play a subordinate, and subservient, role. This system’s configuration of its elements, and its reliance on a central divine-like figure, recalls or prefigures, I have argued, the structures and assumptions of the texts of logocentrism, as deconstruction would characterize them. And

indeed, as the deconstructive critic subverts those texts, which are thought to be fundamentally naive, by a subtle non-interventionist strategy—"obeying," in a sense. the text's terms, but inverting its domination structure and rewriting it according to the previously subordinate term—so the Verver system is also rewritten by the subtle manipulations of Charlotte and the Prince, who see themselves as merely teasing out—acting in strict accordance with—the deep structural necessities of the system they inhabit. only to release its hidden, dissonating forces at the expense of the essentially childish naiveté of its originators.

Maggie's voice and consciousness then step forward to assume the "center" of a deconstructed stage, the system still operating (the metaphysics of presence can never be eliminated) but according to the new "condition of possibility": desire, having usurped the dominant role, maintains the system's operation *otherwise* (representation, the play of the form, permits the appearance of the possibility of presence, the book of the form). Maggie's own manipulations, under the "authority" of her suspicion and under the authority of her "knowledge," mimic those of her deconstructionist predecessors, who are ultimately destroyed by the new lord of the system's media. Maggie accepts the formal proposition that representation—or *value*—is the only foundation for action, but is unshaken from her primary motivation, which emerges clearly and powerfully as a matter of faith—her loyalty to her father-god. In Maggie's hands, this combination is potent. If value is all, she and her father hold all the cards (whoever sits at the bridge table), and so Charlotte and the Prince are more completely bought—caged, noosed, transported—than ever before. The initial deconstruction has unleashed forces that will obey only the law of the marker, the rule of the most powerful player. However oppressive the original system, force without any direction or guidance other than that provided by desire and a kind of faith produces oppression in its purist form. And let me be clear: James's sympathies are *not*, I think, with Adam and Maggie in the first volume, and they certainly are not with them in the second. Charlotte and the Prince are also, it seems to me, portrayed as

betrayers, if they are also liberators; but their reluctance to challenge the Ververs' idealism on more materialist grounds is also a cause of their final doom. They wanted it all—passion *and* security—and tried to get it without making their own assertion: they would only live on *within* the system, perpetually “questioning” it. James's last novel evokes, out of its apparently narrow concern with the romantic entanglements of the wealthy, the aristocratic, and the charming, a startlingly pessimistic image of power undermined and by that very action made all the more cruelly powerful.

¹ Recalling James's famous observation: “The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe—though remaining exhilarated, naturally, as we like, when all goes well” (Preface to *The American* in *The Art of the Novel*, 34). When all goes well, there may be exhilaration, but there is also, essentially, isolation—one steps out of relation, out of the true web of interconnection.

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