The Philosophical Importance of James's Late Style

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When speaking of the philosophical importance of James's late style, critics and philosophers have taken two broad approaches. One route, exemplified by Martha Nussbaum, attributes this style to the sensitivity of the characters. The other, exemplified by Robert Pippin, attributes the writing's complexity to the ambiguities of the moral codes during this period of history.[1] As Pippin says,

> James presents his characters as having a difficult time trying to understand . . . the meaning of their own and others' acts and interactions. It is extraordinarily difficult for them to do this precisely because so much of what had made possible such interpretation—the conventions and background assumptions, forms of life in general—has lost a great deal of its cultural authority. (5)

In my reading, James's texts address a more general problem of modernity, which is the flattening of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) by disengaged approaches to both epistemology and morality, the reduction of the lifeworld to the environment (*Umwelt*).[2] James's works open an ontological dimension to the question of language and normativity, a question that modernity's moral languages—whether based on deontology, utility, or virtue—fail to articulate. His texts interrogate what normativity is rather than just portraying the sensitivity of the characters or uncertainty of the historical moment, although both of those readings are certainly justified. Rather than reading through a Hegelian lens to account for James's way of addressing the historicality and sociality of normativity, as Pippin does, I see James as giving his own implicit version of a Heideggerian transcendental argument, in which our "thrownness" is logically prior to our moral or epistemological reasoning. Heidegger uses the metaphor of the subject's "thrownness" to capture the logical priority of the languages and practices

of the world to any subject's thoughts or actions. The subject is not standing against other objects; rather, "Self and world belong together in the single entity of Dasein" (Heidegger, *Being* 297). The world for James, as for Heidegger, is not a collection of objects that stand over against a subject—the theoretical view instantiated by the realist novel, a view that James explicitly criticized in Flaubert.[3] Rather, the world is a structured totality of meanings and practices in which we find ourselves.[4] James's plots are organized around moments when the stability of these holistic structures is challenged by a dissonant impression or a break in a shared linguistic practice. The characters then find themselves at sea in the push and pull of normativity and they must re-establish an equilibrium through a new way of talking and being in the world.[5] James's characters are forever asking themselves and each other "where they are," and their question pertains to moral space, a space of normativity.[6]

Obviously, James is not trying to refute explicitly the "disengaged" moral and scientific paradigms of modernity, as Heidegger and Charles Taylor do. Instead, James takes the dominant discourses, many of which appear in the realistic novels of his contemporaries, and sets aside their concerns so that a richer moral phenomenology can appear. In the late novels we do not get the sociological or physical descriptions as we find in Balzac or Flaubert, though we are not in any doubt about the class or society in which the texts are set. One of the ways James sets aside the material of the realist novel is by choosing, as centers of focalization, minds that are intelligent and sensitive but ignorant of the commonsense—e.g., Strether, Maggie, Maisie, and Marcher—wisdom that other, often less imaginative characters have. When morally repugnant characters appear, as in *What Maisie Knew*, the kind of language that we would find in a historical portrayal or in a novel by Dickens does not control the moral phenomenology. Rather, the Jamesian novel insists on the worldhood of the world, on the priority of the world to the determination of local meanings, a priority that enables James to develop an alternative language for evoking the world.[7] I think this is the key to understanding a fact often noted by critics: James's narrator and characters don't talk about politics, ideas, or even art but only about each other and only in a vocabulary that resists conceptual definition.[8] James was trying to open a new way of thinking about our being in language and normativity, in which style, in a broad sense, is not in the service of representing objects, whether those objects are characters or historical situations. Rather, James's late style opens a distinctive understanding of our being in the world.

Thrown Subjects in the Jamesian Sentence

The grammar and style of the late novels foreground a shift in the presenta-tion of subjectivity, in which characters find themselves in the grip of larger forces, a shift that parallels what Heidegger calls "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*). The most obvious examples occur when characters are the objects rather than subjects of sentences: "What carried him [Strether] thither and yon was an admirable theory" (*AB* 57). "Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then" (20). There is also James's use of "nominalization," in which an abstract entity is put on stage instead of a human actor: "[T]hat consciousness, lately born in [Maggie] had

been taught the evening before to accept a temporary lapse, but had quickly enough again, with her getting out of her own house and her walking across half the town . . . found breath still in its lungs. It exhaled this breath in a sigh faint, ad unheard" (*GB* 2: 31). A few lines later, an "impression" becomes a "witness": "Meanwhile . . . the prior, the prime impression had remained, in the manner of a spying servant, on the other side of the barred threshold, a witness availing himself, in time of the slightest pretext to re-enter" (43).

Instead of psychological verbs portraying acts of consciousness, James turns thoughts and perceptions into entities in propositions and arguments. Thus, we find cleft sentences, which increase the number of nontransitive verbs—for example, "What befell however was that even while she thus waited she felt herself present at a process taking place rather deeper within him" (28). (Without the cleft construction the sentence would read: "However, even while she thus waited. . . .") As with nominalizations, these constructions foreground propositions about abstract entities rather than acts. "But perhaps what most came out in light of these concatenations was that it had been for all the world as if Charlotte had been "had in . . ." (23).[9]

These grammatical constructions are not a tracking of the passivity of characters, as critics often maintain, but a foregrounding of the structures of meaning as the guiding force pushing the plot.[10] Characters' actions are secondary to the structures of meaning into which these actions are placed. We can also see the attention to these structures in the Jamesian technique of leaping over an event and then having it appear in a character's mind through past perfect retrospection. This kind of presentation puts the emphasis on what is happening in the character's mind, which is a much broader philosophical terrain than the character's intentional acts.

We find a funny and obvious example of the dynamics of the Jamesian mind in *The Ambassadors* after Strether and Maria go to the theater and we watch Strether trying to come to terms with the meaning of the velvet band around Maria's neck. The band is part of an entire holistic belief understanding, a competing moral tradition that surrounds Maria and that challenges the vocabulary of Woollett:

> What was it but an uncontrolled perception that his friend's velvet band somehow added, in her appearance, to the value of every other item—to that of her smile and of the way she carried her head. . . . What, certainly, had a man conscious of a man's work in the world to do with red velvet bands? He wouldn't for anything have so exposed himself as to tell Miss Gostrey how much he liked hers, yet he had none the less not only caught himself in the act—frivolous, no doubt, idiotic, and above all unexpected of liking it; he had in addition taken it as a starting point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights. (42)

The passage illustrates the way particular words and objects make sense of part of larger understandings of how things are and ought to be. Moreover, the passage shows how James portrays interpretation as an event rather than act executed by the subject.[11] The "flights" are, of course, imaginative flights, in which Strether looks for parallels or analogies to help him come to grips with the band while buffeted in flight by the normative conflicts and confusions that emerge from the exploration of meanings; however, when he "lands" on "the manner in which Mrs. Newsome's throat was en-

circled," he no longer finds the familiar sense that he was expecting: "Suddenly [the manner in which Mrs. Newsome's throat was encircled] represented for him, in an alien order, almost as many things as the manner in which Miss Gostrey's was" (42). The narrator does not depict only Strether's acts of consciousness and interpretation. Rather, he portrays an event of understanding that is only partially available to the character. The Jamesian mind is a mysterious space in which the character floats.[12] The narrator talks about mental events that exceed the character's consciousness, and the language of the text oscillates between the intimacy of free indirect discourse and the distance of the narrator's alternative language. The result of these events is that the characters undergo changes that estrange them from their past ways of talking. Strether becomes increasingly alienated from the language that binds him to Mrs. Newsome: "A personal relation was a relation so long as people perfectly understood or better still didn't care if they didn't. From the moment they cared if they didn't it was living by the sweat of one's brow" (92).

Another way James brings out this ontological concern is through the use of abstract nouns such as "something" or "the thing," or demonstrative pronouns—"this"—without an antecedent. These word choices are ways of marking a glitch or uncertainty that cannot yet be named in the language of the character's current mode of understanding. Characters then circle around these markers, just as they do around proper names—in *The Ambassadors*, "Paris" (64–65), "Chad" (89–94).[13] Strether explicitly uses "thing" as this kind of placeholder: "What I want is a thing that I've ceased to measure or even to understand" (294).

Achievements and Dangers of the Jamesian Imagination

James portrays the imaginative journeys of the characters, such as we saw in the above passage concerning Strether, not as simply subjective voyages but ontological voyages. The characters develop new ways of being that can be both admirable and morally deficient. Strether's "aesthetic" voyage is a good example of the moral ambiguity of these changes. Soon after his arrival in Paris, Strether recognizes that he must abandon "his odious suspicion of any form of beauty. . . . He periodically assured himself—for his reactions were sharp—that he shouldn't reach the truth of anything till he had at least got rid of that" (118). During the course of the novel, we follow Strether as he not only gets his footing in the new linguistic practices of Paris but becomes such an aesthetic idealist that he loses his connection to others. Strether's self-deception is dramatically revealed when he goes to the country to escape from the pressures of Paris. Once there he begins to indulge in his newly acquired aesthetic practices, drawing analogies between art and the landscape: "It [this area] had been as yet . . . but a land of fancy for him—the background of action, the medium of art, the nursery of letters" (301). His reverie culminates in what can only be called "the thing," which is "the thing, as he would have called it . . . that implied the greatest number of the things of the sort that he had to tackle" (306). When Strether recognizes that the couple in the picture he has been elaborating is actually Chad and Mme de Vionnet, he is forced to come to grips not just with their relationship but with his own self-understanding and his way of being in the world. This misunderstanding does not do away with Strether's achievement, but it does show the moral hazards of the imagination when it becomes a mode of being in which characters hide from

the intersubjective moral demands of others. James offers critique of a linguistic and aesthetic idealism that purchases a shallow liberty at the expense of the moral reality of others.

James lays out this kind of hiding through his treatment of the language games that the characters establish with each other. Perhaps the most dramatic example can be found in "The Beast in Jungle," where the protagonist, John Marcher, asks his companion, May Bartram, to join him in a life of waiting, a life of superficial living out of social form. Such a life is "justified" by Marcher because the real truth of his life is something grand but unfathomable, a "beast in the jungle," that will leap at some point in his life and give it significance. Bartram agrees to share his secret and watch with him—that is, share his whole way of talking and being. As the couple ages, she begins to change the language game of speaking about "the beast." She shifts out of the future tense and speaks of the project in terms that unsettle Marcher. I cannot go into the details of their exchanges here—I have analyzed them elsewhere (Steele, "Anxiety")—but I will look at how the characters discuss the "places" from which they talk about the beast. "'Well'—she did her best for him—'not from this side. This, you see,' she said, 'is the *other* side'" (*BJ* 440). "This" points insistently to their present situation, which is a decided but unspecified break with their past way of talking. Marcher is baffled: "'I think,' poor Marcher returned, 'that all sides are the same to me.'" Bartram then brings out one of the assumptions of their past practice of life and lays it before him: "Before, you see, it was always to come. That kept it present." She changes their language games, yet Marcher finds only anxiety and no insight. After Bartram dies, Marcher can no longer live inside the story of waiting for the "beast." He knows this "something" has come but has no idea what it is until he sees the face of grief on a stranger in the cemetery. This face crashes through his habits of being with "the insolence of accident" (449). This moment of moral disclosure, in which a character's entire normative scheme and way of living are called into question, is a typical moment in the Jamesian text.[14]

There are many examples of such disclosive moments, but perhaps the most powerful is the ending of *The Golden Bowl*, where both Maggie and the Prince are brought face to face with each other after cutting loose all the moorings that have guided their marriage thus far. Maggie's task in the second half of the novel is not just to ship her father and Charlotte off to America so as to get her husband back. Instead, she must change her relationship to her husband in such a way that she becomes interestingly unreadable to him, evaporating the image of simplistic American innocence and naïveté and with it the very language in which they had lived their relationship. When they are alone in their new state, the Prince grants Maggie the attention and admiration for which she has worked: "I see nothing but you" (2: 369). But Maggie cannot look back into his eyes for more than an instant, much less speak, for the force of the statement had "so strangely lighted his eyes that as for pity and dread of them she buried her own in his breast."

Developing and Losing a Language: James on Intersubjectivity

In the dialogues, we find the speakers negotiating the language of normativity that will shape their relationships. James's characters have a preternatural ability to move from understanding to misunderstanding—or the reverse—or to skate along-

side each other at different moments of the novel. I want to highlight some of the moments when the characters come to a new agreement about how to understand their relationships.

The dialogues between Fanny and the Colonel in Volume 1 of *The Golden Bowl* are comic examples of such linguistic negotiation. At the beginning of their conversations, the Colonel is confident in his ability to translate her way of talking into his hard-nosed, commonsensical language:

> He could deal with things perfectly, for all his needs, without getting near them.
>
> This was the way he dealt with his wife, a large proportion of whose meanings he could neglect. He edited for their general economy the play of her mind, just as he edited, savingly, with the stump of a pencil, her redundant telegrams. (67)

Fanny, by contrast, treats her husband as if the language he uses doesn't even count as speech: "Mrs Assingham denied, as we know that her husband had a play of mind, so that she could on her side, treat these remarks only as if they had been senseless physical gestures or nervous facile movements" (68). At the end of Volume 1, this functional level of intersubjectivity breaks down when the Colonel asks her the devastating question of what she sees in the relationships of the protagonists. She starts throwing out evasive abstractions until she finally collapses in tears. He tries to comfort her, but he can't figure out what she is talking about: "He would adopt it and conform to it as soon as he should be able to make it out. The only thing was that it took such incalculable twists and turns" (371). All the Colonel can do is repeat three times, "They'll manage in their own way." He can no longer translate her language, only repeat it. But Fanny will not be satisfied with mere echoing. He must stand behind these words and give them an intersubjective weight. After reciting Fanny's claim, "We know nothing on earth," the narrator lets us know that this language has now become the language of his identity as well, by calling it a signature: "So he wrote, as it were, his name" (400).

Agreeing to a way of talking always has entailments and consequences for how to understand moral things and moral action. We see this most dramatically when characters come to say the same thing, when they agree to bring into existence a new mini-institution that will change them just by the power of declaration, as we see in the dialogue between Charlotte and the Prince at the end of Volume 1 of *The Golden Bowl*.[15] The sequence begins when they go to look for a wedding present for the Prince, and Charlotte makes her stunning declaration that the narrator calls "a demonstration" (98): "This is different. This is what I wanted. This is what I've got. This is what I shall always have. This is what I should have missed" (97). Charlotte creates a referential hook for their moments together and begins to reframe the relationships by opposing their understanding to the Ververs' understanding. When the Prince threatens this new framework by offering Charlotte a gift, she comes back with, "'You don't refer,' she went on to her companion, 'I refer'" (109). This reframing culminates at the end of Volume 1 when Charlotte says to the Prince, "It seems to me we must say the same thing" (308), and then they repeat together "it's too wonderful," "too beautiful," "sacred" (312).[16]

When we consider the morals of modernity, we often understand them as having to come to terms with a universe that is "disenchanted" by the discoveries and methods of science. Perhaps the most influential philosophical "solution" was Kant's separation of the worlds of science from morality, of theoretical from practical reason. Granted a separate world, moral philosophy could develop its concepts and principles, such as autonomy, obligation, and freedom, without taking science's causal claims into account. The literary portrayal of morality during the time James was writing sought to come to terms with the world without such careful separation. Instead, writers tried a variety of strategies, from Dickens's Christian critique of character to Zola's attempt to adopt an explanatory framework. James rejects such proposals from the ground up. Jamesian characters are not deducing moral principles, nor are they wedged between the causal forces of nature and nurture. Rather, James's characters find themselves in a world that is teeming with conflicting values, ways of talking, and ways of living. They are never isolated subjects confronting people and objects. They must make their moral choices from within the world into which they are thrown and from which they must articulate a way of being and talking that gives their lives normative force. James's distinctive understanding of morality is revealed through his style in the broadest sense, from his syntax and narrative technique to his depiction of action, diction, and time. James's literary criticism was never able to articulate the innovations of his late novels, but he did give us a hint in his essay, "The New Novel": "The value of the offered thing, its whole relation to us, is created by the breath of language, that on such terms exclusively, for appropriation and enjoyment, we know it" (*EL* 59).

NOTES

[1]See Nussbaum's essays on *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors*, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature and Moral Philosophy" (125–47), "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination" (148–67), and "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory" (168–94).

[2]Through his brother William, James was undoubtedly aware of the German debates over the study of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. William had dinner with Wilhelm Dilthey in 1867 (Ermarth 33). I'm picking up this debate in Heidegger and Charles Taylor, for whom "throwness" is key. Taylor's transcendental argument is directed at the idea that we are subjects standing over against the world, which he calls the "pervasive bewitchment" that informs much of our moral and epistemological thinking—that we can live without evaluative frameworks: "Doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons through which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include strong qualitative discriminations" (27). We do not choose to commit to evaluative frameworks. Rather, evaluative frameworks are logically prior to choice and reflection (99).

[3]James's critical remarks on Flaubert indicate how dissatisfied James was with the novel's adoption of modernity's stripped down vision of normativity and the mind: "M. Flaubert's theory as a novelist, briefly expressed, is to begin on the outside. Human life; we may imagine his saying, is before all things a spectacle, an occupation and entertainment for the eyes" (*FW* 150). Flaubert's style is limited because "it renders only the visible. The invisible Flaubert scarcely touches; his vocabulary and all his methods were alien to it . . . he had no faith in the power of his moral to offer a surface" (312).

[4]Heidegger characterizes the way we encounter others: "Dasein is with equal originality being-with-others and being-among intraworldly being ['entities in the world,' alternative translation]. The world, within which these latter beings are encountered is . . . always already world which the one shares with others. Only because the Dasein is antecedently constituted as being in the world can one Dasein existentially communicate something factically to another" (*Basic* 297).

[5]In *Being*, Heidegger speaks of how Dasein moves from familiar absorption in a practical activity, such as hammering, to the distanced examination of the hammer when the hammer breaks (98).

[6]Veeder notes forty-one different appearances of the expression "knowing where someone is" (132).

[7]As the narrator takes the material of the typical realist novel of manners and sets it aside: Maria Gostrey has "cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which, from a full experience, she pigeon-holed her fellow mortals with a hand free as that of a compositor of scattering

type. She was as equipped in this particular as Strether was the reverse" (*AB* 21). James's text takes what would be developed at length by other novels—the shared knowledge of characters—and turns it into a "region" that is thematized by the narrator and/or the characters. Of Fanny and Colonel, we learn that "what was between them . . . had entered . . . as it were, without more words, the region of the understood, shutting the door after it and bringing them so still more nearly face to face" (*GB* 378).

[8]McCarthy says, "When you think of James in the light of his predecessors, you are suddenly conscious of what is not there: battles, riots, tempests, sunrises, the sewers of Paris, crime, hunger, the plague, the scaffold, the clergy, but also minute particulars such as you find in Jane Austen—poor Miss Bates's twice-baked apples, Mr. Collins's 'Collins,' the comedy of the infinitely small. It cannot have been simply a class limitation, or a limitation of experience, that intimidated his pen. It was a resolve, very American, to scrape his sacred texts clean of the material factor. And it was no small task he laid on himself, since his novels, even more than most maybe, dealt with material concerns—property and money—and unrolled almost exclusively in the realm of the social, mundane by definition. Nevertheless, he succeeded, this American prodigy. He etherealized the novel beyond its wildest dreams and perhaps etherized it as well" (5–6).

[9]Chatman's *The Later Style* is a helpful linguistic analysis, but Chatman draws no philosophical conclusions from his analysis.

[10]James's focus on linguistic entities rather than engaged practices is an un-Heideggerian but crucial dimension of his presentation of thrownness. James's phenomenology opens up the dynamics of subjectivity and structures of meaning in ways Heidegger does not.

[11]This is, of course, one of the key transformations that Heidegger's phenomenology makes to Husserl's phenomenology, with its foundation in intentionality. My reading of James's style illustrates how much is left out by narratological approaches that speak in terms of showing and not telling—indeed, by all formalist approaches, even though James's own literary criticism often suggests such readings. It is not the absence of commentary or the use of point of view that distinguishes James from other novelists but his distinctive articulation of subjectivity and normativity.

[12]At the beginning of Volume 2 of *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie circles around the established patterns of their relationships trying to grasp the breach that she can only sense. The narrator uses a pagoda metaphor to figure the eruption of strangeness and impenetrability in the midst of what she once understood and enjoyed: "This situation had been occupying for months and months the very centre 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 outlandish pagoda. . . . She had walked around and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation . . . at present however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder" (3–4).

[13]Searle says that "the uniqueness and pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lies precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to an agreement as to which descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object. They function not as descriptions but as pegs on which to hang descriptions" (*Speech* 172).

[14]Strether's sighting of Gloriani and Isabel's vision of Osmond with Madame Merle are two well-known examples. It is worth noting that at the end of *The Ambassadors* when Strether is explaining to Maria that his "moral logic" is to have gotten nothing for himself (344), Maria corrects him, "But with your wonderful impressions you'll have a great deal" (345). Maria is reminding him of all he has gotten by virtue of his relationship with her and the way they've learned to speak with each other and forces Strether to say that "[Maria] would make [him] wrong." Strether closes the novel by putting this new understanding into a holistic picture that locates their new relationship and necessary parting: "Then there we are." Many of James's characters struggle to come up with a moral "logic" to guide them through the competing normative demands, through the conflicting fears and desires, but this logic is often a rationalization, as we see not just with Marcher but with Maggie (*GB* 2: 6).

[15]Searle's terminology can help here: "All institutional facts, and therefore all status functions, are created by speech acts of the type that I baptized in 1975 as declarations" (*Making* 11). The extraordinary thing about declarations is that "they change the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state into existence" (12). Charlotte's speech to the Prince is a declaration in Searle's sense.

[16]Charlotte begins her argument earlier in this section when she informs the Prince that he has already committed to her way of understanding: "You knew besides, you knew to-day I would come. And if you knew that you know everything" (1: 301). She follows by leveraging this "everything" with, "You can't not know . . . where you are" (302). I discuss this scene and the dialogues between Fanny and the Colonel at greater length in *Realism* (chapter 6).

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