DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

Pokol Ágnes

A RECIPROCITÁS MEGJELENÉSI FORMÁI HENRY JAMES MŰVEIBEN: SZOCIOLÓGIAI SZEMPONTÚ ELEMZÉSEK

THE CONCEPT OF RECIPROCITY IN HENRY JAMES’S FICTION: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola
A doktori iskola vezetője: Kulesár Szabó Ernő akadémikus

Modern angol és amerikai irodalom program
A program vezetője: Péter Ágnes CSc, habilitált egyetemi tanár

A bizottság tagjai és tudományos fokozatuk:

Elnök: Kállay Géza PhD, habilitált egyetemi tanár
Hivatalosan felkért bírálók: Dr. Takács Ferenc PhD, Kovács Ágnes Zsófia PhD
Titkár: Friedrich Judit CSc
További tagok: Juhász Tamás PhD
Kállay G. Katalin PhD
Komáromy Zsolt PhD

A témavezető és tudományos fokozata: Sarbu Aladár DSc

Budapest, 2010
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POKOL ÁGNES

2010
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“…everyone who had anything to give […] made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. The strangest thing furthermore was that this might be in cases a happy understanding. The worker in connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled. People could quite like each other in the midst of it.” (The Wings of the Dove)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nothing could be more in key with the topic of this dissertation than the manifestation of heartfelt gratitude to all of those who have helped me complete it. My family, the sine qua non of my existence, I sincerely hope that every member of it similarly feels the indescribable happiness that stems from being surrounded, helped, and loved by such a group of individuals. Robert, I thank you for everything; your love, your support (spiritual and financial), and not least of all your role as “the native” who has made sure that my style of writing has not taken me beyond the bounds of the English language (grazie infinite per il miglior fabbro). Professor Aladár Sarbu, my intellectual guide and mentor not only on this project, but also during the whole of my university life. He introduced me to James and assisted me in going deeply into the intricate but inimitable world of our shared favorite. Ágnes Kovács, who has given me helpful tips concerning the structure and the theoretical framework of this study; Ágnes, I thank you for the “invaluable trio” of Martha Nussbaum, Lionel Trilling, and Winfried Fluck. Tamás Juhász, whose dissertation on the exchange mechanisms in Joseph Conrad’s work has given me inspiration and has been my exemplar as to a multidisciplinary analysis. Ildikó Simon, my patient and resourceful helper in laying hold of, photocopying, and sending a large part of the material needed for this work.
PART I.  INTRODUCTION

Antipeponthos¹: Ineluctable, ubiquitous, ambiguous

The Master’s preoccupation with moral issues and his interest in manners. Yawn. Old hat. Gnawed bones. Hoary subjects. Or, to be more diplomatic, the sine qua non of Jamesian art. Knowing his great delight in hunting down and skillfully using colloquial expressions then in vogue, he would most probably have excused my daring phraseology and would not have taken me for a disrespectful personage. Furthermore, that I am trying to add my “umble”² portion to the mighty pile of thoughts concerning his oeuvre would surely have been welcome to the increasingly frustrated and lonely Master of the late years, who had never felt appreciated enough and whose ever more inaccessible style forced him into some sort of “splendid isolation” and the position of the high priest of art disdaining worldly success. Indeed, he may have been gratified and perhaps consoled by the interest that has been shown regarding his writings, but it nevertheless forces the enthusiastic scholar to face the familiar dilemma that arises in the case of any of the classics: What has not been said about his art? What to add that is of real interest and is not only written for the sake of writing something? If I propose to discuss the concept of reciprocity concerning his fiction, do I sound forced? Am I desperate?

The word “reciprocity” has quite an outlandish ring; people are not quite sure what to make of it. In certain cases, it is just what the shrewd scholar wants: to use a difficult word so as to shroud the whole thing in mystery. When, however, the desired reaction is not incomprehension and awe but appreciation, it is expedient to throw in such expressions as “giving and taking,” “exchange,” “gift,” “gratitude,” “obligation to return,”³ and so forth.

¹ The Greek equivalent of “reciprocity,” Polányi uses the term when he refers to Aristotle’s teachings concerning community and mutual attraction, which states that it is in reciprocity (antipeponthos) that the members of a community (koinonia) find expression of their mutual attachment (philia) (245).
² The word “humble” in its more idiosyncratic form, which is ceaselessly used by Uriah Heep, one of the villains of Dickens’s David Copperfield.
³ Dictionaries usually give a definition of “reciprocate” and “reciprocity” using the terms “give,” “take,” “receive,” “return,” and “mutual.” In Collins, “reciprocate” means “to give or to feel in return” (1234), while
which usually results in knowing nodding of heads as to the estimative meaning of the word, yet an even more puzzled facial expression as to its actual connection with Jamesian fiction. One may think that scholars of such disciplines as ethnology, anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology—whose professional vocabulary includes this term—would be able to help in the endeavor to give a sufficing definition as to its meaning, but, curiously enough, they are at just as great a loss as any other mortal. Alvin W. Gouldner, in his seminal essay entitled “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,” also emphasizes the simultaneous ambiguity and ubiquity of reciprocity; along with Howard Becker, L. T. Hobhouse, and Richard Thurnwald, he similarly stops short of providing a systematic definition for it and at the same time affirms its prime importance (1).

For one thing, I cannot help agreeing with Lawrence Becker, who valiantly points to the “indeterminativeness of it all” in the midst of his endeavors to account for the fundamental importance of reciprocity as a moral virtue and likens it to the whole of moral theory— which is equally changeable and unfinished and partial—yet contends that exactly by virtue of its complexity it is all the more important to human life (143-4). One should not give in so easily but rather watch out for that silver lining, which can be detected as soon as one bears in mind how drawbacks are very often advantages in disguise; this is what Gouldner does when he hails reciprocity as an essential stabilizer of social systems, which is nothing less than an “all-purpose moral cement,” exactly because its indeterminacy enables it to be flexible, to act just like a “kind of plastic filler, capable of being poured into the shifting crevices of social structures” (14).

Longman defines it as “to give (something) in return” (921). Similarly, The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of English explains it as to “give in return” or to “give and receive, each to and from each” (815). The Wordsworth Dictionary of Difficult Words gives the following synonyms: to “return equally,” to “interchange,” to “alternate,” to “move backwards and forwards” (281). With the noun “reciprocity” the situation is similar. Collins defines it as a “reciprocal action or relation” and “a mutual exchange of commercial or other privileges” (1234). Longman takes it to be the “principle or practice of giving and taking advantages or of buying and selling from and to each other” (921). The Advanced Learner’s describes it as the “principle or practice of give and take, of making mutual concessions” and the “granting of privileges in return for similar privileges” (815). In all of these dictionaries there is a mention made of the so-called “reciprocating engine” which “moves backwards and forwards” and has a “rotary” movement (The Advanced Learner’s 815). It is pertinent to signal that rotation and cyclicity will be of interest in my discussion concerning reciprocity (Marcel Mauss’s concept of the circle/cycle/chain of reciprocity, and Alain Caillé’s idea of a spiral, for example).

Looking at the word “gift,” Helmuth Berking cites the §516 of the German Legal Code: “A donation whereby one person makes another richer out of his own assets is a gift if both sides are agreed that the donation takes place free of charge,” stressing the importance of “voluntariness on the donor’s part and approval on the recipient’s” (25)—elements which will be relevant in the course of my analysis. A final example as to the given meaning of words is The Advanced Learner’s reference to a secondary signification of “gift” being the “right or power to give” (419), which, once again, shall play an important role in my discussion when it comes to gift-giving and unbalanced reciprocity as sources of power/domination/exploitation.
As my approach towards the concept of reciprocity is sociological and it is by way of this that I propose to view the sociological dimensions of Jamesian fiction, when it comes to
making “head or tail” of this problematic term, I am not going to make the—otherwise
impossible—attempt at being exhaustive and examine all the various facets of “reciprocity”
that tie it to the field of economics and anthropology as well. Instead, in this Introduction I
outline my understanding of it as part of my overall theoretical framework based on the
systems of thought of Lawrence Becker, Georg Simmel, Peter Blau, Robert A. Emmons,
Helmuth Berking, Pierre Bourdieu, Marcel Mauss, Donald Mull, Jonathan Freedman,
Winfried Fluck, Martha Nussbaum, Lionel Trilling, Virginia Fowler, Paul B. Armstrong,
Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan—to name the most important ones. Along with “reciprocity,” I
focus on the following key terms closely connected to my argument: “gift,” “benefactor,”
“beneficiary,” “capital,” the dynamics of “give and take,” and “gratitude.” So as not to turn
the beginning of this analysis into a cut and dried theoretical block—what with the essential
importance to give a detailed consideration to the problematic “moral issue” as well—I
propose to outline only “reciprocity,” “gift,” and “capital” in this introductory Part. I turn to
the other concepts as soon as they become of relevance in the discussion, which thereby
allows me to explain them with using primary sources in my demonstration.

Accordingly, the figures of the “benefactor” and “beneficiary” are examined in
James’s works preceding The Portrait (“A Light Man,” Watch and Ward, Roderick Hudson,
The American, and “Longstaff’s Marriage” in Part II.) and through The Portrait itself (Part
III.). As Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism (Fowler) plays an important role in my approach
towards the quest for adulthood via learning to live as social beings that the three American
girls (Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver) face, I will give a brief overview of
Lacanian terms as soon as the discussion turns to Isabel Archer’s concept of self.

Next, the dynamics of “give and take”—the gist of the Jamesian concept of reciprocity—is looked at in detail when the discussion focuses on The Wings (Part IV.). This
novel’s depiction of the system of “the workers and the worked” is a case in point indeed,
which is why this is the longest Part of the dissertation. Last but not least, “gratitude” is in
the limelight in Part V.; The Golden Bowl with its ungrateful sposi (the Prince and Charlotte)
serves as an ideal ground for the analysis of this concept, which is to be complimented by a
re-thinking of the “gift” and “sexual/erotic capital” as well.
A brief apologia for (apparent) theoretical eclecticism

By having created a theoretical framework that falls back on thinkers from such apparently different fields of thought as sociology, anthropology, psychology, (moral) philosophy (/ethics), political economy, and literary criticism, I have laid myself open to the charge of theoretical eclecticism; what I offer is something of a “spiritual smorgasboard,” as a witty colleague of mine put it. Is this bad? Is this a “no-no” in literary criticism? On the contrary, putting aside the fact that a multidisciplinary approach is by definition inevitably eclectic in that it consults various fields of thought, literary criticism has been and should be in favor of a cooperation between different disciplines. I share this opinion with Martha C. Nussbaum, who hails the fusion of literature and (moral) philosophy on the one hand, and the interdisciplinary approach of moral philosophers on the other, which results in an affirmative answer when it comes to questioning the propriety of eclecticism in literary criticism. In the whole of Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, Nussbaum calls for a dialogue between these two disciplines, and in one of her essays in the collection entitled “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory,” she approves of philosophy’s frequent adoption of an interdisciplinary approach, which literary theory should also emulate:

[…] philosophical debates have frequently become interdisciplinary, touching as they do on human issues that are central to more than one field of study. On the emotions, for example, moral philosophers have a lively dialogue with psychologists; on moral relativism, with cultural anthropologists; on rationality and well-being, with economists. One would certainly expect literature and theory about literature would play a role in these debates. (171)

Nussbaum does indeed put her theory into practice, as she not only fuses literary criticism with (moral) philosophy, but also “calls in” psychology (psychoanalysis) in the shape of Freud throughout her excellent book. In fact, the tendency of literary criticism to resort to Freud was not only not at its beginnings at the time of the first appearance of Nussbaum’s essays here resorted to (1989), but owing to its popularity it was experiencing
something of a slump by way of its concepts having come “to be applied too easily and often in an ill-considered manner” (Sarbu, Study 229). Lacan’s “appearance on the scene” freshened things up by giving “psychoanalytic criticism a new lease of life by filling the Freudian structures with meanings more in tune with the skeptical spirit of the decades after world War II” (Sarbu, Study 229).

The recent development of literary criticism continues to be increasingly interdisciplinary and the penchant for “in-house” fusion—mixing New Critical ideas with poststructuralist thought or with, say, reader-response criticism—is observable everywhere within this discipline just as well as within others. Indeed, it is very difficult to find any analysis nowadays that does not, in some way, mix and match. This does not, of course, mean that “anything goes”; it simply gives the critic a freer hand to gauge the depths of literary artworks and hopefully find new meanings worth her/his trouble, as well as that of the kind reader.

By way of furnishing further examples besides Nussbaum, a closer look at the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature is worth the attention for several reasons. Firstly, when it comes to a multidisciplinary approach, psychoanalysis is one of the disciplines most often resorted to by different schools of literary criticism; apart from Marxist and feminist critics’ avowed interest in it, already by the nineteen-sixties “its presence had become so persuasive that its concepts were cropping up even in the writings of critics who would regard it with suspicion (Sarbu, Study 229). The collection entitled Literature and Psychoanalysis is a good example of the diversity of literary approaches that fuse the two disciplines, but it is also edifying for another reason; Shoshana Felman—editor of and contributor to the collection—points to an important detail. Departing from the premise that “the cultural division […] of scholarly ‘disciplines’ of research is by no means a natural geography [and] there are no natural boundaries between literature and psychoanalysis,” she goes on to claim that the existing relationship between these two disciplines has “to be reinvented” (5, 9, original emphasis).

This is to say that Felman takes a multidisciplinary approach for granted—thus oversteps the question “why”—but calls attention to the importance of the “how.” Even as late as 1977 she claims that literature has been “submitted to the authority, to the prestige of psychoanalysis” (5). Not only are “key concepts of psychoanalysis references to literature,” but it has, “from the very beginning,” usurped literature as “a contiguous field of verification

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4 “Late” compared with the previously mentioned nineteen-sixties referred to by Sarbu, when the (ab)use of psychoanalysis in the field of literary criticism had already been in full swing (Study 229).
in which to test its hypotheses and to confirm its findings” (9). A good example of this is Lacan’s “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in \textit{Hamlet}.” In a thoroughly feminist fashion, Felman identifies the attitude of psychoanalysis towards literature with that of master and slave, respectively (5). She argues that instead of domination, the relationship of these two disciplines should be more of a cooperation—which should not, let it be added, equal the “taking over” of literature (7). A supposed result of such “reinvention” of the relationship between the two disciplines is, for instance, Felman’s “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” to be found in the collection along with Lacan’s. A less dramatic way of calling attention to the difference between the use of literature by psychoanalysis and vice versa is to say that in the former case psychoanalysis looks to literature “as source material for the exposition of its doctrines,” while the latter scenario is “the application of psychoanalytical concepts in the interpretation of imaginative writing” (Sarbu, \textit{Study} 232).

A second reason why a closer look at the nature of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature is relevant in this discussion is the fact that it plays a prominent role in my line of thought as well—not surprising in the light of what has been said concerning the widespread application of multidisciplinary combinations involving psychoanalysis. Apart from Nussbaum being a significant example of how even moral philosophy and psychoanalysis may help each other, the question may still arise how a sociological approach proposes to make use of Lacanian concepts and whether or not it results in an uncalled-for detour. Let us remember, however, that the examination of the relation between self and society should be complemented by a closer look at the relation of the self to itself, so to say—it is important to be aware of what concept of the self the sociological discussion viewing self and society is based on. Furthermore, the Lacanian theoretical framework is fundamental to the analysis of the (social/moral) development of the American girl in Jamesian fiction, which is to form an integral part of the dissertation. Virginia Fowler’s psychoanalytical literary criticism is to function as a kind of mediator. In connection with the problem of the self and other, concepts of phenomenology will also be resorted to, this time partly through Paul B. Armstrong’s excellent observations.
What makes a sociological approach to Jamesian fiction feasible is the social and moral function of reciprocity. Thomas F. Bertonneau rightly claims that “reciprocity is the essence of morality” (“The Mysteries” 15). This stance towards reciprocity is in line with the belief I share with Lawrence Becker, namely that the disposition to reciprocate is one of the fundamental moral virtues (150), which has to be acquired by each individual as a part of growing up and becoming a social being fit to live side by side with one’s fellow humans. Because it is not an inherent disposition to reciprocate, the environment, the traditions, the manners and mores, the culture, and the society that surround one are both varied and influential. To live a “moral life” and to have a harmonious relationship with the fellow members of the society one belongs to partly depend on the acceptance of the specific rules that that particular society has set for its adherents. Details concerning how to accept, how and when and with what to reciprocate, are all culture and context specific, and so besides claiming that the disposition to reciprocate is a universal moral obligation, any attempt at further generalization or abstract theorizing is out of place. In fact, were it at all possible, it would not be commendable; general rules, even if they exist within a given culture, are not the whole story even within that context. The “moral life” does not equal a slavish adherence to a set of norms.

This is where James’s particular understanding of the “moral life” has to be clarified, however ambiguous critics have always claimed it to be. Perhaps a good starting point is to follow up what has been said about the crucial importance of context/circumstances, because this claim was shared—even if for different reasons—by James and the English and French realists he admired. George Eliot and Honoré de Balzac also laid great emphasis on collecting primary/sense experience (data). This stems from their common endeavor to paint a comprehensive picture of society, which is inevitably part of the process of painting a

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5 Simmel similarly observes that exchange/reciprocity is a social arrangement, the invention of which no single individual can be credited with; it is the product of “interactions between individual and collectivity” and each new member of a society has to learn its rules as (s)he endeavors to fit in and engage in such “interindividual activities” (67).
truthful portrait of any individual. Nobody can be viewed in isolation, but only in her/his\(^6\) context, namely the particular society with its particular manners and mores that (s)he belongs to.

The *Comédie Humaine* of the self-proclaimed “*docteur des sciences sociales*” (Lepenies 85) and Eliot’s *Middlemarch* are great examples of what Beatrice Webb enthusiastically called “ideal sociology” (Lepenies 183): the successful fusion of sociology and literature so as to fulfill the supreme task of every artist. Which is? If we hark to Eliot’s artistic credo, it tells us that “art is the nearest thing to life and it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” In other words, art also has a strong social binding force and a moral function if it succeeds in surprising “even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the material of moral sentiment.”\(^7\)

Balzac and other French writers of the time—Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, Emile Zola, Maxime Du Camp—had absolutely no pretensions as to the moral dimension/function of art. James, in his 1903 essay on Turgenev, claims that “the conviction that held them together was the conviction that art and morality are two perfectly different things [...] the only duty of the novel was to be well written” (6). In their case, then, realism/truthfulness was not pursued because they believed that it was the social and moral responsibility of both creative author and literary critic to cultivate their fellow citizens by mediating between them and the realm of art. This belief James shared with George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, both of whose influence, in fact, was also palpable on James’s compatriots, E. L. Godkin, W. D. Howells,\(^8\) and Charles Eliot Norton (Kovács 5, 9-10)—the proponents of American realism (of “the new American school of fiction” [Fluck, “Morality” 77]). Indeed, James had always admired his French contemporaries—mostly because of their focus on the importance of perception (primary/sense experience) (Kovács 212-3)—but could “never quite overcome his concern about [their] lack of moral sense” (Fluck, “Moral” 83). To furnish an example, we may consider James’s words in one of his essays on Flaubert:

To count out the moral element in one’s appreciation of an artistic total is exactly the same as it would be (if the total were a poem) to eliminate all the words in three syllables [...] [The

\(^6\) My placing “her” in front of “him” can be attributed to two opposing attitudes: it is either a feminist approach that objects to male primacy, or it is the “old-school” custom of “ladies first.” It boils down to the same thing, namely that I place “her” before “him” throughout this analysis.

\(^7\) From Eliot’s review of W. H. Riehl’s “The Natural History of German Life.”

\(^8\) For a more in-depth discussion of Howells’s realism and his stance concerning the relationship between life, art, and morality, see Fluck’s “Morality,” especially pages 90-1.
moral element] is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration. [...] [To reject] the importance of the moral quality in a work of art [...] strikes us, in two words, as very childish. (“Flaubert” 61, 64)

Based on George Eliot’s artistic credo just cited, the belief that “art and the social function of literature are inextricably intertwined, and the novel is the literary genre best suited to bring the two together” (Fluck, “Power” 18),^9^ was a common ground for Eliot and James—and separated him from his French contemporaries. Yet, despite the similarity between Eliot’s and James’s moral visions, the latter had always claimed to have departed from what he termed Eliot’s narrower, more didactic adherence to moralism. When he praised his friend and fellow artist Ivan Turgenev as one of the great writers of all times, he paid tribute to the latter’s tendency to “judge things with a freedom and spontaneity” as opposed to the “Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, moralistic, conventional standards” so typical of, but so detrimental to, both artists and individuals (“Turgenev” 3)—Eliot not excepted.

James regarded Turgenev’s art as the commendable example to follow. With “all his moral passion” (“Turgenev and Tolstoy” 225), “interested in everything,”^10^ without “a particle of vanity” or “a grain of prejudice,” “natural to an extraordinary degree,” but “at the same time [bearing] the stamp of the highest cultivation” (“Turgenev” 3), this “observer with a rare imagination” concentrated on “the great central region of passion and motive, [on] the usual, the inevitable, the intimate,” and his works had “the beauty […] of the finest presentation of the familiar” (“Turgenev and Tolstoy” 229, emphasis added). Turgenev, in other words, “embodies the happy example of the coexistence of art and morality” (Kovács 41), and can be taken as the ideal proponent of “moral realism” that may be the best way to define James’s own moral orientation.

“Moral realism” brings us to Lionel Trilling, one of the few amongst critics who had not feared to tread in the theoretical region where “the moral issue” and James’s relation to it belong. As to the term Trilling uses (moral realism), it is important to clarify at the outset that James himself might not have been overly satisfied by having his name connected with either realism or any overt moralistic endeavor. Concerning realism, Fluck points out that James

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^9^ It is in connection with “the usefulness of James for a redefinition of the relation between art and life, aesthetics and social meaning” that Trilling, the exponent of “the liberal consensus of the sixties” hailed James’s works (Fluck, “Power” 19). As its title also suggests, in ‘Power relations in the novels of Henry James: the ‘liberal’ and the ‘radical’ version,” Fluck concentrates on the differences between, but ultimate complementariness of, the two approaches (liberal and radical).

^10^ To anticipate, Martha Nussbaum’s reference to the exemplary attitude of Aristotelian perception-based morality as the “loving nonjudgmental attention to [others’] particularity” (“Perceptive” 184) fits Turgenev as well.
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had always “shied away from the term”; he used it “infrequently and never accepted it as a description of his own work” (“Moral” 80-1). When it comes to “the moral issue,” it might be correct to ascertain that exactly because of the negative connotations of “moral” due to the unsatisfactory narrowness of “our Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, moralistic, conventional standards” (“Turgenev” 3), James did not want to be grouped with the adherents of such moralism and preferred not to theorize about the real nature of his moral approach and opted for demonstrating it in his works of fiction instead. Admittedly, “the term ‘moral’ covers a lot of ground in his critical comments” (Fluck, “Morality” 92), but very rarely, briefly and vaguely with reference to his own stance and work. What can be safely deduced concerning his relationship to the “moral issue” is that James’s insistence “on the indispensability of a moral sense” should not be a license to “conceive of the term as moralism” (Fluck, “Morality” 92, emphasis added)11 and to confuse it with the “moral rigorism” of Woollett portrayed in The Ambassadors (Nussbaum, “Perceptive” 177).

Trilling’s definition of moral realism is perfectly in harmony with James’s attitude12 just described: moral realism is “the perception of the dangers of moral life itself” (“Manners” 221), and the laudable endeavor to concentrate on particulars and the motivations for actions instead of a focus on portraying only the results. This is to say that any hypocritical interest in “‘strong’ reality” (Trilling, “Manners” 220)—which is none other than a surface or abstract reality—is delusive and out of place, even if it is, unfortunately, just the kind of attitude that the term “realism” usually stands for. This dangerous tendency towards an abstract reality that paradoxically appears to be interested in particulars in that it focuses on the (surface) results of human passions and motivations, lures away the individual from the genuine reality with its “natural, direct human feeling” (Trilling, “Manners” 220). In line with this is James’s emphasis on the insufficiency of “the mechanical in reproduction,” of “mere fidelity in representation,” of “the merely photographic”: the “basic task is to preserve the idea that representation has to be made meaningful by going beyond the merely empirical” (Fluck, “Morality” 92, original emphasis).

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11 Kovács, while focusing on James’s What Maisie Knew, also discusses the difference between “moralism” and “moral sense” (214-5). In connection with the latter term, it is interesting to briefly observe its development among the adherents to the so-called “moral sense theory.” The belief that morality is grounded in moral sentiments and emotions and based on empirical knowledge is shared by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith as well. However, they have different views concerning the extent to which education, reason, and the inherent nature of the very germ of moral sense are influential. For details, see Shaftesbury’s Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit, especially Book 2; Hutcheson’s Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue and Moral Good; Book 3 of Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature and An Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals; and Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

12 It is in “The Princess Casamassima” that Trilling dwells on moral realism being “the informing spirit” of James’s works—especially of The Princess Casamassima (97-101).
Strange as it may seem at first, it is the manners of a society that point to its deepest depths, and not only show its surface:

The great novelists knew that manners indicate the largest intentions of men’s souls as well as the smallest and they are perpetually concerned to catch the meaning of every dim implicit hint. The novel, then, is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man’s soul. (Trilling, “Manners” 214)

This observation simultaneously supports James’s interest in manners and my claim concerning the pertinence of a sociological approach towards James’s fiction. As a researcher of the social world, James is nothing less than a sociologist, who gives his observations the form of a work of fiction instead of a sociological treatise.

This last remark brings us to Martha Nussbaum’s concept of the mutually beneficial relationship between moral philosophy and literature. In the footsteps of Trilling (and F. R. Leavis to a certain extent), Nussbaum also points to James’s (especially later) novels as invaluable exponents of moral philosophy (“Perceptive” 172, “Flawed” 142). She claims that it is exactly in the “very ellipses and circumnavigations” of the late Jamesian novels—their form/style, in short—that the “moral quality” resides (“Finely” 149), which would be “killed” by any attempt at paraphrasing. Thus, the form of literary prose is the ideal vehicle of moral content, much more so than most philosophical treatises (Nussbaum, “Finely” 161). What James had praised in connection with Turgenev’s art is, in turn, praised by Nussbaum: “[T]he happy truth of the unity, in a generous talent, of material and form—of their being inevitable faces of the same medal […] disproving the perpetual clumsy assumption that subject and style are […] different and separable things” (“Turgenev and Tolstoy” 3).

To repeat, the moral quality of James’s (and Turgenev’s, and any great writer’s) texts resides in their very texture; in their style/form. In accordance with Aristotelian perception-

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13 Nussbaum does not share F. R. Leavis’s “denigration of the late novels of James” which is, she believes, “superficial in a way that most of his work is not” (“Perceptive” 191). Somewhat similarly, Trilling fails to appreciate James’s major phase and concentrates on his “‘political’ novels of the middle period” (Fluck, “Power” 18).

14 This is the very thing missing in the writings of his French contemporaries, who concentrated on style/form for its own sake. The fact that it was not so in the case of James is what makes his increasing focus on aesthetics not a move away from the social, but yet another step closer to it. As Fluck puts it, “the aesthetic and the ‘political’ (in the sense of any exertion of power) become inextricably intertwined” and there is “the sense of the aesthetic as ‘intense activity’ in social life” (“Power” 30, 32). Martha Nussbaum’s repeated emphasis on the “fruitful link between aesthetic activity and the moral point of view” also reasserts this
based morality, Nussbaum claims that “we need [...] texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of moral choice” (“Flawed” 141, original emphasis). Such display, however, should not be visible—the writer’s moral preoccupation should not become salient, that is—via: 1. her/his stories pointing to a moral (lesson); 2. having a prescriptive attitude towards morality and “laying down the (moral) laws” of right and wrong; 3. avoiding “immoral” subjects (passion, adultery, deceit etc.); 4. choosing an “immoral” subject but only to provide moral retribution to “sinners.”

At this point, the sine qua non of the “moral sense” hailed by James appears to be the interplay of experience, perception, and imagination, which is why it is pertinent to say that it is in line with Aristotle’s perception-based morality (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 139). In order to sum up what this understanding of morality stands for, let us first resort to the few pieces of advice Nussbaum offers to Maggie Verver in the latter’s quest for a more comprehensive version of morality than her initial striving for “moral goodness” and “moral simplicity,” which shied away from particulars (“personal qualitative uniqueness”) and conflicts (“Flawed” 126, 128, 130): “See clearly and with high intelligence. Respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination. If there are conflicts, face them squarely and with keen perception. Choose as well as you can for overt action, but at every moment remember the more comprehensive duties of the imagination and the emotions” (“Flawed” 134-5).

In fact, this “ideal is summarized by James in his Preface to The Princess Casamassima as one of ‘being finely aware and richly responsible’” (“Flawed” 135). This “motto” signals that it is not enough to be “aware”; in line with the previously quoted advice’s stress on “duties,” here we have the admonition to be not only “aware,” but also “responsible.” Although at first sight the only components of the essence of Jamesian “moral sense” seemed to be experience, perception and imagination, they do not suffice. Still in accordance with Aristotle’s emphasis on “the dialogue between perception and rule” being the ideal basis for morality (with general conceptions and rules being secondary to perception, particulars, context), Nussbaum displays the importance of being “responsible” on Fanny and Bob Assingham’s case in The Golden Bowl:

[While] Bob Assingham is a man devoted to rules and general conceptions [...] and does not permit himself to see particularity [...] Fanny, on the other hand, takes fine-tuned perception to a dangerously rootless extreme. She refuses to such an extent the guidance of general rules

statement (“Flawed” 146). This will be of relevance when the discussion comes to The Wings and The Golden Bowl.
that her imagination too freely strays, embroiders, embellishes. […] By showing us these two characters and the different inadequacies of their attempts to see and judge what stands before them, James […] suggests to us […] that perception alone is not a self-sufficient form of practical reasoning, set above by its style alone. Its moral value is not independent of its content, which should accurately connect itself with the agent’s moral and social education. This content is frequently well preserved, at least in general outline, in the plain man’s attachment to common-sense moral values, which will often thus give reasonable guidance as to where we might start looking for the right particular choice. (“Finely” 157-8)

General concepts and rules are not to be entirely discarded; they should serve as “rules of thumb,” complimenting the more important—but by itself not sufficient—trio of experience, perception, and imagination. Once again, “without the abilities of perception, duty is blind and therefore powerless,” just like imaginative perception without the guidance of general rules “can lead to self-indulgent fantasy” and ultimate immorality (“Finely 156, 158). “A shared moral ‘basis,’ a responsible vision, can be constructed through the dialogue of perception and rule” (“Finely” 158), which will ultimately result in the coveted “moral imagination” essential not only to the artist and the reader, but, more generally to us “people who are trying to live well”; its acquisition and constant use is “our ethical task” (“Finely” 148).

Scope

James’s emphasis on the importance of collecting firsthand (sense) experience—so concisely put in his “Paterian” “The Art of Fiction”—connects him even more than other advocates of realism to the ideal sociologist-novelist propounded by Beatrice Webb, who was said to have collected experience as a participant observer15 by way of personal immersion.16 James, the “observant stranger” (204), to use Leon Edel’s expression, had some initial

15 Although the term is repeatedly used by Lepenies in connection with Eliot and Webb, it was Carolyne Porter who applied it to James in her work entitled Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams and Faulkner.

16 Lepenies calls Webb’s approach the mixture of that of “a detective and an ethnologist,” in whose case the term “personal immersion” is to be taken literally; it even took the shape of assuming various guises, such as the use of a different name or a temporary job that could bring her amongst the people whose conditions she was researching (124). In fact, Webb’s emphasis on direct evidence corresponded with the contemporary endeavors of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski in the field of anthropology, who are said to have taken that science “off the veranda,” advocating the importance of an organized empirical method instead of the unscientific and speculative theories of their predecessors; tradesmen and missionaries sent out to the colonies in the course of industrial development and economic boom of Empire in the 19th century.
difficulties in conquering Parisian society, while his success in London was almost instantaneous. In any case, it is easy to measure the extent of his socializing if we consider the staggering 140 times that he dined out during the winter of 1878-9. It was not always fun and games, though; giving himself “over to the social process with the same systematic care he had exercised in the planning of his professional career,” his immersion was more of a heroic feat, because not all the talk was “good talk, by any means,” the tables were too “heavily loaded,” and Victorian formality was nothing short of “stuffy” (224).

Despite his socializing, James had always remained an outsider who was something of a welcome curiosity with his American background. Sufficiently detached and immersed at the same time, the position he had created for himself as an American artist traveling and working in Europe did bear wonderful fruit. An example of this is the evergreen Jamesian issue of the clash between Europe and America. This is, furthermore, one of the fertile grounds to investigate the social context of individuals, which are so many different cultures with different attitudes towards the disposition to reciprocate. Yet another recurring Jamesian motif is the story of the innocent American girl’s quest for self in the guise of her adventure of coming to Europe, the land of experience, where she has to come to terms with the fragmented nature of reality and the existence of the Other if she is to grow up and become an independent individual (Fowler).

The greatest emphasis throughout my sociological analysis of the concept of reciprocity in Jamesian fiction is, therefore, placed on the endeavor to re-visit the story of Jamesian protagonists in order to investigate whether in the course of their moral education—their quest to grow up—they manage to acquire the essential disposition to reciprocate and whether they succeed or fail when it is put to the test. As to a “testing ground” for exchange (reciprocity), based on Simmel’s claim that every interaction is a kind of exchange, it is easy to see how all human relationships offer innumerable instances of transactions of give and take—be it conversation, love, or even an exchange of looks (43-4). Among the more salient examples, however, are those that deal specifically with some sort of gift, as in the case of Isabel Archer, who is presented with a whole fortune, or Maggie Verver, who is supposed to receive a wedding gift, which is to turn into the birthday present she is planning to give her father.

Although (gift) giving often seems the more challenging part of exchange, it is my aim to prove that taking is sometimes even more difficult—Isabel’s (and to a certain extent Milly’s) story shall demonstrate that. This is despite the fact that any social “association” (relation) is formed with an eye on the “social reward” one can get from the other—whether
“intrinsic” (the individual her/himself as the source of interest/pleasure) or “extrinsic” (benefits “detachable” from the individual/association) (35-6, emphasis added).

Concerning the types of exchange between individuals, Bourdieu’s differentiation between forms of capital is to be of great relevance; the (innocent) wealthy American characters of the Jamesian world of fiction will be seen as transactors coming to Europe to exchange their economic capital for the social, cultural, human, symbolic, or erotic/sexual variety. This will be helpful in trying to demonstrate the underlying complexity of the numerous relationships between benefactors and beneficiaries. Or, more generally, it will facilitate the examination of the relationship between “the workers and the worked”—to anticipate the phraseology of Lancaster Gate in The Wings—which can be regarded as the epitome of the Jamesian concept of reciprocity.

In cases where the formation of personality has taken place before a character is met and so her or his moral education is supposed to have already been completed, the stress is to be on the evaluation of her/his character in situations where her/his reactions reveal whether—besides the moral sense (her/his use of perception and imagination complimented by the intelligent application of general moral rules as “rules of thumb”)—(s)he also possesses the disposition to reciprocate (and be grateful).

It is at this point that the aim of this analysis to go beyond the findings of James criticism may best be demonstrated. Departing from the premise already explained in “A brief apologia for (apparent) theoretical eclecticism,” namely that a multidisciplinary approach is—however unwittingly at times—generally accepted and practiced, I hereby claim that it is the very thing that helps me surpass what has been said in connection with Jamesian fiction. In the footsteps of Beatrice Webb, Lepenies has dwelt on the beneficial fusion of literature and sociology. Along Aristotelian lines, Nussbaum has hailed the fruitful dialogue of literature and philosophy (ethics), complimenting it with findings from the fields of psychology and anthropology.

My approach proposes to focus on such sociological aspects of (Jamesian) literature that have great relevance to moral philosophy, but have not as yet been investigated. Admittedly, exchange as a means of domination has already been analyzed to a certain extent (Freedman, Fluck). However, to concentrate on the concepts of reciprocity, gift, and gratitude in general, and in connection with the American girls’ moral education in particular, is to discover moral and social dimensions of Jamesian fiction hitherto left untouched.17 My

17 Admittedly, there is Thomas F. Bertonneau’s essay (“The Mysteries”) on The Golden Bowl, which resorts to the concept of reciprocity and claims to investigate the moral aspects of this novel. Yet, by designating
method and focus are supposed to shed a new light on the (moral) conduct of several characters besides the three American girls of central importance (Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver); Maud Lowder, Lord Mark, Prince Amerigo, Charlotte Stant, and Adam Verver are perhaps the most salient examples when it comes to digging deeper into the motives of their (non) actions.

Furthermore, the dissertation is built up in a way that it may serve as a monography of Jamesian fiction that covers his whole oeuvre, proceeding from his early phase towards his last finished novel, *The Golden Bowl*. Moreover, besides such landmarks in his writing career as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, I also analyze pieces that have not received so much attention, but bear relevance to a more complete understanding of the better-known works. An example of this may be “A Light Man,” “Longstaff’s Marriage,” and “Georgina’s reasons,” or even *Watch and Ward*.

**Money makes the (Jamesian) world go round**

My approach is sociological; the emphasis is on the social and moral aspects of the concept of reciprocity. Anthropology’s and political economy’s usages of the word are relegated to the background. The relation between individual and society (community) is in focus. This should be clear enough—and hopefully interesting enough. Yet it should not be forgotten that James’s attitude towards money, the marketplace, and the whole world of business is a very intriguing issue as well, exactly because it was so ambiguous. A generally accepted view is his ever-present aversion to the life of business and the money-minded mentality of his native land, the culmination of which is supposed to be *The American Scene*. Among several adherents to this opinion of James, Martha Bantha relates that already when “growing up in the 1840’s and 1850’s, James learned early that being demonstrably ‘masculine’ in America was mainly associated with the making of money” (23). ¹⁸ Indeed, as early as 1888, he already admitted in the Preface to *The Reverberator* that “the men, […]

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¹⁸ Recently, it has become increasingly popular amongst literary critics to re-interpret James’s opinion about America in *The American Scene*. He is supposed to have felt and expressed a mixture of repulsion and admiration, in which admiration was the most prominent. According to this opinion, James saw the American businessman as a hero. I, however, tend to agree with Fowler’s and Bantha’s outlook on the issue; namely that James was first and foremost repulsed by what he saw when revisiting his native land.
fathers, brothers, playmates, male appendages of whatever presumption, were visible and thinkable only as the American ‘business-man’ [...]. I have been prompt to declare, I was absolutely and irredeemably helpless, with no fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery” (xi).19

In consequence, as an artist he was often criticized in his homeland for his effeminacy due to his keeping away from the public sphere of manly enterprise. It further follows that even in literary circles, the businessmen of his writings are frequently considered unrealistic. Take, for instance, the retired but still relatively young millionaire Adam Verver, whose (alleged) angelic innocence seems incompatible with the possession of a fortune of such magnitude that it vies with the notorious robber-barons of the time. Another possible corollary to James’s “non-presence” in the world of business is the question of whether or not it was due to the good old “sour grapes effect” that James had always looked down on artists—Oscar Wilde in particular—who were supposed to be worshipping the mercenary muse and letting their talent and vision be corrupted by the demands of the marketplace. These reasons would seemingly suffice to conclude that James is not a writer whose works should be discussed in connection with matters of economics.

Yet it has to be kept in mind that he had, at the same time, a great fascination for money, especially when it was not about the making of it and when there was a lot of it.20 James’s lifelong preoccupation with heiresses, with fortunes being hunted, inherited, given away or squandered, is sufficient evidence of this. How money influences the character and moral values of a person had always held a great interest for him. It gives one power, it enables one to put others under obligations, it helps one to dominate, to subjugate, to buy and corrupt one’s fellow humans—an attitude that Mrs. Lowder is (erroneously) supposed to represent. At the same time, however, money also makes it possible to assist others by offering protection under one’s wings, which is what Milly Theale is said to do.

19 Matthiessen also points out that James was not ashamed to admit that “he did not have the shadowiest notion of business” (89).

20 Discussing the nature and the possible origins of James’s ambiguous attitude towards money, Donald Mull, in his excellent study entitled Henry James’s “Sublime Economy,” rightly refers to the “complete alienation of the James family from the realm of business,” which made a sharp distinction between the commercial and the imaginative sense of money; instead of converting experience of the world “into the hard fact of gold, a conversion of that fact into another kind of experience” was hailed by the elder James. Indeed, independently wealthy, the James clan did not have to worry about making money, but had the choice to simply enjoy it or to convert it into art or other modes of expression that the converting—and not the business—imagination allowed (7-9).
Gender on the agenda

It is also pertinent to ask ourselves whether gender should be on the agenda in connection with Jamesian fiction and with reciprocity. What place has feminist criticism had in Jamesian fiction so far? Does my focus on female characters—Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver—equal (call for) a feminist approach? What role does gender play in the concept of reciprocity? In other words, is reciprocity “gender-blind” or else?

James reception has never been teeming with candidates of feminist criticism—and not because of the brunt they might bear him for the unflattering portrait of feminists in *The Bostonians*. John Carlos Rowe points out that “the ambivalence [James] has provoked among feminists, rang[es] from what [Rowe] would term ‘studied neglect’ to flagrant attacks and, more recently, to the beginnings of a recognition that James was a pioneer among the nineteenth-century writers in the presentation of the psychological effects of woman’s subordination in a patriarchal culture” (88). However, what could be termed positive characteristics in the eyes of feminists—James’s insistent focus on female characters and his “uncanny ability to represent the complex psychologies of women” (Rowe 90)—were coupled with two further aspects of his fiction that continue to dampen feminism’s enthusiasm. Firstly, there is James’s “nearly fatal attraction for subjects and themes of ‘high society,’ in which woman’s bondage is more evasively represented than it would be in working-class novels” (Rowe 89). Secondly, feminist critics find that James was unable “to transvalue the social rhetoric [and] do more than merely represent the psychology and sociology of woman’s servitude” (Rowe 89). Marriage still remains “a primary social institution” on the pages of Jamesian fiction, and “feminine characters end up achieving only the awareness of their contradictory relationship” to it, but “remain trapped by its values to the end” (Rowe 89).

The main reason for James’s unceasing interest in creating primarily heroines instead of heroes may be the affinity between his and their “marginal and powerless situations” (Rowe 90). I have already alluded to the ill-hidden charge of effeminacy leveled against artists in America at the time when I mentioned James’s aversion to the sphere of business and his seemingly contradictory fascination with money. One easily senses a strange kind of split between the spheres of men and women, with the artist relegated to the latter. This was (and is) exactly the case according to James whose dismay—along with such fellow artists’ as
E. L. Godkin—concerning the “growing cleavage of the two” spheres found full utterance in *The American Scene* (Matthiessen 92). As a result of the lamentable “separation between domestic life and production, the consequent identification of men with the external world of work and women with the internal world of feeling” (Stubbs 5), it was precisely the American girl—the young inexperienced American female—that had been “too long abandoned and too much betrayed” (*Scene* 311). This “exposed maiden” (*Scene* 311) was best portrayed by the young orphaned American heroine that consequently became the center of James’s interest. This is also why a focus on James’s female characters—particularly the American girl—can be termed to “go without saying” in James criticism, and does not necessarily imply a feminist approach. It is at the heart of his art—yet another sine qua non of his fiction—which, however central, remains complex and ambiguous enough to invite continuous critical attention.

It is important to add, however, that the American girl stands for a universal predicament despite the seemingly specialized nature of her being young, female, American, and of the late nineteenth (and early twentieth) century. Her multiple tasks of growing up—accepting the fragmented nature of the world and her place in it as a social being—and acquiring the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) and thereby becoming a moral and social being are the tasks of us all, regardless of gender, nationality, and century. When it comes to the question of age, this “quest” should ideally be completed as a part of the ordeal to become an adult, but we will see that many individuals remain “giant babies” when it comes to the acquiring of certain fundamentals—the acceptance of a fragmented world (and self) and the dispositions to reciprocate and be grateful included.

In my understanding, then, reciprocity is gender-blind in that it does not matter whether we are men or women; the fundamental moral virtue of the disposition to reciprocate (and be grateful) should be attained by all of us. Consequently, my approach does not focus on what difference the gender of transactors might make; whether an exchange (instance of reciprocity) is between a male and a female or between same-sex transactors is beside the point for my purposes. Admittedly, the concept of reciprocity/exchange is a veritable breeding ground for feminist theory. If any social interaction can be viewed as exchange (Simmel 43) and at the same time “social interaction is always potentially also a form of...

21 Fowler refers to this as well (27). Interestingly, George Santayana a few years later seems to pick up this line of argument concerning the split between values falling together with a split between genders. In his “The Genteel Tradition” (1911), he uses the skyscraper and the Southern colonial mansion as symbols of Puritanical, “Benjamin Franklinesque” force and fragile, creative, feminine influence, respectively. This, in turn, appears in Van Wyck Brooks’s “America’s Coming of Age” in 1915.
manipulation” (Fluck, “Power” 23), then it follows that to view social interactions as a series of unequal exchanges—domination, asymmetrical (unbalanced) reciprocity—is not wide of the mark. Unlike my focus, that of most feminist critics in connection with domination resulting from unbalanced exchange (reciprocity) is on exchanges between male and female partners where the former is said to invariably fill the role of the master/dominator/oppressor “short-changing” the female transactor.

An example of a preoccupation with the problematic relationship between exchange, power, domination, knowledge, and discourse, and their relevance to gender issues is Hélène Cixous’s and Catherine Clément’s “Exchange,” where they “engage in an evidently unpremeditated dialogue” (Gilbert x-xi). However, despite the promise held out by the title, Cixous’s and Clément’s “mutual focus is on the sometimes oppressive, sometimes privileged madness fostered by marginalization, on the wilderness out of which silenced women must finally find ways to cry, shriek, scream, and dance in impassioned dances of desire” (Gilbert xi). The focus on male domination (power) through discourse (knowledge) is there, but exchange which is not of the unbalanced type (domination) does not receive any in-depth treatment; an occasional truce, such as “giving isn’t sacrificing” (140) or “receivers are what they have received” (143) is the closest it gets—unless the title refers to the exchange of ideas between Cixous and Clément.

A more satisfactory piece for those in search of feminist approaches to exchange is Clément’s “The Guilty One” in the same volume as “Exchange,” The Newly Born Woman. Apart from providing an analysis of “‘images of women,’ specifically images of the sorceress and the hysteric, as exemplary figures” (Gilbert x), the section entitled “The Child, the Savage” re-evokes, amongst other things, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s remarks concerning “the place of origins, the feast, [which] is also the place of exchange” (28). “Lévi-Strauss finds the two axes of exchange that make men’s cultural law: the exchange of words, the exchange of women,” (28) among which the fate of the latter has fared better in Clément’s opinion. While the exchange of women “has kept its original value, for women are both sign and value, sign and producer of sign” and therefore “woman is in the primitive state; she is the incarnation of origin,” the exchange of words—language—has witnessed a decline in the shape of “entropy” (28). Clément therefore concludes that “woman must remain in childhood, in the original

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22 Cixous is actually the representative of feminism of a more radical kind—perhaps even too much so. (Sarbu, Study 300).

23 Reliance on psychoanalysis is present here also; Clément refers to Freud’s description of the “totem meal”: “Celebration follows mourning and the father’s murder; but the murder is due to the mother’s making capital of women, that is to say, it is due to an absence of exchange” (30, original emphasis). In fact, the whole volume The Newly Born Woman is interlaced with Freudian and Lacanian terminology.
primitive state, to rescue human exchange from an imminent catastrophe owing to the progressive and inescapable entropy of language. […] Women are the guardians, because of their mystery, of all language” (28). From originally being an object and subject of exchange, woman thus becomes the rescuer of her fellow object of exchange (words, language) and thereby metamorphoses into the savour of all human exchange.

Stylistic(s) matter(s)

There is another matter that may meet with the disapproval of some members of Academia; the language of this analysis does depart from the customary lingua franca of scholarly dissertations, and it does so deliberately, yet respectfully. To explain, I once again resort to Nussbaum, who, in “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” contends that certain literary works are more ideal vehicles of moral philosophy than most philosophical writings (161). We have seen that this has to do with the inextricable interlinking of style (form) and content, the prime example (and advocate) of which is, in her opinion, Henry James and his art (142). In light of this, not only are certain literary works considered as works of (moral) philosophy, but philosophical writings are also encouraged to “diverge from some traditional philosophical styles, toward greater suggestiveness” (161).

Writing about Jamesian fiction in a language that aims at—and probably succeeds in only faintly—evoking the very language of the Master has been done in this spirit. It is not meant to “cheapen” its content by creating the illusion of being academically unserious. Furthermore, it does not in the least try to pass judgment on the “lingo” of scholarly writing. Yet, let us admit, as literary critics, we all have a passion for literature and an excusable preference for literary texts; as long as a style of writing brings the reader closer to the primary source that the analysis adopting it discusses, and it does so without detrimental consequences to content, such an approach might, at the end of the day, (be allowed to hope to) meet with assent, or with forbearance at least.
The “building blocks” of my theoretical foundation: An overview

Having explained (apologized for) the multifarious nature of my approach, I shall rely on various systems of thought from different fields, which I propose to outline in this section. Note the moral preoccupation common to them all.

Lawrence Becker’s moral theory concerning reciprocity is of crucial importance here. In line with Nussbaum’s moral philosophy, L. Becker also bases his framework on Aristotelian tenets: he claims that the a priori part of moral theory has to be complimented by experience (5). Nevertheless, exactly by virtue of its a priori part, rules do play an important role, even if they are to be guidelines and the empirical dimension is equally essential. Therefore, L. Becker explicated what he calls the “‘general’ conception of morality, hold[ing] that the moral point of view is the most inclusive one we can manage—the one we use when we say ‘All things considered, here is what we should do’” (5). He consequently lists and defends a set of maxims that constitute the core of our moral obligations when it comes to reciprocity. (I shall set them forth below.)

Georg Simmel’s investigation of “marginality, role-playing, social behavior as exchange, conflict as an integrating process,” “social types,” “the theme of individuality” (Levine ix, lxiv) underlies to a certain extent the work of every sociologist, especially those who focus on reciprocity, (social) exchange, the gift, and gratitude.24 Once again in the Aristotelian vein, Simmel was also intrigued by “the eternal conflict between established form and the needs of the ongoing life process” (Levine lxv); the problematic relationship between the general (rules, laws, abstractions) and the particular (the context, the circumstances, the actual). Exactly by way of his relativism and nonconformity concerning system-making, Simmel’s legacy is still not accorded the amount of attention it merits (Levine lx). Nevertheless, when it comes to reciprocity, his output is a landmark in the field.

Remarking that “within social relations there is a strain toward imbalance as well as toward reciprocity” (26), sociologist Peter Blau gives priority to focusing on reciprocity in his social exchange theory. Once again in key with the Aristotelian stress on the importance of particulars/context, Blau names the “Scylla and Charybdis” of any study of social structure:

24 Peter Blau, Barry Schwartz (Levine lx), and Helmuth Berking are all good examples here.
“abstract conceptions too remote from observable empirical reality” and “reductionism that ignores emergent social and structural properties” (2-3). His observations concerning the motivations of human beings for exchange and socialization are of great relevance to my analysis. He holds that “social approval” is the key ingredient of happiness and consequently the “holy grail” of every individual’s quest. This is where Blau’s work can be linked with more ethically orientated ones: Nussbaum calls attention to Aristotle’s conception of ethics as “a part of the social study of human beings,” and as “the search for a specification of the good life for a human being” (“Flawed” 139).25 By analyzing “how we live”26 (how society is constructed and how it functions) and acquainting us with the motivations of our (social) actions, Blau also facilitates our (moral) preoccupation with “the good life.”

In a similar vein—trying, in the Aristotelian ethical spirit to advise the reader “how to live”—Robert A. Emmons’s focus on the fundamental moral importance of acquiring and maintaining the disposition to be grateful is also based on the benefits such an attitude brings along. A leading scholar of the positive psychology movement, Emmons maintains that gratefulness makes both donor and recipient happy (7, 10) and thereby serves to enhance individual well-being as well as solidarity between fellow social beings (54). Another crucial point Emmons makes that I observe here by way of introduction (an in-depth treatment belongs to the discussion of The Golden Bowl) is that the dispositions to reciprocate and to be grateful are closely interlinked but not the same. Requital of a favor does not automatically entail a demonstration of gratefulness.

Helmuth Berking argues that gift-giving and reciprocity have not been given sufficient attention by any of the disciplines, sociology included (4). It is not only a matter of abstract scholarly interest but an issue that concerns every person both as an individual and as a social being—he bids one to look around and witness “a scene dominated by phenomena of psychosocial deprivation […] political apathy, disaffection and a fundamental utilitarianism [that] cause the moral consensus of society […] to dissolve in a mass of particular interests, whose normative demands seem to consist of nothing other than the protection of one’s own

25 Further references to the search for “the good life” and for the answer “how should we live” as the task of ethics and art are in Nussbaum’s “Perceptive” 171, 173, 192.

26 It is interesting to note Matthew Arnold’s similar observation concerning the function of literature (poetry, criticism, or art in general) in the context of the relation between art and morals (or the moral task of art): “poetry at bottom is a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life—to the question: How to live. Morals are often treated in a narrow and false fashion; they are bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day; they are fallen into the hands of pedants and professional dealers; they grow tiresome to us” (“Wordsworth” 343, emphasis added). Furthermore, Arnold’s comment about giving a bad name to morality by treating it in an overly narrow and abstract way falls in perfectly with Aristotle’s approach.
advantage” (viii). In this scenario, writing about the act of giving might seem like “shutting [one’s] eyes to the harshness of reality and taking refuge in the mawkish idyll of a hoary yet inconsequential form of interaction” (viii). On the contrary, this seemingly commonplace and transparent act lies at the very heart of the problem in Berking’s opinion, and to focus on it “within a cultural-historical perspective” is to emphasize its moral and integrative potential (ix).

In the field of anthropology, Marcel Mauss’s pioneering contribution to the question of the gift originally had the same motivation. “The Essay on the Gift was a part of an organized onslaught on contemporary political theory, a plank in the platform against utilitarianism” (Douglas viii). In the footsteps of Durkheim (and a whole troop of French philosophers representing “a tradition that stemmed from the eighteenth century, from Rousseau and Tocqueville” [Douglas viii]), opposition to English utilitarianism was based on the latter’s “impoverished concept of the person seen as an independent individual instead of a social being” (Douglas viii). As “today the same political debate is still engaged” (Douglas xii), neither Mauss’s work nor the focus on the gift and reciprocity have lost their actuality.

The basic thing to drive home (both in Mauss’s and in my opinion) is that not only is “the whole idea of a free gift based on a misunderstanding, (but) there should not be any free gifts” (Douglas vii) anyway: “[W]hat is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. […] A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Douglas vii). By refusing to believe in the existence (or at least the commendableness) of the free gift and at the same time waging an intellectual war on utilitarianism, Mauss suggests that viewing the gift as a synonym of commodity does not entail a cold calculating (utilitarian) attitude, only a more realistic one. More about this later on.

Donald Mull’s Henry James’s “Sublime Economy”: Money as Symbolic Center in the Fiction I have already briefly referred to. Mull’s focus on money as the generator of power struggles (domination, exploitation) and as the dictator of fates and (Jamesian) plots is an earlier (1973) example of literary criticism’s turn towards sociological and moral (ethical) issues. It is important to stress the symbolic nature of money so as not to expect a more economically orientated discussion of Jamesian fiction. Once again, money represents power, freedom, and, paradoxically, limitations in the shape of obligations (towards oneself, towards the other during one’s endeavor not to
abuse the power it gives one), and therefore signals the moral dilemma that comes hand in hand with a “pile of money.”

Jonathan Freedman’s name directly in connection with reciprocity and the gift may not be of relevance, yet his place in this discussion is essential by way of his focus on the relationship between aestheticism and commodity culture, their exploitative potential and, linked to this, their moral dimension. Moreover, his use of Lacanian psychoanalysis further links his observations to my line of thought which, as has been mentioned above in connection with the fusion of different disciplines (theoretical eclecticism), likewise draws on Lacanian concepts when it comes to examining the (moral/social) development of the American girl(s) in Jamesian fiction.

Winfried Fluck’s claim that “for James, social interaction is always potentially also a form of manipulation” signals his affinity with my approach, and no less with that of Freedman, Barry Schwartz, Berking, and Blau as well. Fluck goes on to say that “James’s fiction abounds in constellations of dominance and dependence, deception and duplicity,” which bring about “states of imposition and coercion ranging from victimization to triumphant counter-manipulation.” That domination may have a positive result can be described with a reference to the concept of “useful bad”; an apparently painful experience that positively influences the moral/social development of any individual: “‘[A]ssymetries’ in social relations do not endanger knowledge, but become a driving force in the pursuit of knowledge and, in the process, a crucial source for the development of imaginary activities, the emergence of social awareness, and, through the refinement of consciousness, of the aesthetic sense” (“Power” 23, 25).

Similarly to Nussbaum, then, Fluck also focuses on how the moral and aesthetic sense—along with their constituents, like perception, awareness, knowledge—come into being and what function they have in the life of an individual. Besides Nussbaum, Fluck shares his stance concerning the relationship between the moral, the aesthetic, and the economic with Freedman: “The aesthetic is not only an inevitable part of the ongoing power plays in social interaction, but also is especially useful for them” in that it is a kind of “‘intense creativity’ in social life that redeems its manipulative potential [by serving] as a model of creative and productive self-assertion” (Fluck, “Power” 32). Once again recalling Nussbaum’s approach, Fluck points out that it is by virtue of the interplay between the aesthetic, the moral, and the social, that “the increased importance of the aesthetic in James does not signify a growing retreat from life to the ivory tower” (“Power” 31). James had always remained true to his artistic credo concerning the moral and social function of art.
Virginia Fowler’s important place in my framework I have already touched upon in connection with the examination of the American girls’ (Lacanian) quest. Directly related to Lacanian concepts, I mainly rely on Slavoj Žižek’s helpful comments in *How to Read Lacan*, which will be discussed as soon as the discussion concentrates on the quest of the first American girl to “face the whole assault of life” (growing up, individual as a social being). Paul Armstrong’s name has likewise been mentioned already, whose valuable contribution to this dissertation is the examination of the phenomenological dimensions of Jamesian fiction. Sharing with Lacanian psychoanalysis the concern for the relationship between self and other, it fits in well with a sociological inquiry looking at the relationship between the individual and society. I have also dwelt on the relevance and importance of Martha Nussbaum’s and Lionel Trilling’s thoughts concerning the moral dimension of literature in general and Jamesian fiction in particular—their presence, in turn, I have attributed (in Acknowledgements, together with Winfried Fluck’s) to the mediation of Ágnes Kovács, whose study on the function of the imagination in James’s works I likewise repeatedly refer to. Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts are to be explained below, in the section entitled “Capital.”

“Reciprocity” and the “gift”: A preliminary statement

Preliminary to our discussion, let us first concentrate on my understanding of the two key terms “reciprocity” and “gift.”

Agreeing with L. Becker, I take reciprocity—side by side with justice—to be a fundamental moral virtue; in order to approach the ideal of her/his type (to reach excellence, that is) any individual is supposed to acquire the disposition to reciprocate (74-5, 149-51).

Along with Marcel Mauss, Peter Blau, Marshall Sahlins, and Jacques Derrida, I do not believe in the existence of the so-called “free” or “pure” gift. There are always strings

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27 One might rightly ask what is meant by “excellence” here. The most succinct definition of this quality can, in my opinion, be found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “To respond ‘at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best and this is characteristic of excellence’” (qtd. in Nussbaum, “Finely” 156).

28 Osteen’s introduction to *The Question of the Gift: Essays across disciplines* provides an excellent overview of the positions taken by the most important thinkers on the question of reciprocity and the gift. The most relevant to the point I am making here are his references to Mauss’s *The Gift: The Form and Reasons for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Derrida’s *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Marshall Sahlins’s *Stone Age Economics*, Jonathan Parry’s *The Gift*, the Indian gift, and the “Indian gift.” Blau’s position is to be found in his *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (15-7).
attached; donors always have some kind of expectation, be it self-gratification via enjoying the pleasure given to the recipient, or a more transparent mercenary motive. As the concept of a free/pure gift precludes the obligation to reciprocate, I consequently hold the gift and reciprocity to be interlinked at all times. This further implies my agreement with Mauss’s tenet concerning the eternal chain of reciprocity, namely to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (39). Whether it is the Maussian circle or Alain Caillé’s spiral suggesting a progress due to the gift “introducing something that was not there before,” the three “steps” are forever connected.

Part of a chain, reciprocity is always a reaction, the third step, never an initiator but always a consolidator of human ties; relationships are perpetuated by it, but as it is with any other virtue, it does not suffice alone. As L. Becker points out, virtues always have to come in mutually supportive clusters, otherwise they tend to become vices. The accompanying virtues of generosity (the donor’s virtue while reciprocity is that of the recipient [L. Becker 93]), empathy, conviviality, and practical wisdom are all necessary for reciprocity to become an effective moral virtue (150-1).

If I agree with the claim that there is no such thing as a free gift and gift and reciprocity are ineluctably attached, it follows that I do not subscribe to modern society’s belief in the division between the two spheres of the private/personal/traditional where the gift belongs and the public/business/economy-oriented one where commodities reign. As Berking aptly points out, the emergence of the market economy in the nineteenth century brought along this sentimentalized bourgeois attitude towards the gift, which went against the Maussian concept of the gift being the ancestor of commodity, as the non-market/gift economies of archaic societies seem to show it (3). Accordingly, the subscriber to the bourgeois concept of the gift refuses to agree with what C. A. Gregory calls “Mauss’s three-

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29 For an ambitious attempt at proving the existence of the “truly free gift,” see James Laidlaw’s “A free gift makes no friends,” where he concentrates on the phenomenon called dan, which is a traditional exchange practice of India’s Jain renouncers (45-67).

30 Osteen refers to Alain Caillé’s “The Double inconceivability of the pure gift.” In fact, Simmel’s claim that exchange is productive/creative because “the sum of values is greater afterward than it was before” (44) falls in with Caillé’s line of thought concerning a kind of progress, something always added.

31 Seemingly to the contrary, Gouldner draws attention to another social function of reciprocity: besides fulfilling a stabilizing role, it is also crucial as a starting mechanism. This, however, refers to the help that the norm of reciprocity renders when mutual mistrust impedes exchange; “Like participants in a disarmament conference, each may say to the other, ‘You first!’ Thus the exchange may be delayed or altogether flounder and the relationship may be prevented from developing. The norm of reciprocity may serve as a starting mechanism in such circumstances by preventing or enabling the parties to break out of this impasse” (21-2). The reason why Gouldner may think so resides in his fusion of what L. Becker takes to be two separate yet mutually supportive virtues: generosity and the disposition to reciprocate, with generosity being the needed virtue in case of initiating a relationship, be it a business or a private matter (93).
stage theory of the evolution of the gift economy” where the first stage of “total prestations” (any form of exchange) was supposed to have been followed by the second stage of “gift economy” and the third and final stage of “commodity economy” (20).

Departing from the premise that gifts and commodities are two extreme points of the same continuum with gifts being more typical goods of exchange of non-market/gift economies, Gregory sees the difference between them as a question of degree, namely the (kinship) distance between clan/group members. Thus, when dealing with complete strangers who are to be found at the periphery of the circle of the group, “exchange assumes the pure commodity form” (42). This is to say that although between close relatives the goods of exchange are called “gifts,” they still are very far from being destined as offerings that are meant first and foremost to please, as the sentimental bourgeois myth of gifts would have one regard gifts. They are about bonding (in the case of inter-clan exchange) and/or competition (as it often happens when it comes to intra-clan gift-giving) (43). Along the same lines, without questioning that the same motive lies behind both gift and commodity, Gregory’s further comments concerning their difference focuses on the “whatness” of the goods of exchange—whether it is alienable (commodity) or inalienable (gift) (43)—and on whether the transaction is among the objects (commodity) or among the transactors (gift) (42), thus defining commodity exchange as an objectified transaction between alienable things and gift exchange as a subjective transaction between inalienable things/persons.

In fact, this so-called “bourgeois” tendency can be regarded as none other than an easily understandable defence mechanism against the increasing emphasis on self-interest and gain that was (and still is) so typical of the utilitarian attitude of Western capitalism. Aafke Komter’s terminology accords with this; she differentiates between an “anti-utilitarian” and a “utilitarian” view of the gift, the former of which downplays “the idea that gifts are caught in a cycle of reciprocity” and “the freedom of the gift is seen as one of its main characteristics,” while in the case of the “utilitarian approach, assumptions about rational actors weighing their preferences according to some utility are predominant” (93). As long as it is seen as an “either/or” question, my attitude tends to fall in with the utilitarian approach. Closer to the truth, however, is a third possible way of looking at the question of the gift, which Komter propounds and I likewise adopt; taking into account “both the variety of the forms of the gift

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32 The editorial note to Mauss’s The Gift comments on the fact that “the French terms prestations and contre-prestations have no direct English equivalents” and have been, for brevity’s sake, translated as “total services” and “total counter-services.” They represent “the actual act of exchange of gifts and rendering of services, and the reciprocating or return of these gifts and services” (vi), respectively.
and the universality of the underlying principle [...] gifts reflect a multi-purpose symbolic ‘utility’ that transcends both utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism” (93). This attitude refuses to equate the belief in the principle of reciprocity with a perpetual desire for sordid gain whenever the question of giving arises.

Furthermore, along the lines of the division between the private/personal/traditional sphere, where the gift belongs, and the public/business/economy-oriented sphere, in which commodities reign, one is led to believe in the existence of the gift as something uncontaminated by any kind of expectation—thus making gift and free/pure gift interchangeable terms—posing, therefore, a difference between exchange and reciprocity, with gift and reciprocity in the “sentimental camp” and commodity and exchange in the field of market economy. This is Alain Testart’s approach (he even furnishes us with a scale to show the varying relationship of gifts and the obligation to reciprocate [Osteen 6]), as well as Lewis Hyde’s (72, 78) and, to a certain extent, Robert A. Emmons’s (37, 45, 153).

As I do not believe in free/pure gifts and therefore I hold the obligation to reciprocate to be inseparable from any gift, I do not see any sufficient reason to make a distinction between reciprocity and exchange either. Agreeing with Simmel, I view every human interaction as exchange, the productive process of exchanging values and ending up with a surplus value as a result (47-9). To be even more down-to-earth about it, Blau is right in positing that the initial incentive to embark on any transaction/exchange/relationship and the willingness to discharge one’s obligation to reciprocate, and thereby perpetuate the relationship, stem from self-interest, with an eye upon that surplus value (benefit) (92, 97).

Having posited that, the slipperiness of the term “value” necessitates further observations. Firstly, in accordance with Bourdieu’s concept, I take value to be the sum of any individual’s or any object’s capitals, be they economic, social, cultural, human, symbolic, or sexual/erotic. Secondly, along Simmelian lines again, I hold that it is not inherent in things, and therefore it is relative and in need of comparison (50-1). It further follows that the benefit/gain/surplus value that is the result of an exchange is also relative, depending on

33 The definition of “value” that I draw on here is from the Dictionary of the Social Sciences, which also offers a helpful summary of the terms used by Bourdieu in “The Forms of Capital” and Distinction. Bourdieu’s terminology I shall discuss in the subsequent section entitled “Capital.”

34 In connection with the relativity of value, John Alberti also points out that “value depends on human interest and not on any intrinsic quality in the object or person of value” (13). Discussing The Golden Bowl, Alberti opines that the value of Maggie and the Prince’s marriage must come from a partnership of husband and wife (13); they create and maintain the value of their marriage (13), which, in turn, becomes the symbol of their joint effort. The mere fact of being legally married does not, therefore, mean much; the empty form has to be filled by meaning/value, which is the task of the married parties.
“the measure of sacrifice demanded in acquiring it” (Simmel 49, 51). Paradoxically, while any challenge or obstacle in the way of obtaining something makes it more desirable and therefore more valuable (Simmel 53), there is, at the same time, the universal yet seemingly contradictory tendency that L. Becker calls “the maximal-benefit minimal-sacrifice rule” (112): although people respect and value great efforts and sacrifices made by others, when it comes to themselves, the less pain and exertion the better.

Concerning the question of the amount of sacrifice and gain, there arises the issue of “proportionality” and “fittingness” in the case of reciprocation (L. Becker 107, 111). Looking at Sahlins’s grouping of the various kinds of reciprocity (balanced, positive, and negative), or Gouldner’s discussion of exploitation as “reciprocity imbalance”/“unequal exchange” (6), it becomes clear that there is a great difference between balanced and unbalanced (negative) or positive reciprocity; the latter types of unbalanced reciprocity entail control, domination or exploitation, while it is only the endeavor at a balanced reciprocity that can be regarded as a fundamental moral virtue. As L. Becker points out, in order to create social equilibrium and lasting human relationships, the aim is not to subjugate but to cooperate, help or please (106). Thus, when I state that in order to reach (moral) excellence every individual should strive to acquire and use the disposition to reciprocate, this aim is always towards a balanced type of reciprocity, that is, an endeavor to engage in (roughly) equal exchange.

“Roughly” is pertinent here because it would not only be nigh impossible to find the exact equivalent of the gift received, but it would actually be counter-effective. Gouldner rightly argues that it is precisely the subsistence of these “outstanding obligations,” this “shadow of indebtedness,” that envelops any human transaction that enables reciprocity to “contribute substantially to the stability of social systems” (13) by forging long-term relationships; “It is obviously inexpedient for creditors to break off relationships with those who have outstanding obligations to them. It may also be inexpedient for the debtors to do so because their creditors may not again allow them to run up a bill of social indebtedness” (13). Stripped to its essentials, Gouldner opines that the goal is not to be “quits.”

Surely Emerson is right in echoing Aristotle and in drawing our attention to how onerous it is to remain under (however slight) an obligation, because it seems to curtail one’s

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35 Simmel’s following line of thought concerning the importance of sacrifice when it comes to the value/merit of a thing or an action is of great relevance concerning the recurring motif of renunciation in Jamesian fiction (Isabel’s or Strether’s return at the end of The Portrait and the Ambassadors, respectively). “[...] all ethical merit signifies that for the sake of the morally desirable deed contrary drives and wishes must be combated and given up. If the act occurs without any conquest, as the direct issue of uninhibited impulses, its content may be objectively desirable, but it is not accorded a subjective moral value in the same sense. Only through the sacrifice of the lower and yet so seductive goods does one reach the height of ethical merit; and the more tempting the seductions and the more profound their sacrifice, the loftier the height” (53).
independence and belive one’s self-sufficiency. Hence the understandability of the universal tendency to try to get even at the risk of incurring the charge of being ungrateful due to our “posthaste reciprocation” (Blau 29, 99), or even to try to “get on top” by making the return gift disproportionately bigger—just what Aristotle’s “magnanimous man” would do. Indeed, it is not only Nietzsche’s Zarathustra who follows suit and prefers to be magnanimous and give excessively while being wary of debt (Osteen 13). By the same token one does not have to go to Melanesia to observe “the ‘property wars’ of so-called potlatch societies” in order to notice the latent tendency of human beings to either break the chain of reciprocity by “settling all bills” or by “destroying the opponents” by driving them into a game of who can give more extravagant things, which results in one’s superior position and the other’s bankruptcy (Mauss 5-7, Berking 40-9).

The way to break the chain of a “wicked” circle of reciprocity is to keep in mind that one’s moral obligation to reciprocate is valid only in the case of good gifts. To explain with L. Becker’s example concerning parent-child relations, “there is a saturation point for many of the things children receive, beyond which more of those things is not a good” (210, original emphasis). In other words, “evil received should be resisted” and “evil received should not be returned with evil” (L. Becker 94-97). Indeed, the obligation to reciprocate refers only to goods received and because “good received should be returned with good” (L. Becker 89), it is crucial to keep in mind that “the good returned will have to be good for the recipient, and (eventually) perceived by the recipient both as a good and as a return” (L. Becker 107, original emphasis).

Starting once again from the principle that the disposition to reciprocate is not inherent but has to be acquired in the course of one’s moral education when growing up to be an individual fit to live side by side with the other members of a community, it therefore follows that it is being formed simultaneously with the individual’s images of both self and the other. The three things remain interlinked after the formation: one chooses (return) gifts according to one’s image of another individual (what (s)he would like etc.) as well as according to one’s self-image (the choice of a gift is representative of one’s taste, judgment, social position etc.) (Berking 5-6, Schwartz 1-2). This is why gift-giving is loaded with “strategic implications” which, once again, points to the impossibility of a free/pure gift. In key with this, Lévi-

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36 “Gifts” and Book 4.3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, respectively. Aristotle opines that the magnanimous man “is the sort of man to confer benefits, but he is ashamed of receiving them; for one is the mark of a superior, the other of an inferior. And he is apt to confer greater benefits in return; for thus the original benefactor besides being paid will incur a debt to him [...].” As to Emerson, “the champion of self-reliance” in his 1844 essay entitled “Gifts” suggests that gifts “invade our privacy and demolish our carefully constructed autonomy” (13).
Strauss refers to the gift as a “means of control” (85), while Schwartz calls it a “generator of identity” (1-2), and Berking defines it as “identity politics” and “impression management” (6-7); what we give represents us and our opinion of the recipient (and the outside world/the other), enabling us to forge a desired identity for ourselves, or even to forge an unpleasing one and force it on others.

My ultimate remark likewise stems from the statement that the disposition to reciprocate is not inherent but has to be acquired. What would at first seem to be a conscious and therefore not spontaneous behavior opening up the dreary possibility to reduce every human relationship to “book-keeping” and artificiality of emotions, is, on the contrary, a disposition that ideally becomes like second nature and enables one to behave quite spontaneously. This is why it is a disposition after all: “It is rarely even necessary [to keep score], once the habit of reciprocating is well ingrained, any more than sounding out the syllables is necessary for fluent readers. We just learn to keep relationships in balance without the sort of calculations that destroy spontaneity” (L. Becker 137-8).

“Capital”

Not surprisingly, I first turn to Marx’s Capital so as to define the eponymous concept. For us the most relevant aspect of capital in Marx’s analysis is that it is an abstraction, “not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is rather the means of production transformed into capital, which in themselves are no more capital than gold or silver in itself is money” (465). In other words, there are several other forms of capital besides the economic variety that can serve as means to an end. As to these other forms, it is likewise advisable to delineate what I mean by them, especially because these concepts also tend to be used in a rather broad sense—which occasionally results in overlaps and synonymous signification—resulting in almost hopeless ambiguity if one is to try and consider all their possible meanings. I have accordingly singled out Pierre Bourdieu as one of the corner-stones of my understanding of these terms.

Similarly to Blau, Bourdieu was also bent on constructing investigative frameworks and concepts to explore the dynamics of power relations in social life. By focusing on domination that stems from the stratification of society (classes within a hierarchy), his aim was to portray the “struggles between classes and class fractions in modern capitalist society.
and [to teach] people to tailor their expectations and their own view of themselves to their place in the hierarchy,” as well as to provide “vehicles to contest the place a class fraction has in that hierarchy and for the individual to claim a place in a given class fraction” (Blunden, original emphasis).37 Similarly to the method of this dissertation, Bourdieu’s approach was also multidisciplinary; his theoretical framework is the fusion of his findings in the fields of philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. The most important of his concepts for my purposes are the following: “field,” “habitus,” “capital” in general and its forms (economic, social, cultural, symbolic). In the following delineation of these terms I will, however, refer to other sociologists’ definitions as well, so as to provide a multi-sided view of them.

Concerning the different forms of capital, Bourdieu uses the term “social capital” as early38 as 1972 in the Outline of a Theory of Practice, but it is in his 1983 essay tellingly entitled “The Forms of Capital” that he attempts to clarify the difference between the economic, social, and cultural varieties, with a reference to the symbolic function of embodied cultural capital, and the insufficiency of the term human capital compared with the institutionalized state of the cultural variety. It is a year later, in Distinction, when he not only uses these same terms, but he finally adds educational and symbolic capital as well. Sociologist Adam Isaiah Green subsequently enriches the list by adding erotic/sexual capital.

Before turning to Bourdieu’s descriptions of the types of capital, however, let us clarify the concepts of “field” and “habitus.” Modern society is viewed as constituting “distinct fields of action” (McNay 106). “The field is defined as a network or configuration of objective relations between positions. The configuration receives its form from the relation between each position and the distribution of a certain type of capital” (McNay 106). In other words, “field” refers to any set of social relations, any site with an ongoing struggle between the individuals that comprise that set, who—forever bent on exchanging capital—want to establish the value of the variety they are in possession of before embarking on transactions. The various milieus of Jamesian characters are, therefore, so many fields with different expectations and value systems regarding the several forms of capital.

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37 Andy Blunden’s comments concerning Bourdieu’s work can be found on <http://www.home.mira.net/~andy/works/bourdieu-review.htm>. Despite Blunden’s blunders concerning syntax, his (chiefly Marxist) website contains some interesting observations.

38 As to “earliness,” for precision’s sake it is perhaps advisable to point out that one of the earliest uses of the term date back to the mid-nineteenth century: Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, James Madison’s The Federalist Papers, and John Dewey’s The School and Society are among the most noteworthy examples of the occurrence of “social capital” in the works of nineteenth-century thinkers.
“Habitus” could be defined as “a set of acquired patterns of thought, behavior, and taste, which is said by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of Theory and Practice* to constitute a link between social structures and social practice (or social action)” (*A Dictionary of Sociology*). Yet another way to describe this notion is to say that it is a “system of durable, transposable dispositions that mediates an individual’s actions and the external conditions of production,” with which Bourdieu captures “the incorporation of the social into the corporeal” (McNay 99). McNay further remarks its openness and modifiability: “Habitus is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies structures” (103). Thus, although one may have a certain disposition as a result of one’s (social) background and upbringing, it is exposed to change at all times due to the modifying effect of the experiences a person collects.

This is an important point to consider in the case of Jamesian protagonists—especially the American girls with their quest to grow up. In this light, they are not so many sheets of *tabula rasa* but individuals with a habitus already, which had been conditioned by their American background and upbringing. Exactly because habitus is not fixed but constantly modifiable by experience, their European experience—the main lesson in socialization/contextualization—is supposed to be decisive in the adoption of the disposition to reciprocate (and the separate but interlinked disposition to be grateful). Thus, habitus, which is a disposition itself, should ideally include the dispositions to reciprocate and to be grateful. This, in turn, falls in with what we have said about reciprocation and what we will find out about gratefulness: not only does one have to acquire them, but also actively keep them up (Emmons 17, 35), even if, after a while, they should become like second nature and the relative spontaneity of our gestures should thereby remain (L. Becker 137-8).

Still connected to the modifiability of habitus is the question of the fixed/core self. A crucial part of my line of thought will be to conclude that, mostly along Freudian/Lacanian lines, the existence of a fixed/core self is an illusion. Just like our habitus, our self is also in a constant state of becoming, a part of the general flux (fragmentation of the world, irreducible gap between self and other).

Depending on the nationality and family background with their specific traditions, as well as depending on what habitus it results in, as well as on what experiences the individual may collect (which may modify her/his habitus), each Jamesian protagonist is an idiosyncratic version of the transactor partaking in exchanges with her/his fellow individuals. Or, to put it simply, in order to be an active member of society, it is via exchanges that (s)he participates.
in the “business called life.” It is important to note that “[a]ny field is marked by a tension or conflict between the interests of different groups who struggle to gain control over a field’s capital. In the final instance, all fields are determined by the demands of the capitalist system of accumulation” (McNay 106). This last remark reflects Bourdieu’s view of every exchange being loaded with strategic implications and expectations, and everything given having strings attached. Dos ut des: “I give so that you may give,” as the motto of my whole analysis puts it.

McNay’s succinct version of Bourdieu’s concept of capital may be an ideal point of departure. She remarks that capital “denotes the different goods, resources and values around which power relations in a particular field crystallize” (106). Bourdieu’s own description in “The Forms of Capital” is a bit more complex and immediately raises all kinds of issues:

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its “incorporated,” embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a vis insita, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a lex insita, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. (“Forms” 241)

Similarly to Marx’s view of capital as “means of production” (465), then, capital for Bourdieu—“accumulated labor”—is an abstraction. This is why there may be more varieties of capital: it not only stands for tangible goods, but for power based on the potential of production (and purchase) as well. It is “the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world,” thus one may say that it is what makes the world go round. We have already said that about money. Yet the interesting thing is that although Bourdieu differentiates between several types of capital, it is still the economic variety—money/cash, assets—that is placed above all; it is the fastest, the most liquid, the most neutral, and so the safest one of all.

Social capital is a resource based on who you know; it is a particular network of relationships, or, to be more elegant, “it is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (“Forms” 248). Differently from Bourdieu but still in line with my understanding of this concept, it is worthwhile mentioning L. J. Hanifan’s definition of it as the sum of “those tangible resources [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse […]” (Putnam, Bowling Alone 4). This approach could perhaps be called more of a “socializing
capital,” essential to the healthy functioning of any community or social grouping of individuals. While Bourdieu stresses the potential benefits which a person as an individual may derive from social capital, Hanifan emphasizes its social dimensions, regarding the individual first and foremost as a member of society. Robert Putnam similarly concentrates on social capital’s importance in enhancing civic engagement and “foster[ing] collective action” (“Rebuilding” 28), which furthermore falls in with Carlos García Timón’s definition of social capital as the ability of any individual to make ties within a system.

James Coleman is right in pointing out—thereby also agreeing with Bourdieu—that it is a neutral resource depending on the individual uses to which it is put (98). To put it differently, it is well and good to know influential and important people, but it is not enough; one must be able to turn it to advantage. Bourdieu consequently adds that social capital is nothing less than a tool that can be used as a powerful weapon, enabling one to attain a position of domination and the possibility to exploit others. It is a potentially dangerous resource exactly by virtue of being neutral; both self-centered and community-centered aspirations can be assisted by its application, always depending on personal choice and skill.

Human capital is also an elastic enough term to cause confusion. It is sometimes used to denote a mixture of cultural and social capital, namely an individual’s character and connections with others. However, it is also used as a synonym of educational capital. Perhaps the most succinct way to define it is as the set of all the skills and knowledge that a person is endowed with and can apply when working; it therefore indicates her/his value at a given workplace. In An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (Book 2), Adam Smith counted it as one of the four types of fixed capital. He described it as the aggregate of skills, dexterity (physical, intellectual, psychological), and judgment. Bourdieu, in fact, stresses the inappropriateness of the term compared with cultural capital:

From the very beginning, a definition of human capital, despite its humanistic connotations, does not move beyond economism and ignores, inter alia, the fact that the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family. Moreover, the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up. (“Forms” 244)

Cultural capital, in turn, is to play the greatest part when we consider the Jamesian scenario as the world of various transactors bent on exchanging various types of capital. It is a comprehensive term because, on the one hand, it comprises forms of knowledge, skills and
education, thus overlapping with human and educational capital. On the other hand, it also includes advantages that are derived from family ties, status, and connections, thereby overlapping with social capital. So far, then, human capital may stand for the mixture of social and cultural capital, and cultural capital may stand for a mixture of human and social capital. This would entail that cultural capital, despite Bourdieu’s original aim, is not necessarily more comprehensive than the human variety, at least not anymore; the frequent usage of the terms brought along a fusion that brings about confusion.

To allay such confusion as much as possible and to show the more comprehensive nature of cultural over human/educational capital, at least concerning Bourdieu’s concepts, it is helpful to revert to the three subtypes of the cultural variety amongst which he distinguishes: institutionalized, objectified, and embodied cultural capital. In its institutionalized state, cultural capital refers to academic credentials and qualifications, thus at first glance it indeed appears to be synonymous with the human/educational variety: it similarly bears reference to the value that an individual may have for employers by applying her/his skills and thereby earning wages (converting it into economic capital on the labor market). Bourdieu’s reason for setting it above any random set of skills one may utilize lies in the emphasis on its reference to academic credentials. Because cultural capital comes into being via one’s skills having been sanctioned by society, the skills thus become more valuable; they become more akin to economic capital in that they become generally more accepted (taken for granted) and more liquid:

[Note] the difference between the capital of the autodidact, which may be called into question at any time, or even the cultural capital of the courtier, which can yield only ill-defined profits, of fluctuating value, in the market of high-society exchanges, and the cultural capital academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications, formally independent of the person of their bearer. With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time. (“Forms” 248, emphasis added)

The objectified state of cultural capital denotes an individual’s possessions, such as paintings, sculptures or works of art. Before we congratulate ourselves on finally finding a
clear-cut case, the concept becomes more complex as soon as the following necessary specification is made:

However, it should not be forgotten that it exists as symbolically and materially active, effective capital only insofar as it is appropriated by agents and implemented and invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production (the artistic field, the scientific field, etc.) and, beyond them, in the field of the social classes-struggles in which the agents wield strengths and obtain profits proportionate to their mastery of this objectified capital, and therefore to the extent of their embodied capital. (“Forms” 247)

Similarly to social capital, then, the objectified cultural capital also remains a neutral resource to a certain extent. It all depends on its possessor; to what uses (s)he puts her/his cultural goods. As long as they are hanging, say, on her/his dining-room wall and their main function is to be complacently admired during a pleasant repast, they do not become objectified capital but remain so many pieces of decoration. They have to be “active” and “effective” in the hands of “agents” who “implement” and “invest” them as “weapon[s]” and as so many “stake[s] in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production” and “of the social classes-struggles.”

It is the embodied state of cultural capital that I hold to be of the most importance and interest, as it refers to the individual as (s)he is; personal character and way of thinking are made up of elements that are inherited and acquired from our surroundings, the imprint left on us by the society we are members of—culture, traditions, manners and mores of our nation, our family and friends. So far, embodied cultural capital sounds like habitus, and Bourdieu does, indeed, make the connection: “This embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange” (“Forms” 245, emphasis added). The rest of his comment is interesting in that it signals the difficulty of exchanging such capital. The fact that it is “the integral part of the person” makes it much less liquid than any other variety, which, ironically enough, has a positive side to it as well: it entails a protection against being exploited by one’s fellow-transactors:

It follows that the use or exploitation of cultural capital presents particular problems for the holders of economic or political capital, whether they be private patrons or, at the other extreme, entrepreneurs employing executives endowed with a specific cultural competence.
(not to mention the new state patrons). How can this capital, so closely linked to the person, be bought without buying the person and so losing the very effect of legitimation which presupposes the dissimulation of dependence? How can this capital be concentrated—as some undertakings demand—without concentrating the possessors of the capital, which can have all sorts of unwanted consequences? (“Forms” 245)

Without listing symbolic capital as a separate variety, Bourdieu does, in “Forms,” refer to the embodied state of cultural capital being “predisposed to function as symbolic capital” (186). Indeed, if we look at the symbolic variety that he finally added to economic, social, and cultural capital in *Distinction*, we find it closely resembling the embodied state of cultural capital. Moreover, it bears resemblance to yet another concept, namely “status.” Symbolic capital, then, is akin to reputation; it refers to an individual’s resources that can be derived from one’s status, prestige, recognition, or honor. Bourdieu’s definition of this variety is actually based on Max Weber’s understanding of “status,” one of the three components of social stratification: class (economic situation, one’s position on the market), status (non-economic position), and party (political affiliation).39

Although status and symbolic capital (as well as the embodied state of cultural capital) are non-transferable—one can sell/buy them only by selling/buying the person to whom they belong—they are also fragile. In spite of the fact that they are inalienable and enhance the value of the individual who acquired them in the first place, and who thereby seems to be sure of having a value of which (s)he cannot be robbed, it is not only a constant effort to live up to one’s attributed value based on them, but it also has to be accepted that they can actually be depleted/expended (Blau 132-3). We shall see the uncomfortable position Prince Amerigo lands himself in due to his endeavor to enact a transaction with the Ververs based on his possession of such capital in *The Golden Bowl*.

Finally, erotic/sexual capital—a concept based on Bourdieu’s theory and developed by Green40—may be defined as a source of power drawn from one’s own sexual attractiveness to other individuals. It is a form of capital interconvertible with other varieties. As I have already signaled, the discussion shall revert to this variety in connection with *The Golden Bowl* in the chapter entitled “A brief excursus on erotic capital.”

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39 For a more detailed discussion of Weberian stratification, see his *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, especially the chapter entitled “Status Groups and Classes.”

40 Apart from Adam Isaiah Green, sociologists John Levi Martin and Matt George have also greatly contributed to the development of this concept. See “Theories of Sexual Stratification: Toward an Analytics of the Sexual Field and a Theory of Sexual Capital.”
PART II. “CAPITAL” BEGINNINGS

1. Looking Ralph Touchett’s gift-horse in the mouth

Ralph Touchett persuades his dying father to bequeath to his newly found cousin, Isabel Archer, half of the fortune that would be his due. How nice of him. What is more, he does not want his request to be revealed. How really nice of him; thus he even curtails the least little possibility of receiving the smallest possible token of gratitude. Not even a word of thanks from the recipient does he want in return.41 This surely must be an act of pure generosity, a free gift, or simply a gift as the adherents to the anti-utilitarian (sentimentalizing bourgeois) concept would have it. Putting Ralph’s seemingly gallant gesture under a magnifying glass, however, I propose to exhibit a specimen of the gift by adopting the approach that transcends both the anti-utilitarian and the utilitarian, and to consequently posit that Ralph’s gift does have strings attached to it and does “reflect a multi-purpose symbolic ‘utility’ ” (Komter 93) without making him a cold calculating fellow.

Ralph is one of those Jamesian protagonists who are endowed with both the sensibility and the means to enjoy life to the full, but who are, alas, denied the option to do so because of being terminally ill. When the other typical Jamesian character—who has the sensibility and the vitality but not the financial background to soar as high as (s)he would like to—appears in the shape of charming Isabel Archer, the rich imaginative invalid is overjoyed. By endowing his cousin with the means to realize her ideals, Ralph not only finds some use for his money, but he actually buys himself a ticket to the “finest entertainment that the world now had to offer him” as well: “the conscious observation of a lovely woman” (230).

41 In this Ralph resembles Mr. Jarndyce in Dickens’s Bleak House: a man of an exceptionally generous and grateful disposition, his greatest fear is to be thanked; “[…] he, who was probably the most grateful of mankind upon the least occasion, [desired] to escape the gratitude of others” (110).
It is useful at this point to consider what L. Becker says about the two dimensions of the notion of balanced exchange: “One concerns what it costs the participants to make their ‘gifts,’ the other concerns the benefits they derive from their ‘receipts’” (111). As to the first dimension, renouncing half of his fortune on behalf of Isabel is not such a great sacrifice because he could not and would not use it anyway. As to the second, not only does he expect to be entertained, but it is admittedly also the “finest” kind of amusement he could wish for. He has nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Or, to be more precise, his “investment” does put him at risk of being “awfully sold” (419) if Isabel turns out to be too weak to make good use of such a fine thing as the freedom and the power that so much money gives her. His risk, however, merely concerns the quality of the entertainment, or, better still, its genre; it may turn out to be a tragedy.

What Freedman calls Ralph’s “reifying vision” (Professions 153) turns Isabel into a beautiful objet d’art, finer even than a Greek bas-relief or a Titian, which, like a “gift of fate” (253), suddenly arrives “by post, to hang on [his] wall” or “to stick over [his] chimney piece” just when he was feeling “more blue, more bored” (253-4) than ever. The great irony is, of course, that Isabel is not a static artwork that withstands being hung on the wall of “his mental portrait gallery” (Freedman, Professions 154). What would make her even “finer than the finest work of art” (254) is exactly the source of her tragedy; she is a human being who grows and changes “along the idiosyncratic lines of her own character” (Freedman, Professions 155). The fact that her choices are not the ones Ralph would have wanted her to make disappoints him in more than one way; not only is he robbed of the entertainment he expected to have, but, even more importantly, he is denied the possibility to live by proxy, so to say, with Isabel as his surrogate or ambassador of sorts. The reason why he deems his cousin to be a worthy vessel of his own ideals is that—due to the distorting effect of his aestheticizing/reifying vision (Freedman, Professions 153)—Ralph idealizes Isabel and mistakenly interprets her ambitions to be the same as his.

At first glance, Ralph’s wish to live at least by proxy is perfectly understandable and even admirable if one considers the gravity of his physical condition. Yet if one compares him with Milly Theale’s attempts at living and loving in The Wings of the Dove, and furthermore bears in mind that “a certain fund of indolence” and a “good deal of native indifference” made him easily reconcile himself to “doing nothing” (230), his wish to transfer the task of taking some share of the suffering and toil that living entails leaves ample room for critical afterthought. Choosing to be the participant observer of the lives of others is not only a necessity, but also a preference. Ralph is reluctant to get involved in the messy business
called “life,” where the individual inevitably exposes her/himself to disappointment and pain in her/his endeavor to form and sustain relationships with other individuals and become and remain a member of society. He finds the practice of generosity a safer virtue than reciprocity because it puts him in the superior position of the donor (giver) to whom the recipient is necessarily obliged.

The fact that he does not wish to be acknowledged as a donor and wants to be spared any possible show of gratitude does not disprove this statement. To the contrary, it proves how reluctant Ralph is to engage in any human relationship whatsoever because in revealing himself as a benefactor, a strong bond would be formed between him and Isabel. He is afraid to live and love; to participate in life in general, and to risk loving Isabel in particular. To have Isabel as his surrogate promises to solve both dilemmas by enabling him to live through the one he loves.

That Ralph wants to remain unknown to Isabel as the real donor has some more prosaic reasons as well. Firstly, their cousinship is a recent discovery; they have only just met. Offering Isabel such a great sum of money upon such short acquaintance would be in very questionable taste. Secondly, Isabel is a “special case”; it is exactly her fierce independence so much admired by Ralph that makes her “averse to being under pecuniary obligations” (232) of any kind, let alone one of such magnitude. Thirdly, her situation is not exactly what one would call desperate; unlike Watch and Ward’s Nora Lambert, Isabel is not destitute and not young enough to be patronized. Not that Ralph would be willing to take the same chances that Roger Lawrence takes; the young James’s relatively outspoken style makes no secret of the designs of the wealthy Bostonian to mold his “little daughter of charity” (33)—his “investment,” his “property” (93)—into the wife of his dreams, while he is willing to take the risk of not being the one that the grown up Nora chooses. A text richly studded with phrases like “monstrous burden of gratitude” (110), the “comfortable glow of charity” that “prosperity” enables one to emanate, the “small capital of sentimental patronage for which [someone] desires a secure investment” (69), it is one of the cruder examples of the ever-recurring Jamesian theme: human relationships are formed and sustained by actions that always have expectations/strings attached to them, however disinterested or charitable they may appear.

In fact, using the words “benefactor” and “beneficiary” may mislead us into thinking that we are automatically dealing with a one-way transfer instead of a two-way exchange; apparently, the benefactor gives while the beneficiary receives. Seemingly, the former has a surplus of something, while the latter is in need of it. This may therefore suggest that any
relationship between a benefactor and a beneficiary does not aim at, and can never be, a balanced exchange; it rather smacks of “reciprocity imbalance” (Gouldner 6). How can it be termed commendable, then, if it seems to go against our ideas earlier endorsed; namely, L. Becker’s definition of the disposition to reciprocate as a fundamental moral virtue, which deemed balanced exchange the only kind of exchange we should aspire to (106)? I propose to resolve this contradiction by looking at a number of Jamesian benefactors and beneficiaries as transactors of different kinds of capital, which should lead to the satisfactory conclusion that, at all times, both benefactor and beneficiary gain something from the exchange.

2. Putting Ralph in context: The evolution of “the benefactor” in James’s early fiction

Paradoxical as it may seem, I choose to go ahead by taking a backward glance. A quick look at Jamesian fiction preceding The Portrait helps me place Ralph among yet another group of characters: the benefactors. Be it a (wo)man of health, of intelligence, of sensitivity, or stricken with a terminal illness, or devoid of imagination; be it an American or an English person, young or old, the Jamesian benefactress/benefactor is in possession of a hefty amount of economic capital that (s)he is either “dying” to exchange for some other variety, or for which (s)he is targeted by others. In the latter case (s)he is regarded as a source of economic capital that could be accessed by supplying the social, cultural, human, symbolic, or erotic variety in return. Indeed, benefactresses/benefactors always want something for their money, however charitable the impulse appears, even to them. Or they are always offered something in return, however destitute or selfish the beneficiary may seem at first.

Examining the financial motif in Jamesian fiction, Donald Mull rightly calls “A Light Man” from 1869 a “fairly obvious example” with “the least subtle of James’s first-person villains” for a narrator. Indeed, this early tale is something of an “open and shut case” regarding both benefactor and beneficiary. This, however, makes it all the more ideal for my purposes. Having selected it along with four other of James’s earlier works preceding The Portrait, I would demonstrate how the five benefactors of these stories are more transparent cases than Ralph and can be taken as facets of his more complex personality.

42 In fact, the whole ado is about the questionable motivation of one of the potential beneficiaries, namely Theodore Lisle. He, however, turns out to be as irreproachable as his friend and rival Max Austin had originally thought him to be. It is because the story is told from Max’s point of view that the reader is supposed to share his suspicions concerning the purity of Theodore’s conduct, who, nevertheless, fails to become a complex personality.
Naturally, they all have mixed motives and it would be a sign of inferior literature if they really stood for a single character trait or a single aim, yet it seems fair to emphasize a leading interest in each case: Mr. Sloane in “A Light Man” wants to be entertained; Roger Lawrence in Watch and Ward dreams of an ideal wife. Rowland Mallet in Roderick Hudson aims to be a creative artist by financially assisting a struggling creative artist—Roderick would be his artwork. Christopher Newman in The American plans to purchase a wife who is the embodiment of “the best of Europe”—culture, ancestry, style, grace, beauty etc.—thus he is ready to exchange his economic capital for what Bourdieu terms embodied cultural capital. The mortally ill Longstaff in Longstaff’s Marriage wants to keep on living “in” Diana Belfield by enabling her to use all the freedom that (his) money and noble origins entail. Amusement, emotions, creativity, beauty, life; these are the things that benefactors aspire to.

3. Patronage in exchange for entertainment: Mr. Sloane, the benefactor in “A Light Man”

Without intending to be harsh, Mr. Sloane’s being on the brink of the grave may be thought of as less lamentable than Ralph’s nearness to death; Mr. Sloane is an old man who lives under the delusion that he has already “drained the cup of life to the dregs” (174). He is convinced that he has lived, loved, seen, suffered. Furthermore, “he fancies himself one of the weightiest of men [while] he is essentially one of the lightest” (173)—this, at least, is the opinion of another light man, Max, one of Mr. Sloane’s charming beneficiaries, the narrator of James’s rather “lightweight” story. The indolent young man considers his benefactor a selfish vain old fool, who “has never loved anyone but himself” (174). Indeed, as Max judges Mr. Sloane to be a person who “understands favor and friendship only as a selfish rapture—a reaction, an infatuation, an act of aggressive, exclusive patronage” (181), he has even less qualms about exploiting the old man’s frenzied friendship than his own indifferent and egotistic nature would otherwise cause him.

Rich and bored Mr. Sloane would really give anything to have his fancy tickled (182), which makes his relationships with his protégés unnaturally intense, intimate,⁴³ and volatile. He picks up and drops his alleged “secretaries” in rapid succession, with the apparent aim of

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⁴³ Edel actually lays stress on James’s use of “very libidinal language” throughout this early tale, which makes male relationships pervaded with covert homosexuality; both Sloane and Theodore are seen as potential homosexuals, something that Max recognizes and turns to his advantage (82-3). Mull likewise talks of a “hint of inversion” present in the story, yet he refers exclusively to the relationship between Theodore and Max (16).
having assistance in writing his memoirs. Max’s friend Theodore does prove his mettle by
the end of the story; after a short period of doubt and nigh belligerence, Max is finally
reassured about the irreproachableness of Theodore’s motives. The latter is the only one of
the long line of protégés who expects to be paid by Mr. Sloane for the honest work he had
been employed to do in the first place. Theodore is mercenary only as far as his dire need of
money forces him to count on payment for his services.

It is Max as a beneficiary, however, with whom we are first and foremost concerned; he is a fitting match for his benefactor, completing James’s early portrait of any such relationship as a sordid affair. Indeed, the desire to use the other forever permeates the relationships of James’s world. In his early works it is spelled out for the reader, leaving a bitter aftertaste and a sense that human beings are disappointing egotistic at the core. Using the phraseology of *The Wings*, his literary universe may be said to be divided between “the workers and the worked”: those who exploit and those who are exploited. There is always some use to which the other person can and should be put. The irony behind it all is that the dividing line between workers and worked—or benefactors and beneficiaries, if you prefer—is far more ambiguous than it may seem at first, and, as I am endeavoring to prove, in ideal cases the two roles merge; they are the two sides of the same coin.

This is *not* to say that James was a cynic; if one is pressed to give it a name, it may be better, for one thing, to attribute his stance to that of a realist. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that what James had been so steadfastly trying to drive home is that although such may be the human condition, it is not so much the ugliness of reality as the misleading nature of illusions forced on mankind that lead one to disenchantment when faced with reality. There is nothing terrible about giving with the intention to get something in return. There are, of course, extreme cases, such as that of Mr. Sloane and Max, but it does not necessarily mean that something given with strings attached cannot be the basis of satisfactory human relationships.

Although it *is* a rather repulsive portrait of both benefactor and beneficiary, while it lasts, the relationship between Max and Mr. Sloane is mutually satisfactory. Max has nowhere to go, nothing to do, but, “in the name of bare nutrition” (166), he urgently needs a situation. However hollow at the core, he does “pass for a superior fellow,” who is “intelligent, well-informed, accomplished, amiable, strong,” who has “a keen relish for letters, for music, for science, for art” (166)—in a word, he has plenty of cultural and erotic capital to exchange. Furthermore, prematurely indifferent and world-weary as he may be, he does greatly enjoy Mr. Sloane’s house; he has a “sense of perfect well-being in this perfectly
appointed home,” leading an “absolutely comfortable life” in this “delicious old house” (167).
Alas, if Mr. Sloane was an old widow “instead of an old widower” (167), it would be a perfect
match; Max’s future could be secured. With the volatile infatuation that is so typical of Mr.
Sloane towards his protégés, Max knows his position is not to last forever; even if he
succeeds in supplanting Theodore and becomes a personal secretary instead of remaining a
guest, he is sure to fall out of favor sooner or later.
Yet as long as it lasts, Max’s footing in the household as the temporary substitute for
ailing Theodore is very convenient. There is nothing fatiguing for Max in the task to “read to
the old man, lay down the book awhile, with his finger in the place, and let him talk; take it up
again, read another dozen pages and submit to another commentary” and so on, and so forth,
as far as the literary schemes go. Apart from that, the more the old man is bullied and
contradicted, the more his fancy is tickled (182), the more he “runs after” Max,” “devours”
him and makes a fool of himself in the process. However, if this is what he wants for
entertainment, he is a happy man; Max surely does not begrudge him any of these services as
long as he can subsist in such a delicious state of “slothful inaction” (164) and “magnificent
languor” (167).
The fact that Max is left high and dry in the end is not because his conscience gets the
better of him; he cannot bear the thought of remaining in uncertainty concerning Theodore’s
motives and so he does not take advantage of dying Mr. Sloane’s wish to have the old will in
Theodore’s favor burnt. With the fateful document in hand, Max faces his by-then alienated
friend. He claims to be reluctant to take advantage of the situation, thereby having the
opportunity to see Theodore’s reaction when confronted with the jeopardy facing his
inheritance. The latter expresses his indifference as to the financial aspect of the matter and
coolly rejoices in Max having saved his own honor, not leaving his one-time friend in doubt
as to his worth. In fact, Max is as worthless as Theodore had suspected him to be, and it is his
own burning need to find out about Theodore’s honor that makes him appear irreproachable
to Theodore. Despite both of them being cleared in the eyes of the other, their alienation
seems irretrievable; Theodore says goodbye, leaving Max wondering whether he has not only
“lost a fortune” but also a friend (200).
4. “The fashioning of a wife to order” (49): Ward as “losing investment” (65) or the successful kindling of “passionate gratitude” (33) to form an eternal bond?44

I am happy to say that in Watch and Ward we encounter a much pleasanter scenario; both benefactor and beneficiary are not only more agreeable than Mr. Sloane and Max, but they are also more complex and interesting. Firstly, they both have a conscience, which transforms their gestures of giving and giving back as a token of gratitude into something meaningful and heartwarming. Certainly, there are the perennial strings attached and the consciousness of an obligation to reciprocate, yet these individuals are very far from the mercenary and calculating protagonists of “A Light Man.”

It is Roger Lawrence’s conscience that triggers his charitable gesture to take on as his ward the little girl whose transformation into an orphan not only happens in front of his eyes, but may be indirectly attributed to a refusal to help Nora Lambert’s desperate father. In fact, Roger’s motivation as a benefactor undergoes a metamorphosis worth our attention. Disturbed during the night by a “pistol-shot” and a “loud shrill cry,” Roger runs to the “neighboring door” (10) and beholds the man who appealed to him for financial help earlier that day lying dead on the floor with a little girl beside him. Relating “his own interview with the deceased, and the latter’s menace of suicide” gives him “a sickening sense of connection with the calamity, though a gratuitous one” (12), which, coupled with “the salient fact …[of] her absolute destitution” (12), makes him take the plunge and rescue Nora, despite the risk of

44 It is interesting to compare Roger and Nora’s relations with those depicted by Balzac in his Cousin Bette—a novel teeming with older male benefactors and young female beneficiaries. In their case, however, the sexual/erotic intent is clear from the outset; the paternal role is mixed with that of the lover. There is baron Hulot and Monsieur Crevel, for instance, becoming infatuated with such young charges as the thirteen-year-old Josepha, or Jenny Cadine of the same age group, as well as little Olimpia Bijou, and Atala Judici. A similar setup, but with an older woman as a benefactress and a younger man as a beneficiary, is that of cousin Bette and Steinbock, the talented but indolent Polish sculptor. In all these cases the beneficiaries ultimately exploit their benefactors and leave them in the lurch, heartbroken and destitute.
taking on such an “unknown quantity,” whose nature, whose heritage, whose “good and bad possibilities were an unsolved problem” (15).

Roger soon warms to the paternal role, which gives him both joy and occupation in a world he had only recently renounced as a result of an unsuccessful suit. At the outset we meet him bent on making a certain Miss Morton his wife. But she turns him down and soon makes a more advantageous match in the shape of Mr. Keith, a gentleman with enough tact to breathe his last soon after their marriage, leaving Mrs. Keith “precisely the widow that young unmarried ladies wish to be. With her diamonds in her dressing-case and her carriage in her stable, and without a feather’s weight of encumbrance, she offered the finished example of satisfied ambition” (68). Not wishing “to cultivate in his young companion any expression of formal gratitude,” Roger still hopes “to inspire the child with a passion” (22). Thus, from the beginnings his generosity is heartfelt and he endeavors to do good by his charge for her own sake. Naturally enough, he longs to be loved in return and he ardently wishes to be cuddled back as a result of cuddling, yet he represses his immediate interests and keeps silent. As to the nature of the passion he is hoping to inspire, it is still of an innocent kind; at this point, he has no thoughts of feelings that exist between lovers and spouses.

Having fulfilled his fatherly duties by sending Nora away to school for her own benefit and thus robbing himself of the pleasure of her affectionate companionship, Roger meets her again after two years’ time only to discover that his little charge has all the potential of an ideal wife; at their parting—her schooling had not been completed then—“she neither suspected, nor could she have understood the thought which, during this interview, had blossomed in her friend’s mind,” namely to do what he can so as to make the “homeless little girl” he adopted a “lovely woman,” who, “six years hence, will [hopefully] be grateful enough not to refuse” (27) him as Miss Morton had done. It is only a “temporary eclipse” that “his poor little potential Nora” suffers during Roger’s travels that are destined to keep him occupied while waiting for her to complete her education; he almost falls for the “plump and full-blown innocence” of a lovely señorita in Lima, but a letter from Nora recalls him to his original emotions and plans. He quits both Teresa and Lima, sacrificing “amorous bird-notes, twittering in a lazy Eden” (29) for the uncertainty of Nora’s affections; will she be able to transform her daughterly feelings into the love that a woman feels for her future husband? Will she spontaneously accept him in the end?

Roger has to try harder than ever not to burden Nora with thoughts of obligatory gratitude in order to make sure of his success:
Ought he not, in the interest of his final purpose, to force home to her soul in her sensitive youth an impression of all that she owed him, so that when the time had come, if imagination should lead her a-wandering, gratitude would stay her steps? A dozen times over he was on the verge of making his point, of saying, ‘Nora, Nora, these are not vulgar alms; I expect a return. One of these days you must pay your debt. Guess my riddle! I love you less than you think—and more!’ (33)

Fluck observes that the depiction of Roger’s moral predicament is James’s “early acknowledgement of self-interest and desire even in the representative of moral authority,” who is the “self-appointed guardian of a young and innocent (i.e. inexperienced) woman” typical of the “domestic novel” (“Power” 26-7). Yet “in the constant strife between his egotistical purpose and his generous temper, the latter kept gaining ground” (38) and so Roger succeeds in remaining silent as to his ultimate intentions. This is necessary “in the world of domestic fiction [because the] fantasy of possession can only be realized if this ‘selfish’ wish is hidden behind a complete and unfailing show of unselfishness, which, as a consequence, becomes the domestic novel’s privileged, because morally legitimised, mode of social manipulation” (Fluck, “Power” 27). Thus Roger takes the risk of losing Nora in case she falls in love with someone else, which, despite the “passion of gratitude [that] was silently gathering in the young girl’s heart” (33), is exactly what happens: Nora does fall for another. What is worse, she falls in love with Roger’s charming cousin, Hubert Lawrence, which will be even more wounding to her benefactor when he eventually finds out. Yet it is not for Hubert that Nora abandons Roger; the latter falls ill and Nora’s passionate gratitude makes her ready to “serve Roger, to please Roger” and “to give up her dream of Hubert” (108).

As a loving ward, a grateful foster-daughter, Nora is ready to do anything for her benefactor. She knows how much she owes him and she is willing to make the biggest sacrifice she is capable of and keep all herself for Roger in order to show him her unfailing affection. However, the only “capital” she is willing to utilize in her grateful scheme of reciprocating Roger’s help is an “emotional capital” of sorts. That she has and as long as that is in demand, she is ready for the sacrifice. It is the revelation of Roger’s hidden motivation, the wish to make her his wife—a plan he had nursed for so many years without her knowledge—which turns her off. Roger’s proposal seems to her a joke first, then it leaves her “painfully startled” and keenly embarrassed. She pleads with him to let her love him “in the old, old way” (123), but it is obvious that he is deeply disappointed and even if he lets her off, which he does, their relationship can never be as it was before.
Nora’s bewilderment soon turns into pain and anger; she feels “horribly deluded and injured,” overflowing “with a tenderness of reproach which contained the purest essence of resentment” (125):

That Roger, whom all these years she had fancied as simple as charity, should have been as double as interest, should have played a part and laid a train, that she had been living in darkness, in illusion, on lies, was a sickening, tormenting thought. The worst of the worst was, that she had been cheated of the chance to be really loyal. Why had he never told her that she wore a chain? Why, when he took her, had he not drawn up his terms and made his bargain? She would have kept it, she would have taught herself to be his wife. Duty would have been duty; sentiment would have been sentiment. (125)

Nora feels like someone who tries to express her gratitude by buying the wrong present for a beloved person due to the latter’s obscure wishes; her gift to Roger would have been the tenderest love that can exist between friends and family members, yet it is the gift of love for a husband that he had secretly hoped for. The disappointment she feels is double-edged: it is not just that she feels she had been mislead, but that she feels ungrateful because she is unable to give Roger the return gift he would want for all he had done for her. She is his debtor, unable to pay, and the best she can do is to put a stop to a situation where she is in the position of continually receiving without being able to satisfactorily reciprocate. Her conscience does not let her exploit benefits she is unable to requite; “she must throw off those suffocating bounties which had been meant to hold her to the service in which she had so miserably failed” (127). Thus she runs away, bearing in mind the words of her soft-spoken cousin George Fenton. The latter, having sniffed out a possible source of money, had made up to his charming cousin when on a visit earlier in the story, only to be repulsed by an angry and suspicious Roger. George writes her a melancholy letter some time later, feeling lonely and unsuccessful. His closing lines turn out to be decisive for Nora:

Are you ever lonely in the midst of your grandeur? Do you ever feel that, after all, these people are not of your own blood and bone? I should like you to quarrel with them, to know a day’s friendlessness or a day’s freedom, so that you might remember that here in New York, in a dusty iron-yard, there is a poor devil who is yours without question, without condition, till death! (115)
Unserious George is caught at his word when he beholds a friendless Nora counting on him for support—both emotional and financial. He is less than ready to get tangled up in a business that not only does not promise any gain, but actually saps his own funds. He does put on a half-hearted show of welcome and solicitude, but it becomes clear to Nora very soon that his cousin is a rascal. George consequently tries to keep her locked up while he lets wealthy desperate Roger know where she is so as to squeeze out some money from the whole affair and get rid of Nora, congratulating himself at the same time on having brought about a reconciliation in the bargain. Nora flees, this time to the other honey-tongued cousin, that of Roger. Hubert had likewise urged her earlier to throw off the “monstrous burden of gratitude” (110) she had been smothered beneath. It had been world-wise Mrs. Keith who had turned him off the premises of the ailing Roger, sensing the unprofitable danger that Hubert’s amorous meddling constituted.

Sure enough, Hubert’s speechifying turns out to be as hollow as that of George, making Nora feel “as if she had taken a jump, and was learning mid-air that the distance was tenfold what she had imagined” (155). Like a second-rate Narcissus, he is having his likeness painted, while waiting for pretty, wealthy Amy and her mother to arrive; he is about to make a very advantageous match. Nora’s appearance turns everything upside down and he experiences even more difficulty in showing a smile than George did; he has much more to lose and nothing to gain. She instantly feels her awkward position, and with “the spiritual substructure of a passion melting from beneath her feet,” it is left to her to save the situation, to bridge “this dizzy chasm with some tragic counterfeit of a smile” (156). She explains her visit with the aim to turn to Hubert (only) for financial assistance, which is, indeed, a “vast sense of relief” to him to have “her ask this simple favor,” and it makes him momentarily forget his assumed role of an adorable manly man; money seems to “buy his release” and so “he took out his purse and grasped a roll of bills” (156). But then, “suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of his cruelty,” he admits that he knows he disappoints her. He is even driven to the point of offering Nora to give up the pretty heiress he is planning to marry. The revelation that he is (and was) engaged all this time makes Nora refuse, which is immediately followed by the appearance of the young lady in question.

Nora, after the calumny of the saucy heiress that she is “a wicked girl” who had done her “a wrong” (158), quits Hubert’s lodgings, only to bump into a Roger distracted with worry. Aching with the pain of experience, overwhelmed by the relief at the sight of Roger, she has a revelation, she is “let into the secret of the universe,” which is none other than Roger being the only man in the world “who had a heart” (160). Without intending to be
cynical, Nora’s final acceptance of Roger as her husband can be regarded not only as the result of realizing how precious he is, but also as a corollary to having realized how worthless those are who had filled her with illusions. In a very short space of time she is disappointed both in love (Hubert) and in family affection (cousin George), and it is especially important that her heart thus becomes purged of emotions that would have made it impossible for her to learn to love Roger the way a wife should. Now she is all his and with eyes open and a full consciousness of what is expected of her, she willingly accepts the life-long patronage that Roger as a husband is offering her.45

Fluck sums up Watch and Ward as representative of “the courtship pattern which serves as a testing ground for the possibilities of acquiring knowledge through experience” (“Power” 27):46

[Having to choose] between two representative suitors, a virile, but morally crude Westerner, and an effete and dishonest Easterner, [Nora] reveals a lack of adequate knowledge of reality by failing to realize that her devoted, though unspectacular guardian, Roger Lawrence, is the only man in the universe ‘who has a heart’ and therefore the only fitting companion for her. Roger, however, although clearly in possession of superior moral insight, cannot further his own course, because this would constitute an act of manipulation. The heroine has to go through her own experiences, and she is left to do so because ‘adequate perception of reality’ in a domestic novel like Watch and Ward can only mean recovering one’s own innate moral sense after a temporary flirt with passion. ‘Experience’ thus leads to a reaffirmation of the superior moral authority of the guardian figure. (“Power” 26)

5. “Hammering away at it”: The creative benefactor’s abortive attempt at an artwork, namely the formation of his beneficiary into a successful artist—Rowland and Roderick

45 Referring to Dickens’s Bleak House once again, it is quite intriguing to draw a parallel between the two endings. Contrary to Nora Lambert, Esther Summerson, Mr. Jarndyce’s ward, never for a moment hesitates about accepting her guardian’s proposal, who, eventually, as a supreme sign of magnanimity, “makes her over” to the young man she is in love with but would be ready to renounce in her endeavor to show her gratitude for all that Mr. Jarndyce has done for her.

46 Fluck observes that this “courtship pattern” is a recurring motif in Jamesian fiction. By way of example, he mentions a number of novels also in focus in this analysis, namely The American, The Portrait of a Lady, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl (27).

47 A phrase that should be apt for a different reason in this context, it is actually used by James in his tale entitled “Modern Warning” (430).
The evolution of the figure of the benefactor has reached its third stage; Rowland Mallet not only has an “uncomfortably sensitive conscience” (167), but also a sense of duty towards society. He placidly embraces his cousin Cecilia’s definition of him as a “rich and unoccupied” man whose circumstances “suggest the idea of social usefulness”—and that “on a large scale” (169), since his time and money are accompanied by such qualities as intelligence and education. Indeed, Rowland rejoices in his advantageous position and he is ready to put it to use, but he is convinced that he needs “inspiration” in order to find the right way to do whatever he can “on a large scale”; “I am holding myself ready for inspiration. I am waiting till something takes my fancy irresistibly” (169). He is not completely devoid of ideas, however, as he has a leading passion: he is “extremely fond of the arts” (170). Alas, the most direct way is barred from him; he cannot be an artist himself, since the “faculty of expression is wanting in him” with only the “need for expression” (171) remaining. His plan of “creative charity” must fall back either on assisting artists who possess the “faculty of expression” but not the means to embark on an artistic way of life, or, and this is his original “hobby-horse,” in order to “do the work of a good citizen” and yet remain in the field of arts, he could collect artworks and create a museum for the benefit of his fellow members of society.

It is interesting to note that Rowland’s “activity” as benefactor in the field of arts makes him one of the early examples of the figure of the connoisseur/collector/aesthete, the individual who prefers being/seeing to doing and thus feels Europe to be more congenial soil than his Puritanical native land obsessed with the ethos of work/action (216). This character is indeed central to Jamesian fiction, the full-blown example of which is to be encountered in The Golden Bowl in the form of Adam Verver (Perosa 155, 158). True enough, the earlier written The Portrait actually abounds in collector figures—Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle, little Rosier, and, most importantly, Ralph Touchett—yet they all represent, with the exception of Ralph, the type of collector who has the sensibility and enthusiasm but not the means to be a collector “on a large scale.” The other extreme, to anticipate the next chapter concerning The American, is to be found in the person of Christopher Newman, who has a large fortune at his disposal but not the requisite taste and sensibility to be a real connoisseur/collector. James stages our first meeting with him in the Louvre “dabbling at” being a collector. Newman decides to order pictures from the pretty dabbler Mademoiselle Nioche, not even realizing that the lady is trying to exchange her erotic instead of her cultural/human capital.
It is the encountering of a statuette of “exceptional merit” (177) in Cecilia’s parlor that decides Rowland’s fate. It leads him to a certain Roderick Hudson, a law-student with a knack for sculpture, who is the most entertaining companion of Cecilia’s humdrum existence in out-of-the-way Northampton. As soon as Rowland meets this young man of “three or four and twenty” (178), Roderick appears to him in the light of an exceptionally promising material that could be molded to perfection. Roderick is unaware of his own potential and would, in any case, have no means to finance the beginnings of an artistic career. He is resigned to playing at being a sculptor as a kind of pastime. Yet Rowland’s inspiration has come; he envisions himself as an artist by proxy, with an artist as his own artwork. While, at that point, Rowland only has the awareness of the need for expression, Roderick has only the faculty of expression without the awareness of a need to use it “on a large scale.” Indeed, Rowland could assist Roderick’s first steps, giving him both financial and spiritual support, thereby enabling them both to do creative work for the benefit to mankind and to themselves as well. It would not only be a benefit to Roderick, because he could make good money selling his statues, but also because he has been overtly dissatisfied with his current life without knowing the reason why; he is “too fast” whatever he does, due to some sort of inner drive that makes him “a restless fiend” (180). At this stage of the story, both Rowland and the reader are led to believe that Roderick’s nervous force could find a satisfactory outlet in artistic work. His élán appears to be promising; a source of creativity and a welcome sign concerning his real vocation.

Rowland broaches the subject while they are lying on the grass and tossing “stones into the river” on “one of those lovely days of August” (186-7). Roderick is speechless with amazement and excitement at the thought of being taken to Rome to embark on an artistic career, and his candid reaction embarrasses Rowland into the following little business proposition that is meant to mitigate the magnitude of his gesture:

In three words, if you are to be a sculptor, you ought to go to Rome and study the antique. To go to Rome you need money. I’m fond of fine statues, but unfortunately I can’t make them myself. I have to order them. I order a dozen from you, to be executed at your convenience. To help you, I pay you in advance. (189)

Roderick joyfully accepts, more restless than ever to pack and go. The only “obstacles” are the members of his intimate circle, his limited but adoring mother—for whose New England sensibility sculpture is “an insidious form of immorality” (185)—and his plain
but good-as-gold fiancée Mary Garland. The first signs of Roderick’s egotism are salient; that he is the hero of a “cult” in his home oils the mechanism of his increasing self-absorption, and his absence from them for several years does not seem to bother him too much. Dutiful Mary is expected to sit in their parlor with his mother and chat about him while he is away. After being reassured of Rowland’s honest intentions and the protection he is offering their beloved Roderick in the guise of “an investment” (217), the ladies wave goodbye to the gentlemen.

Three months have elapsed by the time the reader encounters them in Rome, with Roderick already the soul of the artistic community; “he took to evening parties as a duck to water and before the winter was half over was the most freely and frequently discussed young man in the heterogeneous foreign colony” (232). Until then, he had been diligently “absorbing” the influence of Europe without having as yet created anything, but he complains of his “deep impatience to make something of all his impressions,” a welcome sign that his benefactor notes with “immense satisfaction” (228): “Certainly, among the young men of genius who, for so many ages have gone up to Rome to test their powers, none ever made a fairer beginning than Roderick. He rode his two horses at once with extraordinary good fortune; he established the happiest modus vivendi betwixt work and play” (234, original emphasis).

The proof of the balance he seems to have found is his first statue, the Adam, which is very much admired amongst his fellow artists. It is during the event of viewing Roderick’s first Roman effort that the other members of the artistic colony are introduced as well, furnishing us with welcome parallels. There is the mercenary sculptor Gloriani, always ready to corrupt his art for the sake of success and profit. There is little Sam Singleton, the epitome of diligence if ever there was one, whose attitude towards art proves to be the happiest in the long run; he is less talented than Roderick, but his humility and perseverance bear wonderful fruit in the shape of a series of small landscapes Rowland eagerly purchases. And there is Miss Augusta Blanchard, the old-maidish but pretty painter of flowers, who is

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48 For those acquainted with Hawthorne’s fiction it is impossible not to associate with the artistic colony depicted in The Marble Faun (1860), with such memorable artist figures as Kenyon, Hilda, and Miriam.

49 Another welcome parallel may be drawn between the afore-mentioned Polish sculptor of Balzac’s Cousin Bette, who likewise has lots of talent but turns out to be a failure; Count Steinbock’s native indolence is further strengthened by unfavorable circumstances in the shape of bewitching Valerie Marnette and the fragile balance between work and play is upset once and for all.

50 Although the re-occurrence of any character in another of his works is a rare phenomenon in Jamesian fiction, Gloriani does resurface later; we meet him again in The Ambassadors. To anticipate, the other characters whom readers may re-encounter are the Casamassimas, who resurface in the nigh eponymous The Princess Casamassima.
thought of as a potential wife by a Rowland doggedly bent on forgetting the haunting vision of his beneficiary’s fiancée.

They all applaud Roderick’s genius, but there is no unanimous optimism concerning his future. While Singleton embarks on an unflagging idolization of Mr. Hudson’s talent and personality that he is to keep up even in the face of evidence of his hero’s failure (290, 438-9), Gloriani’s reaction is a warning concerning the impossibility of keeping up the uncompromising idealism that threatens Roderick’s career (244-5). Gloriani explains that passion and inspiration that lead to revelations of the ideal are not enough because the former “burns out” and the latter “runs to seed,” compelling the artist to make a compromise between his visions of perfection and the “lump of clay” or the “empty canvas” with which he will inevitably find himself “sitting face to face” (247) one day. Roderick sticks to his former declaration; he is only willing to create beautiful things and, on top of that, he declines to stoop lower than reaching perfection. In the Arnoldian vein,51 young Hudson declares himself to be a Hellenist (242).

Merely a week later he experiences his first “slump”; he has “struck a shallow” after having sailed so bravely, and he sits “before an unfinished piece of work, with hanging head and a heavy eye” (248). Indeed, Rowland’s “blood horse” is “stumbling” and “balking” after the “even, elastic gallop” of the last couple of months (249). He instantly recognizes the need to come to his beneficiary’s aid and help him through this rough patch, and so he heartily approves of Roderick’s desire for a change; they should leave Rome for a while and do a bit of traveling. He is even willing to let the troubled genius go his own way after the latter had declared that he feels oppressed by his benefactor’s watchful expectant presence (249).

After a period of dissipation in Baden-Baden, already under the influence of Christina Light’s dangerous charm, Roderick comes back to Rome and sets to work on a new statue. The female figure “is deucedly pretty, but it isn’t the topping high art of three months ago” (262). Gloriani detects the first signs of compromise in Hudson’s work, suspecting a disappointment or any decisive experience in love to be in the background. Apart from his change in style/quality, Roderick admits that he is without ideas for any kind of subject matter. Whether it is to his rescue or his doom that Christina has come, she nevertheless appears in his studio while he is thus complaining to his benefactor and inspires the young sculptor with the heavenly idea of making her bust. It proves to be a “very happy

51 Matthew Arnold’s tenets concerning the desire for perfection characteristic of the spirit of Hellenism, and the differentiation between Hellenism and Hebraism in general, as well as his perennial veneration of Greek culture, are most aptly put in the first and fourth chapters of his Culture and Anarchy, “Sweetness and Light,” and “Hellenism and Hebraism,” respectively.

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performance” with Roderick having “risen to the level of his subject”; the resemblance is “deep and vivid” and there is “an extreme fidelity of detail and yet a noble simplicity” in this “representation of ideal beauty” (285).

Although Christina’s presence has yielded such lovely fruit, Rowland is not blinded to the sinister aspect of his beneficiary’s acquaintance with that lady. Amidst the increasingly frequent “cloud shadows on his mood,” he experiences an “undue apprehension that things after all might not go so ideally well with Roderick” (279). The more the young protégé abandons himself to the charms of Miss Light, the more he becomes indifferent to all else; he neglects his correspondence with his beloved ones back in Northampton, he declares that he could never move back to America because “Rome is the only possible place” for a man of his temperament (279), and he refuses to listen to his benefactor’s advice when the latter tries to persuade him as to the danger and the impropriety of an infatuation for an ambitious girl who not only aims high of her own accord, but who is also “dragged about the world to be sold to the highest bidder” (293) by her mercenary mother. Indeed, based on her daughter’s erotic and cultural capital, the shrewd parent is planning to bring about the most profitable transaction possible; she wants economic and social capital in return by finding a wealthy nobleman with impeccable connections. Her expectations are clearly not met by the penniless young American artist, while she finds all she aims for in the person of Prince Casamassima, who duly falls for Miss Light.

However unwittingly, the noble suitor poses a great threat to Roderick’s artistic career. With his Muse about to be snatched from him, the young sculptor becomes ever more intractable and self-centered. He accuses Rowland of being incapable of understanding genius, of his expectant presence being excessively oppressive, and of meddling with the private matters of his beneficiary (310-1). Roderick admits to be “in a miserably sterile mood” (313), incapable of work. He partly blames his particular branch of art, opining that it is much more difficult for a sculptor to find subject matter than it is for a painter, for instance; it is easy for diligent little Singleton, who just has “to open [his] Ariosto to find a subject, to find color and attitudes, stuffs and composition,” or he should “only have to look up from the page at that mouldy old fountain against the blue sky […] to find [himself] grasping [his] brush” (314).

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52 In fact, Roderick has another benefactor in the shape of the obtuse self-made millionaire Mr. Leavenworth, whose expectations concerning his concept of a statue symbolizing Culture come to naught in the end. During their business relations, Mr. Leavenworth proves to be an even more oppressing benefactor, posing to a dismayed Roderick “the danger of dying of over-patronage” (341).
Soon afterwards, Roderick “deliver[s] himself of a tissue of lugubrious speculations as to the possible mischances of one’s genius,” part of which is his statement that failure and life are mutually exclusive in his case: “What am I? What are the best of us, but an experiment? Do I succeed—do I fail? It doesn’t depend on me. I’m prepared for failure. It shan’t be a disappointment simply because I shan’t survive it. The end of my work shall be the end of my life” (316). It will soon become evident that he is the type of artist whose private life and work are inseparably interlinked; he can only function as an artist if he is happy. These two maxims—life is only livable to him if he is successful in art, and he can only be successful in art if he is happy—finally amount to the following ominous conclusion: Roderick’s life (and art) depend on Christina, since his happiness is bound up with her.

Poor Rowland catches himself wishing “his companion had a trifle more of little Sam Singleton’s evenness of impulse” (316) and a bit less of genius perhaps, with all that troublesome dependence on passion and inspiration. His venture is not only beginning to appear to him in the light of a losing investment, but it also gives him the oppressive feeling of being responsible for his protégé’s fate; Rowland lifted Roderick out of his benignant ignorance and infused him with dreams of an artistic career, persuading both the young man and his beloved ones to suffer parting from each other for the sake of an almost certain success. In the process he has exposed Roderick to the corrupting influence of the old continent, which has reached its climax in the young sculptor’s infatuation for Miss Light.

Rowland has moral obligations not only towards his beneficiary, but also towards the latter’s mother and fiancée. Mrs. Hudson is to agree with him more than he has ever bargained for; she blames Rowland and expects him to save her son and them when Roderick breaks down due to Christina’s engagement to Prince Casamassima. Contrary to the exacting desperation of the mother, Roderick’s fiancée yet again proves her excellence; Mary not only does not blame Rowland for making her lose Roderick, she is actually grateful for his unflagging assistance after the young sculptor proves to be an ungrateful failure. Rowland continues playing the part of protector as best as he can, “coaching” listless Roderick and his family. The sculptor is persuaded to work and he actually produces a bust of his mother which surpasses everybody’s expectations. It, in fact, leads Gloriani to retract his former views, who enthusiastically joins in singing Roderick’s praises, calling himself a “great ass” for having ever doubted the young genius’ capability of “keeping it up” (404). He is not destined to agree with Roderick this time either, as the latter declares himself to be “weak” (404).
Roderick’s half-hearted attempts at losing himself in his work in order to forget Christina and go on living and creating come to naught when he once again meets her at a party. Allegedly going off alone to work, he leaves Rowland, Mary, and Mrs. Hudson behind, only to seek another interview with the bewitching Miss Light. Whatever takes place between them does not prevent the ambitious young lady from finally deciding to give her hand to the prince, which has the foreseeable effect on her other admirer: he becomes completely desperate and tactless, giving himself up to his grief without heeding his mother’s and his fiancée’s presence. When Rowland arrives, he finds them in a state of utter bewilderment, more than ever needful of his help with the raving apple of their eye. Roderick pronounces himself to be “a hopeless humbug” (442), a “second-rate, tenth-rate” man, a “failure” (444) beyond help who is further burdened by the consciousness of being morally and physically insolvent; a “bankrupt” (443) crushed under the weight of obligations he cannot fulfill and debts he can never repay.

Finding himself in nothing less than a “moral bondage” (458), Rowland braces himself and tries to “clear up the mess” by taking care of the three persons who look to him for a solution. He decides to rent a villa in Florence. The atmosphere is nearly unbearable, with the totally indifferent Roderick doing nothing more than vegetating, and with Mrs. Hudson not even trying to hide in her manner “that undercurrent of reproach and bitterness towards himself, that impertinent implication that he had defrauded her of happiness” (460). Mary is as impressive as ever, never reproaching, always calm and pleasant and appreciative even in her grief. Roderick’s only thought is to behold the embodiment of his ideals just once more, wanting to store Christina’s image in his mind forever before quitting Italy, which he by then advocates with as much ardor as there remains in his listless and hopeless self. Whether he is in luck or not when his wish is fulfilled, is difficult to decide. It is a matter of speculation that his final accident-suicide is due to the renewed influence of Princess Casamassima’s presence. He decides to go to Interlaken and remain there as long as his charmer favors the spot with her presence, bidding Rowland to take charge of Mary and Mrs. Hudson.

The gathering storm breaks. Rowland has a very unpleasant argument with his protégé, in which several home truths transpire; Roderick calls Rowland an unimaginative obtuse fool without a grain of sensibility, incapable of understanding his artistic soul, while Rowland refutes the charges by alerting Roderick to his own heroic silence concerning his ardent love for Mary, a proof against his insensibility. Furthermore, Rowland finally reveals his crushing opinion of Roderick’s character: he is an “incredibly ungrateful” (498) person
and a terrible “egotist” (499), who uses everyone around him, thinking their perpetual solicitude a matter of course. Rowland feels exploited by his protégé who is completely devoid of that fundamental moral virtue, the disposition to reciprocate. He only takes and takes and never gives back:

You think only of yourself and believe only in yourself. You regard other people only as they play into your hands. You have always been very frank about it, and the thing seemed so mixed up with the temper of your genius and the very structure of your mind, that often one was willing to take the evil with the good and to be thankful that, considering your great talent, you were no worse. But if one believed in you, as I have done, one paid a tax upon it. (499)

The benefactor’s declaration of complete disillusionment with his beneficiary seals the latter’s fate. He wakes up to the fact that he “must have been hideous” throughout. Yet it is not the painful consciousness that he has made unhappy those around him who loved him and did their best to help. It is “egotism still: aesthetic disgust at the graceless contour of his conduct, but never a hint of simple sorrow for the pain he had given” (502). Roderick declares to be “damned,” only “fit to be alone” and walks off, never to return. Following the emotional storm between the two men, a real tempest breaks out and the hapless sculptor’s lifeless body is found the next day by anxious Singleton and Rowland, the former of whom happens to be on the spot due to a field trip.

The tragic outcome of the brilliant young man’s artistic endeavors and the other ardent young man’s enthusiastic attempts at doing good in the world by helping to create and thus also creating by proxy makes one think as to the reasons of their failure. Roderick’s essential egotism is a damning character trait, and so is his restlessness; the nervous force that drives him turns out to be more counter-productive than helpful. Instead of being a creative impulse to his benefit, it prevents him from persisting and working diligently. Whether it is a sign of genius and so the excessive amount of nervous force should be taken as a sign of too much genius, is yet another question. Surely, the balance between work and play, talent (genius) and diligence, which Rowland was hoping to have detected at the outset of their Roman sojourn, was very soon upset in Roderick’s case, never to be found again.

Apart from egotism and restlessness, young Hudson’s uncompromising idealism should also be taken into consideration. Gloriani was right when he warned his fellow sculptor as to the dangers of relying purely on passion and inspiration and insisting on
perfection. Indeed, Roderick frequently complained to Rowland about the terrible discrepancy between vision/ideals/transcendental images and reality/artworks/immanent things. He had always felt unable to “translate” his vision of perfection into the work of art, often blaming his real life models for being more misleading than helpful to his work; “Roderick lost his temper, time and again, with his models, who offered but a gross, degenerate image of his splendid ideal” (235).

Furthermore, Roderick had always been occupied with concepts, large ideas, symbols. The exquisite little statuette in Cecilia’s home represents a boy drinking from the cup of experience. Then he sculpts “the father of the human race and the primal embodiment of human sensation,” Adam, who is supposed to be followed by an Eve that finally becomes the representation of “Reminiscence” (259). That he makes an exception by sculpting the bust of a particular personage, Christina Light, is contradicted as soon as we come to realize that the young lady in question is nothing less than the embodiment of Perfect Beauty, his Ideal in flesh and blood. In fact, Mr. Leavenworth’s order of a statue representing Culture should have fallen in line with the young idealist’s style and endeavors, had it not been for his infatuation for Perfect Beauty come to life.

So far, we have been considering character traits that may have been responsible for Roderick’s failure. Going along the lines of positivist thought, or simply taking the sociologist’s approach, we may term it the influence exerted on the individual by her/his heredity, which is accompanied by the influence of environment (circumstances), so much propagated by Balzac and George Eliot, who viewed society as a web-like structure and put great emphasis on the individual’s particular circumstances when analyzing her/his life and deeds (Lepenies 84, 183). Just so, we may recall Trilling’s concept of moral realism and Nussbaum’s (Aristotelian) moral philosophy setting great store by particulars and context. According to these lines of reasoning, it is pertinent to say that Roderick’s doom has very much to do with the baleful influence of the old continent, and, more especially, his fateful encounter with Miss Light. Had he remained in America, he would have gone on creating exquisite statuettes once in a while, working as if in a dream. It is Rowland, the one who transplants him and “wakes him up,” who tells him of an interesting theory concerning the nature of “genius” or “great talent in action,” calling it a “kind of somnambulism,” with the artist performing “great feats, in a dream” who should not be woken up “lest he should lose his balance” (183-4).

Indeed, Rowland’s attempts at being a benefactor may easily be termed fateful meddling. Without having to stretch our imagination, it seems to me that James was more
than ready to suggest such ideas when he chose the names for his characters. “Mallet” is a synonym of “sledge-hammer,” a rather destructive tool preventing the necessary “light touch,” which does not come in handy as much as a chisel would. Mallet’s “heavy hand” (performance as a benefactor) is counterbalanced by his good intentions: he wants to “row to land” the young man named after a river (Hudson), who seems to him to be “at sea” concerning his potential. For the purpose of “saving” the young man by enabling him to find an outlet for his creative energies and at the same time enabling himself to create by proxy, he uses Roderick as a tool, “as a rod.” He actuates a parting from the beneficial soothing influence of (Virgin) Mary, only to bring about the young man’s falling under the influence of another religiously named lady, Christ(ina), who is nothing less to Roderick than a “revelation” (229), the bringer of “Light.” Thus the rower of the boat (Rowland) and the boat/rod (Roderick) are shipwrecked; their attempts at a common endeavor—a successful transaction of resources—fail, leaving us this time with a sense of sadness as to the representations of benefactor and beneficiary.

6. Wanted: The “best article in the market” (549), a “first-class wife” (585) embodying all the best in Europe, so as to “perch on the pile” (548) of Christopher Newman

I have already alluded to the benefactor in The American as one of the many collectors/connoisseurs of Jamesian fiction. Having made his millions and proved his mettle in the field of action, Christopher Newman is ready for amusement. In fact, similarly to Mr. Sloane, his foremost intention when coming over to Europe is to exchange his economic capital for some entertainment, be it churches, pictures, or people. He is very open to suggestions, the more so because he admits to being a “good worker” but a rather “poor loafer” (534), who has to learn how to be “idle” and enjoy himself. It does not come to him naturally as it did to Rowland Mallet, as he is an out-and-out American for whose habits Europe does not promise to be a congenial soil.

Whether to see or to appropriate, Newman is adamant in getting the best of Europe (535). His first attempts at collecting some specimens, however, testify more to his benign ignorance than to his success at getting the best articles; he is struck by the daubs of the pretty copyist Noéémie Nioche, and he tries his hand at being a benefactor and collector by ordering “half a dozen pictures” (559) from that lady in order to help her collect her “dozen”—a good enough dowry so as to be able to marry well. He makes this deal with the Mademoiselle’s
father, the seemingly shabby but very respectable Monsieur Nioche, whose overflowing
gratitude tries to find an outlet in offering the generous American some French lessons in
return.

It is also in the Louvre that Newman encounters his old friend Tristram, who turns out
to be one of the unwitting guides of his fate; his spouse, the clever and well-connected Mrs.
Tristram, becomes an invaluable companion and advisor of Newman and, taking on the role
of his guide, she leads him to Claire de Cintré. Although Mrs. Tristram is as unhappy with
her husband as possible—she deliberately married this “fool” after having been slighted by a
“clever man” (540) with the foreseeable outcome of utterly despising him—she is the avid
advocate of marriage, not losing time in advising her new acquaintance to “take a wife” (547).
She asks Newman about his expectations, and that gentleman candidly answers that he thinks
of “the world as a great bazaar, where one might stroll about and purchase handsome things”
(574). What he says concerning wives is in key with this consumer attitude:

I want a great woman. I stick to that. That’s one thing I can treat myself to, and if it is to be
had I mean to have it. What else have I toiled and struggled for, all these years? I have
succeeded, and now what am I to do with my success? To make it perfect, as I see it, there
must be a beautiful woman perched on the pile, like a statue on a monument. She must be as
good as she is beautiful, and as clever as she is good. […] I want to possess, in a word, the best
article in the market. (548-9, original emphasis)

After having patiently listened to Newman’s description of his expectations, Mrs.
Tristram recommends a friend of hers who “belongs to the very top of the basket” (551), a
lady who possesses all the qualities that are required to make her the “best article in the
market” (549) and, what is more, “her family, on each side, is of fabulous antiquity” (551). It
has to be pointed out that Newman’s original idea of the best of eligible ladies does not
include anything concerning pedigree; he has no thoughts about trying to rise on the social
ladder, and he is utterly devoid of dreams of being associated with the nobility. It will be seen
how his indifference to class and status, his total incomprehension as to the alleged qualitative
differences that exist between people of rank and those of commerce will be his undoing: he
remains blind all along to the insurmountable obstacle that his unsatisfactory ancestry
constitutes in the minds of the marquis and the old marquise de Bellegarde, Claire’s older
brother and mother, respectively. Of course, having a wife with a “topping” pedigree is a
welcome quality in the bargain, but only as long as it does not turn out to be the insurmountable obstacle in his way.

Newman as a collector of pictures has already proved himself to be sadly ignorant, but when it comes to “collecting people,” he shows himself a discerning connoisseur. Mr. Tristram is incapable of seeing Claire in the light of the “loveliest woman in the world, the promised perfection, the proposed ideal” (553), declaring that “she is as plain as a pike-staff, a man would not look at her twice” (552). Mrs. Tristram does not tarry in pointing out that her husband’s incapability of appraising such a pearl among swine only goes to show the exquisiteness of the lady in question; “in saying that he would not look at her twice, my husband sufficiently describes her” (552, original emphasis). Contrary to his friend, Newman is instantly struck by Madame de Cintré, and even after a longish interval of traveling—Claire cannot be visited, she has left Paris for the season—he still finds her the best candidate he has ever come across (585).

Having made up his mind as to Claire being the coveted article, Newman begins to press his suit as well as he can. So far, he has not heeded Mrs. Tristram’s warning as to Claire not being “her own mistress,” at least not “morally”; she explains to Newman that it is a general thing in France to show complete obedience to “ma mère” (589) and to put the family’s interests and wishes before one’s own, an obligation which in Claire’s case is even more binding than usual. Indeed, he is still unaware of the difficulties he is to encounter in the shape of the Bellegarde family, with the exception of Claire’s younger brother, Valentin. The latter, in fact, takes so much to the uncomplicated benevolent American that he decides to act as his “patron”; he espouses Newman’s cause, declaring at the same time that he is aware that his protégé “will never be grateful” because he “will never understand” (625) what and how much Valentin’s gesture means, and so he is not expecting anything in return, save his sister’s happiness, for whom he cares a great deal. The exchange mechanism between Valentin and Newman is worth enumerating, as it is a great example of give, take, and give back amongst people endowed with that fundamental moral virtue, the disposition to reciprocate. Its beginnings have to be searched for in Valentin’s past, long before the narrative starts.

To gauge the depths of the virtually impossible situation in which young Bellegarde finds himself when we first meet him, Thorsten Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* comes in handy; here we find an excellent description of the evolution and the characteristics of that class. Veblen points out that ever since its appearance, the members of the so-called “leisure class”—which, by the nineteenth century consisted of the “noble and the priestly classes” and
was more or less synonymous with “upper class”—have been “by custom exempt or excluded from industrial occupations,” letting them choose amongst employment which are deemed “worthy, honorable, noble”; namely, occupations “roughly comprised under government, warfare, religious observances, and sports” (Veblen 5). Thus, anything that may be termed productive, or “whatever [that] has to do directly with the everyday work of getting a livelihood, is the exclusive occupation of the inferior class” (1).

It is one thing, however, to have such an attitude as long as it is backed up by a large enough pile, and it is quite another matter when gentility is inherited with its “inheritance of obligatory leisure […] without the complement of wealth required to maintain a dignified leisure” (Veblen 18). This is the position Valentin finds himself in, with the further complication of his family’s political beliefs; they “don’t recognize Bonaparte” (607), as they are staunch “Legitimists,” “Ultramontanes” (551). Indeed, Valentin envies Newman’s liberty, his ability to achieve whatever he wants, depending only on his own strength, without being constantly held back by his surroundings. If there is a victim of circumstances, or a great example of how influential one’s environment with its net-like society can be, young Bellegarde is one such individual:

> When I was twenty, I looked around me and saw a world with everything ticketed ‘Hands off!’ and the deuce of it was that the ticket seemed meant only for me. I could n’t go into business, I could n’t make money, because I was a Bellegarde. I could n’t go into politics, because I was a Bellegarde—the Bellegardes don’t recognize the Bonapartes. I could n’t go into literature, because I was a dunce. I could n’t marry a rich girl, because no Bellegarde had ever married a routiere, and it was not proper that I should begin. We shall have to come to it, yet. Marriageable heiresses, de notre bord, are not to be had for nothing; it must be name for name, and fortune for fortune. The only thing I could do was to go and fight for the Pope. That I did, punctiliously, and received an apostolic flesh-wound at Castelfidardo.
> (607, original emphasis)

Valentin, in this outburst not only spells out the impossible situation that his ancestry has put him in, but he also points to an important detail: the Bellegardes are not supposed to stoop so low as to marry for money. In fact, this prohibition only refers to individuals that have nothing to offer besides money, such as Christopher Newman. A titled rich lady/gentleman is more than welcome, and in poor Claire’s case it is obvious that the family has always regarded her as an expensive and noble article that can attract moneyed nobility
and can thus be exchanged. In that case it is a transaction between nobles, the exchange of erotic capital for the economic variety. The fact that the horrible Cintré turned out to be a hoax as far as solvency goes is a real tragedy for the Bellegardes. We see that it is especially so when we find out how much they had put on the line for what had seemed to be a desirable match; the old marquis, Claire’s father, had been silenced by the cold and ambitious wife and older son for the sake of that odious marriage (810, 820-1, 840).

It is an entirely different matter for the Bellegardes to “exchange” Claire for mere money offered by a “commercial person” (758), regardless of the fact that the hapless young woman actually gets to like Newman while she had been horrified by the mere idea of having any connection with old Cintré. This kind of proud and twisted logic is what makes Valentin so isolated in his own family. He feels a great aversion to his kin’s attitude, not only because he finds himself incommmoded as a penniless young man of leisure, but because he adores his sister and knows how unhappy she has been made by the way she was “handled.” Moreover, although he does not know for certain, he strongly suspects that something underhanded had taken place concerning his ailing father and his unwillingness to bless the marriage of his reluctant daughter and the marquis Cintré.

The important corollary to all this is that Valentin welcomes the “new man” with his fresh outlook on life, coupled with his good nature and his attraction to the young man’s beloved sister. He goes to Newman’s apartment for a chat, “testing him,” feeling his way around this new and promising phenomenon. He has no plans or expectations; his visit is rather due to the attraction he feels towards someone who serves as such a great contrast to the suffocating milieu around him. Newman, on his part, is more than happy to have a relative of his coveted prize around and he does not tarry in asking the young man a favor: to do all he can to make his sister think well of Newman (620). Utterly taken by surprise when his American interlocutor explains that the reason for this request is his plan to eventually make Claire his wife, Valentin’s subsequent reaction is to embrace the cause, assuming the role of Newman’s benefactor without expecting anything in return besides the happiness of his sister and his own pleasure in the “new man’s” refreshing presence.

So far we have already traced the first steps of this exchange mechanism between these two men. The next step is Newman’s attempt at reciprocating, which—apart from the rendering of Valentin’s sister’s happiness that would make him the happiest among them all—entails his offer to help Valentin find a way to “do something” by way of a position in an American bank. The young nobleman fearfully but enthusiastically toys with the idea, and it is uncertain whether he would have had the courage to go ahead and rebel against his ancestry
with its obligatory leisure, or whether he would have backed out of the whole thing, sinking back to his old ways on the old continent. The fulfillment of another duty belonging to men of honor costs him his life. There is a cruel irony in being killed in a duel so as to be able to think that he can at least die with his honor intact, only to find out about the dishonorable conduct of his family towards his American friend. The poor young man feels “ashamed” (776) and on his “death bed” apologizes to Newman “for the ancient house of Bellegarde” (777).

The Bellegardes initially are doing Newman the “great favor” (672) of not influencing Claire against him, telling him frankly that although they do not like him and do not wish for this union, they would stand off and let Madame de Cintré decide for herself. After the latter’s decision to accept Newman’s offer, the family changes its mind and backs out of the whole deal, violating their former agreement—regardless of their proud assertion earlier, which amounted to being unfamiliar even with the term “backing out,” as it “suggests a movement of which […] no Bellegarde has ever been guilty” (672). As partakers of a transaction, they are clearly committing a breach of faith. Yet it would be too much to say that they admit to being in the wrong, even morally. True, they do admit that they endeavored to bind themselves—to tie their hands (758-9)—but it had simply proved too much for their pride, and they could not reconcile themselves to a commercial person. More importantly, however, the old marquise attempts to explain her behavior as strictly in accordance with their promises—she did not influence Claire, she “commanded” her; she used “authority” (757) and the poor young lady obeyed. Nobody, at the time of the interview, mentions the name of Lord Deepmere, but Newman’s suspicions are later confirmed by both Mrs. Tristram and Claire as to the Bellegardes’ change of stance owing largely to their new-fangled plan to marry Madame de Cintré to that nobleman with both a title and a handsome “pile” to recommend him, instead of marrying her to the American businessman so indigestibly unattractive in their eyes.

Actually, the Bellegardes may be said to have simply realized that their prestige/status/symbolic capital is too insecure to allow them to benefit from it without depleting it. As Blau opines, the rewards to be obtained by socializing with social inferiors “entail the possible cost of losing social standing” if one’s status is not secure (133).

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53 Indeed, the aversion to a “commercial person” (self-made millionaire) is observable within America as well; we may think of the situation in W. D. Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, where Tom Corey, the son of a Boston city patrician falls in love with Penelope Lapham, the daughter of the a man who made his fortune in the paint business. The Coreys are very much averse to the union, which would force them into association with the crude new-rich Laphams.
Admittedly, “a person with a large capital can live on its interest without using any of it, and the case of the person whose superior social status is pronounced and secure is analogous” (134). Hence the Bellegardes, who want both the economic and the symbolic variety, but whose status is not secure enough to get the former by mingling with social inferiors, decide not to opt for an either-or scenario when a more lucrative and secure deal has just appeared on the horizon, which promises them both.

Madame de Cintré’s reaction should, in fact, not come as a surprise; she has repeatedly told Newman that she is weak, and at the time of her refusal she once again asserts that she is “not a heroine” (662). Whether her insistence on her pride, on her coldness, on her selfishness, and her preference for her comfort should be taken seriously when she tries to explain her decision to her repulsed suitor (785), is a matter of debate. Newman is convinced that she is trying to make her family appear white by “blackening” (786) herself, and it is her angelic generosity and sacrifice that is at the bottom of her refusal and her attempts at blaming herself for it. Yet it is important to understand that she is weak in a certain sense; her fear of her mother and her consequent obedience is rooted in her terror of finding out the sinister secret concerning the old marquise’s behavior towards her ailing father (805). The daughter chooses to obey and remain in that charmed circle, preserving the however suffocating status quo, instead of being brave and breaking with her past circumstances and trying her hand at happiness with Newman’s assistance. Her original acceptance of the American is due to her timid hope that he could save her, but it is she who backs out in the end, not letting him help her (788).

In fact, apart from it being a cowardly option to choose “death-in-life” instead of life, with her decision to become a Carmelite nun she has her revenge on her family; it is burying herself alive instead of giving them the chance to continue treating her as an article to be sold to the best bidder in the market. The Bellegardes are very much upset, but they tell Newman that they prefer her as a nun to her as Mrs. Newman (799, 846). From the point of view of the marketplace, it is like pouring out milk instead of giving it to a child thirsting for it.

Newman is incapable of fathoming what has so suddenly blighted his hopes. Apart from feeling that he has been cruelly duped in a transaction by partners who disrespected the terms they had agreed upon, he still does not understand the distinction they insist on making between a nobleman and a “commercial person.” If we hark back to Veblen’s theory of the leisure class once again, a very interesting thing transpires which actually supports Newman’s stance. Veblen points to a curious phenomenon that came about during the evolution of the leisure class: as part of a chain reaction set off by the emergence of “private
property” “individual ownership,” the accumulation of wealth based on industry and not so much on “predatory exploit” becomes prevalent.

Interestingly enough, it is both as a corollary to this and a reason for this that we witness “the growth of settled industry,” which results in the “opportunities for industrial aggression […] increas[ing] in scope and availability” while the “direct manifestation of superior force grows less available both in scope and frequency” (Veblen 8-9). Thus, engaging in the accumulation of wealth and subsequently showing it off becomes the “customary basis of repute and esteem” (Veblen 9).

It is of this phase that Newman can be regarded as the representative, while Valentin and the Bellegardes in general stand at a stage two phases further down the evolutionary line. The first step ahead is achieved “by a further refinement, [when] wealth acquired by transmission from ancestors or other antecedents presently becomes even more honorific than wealth acquired by the possessor’s own effort” (Veblen 9). The next stage has been alluded to; it is the inheritance of the honor originally attached to accumulated wealth without the actual wealth.

The two ways of representing one’s “repute and esteem” based on the “possession of wealth” are “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure,” which were originally interlinked; “conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure” (Veblen 17). It is due to the unfortunate situation in which some members of the leisure class find themselves that they cannot afford to represent their “repute and esteem” via “conspicuous consumption” simply because they inherit the position of a man of obligatory leisure without the means to finance such lifestyle. This is what was so aptly spelled out by Valentin, talking to Newman—the representative of “conspicuous consumption” at the earlier stage when accumulating the money by one’s own efforts was still considered a basis for “repute and esteem.”

Thus, it is the man of “conspicuous leisure” complaining to the man of “conspicuous consumption”; the former cannot find the means to be at leisure—the only thing he has been trained to do—while the latter does not know how to be at leisure and what it is he is supposed to consume. It has to be added that the later stage represented by the Bellegardes is already a corollary to something that the Newman of two stages behind does not yet possess: the education necessary to be able to consume in style; it is not the quantity but the quality on which the emphasis falls. Newman’s deficient taste and incapacity to enjoy “idling” is a typical example of the lack of this kind of education.
The outraged businessman does not want to accept the annulment of the hoped-for transaction, especially because it seems monstrous to him to see such a splendid specimen of womanhood wasted: “to see a woman made for him and for motherhood to his children juggled away in this travesty—it was a thing to rub one’s eyes over, a nightmare, an illusion, a hoax” (793). Yet it is not a “hoax” or an “illusion,” and Claire does take the veil and irretrievably shuts herself off from the outside world. Even at this point, Newman does not leave off. By this time he wants revenge. He wants to hurt the Bellegardes. Blackmailing them with the secret in his possession after having successfully convinced an old maid who had adored Valentin to impart it, he is almost on the verge of causing a great scandal.

Although he had promised himself to stay forever in Paris in the vicinity of the “stony sepulchre that held her” (866), he gives up both his vendetta and his resolution to remain. It is a kind of revelation that makes him feel ashamed of having ever wanted to take his revenge and “hurt them”; “whether it was Christian charity or unregenerate good nature,” the narrator does not “pretend to say” (868), but the outcome of it is to realize that “they had hurt him, but such things were really not his game” (869). Mrs. Tristram goes so far as to declare that it was this inherent goodness of Newman’s that made the Bellegardes take their chances and bluff; “their confidence, after counsel taken of each other, was not in their innocence, nor in their talent for bluffing things off; it was your remarkable good nature” (871-2).

Lastly, it is worthwhile following up on Newman’s first attempt at patronage: the storyline concerning the Nioches. That pretty Noémie was indeed putting her own charms out for sale more than those of her daubs—the cynical conviction of Valentin despite his personal attraction to the “dubious little damsel,” which leads him as far as that fatal duel—is proved by her subsequent “elopement” with a man “fifty years old, bald-headed, and deaf, but very easy about money” (703). Newman proved to be a losing investment for Noémie, a patron “not galant” (707) simply because he did not want her but only her paintings, which did not promise the expected financial security she had coveted. Newman is not so much outraged by the ungratefulness of his protégé as by Monsieur Nioche’s acceptance of such a disreputable situation; the old man had repeatedly told the American that he was suffering keenly because of the dangers his pretty daughter was exposed to, including the possibility of succumbing to the temptation of leaving off being an “honest girl” (707) for the sake of a mercenary love-affair. Instead, Newman “had found the couple [father and daughter] hobnobbing together in all amity; the old gentleman’s rigor was purely theoretic. Newman confessed that he was disappointed; he should have expected to see M. Nioche take high ground” (710).
With his dream lady turned nun instead of braving it and starting life anew under his loving protection, and his protégé turned a kept woman refusing his offer to help her earn her dowry in an honest way, Newman washes his hands of Europe and goes back to his native land. His attempts at exchanging his economic capital are unsuccessful, but he is not the better or the worse for it; it has been a kind of experience that has left neither good nor bad marks on his character. He had already possessed the disposition to reciprocate at the outset, and it was not the lack of this fundamental moral virtue that left him disappointed in the end. That he never lost his “blinders,” to use Fowler’s expression, and was incapable of fathoming the “whys and hows” of the “land of experience,” is attributable to other causes not in focus here. For Newman it is not difficult to go back to the “land of innocence” because his outlook on life has not been altered by his experiences in Europe—unlike Lambert Strether of The Ambassadors, who is to “outgrow” both the narrow morality of America and the immoral aestheticism of Europe to feel at home on either continent.

In fact, although still in key with the proposition that the difference between Newman and Strether resides in the former having remained unchanged despite his European experiences, while the latter has gone through a transformation, Strether’s story from Nussbaum’s point of view has a slightly different outcome. In her reading, Mrs. Newsome’s first ambassador develops the commendable but fundamentally incomplete “perceptive morality” (openness to particulars, context) that cannot lead to the desired “perceptive equilibrium” but rather to “an unsteady oscillation between blindness and openness, exclusivity and general concern, fine reading of life and the immersion of love” (“Perceptive” 190). Among the two incompatible visions—open-eyed moral perception as opposed to blind love/passion—Strether has adopted the first one and remains incapable of love. Newman, by contrast, is originally capable of blind love/passion, and remains benevolently blind instead of becoming “finely aware and richly perceptive.”

54 The Puritans, arriving in America, regarded that land as “the new Eden” (Manning 3). Consequently, the arrival of innocent Americans in Europe, “the land of experience,” leads to their leaving Eden (“the land of innocence”) behind and becoming experienced (corrupted). Fowler, however, argues that certain Americans are equipped with so-called “blinders”—in other words, they lack imagination—which prevent their being influenced by their (European) surroundings, for better or for worse (36). Daisy Miller and Christopher Newman are typical examples of such Americans with blinders, while Isabel, Milly, and Maggie belong to the “imaginative camp.” These blinders, in fact, may bring to mind the “bandages” in Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence (1920), with which society (men) typically blind (protect) young inexperienced females prior to their marriages, but which seem to be symptomatic of the whole sex at all times, if not the whole era: “It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault?” (53).
Lastly, we should observe that Newman’s character proves the earlier signaled difference between the various “facets” of moral conduct; he is endowed with the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful), but he is devoid of the Jamesian “moral sense” that cannot come into being if one lacks imagination and keen-sightedness concerning particulars—if one is not, to repeat, “finely aware and richly perceptive.”

7. The dying Longstaff’s proposal of marriage: An attempt at living by proxy or the coveting of a moment’s happiness?

Only two years before the serialization of The Portrait, and a year after the publication of The American, a nouvelle that was not destined to become well known appeared in 1878 as part of a collection entitled Master Eustace. Although “Longstaff’s Marriage” is admittedly not one of the shiniest stars in the Jamesian constellation, it is of considerable interest when discussing the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary due to salient similarities and systematic differences that can be traced between this piece and The Portrait. Once again, we find a young man with a large fortune dying of consumption who wants to “do something for” the lady he loves; he has “property—lands, houses, a great many beautiful things” (86)—that he would eagerly offer to her, which would in consequence give her “a larger liberty” and even a name which is “one of the best in the world” (87) in the bargain. There is once again the proud, handsome young lady, very fond of her liberty and very much averse to any emotional entanglement with any man whatsoever. Yet Diana Belfield can afford to stand apart more than Isabel Archer because she is already in possession of a “pretty fortune” (59) due to the patrimony she acquired on the death of her mother (58); indeed, “money, too, is a protection, and Diana had enough to purchase privacy” (60) and to scorn all the offers of marriage that have so far come her way. James spells it out for us: not only does she wear the
name of the Roman “goddess of the chase,” but she also resembles her as far as physiognomy and personality go.\textsuperscript{55}

[…]

her name, which might have been given her in prevision of her tall, light figure, her nobly poised head, weighted with coronal auburn braids, her frank quick glance and her rapid gliding step. She used often to walk with a big dog who had the habit of bounding at her side […].

[… simply the idea of marrying. She found it insupportable: a fact which completes her analogy with the mythic divinity to whom I have likened her. She was passionately single, fiercely virginal. (57, 59)

Diana’s pride and love of independence verges on coldness and pitiless “mockery” of the emotions of others, which is observed with dismay both by her faithful companion, her plain penniless devoted cousin Agatha Gosling (83, 89), as well as by Longstaff’s similarly faithful old servant (81). Miss Belfield is only a bit softened by the sight of the dying man who has finally made up his mind to summon her to his deathbed to confess his love and ask him to marry her. He pleads with her, telling her of the already mentioned benefits she may derive in exchange for the favor he is asking her. He admits that “it would be a great charity, a great condescension” (87) despite the money and the liberty which he could give her in return, but it would still be a relatively small gesture compared with the great happiness that it would bring about.

For one thing, “it would be a bliss to know” that his beloved possessions, “lands, houses, a great many beautiful things” which he is “very sorry to be leaving behind” would rest in Diana’s hands (86). Secondly, having bestowed his fortune and name on the person he loves, he would feel that after his death he would somehow live on both through the “appurtenances” so dear to him once and through the person he adores; it would be living by proxy par excellence. Thirdly, he would wish to die happy: “I am fond of life. I don’t want to die; but since I must die, it would be a happiness to have got just this out of life—this joining of our hands before a priest. You could go away then. For you it would make no change—it would be no burden. But I should have a few hours in which to lie and think of my happiness” (86).

\textsuperscript{55} Another Diana-like heroine is Gwendolen Harleth of George Eliot’s \textit{Daniel Deronda}, who is a similarly proud beauty resembling the goddess of the hunt not only by her fierce virginal independence but also by her skill with horses and her prowess in archery. Despite her aversion to the nearness of men, her greater egoism results in her relish of the admiration of gentlemen. She likes being paid homage to, as long as they stand far enough off and do not disturb her with their adoration.
As soon as Miss Belfield hears the dying young man’s offer, the “patient and pitying” look which had momentarily replaced her “look of proud compulsion, of mechanical compliance” (85) disappears. She gives voice, still in Longstaff’s presence, to her doubts as to his condition, theorizing about the unwelcome scenario of his getting well, after all. The young man gives a “long, soft moan” (89) and turns away. Diana is pitiless and apparently unmoved. It is only afterwards, in Agatha’s presence, that she gives way to her emotions, bursting into tears. This, however, is not fuelled by sadness and pity but by “an almost passionate indignation” (89). She feels insulted, pronouncing Longstaff’s “conduct indelicate, egoistic, impertinent” (89-90). She decides to leave Nice and roams around with her puzzled companion only to find traveling a source of vexation, which leads to their eventual return home. Agatha loses sight of her for a few years, and the next time she is “summoned,” it is by an utterly changed, dying Diana. For a while they embark on another European tour, during which she witnesses the restlessness of an ever more gravely ill Miss Belfield.

It is the chance meeting with Longstaff in Saint Peter’s Cathedral in Rome that solves the puzzle for Agatha; just as the young man was supposed to be dying of love as much as of consumption, so Diana is ailing for the same amorous cause. She has been in love with Longstaff all these years, having realized her passion a mere few weeks after her cruel slighting of him on his deathbed. She was right, after all; he did get better. He was cured of his love by being disappointed in the object of it.\(^{56}\) Diana, on the other hand, was punished; she was condemned to death because of her heartlessness. The tormentress fell in love with the tormented one too late, when he was already cured of his emotions and thus became a tormentor in turn. Unlike Diana, however, Longstaff yields to the dying woman’s wish. Unsurprisingly, the ultimate twist of the story is their union by her deathbed. But Diana is not cured of her illness by the satisfaction of her affections as Longstaff was. She does not want to get well and go on living, but sticks to the original terms of their transaction. She does not snare him into marriage only to recover but, true to her word, dies and leaves Longstaff unburdened.

Diana is an individual averse to anything that may bind her to her fellow human beings. Her love of independence makes her asocial and prompts her to shun any situation where giving, taking, and giving back may come into play.\(^{57}\) She does not want to accept lest

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56 This entails that his illness had really more to do with spiritual than physical malady: most probably, he would just as well have gotten better in the case of the satisfaction of his desire.

57 Diana’s behavior reminds one of Coriolanus in the light of Stanley Fish’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s eponymous play based on speech-act theory. See “How To Do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech-Act Theory and Literary Criticism.”
she feel obliged to show gratitude and give something in return. That she is perfectly devoid of the disposition to reciprocate results in something more unpleasant than a rather neutral unsociability; she is downright egoistic, uncharitable, the opposite of generous. It could be raised in Diana’s defense that she generously shared her patrimony with her cousin. But firstly, this is more of a gesture that puts her in a superior position by obliging her poor relative and “purchasing” her services as a patient companion. Secondly, Agatha is a woman, which makes her less dangerous to her independence.

Longstaff is a real gentleman. He not only offers Diana all he has in return for a small charitable gesture, but he shows his generosity once again by forgiving his one-time tormentress and doing for her what she had refused him: marrying him for the sake of a fleeting moment of happiness.

PART III. THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

1. Benefactor and/or collector: A question of disposition and/or means?

After Part II.’s focus on Jamesian benefactresses/benefactors in his early fiction, we may now turn (back) to the ones in The Portrait, and also commence our discussion of this novel in more detail. This is where we meet the first American girl of great relevance, Isabel Archer, whose figure, in our quest to find out whether she develops the fundamental virtue of the disposition to reciprocate, will be examined from many different directions. Let us now turn to her and her fellow-protagonists and scrutinize them as a group of (sometimes unwitting) collectors.

The apparent difference between collector (connoisseur) and benefactress/benefactor has already been signaled in passing in relation to the figure of Rowland Mallet; the portrayals of several collectors in The Portrait were enumerated, namely Edward Rosier, Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond, and Ralph Touchett. They are all collectors, but it is only Ralph who can be regarded as a benefactor as well. An early example of such a combination was said to be Rowland: he is a benefactor who has an undisguised admiration of everything in the field
of arts and endeavors to be part of it by collecting artworks and assisting penniless artists, who, thereby, end up being collected themselves. The benefactress/benefactor as “collector of people” is not a wolf in sheep’s clothing, however. (S)he is not (always) a heartless monster who regards people as objects that may enrich her/his collection of beautiful things (s)he surrounds her/himself with.

In support of this statement, I propose to turn to Freedman’s brilliant description of the ubiquity of “the process of aestheticization” (Professions 154) “portrayed” by James in The Portrait. Freedman explains it as the result of the ineluctable “reifying vision” (Professions 153) that individuals endowed with a sensibility for the beautiful inevitably possess, whether they be people of goodwill or cold eccentrics. The undoubtedly negative example of the collector/aesthete is Gilbert Osmond, followed by the more ambiguous Madame Merle, who in turn is followed by the clearly good-natured Edward Rosier, while the most kind-hearted of them all is Ralph Touchett. It will be seen, in fact, how Isabel Archer is not exempt from the reifying vision, which turns her into an even more unconscious collector than the others.

“Osmond perceives all the others he encounters as detached, deadened objects of his purely passive perception, and seeks to make those who refuse to be so into such beautiful objects” (Freedman, Professions 153). His view of Isabel is consistent with this from their first encounter; he detects in her the makings of a potential “figure in his collection of choice objects” (501). True, he is not unaware of the dangers of Isabel’s tendency to have “too many ideas” (482, 502, 632), which makes her too mobile and thus reluctant to remain as static and passive as an objet d’art is supposed to be. It is pertinent to recap here that good-willed Ralph’s disappointment concerning his cousin’s short-lived “soaring” and lamentable capture by that “sterile dilettante” (547) is likewise due to the same expectations, even if he contradicts his own wishes when he wants to see the spectacle of this young lady realizing her potential.

In other words, Ralph wants to be the spectator of the drama of Isabel’s life, yet he is dismayed when the freedom that he had given her enables her to act out her own wishes, which are not in accordance with the plot he wanted her to enact. His view of Isabel is closer to his initial associations with paintings and bas-reliefs, and not so much with the mobile art of drama. Having “mentally transformed Isabel into a particularly beautiful but nevertheless static portrait of a lady, the next logical step is to hang her on the wall of his mental portrait gallery” and it is “in order to continue to contemplate her” (Freedman, Professions 154) that he endows her with a fortune. Contrary to Osmond, he likes his cousin exactly because she has so many ideas, but of course it does not enter into his calculations that she may—acting
still in character—come up with one particular theory that will lead to the abrupt termination of his entertainment:

It was wonderfully characteristic of her that she had invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, and loved him, not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed up as honours. Ralph remembered what he had said to his father about wishing to put it into Isabel’s power to gratify her imagination. He had done so and the girl had taken full advantage of the privilege. (550)

It is not by accident that Osmond and Ralph are at the two extreme ends of the scale that we can mentally construct when discussing these collector figures. Osmond has absolutely no intention to give anything to Isabel, neither as a husband nor as a beneficiary of a huge fortune in the form of his wife’s dowry. Surely, Osmond would never have bothered collecting Isabel if she had not been rich (785), even if she had proved to be a pretty passive fool without ideas. He wants everything: a wife to be put in the vitrine and the money he gets as her dowry. Indeed, Osmond is a terrible taker without a grain of generosity or the least sign of the disposition to reciprocate. Unlike idealizing Isabel’s initial view of him as “an original without being an eccentric” (459), he is the egocentric par excellence who is not interested in his fellow human beings and shuns all relationships where he would have to feel obliged to show gratitude or to give something in return. Of course, his fine rhetoric about his “willful renunciation,” his “studied” if not “natural indifference,” his endeavor to “be as quiet as possible” (462) and turn his back on the world with its superficialities, is as hollow as he is; there is no greater poseur than Gilbert Osmond, as poor Isabel finally realizes during her famous vigil of the forty-second chapter. 58

Osmond had talked to Isabel about his renunciation, his indifference, the ease with which he dispensed with the usual aids to success […], but indifference was really the last of his qualities; she had never seen any one who thought so much of others […]. He was unable to live without it [society], and she saw that he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even when he appeared to be most detached from it. (634) 59

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58 It is here that Osmond’s egotism under the misleadingly ornamental facade of “his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, his good nature, his facility, his knowledge of life” is likened to “a serpent [lying] in a bank of flowers” (634).

59 Further revealing paragraphs about Osmond’s sham-indifference to the world: 553, 597.
As a second-rate Narcissus, Osmond cares about the opinion of the world (his fellow human beings) only because it offers him his own reflection as the successful embodiment of his ideal, which is “a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life” (635). Himself as the incarnation of this ideal is the coveted mirror image that he wants to admire, and there is no fellow-feeling or respect whatsoever in his observance of forms and traditions. Or, to put it differently, it is he who should be respected as the perfect embodiment of Form (traditions, customs, manners, style). Social approval is one of the most important social rewards we all seek, and he wants the best even of that, namely respect. While approval denotes equality, respect is of a higher kind because it presupposes the superiority of its object (Blau 63). Osmond only feigns not to care, yet secretly lives for just this.

In this way, despite his egocentrism, Osmond is one of the most conventional souls Isabel has ever encountered: “He had told her that he loved the conventional, but there was a sense [the love of harmony, order, decency] in which this seemed a noble declaration” (633). It dawns on her too late that the fondness Osmond has for “the old, the consecrated, the submitted” results not in harmony and order, but in an oppressing narrowness, a “conscious calculated attitude” which is just a “thing of forms” (635) without any noble substance.

On the other end of the scale, we see the collector/benefactor who is ready to give and get something for it. One may say, of course, that Ralph can well afford to, as he is rich, while Osmond, Madame Merle, and even Rosier are either penniless or not as wealthy as they would like to be in their desire to enrich their collections. It is, however, not a question of means. The fundamental ingredient is the disposition to reciprocate. At this stage of our discussion, we do not even have to go as far as to claim disinterested charity from our benefactor figures; let us remember the strings that are always attached to whatever is given. Ralph’s desire to “collect” his cousin and “hang her” in his mental portrait gallery like a beautiful portrait of a lady is coupled with his unbounded admiration for her, a feeling which borders on ardent love. In contrast, Osmond does not turn benefactor as soon as he has the means; he remains a mean collector and the role of benevolent benefactor is further down on his list than ever.

Before praising Ralph too much, however, let us remember that his reluctance to make himself known as her real benefactor has a lot to do with his fear of love/life with all its risks.

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60 We have already used this epithet in connection with Hubert Lawrence in Watch and Ward, yet it is even more apt when it comes to describing Osmond.

61 It is of course inevitable to muse upon the similarly reifying vision of James the narrator bent on the painting of his portrait of a lady. To go a step further, another collector’s reifying vision also beholds Isabel as a lady in a portrait as she is standing by the doorway, literally framed by it: Rosier once again proves to be a connoisseur with a discerning eye (570).
and possible disappointments; he chooses to play it safe and sacrifices all show of gratitude from her impressive cousin in order to enjoy the spectacle undisturbed. Thus, in a way, he is similar once again to Osmond; namely, his aversion to relationships that always entail some form of exchange with the perennial feeling of obligation attached. Of course, his wish to stay aloof is not as strong as Osmond’s, but he is wary of going beyond family-ties and friendships; love is dangerous ground.

Madame Merle I have called ambiguous, and, indeed, her motives are rather mixed. At first, we find her in the guise of a good friend of both Osmond and Isabel, trying to help them by pairing them up. By now, we suspect that this is no free gift either, but what does she get out of it? At the outset it is hard to say, yet towards the end of the story several reasons for her initial match-making are revealed. First she is discovered by Isabel in a position that throws light on her as someone very intimate with Osmond (612). At that point, Isabel has no proof or second opinion, and the rather obvious suspicion that Madame Merle may easily have been her husband’s lover earlier on has not even crossed her mind. Then, by way of amusement for her bored self and assistance to a desperate Isabel forbidden to visit her dying cousin, Countess Gemini, Osmond’s sister, spells it out for her: not only is Serena Merle Osmond’s previous lover, but she is nothing less than the mother of Pansy Osmond, the jewel of Gilbert’s collection (752-4). Serena had thus been bent on furnishing her “family” with money to live on—her former lover with a charming piece for his collection, and her daughter with a surrogate mother (older sister) to be by her side who may even have the kindness to provide her with a dowry later on. It is as if Isabel had been discovered in an antique shop (her friend Mrs. Touchett’s house) by Serena, collected as a potential wife-material as soon as she became a rich heiress, and successfully passed on to the most important people in her life, the Osmonds.

Due to one of the only “slips of the tongue” we catch her committing, Madame Merle, in her irritated-disappointed state of mind due to Isabel’s harmful meddling in the Warburton-affair, lets her know that Isabel has to do “everything” with her (723). It is in consequence of this one word that poor Mrs. Osmond finally sees the light, even if it is just the beginning of a series of dismal revelations. Mrs. Touchett was right, Madame Merle had been false and played a double game all along: “She had found her profit not in the gross device of borrowing money from Isabel but in the more refined idea of introducing one of her intimates to the young girl’s fortune. […] the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid, had married her for her money” (725). From then on, Isabel’s “status” as a gift-object is several times referred to: the Countess Gemini defines her as “a woman who has been made
use of” (754, emphasis added), and Isabel likewise sees herself as a “dull un-reverenced tool” (759) and a “convenience” (782). What a difference between Ralph’s benevolent approach towards his delightful cousin as a “gift of fate” (253) and the mercenary approach of Osmond and Madame Merle!

The latter’s “profit,” however, is soon questioned by Isabel herself: “It was not slow to occur to her that if Madame Merle had wished to do Osmond a service, his recognition of the fact must have lost its warmth” (725). Isabel sees “the too zealous benefactress” (725) left high and dry by the ungrateful beneficiary. On top of Osmond’s deplorable taking without ever giving or showing any appreciation whatsoever, Pansy is unaware both of Serena being her real mother and the help she had indirectly given her by finding her a lovable companion. Thus the little girl cannot help being ungrateful for a service rendered to her without her knowledge. The sad irony is that she even dislikes her unknown benefactress (765), and although she would never allow herself to give any overt sign of it to Madame Merle, the latter knows it. As if this was not enough punishment, Serena has also to have the causing of Isabel’s unhappiness on her conscience. There should be no doubt about her liking and admiring Isabel from the first (436), and even if she had always taken Osmond’s interests to be her priority, making Isabel wretched and afraid of both Osmond and herself (729) was definitely not part of her plans.

Not surprisingly, a deaf ear is turned to Madame Merle’s complaints; Osmond has neither heart nor conscience and he takes his ingratitude yet another step further. He actually reprimands his benefactress for her trashy donation. Looking Serena’s gift-horse in the mouth, he complains about the vexation that its acceptance has ultimately caused him. Let it be said, however, that—without his ever admitting it—his initial approach had actually been rather positive. Although he did not breathe a word of thanks to Serena, Osmond still said to himself, at least during his soliloquy preceding his marriage, that her donation had been “a present of incalculable value” (552).

As soon as Osmond has to face the fact that his wife is not as pliable as he expected, his silent jubilance at having received such a nice gift turns into scorn and martyrdom demonstrated in exquisite style. And when he is attacked point blank by his donor who claims to have been “fatiguing” herself so as to give him “an interest”—which she deems “a great gift”—he accuses her of having put him “into such a box” (729-30): a marriage with a woman whose character serves as a constant irritant to him. This is Osmond’s characteristic reply to the following allegation of his benefactress concerning his deplorable behavior towards Isabel, due to which Madame Merle claims to have even been robbed of her last
shreds of illusion concerning him: “I judged you, as I say, of old; but it is only since your marriage that I have understood you” (730). Osmond just shrugs it off by calling her match-making “cruelly rash” if she put him in that box without thoroughly knowing him and without being sure whether it would be a “comfortable fit” (730). In the end, with nothing left, she asks herself whether she has been “so vile all for nothing” (731).

Little Edward Rosier,62 “the ornament of the American circle in Paris” (559, emphasis added), is a seemingly harmless handsome youth with a keen eye for bibelots. “Clapping” knowing eyes on Pansy, the crown jewel of Osmond’s collection, he immediately recognizes in this graceful jeune fille a “Dresden-china shepherdess” (560) come to life—his dream come true. Whether she is likened to a flower based on her name, or a giant bibelot, or a jewel, even without a collector’s reifying vision a beholder is sure to recognize at first sight that she is a decorative, timid, obedient girl, as passive and pliant as they come; “she was evidently impregnated with the idea of submission, which was due to any one who took the tone of authority; and she was a passive spectator of the operation of her fate” (432). Indeed, she is her father’s jealously guarded artwork, which he has been forming, trimming, polishing ever since her birth with the express intention to sell her to the highest bidder who is willing to give a great name and an equally great fortune in exchange for Pansy’s erotic capital. In other words, Osmond is biding his time, waiting for the most profitable transaction in the shape of a business partner who has the satisfactory social and economic capital to offer.

Now, Edward Rosier is not It. He is small fry, with nothing whatsoever to offer in exchange that Osmond would care for. The latter does not have any scruples to say to the young inamorato that he had “set a high price for [his] daughter” (581) and so she is an expensive commodity he cannot afford. On top of it, he turns out to be the opposite of harmless: he is a terrible nuisance both because he keeps on persisting, and also because he manages to turn Pansy’s pretty head and bring about that hitherto docile girl’s first disobedient thoughts—which, let it be said, remain “mute and modest” (763-4) all along.

Rosier’s situation is only exacerbated by the fact that he has competition that happens to be just what papa Osmond covets; Lord Warburton, his wife’s former suitor, is in possession of both the appropriate ancestry and the desired fortune that are essential to the mercenary parent’s satisfaction. Warburton is as gentlemanly and good-natured as ever, and he is loath to stand in the way of true love or marry Pansy if she is forced to accept him.

62 Perosa points to Hugh Crimble, “the moneyless lover of art” in The Outcry, as the “prefiguration” of Rosier (162), who, contrary to his predecessor, succeeds in winning the hand of his dream-girl, the daughter of Lord Theign.
against her will. Anyway, this amiable lord does not look on the young lady as an objet d’art he would like to collect; he actually does not care for her, and one of the real reasons for his suit is the proximity it allows him to have to Pansy’s stepmother, his old flame Isabel. As soon as Mrs. Osmond tells him of her stepdaughter’s feelings, Warburton does what is honorable; he steps aside, leaving Osmond raving with frustration and bursting with anger towards his wife.

Pansy is shoved back into the convent in which she was educated so as to have time for “a little reflection” (736) and to freshen her up after having exposed her to the bad influence of being “so much in the world” (736). Anxious Osmond opines that her pretty plumage got ruffled by evil worldly winds and she needs to cool down and regain her former repose. Rosier, the spoke in the wheel of the ambitious father’s plans, has to be forgotten. “It was natural” that Osmond, the conscientious craftsman who “regarded his daughter as a precious work of art […] should be more and more careful about the finishing touches” (739). “The collapse of the girl’s momentary resistance” (763) does not come as a surprise; the few weeks of “little reflection” have their “salutary effect”: “She had no vocation for struggling with combinations; in the solemnity of sequestration there was something that overwhelmed her. She bowed her pretty head to authority, and only asked of authority to be merciful” (764).

At first glance, Isabel’s similarity to Ralph resides in their mutual lack of an actual collection; while Ralph is far from a keen collector when it comes to bibelots, her cousin is downright averse to any appurtenances whatsoever. In contrast with Osmond, Madame Merle, and Rosier, whose delightful apartments are chock full of objets d’art, Isabel shuns belongings because she regards them as obstacles to and misleading foils of her Self. Of her desire for unbounded freedom and her soaring idealism echoing Emersonian self-reliance we shall hear enough in the next chapter. Let it suffice here that her tendency to collect is of a greater magnitude inasmuch as it is only apparent in her attitude towards love; similarly to Ralph, she is afraid to get entangled in a relationship where one is to give so much and ideally is to get so much back. It is still connected to her love of independence that she wants to steer clear of men with whom marriage would entail close intimacy, with such dangers lying in wait for her as her domination by the masculinity represented by Caspar Goodwood or the potency of such a rich nobleman as Lord Warburton. Osmond appears harmless because he has neither money nor masculine sex appeal redolent of force, nor a name to make one feel inferior. When it comes to a definition of him, in fact, it is a list of negatives; all the
references made to him by his own sister (470), by Mrs. Touchett (475), by Ralph (495), and even by Isabel (549-50) and himself (509-10, 530), are made up of what he is not.

Isabel, on the other hand, is endowed with the power of purchase due to her inherited fortune; she can afford to collect this apparently humble noble “man who had the best taste in the world” (632). It is interesting to note that her behavior at their first meeting is that of the connoisseur sizing up an objet d’art to form an opinion, or even purchase it if the fancy takes her; “she took little share in the conversation [and] sat there as an impartial auditor [...] a dramatic entertainment, rehearsed in advance” because she found it “more important that she should get an impression” than to make one (445). Mr. Osmond seems to her reifying vision—very much like she seemed to that of Ralph’s—as one of the fine “drawings in the long gallery above the bridge, at the Uffizi” (445). Once again, we have the classic example of the collector’s association with both static paintings (drawings) and active (mobile) dramatic performances. Isabel similarly likes the entertainment she gets out of Osmond’s performance, but she also expects to “frame him” according to the favorable impression she has got of him at their first encounter. Due to this favorable impression, she ultimately decides to “condescend” to him and help him in his desire for beautiful things, not doing less than enjoying the role of the collector and trying to collect another collector to be put into her collection; it gave her the feeling that “the finest individual she had ever known was hers” (632).

Indeed, Isabel’s tendency to “cubby-hole” people she meets according to the types/specimens (256) they strike her as belonging to is in full swing when she thinks she has recognized a “specimen apart” (459) in the person of Gilbert Osmond; he cannot be grouped with any of the people she has hitherto known, as he is not one of the “half-dozen specimens” (459) she is used to. The collector in her makes her pounce upon this rare piece, this “original” who strikes her—a misconception that will prove to be her eventual doom—as not being “an eccentric” (459).

In connection with “cubby-holing,” it is interesting to consider Nussbaum’s emphasis on the attractive safety that such simplification brings about. Nussbaum analyzes Maggie

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63 It is interesting to note little Rosier’s “most cherished doctrine” refuting the allegation that a lack of funds can pose a serious obstacle in the way of out-and-out collectors; when he finds out that “Osmond had landed most of his great prizes during his impecunious season,” he feels reassured about his doctrine declaring that “a collector may freely be poor if he be only patient” (567). Ironically, patience does not seem to suffice him in the case of the most coveted and most expensive “piece,” namely Pansy Osmond, and Isabel sadly reflects after having witnessed the jeune fille’s surrender that “it was well that Mr. Edward Rosier had kept his enamels!” (763) Collecting human beings is a pastime affordable only to the likes of newly-rich Isabel, Milly Theale, and Adam (and Maggie) Verver.
Verver’s moral simplicity at the outset of *The Golden Bowl*, and explains the young woman’s fear of “the distinct claims of each particular value” that brings about “personal qualitative uniqueness” (“Flawed” 130-1) with the inevitable complications/conflicts that such wide-eyed vision would entail. Both Maggie and Isabel regard these complications as major threats to their “moral safety” and prefer an abstract, simple, unifying morality based on generalizations to “personal separateness, the value of each person and each end as a distinct item generating its own claims” (“Flawed” 130). Ironically enough, James had this “type-casting propensity” in common both with his American girls and with such realists as Balzac, despite his conviction in line with his moral realism that “character ‘types’ […] constrict personality, after all, to a bundle of predictable features” and thereby distort the life-likeness of a protagonist (Bell 90). The best evidence to his “having done his part to add to the stock catalogue” is his very creation of the American girl, which Bell labels a “popular by-word as well as a literary cliché” (90).

Similarly to Rowland, Isabel wishes to assist a poor but talented person to realize his artistic dreams. Even if Roderick was a creative artist and Osmond only a connoisseur, the tendency is the same: to be able to give the chance to their beneficiaries’ exceptional sensibilities to have free play. Alas, Isabel’s venture has an even more tragic outcome than Rowland’s; while the latter had been bruised by his adventure but was still seen at the end of the story as a man hopeful of a future that may fulfill his dream to marry Mary, Isabel is captured body and soul: she is ignorant of the fact that it is she who is being collected and literally pays for her entrapment. The place she is appointed to is indeed as narrow and oppressing as a vitrine, “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” with Osmond peeping “down from a small high window and mock[ing] at her” (633).

2. Isabel the beneficiary

Having briefly looked at Isabel’s unsuccessful attempt at being a collector/benefactor and her unwitting role as a gift-object as well, it is time to analyze her general disposition as an individual towards society, which is the fundamental reason for her ultimate unhappiness. I will try to prove that the key to her failure is her paradoxical desire for an unfettered self and her simultaneous fear of burdensome freedom. Before we focus on her as an individual, however, let our first step be the shifting of our ground and, in a thoroughly Jamesian fashion,
the “re-seeing”\textsuperscript{64} of Ralph’s gift from a different point of view: that of the beneficiary. Then we can proceed to look at Isabel’s own interpretation of this role, and ultimately draw our conclusions concerning her general disposition based on her particular behavior in that given situation.

L. Becker calls attention to the necessity to reciprocate even if the donor is unknown, or dead, or the gift has not been “actively solicited” (124). The latter case can be paraphrased as the maxim that it does not matter whether we have asked for something or not, no distinction should be made between something that we have “explicitly accept[ed]” and a thing that we are merely aware of having received (124). If we are aware of a good that was given or done to us, it is our moral obligation to reciprocate. There is a mitigating factor, however. It is important to stress that this rule only applies to goods received; whatever the intention, if a gesture or a thing given is harmful to the receiver, (s)he is not obliged to accept it,\textsuperscript{65} and surely not obliged to make a fitting return. This is to say that evil should neither pose any feeling of obligation on us to accept it, nor to return it with evil (L. Becker 97).

Isabel is put in a situation where her real donor is unknown, her alleged donor is dead, and the gift has not been actively solicited by her. As long as the sixty thousand pounds that she is presented with constitute a good, she is morally obliged to make a fitting return—even if it can only be to the world/society at large due to the donor’s absence.

This brings us to the multi-faceted nature of Money. Is it, as Isabel initially sees it, a burden that forces us to find a good use for it and puts us in a position where we are inevitably faced with the harrowing need of choice, which consequently brings about the limitation of our possibilities and the curbing of our freedom? Is it, as Locksley, the protagonist of “A Landscape Painter”\textsuperscript{66} would have it, a burden that distorts us, that denies us the possibility to be ourselves in the eyes of others whose vision of us has been modified by the number of our dollar bills? Is it a welcome mask, as it will be for Milly Theale, “the heiress of all ages” in The Wings, behind which we can securely hide? Is it, as it was for Mr. Sloane, a safety net, a

\textsuperscript{64}Matthiessen uses this apt phrase in his “The Painter’s Sponge and Varnish Bottle,” a chapter devoted to the analysis of the Jamesian revisions for the New York edition (152).

\textsuperscript{65}This, in fact, goes against what Mauss described as a fundamental rule of the “monstrous product” (42) of the gift system of the Melanesians, namely the rules of the already mentioned “potlatch”; there it was an offence to refuse any gift, hence the obligation to receive had no exceptions (13). Naturally, Mauss did not applaud this particular “aberration” of the otherwise laudable gift system that he solicited as a much more ideal alternative than the capitalist commodity economy of his (and our) times (70, 83).

\textsuperscript{66}One of James’s earlier short stories from 1866, it depicts the ironic fate of rich Locksley, who, in order to be loved for himself and not for his money, assumes the incognito of a penniless painter and becomes a lodger of Captain Blunt’s humble abode, only to be “captured” by a “blunt,” money-minded, but on the whole likeable Esther Blunt. She comes upon his diary and accordingly keeps up appearances so as to let Locksley think she is unaware of his wealth and origins. The unwitting suitor falls for her and is undeceived only after their engagement.
wadding, a shelter that protects us (171)? Is it, as Isabel’s friend Henrietta argues, a danger to such an idealist as Miss Archer, since it will prevent her ever having to get into closer “contact with reality,” shutting her up “more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people, who will be interested in keeping up those illusions” (413)? Is it, as Ralph believes and Isabel will come to think, a source of power that enables us to realize our dreams? Or, better still, may it even be a part of our better selves, with “a certain ideal beauty” (420)? Yet, should it not rather be looked upon as the source of a different kind of power—as Mr. Sloane, apart from its protecting qualities, was wont to regard and use it—which makes it possible for us to oblige and dominate others? One thing seems certain: enabling us to reach our goals and at the same time limiting our freedom by forcing us to act and choose means that money is both the road to and the obstacle in the way of the freedom of the individual.

Indeed, Isabel’s initial reaction to her inheritance is the questioning of the nature of such a donation. Although she would never doubt her uncle’s benevolent intention, she is not in the least sure whether the huge fortune transferred to her is a good or an evil for her. Before anything else, it makes her afraid and harressed: “A large fortune means freedom and I am afraid of that. It’s such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn’t one would be ashamed. And one must always be thinking—it’s a constant effort. I am not sure that it’s not a greater happiness to be powerless” (419). This first reaction of dismay to the “windfall” she “has fallen victim to” is very soon exchanged for a much more positive outlook on her fortune, justifying Madame Merle’s “perspicacity,” namely that “after Isabel had put her hand in her pocket half-a-dozen times she would be reconciled to the idea that it had been filled by a munificent uncle” (420). Yet Isabel is destined to run full circle: she is to return to her initial position, admitting to herself during that famous vigil of the forty-second chapter that “at bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience” (631).

In the meantime, however, her “morally inflammable” nature is soon set ablaze at the thought of the limitless vistas that her money opens before her. Losing herself amidst “a maze of visions,” she muses upon all “the fine things a rich, independent, generous girl, who took a large, human view of her opportunities and obligations, might do” (420). Her fortune becomes “to her mind a part of her better self […] with […] a certain ideal beauty” (420). Ralph is overjoyed at the sight of her cousin’s changed attitude, which corresponds so perfectly to his original expectations concerning her general outlook on life and the heights she is destined to reach if only she is given the possibility.
3. Emerson’s daughter put to the test

Although Ralph is “awfully sold” in the end, he is not the only one disappointed; Isabel herself has to come to terms with the fact that her conception of herself had been both misleading and harmful. Whether she does come to terms with it at all and consequently learns from it remains to be seen. But, to begin with, how does this young American lady, freshly arrived from the “land of innocence,” picture herself at the outset of the story? “It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem [...who] often admired herself” (240-1). Indeed, as “a young person of many theories” and with an imagination “remarkably active” (240), she “spent half her time thinking of beauty, and bravery, and magnanimity” and the other half endeavoring to have her life always “in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce” (242). In other words, she is a rather egotistic personage, for whom it is not only essential to think well of herself, but it is just as necessary that others should do so. I hasten to add that her narcissistic tendencies are coupled with her “hope that she should never do anything wrong” (241), that she should try not to hurt others (242). James affectionately sums her up as a well-meaning jumble of contradictions “intended to awaken on the reader’s part an impulse more tender” (242):

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67 Concerning Isabel’s Emersonian tendencies, Anette Rubinstein’s pioneering essay “Henry James, American Novelist, Or: Isabel Archer, Emerson’s Grand-Daughter” should be signaled. As to tests and theories put into practice, Sarbu aptly points out that The Portrait “is a novel about the impracticability of the Emersonian principle of self-reliance” (Reality 2, 41).

68 Ralph repeats this when he lets Isabel know about the great disappointment her engagement to Osmond has caused; he reminds his cousin of his earlier allegation and says that indeed, he does feel “terribly sold” (550).
Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better; her determination to see, to try, to know; her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal young girl [...]. (242)

Her “fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action” (240-1) points to a romantic, idealistic outlook on life, which makes her akin to an over-eager representative of Emersonian transcendentalism bent on putting her theory to practice. Indeed, her proud independence is in key with Emersonian self-reliance—and Aristotelian self-sufficiency of the magnanimous individual—which is further fuelled by her special circumstances; she claims that she belongs “quite to the independent class,” because she is not in her “first youth,” has “neither father nor mother,” she is “poor,” “of a serious disposition,” and “not pretty” (356). It is touchingly brave to see Isabel trying to make the best of a list of circumstances that seem more disadvantageous than otherwise.

In connection, recall James’s own view of the situation of American women in general and his young orphaned American heroines in particular—it had always been more pitying than applauding—and compare it with Isabel’s stance: she does not look upon herself as an “exposed maiden” in need of protection. Finding herself in the advantageous position most favorable for her alleged dreams of “free expansion,” marriage is the last thing she covets. Apart from herself, it is Ralph, of course, who takes her “spread-eagle oratory” (Habegger 57) at face value, with the difference that he has the sobering foresight concerning the possible obstacles that a young penniless female candidate of Emersonian idealism is sure to find in her way; her disposition and her family circumstances (unmarried, parentless) are an advantage in his eyes, but he is certain that a lack of funds is enough to fatally clip her wings and force her to marry someone so as to find financial support (379).

It is to “put wind in her sails” and to enable her to gratify her “great deal of imagination” (379) that Ralph persuades his father to leave Isabel that handsome sum. Ralph, the ill and indolent idealist, sees a kite in Isabel, the healthy eager idealist, who should be given enough wind and rope to fly—without her awareness of the rope and the person holding it. Whether her propounded Emersonian free-spirit is an illusion she shares with Ralph, that “apostle of freedom” (667), is a risk he consciously takes and a risk she is unaware of; she has yet to learn about her own self in order to find out.
These two aficionados of freedom, however, do not seem to realize in time the crucial difference between two types of freedom. Moneyless Isabel may truly appear active and interested at the beginning, but the kind of freedom she then has is a comfortable one, as it does not necessitate responsible action. Until then, precisely because she did not have money, beauty and connections, she was not pressured to act. She tried to experience her being alone and exposed as something desirable and positive, like being freed of shackles, since its direct consequence was that there were no expectations towards her. This apparently carefree and untroubled freedom comes to an end when she inherits a fortune, which puts her in an uncomfortable situation. It becomes a kind of burden that endows her with Power that one feels obliged to use. Remember her words quoted above referring to a large fortune meaning freedom, the good use one should make of it, the consequent effort it demands from the individual, and her conclusive remark that she finds it a happier state to be powerless (268). Indeed, great expectations do arise all at once, and unprepared Isabel finds herself in possession of a hitherto unknown power, with everyone eagerly watching what she will do with it. Her untroubled freedom that went hand-in-hand with carefree powerlessness has now been turned into a frightening burden full of responsibilities by virtue of just that “limitless expansion” she had thirsted after and that she is forced to taste all of a sudden.

Paradoxically, this new “powerful” freedom can just as well be regarded as the opposite of a means to “limitless expansion”; as it urges one to make good use of it and therefore act and choose, it entails a serious limitation, since any choice is a limitation, any definition is an exclusion of something. Jean-Paul Sartre’s emphasis on the fearful side of freedom is doubly relevant here: Isabel is thus not only frightened by the hitherto coveted limitless expansion staring her in the face, out of the blue, but she is also overwhelmed by its opposite; the concomitant limitation that is set on her individuality due to the inevitable exclusion of other possibilities in favor of the chosen one.

Fowler views Isabel’s new kind of freedom due to her inheritance as a masculine one, with which Isabel enters the world of power and action that was monopolized by men in the nineteenth century (73-4). By contrast, Milly and Maggie will be seen as perfectly comfortable with their wealth because they have always been rich. Moreover, they put it to use in the opposite way, strongly resembling rich Ralph’s attitude; as if buying a seat in a theatre, they let others act while they go on as passive observers.

69 See, for instance, Sartre’s essay entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism.”
One of the consequences of Isabel’s inheritance is a reversal of the role she would be able to have in a marriage. She believes that if she brings money into it she can retain a kind of freedom and thus she would be the “the agent of power” (Fowler 75) in marriage instead of her husband. As Lord Warburton or Caspar Goodwood would have done with her, it is now she who takes Osmond as “her property” (497). Banta calls it a “schizoid situation” that is “traditionally imposed upon women,” but here it is the man who is “cast into the female role” (36). The traditional nineteenth-century male attitude is very close to that of the collector/connoisseur, which will reappear in rich Milly’s and Maggie’s case as well. Despite their benevolent intentions, they are likewise collecting/purchasing individuals; Milly is ready to buy Densher’s affection—as long as she is not expected to show hers in return—while the Ververs seem literally to purchase Amerigo (and Charlotte). Needless to say, Osmond, Densher and Amerigo all experience and react differently to being put in this “female” role.

Not only does Isabel hope she can retain her earlier untroubled freedom by bringing a fortune into her marriage, she appears to think that she thus solves two more dilemmas. Firstly, although the reversal of traditional roles makes her powerful, the most prominent emotions it evokes in her are feeling uncomfortable and being filled with guilt (Fowler 74). Despite the transitional glorifying of the money as her “better self” with its “ideal beauty” (420), whether because it necessitates choice and consequently puts an obstacle in her way of free expansion or because it frightens her with just that free expansion becoming finally available, she desperately wants to transfer that burden to “another’s conscience” (Matthiessen 183, Fowler 75).

Osmond is her candidate and her decision to give the burdensome power (money) to him actually symbolizes her very exercise of this power. Moreover, it seems to her a noble act to give her money to such a fine, humble and precious person as Osmond. Consequently, not only does she regard herself as a charitable and generous person, she is, at the same time, benefiting from her donation by ridding herself of the burden that the money (power) she gave away was to her. Furthermore, she congratulates herself on her generosity, not noticing that it is a much easier position to be in than to engage in the real give-and-take that a healthy adult relationship would entail with men like Goodwood or Warburton. Her giving puts her in a superior position, and there is no danger in being entangled in something uncomfortably intimate due to the nature of her beneficiary.

4. Isabel the “new individualist” à la Wilde
Still in the individualistic vein, it promises to be a rewarding line of thought to dwell a bit longer on transcendental Isabel in the light of Oscar Wilde’s fascinating essay entitled “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” With his inimitable mixture of paradoxical wit and astute intelligence, Wilde discusses the relation between the individual/self and society, delineating four different attitudes; namely, that of the adherents to “old” (reprehensible) individualism as the first, then the attitude of those who proclaim socialism in the (likewise reprehensible) “original” sense as the second, the approach of the exemplary adherents to what he terms “new individualism” as the third—a group the attitude of which is then re-defined as socialism with a (new and positive) meaning making up the fourth group.

According to this Wildean classification, Gilbert Osmond and the other collector/connoisseur figures may be taken as the representatives of the old kind of individualism; they are essentially self-centered and believe in the contemporary equation between man “and what he possesses” (“Soul” 4). As an inevitable and detrimental corollary to the emergence of private property, “in a community like ours, where property confers immense distinction, social position, honour, respect, titles, and other pleasant things of the kind, man, being naturally ambitious, makes it his aim to accumulate this property” (“Soul” 4). Thus, mankind had been taught to make “gain not growth its aim” (“Soul” 4), unaware of the limitation that such an attitude entails: “One’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, fascinating, and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living” (“Soul” 4).

The connoisseur, with her/his keener-than-average sensibility, is of course the arch accumulator (consumer), who devotes her/his life to the collecting of beautiful objects that surround and at the same time define her/him. As a kind of artist, her/his talent of expression lies in her/his ability to choose the best and rarest there is, which symbolizes her/his taste, that is her/himself. (S)he is her/his property, and it is only a great example of James’s sense of irony when he makes property-obsessed Rosier exclaim in dismay by way of reaction to Madame Merle’s jesting assertion that she was “always kind to people who have good bibelots”: “Ah, I thought you liked me for myself!” (561).

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70 It is important to clarify at the outset that the analogies drawn between the Wildean new individualist and James’s Isabel Archer do in no way suggest any influence of Wilde on James: “The Soul of Man” was written in 1891, years after the publication of The Portrait. This line of thought, therefore, is more of an interesting tour de force.
That socialism in the original sense of the word is not a solution seems, in Wilde’s estimate, to go almost without saying; abolishing private property and making everyone equally wretched is surely not the answer. “Authoritarian socialism” will simply not do because it would not be a solution to enable man to have more of the freedom that is partially limited by the existence of private property. On the contrary, it would entirely curb every individual’s freedom: “For while under the present system a very large number of people can lead lives of a certain amount of freedom and expression and happiness, under an industrial-barrack system, or a system of economic tyranny, nobody would be able to have any such freedom at all” (“Soul” 3).

As opposed to both the “authoritarian socialist” and the “old-style individualist,” the adherent to “new individualism” seems to have the right approach. It is none other than Isabel Archer who can be taken as the representative of this outlook on life, a proof of which can be discerned in her conversation with “old individualist” Madame Merle concerning the seemingly fluid lines of division between the self, her/his things, and society. The older lady insists on the importance of the “shell” or “whole envelope of circumstances” surrounding each human being, asserting that “there is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances” (397). Where one’s self begins and ends is uncertain and thus the self “overflows into everything that belongs to us” (397). When we choose our clothes, our cars, our friends—anything, in a word—we are making a statement; willingly or not, we do express ourselves at every step. As opposed to Isabel’s concept of the self as isolated, this is the definition of the social self, which may also be called a pragmatic position fundamentally different from Isabel’s idealistic one.

Or, to use another terminology, Madame Merle’s model of the self may be labeled “inherently interpersonal and contextual” while Isabel’s stands for the essentialist outlook, which posits that “human essence [is] to be found in the self independent of a social or temporal context” (Kovács 80-1). Accordingly, Isabel refuses to be judged by the clothes she wears and she claims that nothing belonging to her is any measure of her; “on the contrary, it’s a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (398). Her boundless individualism, her belief in limitless expansion spurns appurtenances, be it a thing of beauty or else. She cannot agree more with Wilde when the latter asserts that “what a man really has, is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance” (“Soul” 4).

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71 That Isabel actually “found it difficult to think of Madame Merle as an isolated figure; she existed only in her relations with her fellow-mortals” (388) suggests that the latter can be taken as a case almost as extreme as Lord Mellifont of James’s delightful short story “The Private Life.”
Whether we take her hapless career as the testing of Emersonian or Wildean tenets with their commendation of individualism, Isabel’s tragedy is in great measure due to her isolationist vision of herself as first and foremost an individual living “freely and innocently in an eternal present” and not as a social being aware of her cultural context and endowed with a historic sense. The seeming truce that to be a member of any society is to conform to norms and to accept limitations is regarded differently by the two individualist sages Isabel seems to be following; Wilde boos “conformity” off stage, asserting that “to the claims of conformity no man may yield and remain free at all” (“Soul” 7), while Emerson’s approach to it is characteristically ambiguous. Indeed, his observation concerning self-reliance in his eponymous essay can easily be misinterpreted: “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. […] The virtue most in request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (26). Isabel, in her endeavor to be self-reliant, seems to confuse the coveted attitude with overt rebellion and a license to be preoccupied with her own self and disregard the society she is part of, thereby coming closer to the Wildean interpretation of individualism. Unlike The Scarlet Letter’s Hester Prynne, who succeeded in outward conformity while preserving her inner independence and thereby became the embodiment of self-reliance, Isabel only wants to know about “the things one shouldn’t do […] so as to be able to choose” (259).

It may be pertinent to say that Isabel is the embodiment of a young United States with its aggressive, innocent, and optimistic individualism which is not yet defined by any tradition and is devoid of the manners and mores that are so characteristic of venerable Europe. This is actually consistent with her representation of Emersonian self-reliance as well, since the latter “has come to be read as a classic description of the American national character” (Sarbu, Reality 40). Similarly to her literary predecessors, Daisy Miller and Christopher Newman, Isabel also manages—sometimes consciously and at other times unwittingly—to outrage European (or Europeanized) sentiments concerning the old continent’s code of behavior. Daisy, Newman and Isabel do not “do as the Romans do when in Rome,” either because they

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73 Interestingly enough, Emerson’s definition leaves room to term Osmond a self-reliant person as well, especially in the light of which he is seen by Isabel at the beginning: he shows himself to be outwardly conforming to rules but keeping his independence in the midst of it all. Only later does she realize that all he cares about are those very rules/forms and his whole self/existence depends on them. Thus, Emerson’s theory actually does not exclude the possibility to be evil and self-reliant at the same time; outward conformity may very well hide inward depravity.
bluntly refuse to conform to the norms of the society they are visiting or due to their not heeding good advice.

This entails that not only do they become individuals defying the role of the social being, but they also end up as eventual victims of the people they become associated with. Non-conventional Isabel’s punishment is the most fitting; while poor ignorant Daisy dies of typhoid fever and Newman’s desire of a “first-class wife” (585) embodying all the best in Europe remains unfulfilled, Isabel gets married to the most conventional man conceivable, whose “ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety,” who “was fond of the old, the consecrated, the transmitted” and who “had an immense esteem for tradition” (635). In his rigid respect for forms, he even outdoes the Bellegardes with whom Newman had to deal. In this light, Newman’s tragedy actually appears to be more of a narrow escape.

Although we have seen that Isabel’s individualism may be closer to that of Wilde than that propagated by Emerson, her behavior does not suffice in the Wildean sense either. She is barred from full self-realization because it is the Artist to whom the realization of one’s own perfection, the living up to one’s own potential, the achievement of complete self-expression is given. Isabel “never attempted to write a book, and had no desire to be an authoress. She had no talent for expression, and had none of the consciousness of genius” (240).

Thus, unlike Rowland, not only is Isabel not sorry about her inability to creatively express herself in the field of arts, but she harbors no desire to express herself at all. Similarly to Ralph, she prefers the more passive (and more secure) role of the observer, who only wants to see for herself (345) without being involved—she does not wish to “touch the cup of experience,” which she considers to be the vessel of a “poisoned drink” (345). “Surveying the field” is the most Isabel is ready for, and neither genuine participation in life, which is the lot of most human beings, nor the creative portraying of it appeals to her. This, in fact, makes her not much more than a sterile egocentric dilettante too good and too timid to soil herself amid the “mire and blood” of the world, and too preoccupied with herself to endeavor to

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74 In fact, Isabel is more of a nonconformist than either Daisy or Newman because not only does she not conform to the norms established by the countries she is visiting, but she likewise refuses to “toe the line” back home—an eccentric behavior that her puzzled relatives attribute to her cleverness.

75 Although I have likened the collector/connoisseur to an artist as well, it is important to stress the difference between them and “real” artists; the former are obsessed with appurtenances and the only thing coming close to a creative effort in their case is the creation of their own self-image made up of collectibles that have been created by the latter. Thus the collectors are (merely) the consumers of the fruits of the output of creative artists. They may be called “life artists,” although it is even more apt to apply in their case the tried and tested term, namely artiste manqué. Strether in The Ambassadors is another classic example of this type of individual.

76 This unforgettable expression is from W. B. Yeats’s “Byzantium.”
make something out of her observations that would be to the benefit of mankind—the creation of things of beauty or wisdom.

It is not surprising that when Isabel does get down to surveying the whole field, her fondness “of the spectacle of human life” proves to be as short-lived as it is intense; she feels sated and rather bored after a brief period of “draining cup after cup” (523). Three months of traveling seems basta, and I am not sure she would not feel the same if the impression of charming Osmond was not pulling her back to Italy. Without his alleged appeal, Isabel’s theory about limitless self-expansion is too shallow to serve as a solid foundation for one’s life; to where does she expand—provided that she is able to transcend the barriers that penned in the women of the nineteenth century? What purpose, what aim is behind her desire for self-realization? What is there for her to realize? Exactly by way of wanting to avoid the usual fate of nineteenth-century female individuals, she does not even have as a last resort their “good old” conventional attitude that would make marriage appear as a career-option, a kind of goal in life.

Another important line of thought concerning Wilde’s new individualist revolves around the question of selfishness—also an essential theme in The Portrait, be it Isabel or Osmond we are talking about. Wilde claims that the individualist is the opposite of egotistic; “if the primary aim of his life is self-development” he is not being selfish because “selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live” (16). This entails that if everybody concentrated on her/his own self-realization instead of forcing it on those surrounding her/him, there would be a wonderful world of individualists living peacefully side by side. This is, in fact, the laudable form of socialism in his opinion, a vision which resembles Carlyle’s ideal society constituting “‘greatly living individuals’ […] ‘a whole world of heroes’” (Sarbu, Reality 44-5). According to this kind of reasoning, Isabel is not guilty of egotism, as she is not in the least interested in forcing her own ways on anyone. In this, she is actually akin to Emerson’s representative man, who, “unlike the [Carlylean] hero, does not impose himself on others” (Sarbu, Reality 47).

That Isabel is unwittingly trying her hand at collectorship when she manages to get “the man with the finest taste in the world” into her possession does not contradict this argument: she never tries to mold Osmond as he attempts and half succeeds in molding her. This is exactly the difference between her type of “egotism” corresponding to the description of the new individualists and the selfishness of Osmond the old-style individualist, who collects Isabel with the expectation to work with her as with an exquisite but pliable material. Poor Isabel’s mistake lies in just this: she mistakes him for a new individualist and expects to
live peacefully side by side. Contrary to her expectations, however, she becomes the victim of a selfish individualist whose pent up and frustrated desire for creative expression is looking at human beings as at so many pieces of clay to work with; as he trims and retouches Pansy from time to time, so does he want to create an ideal wife out of Isabel. Even if he is destined to be disappointed and Isabel’s disposition does not let her be the passive pliant wife of his dreams, she does undergo a great change that seems heart-rending to Ralph when he sees her again after a few years’ time:

The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. “What did Isabel represent?” Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. […] He saw now how he kept all things within limits; how he adjusted, regulated animated their manner of life. Osmond was in his element; at last he had material to work with. (597)

The most regrettable and irretrievable “molding” that Osmond has committed, however, is the corruption of Madame Merle. He has made her bad; he has not only dried up her tears, but her soul as well (728). Apart from his “creative” meddling with the people around him, Osmond continues to dabble in art, the quality of which goes from bad to worse after his becoming rich. Curiously enough, while the beginning of the story shows him making a sketch about such a grandiose subject as the Alps and enthusing about the discovery of a Coreggio sketch, towards the end the grandeur of his projects is seen diminishing instead of increasing: he has taken to collecting miniatures, and sketching coins, both of which suggest smallness and insignificance instead of expansion (Freedman, Professions 151). Or, to put it differently, what seems to be a decline is none other than the coming to the surface of Osmond’s real nature, that of being a “sterile dilettante” (547) after all, just as Ralph has told Isabel at the time of her engagement to this poseur.

5. A gilded cage or a coveted cage?

Having hurriedly “guzzled” cup after cup (523) of the human spectacle for the brief stretch of three months’ time, Isabel gladly gives her hand to the man whose alleged aim

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77 It is Rowland Mallet who uses this expression when conversing with Roderick about the symbolic meanings his exquisite statue named the “Water-drinker” may stand for. Hudson claims that the drinker is
is to “be as quiet as possible” (462) in his picturesque villa “in the hills that encircle Florence” (423), with his little girl as his (hitherto) sole source of pleasure. Even without any evidence as to Osmond’s deplorable personality, and also disregarding Ralph’s private hopes as to a nice long entertainment in the shape of his lovely cousin’s “sailing and soaring” (546), there is an undoubted discrepancy between Isabel’s dream of “free expansion” and her decision that proves a preference for a life “as quiet as possible.” When an “awfully sold” Ralph tells her that he had “had great ideas for [her]” and based on her asserted fondness of her personal independence he had pictured her “soaring far up in the blue—to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men” (546), Isabel’s reaction is nothing short of paradoxical. First, she declares that she has “never moved on a higher line than [she is] moving on now. There is nothing higher for a girl than to marry a—a person she likes” (547). Then, contrary to her assertion that she is “soaring and sailing” higher than ever when accepting the hand of Osmond, she claims that “if one marries at all one touches the earth” (549). Whether soaring and sailing or touching earth, Ralph’s expressed pain and surprise at seeing her caught and “put into a cage” elicits a telling reaction: instead of being offended by Ralph’s figure of speech, she takes it up and declares that it should not trouble him as long as she likes her cage (543).

Time proves Ralph’s fears and Isabel gets to see her cage for what it is, while her husband takes “a fancy to [his] box [him]self” (730). Marriage is a disappointment to both, but Osmond finds it a source of cruel fun: “She was morally certain now that this feeling of hatred, which at first had been a refuge and a refreshment, had become the occupation and comfort of Osmond’s life” (637). According to the line of reasoning we have been hitherto following—which corresponds to Ralph’s own conviction concerning his cousin’s “passionate good faith”—Isabel’s decision to “pair up” with Gilbert is based on yet another theory adopted by her; “she was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that she had invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond [...]” (550). In this light, Isabel is misled both by appearances and her delusive idealism, which make her mistake the nature of the cage she voluntarily walks into. The emphasis, I repeat, is on her belief.

“youth, you know; he’s innocence, he’s health, he’s strength, he’s curiosity,” while “the cup is knowledge, pleasure, experience.” To this, Rowland remarks that “he’s guzzling in earnest” (184). Healthy, young, curious Isabel is similarly guzzling from the cup that her travels stand for, although she is anxious to make a difference between observation and experience; she only wants to “see for herself” and remain untouched by experience, without tasting “the poisoned drink” that the other cup, the cup of experience contains. Roderick is not so choosy.
A number of critics, however, are not willing to put into practice the Coleridgean theory of the “willing suspension of disbelief” and credit Isabel with sincerity concerning her alleged blinding by a gilded cage that eventually turns out to be very different from her expectations. Isabel is seen as an “exposed maiden” in search of protection, in denial of the necessity to grow up and therefore secretly attracted to a Pansy-like existence, which is the main reason why she is drawn to Osmond. Fowler, Habegger, and Ash arrive at this conclusion on different roads, but they all have a strongly psychological bent. Fowler’s approach seems to me the healthiest of them all, and the most closely connected to my query as to whether the Jamesian protagonists are endowed with or succeed in developing the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) as a fundamental moral virtue. Consequently, as previously mentioned, I propose to follow up her line of reasoning throughout my dissertation when examining the other two heroines, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver.

It has to be said in advance, however, that Fowler’s use of Lacanian theory as a springboard not only results in an interesting approach to Jamesian fiction, but in a simplification of Lacan’s tenets as well, which at times may give rise to confusion; the concept of “the other” is rather slippery both within Lacanian theory and in phenomenology, and so a distinction between its different uses seems advisable before we proceed along Fowlerian lines. Another important thing to point out is that although the Lacanian tenets herein referred to had originally described infant development, their significance was later expanded to adolescence and adulthood as well. This is especially true in the case of the mirror stage, concerning which Lacan delivered his lecture entitled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” on the Psychoanalytical Congress of 1936 in Marienbad. At the time, he referred to it as a stage in childhood, while by the 1950s he had redefined it as a stage not only relevant to infant development but as a permanent structure of subjectivity, a paradigm of the imaginary order, the mindset of adults concerning their libidinal relationship with their body image. Thus, James’s American girl in general can be taken as both a representative of a young individual “fighting” the battle of growing up, as well as a symbol of the lifelong human condition in general.

One should not, in fact, forget to signal Hegel’s role as a kind of forerunner to the problem of the self and the other discussed in both psychoanalysis and (existential) phenomenology. In the fourth chapter of Phenomenology of Spirit entitled “Self-consciousness,” Hegel theorizes that self-consciousness is gained through the eyes of the other—I become a self by seeing myself through the eyes of the other, or, I am aware of
myself due to the other’s awareness of me. This further implies that subjectivity (selfhood) comes about as a result of being objectified by another subject; subjects are objects for each other, and so I become an object (of scrutiny) in the eyes of the other, who remains a subject (and an objectifier) while objectifying me. Isolation thus precludes selfhood (subjectivity), yet being in context (amongst others) results not only in gaining subjectivity, but also in simultaneously becoming objectified. This creates a hierarchy with the objectifier being “the lord” and the objectified “the bondsman.” The other, therefore, is both a prerequisite and a threat to the individual’s (self’s) existence—hence the emphasis on the other as a source of fear and animosity in both Lacanian theory and (especially Sartrean) existential phenomenology.

In connection with the self’s definition by what lies outside it, Rousseau’s statement in his Discourse on Inequality—which precedes Hegel’s by more than half a century (as it was written in 1754 while the former was published in 1807)—is just as interesting to consider here: “The savage lives within himself, social man lives outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others, and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own existence” (qtd. in Eagleton 136).

Now, Lacan distinguishes between the “small other”—“which is the ego” (Seminar 236), any individual—and the “big Other” (Seminar 236, Écrits 528). “In the function of speech, we are concerned with the Other” (Lacan, Seminar 236, original emphasis), because it is, amongst other things, “the wall of language,” “an organised system” (Seminar 244), which constitutes “the symbolic order, society’s unwritten constitution” (Žižek 8-9). It is the all-pervasive social context that becomes the yardstick against which each small other can measure her/himself (Žižek 8-9): “If the symbolic function functions, we are inside it. And I would even say—we are so far into it that we can’t get out of it” (Lacan, Seminar 31). This big Other (symbolic order), then, provides the Ego-Ideal as a point of reference for the small other(s) (Žižek 80).

Operating “at a symbolic level,” the big Other has no a priori existence “in spite of all its grounding power”; the small others give it existence by believing in it and acting according to it (Žižek 10, 15). It becomes the “real” with a small “r,” the world we (would like to think we) live in, even if it is only make-believe at the end of the day. Everything belonging to it is a “false reality,” which nevertheless becomes “verified reality [due to] starting off from [this] order defined by the wall of language” (Lacan, Seminar 244). The need for this social fiction is not only the standard-setting function already mentioned, but, more importantly, the refuge that it gives from the unbearable Real with the capital “r”—another order of the Lacanian
triad besides the Symbolic and the Imaginary (Žižek 64-5, 80). The horror of this Real is indescribable. We may, paradoxically, encounter it in our dreams in the shape of “a revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real, of the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*” (Lacan, *Seminar* 164, original emphasis).

Being forced to leave the imaginary order with its illusion of perfection and unity (with the mother) in the course of our infancy, we enter the symbolic order with its rules, laws, regulations; it is the order of the father and of language as opposed to the preverbal imaginary order of the mother. As soon as an individual enters the symbolic order, the illusion of unity is left behind and the fragmented nature of reality and the existence of both the small other(s) and the big Other is to be accepted. The human condition and the symbolic order cannot be separated: “The human order is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence. [...] Everything which is human has to be ordained within the universe constituted by the symbolic function” (Lacan, *Seminar* 29).

Compared with this, phenomenology’s use of the term “other” or “Other” is somewhat simpler: it is all that is apart from the self. Fowler’s use of the term is, in fact, akin to the phenomenological variety: be it with a capital “o” or else,78 “the Other” denotes the forever impenetrable, mysterious, desirable, fearsome person or thing that stands outside the self—another individual in particular or the world/society in general. Armstrong explains that the main interest of existential phenomenology—he draws on Sartre, Husserl, and Heidegger—is the relationship between self and Other, the latter being both a source of joy and despair by virtue of its ultimate mystery. The Other threatens the self with solipsism—I cannot tell what her/his world is like and (s)he cannot perfectly agree with mine—but paradoxically also serves as a proof against it: the fact that the Other poses a problem at all means that (s)he exists and I acknowledge her/his existence. Thus, solipsism is both inescapable and absurd.

In fact, communication between self and Other helps narrow the gap between them, and even if perfect intersubjective transparency is impossible, it is attainable to a certain degree. Furthermore, Armstrong holds that not only are the apparently contradictory approaches of Sartre and Heidegger both equally true, but they also complement each other.

78 I will use Other with a capital “o” and leave off the quotation marks. When referring to the term in the strictly Lacanian sense, I will, of course, retain the original distinction between the small other and the big Other and use quotation marks only in citation, but not for the terms themselves.
and are inevitable if one is to get at the true nature of human relationships. Both Sartrean conflict and Heideggerian care are part and parcel of existence, which will be more exhaustively demonstrated when we get to Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*.

Continuing with Fowler’s line of reasoning, she asserts that James’s American girls are “put to the test of responding to ‘the whole assault of life’ ” when they leave America for Europe, “the land of experience,” and although they “all are initially, like Minny Temple, unequipped for withstanding [it...] they suffer that assault differently: Isabel Archer endures it, Milly Theale dies from it, Maggie Verver triumphs over it” (11). This suggests that there is not only the individual progress of each American girl within her own story, but that there is an overall development in their responses to “the whole assault of life” (*The Wings* 299) compared with each other. Indeed, Maggie is one of James’s final American girls, and it is only she who succeeds in what the others failed to achieve.79

It is interesting to note, however, that by emphasizing the “motherlessness” of these girls, Fowler tends to give more importance to the leaving behind of the imaginary order with its blissful state of unity with the mother, than to their “fatherlessness” which may indicate the lack of refuge that the symbolic order standing for the father/rules/laws may provide when an individual is faced with the fragmented nature of reality—especially because of the significant detail that Maggie is both the only real “victrix” and the only one amongst them who does have a father. That Isabel and Milly have neither mother nor father is just what constitutes their complete exposure/abandonment; neither the initial shelter of the imaginary order, nor the refuge of the symbolic order is available to them, making their quest doubly difficult. Let it be said, however, that the overly important presence of the father will prove to be almost as detrimental to Maggie’s situation, which will turn her quest into something as arduous as that of Isabel and Milly.

To explain what these “quests for self” entail, Fowler’s interpretation of the Lacanian theory concerning the development of a subjective “I” (the formation of the individual as a small other standing apart from the rest of the world—the realization and acceptance of the existence of other small others and the big Other) is the following:

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79 Many critics, however, share the opinion that Milly’s quest does not end in individual failure; although she is betrayed, her death should be regarded as a triumph over her betrayers. In contrast, key-scenes that for other critics prove her enduring will to live and love are for Fowler already signs of Milly’s retreat to passivity and early acceptance of death as a result of her fear of love and experience. Although I tend to agree with Fowler, my conclusive stance regarding Milly’s quest is to be different.
Lacan theorizes that the most important of our early experiences is that by which we first come to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the world [...]. His distinction is made possible by the periodic absences of the mother, which constitute a ‘lack of object’ [...] The experience of ‘lack of object’ is ‘what enables the child to progress to the subjectivity of ‘I’ [...] The experience of a divided reality [...] is an uncomfortable, perturbing experience [...]. There is, of course, a strong resistance on the part of the individual [...], essentially a suicidal impulse [...]. One form of resistance to the recognition of difference between self and Other [...] is identification with the Other. (32-3)

To put it even more simply, if one is to grow up, one has to accept the existence of a divided reality and the ambiguity of the world. This is really one of the “most basic of human situations,” as every inexperienced person, regardless of nationality, has to go through it in order to grow up. But James, based on America’s Puritan heritage, gave it an interesting twist when he equated the inexperienced person with Americans and the Other with Europe—and the gist of the “international theme” was born. According to the Puritans’ belief, America is the “new Eden”; as long as one remains there, one is not corrupted. Americans can consequently be regarded as a childlike nation, having remained in a paradisiacal state of purity. Or, in Lacanian terms, they did not leave the imaginary order behind and are therefore unaware of the frighteningly fragmented nature of the world (existence). But if one looks at the innocent and ignorant Daisy Miller of James’s eponymous story, for instance, he seems to imply that it is not all that beneficial and positive to remain in Eden (imaginary order).

With trying to avoid guilt/experience and the inevitable “fall” it results in, the Puritans seem to avoid adulthood itself, as one can only “grow up” if one collects experience. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the way to adulthood is to face the ambiguity (complexity) of the world first, which seems only possible for Americans if they leave America (Eden) with all its purity and ignorance (simplicity) behind.80 Thus, Fowler posits that Europe should be looked

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80 As to possible sources and influences around and prior to James concerning the necessity to leave Eden behind and collect experience so as to grow up, Henry James Senior, who was an avid advocate of the so-called “fortunate fall,” seems to be closest to home. He regarded the felix culpa as indeed necessary in order to grow up and become an intelligent human being by leaving that “premoral state, a state of blissful infantine delight unperturbed as yet by those fierce storms of the intellect,” which he deemed a “sleek and comely Adamic condition” as remote as possible from “distinctively human attributes” (James Senior’s Christianity the Logic of Creation, qtd. in Lewis 59).

For precision’s sake, it should be added that the motif of the “fortunate fall” goes back a very long way in religious thought. James Senior himself might have been influenced first and foremost by Swedeborg, but when it comes to an endeavor to find the original and earliest source of what is generally known as the Miltonic Fall (in the Twelfth Book of Paradise Lost), it is worthwhile consulting Lovejoy, who points out in his essay “Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall” that its most probable earliest version is to be found as a passage in a hymn called Exultet in the fourth-century Roman Liturgy sung at the Easter Even during the blessing of the
upon as a symbol of the Other, which provides the necessary impetus for Americans if they want to develop an autonomous mature self, a subjective “I”—or, to hark back to Hegel, to attain self-consciousness. Or, going further back to Rousseau and his remark concerning the self’s definition by what lies outside it, we may say that the unaware American who arrives in Europe is “[t]he savage [who] lives within himself,” while the European is the “social man [who] lives outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others, and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own existence” (qtd. in Eagleton 136). Viewed this way, the unaware American arrives in Europe as the “savage” and her/his quest for self is to become a “social [wo]man” as a result of defining her/himself in her/his relation to the Other.

In all three cases, Europe (the Other) is also symbolized by the vibrant female characters whom the American girls encounter in Europe: Isabel befriends the Europeanized American lady, Madame Merle, Milly meets the European (English) Kate Croy, and Maggie meets again an old American schoolmate, Europeanized Charlotte Stant. The attraction the American girls feel towards these women companions is a curious mixture of fascination and envy that is the result of a blend of two things. Apart from their Europeanness—even if some of them are originally American—it is their womanliness and experience as opposed to the girlish innocence of Isabel, Milly and Maggie that provide a stimulating effect for these girls.

If one recalls the equating of Americans with childlike beings living in their new Eden (imaginary order) instead of being experienced and thus fully human, it is no wonder that American women—however mature physically—whom Isabel, Milly and Maggie have met aplenty in their native land, did not provide a similar stimulus. On top of their having already faced and learned to use their feminine faculties (love, desire), 81 Madame Merle, Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant are endowed with imagination, intelligence and have absorbed...
European culture—with all its fabulous richness and immorality—to the full. This “otherness,” this “mixture” of Europeanness and experienced womanhood is actually one and the same thing then; if one is to reach genuine womanhood—as opposed to the “childlike” womanhood of American women—one has to be infused by European influence.

Despite the “motherlessness” of the Jamesian American girls, the first real encounter with the ambiguity (divided nature) of the world thus comes about when they leave America (the imaginary order). Therefore, Madame Merle’s, Kate Croy’s and Charlotte Stant’s otherness is what points to an ambiguous, divided reality for the American girls for the first time and their desire to imitate their companions is a primal, suicidal impulse; instead of accepting their self as a separate entity, they are bent on identifying with the Other—who is a small other yet paradoxically stands for the big Other (the symbolic order) as well—so as to regain the lost unity of the imaginary order, which they hope to find as a characteristic of the symbolic order these small others partly stand for. The point is that they are reaching out for stability (unity) that is unfortunately not concomitant of growing up (human existence). Let us recall that the symbolic order gives us only a semblance of stability with its rules (laws, regulations etc.). This imitative tendency, on the other hand, can also be regarded as a positive reaction on the girls’ part, provided that it is only a temporary phase that induces an eagerness to “better themselves”82 and learn from it. It is only Maggie who really benefits from her encounter with Charlotte, as it drives her to grow up, break the unnaturally strong bond with her father and become her husband’s genuine companion.

Let us remember, however, that not every American girl becomes aware of the otherness of Europe but stays benevolently ignorant throughout her visit instead. It appears that one’s blissful ignorance can only be shaken if one is endowed with imagination—a prime “ingredient” of becoming “‘finely aware and richly responsible’” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 135). Fowler points to those already mentioned “blinders,” which are “part of the native equipment” (36) and help James’s early American girls, such as Sophie Ruck, Miranda Hope and, most importantly, Daisy Miller, to remain unaware of any kind of threat being posed to their childlike state. We have already explained these “blinders” as equivalents of “lack of imagination.” Accordingly, Daisy’s daring is rooted in her “incapacity for fear” (Fowler 38), which proves to be fatal; she catches Roman fever and dies as ignorant and innocent as at the time of her arrival. This is because, remaining unaware of the otherness of Europe, she does

82 The expression “better oneself” tends to sound ironic if one considers that Maggie’s development entails her acquiring the knowledge of lying and deceit. However, as it has been and will be repeatedly pointed out, it is inevitable if one is to grow up and participate in this world.
not have to respond to anything; she goes on the same way as she would back home in Schenectady and, as pointed out before, the only thing she experiences is the death such behavior leads to.

As to the presence or absence of fear, Fowler agrees with Lacan when she points out that it is “a necessary element of growth and change” (38). As opposed to the Daisy-type of American girl, James’s later heroines are indeed often afraid; Isabel, Milly and Maggie do have imagination and thus become aware of the otherness of Europe and the people they meet there, be it a European or a Europeanized American. James describes this type of girl as “intensely American in temperament—with her freedoms, her immunity from traditions, superstitions, fears and riguardi, but with an imagination kindling with her new contact with the presence of a past, a continuity etc.” (Notebooks 73, original emphasis). To give a few examples of this contact with the past, we meet the unhappy Isabel amongst the “marble columns” and “pagan ruins” of Rome, where she has by then developed a “haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot” (597), and where she feels that “her sense of suffering has been caught up into the larger human record” (Porte 23). At the end of the book she also develops the “ghost-sense” she lacked when arriving in Europe. Similarly, Milly will also become “possessed by […]a ‘cosmic consciousness’” (Lewis, Jameses 521) when looking at the Bronzino picture at Matcham. Very different from these instances is Daisy’s reaction to the moonlit Colosseum she visits with her young Italian friend Giovanelli; although she declares she “never saw anything so pretty” (83), her reason for joy is simply that now she was able to “brag about” having seen the Colosseum by moonlight.

Apart from the cultural context, another manifestation of Isabel’s fear—of experience, of growing up, of becoming fully human—is her choice of Osmond. The passivity of Osmond’s situation makes him a “less threatening suitor” (Fowler 74) than Isabel’s previous ones, which she welcomes for yet another reason: the fear of a particular kind of experience above all, namely sexuality. This fear of sexual experience and of any kind of close human contact is very typical of the American girl in general, which is most obviously present in Isabel’s aversion to Goodwood.

Ash claims that Isabel “cannot engage desire […]. [S]he would instead remain dissociated, fresh, forever innocent and independent of desire’s danger […]. [T]his is really a paralysis of being […]. [S]he can neither satisfy nor purposefully unmask male desire” (142). Matthiessen similarly points out “James’s awareness of how Isabel, in spite of her marriage, has remained essentially virginal, and of how her resistance and her flight from Caspar are
partly fear of sexual possession” (179). In fact, Ash devotes most of her essay to explaining what she calls “Isabel’s Narcissism” (131), which comes from her exposed state as an orphaned young woman whose unbalanced ego feeds on outer reassurances: “Isabel’s egotistic armor will be seen as a formidable defense against powerful desires” (127). Sarbu, referring to Dorothea Krook’s observation, likewise draws attention to James’s comment in the Preface to The Portrait, where James seems to imply that Isabel is, in fact, a rather self-centered, vain person (Lélektani 61).

An example of key importance to Isabel’s fear of experience—suffering, adulthood, sexuality—is her dialogue with Ralph when they first talk about the ghost of Gardencourt. According to Ralph, the two go hand-in-hand; one cannot know the world without having suffered. She, on the other hand, claims that “it’s not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that” (186). However, she also seems to connect suffering and knowledge when she says: “I don’t wish to touch the cup of experience […] I only want to see for myself.” To this Ralph answers: “You want to see, but not to feel” (186). She does not want to be touched precisely because then she would “feel depleted, drained, vulnerable […] opening herself to being hurt” (Porte 19).

As the typical abandoned American girl, Isabel is averse to genuine, close human relationships. Since the unknown is always frightening, she, as a defensive mechanism, seems to have convinced herself that it is not desirable or even necessary in life. Indeed, the Other is an ultimate source of mystery and a source not only of joy but also of despair by way of its impenetrability (Armstrong 136-9). Yet we have seen how there is no self either in perfect unity with the world (mother) or in isolation, and so contact doomed to imperfect intersubjectivity with the Other is indeed necessary in life—foregoing the joy of which human relationships are a source does not solve the dilemma of existence.

In connection with the fundamental importance of experience both in life and in art, Porte’s interpretation of the penultimate chapter of Walter Pater’s The Renaissance, written about Winckelmann, is of interest. Porte emphasizes that life/art can only be really appreciated and experienced “through the senses”: “Pater goes on to praise ‘the native tendency of Winckelmann to escape from abstract theory to intuition, to the exercise of sight and touch […]’. [Aesthetic and moral experience] is an experience of feeling […]; neither one has reality—has psychological depth—unless it is ‘felt’ ” (21).

We may also bear in mind the Puritan outlook on the relationship between reflection/art and experience, which is the exact opposite of this approach. The best example
of this is Hawthorne, whose art both impressed and baffled James.\textsuperscript{83} In his \textit{Hawthorne}, his chosen quotation conveys that instead of “felt life” Hawthorne’s tales had been based on “imagined experience.”\textsuperscript{84} “I have seen so little of the world that I have nothing but thin air to concoct my stories of” (468). Isabel’s approach is undeniably Puritanical in this sense, and albeit her willingly leaving “the new Eden” behind when coming to Europe is a step forward from her Puritan heritage, she is still not disconnected enough from it to think differently about “felt life” and experience than her ancestors did. In the light of this it is no wonder that she is attracted to Osmond, whom Ralph rightly calls a “sterile dilettante” (404); an apt expression that fuses art and life and refers to Osmond’s detachment from direct experience and his tendency to imitate instead of create.\textsuperscript{85}

In her aloofness from close human contact, Isabel is actually very similar to both Diana Belfield and to the heroine of George Eliot’s \textit{Daniel Deronda}, Gwendolen Harleth; they also depend on outward praise but likewise want to remain untouched. We have already mentioned that there are a number of striking analogies amongst these female characters, but it is Isabel and Gwendolen who are worth our attention here regarding some of their reasons for choosing a husband and the disastrous outcome of their marriages. Gwendolen is also “exposed” at the beginning; her father is dead, her mother is a rather weak-willed creature—in no way a positive, influential presence—and her financial background is likewise uncertain. As to their husbands, both Grandcourt and Osmond are—outwardly at least—refined and polished. They are bland and devoid of the threatening masculine passion Goodwood possesses, which so attracts, but mostly scares, Isabel. Both Gwendolen (\textit{Deronda} 111-2) and Isabel believe that they can retain their untroubled freedom or even expand it when married. Most importantly, due to “marital tyranny […] proud Gwendolen [is] chastened, almost broken by marriage” just as Isabel is (Gordon 129).\textsuperscript{86}

The frequent observations about Isabel thinking in abstractions, her need to be admired but not sexually approached by others (Porte 20), might make one wonder about the issue of sexuality becoming an obsession of literary critics. However, the reason why it is

\textsuperscript{83} Porte recalls James’s “general theory of ‘tangibility’ ” that the latter explains in the preface to \textit{The Portrait}: “[T]he only significant question to be asked about a work of fiction is ‘is it valid, in a word, is it genuine […] the result of some direct impression or perception of life?’ […] ‘Felt life’ is the only meaningful criterion for a work of art” (18).

\textsuperscript{84} For the first time, the word “imagined” has a negative connotation here.

\textsuperscript{85} Matthiessen points out how, in his revisions for the New York edition, James “has done an expert job of heightening Osmond’s thoroughly studied effect” and how he stressed “Osmond’s utter dependence on art rather than on nature” (165, 167). Fowler makes a similar observation about Milly’s attraction to the lady-copyists and her tendency to imitate instead of create.

\textsuperscript{86} In fact, Gordon’s interpretation of the result of Isabel’s quest differs from this, as does Fogel’s.
emphasized so much is not because it is the only important thing about human relationships, of course. Apart from it symbolizing the primary “assault of life” the American girls have to face, namely becoming grown-up women who have reached the state of autonomous human beings, it has a lot to do with plot and characters as well: “The characters who constitute Isabel’s milieu and who help determine the answer to the question ‘Well, what will she do?’ would seem to point to the idea that the real question of the novel is ‘whom will she marry?’” (Fowler 67).

As to the other two psychological approaches, Ash sets great store by James’s curious neglect of positive mother-figures in his fiction and therefore, similarly to Fowler, concentrates on Isabel’s “motherlessness” and its grave consequences, while Habegger revolves around Isabel’s fatherless state. Both Ash and Habegger support the earlier mentioned view that James’s American girls are exposed and abandoned—a cultural shortcoming which is symbolized by their being individually abandoned (orphaned) as well. Habegger claims that Isabel’s attraction to Osmond is a classic case of “the independent orphan-heroine in search of the sorrowing father-lover” (53), an often used motif also found in Jane Eyre, for instance. Ash claims that Isabel is not only searching for her father in Osmond, but describes him as “the feminized patriarch” who “possesses many of the distinctive traits of the omnipotent phallic mother” (150). She supports this through Isabel’s enchantment with the loving relationship she sees displayed by Osmond and Pansy, with Osmond fulfilling the role of both mother and father.

That Isabel is drawn to Osmond because she can thereby identify with Pansy is consistent with what Fowler has referred to based on Lacan’s theory, namely, that one way of escape from the acceptance of a subjective “I” and the undivided ambiguous nature of the world is through identification with another. Isabel seems to feel towards Osmond that “Fogelian” “mediated desire” (60); being united with him is being united with Pansy at the same time. Although Isabel’s desire to identify with Pansy and with Madame Merle are both attempts to escape from facing her own self, the two female characters are attractive to her for different reasons. As mentioned earlier, similarly to Kate and Charlotte, Madame Merle represents womanhood with all its sensuousness, complexity and experience. Although it is a desired state, it is also fearful to the inexperienced American girl—in this case, Isabel.

Identification with Pansy is a much safer alternative. On top of being selfless and without imagination, Pansy’s life is simple—her main concern is to please her “papa”—and protected; she is not in the least exposed, as are the American girls (except for “over-cuddled” Maggie), but guided and sheltered by a loving father. Alas, the cocoon she lives in is an
unnatural perpetuation of the imaginary order with the unity of child (Pansy) and surrogate-mother (Osmond). Or, it may be seen as an overly regulated version of the symbolic order with Osmond as the father whose laws and rules do not leave any room for the child’s self. In either case, it is an overprotective and damaging atmosphere for a young woman and it should not be regarded as a desired state to be in, especially not by someone allegedly so much in love with her personal independence.

One finds evidence of Isabel’s attraction to this existence if one recalls what she tells Ralph when discussing her decision to get married to Osmond: she declares that she does not mind a cage if it is to her liking. What I have termed the “gilded cage” referred to our understanding of Isabel’s preference for it based on her alleged belief in the possibility to retain her personal independence even after her marriage. In this light, however, the marriage is a “coveted cage” promising protection and guidance; it is an alluring vision to the fearful exposed maiden, based on what she has seen displayed by “papa Osmond” towards Pansy when she was there visiting. Pansy is already an inhabitant of that cage, and Isabel decides to share it with her, thus she is attracted—even if subconsciously—to that kind of existence. In fact, the problem is not so much her desire to find refuge from the Lacanian unbearable Real—it is this same drive that compels us all to enter the symbolic order. The tragic aspect of Isabel’s choice is the excessively suppressive nature of the kind of symbolic order that Osmond as father-husband turns out to provide; it does not shelter but suffocate.

Indeed, Isabel’s attraction to a Pansy-like existence should not be surprising if one recalls Fowler’s view on the psychological disposition that is the result of the abandonment of the American girl. To recapitulate, Isabel’s behavior is typical of the exposed American girl who is even more afraid and unprepared than other girls on the verge of growing up and establishing an autonomous self. As Isabel is devoid of a protective cocoon in her immediate surroundings—the imaginary order with its soothing unity with the mother and the refuge provided by the symbolic order of the father—and her native land lacks a healthy balanced culture, her initial reaction is to try and make do with being thus abandoned and glorify her state to such an extent that it actually becomes a protective shield. Consequently, her being unsheltered first becomes her shelter; she hides behind her much boasted-of independence when somebody tries to come close to her—until she meets Osmond and Pansy. Naturally, she never acknowledges the attraction she feels towards Pansy, even to herself, as it would be akin to admitting that she is weak and afraid, just like any lonely uncertain young woman.
Yet Isabel is attracted to Pansy not so much by way of her otherness, but because of her similarity. Regardless of the seeming opposition between their characters at first glance—Isabel is active, proudly independent, without father and mother, while Pansy is passive, submissive and overprotected by her loving “papa”—they actually are the two sides of the same coin. This way, Isabel is not the embodiment of the Emersonian free-spirit, but simply an exposed, uncertain young woman influenced by the restraints of the nineteenth century. Thus, what she thinks is her “touchingly ardent belief in the possibility of limitless self-expansion” (Fogel 3) is, in fact, not more than mere “spread-eagle oratory” (Habegger 57), an assumed pose that helps her ignore her fear and inability to establish a genuinely autonomous self. Although, “by word of mouth” she frequently claims that she is daring and wants to live dangerously—for instance, a happy life for her is supposedly like “a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see” (203)—she does not actually do anything that really entails any serious risk. If one accepts the argument that her refusing Goodwood and Warburton primarily stems from her fear of genuine human contact and the responsibility it entails, and that her apparently daring choice of Osmond stems from his being a less threatening suitor offering a seemingly pleasing protective cage, there really is nothing else that might be called into question as dangerous.

Habegger is not very sympathetic towards Isabel, although he similarly detects the weak and uncertain young woman hiding behind a mask that shows her as proud and independent: “[T]hat Isabel’s lively mind is captivated by the appallingly tractable Pansy sums up James’s muted lesson: even the freest American woman dreams of a dominating master” (59). I feel it important to repeat that in none of these psychological interpretations asserting Isabel’s secret attraction to a Pansy-like existence is there a charge of insincerity against her. The gilded cage and the coveted cage differ only in this: the first one sees an independent-minded Isabel misled by the pleasing appearance that companionship with Gilbert Osmond promises, while the second one posits a fearful Isabel hiding behind the fine theory of independence when all the while she is subconsciously looking for protection. Whether she is looking for sustained independence or a cocoon, Isabel is as admirable sincere as Ralph has to admit to himself on the eve of her marriage: “She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was consistent” (550).

87 Fogel, drawing on Edel’s observation that “contrast and comparison was […] the law of his [James’s] life,” points out that oppositions are ever-present in James’s fiction, be it themes or characters (10). One of the frequently recurring contrasts is his play with light and darkness, in other words his technique of “chiaroscuro,” which he is said to have “refined from the work of Hawthorne” (Porte 5).
6. To return or not to return

Undoubtedly, Isabel’s decision to go back to Rome is her deliberate return to her unhappy marriage. It is also the refusal (yet again) of Caspar Goodwood, whose stiffness and arrogant manliness not only stand for the threat of domination at this point, but also for the promise of rescue and a healthier kind of protection than that furnished by Osmond. Her motives for returning are far from clear, and there are as many readers/critics damning James for the open ending of his novel as there are who congratulate him on leaving room for speculation. As to individual interpretations, there are twice two “camps” we can delineate. The first division is between those who find Miss Archer’s final gesture a proof of her courage and those who condemn her for cowardice. The other grouping concerns Isabel’s personal development: has she learnt something from her experiences? Has the innocent American girl full of theories and eager to see life been touched by experience and consequently re-evaluated her former beliefs? Has she faced the “whole assault of life” and managed to “grow up”? Has she, in other words, completed her moral education by acquiring the fundamental virtue of reciprocity? Is her final act in key with her original Emersonian individualism or has she revised her ideals? Is her return an escape from life or from death?

Of course the two groupings merge on several points. There are critics who claim that Isabel’s return is courageous and stands for her ultimately successful development. Winfried Fluck’s interpretation of Isabel’s final gesture is a case in point here. He regards her return as a proof of the paradoxically positive outcome of her painful experience of manipulation, so typical of James’s portrayal of “the development of imaginary activities, the emergence of social awareness, and through the refinement of consciousness, of the aesthetic sense” (“Power” 25). Isabel’s is the “triumph of a creativity provoked by social manipulation, [...which] has to remain ‘mental’ and cerebral in order to emphasize the elements of creativity over those of vengeance and retribution” (“Power 25-6). Fluck concludes that “Isabel can return to Osmond because the act of returning can signal the highest form of triumph over her melodramatic impulses” (“Power” 26). Indeed, such subtle victory demonstrates best why James’s “stories are never mere melodramas”: it is because “the final triumph is not, as in traditional melodrama, the result of a transcendent law of moral retribution” (“Power” 25).

Fogel also claims that Isabel’s character undergoes a positive development throughout the novel, and views her as ultimately courageous. Emphasizing James’s avid use of contrasts, he takes James’s approach to be an endeavor to show a movement from the
opposition of polarities towards their synthesis. As a result of a so-called “spiral development,” Isabel is supposed to have reached by the end of the story the final stage of Blakean “organized innocence [...] a return on a higher level to her original idealism, purged of egoism by suffering and the concomitant growth of awareness” (Fogel 54).

In this light, hitherto self-centered Isabel becomes conscious of the world surrounding her, the most telling sign of which is her earlier epiphany among the “marble columns” and “pagan ruins” of Rome in chapter forty-nine, where she feels that “her sense of suffering has been caught up into the larger human record,” and that she is at last in possession of a “haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot” (723-4). As Edward Said also points out, she is said to have undergone a “moral reawakening” of sorts, which has prompted her to see herself “in the larger scheme of things,” giving her the “impulse to be in, engage with, the world” (143), an example of which is to help Pansy instead of running away from a lot that is sure to cause Isabel yet more suffering.

Becoming an “active” member of the community is definitely to “touch the earth” instead of soaring, but it may still be reconciled with a healthy version of Emersonian transcendentalism; similarly to Hester Prynne, Isabel can be said to have finally found the way to genuine self-reliance by outwardly complying and engaging in the matters of the other members of the society she is part of without having to give up her inner freedom. Gordon’s interpretation is likewise in key with this approach. He also interprets Isabel’s decision to return to Rome as a proof of a positive outcome of her initiation into life and knowledge. He claims that by the end of the story she realizes that a “reckless plunge to outer expansiveness” leads only to “inner defeat” and that real life is not lived by “limitless self-expansion” but by discovering “the freedom to act within the limitations of circumstance” (146).

Isabel’s final decision can just as well be attributed to her being a “chip of the old Puritan block” as with her successful re-interpretation of Emersonian self-reliance. She made a choice when she left Eden. She made another when she married Osmond. However unhappy these decisions have made her, it is her duty to accept the consequences—both according to Emersonian self-reliance and Puritan doctrines. In fact, this time solely in the Puritanical vein, the conviction that unhappiness and suffering are inevitably part of one’s life is not new to her either, even if it goes against her statements during the several talks with

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88 James, in his eponymous biography of Hawthorne, uses the expression “chip of the old block” (434) in reference to his Puritan heritage.

89 Sarbu refers to “The American Scholar” and “Heroism,” two earlier essays of Emerson (from 1837), where “self-trust”—to “adhere to your own act”—is hailed, “[a]nticipating self-reliance” (Reality 45). Thus to stick to one’s decision is in key with the conduct of the self-reliant individual.
Ralph concerning the “ghost-sense,” the “necessity of suffering,” and her aversion to “touch the cup of experience” because it is a “poisoned drink” (239, 345). One of the reasons she gives Lord Warburton for refusing him is that she “can’t escape unhappiness” and in marrying him she would be trying to; she does not want to separate herself from “life, from the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer” (326-7).

That Isabel’s final decision is also linked to her belief in the “necessity of suffering” seems to point, in my understanding, to the fact that while at the very outset she had already had a handy theory about it and used it to let Warburton off, by the end she had experienced it herself; theory has been put to practice and with a renewed conviction she continued to act accordingly. This seems to hang together with Fogel’s theory of “organized innocence,” where her ultimate state is a kind of return to her former innocence; she was touched by experience and she has drawn the proper conclusions.

Furthermore, her Puritan heritage appears to be a link between her and her seemingly different husband. Because Isabel has the intention to go to Gardencourt to be there for her dying cousin, a veritable battle of wills takes place between her and Osmond, which is suppressed under the inevitable veneer of civility so essential to the latter, that worshipper of forms. It is, ironically, this very love of forms that becomes his trump card, and even if she does go to Gardencourt in the end, her decision to return has a lot to do with Osmond’s argument resembling Isabel’s original way of thinking, so much akin to the Puritans, which she is said to have preserved all through her marital trials; it is her belief in taking the consequences of one’s actions and her “passion for justice.” Her reaction to Osmond’s declaration—“Because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of the thing!” (744)—is worth quoting:

[…] although she felt that any expression of respect on Osmond’s part could only be a refinement of egotism, they [his words] represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s country. He spoke in the name of something sacred and precious—the observance of a magnificent form. […] Isabel had not changed; her old passion for justice still abode within her; and now, in the very thick of her sense of her husband’s blasphemous sophistry, it began to throb to a tune […]. (744-5)

It is only too typical of Osmond, in fact, to talk of the “honour of the thing”—I am thinking of Mandeville’s pithy remark in The Fable of the Bees considering the difference between honor and virtue. According to Mandeville, honor is “nothing but the good Opinion
of the others,” while “the Recompense a Man has of a virtuous Action, is the Pleasure of doing it, which most People reckon but poor Pay” (qtd. in Blau 14). Therefore, once again, it is Osmond’s eternal “observance of a magnificent form,” which still stems from his—however “refined”—“egotism” feeding on “the good Opinion of others” that Isabel’s approach (point of view) transforms into something “sacred and precious.”

Whether to lay it at the door of her Puritan heritage or not, experienced Isabel’s focus on suffering may indeed be interpreted in a less optimistic vein as well. The “literally critical camp of critics” labels Isabel a coward and/or a deluded theorist not much wiser than at the outset. Fowler regards her return to Rome as a negative outcome and claims that Isabel’s open-eyed decision to go back and suffer is part of her original delusion; Isabel mistakes a meaningful life for a life of suffering, exchanging the insofar protective mask of the fiercely independent young woman for that of a martyr. Hence Fowler takes Isabel’s opinion expressed to Ralph about the “necessity of suffering” at face value, viewing her as a person whose initial position was to deny this necessity. This stance that later gave way to its opposite extreme: the equation of life with suffering and endurance, instead of a healthy conception of the presence of suffering as part of life, which would leave room for pleasure/enjoyment. Fowler’s consequent conclusion is to view Isabel’s story as the representation of a failure to “face the whole assault of life” (77, 82).

Ash is similarly critical of Isabel’s development when she states that Mrs. Osmond nee Archer is a victim of her own delusively logic according to which fine things suffer thus suffering is fine, and so to suffer makes one fine (159-60). Furthermore, Isabel is viewed as first and foremost afraid of the freedom she would once again be faced with if she left her marriage behind her and started out anew, with or without Goodwood. It is this cowardliness that prompts her to go back to her “cage,” thereby acting once again like surrendering little Pansy Osmond.

I nevertheless find it hasty to label Isabel a coward and a hopeless “student of life” drawing faulty conclusions based on delusive logic. Based on James’s pioneering technique of the “point of view,” there seems to me a kind of twist that should be taken into consideration: from her point of view, with her firsthand experience as a participant observer, suffering, knowledge, experience, and social awareness really do seem to be the same.90 Surely a different set of experiences might have led her to draw different conclusions, but then, even if Jean-Paul Sartre tells us off if we blame our misery on the “force of

90 Despite the novelty of this Jamesian technique, the conclusion that Isabel thus reaches echoes that of Hawthorne in The Marble Faun in particular, and romantic tenets in general.
circumstances,” there still are things that we cannot control, things we cannot choose; Isabel could choose between Gilbert Osmond, Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, but she was not given the chance to choose between, say, Mr. Darcy\textsuperscript{91} or Merton Densher. Indeed, when it comes to taking a stand on Isabel’s conduct, it is pertinent to recall Nussbaum’s (Aristotelian) emphasis on the importance and the consequences of context specificity, and the danger of applying general (moral) rules to situations, blind to particulars (“Discernment” 66).

Another way to look at Isabel’s final decision as both lamentable and laudable is to say that although she recognizes her initial isolationist concept of self as untenable and the need to apply the matrix of a social idea to it, yet she refuses to fully exchange her Romantic imagination for the social imagination that she has learnt to identify because of its powerful manipulative potential (Kovács 100). In a way, it smacks very much of a “Milly-Thealesque” aversion to corruption; Isabel decides not to participate in social interactions that are inevitably imbued with manipulation and deceit. It is not exactly like Milly’s “turning her face to the wall” and dying instead of participating in such a corrupt world, but it is a renunciation of personal happiness in the endeavor to remain morally irreproachable. Indeed, Isabel is committed to life, even if her actions seem to have rather morbid overtones; although it would appear more logical to take Goodwood as the representation of life with his bubbling masculinity and his offer to rescue Isabel and show her something else besides suffering, he is for her “the next best thing to her dying” (679). It still sounds like the Isabel so obstinately guarding her personal independence against any male domination, where choosing Goodwood would be a surrendering of herself. With that “sterile dilettante” of an Osmond she has, in a figurative sense, retained her virginal independence, while Goodwood’s companionship would require full immersion in the life of genuine adulthood. I have to agree with Fowler and say that Isabel has really not faced the whole assault of life successfully.

7. **Indisposed Isabel: A tentative conclusion**

To recap one of my original goals at the outset of this sociological analysis of the concept of reciprocity in Jamesian fiction: the endeavor to re-visit the story of Jamesian protagonists in order to investigate whether in the course of their moral education—their quest

\textsuperscript{91} The main male protagonist of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. 
to grow up—they manage to acquire the essential disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) and whether they succeed or fail when it is put to the test. That Isabel’s quest for self has been incomplete and short of reaching genuine adulthood entails the likewise unsuccessful moral education she has gone through. Although Kovács interprets Isabel’s refusal to participate in life/social interaction as her opting for moral irreproachability in the face of a world inevitably linked to corruption and deceit (100), I have to point to Isabel’s final (and initial) stance lacking in the fundamental moral value(s), the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful).

Too selfish or too selfless, suffering or happy, uncorrupted or immoral, at the end of the day it cannot be doubted that we leave Isabel as much averse to social interaction as at the outset. She is still steering clear of any relationship where the give and take resembles a balanced exchange; she either gives nothing or too much, thereby either remaining aloof or being in the superior position of the donor placing the other under obligation. If we recall Gouldner’s words concerning the norm of reciprocity that cements human relationships and makes them last by virtue of outstanding obligations (13), it is easy to see why Isabel does not want to be under any: she is afraid of just that cementing function, which would necessitate her engagement in those lasting human relationships that continue to frighten her. A virtuous young lady otherwise, she prefers to cultivate the safer virtues of generosity and moral integrity/incorruptibility to those that “take two”; to give is often easier than to take. To receive and reciprocate are not to be acted out in isolation. My last look at Isabel sees her as a charming, intelligent young woman who has always been and remains essentially selfish, fearful, theoretical—a girl in woman’s clothing reluctant to grow up.
PART IV. THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

1. The return of the American girl: A “very old/young motif” resurfaces

To embark on a discussion of The Wings directly after The Portrait necessitates a mighty jump of two decades, with only one stepping-stone in case we need to rest our foot awhile in between; not long after the publication of the story of Isabel Archer in 1881, a piece concerning a certain Mildred Theory saw the light in 1884, entitled “Georgina’s Reasons.” This tale, featuring a very close kin of the American girl of The Wings, had been written “despite” James’s earlier resolve—actually during the composition of The Portrait itself—not to go on “paying so much attention to the young unmarried American female—to stop, that is, making her the central figure: which is of necessity a limitation” (James qtd. in Gordon 188).

Indeed, in the long interval between 1881 and 1902, James first turned to social issues in such novels as The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassima (both from 1886), then he (unsuccessfully) tried his hand at drama (the writing of Guy Domville in 1893 and the traumatic experience of its subsequent staging two years later), which was then followed by his return to fiction 92 with a still strongly dramatic bent; he came out with such technical

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92 For precision’s sake it is appropriate to say that during those twenty years, James continued to turn out a staggering number of short stories, tales, essays, articles, and sundry other examples of prose, be it fiction or non-fiction, despite his ever-growing “obsession” with the stage. Furthermore, although in his longer novels his focus had changed, in his shorter pieces he never stopped coming back to his characteristic topics, preoccupations, motifs. To name a few where the American girl is the heart and soul of the events, there is
experiments in the field of novels as *The Awkward Age* (1899), which it is not much of an exaggeration to view as a long dramatic dialogue.

Or, to name another innovative creation, the story of *What Maisie Knew* from 1897 is a great example of his lifelong refinement of the technique of the “point of view.” Here he chose a little girl as the pliable/sensitive consciousness through which the reader is led to feel her/his way in an endeavor to piece together an actually downright “adult” story of use and abuse of human beings/affections. In fact, the question of the point of view and the consequent complexity of his texts reach, from my point of view, their climax in *The Wings*, a claim that is amply supported by James’s own Preface, which is mostly taken up by his own musings on the niceties of just this issue. We shall therefore wrestle more exhaustively with it further on.

As to those social issues James had been so keen on investigating and portraying in his “middle years,” similarly to the lasting influence of drama on his subsequent novels, his preoccupation with social issues continued in his major phase as well, playing a role far more prominent in *The Wings* than in the early *The Portrait*. Lancaster Gate is to be seen—amongst other things—as the epitome of the vulgar nineteenth-century marketplace attitude pervading not only London or the whole of “Britannia,” but the entire modern civilization of that era as well. The Ruskinian, Arnoldian, Paterian, and Wildean exaltation of the redemptive power of high culture is first shared, then consequently explored, only to be questioned by James, echoing, to a certain extent, Ruskin’s own disillusionment with exactly the Venice James not accidentally chose as the place central to the story of Milly Theale besides the apparently antithetical London (Freedman, *Professions* 226-7).

Indeed, the Arnoldian notion of the mutual exclusivity of the marketplace (world of economy) and the sphere of culture is proved inadequate in *The Wings*, which can lead to as many disheartening deductions as optimistic ones. That culture is not “above” the marketplace not only entails that it is sadly corrupted and dragged down by it, and so fails in its redemptive quest, but—apart from the illusoriness of an uncontaminated superior cultural sphere—it likewise suggests that the marketplace is not “below” it, but on the same level with it. To put it differently, this revelation is not necessarily to the detriment of our vision of culture, but to the benefit of the hitherto despised marketplace. I have been trying to prove my point concerning the insufficiency of the sentimental (bourgeois) concept of the gift

“Poor Richard” (written as early as 1866, but printed only in 1885) with Gertrude Whittaker and her three suitors resembling the love quadrangle of *The Portrait*, or “A London Life” with Laura and Selina Wing from New York (1888).

93 Sarbu discusses James’s social criticism in *The Wings* in detail (*Lélektani* 183-6).
(reciprocity), which I hereby resume claiming that there is nothing tragic in finally realizing that the sphere of culture (private life, sentiments) is not all high and mighty, and the sphere of the marketplace (public life, economy) is not all despicably exploitative and vulgar.

Freedman (at times unwittingly) will come to my assistance in trying to demonstrate that Milly is not a charitable merciful creature victimized by the milieu of Lancaster Gate, and the latter is not simply a circle of mercenary fiends bent on exploiting the apparently “dazzling, dazzlingly exploitable princess.” Everybody gives with the expectation of return in mind, and Milly neither “gains” less than the others, nor is she manipulated more than her alleged manipulators are ultimately controlled by her. In line with this, Fluck remarks that what will reach its climax in The Golden Bowl is already present in The Wings: “There are no longer any ‘innocent’ characters who are forced by experience to renounce their own part in the world” (“Power” 28). Instead, the innocent American “not only reaches a ‘breakthrough’ in the awareness of manipulation to which she has been exposed, but also acts on that knowledge in a way that, for the first time, constitutes a subtle imposition in reverse. By turning the tables on Densher and Kate Croy, Milly Theale reasserts the power of her own imagination and entraps them in an exceedingly clever and ‘creative’ scheme of her own” (“Power” 28).

Point(s) of view, a healthier approach to the relation of marketplace and culture, and the return of the American girl are thus on our literary menu concerning The Wings. Yet—and James, the perennial literary architect, would nod in agreement—the bridging initially proposed should first be completed with greater finesse; let us turn to Mildred Theory before we give all our attention to her descendant, Milly Theale.

2. James’s “Theorys” prior to The Wings: Mildred Theory as the Ur-Milly Theale and further presagements

I have to commence by noting that James was, in fact, quite true to his resolve not to make the American girl the central figure of his fiction in “Georgina’s Reasons” as well.

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94 I agree too much with the New Critics to dwell on biographical parallels concerning James’s life and his oeuvre. However, it does seem worthwhile to cursorily mention his much beloved and early deceased cousin Minny Temple, who is taken as one of the central inspirational female figures in the author’s life concerning the American girls in his fiction. Furthermore, and especially in connection with Venice and The Wings, the name of James’s friend and fellow author Constance Fenimore Woolson should also be mentioned. For further details on a wholly biography-oriented reading of Jamesian fiction, see for example Gordon’s A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art.
Certainly, we do have a large number of American “petticoats”—to anticipate Merton Densher’s characteristic reference to the ladies surrounding him in The Wings (559, 612, 622)—but none of them, and least of all Mildred Theory, can be designated as the center of this otherwise rather “unmasterly” achievement of the Master. It is almost incredible to read it with the knowledge that it was written after the outstanding The Portrait; without the shadow of the use of the technique of the point of view, with the clumsy attempts of a would-be omniscient narrator to churn out a riveting plot with intriguing characters—it all falls flat and, besides my passionate interest in anything James wrote, the only reason it is worth any attention is the set of similarities and instructive differences it bears to The Wings.\footnote{Adrian Dover’s way to put this in his introduction to the tale available on the excellent website “The Ladder,” seems to me too concise and witty not to quote here: “Critical consensus seems to be that ‘Georgina’s Reasons’ is at the lower end of [the] scale, but, as usual, there is something here for the James scholar to dig out, if not for the general reader to enjoy. Again, as usual, the most rewarding truffles are found with a retrospective eye: looking for hints of things to come.” <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/georgr/home.htm>.

In line with its title at first, the story starts with Georgina Gressie in the limelight, only to put her aside for the middle part of the narrative and return to her at the end, making more of a gilt frame than a wholesome center of her affairs, despite her title-bearing status. In any case, for the scholar eager to trace familiar traits and without Kate Theory on the scene as yet, Georgina Gressie may be said to bear a certain resemblance to Kate Croy; her distinguished appearance, her stately grace and decided manner do recall Merton Densher’s beloved, especially when we find out about her relationship with Raymond Benyon. Yet it soon transpires that this beautiful, proud, insolent, and domineering creature has not a shred of goodness in her body; she is the exaggeratedly negative version of the future Kate Croy.

As to Georgina’s admirer, initially blind with love, he remains very similar to Densher throughout the story (even if the object of his affection will become Kate Theory in time); both Raymond and Densher adore girls whose families are adamant in obstructing the happiness of the young couples. Raymond is a talented but, alas, penniless lieutenant, who is not likely to distinguish himself any time soon, and it is even more probable that he will never be wealthy. The Gressie clan’s almost exclusive focus on the financial side of life naturally expects advantageous matches from its members, and proud Georgina meets mute yet deep-seated hostility towards her liaison with Raymond. Here we do not have poor relations trying to “work” the rich aunt of Lancaster Gate through Kate Croy, but the opposition of the house of Gressie with its avoidance of scenes clearly anticipates Mrs. Lowder’s “style of battle” against Kate and Densher’s relationship: keeping up appearances and remaining civil towards each other even while in the thick of the fight. The “Twelfth-street Juliet and her Brooklyn
Romeo” (11) are playing a deep game, meeting only occasionally in secret. The parks of New York come in as handy as those of London will prove to be in *The Wings*, after Raymond had almost literally been shown the door—a stage Densher will never get to, which is a proof of Lancaster Gate’s superior tact to that of the house of Gressie.

Indeed, one of Georgina’s reasons—about which the whole ado is, after all—is none other than the prohibition of her parents. Whether her inordinate pride makes her less bewilderingly inhuman by taking it as a characteristic human failing, or, on the contrary, it completes James’s unwitting portrait of a monster, depends on individual interpretation. In any case, she cannot bear being forbidden something, but she is too cowardly and comfortable to bring about a rupture with her family, so she decides to get married to Raymond in complete secrecy, eliciting from him a promise never to disclose their tie unless she agrees to it.

Whether Georgina has ever really loved Raymond remains another enigma the reader is expected to—yet is not likely to care to—muse about when the story finishes. Despite her occasional declarations of her initial adoration of Raymond (59), Georgina’s behavior makes her rather consistently appear both to the reader and to her poor husband as “a cold-blooded devil” (50) who may be “insane” (56); deeming her child from Benyon a “complete mistake” (56) who had “no right to exist” (56)—without even telling the hapless father of its existence—she goes to Genoa to give birth in secret, only to abandon that innocent infant to the unreliable care of some *contadina*. In order to get to Italy without arousing suspicion, Georgina first coaxes good-natured Mrs. Portico into complicity and then uses her till the poor lady literally dies of the unwholesome role of the “participant observer” of such a heartless creature—a very different scenario for this duenna compared with Susan Shepherd Stringham’s in *The Wings*.

With the baby deposited and the only person in the know conveniently deceased, Georgina returns to New York as if nothing had happened besides the lamentable death of a friend. On top of it all, Mrs. Portico’s long-cherished dream of a European tour makes it even more credible to everyone that the Italian sojourn had been the brainchild of the older lady and not Georgina’s. Back with her duped parents in their elegant Twelfth-street mansion, Miss Gressie disappears from our sight and we meet her again towards the end of the story as bejeweled magnificent Mrs. Roy; she has been audacious enough to commit bigamy with the well-meaning rich nondescript widower who happens to be the brother-in-law of Mrs. Percival Theory.
While Georgina is not on the scene, the Theory sisters make their appearance. To look at Kate Theory first. As Miss Gressie can be regarded as Miss Croy’s negative caricature, so can Kate Theory be taken as the purely positive version of Kate Croy. Mildred’s junior by a year or two (29), she is “literally the little sister of charity” (35), making her ailing sibling the center of her existence (30). As we find out from her during an interview with Captain Benyon, Mildred is dying of consumption and has not more than ten months to live. Differently from Milly Theale, the Theory sisters are not at all wealthy and although they have an older, recently-married brother, Percival Theory cannot be counted upon as a protection for Kate, unless the latter assumes the rather sad role of the “maiden aunt” (31). In short, Mildred wishes Raymond to marry her sister, which she lets the gentleman know without any blushes or other show of embarrassment, testifying to far less reticence and shy pride than Milly Theale will be capable of—unless we count her fateful openness with her allegedly “safe sympathiser,” Lord Mark (519-20).

This tale’s Kate is just as pretty as that of The Wings, and Mr. Benyon does not tarry in falling in love with her despite his resolve not to get into any trouble of the sort. As an unhappy man with the cross of an indissoluble bond to bear, he finds it dishonorable to play with anybody’s emotions—let alone the state his own poor broken heart would be in if he fell in love without the hope to marry the object of his affections. Indeed, just as Densher will be seen as a man who is desperately trying to keep his honor untainted and therefore has a mortal aversion to lying, so does Raymond find it incompatible with his nature to do anything dishonorable. Already the secrecy and dissimulation forced upon him during his “affair” with Georgina had made him very uncomfortable and wretched, and the only way he had been able to soothe his conscience concerning that matter was his excuse of having been utterly infatuated with that woman, which had made him ready for any sacrifice necessary to have her return his love. This time he would rather choose renunciation than any crooked way that would apparently secure his happiness.

Just in time, or so it seems at first, Raymond is saved from bitter renunciation. The scene that brings about the revelation of Georgina’s bigamy is actually more interesting for a different reason. During a leisurely visit to one of the old Neapolitan palazzos, “pretty and silly” (41) Mrs. Percival is struck by the portrait of a Bourbon princess for reasons other than

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96 Kate Croy is actually “two or three years older” than Milly Theale, and although James (from Densher’s point of view) goes on to opine that “at their time of life [this age difference] considerably counted” (477), still the emphasis is on the two girls’ approximately same age; both Kate Croy and Milly and Kate and Mildred Theory are of the same age group, and so their relations are different from those between Milly and Susan, or Georgina and Mrs. Portico, where it is a friendship between a young woman and another who is considerably her senior.
artistic merit: she declares that the “woman young, fair, handsome, covered with jewels” (46) looking back at them from the painting bears an uncanny resemblance to Georgina Roy, her splendid sister-in-law. What a different use of a recognition scene brought about by a painting! Although it leads to hitherto hapless Raymond’s seeing a ray of hope for ultimate bliss with little Kate Theory, yet there is nothing of the catharsis of the Bronzino scene awaiting us in *The Wings*. As Captain Benyon has just said goodbye to poor Kate, that lady is rather surprised at his alleged volte-face. Indeed, he starts raving about future meetings and seems as pleased as punch. Kate does not suspect that the young man, in the first flush of excitement, believes he can force his wife to let him divorce her.

Alas, Mrs. Roy not only proves herself to be as audacious as ever, but she is also just as proud. The humiliation of a divorce is the last thing she wants and she ruthlessly presses her first-husband’s “weak point”—his honor. She declares that she knows Raymond always to remain true to his promise not to publish their marriage without her approval. She goes as far as to let her two husbands face each other, thereby giving Benyon the chance to reveal Georgina’s crime of bigamy to Mr. Roy. A scene that is (supposed to be) full of tension results in Raymond’s decision to remain silent and rather opt for the renunciation of a future happiness on Kate Theory’s side than the possibility to do as Georgina had done. Although she would keep their secret, Raymond’s conscience does not let him base his bliss on a lie. The story’s open ending shows us a Kate Theory and a Captain Benyon living their life separately and patiently waiting—for Georgina’s death?

As to Mildred Theory, her benevolent influence does not so wholly permeate the life of those around her as Milly Theale’s will, and neither does she become the center of the story as Milly will do, despite both of them being placed there from a technical point of view. Mildred does, nevertheless, bear a great resemblance to Milly besides being the latter’s virtual namesake; she has the strange ethereal beauty of ill health and an imagination so rich that it helps her turn the smallest particles into revelations, thereby making her as knowledgeable as if she had had recourse to far more firsthand experience than in reality. True to her name, she is theoretical, perhaps more so than Milly, who is seen by Mrs. Stringham as a poor creature literally “starved for culture” and so in need of the elder lady who regards herself as

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97 Intentional or not, there is a fine irony to be detected concerning the choice of this last name, which serves as a further analogy between *The Wings* and “Georgina’s Reasons”: while Milly is regarded as a princess, Georgina actually becomes a nominal queen by marrying Mr. Roy.

98 I paraphrase James’s words in “The Art of Fiction” concerning the way an imaginative mind “utilizes” experience: “[…] and when the mind is imaginative […] it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (56).
the representation of it (288). Mildred Theory, on the other hand, “knew everything, without ever leaving her room” (29), and, by way of conversation, she “poured forth floods about the Magna Graecia [… and] the dates of the different eruptions, of the statues and bronzes in the Museum, which [she] has never seen” (30).

Kate looks up to Mildred as to an oracle, to a mother, a protectress, a friend, and although the little sister would be a good-natured enough person without the express need to be positively influenced by any kind of redemptive power that Milly Theale will prove to have and Mildred also seems to exude, the latter’s presence is held to be the most precious thing conceivable to Kate. Just so, Raymond is an honorable man with a heart of gold before he meets Mildred, and his wavering and final opting for renunciation is not brought about because of her influence. The elder Miss Theory thus remains a supporting character with an intriguing personality resulting from that interesting mixture of illness and goodness, the latter quality of which remains a redundant feature to those around her. The only one in need of redemption is the wholly “depraved” (51) Georgina, who never meets Mildred and the level of whose selfishness and heartlessness is most probably beyond help anyway.

Anticipating Milly’s Venetian sojourn and the Palazzo Leporelli as the “gilded shell” she vows never again to leave (521), we meet Mildred stretched on a couch positioned by the window so as to conveniently watch the Neapolitan bay of Posilippo with its blue waters lapping the shore. There she stays and looks down on the world, surrounded by much less splendor than Milly Theale, yet equally ensconced in a kind of ivory tower. More of a fleeting vision than a weighty presence in the story, the last function Mildred has to fulfill before she disappears from our view is to talk openly to Raymond about her sister’s future prospects and her own predilection to see Kate married to him.

One may hazard the assertion that Mildred’s illness is more accentuated than Milly’s. Not only does the former talk more openly about her rapidly approaching death, but the narrator as well as those around her treat her as an “open and shut case”; she is beyond help, she is dying, she is written off. This is exactly what James does not want to emphasize in the case of Milly. What is to be highlighted is her desperate attempt, “while all melts under [her] feet,” at “grasp[ing] any exquisite passion” so as to live and love all she can on her “short day of frost and sun,” and not to “sleep before the evening”—to quote Pater’s beautiful words

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99 Interestingly, due to the fact that both the Theorys and Susan Stringham are from Boston and that Mildred has a superior erudition compared with Milly, Mildred can actually be said to have a bit of Susan Shepherd in her as well. Characters from Boston are always renowned for their cultivation, especially compared with those of New York. Indeed, the opposition between New York and Boston is present in both stories, but here it is Georgina and Raymond who, similarly to Milly, represent the former, while it is the Theorys who come from New England, just like Mrs. Stringham.
It is because of this that James’s first title *La Mourante* (the dying girl) was later found inappropriate; Milly is not just a dying girl, she is a dying girl trying to live. Even if she is beyond help and her days are counted, the interest she supplies is due to her short but all the more intense period of life before her death.

James himself dwells on this as one of the first important issues to discuss in his Preface to *The Wings*. He posits that art should never concern itself with the act of dying but with that of living; “[...] 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 [...]” (198, original emphasis). While death should not be put in the center of a story and the main protagonist thus cannot “smell of drugs or taste of medicine” and cannot narrow the focus by being first and foremost a hopeless case, this does not disqualify a terminally ill personage from being the ideal candidate to occupy the central role. The key is to make the accent fall on her quickened sense of consciousness spurred on by the shadow of approaching death to live as intensely as she can and thus make her the embodiment of humanity in general. Indeed, we all live under the shadow of death and all of us have our hours counted—we do not need Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* to remind us of our mortality. Yet Pater’s exhortation to make the best of what is allotted to us, and his further observation in his essay entitled “Aesthetic Poetry” in *Appreciations* concerning the “salutary” effect of the consciousness of approaching death are certainly very remarkable pieces of advice that not only Milly Theale should take.

James’s own stance was far from fully developed in other respects as well. Towards the end of 1894, when one-third of the book had already been written, his title was still *La Mourante*, and the setting for the story—apart from London—was surprisingly uncertain; Venice nowhere in sight, he was wavering between Nice, Cairo, or even Corfu (*Notebooks* 174). Whether Constance Fenimore Woolson’s shocking and ambiguous death in Venice in 1894 had been the decisive event that made James choose that city and also base some of Milly’s character on his deceased friend (Cagidemetrio 54-5), is a matter for scholarly speculation. Certain it is, however, that the time elapsed between “Georgina’s Reasons” and *The Wings* had had its generative effect, resulting in a work of art indescribably superior to the one whose greatest merit is that it already bears some of the germs of the latter masterpiece.

100 Reference to James’s plans and provisory ideas concerning *The Wings* as well as other works of his can be found in his *Notebooks*.

101 I have done a bit of editing on this remark of Kate Croy’s: “She won’t smell, as it were, of drugs. She won’t taste, as it were, of medicine.”
3. The riddle of the point(s) of view and some enigmas thereof

One of the keys to any understanding of *The Wings* is to be found at the heart of one of the most Jamesian issues of all: the question of the point of view. In key with Nussbaum’s Aristotelian emphasis on the importance of particulars/context, the relativity of truth and the untenableness of the exclusive application of abstract rules (or a single guideline) in specific cases are perfectly demonstrated by this truly Jamesian method. What we get are snippets of individual versions of what (supposedly) happened and why and how in a particular case. Several consciousnesses are offered to us and through them we are invited to piece it all together—the story of a handful of characters.

True to my usual endeavor not to be influenced during the first perusal of a text, I have left the Preface to the last, wanting to dissociate myself from James’s own observations and to map *The Wings* based on my own experiences. This resulted in a great surprise as far as points of view go. Having successfully recognized that the ten Books are to be treated as ten “blocks” (204) in the whole building (pattern) that stand for diverse points of view supplied by the different “reflectors”/“registers”/consciousnesses of the individuals that make up the group of main characters (207), I devised the following scheme: I attributed Book First to Kate, Book Second to Densher, Book Third to Susan, Books Fourth and Fifth to Milly, Book Sixth to Densher, Book Seventh to Milly, and the final three Books—Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth—to Densher again.

From this I still correctly deduced that Milly was placed in the center; that she was supposed to make her appearance only later and wholly disappear again for the last third of the book, leaving only her pervasive influence lingering in the air, making her absence her presence. I was also close to the mark when I occasionally hesitated between Densher and Kate or Milly and Susan as the reflector (register) of certain Books; they seemed to merge often, but I somehow felt that one always dominated and so I opted for Densher over Kate and Milly over Susan and left Kate and Susan with one Book for each of them.

To my surprise (or dismay), I was then confronted with an authorial conviction that was delineated after having dwelled on the also intriguing issue of the distance between original authorial intention and eventual outcome. James observes that “one’s plan, alas, is one thing and one’s result is another” (205) and candidly admits that, amongst other things, he had planned Lionel Croy to have far more importance; “the image of her [Kate’s] so
compromised and compromising father was all effectively to have pervaded her life," instead of which “he but ‘looks in,’ poor beautiful dazzling, damning apparition that he was to have been” (205). Having thus confessed to certain aborted attempts, James goes on to congratulate himself on how “each piece is true to its pattern, and that while it pretends to make no simple statement it yet never lets go its scheme of clearness” (206, emphasis added).

Apart from Book First, James designates Kate as the reflector in Books Sixth and Eighth as well, and although he does take Densher as another consciousness with which Kate’s is often fused, he claims that it is the latter’s that dominates. Just the opposite of my scheme.

[...] the associated consciousness of my two prime young persons, for whom I early recognized that I should have to consent, under stress, to a practical fusion of consciousness. It is into the young woman’s ‘ken’ that Merton Densher is represented as swimming; but her mind is not here, rigorously, the one reflector. There are occasions when it plays this part, just as there are others when his plays it [...]. She [Kate] is turned on [as a reflector] largely at Venice, where the appearances [...] are treated almost wholly through her vision of them and Densher’s. (207-8, original emphasis)

With equal self-assurance, James then turns to the case of Book Third, where “a new mass of interest [is] governed from a new centre” (211). One may still think of Susan as being that “new centre,” but James goes on directly to demolish such expectations, complacently stating that here again he has made “prudent provision—to be sure to keep [his] centre strong. It dwells mainly, we at once see, in the depths of Milly Theale’s ‘case,’ where, close beside it, we meet a supplementary reflector, that of the lucid even though so quivering spirit of her dedicated friend” (211). Similarly to the previous scenario with Kate being designated instead of Densher, James here designates Milly instead of Susan as the chief reflector, allowing at best for a fusion of these ladies’ consciousnesses. This would all be fine as far as Susan’s “supplementary” status goes, but even if I reread Book Third for the thousandth time, I cannot make myself believe that Milly can be taken as a reflector there at all; she is the idolized object of Mrs. Stringham’s observations and we do not get to see things from her point of view till Book Fourth.

In any event, arming myself with Wimsatt and Beardsley’s exhortations concerning the dangers of the so-called “intentional fallacy” and further steeling myself with the New
Critical maxim to view an artwork as a separate realm isolated even from its own maker from the moment of its completion, I embrace my own opinion and beg to differ with the Master, who, agreeing with Maupassant in his eponymous essay (as well as in “The Art of Fiction”), may have gone so far as to propagate the freedom of the artist but not that of the reader; taking an artwork to be a direct (subjective) impression of life, James allowed for the existence of as many kinds of fiction as there were artists (infinity of point of view), but not for as many readings as there were readers (195-6).

However—to put it in a rather complex (and apparently ambiguous) fashion resembling the phraseology of James’s later works—it is not the difference between author’s and reader’s point of view concerning the point of view why the issue of the point of view is so crucial. The most important questions of The Wings remain ambiguous exactly because Milly’s own point of view is suppressed towards the last third of the novel, leaving us guessing. Indeed, we should not forget that the ultimate explanations of the story as to key questions are never answered by the very persons whom they directly concern, but always by another individual whose point of view should be taken as subjective and not only not necessarily the closest to the right version, but also the testimony to the fact that there is no such thing as a “right version.” Really, whose version would not be subjective? Could we really call even Milly’s concerning her own feelings the “right version”? This ultimate uncertainty of the existence of “the right version”/“Truth” and the despair of ever getting at it even if it does exist underlies many of James’s works and it gains

102 In fact, Oscar Wilde anticipates the New Critics in his “The Critic as Artist” on several points. Gilbert, his main mouth-piece in the dialogue, claims that the artist’s original intention does not matter, and then goes on to say that the artwork has a life of its own from the moment it is finished: “For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say” (47).

Related to this is Wilde’s anticipation of reader-response criticism as well, which, ironically, goes very much against the New Critics in that it does not believe in the existence of a “single right meaning” inherent in the text. However, it is exactly because he does not believe in a core meaning that he ends up agreeing with the New Critics concerning their claim about the separation between the author and the artwork upon the latter’s completion. Thus, it may be said that Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Norman Holland all echo Wilde—and so do other postmodern critics for that matter, such as Paul de Man with his theory of misreading (“Blindness and Insight”) or Harold Bloom with his similar equation between reading and (conscious) misreading, as well as between critical interpretation and re-creation (“The Anxiety of Influence”). Then again, to set the record straight, Wilde does not have the claim of originality in this case either. He actually echoes romantic tenets, Emerson, and Hawthorne as well, when he makes Gilbert observe: “Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings” (46). Indeed, to furnish a few examples, there is Emerson’s statement in “Nature,” according to which “the eye is the best of artists” (50); Hawthorne subscribes to the subjectivity of vision in The Marble Faun, opining that our consciousness determines our perception; or there is Balzac’s rhetorical question in his short story entitled “The Purse”: “Are not our feelings written, as it were, on the things about us?” (28)

103 Perhaps the most famous instance of the (overly) complex nature of the wording of works written in James’s later years is to be found in What Maisie Knew: “[…] [T]here was an extraordinary mute passage between her vision of this vision of his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision” (113).
more importance as his technique of the “point of view” is further refined. It sounds, in fact, very much like the Paterian solipsism of the “Conclusion”\textsuperscript{104}:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (“Conclusion” 236)

Pater’s imagery with its “thick walls,” its “solitary prisoner,” and its “isolation” actually echoes through the whole of *The Wings*, where we are to meet Milly in her “tower” with a “moat she had dug” around it—she deliberately separates herself from Kate, the “wondering pitying sister,” as well as from the rest of the world (512)—along with numerous towers, shells, cages, all indicating the (sometimes forced, sometimes chosen) isolation of individuals.\textsuperscript{105}

The most important riddles in my view are the following. Firstly, what does Aunt Maud get out of the whole thing—why the bother with Kate Croy? Taking as a point of departure my earlier conviction concerning those perennial strings attached to every individual’s gesture of giving—and being further assured of it by Lord Mark’s pithy remark that nobody does anything for nothing (321)—I refuse to believe in Aunt Maud’s *l’art pour l’art* benevolence towards her needy niece. So far, there is no one to quarrel with me about this, as neither the novel nor any critic has ever tried to attribute unconditional benevolence to Mrs. Lowder. However, just because she is not exactly a fairy godmother, she does not have to be taken as the embodiment of the vulgar modern world’s tendency to be grasping, materialistic and exploitative at all times either.

I am intent on proving that the hitherto condemned world of “the workers and the worked” epitomized by Lancaster Gate is far from being as exploitative and unjust as critics almost always like to make out. Not necessarily because the workers of Lancaster Gate

\textsuperscript{104} To furnish a few more examples, the subjectivity and relativity of knowledge and the subsequent epistemological uncertainty of mankind are given voice in Pater’s “Coleridge” and *Plato and Platonism* as well.

\textsuperscript{105} This, in turn, is to be further coupled with another important motif in the story: the mask. Keeping in mind the significance it had for the decadent artists, not only Milly’s assumed roles but everybody’s can be looked at as so many masks which may, after all, be masking yet another mask that had been almost randomly appointed as “Reality”/“Truth” behind deceptive appearances. The despair of ever getting at the real thing behind masks, which led to the still relatively cool-headed attitude that can be labeled as solipsism, very often took on the extreme form of paranoia in the case of adherents to aestheticism; Freedman names Rossetti, Ruskin, and to a certain extent Wilde as well (*Professions* 213-4).
(London, life) are not expectant of return (gain), but because the people who are allegedly “worked” are “workers” themselves at the same time; no one is exploited, no one walks away empty-handed/hearted from any of the exchanges. In other words, my attempt is not so much the whitewashing of Mrs. Lowder as the salutary blackening of the hitherto exaggeratedly spotless personages of the story so as to show a healthier balance with more lifelike human relationships than the fairy (moralizing) tale, with its black and white pattern, that has so far been made of The Wings, has shown. Grey should be made welcome and more shades should be allowed. Once again referring to Fluck, we may say that binary oppositions like “good and evil, corruption and innocence, possession and freedom” are out of place in the Jamesian universe (“Power” 28).

This, in fact, anticipates another crucial issue related to the whole of the novel; the ultimate synthesis of the hitherto seemingly irreconcilable duality of the materialistic (sensual) and the spiritual (Freedman, “What Maggie” 98-9, 112). This dualism can be traced all along, resulting in such contrasting pairs as London—Venice, Mrs. Lowder—Mrs. Stringham, Lord Mark—Densher, Kate—Milly, with the first of the couples always standing for the materialistic and the latter ones for the spiritual. Still related to the synthesis of this duality is, on the one hand, the issue of the fitness of Venice as the setting complementing London, as well as the question of the title finally opted for by James. These three matters converge in the tellingly entitled chapter of Ruskin’s Modern Painters, namely “The Wings of the Lion,” which bears witness, amongst other things, to its author’s realization due to the surprisingly sensuous (material) beauty of Venetian religious paintings that the spiritual and material attributes of Beauty can be satisfactorily fused.106 Thus, apart from the fact that coupling London and Venice as a contrasting pair was a widespread nineteenth-century notion, James’s choice of the two settings in his work—which is finally to bear a title so very similar to Ruskin’s chapter—is certainly suggestive; title, setting, and the issue of the

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106 Another memorable issue concerning this chapter is Ruskin’s lamentation concerning the rapid decline of such glorious art as that of the Venetians—despite the perfection of the Venetian mind with its religiousness, realism, universalism, manliness (220). Yet he does not for a second claim that this fall had been due to the fusion of material and spiritual: he puts the blame on “the one great, one fatal fault—recklessness in aim. Wholly noble in its sources, it was wholly unworthy in its purposes” (221). In addition to Ruskin, Freedman also refers to Charles Eliot Norton: they both saw “Venice as a mythic locus of the aspirations and decline of Western culture […] and discussed the] gloomy diagnosis of the moral causes and consequences of that decline” (Professions 205).

Let it also be added here that Veronese, one of the great Venetian painters that Ruskin dwells upon in this chapter, plays an important role in The Wings as well: Susan likens the scene of the splendid party given by Milly at the Palazzo Leporelli to a Veronese picture, discussing the similarities with Densher (557). It would be too beautiful if the painter of the most important picture of the novel had been a Venetian as well—Bronzino, alas, was a Florentine. For an excellent description of the two Veronese pictures that are “re-enacted” at the Palazzo Leporelli, see Sarbu, Léléktani 187-9.
synthesis of the seemingly irreconcilable dualism of Spiritual (Religious) and Material (Worldly) come together in the two works.

Sarbu actually goes a step further and claims that “Venice, the very opposite of London, is, on a deeper level, an extension of the British metropolis” (Reality 4), where, to quote Addington Symonds’s words, “the association of the counting house and the exchange mingled with the responsibilities and passions of Princes” (qtd. in Sarbu, Reality 4). In this light, the spirit of exchange (materialism) seems to weigh more in the balance of the synthesis between spiritualism and materialism, but I once again would emphasize that the important facet of this is not that materialism is to be found behind the façade of spiritualism (beauty, art) but that the two can exist side by side at all and yield such amazing fruit.

Still ruminating the question of what Aunt Maud “gets,” one may confidently assume that it does remain an enigma, whether we take her to be a naughty-naughty “worker” of “victimizable” Kate or an actually well-meaning lady ambitious for both her niece and herself, but not expecting any particular (financial) gain from the whole matter. To Kate’s initial query as to “what importance therefore did she [Aunt Maud] really attach to her, what strange interest could she take in their keeping on terms,” the answer suggested by the poverty-stricken money-hungry Croy clan is their telltale admiration of their flesh and blood as “one of the belated fancies of rich capricious violent old women” (254). Aunt Maud is thus seen as a female version of “A Light Man” ’s Mr. Sloane, who, in her pampered boredom, happens to take a fancy to “the handsome girl” (311), just like Mr. Sloane kept finding entertainment in picking up some intriguing young gentlemen and making them his protégés.

Mrs. Lowder’s own explanation to Densher at their very first meeting consists of two rather contradictory reasons. The first actually seems to fall in with the Croy clan’s idea. She tells her niece’s penniless admirer that “Kate’s presence, by good fortune, I marked early. Kate’s presence—unluckily for you—is everything I could possibly wish. Kate’s presence is, in short, as fine as you know, and I’ve been keeping it for the comfort of my declining years” (270, original emphasis). As a source of comfort, entertainment, and adornment, Kate Croy seems to possess both erotic and cultural capital worthy of her aunt’s attention and effort. A mere sentence later, however, her plan to savor the charming young woman’s presence suddenly metamorphoses into an “investment” that deserves the “highest bidder” (270-1), only to be instantly transformed from that grossly materialistic plan into something much

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107 Sarbu, in turn, quotes Symonds’s words from John Goode’s “The Pervasive Mystery of Style: The Wings of the Dove.”
more idealistic: “I want to see her high, high up—high up in the light” (271).\textsuperscript{108} What that entails, however, is to see her married to “a great man” (271), which, once again, sounds more entrepreneurial than noble, but not as sordid as if she had said “a rich man.”

Milly’s appearance on the scene complicates matters for better and for worse. The chosen suitor, Lord Mark, prefers the rich dying American girl to such a smaller fry as Kate Croy, whom he strongly suspects to have an attachment already anyway. Yet Aunt Maud does not despair. She sees great things to come to her niece from a friendship made with stupendously wealthy Miss Theale. When Lord Mark is repulsed by Milly, and Densher is said to be the object of her timid affections, we can suspect Aunt Maud to be very much pleased; any combination involving Milly would surely entail relationships generously gilded. Be it Milly Theale as a generous friend of Kate’s and at the same time the happy wife of Densher, who is thus comfortably out of the way, or be it a tragically deceased Milly leaving all her money to Densher the bereaved widower, or leaving a thumping sum to him as to a friend—Aunt Maud knows that where Milly is involved, money and power are also always involved. Nevertheless, the mistress of Lancaster Gate does play fair; the cards are put on the table at the outset and Milly Theale is made aware of her role in “the big drama” of “conquering the world” as the supplier of “her helpful force,” which she willingly accepts:

Aunt Maud had said to Milly at Matcham that she and her niece, as allies, could practically conquer the world […]. On this basis of being dealt with she would doubtless herself do the share of conquering: she would have something to supply, Kate something to take—each of them thus, to that tune, something for squaring with Aunt Maud’s ideal. […] Milly knew herself dealt with—handsomely, completely: she surrendered to the knowledge, for so it was, she felt, that she supplied her helpful force. (398)

Milly is further enlightened by her sister-in-arms. Kate also talks shop with her, thereby supplying “a lesson, for our young American, in the art of seeing things as they were”\textsuperscript{109} (399). Firstly, Kate talks of herself as being put either “on the counter” or “in the shop-window; in and out of which [she is] thus conveniently, commercially whisked” by her aunt, always according to the latter’s plans concerning the best buyer/husband. Kate candidly admits that she knows the soon-to-be proprietor was supposed to have been Lord Mark, until

\textsuperscript{108} This, of course, rings a bell for any reader of The Portrait: Ralph’s (frustrated) desire to see Isabel soar above the heads of men is echoed here (546).

\textsuperscript{109} This sentence sounds a bit like an ironical paraphrasing of Pater’s already-mentioned maxim concerning the task of the critic in his “Preface” to The Renaissance—which, in turn, is an echo of Arnold’s remark on this as an exemplary skill of the ancient Greeks in his Culture and Anarchy.
Milly has made her appearance on the scene. This has initially caused some vexation to her aunt, which the latter has solved with admirable quickness by deciding to recruit the apparent obstacle. Thus does Kate tell Milly of Mrs. Lowder’s first position: “The bore is that if she wants him so much—wants him, heaven forgive her! for me—he has put us all out, since your arrival, by wanting somebody else. I don’t mean somebody else than you” (400).

This is then followed up by Milly’s remonstrance that: “If your aunt has been, as you tell me, put out by me, I feel she has remained remarkably kind” (402). By way of response to this remark, Kate explains her aunt’s brilliant modification of her original plans: “Oh but she has—whatever might have happened in that respect—plenty of use for you! You put her in, my dear, more than you put her out. You don’t half see it, but she has clutched your petticoat” (402). Kate, in fact, continues in the vein of Aunt Maud’s style of playing with open cards to such a degree that she warns Milly as to the unbalanced exchange the latter might fall victim to; she opines that they are of no use to Milly and she had better drop them (402). Milly is equally candid in her response and points out to Kate that she has her—a dubious entity in return, according, at least, to the very person in question: “Oh, you may very well loathe me yet!” (402)

Whether it turns out to be true or not already concerns the second riddle. Before that, however, let us conclude our line of thought about Aunt Maud’s ambiguous attitude by calling attention to the following detail of crucial importance: Mrs. Lowder never expects financial gain for herself through Kate. This entails that whether she looks to Milly as a source of riches or not, and whether she looks to eligible young men as great or rich enough for her handsome niece, it is not for herself that she is ambitious, apart from the glory it would indirectly shed on her by way of being so closely associated with her valuable charge. This, in turn, brings us back to Kate’s role to be the supplier of adornment, entertainment, and comfort to her benefactress: “[S]he was indeed a luxury to take about the world” (354), an expensive asset to show off, the keeping of which is nothing short of a status symbol and an added attraction to her own person/house. One may, in fact, quote Mrs. Stringham who similarly muses about her former schoolmate’s motives and eventually also reconciles herself to accept them as inscrutable: “[…] with Mrs. Lowder there might have been no reason: ‘why’ was the trivial seasoning-substance, the vanilla or the nutmeg, omittable from the nutritive pudding without spoiling it” (326).

The second riddle concerns Milly’s attitude towards life and death, a corollary to which will be the equally important question as to “what she gets” and how she never really becomes a victim of those around her. Does Milly will herself to death by “turn[ing] her face
to the wall” (599, 602, 631) due to Lord Mark’s brutish revelation of Kate and Densher’s treachery? Or, on the contrary, does she finally get what she wants by experiencing love? Does she cling to the last to life, being afraid of death and not wanting to let go? In other words, are we any further from the truth if we take at face value Aunt Maud’s and Densher’s mutual version based on “the front […] presented with the highest heroism” by Milly herself—a front which shows “their young friend’s unapproachable terror of the end, keep it down as she would” (646)? Are they further from the truth when they posit that “Milly had held with a passion to her dream of a future, and she was separated from it, not shrieking indeed, but grimly, awfully silent” yet heroically dissimulating (646)? Or is it to Kate’s version that we should hark? Indeed, Milly may, as Kate suggests, have died “at peace with [Densher],” with “the peace of having loved” and “of having been loved” (639). In Kate’s opinion, this is the same as “having realized her passion” which, in turn, amounts to her having “had all she wanted” (639).

The usually accepted version, however, is the one supplied by Susan just after Milly’s change for the worse. Several critics seem to take it for granted that Milly “has turned her face to the wall,” thus she gave up on a life that proved to be so disappointingly tainted and corrupted for an individual as divinely pure and good as she is (was). Her initial disillusionment and pain on hearing about Kate and Densher’s lie from Lord Mark may very well be true and Milly must surely have been sorely hurt by it. Yet we do not know anything about her final thoughts and even if we take romanticizing-idealizing fin de siècle Bostonian Mrs. Stringham’s opinion at face value, it dates back to the time directly after Milly’s change for the worse and we do not get to know anything about Mrs. Stringham’s view concerning the last period prior to Milly’s death and after her own return from Venice. Therefore, Milly may very well have died at peace with Densher and satisfied with having lived/loved; or she may just as well have clung to life till the last with an indescribable terror of the end; or she may have willed herself to die in her disappointment with life/love.

Thirdly, this is further connected to yet another riddle, which is openly admitted to be such by Densher: the impossibility of knowing what Milly’s letter to him contained, which could have shed sufficient light on her state of mind and on her stance towards the other
protagonists prior to her demise. Densher gives authority to Kate to do as she wishes with the letter, and the latter burns it both because she is bent on believing her own version concerning Milly’s final mindset and also because the destruction of the missive does not make any difference whatsoever as to the issue that Kate deems to be of crucial importance; if Milly has left any money to Densher—which is proved by the very existence of the letter—it would find its way to the recipient anyway. “[He’ll have it all […] from New York”; Milly’s American lawyers will consult him in due time (677). Densher’s indifference as to the inherited fortune is coupled with a feeling that starts out as remorse, but soon turns into a deliciously melancholy emotion that in time becomes his pet-thought, his precious secret, the most valuable gift he got from Milly, which is—characteristically of, and similar to, that giver—turned into an invaluable presence by its very absence:

He kept it all back like a favourite pang; left it behind him, so to say, when he went out, but came home again the sooner for the certainty of finding it there. Then he took it out of its sacred corner and its soft wrappings; he undid them one by one, handling them, handling it, as a father, baffled and tender, might handle a maimed child. […] Then he took to himself at such hours, in other words, that he should never, never know what had been in Milly’s letter. […] It had made of them [possibilities as to what the letter contained] 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 a sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. (683)

Densher’s eventual infatuation with Milly’s memory is, of course, the corollary to this tender emotion concerning her irretrieveable letter. As to his “private” version—one which is even more exalting than the “public” one shared with Mrs. Lowder—of Milly’s ultimate state of mind, he seems to equate her with the embodiment of infinite goodness, purity, and self-sacrifice (Freedman, Professions 222). She saved him and Kate when she stood up for their innocence in front of Lord Mark, and continued to save them when she withheld the truth from Aunt Maud, who never found out about Lord Mark’s revelation due to a faithful Mrs. Stringham having taken the cue from her beloved Princess. Densher appears to believe that Milly died of the wound he and Kate had inflicted on her and instead of revenge—or at least a cold shoulder—they were shown forgiveness and more: they were remunerated despite their baseness.
The very nature of Milly’s gift, in fact, entails “eternal indebtedness” and leaves the feeling of infinite gratitude towards the giver as the only way open to the recipient so as to reciprocate the “inherited benefit.” Indeed, as Barry Schwartz points out, “willable commodities”—be they land, objects, or money—are “gratitude imperatives,” which create an indissoluble bond between the living and the dead (9). In cases like Isabel’s, where the brief time that giver and recipient have spent together precludes a really strong emotional response, the feeling is understandably not a heartfelt gratitude towards the donor as much as a more general kind of gratitude and elation due to one’s lucky lot. Or, if the recipient is of the fiercely independent kind spurning appurtenances that shackle her soaring self, the donation that cannot be reciprocated may easily act as an irritant; it constitutes an obligation one has not asked for and cannot repay. Let it be said, however, that the *duration* of a relationship between donor and recipient does not seem to matter as much as the *disposition* of the latter. Milly and Densher did not know each other for a longer period than Mr. Touchett and Isabel. While it is in character for Densher to silently, gratefully, and eternally adore his benefactress, it is not so for independent Isabel.

4. *Lancaster Gate revisited: The “workers” and are the “worked”*

To repeat, I have nothing against accentuating Milly Theale’s Christ-like goodness, forgiveness, generosity, and whatever positive attributes we can attach to her behavior towards those around her. What I would like to demonstrate is that she is neither a saint nor a victim, and her being worked by others does not exclude her working her own workers at the same time. As always, everybody gives with the expectation of some sort of return and Milly is no exception to this. As Blau would have it, there is an apparent altruism that pervades social life and people are often “anxious to benefit one another and to reciprocate for the benefits they receive. But beneath this seeming selflessness an underlying ‘egoism’ can be discovered; the tendency to help others is frequently motivated by the expectation that doing so will bring social rewards” (17).

That it is so is termed simply “human” by Blau, who rightly believes that those individuals who “selflessly work for others without any thought of reward and even without expecting gratitude […] are virtually saints, and saints are rare” (16). We do not necessarily have to think of strictly “extrinsic” rewards; while “the initial attraction of individuals to others always rests on extrinsic factors that permit comparisons” (Blau 38), as the relationship
gains in intimacy and importance, the sheer presence of one another may become the leading factor—the coveted benefit—that prompts the two associates to seek each other’s company. Thus, every relationship is based on extrinsic factors and in time may become the source of mixed ones or purely intrinsic ones. Even in the case of the latter, however, there is the other person’s commitment as a return that the one who makes sacrifices for that relationship expects (Blau 36).

What exactly Milly expects and gains during her association with the other protagonists, and what her motives are for her acts of benevolence, are regarded differently by Fowler and Freedman, whose highly interesting views are to serve as the basis of a lengthier discussion of that issue in the subsequent chapter. Let it suffice here that the former interprets Milly’s behavior as a series of defense mechanisms brought about by her fear to “face the whole assault of life” (*The Wings* 299), just like Isabel Archer. This fear prompts her to welcome the roles offered to her by her companions, which she uses as masks\(^\text{111}\) to hide behind. Furthermore, it is this same terror of the complexity and corruption that go hand-in-hand with growing up and becoming part of this world as an experienced adult that makes Milly “jump at” the relatively safe position of a girl whose feeling is the afore mentioned “mediated desire”\(^\text{112}\) for both Densher and Kate—it is safe because it does not amount to much more risk and involvement than loving by proxy does.

Freedman, in fact, identifies this emotional tendency of Milly’s with one instance of her usually voyeuristic attitude (*Professions* 209, 218). He actually concentrates on Milly’s figure as on a representative of the decadent phase of Jamesian aestheticism: as the ambiguous dove, in her person we are invited to recognize the synthesis of the contrasting pairs mentioned earlier. Or, to put it differently, we are shown how two seeming opposites are the two sides of the same coin; “aestheticization is exploitation; imaginative freedom is the will to control; beauty is ugliness; love—even the most radiantly sacrificial love—is indistinguishable from cruelty” (*Professions* 227). Hence Milly is both the “decadent belle dame sans merci” and the Christ-like merciful “redemptive innocent” (*Professions* 222). While giving and helping, she simultaneously aestheticizes both herself and those around her as an aesthete/collector/consumer/connoisseur par excellence.

Not by accident does the novel start amid the shabby knick-knacks of moneyless shameless father Croy. Firstly, it drives home to the reader where Kate comes from, as well

\(^{111}\) The words “role” and “mask” are used as synonyms in this discussion.

\(^{112}\) To recap, Milly likes Kate even more after she finds out that Kate is loved by Densher, and she likewise loves Densher the more for being the object of Kate’s affection.
as how devoid of prospects her life would be without rich Aunt Maud’s backing. Furthermore, it conveniently sets the tone of give and take, which will permeate the whole story and will prove to be less exclusively a characteristic of such unscrupulous mercenary characters as Lionel Croy. His version of people’s value and his calculations concerning the likelihood of how well one can work them is undoubtedly in bad taste, but it is perfectly in character and not surprising amongst the attenuating circumstances made up of hopelessness and poverty. Mr. Croy makes no secret about his intention to accept his daughter’s offered assistance, and he is even more outspoken about his specific understanding of the nature of the assistance he has in mind. Kate should not “come to him” and give up Aunt Maud, on the contrary. His younger daughter would not only be a nuisance by being both in his way and representing yet another mouth to feed, but she would cut herself off from the very source he wants so eagerly to get at. Mr. Croy is proud of his daughter’s handsomeness and sizes her up with the knowing eye of the merchant who is pleased to see how profitable his goods are sure to prove in the marketplace (221-2).

Lionel Croy is the first one to formulate the maxim of working a person for all (s)he is worth; he plans to work Aunt Maud via working his own daughter. This is the only use he sees of his own flesh and blood, a bond that he actually declares to be binding and pregnant with duties. Indeed, Kate is surrounded by kin bent on reminding her of her family duties and the “tangible value” that her own beauty constitutes, which can thus be used as a tool/weapon to be wielded on the battlefield of Lancaster Gate (life). Apart from her father, there is her penniless widowed older sister with her numerous offspring, her sister’s in-laws, the Condrips, and even the memory of her dead mother, who had been repudiated by her rich older sister Maud as soon as she had made such a disadvantageous match with Lionel Croy (226-7, 239, 241, 255).

As to Aunt Maud’s motives for assisting Kate and her possible gain from the whole matter, we have already run a circle and pronounced it something of a riddle. Nevertheless, the representation of Lancaster Gate, which is her abode, has, strangely enough, a crucial role on its own regardless of the exact mindset of its mistress. In fact, the reason why it inevitably stands for many readers for the epitome of the mercenary attitude of the marketplace is that it is shown thus through the points of view of “the Kate and Densher of the beginnings,” and the ever-sordid Croys and Condrips. The picture of Aunt Maud is to go through some amelioration throughout the novel and especially Densher’s opinion of that lady is to take on a less somber hue. The two other ladies, in fact, likewise undergo a change in Densher’s estimate: Kate is to fall, while Susan is to rise, similarly to Aunt Maud and Milly.
The other reason why Lancaster Gate (mistakenly) remains the synonym of the commercial mindset is that famous remark of Lord Mark’s to uninitiated Milly: “Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing” (321). Not only do I find this true of the whole world and less reprehensible than many would like to make out, but I also deem it crucial to bear in mind what sort of a person Lord Mark is and how his point of view of Lancaster Gate should not be taken as carved in stone. His mindset may very well be sordidly mercenary, making his “reflectorship” highly suspicious—or not commendable at the very least. Even so, I am actually inclined to defend him from the charge of being a deliberate “brute” (595) later on. Mercenary or not, the charge of his “crime” against Milly cannot only be attenuated by taking into consideration his hurt pride due to being rejected by two ladies because of the same man, but first and foremost by his lack of imagination. It is Milly herself—during the very dinner at which Lord Mark lets fall that pithy remark of his—who realizes how devoid he is of imagination (322). This may very well be termed a “moral failing” in the Jamesian universe, but not a sign of conscious wickedness (Nussbaum, “Finely” 157). In fact, it explains why “obtuse” (Nussbaum, “Finely” 157) Lord Mark turns out to be incapable of taking his share in that “general conscious fool’s paradise,” that “conspiracy of silence” kept up by all those around Milly eager to help her to live, which was only possible if “a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements” was kept intact despite its being “strained to breaking” (The Wings 618).

“Nobody here does anything for nothing.” When I raised the objection that Lancaster Gate’s attitude is not much different from the whole world’s, I was actually not stating anything that is not spelled out in the novel: Densher, intimidated by the sumptuous surroundings of Lancaster Gate on his first interview with Kate’s aunt, likens that personage to her appurtenances,113 which he further equates not only with “Britannia of the Market Place,” but also with “London,” which, in turn, he identifies with life itself (236-7). This symbolic significance of Lancaster Gate is what makes it the most typical Jamesian field of all. It represents James’s concept of reciprocity.

My stance is to view the fact that in life/Lancaster Gate “nobody does anything for nothing” as less a cause for lamentation than the sentimental (bourgeois) outlook on the whole issue of reciprocity (gift-giving) would like to make out. Yet it is of equal interest to notice that Densher’s observation anticipates the eventual synthesis of the material—spiritual, the ultimate similarity between London and Venice, thereby echoing Ruskin’s own observation in

113 Densher’s equation of one’s personality with one’s appurtenances would find favor with Serena Merle in The Portrait, while it would surely make Isabel Archer frown.
“The Wings of the Lion” that the two can exist side by side. Indeed, neither of them is necessarily reprehensible when not in excess due to the accompaniment of its counterpart making up a harmonious whole. If London is life, then London’s materialistic attitude permeates the whole globe, and Venice, which had hitherto been exalted as the epitome of spiritual beauty, is not excluded from its influence. Consequently, not only does London (Lancaster Gate/Aunt Maud) take its share of spiritual tendencies, but Venice (Palazzo Leporelli/Milly) also shows itself as materialistic (commercial-minded) to a certain degree.

Another way to come to the “defense” of the ethos of Lancaster Gate is simply to read on and not stop at the ever-quoted “Lord Markian” comment; Kate, who surely does have imagination, presents the system of the workers and the worked in a much pleasanter light, and her point of view is thus much closer to—even if not the same as—the one I embrace:

Kate did explain, for her listening friend [Milly]; every one who had anything to give—it was true they were the fewest—made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. The strangest thing furthermore was that this might be in cases a happy understanding. The worker in connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled. People could quite like each other [...]. (333)

Kate’s emphasis on it being a “wonderfully oiled” system that produces cases of “a happy understanding” departs from my version of it in so far as it puts more emphasis on workers coinciding with the worked in other relations; thus it is not between A and B that both are workers and worked at the same time but between, say, A and C or B and D. Or, to put it differently, if Kate (A) is worked by Aunt Maud (B), the former may easily be the worker in her relation with Milly (C), while Aunt Maud (B) may be the one who is worked by, say, Lord Mark (D). The accent does not fall on reciprocity, but on every individual’s possibility to get her/his share as a worker within the system. Both my and Kate’s approach is supported by that of Blau, who likewise holds that although “the rewards individuals obtain in social associations tend to entail a cost to other individuals, this does not mean that most social associations involve zero-sum games in which the gains of some rest on the losses of others. Quite the contrary, individuals associate with one another because they all profit from their association. [...]even if they do not necessarily profit equally” (15, emphasis added).
5. **Do ut des (“I give so that you may give”)**

Let us now turn to the most important relations of give and take. The web surrounding Kate we have already scrutinized as far as her family goes. There are expectations towards her from all sides, and even if the interests of the poor and the rich “detachments” seem to coincide—Kate is to go to Aunt Maud—her lover’s and her own inclinations make it apparently impossible for her to please everybody. But Kate wants to have her cake and eat it too, so to say, as she is bent on not sacrificing anybody: “I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that’s just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything” (264).

Firstly, Kate wants her happiness with Densher, but she does not want to be poor at the side of a person who is the first to admit his evident inability ever to become wealthy (257). She loves nice things—“material things spoke to her” and “she had a dire accessibility to pleasure from such sources” (235)—and she is aware of her own value, two characteristics that make her ambitions well-founded and also explain her refusal to hastily take Densher “as he is” (428), and thereby reconcile herself to a very modest existence without having tried to fight for a better alternative for them both. Not for a second does she entertain the thought of them as separate entities and she tries to be the breadwinner in their relationship. To repeat, she furthermore feels impelled to live up to her family’s expectations—which constitute a “perpetual sound in her ears” and make her ask herself whether this “narrow little family feeling,” this “small stupid piety” leaves her room for “any right to personal happiness” at all (263-4)—and to obediently offer herself up to rich Aunt Maud.

On top of it all, Kate wants to keep a clear conscience and prove to the world and to herself that she is “straight” (281) and not actually doing anything “underhand” by secretly keeping up her relationship with her beloved: “She made the point that she wasn’t underhand, any more than she was vulgar; that the Gardens were charming in themselves and this use of them a matter of taste; and that, if her aunt chose to glare at her from the drawing-room or to cause her to be tracked and overtaken, she could at least make it convenient that this should be easily done” (249). Kate’s (outward) obedience and observance of the rules concerning her aunt is perfectly in key with Blau’s description of the exchange mechanism between two associates in possession of unequal amounts of capital: the insolvent recipient’s capital is that of “willing compliance” because “willingness to comply with another’s demands is a generic social reward, since the power it gives [her/him] is a generalised means, parallel to money, which can be used to attain a variety of ends” (22). Thus, part of Kate’s method of payment is (outward) submission; allowing her aunt to have (the semblance of) power over her.
Another—and seemingly contradictory—way for Kate to soothe her conscience is by claiming that she does not, in fact, owe anything to Aunt Maud because she has never asked for her help. The older lady may get out of the thing whatever she wishes, it is not Kate’s responsibility: “What she’ll have got from us [...] is her own affair—it’s for her to measure. I asked her for nothing [...] I never put myself upon her. She must take her risks, and she surely understands them” (280). It is a comment that actually goes against L. Becker’s maxim concerning the moral obligation to reciprocate even in cases where goods were not actively solicited (124-5), and although Kate says so, her acts prove otherwise: it is her earlier declaration to endeavor to please everybody including Aunt Maud that shows her to be far more aware of the fair play of give and take than she would like to make herself and her lover believe. Indeed, she even wants Densher and Aunt Maud to be on friendly terms, not only to make everyday contact more bearable and civilized, but because she feels that the two individuals would actually find each other’s company quite pleasurable—an intuition that time will prove right (496).

It is difficult to decide whether Kate’s attitude should be defined as overambitious generosity or rather as avarice; at this point she is not ready for sacrifices, and her eventual loss of both Densher and Milly’s money seems to come as some kind of nemesis. In any case, at the outset we see her as a young woman whom everybody wants to work, but before we have the chance to liken her to a victim, it soon transpires that it is her “pure talent for life” (536, 658) that not only makes her the target of demanding “weaklings,” but also the confident agent of the destinies of others, and most of all her own. Her way to take orders is to give orders in turn; the initial push from her family makes her take up the glove and run the show—and those who take orders from her like her the more for it, be it Densher or Milly, or even Aunt Maud, to some extent (459, 474, 658).\(^\text{114}\)

Indeed, it is just this “pure talent for life” with a commanding presence as its corollary that constitutes the greatest attraction to those three.\(^\text{115}\) As to Kate’s relationship with Densher, she shows herself to be very ambitious and does not shy away from playing the “prodigious game of patience” (275) she persuades him to embark on with her. While

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\(^{114}\) When Kate goes back to her sister for Christmas so as to be there for her when their father makes his sudden and rather unpleasant appearance, Aunt Maud is far from overjoyed. But, apart from behaving as a perfect diplomatist and letting Kate have her way concerning this matter, there is a hint of admiration in her of her plucky niece; Kate is decisive, but also a perfect diplomatist in her turn, knowing how far she can go. In short, she is not afraid to have her way even with her influential aunt.

\(^{115}\) As well as for F. R. Leavis, whose scathing remarks concerning the lifelessness, overtreatment, and indirections of James’s major phase deemed to leave room for the praise of Kate due to her “proud and admirable vitality” (157).
Densher represents “mind” in their relationship, Kate stands for “life,” thereby making up a harmonious whole (249-50). Similarly, while Milly is the imaginative agent hungry for crumbs of life to turn them into revelations, Kate is the chief supplier of that nourishment. Aunt Maud, in turn, had been keen-eyed enough to envision the splendor that a girl with such promising exuberance would be capable of shedding around her. This is what the older lady “marked early” and had watched long, “saving it up and letting it, as you say of investments, appreciate” (270).

Interestingly enough, Milly’s relationship with Susan has the opposite role designated to the former: Milly is to supply Mrs. Stringham with the impressions her cultured but starved imagination craves, being, in short, “the biggest impression of her life” (290). “A New York legend [...] of romantic isolation” in the eyes of the Boston lady who has always cherished literary ambitions, Milly is further exalted and seen as “romantic life itself,” which even “refined and grammatical” Boston could not give its expectant native (286-7). And if we thought Susan Shepherd Stringham had at last satisfied her imagination after such soaring symbolism, we are in for further flights of fancy; to be with Milly “was poetry—it was also history—Mrs. Stringham thought, to a finer tune even than Maeterlinck and Pater, than Marbot and Gregorovius” (289). As to history, “the poor young woman’s history” makes the avid Bostonian regard her as nothing short of “the potential heiress of all ages” (288), which surely harmonizes with her also being a “Princess” and a “Byzantine lady” at the same time (295, 383-4). Yet Mrs. Stringham, in her conscientious endeavor to explain to herself how she is not taking advantage of Milly and how their relations are beautifully reciprocal, congratulates herself on being just the right companion for Miss Theale because the young woman is indeed shockingly “starved for culture”—the article the older woman prides herself on not simply having but embodying. Thus “our couple had at all events effected an exchange; the elder friend had been as consciously intellectual as possible, and the younger, abounding in personal revelation, had been as unconsciously distinguished” (289).

Life and Mind, Impressions and Culture—Practice and Theory. In both relations there is a balanced exchange of goods, all of which may be defined as instances of embodied

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116 Just like in the case of Mildred Theory, I once again paraphrase James’s words in “The Art of Fiction” concerning the way an imaginative mind “utilizes” experience: “[...] and when the mind is imaginative [...] it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (56). Instead of seeming repetitious, the use of this quotation for the second time hopefully highlights the similarity between the crucial importance of the imaginative faculty for the two invalid heroines, Mildred and Milly.

117 For precision’s sake, let me add that “Mrs. Stringham was from Burlington, Vermont, which she boldly upheld as the real heart of New England, Boston being ‘too far south’ [...]” (286). This, however, only strengthens her candidacy for all that cultured Boston stands for—Vermont being even more “Boston” than Boston itself.
cultural capital—talent for life (Kate), intriguing personality (Milly), intellectual bent (Densher), culture and education (Susan). The beauty of these relationships is that they are not tainted with mercenary thoughts. Within these two couples nobody expects financial gain from the other; material advantage (economic capital) is nowhere in sight. Admittedly, the only person among the four who does have the economic variety at her disposal is Milly, but Susan is above any expectation of financial advancement via her young friend—true, she likens Miss Theale to a “mine [that] but needed working and would certainly yield a treasure [but] she [is not] thinking either, of Milly’s gold” (299).

Furthermore, apart from retrieving “pleasure,” “satisfaction,” and an exciting “occupation” as a participant observer of Milly’s life, Susan is also a very much needed protector-companion of the orphaned girl (293). It is not an easy role, if we bear in mind “the girl’s high restlessness”118 (291), her pride that makes her reluctant to accept any manifestation of pity or sympathy (467), and also her seemingly contradictory and therefore unuttered need to be humored and played along with. It really does take a person of a great deal of imagination—and empathy and patience moreover. Susan Shepherd Stringham is to prove ideal for such a role, also becoming in time as discreet and helpful a companion to the Densher “of” Venice—left behind by Kate and Mrs. Lowder to brave the situation—as the young man could wish for.

Concerning the balanced exchange between Susan and Milly, it has to be said that the latter’s view of the matter is different, albeit only in its comparative simplicity: Milly is not looking for culture, she is much more interested in finding an understanding companion/protector.119 Luckily, Susan’s privately romanticized version of the matter does

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118 This romantic character trait she has in common with Roderick Hudson.
119 Such female companionships abound in Jamesian fiction; we may think back on Diana Belfield and Agatha Gosling of “Longstaff’s Marriage,” or one of the most important novels of James’s middle years, the tellingly entitled Bostonians with Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant. Indeed, these types of relationships were often called “Boston marriages,” or the women were alluded to as “Ladies of Llangollen”—a designation directly referred to in “Longstaff’s Marriage” in connection with Diana and Agatha (58).

Surely, just as there is room left for different ways to interpret the nature of “Boston marriages”—whether they are platonic or have lesbian tendencies as their basis—so do we find a similarly great variety of female relationships in the Jamesian universe as well. There is usually an older and a younger woman, with one of them considerably wealthier than the other, and although there never is any overt reference to lesbian feelings, there is always a very strong admiration of one of the companions by the other.

This, furthermore, can either be positive or negative, the latter being the case of poor Mrs. Portico in “Georgina’s Reasons,” who is forced into a female companionship with the awe-inspiringly heartless and audacious Georgina Gressie. Agatha Gosling is likewise overawed by Diana Belfield, but the latter’s fierce virginal independence and tendency to cold-heartedness does not make the older and poorer lady hate her as Mrs. Portico comes to detest Georgina—Agatha’s feelings remain fundamentally affectionate all along.

In contrast, Susan Stringham not only admires, but downright idolizes her younger and wealthier companion, while Isabel Archer initially looks up to the older yet poorer Madame Merle. Olive Chancellor is the older and more experienced protector-companion of Verena, who is the object of the former’s admiration/affection.
not hinder her from coming up to the mark as just such a reliable presence on the young woman’s side, who, let it be added, is of course imaginative enough to guess the older lady’s fairytale view of herself and not only humors it (383-4), but will eventually adopt it in her attempts at forging herself an identity—an innate tendency that we are to examine in more detail not only as her bent for aestheticization (Freedman, Professions 207-27), but also as a symbolic representation of the postmodern/Lacanian condition of mankind in general (Fowler 84-111, Elliott 46-66, 136-8).

As to Susan’s position in her relations with her “quondam schoolmate” Maud Manningham nee Lowder (309), it is important to point to the essential irony of the affinity between the attitudes of these two older ladies towards their young charges. Just as Maud is “showing off” her magnificent niece in society, so does Susan have expectations of indirect glory due to being bathed in the light shed by her dazzling princess. A “reunion” after so many years with her “high-coloured,” “florid, alien, exotic” schoolfellow, whose life has been an intimidating series of successes, is a challenge that Susan has been hitherto too timid to face. Not only had there been the multiple obstacles of “distance, difference, diminished communion” at the beginning of their rather sporadic correspondence immediately following their separation, but it was Susan’s positively unpleasant sensation of finally having been “sensibly outlived, or, as people nowadays said, shunted” (308-9).

Indeed, the crucial reason why they did not continue to cultivate their relationship was the imbalance between the careers of the two parties. Maud “had made a great marriage, while she herself had made a small” (308), with the former leading a glittering social life as a member of London high society, while the latter’s New England life has been of a quieter and humbler kind. Milly’s advent, however, has brought about a great change in Mrs. Stringham’s existence from this perspective as well: “Whatever Mrs. Lowder might have to show […] she would have nothing like Milly Theale, who constituted the trophy producible by poor Susan” (309). It is a highly satisfactory state of affairs, which the latter defines as “the happy consummation, the poetic justice, the generous revenge, of her having at last something to show” (309).

Aunt Maud’s “appropriation” of Milly as her showpiece is yet another irony. The way Lord Mark sees it is that Susan had not so much planned on showing off Milly by keeping her, but on showing up with her as a present to give to the mistress of Lancaster Gate who can

Instead of going on with an exceedingly long list of further examples, let me finally add that James’s sister Alice also lived a great part of her adult life in the companionship of Katherine Loring—a “Boston marriage,” the nature of which has been a constant matter for debate amongst James’s biographers.
in turn show off the young American as a spectacle for her guests to “jump at” (316-7). Whatever the original intentions, it is thus not Susan but Maud who reaps the benefit of having such a marvelous companion to offer up. Yet Mrs. Stringham does have her initial moments of éclat before her “trophy” is snatched away. She “glitter[s] […] in the character of a fairy godmother” and is only too happy to see her princess become the thumping success of Lancaster Gate. Susan is never avid for personal glory and after she has had her brief moment of “generous revenge” (309), she is very much satisfied by taking a seat in the back and keeping a watchful and admiring eye on her young charge in the midst of the dazzling London whirl.

Whether Lord Mark’s unimaginative sordid mindset turns it into a case of having had to buy that seat of hers by bringing an offering that allows her entry, is once again a matter of point of view. In order to supply her starved young friend with the cultural nourishment she thinks Milly needs, Susan “uses” that very same beneficiary to be able to do so; whether Miss Theale is hungry for Culture or for a taste of Life (the “human spectacle”), she is led to a banquet where she can feast at her will—alas, cast in the role of the main delicacy of the whole affair. The image may be violent, but it is actually in key with Kate’s honest opinion of the matter. When teaching her American friend how to see “things as they [are]” (399), she not only points out that Milly is in danger of being exploited by them, but she further laments “poor Mrs. Stringham’s having let [Milly] in” with “the best conscience in the world” (402, 327). Kate therefore thinks that Susan has unwittingly dropped Milly in the midst of a den of lions, and she does not hesitate in pointing out that she is one of the main carnivores—that “paced like a panther”—whom the poor victim may loathe as yet (402).

The dubious outcome of Susan’s well-meaning endeavor to guard her but also to enable her to take lessons in life is viewed with a similarly critical eye by Freedman, who blames her “honest but misguided quest” on her distorted vision so characteristic of aesthetes. Not only does she make fodder of her inexperienced charge, but she also manages to “infect” her with aestheticism, which in turn will lead to Milly’s own distorted vision of herself and

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120 As frequently happens in Jamesian fiction, the imagery abounds in references to the theater; Milly actually admires Lancaster Gate as a stupendous scenery, the details of which “were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play” (312). Indeed, our discussion is soon to turn pictorial as well: the effect of the Bronzino picture on Milly and her subsequent “make-believe of a settlement” (507) in Venice all call to mind the art of painting and drama.

121 James uses almost identical words concerning Milly’s vision of Kate pacing like a panther at the very interview that brings about the latter’s candid revelations of the potential use and abuse that Milly Theale may be unwittingly in for (402).
the world; it is “Pater’s piedpiping” par excellence, to use Richard Ellmann’s words (qtd. in Freedman, *Professions* 208-9).

Kate and Milly’s relationship from the point of view of the former also deserves close attention before we reach the epicenter of the whole affair and concentrate on the vision of the central consciousness, that of Milly. At the beginning of their association, Kate seems pleased to have found an influential friend; there is no light shed on Milly’s condition as yet and the issue of the object of both of their affection being the same has not yet arisen either. Kate takes her cue from Aunt Maud and benevolently undeceives their target as to the whole scheme: they are to “conquer the world” (398), but Milly has to be aware of the dangers to which she is exposed in the process. By way of answer to the surprised and frightened question of her friend “Why do you say such things to me?” Kate for the first time identifies her with a dove (403). In this context, it is to be taken as a symbol of purity, innocence, and defenselessness, which will only later acquire a more complex meaning through a reference to protection/power.

Having eased her conscience as to playing with open cards, Kate does not have any scruples in taking and Milly is only too happy to give (331, 398), deriving her own benefit from the pleasure of giving itself and the possibility to observe “the handsome girl” (311) at her leisure. Kate fascinates her, even before she turns out to be Densher’s beloved—which will be yet another cause for her admiration verging on desire to be (with) her. To Kate it is not an uncomfortable position because—apart from being aware of her handsomeness and used to being made much of—she is likewise intrigued by the American girl who has limitless possibilities before her (402). It is the happy case of mutual fascination: “It was meanwhile a pretty part of the intercourse of these young ladies that each thought the other more remarkable than herself—that each thought herself, or assured the other she did, a comparatively dusty object and the other a favourite of nature and of fortune and covered thereby with the freshness of the morning” (329).

In fact, the transformation of Kate’s interest in Milly may be outlined as follows: Milly as an intriguing specimen being admired as an “American girl,” who is surely wealthy, although at that point it is not yet clear how stupendously. As soon as that information is revealed, Kate’s keen eyes fondly scrutinize Milly as the “rich American girl”—the stage we have just reached; Milly has all the possibilities in the world and Kate cannot help being very much impressed by that. “Conquering the world” at the side of such an exciting phenomenon seems like a promising (lucrative) entertainment.
When Milly asks Kate to accompany her to Sir Luke Strett, the great medical light, Kate’s vision undergoes yet another alteration. Although Milly never tells her point blank how ill she is, it does not take much for the shrewd companion to guess that she is dealing with a “dying rich American girl.” We never find out Kate’s thought-processes concerning the benefit she may derive from the association with a dying heiress. True, she does freely take while they are together and the numerous presents she is bombarded with leave no doubt about the mortally ill friend’s generosity after she is gone. But Kate’s uppermost feeling at this point is pity and the desire to help and please the luckless girl whom, only a short while ago, she looked upon as the epitome of possibilities/freedom. To have all that taken away from her seems to Kate a tragedy and she does aspire to be a good friend.

As soon as it turns out that Milly is a “dying rich American girl in love with her Densher,” things become too tempting. Kate has reason to view her “dove” of a friend from here on as not only in need of protection because of her purity and gentleness, but also as a powerful creature that at the same time is capable of offering protection. Furthermore, the dove’s love of Densher makes it possible for Kate to do something for her by way of protection in return for the protection she is to get for herself and her lover; this is to be the scheme of mutual consolation. Actually, the stage where Milly is regarded as the “dying rich American girl in love with her Densher” has two phases in line with the two significations of the word “protection.” As to the first, it literally refers to protection as shelter: Kate’s plan at this point is to make a “convenience” of Milly as far as a place to meet with Densher goes. Here she only lets drop that “the charming girl adore[s] her […] and would protect, would lend a hand, to their interviews” (425, emphasis added), but Densher will soon be told about “his little New York friend’s” love for him (422, 427, 432).

The gentleman in question is not exactly overjoyed either at being the object of Miss Theale’s affections or at having to include her in their meetings; he literally feels that she “took up room, and it was almost as if room had been made for her” (424). His turbid state of emotions concerning Kate is even more pressing due to having just come back from his long sojourn in America. However, although “his absence from her for so many weeks had had such an effect upon him that his demands, his desires had grown […]”, their mistake was to have believed that they could hold out […] against an impatience that, prolonged and exasperated, made a man ill” (419). In short, it is the whole state of affairs which he grumbles against, finding himself at the end of his tether “already” and urging Kate to give up her

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122 For an example of a very positive (lenient) approach towards Kate Croy (her motives, her conduct), see Millicent Bell’s “ ‘Type’ in The Wings of the Dove and the Invention of Kate Croy,” especially pages 96–7.
overambitious plan to “play a game of patience” which they—or at least he—have no patience for. Although it is a nuisance to have Milly in the way, he is forced to admit that they are short of possibilities when it comes to finding a safe place for their encounters, and so he once again “obeys” Kate’s orders and humors Milly’s admiration and company.

Not that Densher does not like Milly; the “little American” (445) has left fond memories in his mind, but at this stage he is far too much in love with Kate to appreciate Milly. Furthermore, however favorable the impression has been of the American girl, it has not been anything very special; he finds himself “rather stupefied at the range of Milly’s triumph” in London society (441). He opines he has seen “too many little Miss Theales. They even went so far as to impose themselves as one of the groups of social phenomena” (422). Thus, Milly may be charming and all, but she is, in his initial opinion, only one mildly intriguing representative of her kind. Although by way of politeness he does publicly subscribe to the possibility that she was not such a success back home because the Americans were unable to appreciate “some native product” (442), he privately explains away Milly’s success by reminding himself that one may easily be a one-in-a-dozen in one’s natural habitat and become a rarity when transplanted, as well as by the lamentable shallowness of over-appreciated Civilization/Culture:

The little American’s sudden social adventure, her happy, and no doubt, harmless flourish, had probably been favoured by several accidents, but it had been favoured above all by the simple springboard of the scene by one of those common caprices of the numberless foolish flock, gregarious movements as inscrutable as ocean-currents. The huddled herd had drifted to her blindly—it might as blindly have drifted away. […] The boom as in itself required—that would be the note; the subject of the process a comparatively minor question. […] He had supposed himself civilised; but if this was civilisation—! One could smoke one’s pipe outside when the twaddle was within. (445-6)

Kate does not immediately tell Densher about all the reasons why he should try to be nice to Milly. At first, the question of a way to meet suffices. It is only later that she mentions Milly’s illness (450, 452), which is why she is allegedly bent on helping the latter by doing all that is within her means to make the dying girl happy. To “lend” her beloved to her in what seems like an innocent scheme is the least she can do: “I want […] to make things pleasant for her. I use, for the purpose, what I have. You’re what I have of most precious, and you’re therefore what I use most” (451). As to lending, it is interesting to note the
connection between the original Maussian term for gift exchange, namely “total prestation” (prestation totale), which signals the inalienability of the thing/person given. For one thing, provided that gifts are endowed with a spirit (hau), an equation can be made between objects and people that are changing hands: if every article given (taonga) has a hau, then gift objects are akin to persons in that they are not inanimate, “not inactive” (12).

It follows that not only do gifts have to be reciprocated with return gifts, but the original gifts have to be passed on. Furthermore, while a gift is with the beneficiary, the giver has a hold over her/him by way of its hau—giving is therefore a source of power in a double sense, because the donor is superior due to having obliged the recipient, as well as because of the potent force of the gift’s hau. There is, on the other hand, proof of the original connection between (gift) giving and lending in the Latin word præstare, which not only means “to lend,”¹²³ but if we take a closer look at the prefix and the root (praes is “in front of;” stare is “to be”), we come to the significance “to be ahead, above,” which is rather allusive by way of pointing to the superior position of the lender. Or, to take it a step further, “the gift necessarily entails the notion of credit” (Mauss 36, emphasis added).

In Kate’s case, then, we may say that she regards Densher, her most precious possession, as a gift to be given (lent). Firstly, Milly’s (the recipient’s) hold over Densher is incomplete and indefinite due to the inalienability of gifts, so Kate may rest relatively assured as to not losing her beloved (which, ironically enough, is just what will eventually happen). Secondly, Kate, having thus placed herself in a superior position, gains control over Milly through Densher (the gift with a hau), and through the very gesture of having put her rich friend under the obligation to reciprocate. It does not even matter whether Milly is aware of Kate’s love for Densher; the fact that she apparently does her best to transfer her admirer to her ailing and unloved friend qualifies as a great donation in the eyes of Milly.

As to “using” her fiancé in order to console her friend, it is exactly by way of this feigned indifference; Kate’s plan is to convince Milly that she does not care for Densher and it is only that poor gentleman who pines for her, thereby giving the opportunity to generous Milly to be nice to Densher and “console” him (451). As a director of a veritable play, Kate arranges to have two people comfort each other: the unloved suitor and the “angel with a thumping bank-account” (451). It does not matter that Milly’s is to be a “beautiful delusion” and a “wasted charity”; her ignorance shall be her bliss (467, emphasis added). On top of it all, not only is it easier for Milly to accept Densher’s approaches under such pretence, it also

¹²³ A further connection between prestige, præstare, and prestation is to be of importance in the case of Prince Amerigo during the discussion of The Golden Bowl.
helps Kate dupe Aunt Maud as to the current state of her emotions. (Let it be added, however, that Aunt Maud is perfectly aware of the benefit she may derive from backing up Densher. “Mrs. Lowder had bethought herself of the American girl as a distraction for him” and proceeded to smooth his path by telling “the proper lie” for him: “She had guaranteed to Milly Theale through Mrs. Stringham that Kate didn’t care for him” [461-3]. Thereby Aunt Maud has yet another profitable exchange: she helps Susan with Milly so as to be helped with Kate [494]. Consequently, everybody is square à la Mrs. Lowder.)

The second stage witnesses the extension of the word “protection” to the more abstract meaning referring to a financial variety. The dove is now seen as powerful enough to shelter them not only as far as a place to meet goes, but with reference to their hitherto penniless prospects. However, despite Kate’s attempts at fine rhetoric about her motives, the way Densher sees it is that he is basically asked to “make up to a sick girl” (454) without knowing as yet what her ultimate reason is. Indeed, it is not until much later that Kate actually spells out Densher’s task and thereby reveals her more mercenary motive apart from her hitherto admitted charitable impulses. Only when she and Aunt Maud are about to leave Venice does she tell her fiancé that she expects him to stay and let his relationship with dying Milly proceed to the next level, namely marriage:124

“Since she is to die I’m to marry her?” […] her lips bravely moved. “To marry her.” “So that when her death has taken place I shall in the natural course have money?” It was before him now, and he had nothing more to ask; he had only to turn, on the spot, considerably cold with the thought that all along—to his stupidity, to his timidity—it had been, it had been only, what she meant. (570)

It is from Densher’s point of view that we find out about Kate’s alleged plan; whether or not it really had been first and foremost a mercenary scheme all along is never revealed. Whether or not from the very first it was with her eyes on Milly’s money that Kate was trying to comfort her dying friend is never fully and directly proved or disproved. Indeed, Kate may have succumbed to the temptation Blau refers to concerning “priceless spiritual benefits” like love, salvation, respect: “[B]y supplying goods that moral standards define as invaluable for a price in the market, individuals prostitute themselves and destroy the central value of what they have to offer […]” (63). Kate may be said to try and supply such goods (love) to Milly

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124 In fact, Kate envisions things with Milly to be smooth and easy to such an extent as to let Densher passively stay on and count on Milly asking him to marry her (573). Thus, all her beloved has to do is to stay put and accept Miss Theale’s offer.
by convincing Densher—the supply itself—to pretend. Although such “spiritual benefits” are priceless exactly because they only become benefits at all if they are genuine, some people are so desperate to have them that even the second-best, the sham variety, will do (Blau 63).

To illustrate the ambiguity of Kate’s approach with an example, she is at one point designated as “a wondering pitying sister” (512). This may be taken as a remark in her defense, yet we have to keep in mind that this Book (the Fourth) depicts the world from Milly’s point of view—the girl who is desperately bent on guarding the truth from everyone about her condition and so it may easily be she to whom it seems that there is yet another well-meaning person who, alas, has to be kept off in order not to let her too close and thereby find out about her state. Milly does not want anyone to pity her openly and, full of apprehension, she is always on the alert to catch the slightest sign of compassion in the eyes of all those who are nice to her. Nevertheless, one may say that a reader has to be quite naïve to doubt Kate’s mercenary motives all along, and it is only Densher who is surprised. Yet I would once again emphasize that there is a lot of generosity and charity in Kate’s motives and it would be hasty to condemn her for her behavior—especially because she is far from being the only one who supports the idea to keep up the beautiful illusion for Milly so as to make her want to live/love. Aunt Maud and Susan likewise “conspire” against reality and endeavor to “dupe” Milly for her own good—even if it is for their ultimate good as well.

6. The central “vessel of sensibility”: Milly in focus

“Yearningly” or not, we have indeed begun with “the outer ring, approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations” (Preface to The Wings 202), which we have finally reached; we are now to turn our full attention to Milly Theale’s point of view and her possible state of mind and motives throughout the story. To recapitulate, we have so far seen how the first three Books are related from a point of view other than Milly’s. I have proposed to view Book First as Kate’s, Book Second as Densher’s, and Book Third as Susan’s, but even if we take James’s own view of the matter, the first two Books completely ignore Milly and it is in Book Third that we first find out certain things about her—whether it is mainly through her consciousness or Susan’s does not make any difference concerning this fact.

In my approach, then, Book Third prepares us concerning this central “vessel of sensibility” (Preface to The Wings 203) with the following details: Milly is a young New York heiress who has recently lost all her kin and has thereby found herself in the situation of
a stupendously rich but frighteningly lonely individual. Her “two-and-twenty summers” (285) go hand-in-hand with innocence (inexperience) and a consequent impatience and curiosity to collect experience by a full immersion in the human spectacle. Whether it is Culture she is starved for, or simply Experience, does not alter the fact that she is an “exposed maiden” bent on embarking on the dangerous adventure called Life.

Whether Milly is as amazingly unique as Susan makes her out to be or is just an interesting complex of circumstances—youth, riches, orphanhood, striking physical appearance—is beside the point (or, to harp on it a bit more, it is a question of point of view). She is certainly interesting enough to make a hit in London society and, indeed, the first time we meet/hear her seems to support Mrs. Stringham’s reflections: she is a success, sitting as a queen surrounded by her admirers at a lavish dinner party at Lancaster Gate. In fact, James’s endeavor to place her central consciousness in the actual center of the story is triple-edged; not only do we first meet/hear her at the middle of the novel in Book Fourth, but she is also seen as already plunged in the middle of the human spectacle, and as the very center of its attention. Furthermore, there are to be three dinners of crucial importance and the second one occupying the middle/central position experiences her presence through her palpable absence: she is not at that dinner allegedly due to a “slight” ailment, yet the whole event revolves around her. It is her “triumph,” her “success” that is the main topic of conversation, and the feeling it inspires in Densher anticipates the characteristic atmosphere created by/around Milly throughout the whole story: “[…] the occasion took on somehow the air of a commemorative banquet, a feast to celebrate a brilliant if brief career. There was of course more said about the heroine than if she hadn’t been absent […]” (441, emphasis added).

The spectacle of the central “vessel of sensibility” is indeed the sight of “the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business” (Preface to The Wings 201, emphasis added): Milly makes a great big splash and “for any neighboring object, makes immersion inevitable” (Preface to The Wings 201). “The whirlpool movements of the waters produced by” it, and all “the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment” will be in focus again soon (Preface to The Wings 201) because after a mere four Books—with one belonging to Densher within that series (Book Sixth)—the “big vessel” disappears from sight; Milly is again out of earshot. Her brief but influential career in the novel is perfectly in proportion with the brevity of her life.

In any case, we behold Milly in the midst of London high society, with several roles already offered to (imposed upon) her. To begin with, she is celebrated as an American girl,
an exotic product\textsuperscript{125} of that young faraway country. Furthermore, she is a very \textit{wealthy} and very \textit{young} personage, and so the “rich American ingénue” is more or less the light in which she is seen by most of the dinner guests. Funnily enough, being the representative of democratic America in the eyes of a group of Europeans still ruled by kings/queens does not prevent her being simultaneously regarded as royalty both by herself and her companion; Susan has consistently been treating her like a princess, and, in turn, she treats that good lady as her fairy godmother, thus signalling a connection between that London dinner and the famous ball in Cinderella’s story. Indeed, Susan not only views her as a princess, she has literally turned her into one by having led her to that dazzling event representing all she had been longing for.

“All,” however, may be a bit of an overstatement if we consider that the prince is missing; Densher is not present and the coincidence as to both couples—Susan and Milly, and Kate and Aunt Maud—knowing him has not yet transpired. Kate, on the other hand, \textit{is} there, and she duly steals the show. Milly is fascinated by “the handsome girl,” whose appeal besides (or mingled with) her looks is attributable to two things that may be termed the two sides of the same coin: Kate is the embodiment of Europe and Experience, which can be further equated with otherness and womanhood, respectively. Indeed, her beauty is that “special strong beauty” of English girls (311), thereby standing for the cream of \textit{Europe} as well; half of the source of her physical attraction is therefore its foreignness for the American girl. Apart from being European (Other), Kate is also womanly (experienced); even before she “goes to Densher”\textsuperscript{126} and thereby becomes a woman in the sexual sense of the word, her eventful European life has initiated her enough into the ways of the world to transform her into a grownup.

In addition to a general experience of life, Kate is also imbued with the bewitching effects of being in love and being loved in return; even before Milly has any tangible proof, she feels that there is some secret that the “handsome girl” harbors (329). Kate’s attraction is further heightened by the mystery that envelopes her private life, and it is very telling that Milly finds pleasure in remaining in ignorance as to concrete details and thereby being allowed to guess at her leisure and let her imagination roam freely. This characteristic of hers

\textsuperscript{125} As to exotic products becoming curiosities in Europe, one is reminded of \textit{The Ambassadors’} Waymarsh, who, at a gathering at the fabulous “Fabourg Saint-Germain” dwelling of “the great Gloriani” (114-5), is envisioned by Miss Barrace as “an Indian chief […] wrapt in his blanket” (122). Furthermore, Lord Mark makes Milly feel like a “cheap exotic” at that first dinner—a feeling she does not mind and a suggestive role she embraces (324).

\textsuperscript{126} Densher will want Kate to come to him by way of getting something for all the sacrifices he is making in the name of their common endeavor; he wants proof, he wants her to pledge their “deal” and he eventually obtains her acquiescence. Kate visits him in his Venetian lodgings (573-4).
is of crucial importance when it comes to both the benevolent conspiracy of those around her and her tendency to remain silent and to prefer others to do so concerning the verification of certain statements; she is “duped” by others because she wants to be, and her “beautiful delusion” (467) is deliberately brought about.

At this stage, the discussion is to take on a decidedly psychological tone. Continuing the line of thought concerning the American girl’s quest “to face the whole assault of life” (299) and accept the existence of a divided and corrupted (ible) reality and consequently become a grownup, we have already examined Isabel Archer’s rather unsuccessful attempt at it. Here we are to proceed with our analysis by looking at the next American girl, who is nothing less than the “potential heiress of all ages,” the very person literally “taking full in the face the whole assault of life” both while sitting on the promontory and being watched by an (over)imaginative Bostonian (299), as well as during the whole of her “brilliant if brief career” (441).

i. À la recherche de soi-même: Mademoiselle Theale and Monsieur Lacan

Instead of the “periodic absences of the mother,” which constitute the usual situation of a young person, poor Miss Theale becomes exposed to a complete absence of one. Having recently lost all kin, on top of losing her mother, she is as forlorn as any person can ever get (Fowler 32-3, emphasis added)—Isabel, at least, had two sisters and their families, and she was “re-discovered” by her aunt Touchett at the outset of the novel, almost immediately after her loss of her father, thereby getting to know her uncle and her cousin Ralph as well. It is important to stress again that, in the Lacanian sense, due to being devoid of both mother and father, Milly (and Isabel) is (are) denied the refuge of both the imaginary and the symbolic order; that of the mother and the father, respectively, with the soothing illusion of completeness suggested by the former and the helpful regulation of the latter, which provides shelter from the unbearable third order, the Real.

To recapitulate, under normal circumstances, a young person’s progress from the imaginary order towards the symbolic comes about due to those “periodic absences of the mother,” which first “constitute a ‘lack of object,’ ” and, in turn, “enable the child to progress to the subjectivity of ‘I,’ ” or, in other words, to the realization of a divided reality (Fowler 32-3). However, although one has to accept the fragmented nature of the world, entry into the symbolic order does provide some sense of comfort. James’s fatherless American girl has
thus been seen as something more than the epitome of the Lacanian description of the human condition exactly because the father’s order, which is generally the “destination” of every human being in their course of growing up, seems to be more difficult for her to reach. (The [too imposing] presence of the father in Maggie’s life can either be taken as an aggravating circumstance landing that American girl in a similar predicament, or it may foreshadow her success.)

When Susan Stringham first meets the young New York heiress, the latter has only recently lost all kith and kin; devoid of bearings, without any shelter, refuge, certainty, neither her “high restlessness” (291) nor her eager clutching at Susan as a companion should come as a surprise. The elder lady is welcomed as a kind of buoy to hold on to. It is a different kind of relationship from those that the American girls form with the vibrant female characters encountered in Europe, however. Susan is an out-and-out American—the inhabitant of the new Eden (imaginary order)—and so she does not constitute the Other in the eyes of her younger companion. More like a surrogate mother, Susan may stand for the provider of a makeshift imaginary order, rather than being a source of fascination and awe that the Other brings about.

Stranded between the imaginary and the symbolic order, relatively lulled by the soothing presence of Susan (imaginary order), Milly’s other source of shelter is the set of roles/masks she is offered; as a kind of diminutive symbolic order, it is yet another make-believe to hide from the unbearable Real and to try to impose some pattern on the fragments she finds herself surrounded with. Let us not forget that the symbolic order is nothing else than a make-believe either; it is a social fiction that becomes “real”—with a small “r,” mind—because the “subjects act as if it exists” (Žižek 10, original emphasis). Therefore, our supposedly real self, with which we are members of the symbolic order, is also nothing more than a social mask (Žižek 33). From this it follows that if our supposedly real self is just another mask—albeit accepted on the grand stage of the world—in theory at least, any other mask may suffice as long as others act as if it exists. If Milly plays the part of the Princess, and Susan and the others share the fiction and act as if she was, another symbolic order is born.

The crux is that such a symbolic order is extremely fragile exactly because it is not generally shared; one person who does not act according to it is enough to shatter the whole fiction—someone like Lord Mark—and then the unbearable Real peeps out from behind the tattered fabric carefully drawn over it. More importantly, we are concerned with the (Jamesian) individual’s progress towards growing up and becoming a social being equipped
with the fundamental virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful): fabricating a private universe that only a handful of people share at best is far from the goal that James’s American girl should set for herself. Thus, the aim should be to enter the symbolic order inhabited by us all—the American girl is to come to terms with the fragmented reality that is concomitant of the (Lacanian) existence and find her place on the grand stage of social interaction as an autonomous but not isolated individual.

Susan is, in fact, not only the source of the makeshift imaginary order, but the fellow-maintainer of that diminutive symbolic order as well. Apart from the role of the young wealthy American heiress, “Susie’s romantic mind” (326) manufactures such roles as the Princess, or the Byzantine lady for Milly. Susan’s good intentions, however, are not necessarily beneficial for the confused and highly pliable girl. Instead of being assisted in her quest to grow up and accept the fragmented nature of the world and become part of the symbolic order shared by all, Milly is helped to escape from it. She is, in short, exposed in yet another sense: apart from being forlorn because she is completely alone, and apart from being exposed to the distorting effect of her tremendous wealth, she is accompanied by a dangerously dreamy Bostonian. In fact, the (over)active imagination of the person to whom she is looking for protection is set off by her wealth. True enough, Susan does not focus on Milly’s money as a source of financial gain but as a source of unlimited romance, yet this may turn out to be quite as harmful despite all her good intentions as the attitude of those who look to Milly for more palpable benefit. In consequence, Milly’s quest for self is detrimentally influenced by the convenient escapes offered to her in the shape of all kinds of roles that presuppose alternative symbolic orders which not only are terribly fragile by virtue of not being shared by all alike, but which also prevent her from genuine social interaction.

Nevertheless, at the beginning, Milly’s mindset appears to be just the contrary; instead of desiring to escape from reality due to a fear “to face the whole assault of life” (299), she shows herself to be eager to plunge into the human spectacle. It is not only the promontory scene from the point of view of romantic Susie that testifies to this urge of Milly to do so (298-9): Book Fourth is loud with enthusiasm concerning Milly’s excitement at finding herself in the midst of it. Let it be said, however, that the relative ease with which she embarks on social interaction is deceptive. Having until now inhabited the makeshift symbolic order bolstered by her wealth and the imagination of Susan, Milly’s sense of danger

127 It is just this distortion that Locksley in “The Landscape Painter,” and Gertrude in “Poor Richard” want to escape. It furthermore reminds one of Isabel objecting to possessions and appurtenances that may smother and fetter her Self.
as to the fragmented nature of the world has been lulled lately. Alas, she is about to find herself in the midst of a society sharing a different symbolic order—the one generally adhered to. Her private universe is to be exposed as soon as she enters the dazzling social scene.

Indeed, the encounter with the Other is not long delayed; it is at this dinner that Milly first beholds Kate, “the handsome girl” with her “special strong beauty” of English females (311), who is the most brilliant detail in the whole picture/scene. At first, a fragmented reality that is represented by such a wonderful creature seems all of a sudden highly desirable, but fascination is coupled with fear and dismay. Milly soon finds that all that is wonderful in Kate is what she does not have, and consequently any identification with this marvelous Other can only take place on the plane of imagination; “the handsome girl” is a healthy girl and Milly already has her apprehensions concerning her own health. Furthermore, her disposition to be more of a participant observer than a main actor in the drama of life prompts her even more to identify with Kate only in imagination. This disposition is, of course, a telltale sign of her actual fear of life (experience, social interaction) and anticipates her further attempts to escape herself (and socialization) by forging an identity (a private symbolic order) based on a more reachable model. For now, she contents herself with the observation of the intriguing and unreachable version of the Other represented by Kate Croy.

Milly instinctively feels right at their first encounter that Kate has some secret, and “the clear shadow of some probably eminent male interest […] hung at any rate over Milly’s companion the whole week, and Kate Croy’s handsome face smiled out of it […]” (329). The American girl’s fascination only increases when she finds out that “the handsome girl” knows Densher: “[…] the abrupt extrusion of Mr. Densher altered all proportions, had an effect on all values […] and] Milly found herself seeing Kate, quite fixing her, in the light of the knowledge that it was a face on which Mr. Densher’s eyes had more or less familiarly rested” (340). It is a “side of her friend which she had doubtless already been more prepared than she quite knew to think of as ‘other’ ” (340, emphasis added)—a side which further strengthens Kate’s initial otherness. It is a “new sort of fun” for Milly to contemplate her friend thus (340), and it naturally makes it even more exciting when she finds out that not only is Kate acquainted with that other handsome specimen of the English race, but she is the actual object of his ardent affections.

“The eminent male interest” (329) is that of the nice English journalist Milly had earlier encountered on home turf—a person that has left a deep imprint on her mind without too much future hope of seeing him, unless her agitation resulting in a wish to move from place to place and her ultimate desire to visit London has been unconsciously fuelled by just
that. She is, in fact, bound by “something of a promise” to Densher “never [to do] so dire a thing as to come to London without, as the phrase was, looking a fellow up” (306). Yet the “gentleman [is] to a certainty […] still in America,” so shy Milly can reassure herself that she would not have “the air of running after him” (307). The fact that Susie’s “quondam schoolmate” (309) happens to have such an attractive niece who is the beloved of the very man Milly is secretly seeking, makes us think how small the world is—a tremendous platitude, a rather suspicious authorial arrangement, but not exactly unlikely to happen, and not an uncommon method of even the most sternly realistic writers. In any case, the two fascinating creatures know and love each other—or at least Densher is in love with Kate and the latter’s feelings are ambiguous.

As we have already pointed out, the increased interest of their imaginative beholder is a kind of “mediated desire” that enables her to love both of them by proxy (Fogel 60): Milly loves Densher by identifying with Kate and loves Kate by looking at her through Densher’s eyes. It is a seemingly safe love, without the immediate danger of being hurt. When it comes to her immediate relationship with Densher, it can be comfortably based on this mediated desire. The plan of mutual consolation suits Milly down to the ground without, of course, knowing (or wanting to acknowledge) that her charity is wasted and that she is also being consoled—what she is aware of is the good she may do to that allegedly unloved lover of Kate Croy. She does not mind that Densher has no love for her; it is safer and more pleasant

128 Her restlessness and wish to travel on and on reminds one of Diana Belfield after she had fallen in love with Longstaff, an emotion that she hides from her companion, Agatha Gosling, who attributes Diana’s restive state to her physical condition—at that point she is already dying (of hopeless love).

129 In the novels of realists like George Eliot and Balzac, coincidence (chance encounter) is a very frequently used authorial method to fuse hitherto separate plotlines. These never are miraculous coincidences but always within the range of feasibility. To furnish a few examples, we can think of some of the protagonists of Middlemarch, who move in apparently very different circles, yet turn out to be rather closely related. Rich banker Bulstrode’s onetime partner-in-crime Raffles finds his old crony when he shows up to squeeze more money out of his abused stepson Joshua Riggs, the heir of recently deceased Featherstone. Raffles is turned off the premises by his angry stepson but first he picks up a letter written by Bulstrode to Riggs in order to put it under the leather of his brandy-flask to keep its glass firm. He finds out from the letter that Bulstrode is about to buy Riggs’s inherited property and Raffles therefore continues to haunt Stone Court, the place in question, so as to start milking his old accomplice in turn. It further transpires that Bulstrode had come into money by hushing up with the help of Raffles the whereabouts of his first wife’s runaway daughter, who turns out to be the mother of Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s nephew and Dorothea Brooke’s beloved. Another example lies in Balzac’s Father Goriot, where poor student Eugène de Rastignac uses his noble origins (his distant relative is the immensely influential Madame de Beauséant) to get closer to the object of his desire, the beautiful and rich Countess Anastasie de Restaud, met at his relative’s ball. As he is to enter their abode, he accidentally sees his decrepit fellow-lodger Goriot coming out of the same building—it turns out that the old man is none other than the father of Anastasie. In fact, these coincidences only strengthen the picture both realists tried to convey of society: it is seen as a web/netlike structure involving every individual and producing an inescapable interrelatedness. Mankind is seen as a large family.
to give than receive, as it puts the benefactor in a superior position apart (above), yet interlinked with the fate of the beneficiary.

A reluctance to engage in a real give and take is a fundamental characteristic of the American girl fearful to grow up and become part of the world by engaging in human relationships, and it is no surprise that Milly’s disposition echoes that of Isabel. Both girls prefer giving to accepting because the former act does not entail obligations and emotional complications as much as the latter—especially so in the case of relationships with men. Milly’s money makes it easy for her to remain the perennial benefactress of those around her, but her charity is commensurately greater than Isabel’s ever became—even after her inheritance—mainly because the latter was far too preoccupied with her individuality to live for others, while Milly is forever bent on extending her beneficial influence. In fact, Milly’s relationships with Eugenio and Sir Luke Strett are prime examples of her disposition to prefer safer types of love/devotion; whenever she is expecting anything in return it is a veritable financial exchange, and indeed, both in the sleek Italian’s and the erudite medical man’s case, their attention is literally purchased, leading to a happy relationship with both.

ii. The Bronzino picture as mirror: Milly’s misrecognition

Milly’s visit to Matcham brings about the encounter with another Other—another Lacanian small other who ultimately signals the divided nature of the world once again, but this time, paradoxically enough, it also lures her with the false hope of unity. Milly beholds Bronzino’s famous picture of Lucrezia Panciatichi who, differently from Kate, is an Other with whom, by way of their similarity, identification seems possible. The encounter consequently brings about her alleged self-recognition—the Lacanian mirror stage par excellence—a misleading realization that brings about a complex mixture of grief, relief, and even jubilation at having finally found herself. She subsequently embarks on her Venetian sojourn, literally reenacting the lifestyle of her likeness painted by Bronzino.

In so many words, the mirror stage brings about the creation of the “ideal-I” via identification with one’s specular image, a picture, or even another person (small other):

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130 Let it be added, however, that it is Lord Mark (and Kate) who recognize(s) the similarity between Milly and Lucrezia.

131 Freedman aptly points out that Milly’s mirror stage is an “ekphrastic identity formation” highly characteristic of aesthetes—it is nothing less than a central topos observable in Gautier’s, Pater’s, Rossetti’s, and
The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation [...] for the subject is caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body [...]. (Lacan, *Écrits* 98) The body in pieces finds its unity in the image of the other, which is its own anticipated image [...]. The subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces. And it is jammed, sucked in by the image, deceiving and realised image, of the other, or equally by its own specular image. (Lacan, *Seminar 54*)

It is crucial to understand, however, that the “ideal-I” is an imaginary construct, “the idealized mirror-image of my ego” (Žižek 80). Thus, the mirror lies because it does not reflect the way I am, but “the way I would like to be, the way I would like others to see me” (Žižek 80), pushing the “ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual” (Lacan, *Écrits* 94). However, the “the jubilant assumption of [one’s] specular image” (Lacan, *Écrits* 94) should in time give way to the dismaying realization that the “ideal-I” beheld does not correspond to one’s actual state of affairs, so to say; even if “the fictional direction” is to remain with the individual forever trying to attain the unattainable, one still has to come to terms with the actual, the fragmented, the real. In fact, the subjective “I” that any grownup has to develop will be constantly influenced by not only this “ideal-I” belonging to the imaginary order, but also by the “Ego-Ideal”—“my symbolic identification, the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself” (Žižek 80)—and the “superego,” which belongs to the frightening Real and “bombards me with impossible demands and then mocks at my botched attempts to meet them” (Žižek 80).

The main problem with Milly’s “misrecognition” is that the “ideal-I” thereby encountered continues to exert an excessive influence on her and becomes confused with the “Ego-Ideal.” Because she was shown this imaginary construct by others—Lord Mark and, to a lesser extent, Kate and the Aldershaws second him in his opinion concerning the likeness (360-1)—Milly seems to take it as her symbolic self that is part of the symbolic order, the personal yardstick to measure herself against. If others see her like this, then this is what she is like, or should be like and consequently would wish to be like—a reasoning recalling Wilde’s works as well. The individual’s self-formation comes about as a result of her/his encounter with a work of art, most commonly a picture (*Professions* 213-4).
Hegel’s dictum about self-consciousness being gained through the eyes of the other (I become a self based on how the other(s) see(s) me).

Hence the image (Lucrezia Panciatichi) beheld by Milly does not turn out to be a lie in her eyes; even if it is idealized, it strikes her as actual and attainable enough. The others thereby push Milly towards an existence based on this likeness that will result in her increasing passivity; society (its other members) seems to appoint her place in it, which is outside it—beautiful but frozen into passivity, dead. Freedman’s apt comment about the “appropriately named countryhouse” comes in handy here: it is the crafty Lord who obeys the summons to “match’em” (*Professions* 211).

Actually, Milly first claims not to see any resemblance and when she does, she gives voice to the tragic realization that the lady in the picture is dead and so she may strike her beholders as dying if she is seen as someone resembling Lucrezia. Lord Mark’s indirect offer of marriage during this very scene is thus in rather questionable taste. One may ask where the “jubilation” comes in amidst all this identification with a dead lady. In fact, apart from the pleasure that she may derive from having been likened to a beautiful, stylish, illustrious personage, Milly’s reaction should be described as more of a relief; identification with a palpable, attainable image simplifies matters. It is, at the end of the day, a welcome shelter from the threat of fragmentation and uncertainty—another role to enact, another mask to wear.

Yet what is there supposed to be behind masks? What is an individual like when not playing a role? Is the subjective “I” supposed to be a fixed/core self that the individual should manage to construct as a result of her/his quest to grow up? Unsurprisingly, the answer is in the negative. The whole ordeal of accepting the fragmented nature of the world centers around the fact that the self has to come to terms with permanently sharing in this quality: it remains “decomposed, in pieces” (Lacan, *Seminar* 54), just as it was prior to the formation of the “ideal-I.” As Anthony Elliott puts it:

>[A]ll images of the self are intrinsically false, for the self is a delusion. According to Lacan, the original experience of misrecognition generated by the mirror stage becomes the basis of all subsequent experiences of interpersonal relationships, of family ties and friendships, of social and communal bonds, and most importantly of intimacy and love. (54)

In the footsteps of Freud, Lacan departs from the Cartesian concept of the ego outlined in the latter’s *Meditations*, and consequently repudiates all other theories following Descartes
(Roudinesco 32-3). As Lacan puts it at the beginning of “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,” it is the mirror stage itself that “sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the cogito” (Écrits 93). Thus, Lacan refuses to subscribe to the Cartesian claim that there is a solid self. The only thing that may be called perennial about our identity is the perpetual endeavor to identify with images—in the fashion of our (mis)recognition during the mirror stage. The sole consolation at our disposal is the following oxymoron: the condition of flux is the one thing fixed. Falling back on Lacan, then, leaves us with an even greater sense of fragmentation and chaos than ever, and makes us toy with the conclusion that whatever has been taken as “self” hitherto is just another mask/role, with the center/core lacking—a truly postmodern outlook.

It further follows that Fowler’s tenet concerning the quest for self that James’s American girls all go through and, with the exception of Maggie Verver, do not succeed in (11), is not only a universal quest concerning each and everyone, but, more importantly, it is a quest doomed to failure right from the outset. Admittedly, it does not entail that they (/we) should all “turn their [our] face to the wall” and die; the “Fowlerian maxim” based on Lacan concerning the necessity to accept the fragmented nature of reality stands as irrefutable as ever. Yet the outlook is even less rosy than before: it is essential to come to terms with the added piece of bad news that such a thing as a permanent self is impossible. We are as fragmented and volatile as the reality that we are fragments of. At the end of the quest, then, there is the obligatory acceptance of the need to keep on wearing masks (enacting roles), and to alter them so as to adapt ourselves according to the situation.

Let us recall that the importance to regard the individual as part of a social context, which necessitates every person’s adaptation (/conformity), is nothing new. Apart from the repeatedly mentioned position of Aristotle and the social realism of George Eliot and Balzac, there are, to name a few more examples, Spinoza’s tenets in his Ethics, Feuerbach’s philosophy in The Essence of Christianity, the evolutionary philosophy of Spencer, the positivism of Comte—the crucial role of context/circumstances has indeed already been driven home to us. What is added—or taken away—is the realization that there is no inner

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132 In all their systems of thought, (wo)man is to come to terms with the idea of a deterministic universe with a set of universal laws to be known and to conform to, therefore (s)he has to learn to see her/himself in the context of the surrounding world, of the community (s)he is part of. Thus, to regard society as an organism/web/net is nothing new. Apart from the primary sources concerning Feuerbach and Spinoza, for more details on similarities between the systems of thought of these thinkers, see: Lepenies 41, 82, 137, 183; Karl 164, 315; Cooke 166, 184. Lastly, it is interesting to note Wilde’s endorsement of the web-like nature of society based on evolutionary philosophy. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert-Wilde arrives at the following observation concerning the influence of the “scientific principle of Heredity”: “It has shown us that we are never less free.
core behind the masks (roles) we all have to wear (enact) in the sundry situations of our social existence. To repeat, the selfhood itself is a state of flux and “identity is a constructed phenomenon” (Elliott 46) without any claim to permanence, echoing Pater’s “Conclusion” once again; we are reminded of “that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (236). Therefore, masks and roles are not devices of deception but varieties of the self.

The decadent imagination’s fascination with masks is directly related to this dilemma (Freedman, Professions 221). Echoing the Paterian solipsism of the “Conclusion,” Oscar Wilde in “The Critic as Artist” questions the existence of a so-called ultimate Truth; just like everything else in a world of flux, Truth is likewise fleeting and changeful: “For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one’s last mood” (86). In matters of personality, it is one’s actual mask; instead of expecting to have any core self coming to the foreground by which a man is to be known, the truth about her/him comes out and resides in the mask(s) he is wearing at the moment. “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (83). Naturally, a different mask yields a different truth, but that is perfectly in line with our original tenet that everything is in a state of flux, personality included. Or, to be more pessimistic, “‘sincerity’ and its correlative ‘truth’ are themselves only the most thorough masking devices; revelation is only a more sophisticated form of deceit; the putting off of one mask is only the putting on of another, more compelling device” (Freedman, Professions 221). This is just what Milly and Kate are doing in the midst of their so-called intimacy:

[...] it was only that with this young woman [Kate] Milly had constantly proceeded, and more than ever of late, 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. [...] Strangely enough [...] 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. (511)

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Freedman mentions Max Beerbohm’s “A Defense of Cosmetics” as an even better example of this (Professions 221), yet I do not find his otherwise astute remarks to be supported by Beerbohm’s essay. True, Beerbohm does emphasize that the outward/mask/face and the inward/soul are two separate spheres and one does not mirror the other. Nevertheless, not only was his essay destined to be a parody of the decadents, it also puts emphasis on the usefulness of masks/makeup without disclaiming the existence of an inner core/soul. To repeat, it is the separation of the two and not the negation of the latter that Beerbohm focuses on.
Where does all this “constant vanishing away” and despair of knowledge/truth leave Milly and her quest for self, then? Well, life has been proved to be tolerably livable by billions of people and so the possibility to live and love is still there. Regarding the specifically unfriendly condition that James’s American girls find themselves in—“exposed maidens” by way of national and familial heritage, with the second being highly symbolic of the first—their quest is admittedly more arduous than those of others, but it is not doomed to failure concerning the possibility to survive the realization that the world is a fragmented, chaotic place, and one’s self not less so. Indeed, to grow up and become a member of society has been relatively successfully tackled by all those billions of human beings just referred to. The way I see it concerning our original stance based on Fowler’s theory is that the ultimate goal is not the establishing of a permanent autonomous self but the mastery of masks/roles.

Underlying this general human condition necessitating the constant choosing and wearing and readjustment of masks (performing roles) there is, of course, the most basic fact that we are social animals. Apart from the already mentioned tenet of Rousseau that “social man lives outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others, and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own existence” (qtd. in Eagleton 136), the quality of one’s existence should also be taken into consideration. “Most human pleasures have their roots in social life” (Blau 14), which entails that socialization is essential to any individual’s happiness. Because pleasures/benefits/rewards that we covet in our relations with other (potential) associates fill us with the desire to be attractive to them so as to make them want to associate with us (Blau 34-5), we consciously want, therefore, to impress others. “People create impressions, of course, continually and without special design in the process of engaging in activities and interaction with others. But an interest in gaining social acceptance in a new group makes individuals self-conscious and deliberate about making a good impression (Blau 39).” As soon as our spontaneity is gone, our behavior is nothing less than a role that we perform, or a mask/ front that we put up which shows us to our advantage.

Milly’s roles/masks, then, should be analyzed according to their fitness in her endeavor to live and love and find happiness—to engage in relationships with her fellow social beings. Does she choose the right roles/masks? Does her death testify to a failure to do so or is it literally a “death-mask” that stands for her ultimate relinquishment—in other words,

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134 This is also valid for Isabel’s case: her alleged protective shields—or, to quote Ash, her “egoic armor” (179)—should not, therefore, be condemned as attempts at escaping from herself but as her own version of the general endeavor to choose the apt masks/roles in order to function as any other human being.
for her deliberate capitulation? Or is it in death itself that she arrives at her own consummation?

iii. “Pre-Susan” Milly in the flowing robes of the Pre-Raphaelite woman

Prior to meeting Susan, Miss Theale had already donned Pre-Raphaelite robes. It is partly due to these flowing garments that she catches Mrs. Stringham’s fancy in the first place, who does not tarry in recognizing what they stand for. Apart from being “slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably angular”\textsuperscript{135} and crowned with “exceptionally red” hair, Milly wears clothes that are “remarkably black even for robes of mourning” (285-6)—all in all, she strikes Susan as the very lady who must have inspired Millais, Burne-Jones, and Rossetti. Nay, more than the model for Millais’s Ophelia, or Rossetti’s Blessed Damozel, Milly seems to compete with Jane Morris for the title of the epitome of the Pre-Raphaelite woman (Freedman, Professions 210).

The suggestion that Milly resembles a style of painting only seemingly goes against our previous observation concerning her self-recognition at Matcham. To repeat, although it is Bronzino’s picture that ultimately brings about her decision to reenact the style of the lady in that painting, one of the main reasons why she can identify with her in the first place is their initial similarity. This is to say that while Milly has no chance to try and imitate Kate—the first attractive Other—because they are so very different, Lucrezia Panciatichi, on the contrary, is an Other the attraction of whom can be partly attributed to their resemblance. To try and identify with her is within Milly’s reach, while Kate has to remain a desirable Other that can only be admired, without Milly’s having any chance ever to become (like) her.

\textsuperscript{135} In the light of Burke’s treatise on the Beautiful and the Sublime, one may say that it is not the word “beauty” that should be applied to the Pre-Raphaelite ideal; beauty and angularity are mutually exclusive in Burke’s opinion. While dark colors, obscurity suggesting infinity and inspiring awe, suddenness and angularity all are the attributes of the sublime, beauty, on the other hand, is characterized by roundedness (gradual variation or imperceptible change in form), smoothness, and light. Thus, Milly and the Pre-Raphaelite woman in general are more sublime than beautiful, which, in fact, is regarded as superior to beauty—the latter is referred to as mediocrity inspiring love/affection/condescension, while the former awakens awe/delight. See A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions. The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke.
Related to this is Susan’s (possibly detrimental) influence on Milly’s development. Freedman lays it at the over-imaginative Bostonian’s door that Milly also comes to adopt the aesthete’s attitude and thereby both “invites the exploitation that is to follow at the hands of the novel’s worldly aesthetes” and also exploits her exploiters in turn (Professions 209-11)—an observation that actually goes against our previous one which he also shares, namely that Milly has Pre-Raphaelite tendencies before she meets Susan. Whether it is Milly’s particular propensity that has already manifested itself in her resemblance to a Pre-Raphaelite woman, or the “ubiquity of aestheticism” with Susan as a potent host of that “virus” (Freedman, Professions 153), as soon as they become companions Milly turns into a full-blown aesthete herself and transforms her own (brief) life into a work of art—the experience she covets is to be of an artistic/aesthetic kind.

Still subscribing to the view that the exploited is also an exploiter—an unnecessarily strong terminology instead of our time-hallowed “workers and worked”—I would simply emphasize the following amidst Freedman’s observations: the role (mask, self) Milly adopts is that of the aesthete. Milly’s vision is of the reifying kind, which transmutes herself as well as those around her into (more or less) beautiful objets d’art. In line with Pater’s tenets, among the types of passion that may help one to get a “quickened sense of life,” Milly thus opts for the one that is most highly recommended, namely “the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake […] for art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass […]” (“Conclusion” 238-9). If someone, Milly really does have only a very limited number of heartbeats at her disposal and her endeavor to make the best of it calls for extreme measures: she is to turn into a lady-copyist in the grand style and copy a painting with the use of prime materials—that of life. As both the main protagonist and the creator of a kind of tableau vivant, Milly lives in the midst of her resuscitated picture.

The crux with her choice of role (self, mask) is that it leads straight to death for several reasons. Firstly, both a picture and a tableau vivant are something static, forcing the subject into passivity.136 Secondly, the specific type of artistic style for which she has a

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136 Ironically enough, in her endeavor to remain static, Milly would have pleased both Ralph and Osmond more than Isabel. Another thing worth considering is Wilde’s comment in his essay “The Critic as Artist” concerning the difference between the perfection achieved by the visual arts (painting, sculpture) and literature. Gilbert-Wilde claims that the perfection literature attains is superior to that of the visual arts because in the latter case it is only a single moment of perfection arrested: “Those who live in marble or on painted panel, know of life but a single exquisite instant, eternal indeed in its beauty, but limited to one note of passion or one mood of calm. Those whom the poet makes live have their myriad emotions of joy and terror, of courage and despair, of pleasure and of suffering” (37-8).
strong penchant is death-obsessed; the Pre-Raphaelite woman’s type of beauty with its pale, haggard looks is of an unearthly, unhealthy kind. Indeed, in the wake of the Bronzino scene Milly “initiates a process that can only climax in her re-creation of herself as a beautiful, fully aestheticized corpse” (Freedman, *Professions* 214). It seems to be rather paradoxical at first that by heeding Pater and choosing the passion for art in her endeavor to make the most of her numbered heartbeats and have a “quickened sense of life” “before evening” (“Conclusion” 238, emphasis added), Milly actually becomes more passive and “anti-life” than ever. Her way of living all she can is the negation of life and the opting for a deathlike stillness. What seems to explain this contradiction is the fact that although art itself is a dominion closer to death than to life, it is not only the sphere of the end of all that is mortal but that of everything immortal. Milly’s last brief phase before her demise is thus occupied with her Yeatsian endeavor to reach the “artifice of eternity.” We may say that from the climactic scene at Matcham she “turns her face to the wall” as far as action and struggle in that “mire and blood” go. She does not necessarily choose death over life, but rather art over life, which, at the end of the day, comes to the same thing as far as our earthly existence concerning social interaction goes.

Milly’s version of art, let it be added, is of the strictly imitative kind. She is not a creative artist and her subsequent attraction towards the lady-copyists at the National Gallery fits in perfectly with the particular version of artistic life she endorses at Matcham. It is an imitation based on a highly admired external object, an already existing picture or style, be it the portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi or the atmosphere of Pre-Raphaelitism. In this sense, it is really the mirror stage par excellence: an identity fashioned on the basis of an Other. It is, as she candidly admits it to herself at the National Gallery, a safe position: “She should have been a lady-copyist—it met so the case. The case was the case of escape, of living under water, of being at once impersonal and firm. There it was before one—one only had to stick and stick” (406-7).

Not only is it the safer, but it is also the easier way, as Milly has to admit that “what held her was the mere refuge, that something within her was after all too weak for the Turners and Titians. [...] They were truly for the larger, not the smaller life [...]” (407). To have the “potential heiress of all ages” opt for “the smaller life” is an ominous sign concerning the way she seems to be tackling the task of “fac[ing] the whole assault of life” (299). We are in Book

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137 I once again refer to Yeats’s “Byzantium.” In fact, the worthy poet does not only have a rightful place in this discussion due to the felicity of his phrases, but also because of his own use of masks (antithetical selves, personas)—an issue that would deserve a whole dissertation to itself.
Fifth and she has already “turned her face to the wall” in a certain sense. Indeed, the moments she had spent in front of the picture at Matcham “had exactly made the high water-mark of her security” and she had there and then started “consciously rounding her protective promontory,” which had finally taken shape in that “great gilded shell,” in which “she wants to sit tight and float on and on” (514-5, 521). The greatest problem with this kind of (passive, isolated) existence is that it implies an antisocial stance, which furthermore prevents her from deriving the pleasure/happiness that is to be found only in social interaction (Blau 14).

iv. Another Wildean\textsuperscript{138}: Milly the (aesthetic) critic

A way to exculpate Milly from the charge of prematurely abandoning her quest and to prove that her choice of self/mask/role/existence may be a way of socialization and a source of personal fulfillment, is to examine the problematic relationship between the realm of ideals (eternity), life (physical world), and art. In order to do so, the first thing is to posit that the ultimate goal of everyone is to get as close to the realm of ideals as possible, which includes Beauty, Truth, Justice, and all the desirable virtues and attributes. Next, the question arises whether art is two or only one remove away from the realm of ideals. Is art, in other words, a copy of a copy, as Plato would have it, or is it the copy of the ideal (essence) residing in the artist’s mind, as Plotinus argued? If we listen to Plato, Milly’s imitation is indeed a faint shadow, while agreeing with Plotinus lets us come to the conclusion that her preference for art does not land her any further than her concentration on life (material world) would. Art is thus seen as a different—and not a longer—way to ideal forms, be it Beauty, Truth, or Justice. It is, in this light, another reality, which is another copy, but not a copy of a copy.

This hangs together with Milly’s vision of her palazzo as a kind of Yeatsian tower, or the ivory tower of artists trying to isolate themselves from the hubbub of the world and live only for their art.\textsuperscript{139} In fact, her desires revolve around a tower of the safest kind that guarantees her isolation—Palazzo Leporelli is seen by her as a veritable “fortress”: “The romance for her, yet once more, would be to sit there for ever, through all her time, as in a fortress; and the idea became an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine dustless air [...]” (518). There, so high up, Milly seems to be closer to the realm of ideals than to the physical world—just what her romantic/idealistic temperament has always craved.

\textsuperscript{138} Unlike the case of Isabel and the Wildean new individualist, the analogies that I draw here do not founder in any “chronological net”; the Wildean text precedes The Wings by nine years (published in 1891).

\textsuperscript{139} This also reminds one of Hilda’s tower in Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, a young lonely female artist who is actually described as a fond companion of the neighboring doves.
So far, however, it does not seem to be the way towards socialization and the attainment of the fundamental virtue(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful).

Although it is by her own choice that Milly retires from the physical world, her tower nevertheless recalls “another favorite topos of aestheticist art [...] that of the isolated, empowered woman—the woman locked away in a tower like the Lady of Shalott, withdrawn from the world like Mariana of the moated grange” (Freedman, Professions 221). As to the Lady of Shalott, in fact, Milly seems to have a lot in common with both the original donna di scalotta and with Tennyson’s version of that lady as well. The thirteenth-century Italian novella relates the tragic fate of a daughter of the great Barbassoro who dies of unreciprocated love; Launcelot of the Lake adores the fair Queen Ginevra and “cares not” for the love-lorn maid. Upon her demise, Milly-donna di scalotta leaves a letter behind that relates Densher-Launcelot’s heartless behavior towards her due to his affection for Kate-Ginevra. Like Milly, the Italian Lady of Shalott is not under any spell and she is not forbidden to go down and mingle with the world, yet she chooses not to. Not so Tennyson’s, who is doomed to weave away her life in her tower and cannot even look at the world, save through a mirror. Her great desire is to leave the prison that holds her and to participate in the world. Catching sight of Lancelot makes her break the rules imposed on her; she looks out of the window and therefore she is to die.

The most important “tower” related to Milly’s deliberate isolation from the physical world and her vicinity to the purer sphere of the ideals via the breathing of the rarified air of art is, however, that of the perfect critic delineated by Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist.” While we have likened Isabel to the new individualist propounded by Wilde in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” it is worth the effort to examine Milly in the light of his description of the ideal critic. Even if it does not promise to allay the suspicion that Milly’s choice of mask/role/self/existence leads her away from social interaction, it at least disproves the charges that: 1. Milly’s fashioning herself after an already existing likeness is mere imitation inferior to creation; 2. that it is a cowardly refuge from the material world; and 3. that it is a missing out on experience (impressions, the gist of life). What it aims at proving is that, besides social interaction, art provides an alternative way to constructing (perfecting) one’s self, and to achieving a sense of fulfillment (happiness).

140 We encounter yet another mirror. This time it may be said to stand for the Lady of Shalott’s doom not to have any firsthand experience of the world and to be allowed to have only the experience filtered through the mirror. Furthermore, she may be the embodiment of mankind pictured by Plato as sitting in a cave and having access to ideals only in the shape of vague reflections on the wall of the cave. Be it a prohibition to behold ideals or even the copy of ideals (the world), the mirror thus stands for a kind of keyhole of a prison that allows only an unsatisfactory view of whatever is outside.
To begin with, criticism is creative because it is a constant selection and choice, the exercise of one’s taste and judgment, just like in the case of art. The highest criticism, moreover, is “a creation within a creation” (“Critic” 42) because it takes an already existing artwork as its material to work from; “it treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation” (“Critic” 46). Consequently, one may say that the critic has much finer stuff at her/his disposal to work with, because it is not sheer “mire and blood” that (s)he has to give form to, but a thing already formed. In like fashion, Milly, in her endeavor to turn herself into an artwork so as to live as intensely as she can, takes the Bronzino picture as her prime material from which to create herself (her own life). In fact, the critic is not that different in this respect from the best artists, who likewise turn to artworks for material to create their own.141

Indeed, I [Gilbert-Wilde] would call criticism a creation within a creation. For just as the great artists, from Homer to Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have already been added. (“Critic” 42)

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141 Wilde here cunningly justifies his own artistic methods; he was repeatedly charged with plagiarism, most famously by James McNeill Whistler, who claimed that Wilde’s reputation was based on plagiarism of his ideas, (Sloan 16-7)—more precisely in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying.” Upon Whistler’s countermove in the shape of his “Ten O’clock Lectures,” Wilde’s subsequent step was the very dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” in which, amongst other things, his disagreement with Whistler that “only an artist could be a judge of art” found its fullest expression (Sloan 16-7). In fact, apart from the intellectual battle with Whistler, this critical dialogue is just another example of using already existing works as a springboard: Pater’s “Preface” and “Conclusion” to The Renaissance, Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” are among the most important sources of Wilde’s thoughts. Yet he is right; his usage of them is not copying but a creative transformation of them into something new and thought-inspiring.

The best example of the originality of Wildean concepts born out of already existing works is the metamorphosis of the objective critic delineated in Pater’s “Preface” into a subjective one, whose main task is not “to see the object as in itself it really is” (“Preface” viii), but as it is not. By detecting an underlying contradiction between Pater’s tenets propounded in his “Preface” and those in his “Conclusion,” Wilde artfully justifies his own version of subjective/impressionistic criticism with Pater’s emphasis in the “Conclusion” on the inescapable subjectivity of any individual and on the importance of impressions (“Conclusion” 236)—Wilde’s concept of a subjective critic is actually the exact opposite of T. S. Eliot’s “perfect critic” described in his tellingly entitled essay “The Perfect Critic,” the latter taking the Paterian maxim concerning the importance of objectivity to the extreme. Nevertheless, Pater’s seeming inconsistency is more laudable than otherwise. This time following Emerson and Walt Whitman (“Self-Reliance,” “Song of Myself,” respectively), Wilde claims that one should always be guided by momentary impressions and, after having given expression to that, move along and not be bound by it in the future. To be ready to contradict our past opinions/moods is, therefore, an attitude to be emulated. As to Arnoldian sources and tenets, by first turning the critic into an artist and then even claiming the superiority of the former, Wilde refuses to subscribe to Arnold’s privileging of the creative over the critical spirit propounded in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.”
Not only is criticism creative, it is also the greatest source of impressions (experience) that others mistakenly covet in actual life. In the footsteps of Pater, Wilde also hails the realm of art as the one that quickens the individual’s consciousness the most. The critic is just such an initiated person, who rightly turns to art for impressions (experience, passions): “There is no mood or passion that Art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be […] Are there not books that can make us live more in one single hour than life can make us live in a score of shameful years?” (“Critic” 60, 64). The crafty critic does not waste time with the sphere of action but stands back and contemplates the beauty of artworks: “[…] the elect spirits of the age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what art has touched” (“Critic” 58). Milly is just such an “elect spirit” who has even less time at her disposal and therefore has no means or intention to waste “a score of shameful years” on experiences to be gotten from actual life.

Moreover, apart from the intensity that Milly’s life can gain by focusing on art, she is shielded “from the sordid perils of actual existence” (“Critic” 67): “For life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. […] One is always wounded when one approaches it” (“Critic” 58). As to Milly’s tower with the safety and the essence of life that it furnishes her with, Gilbert-Wilde actually goes on to envision the critic smugly ensconced in his tower contemplating the world and thereby getting the best of it: “From the high tower of Thought [(s)he] can look out at the world. Calm, and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplates life, and no arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the joints of his harness. He at least is safe. He has discovered how to live” (“Critic” 75).

As the life of the critic is a life of contemplation, her/his apparent passivity is far from reprehensible: “It is to do nothing that the elect exist. Action is limited and relative. Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who walks in loneliness and dreams” (“Critic” 69). Milly’s increasing passivity may therefore be taken as a laudable sign of her progress in her endeavor to realize her perfection through art (“Critic” 67), and not indicative of her “capitulation.” Instead of giving up on her quest, she is employing the most efficacious means to obtain her end. To envision her in her palazzo, “remaining in the divine dustless air, where she [hears] but the plash of the water against stone” (518) is to see the embodiment of Gilbert-Wilde’s critic: “He will sit contented ‘in the deep, motionless quiet which mortals pity, and which the gods enjoy.’ He will look out upon the world and know its secret. By
contact with divine things he will become divine. His will be the perfect life, and his only” (“Critic” 112).

So far, we have seen criticism as the treasure-house of experience (impressions, passions), as something creative, and as safe. The critic, in her/his life of contemplation, is as near the divine life as any human being is capable of getting. Connected to this is her/his superiority even to the creative artist, despite the fact that criticism has been defined as a creative occupation as well. While creation limits vision (“Critic” 102) and has an ever decreasing reserve to choose its subject-matter from (“Critic” 103, 105), criticism is closer to the divine by being limitless. It is just the field for a person with a romantic/idealistic temperament like Milly.

There seems to be one obstacle, though. How could Milly, “starved for culture” as she is (288), be the embodiment of the Wildean critic if the latter is defined as the representative of culture (“Critic” 73)? There are two explanations to be had from Gilbert-Wilde himself. Firstly, he equates culture with the best of race-experience (“Critic” 73), thus the emphasis falls once again on experience and not on book-knowledge. Secondly, his concept of education also favors Milly’s situation; instead of facts and so-called practical information, the development of temperament (beauty sense), the cultivation of taste, and the creation of the critical spirit should be accentuated (“Critic” 93). Referring to Plato’s vision of the ideal circumstances for such an education, Gilbert-Wilde delineates a life sheltered from everything ugly, vulgar and lowly. The student of life should breathe the air of beauty and be surrounded by an atmosphere that assures the development of that ideal temperament (“Critic” 92). To opt for what is fair should become an instinct.

Contrary to Kate, stupendously wealthy Milly has always been sheltered from squalor and ugliness. Although money is not necessarily an educator, it does serve as a protective cocoon, and if the individual is gifted with imagination, the combination can result in a personality with a taste and temperament akin to that of someone consciously cultured. In fact, cultured Susan’s admiration of Milly’s “noble inelegance” seems to perform just this kind of conflation: that of richness and style. “[T]o be truly rich” is to have an effortless beauty emanating from the smallest details of one’s person:

[…] it was in the fine folds of her helplessly expensive little black frock that she drew over the grass as she now strolled vaguely off; it was in the curious and splendid coils of hair, ‘done’ with no eye whatever to the mode du jour, that peeped from under the corresponding indifference of her hat, the merely personal tradition that suggested a sort of noble inelegance;
it lurked between the leaves of the uncut but antiquated Tauchnitz volume of which, before going out, she had mechanically possessed herself. She couldn’t dress it away, nor walk it away, nor read it away, nor think it away; she could neither smile it away in any dreamy absence nor blow it away in any softened sigh. She couldn’t have lost it if she had tried—that was what it was to be truly rich. It had to be the thing you were. (296, original emphasis)

There is nothing harsh or forced about Milly. She is effortlessly, naturally graceful and tasteful—she oozes ease and thereby has a beneficial influence on her surroundings. Just like the perfect critic, her influence is “the mere fact of [her] own existence” (“Critic” 99). But how could she emanate ease when she is, at the same time, a restless, romantic spirit, who is, moreover, suffering from a physical malady? In fact, Milly’s initial “high restlessness” (291) gradually gives way to calm and repose upon her (mis)recognition scene at Matcham. As she is bent on turning herself into an artwork, she becomes increasingly passive, which is another way of saying that she attains a soothing calm she hitherto lacked. At the climactic dinner party at Palazzo Leporelli, “the pervasive mystery of Style” (555) of Milly’s abode—which is her “gilded shell” (521)—has a strong effect on all the guests. At the height of her “critical” powers, Milly composes her tableau vivant, which is—as erudite Susan notices—an (unconscious) re-composition of a Veronese picture. It is an expression of herself, which is “a mode of consolation”; not only is Form “the birth of passion, [it] is also the death of pain” (“Critic” 99), and so Milly may be said to have become a “beatus artifex”142 who, having realized her vision,143 was able to put her earthly troubles behind. She strikes Densher as “happily pervasive,” and somehow “younger, fairer” (562). In her white dress she bears great resemblance to the Beatrice envisioned by Gilbert-Wilde, who appears in The Divine Comedy “in a griffin-drawn chariot […] veiled in white” (“Critic” 63).

It is by way of this beneficial influence that Milly (the Wildean aesthetic critic) rises above the charge of egoism; without becoming a busybody philanthropist, her/his sheer existence is a good to mankind. Like Wilde’s new individualist (Isabel), the critic fits in wonderfully with her/his fellow human beings—(s)he has her/his appointed place in Wilde’s version of socialism. By being self-centered, (s)he realizes her/his own perfection and thereby adds something positive to society. (S)he does not preach or try to reform, but lets the others realize their own perfection and thus live side by side as individuals. In this sense, Milly’s choice of self-fashioning does not result in a wholly antisocial stance. Although by

142 Max Beerbohm uses this expression in that witty article of his that I have already referred to, “The Pervasion of Rouge,” also known as “A Defense of Cosmetics.”
143 One may be reminded of Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse.
way of diffusing her beneficial influence as a critic (artist) she gives rather than takes and so we cannot congratulate her on having mastered the fundamental virtue(s) of reciprocity (and gratefulness), her isolation does not equal a selfish withholding from her fellow beings.

Furthermore, the serenity and repose of the critic that is the happy corollary to her/his contemplative lifestyle does not equal being static. Hers/his is not a passivity that excludes movement. On the contrary: it is not so much a preference for being to doing, but that of becoming. Just as the Wildean critic defines her/his existence on the basis of Pater’s and Emerson’s observation concerning the constant state of flux of all that exists, so does Milly also envision her life in her palace as a “float[ing] on and on” (514). Floating or hovering, it is a kind of movement that suggests, at the same time, repose as well. It is a momentary repose that vanishes with the moment itself and so has to be re-created in the next, *ad infinitum*.

Not only does this correspond to the Lacanian concept of the (unstable) self that is always in the state of becoming, but it also fits in perfectly with Milly the critic’s position between earth and heaven—(wo)men and gods. Limitlessness, fluidity, aloofness, superiority; they all accentuate the mystery surrounding her, which is yet another attribute of the Wildean critic. Indeed, Milly’s ambiguity signals her success in “transform[ing] herself into a symbol” (Freedman, *Professions* 214), which may be her idiosyncratic solution to taking her place in the Lacanian symbolic order. If we accept that the symbolic order (the big Other) functions as a yardstick for the small others to measure themselves against by providing their “Ego-Ideal,” Milly can be taken as the embodiment of an ideal. A more equivocal approach to her ambiguity—to anticipate the next chapter’s orientation towards decadent iconography—is to liken her to the sphinx, or to the *femme fatale*.

**v. Milly—*La belle dame sans/avec merci***

Another pertinent issue is the role Milly would like to assign to those around her in her endeavor to turn herself (her life) into a work of art. In other words, the nature of her relation to others should be looked at. Is her way of social interaction really only a diffusion of positive influence and a one-sided act of giving? It seems unlikely if we consider that her associates have important tasks to fulfill in return, even before the artwork (Milly’s realization of self) can inundate them with anything beneficial. Not only are they supposed to be participants in her *tableau vivant*, but also the beholders of her completed artwork. As Lord
Mark aptly puts it, “there ought of course always to be people at top and bottom, in Veronese costumes, to watch you do it” (518). Indeed, they are to be both actors and audience.

Apart from their apparent compliance with her vision and their subsequent place in the picture, however, their role as admirers of the joint effort at an artwork leads to different interpretations. On the surface they may play along and take their appointed places in Milly’s “make-believe of a settlement” (507), but they actually regard it differently from the mistress of the Palazzo Leporelli. Milly’s great delusion resides in the fact that she initially identifies others’ vision of art with her own. It is already apparent at Matcham that there may be as many ways to look at the Bronzino as there are beholders, and the particular vision of art that the Lancaster set shares is different from hers—at least at this point. Her aestheticism is of the idealizing kind, while that of Lancaster Gate is the commodifying version. This entails that she initially insists on “treating herself and others in the generous and ennobled spirit of an idealized aestheticism that she has falsely introjected from those around her, not the commodifying aestheticism that Aunt Maud’s circle deploys the better to exploit her” (Freedman, Professions 215). Indeed, according to the latter, an artwork is an object of cultural and economic exchange (objectified cultural capital), and Milly, “like the portrait itself, is an ‘acquisition’; the characters who ‘appreciate’ her beauty most vociferously are those who are the most eager to annex her fortune to their own” (Freedman, Professions 215).

Not even this time does this commodifying aestheticism lead to Milly’s exploitation, however. The “ubiquity of aestheticism” casts its potent spell yet again and Milly soon annexes their kind of aestheticism as well (Freedman, Professions 216). The very gesture of treating them as so many pieces of mosaic in her grand design testifies to this new vision. It is of a more aggressively reifying kind, since it views others first and foremost in the light of objects to be acquired and used to her own ends.

Let me repeat, however, that despite Freedman’s rather condemnatory words concerning Lancaster Gate’s attitude, I still claim that their so-called commodifying aestheticism is just another name for the usual give and take with those ever so often mentioned strings. Milly’s mastery of their outlook on life is not necessarily a moral decline, but the successful attainment of a role vital to participate in this world. In fact, Freedman’s claim that Milly turns into a veritable belle dame sans merci with the skill to get something in return for her donations goes against most critical interpretations of The Wings; it has been

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144 An exception to this may be Fluck, who points out that “by turning the tables on Densher and Kate Croy, Milly Theale reasserts the power of her own imagination and entraps them in an exceedingly clever and ‘creative’ scheme of her own” (“Power” 28).
more customary to view Milly as too good for this world, someone who refuses to share its taint and remains pure and generous and untouched all along, and so on and so forth (Fowler 139, Gordon 146, Sarbu, Lélektani 192). To regard Milly’s “brilliant if brief career” (441) as a development mirroring that of British aestheticism is to claim that she is far from untouched by the (corrupting) influence of her surroundings. Freedman sees Milly’s life as the three-stage process aestheticism has gone through: from her own Pre-Raphaelitism to Susan’s Paterian aestheticism all the way to decadence, the last phase commencing around Book Seventh (Professions 219-20).

Before Milly becomes the belle dame of the decadent iconography, however, her “dove-hood” gains more complexity. Apart from purity and fragility, and even the benevolent protection Kate saw in her, Milly the dove becomes the symbol of “worldly, economic power” (Freedman, Professions 216-7) that not only looks to her friends as beneficiaries of the protection this power/wealth enables her to give, but as potential suppliers of her own wishes. Or, to be more egalitarian, Milly recognizes the possibility of profit from her role as a benefactress; she can get what she wants in return for what she gives. “Dovelike” attributes begin to stand for aestheticism itself, shared by Lancaster Gate and Milly; Aunt Maud “coos” and Milly, in turn, “masters their idiom of dress and language of gesture […]” (Freedman, Professions 216).145

Milly’s appearance at the famous party she gives at the Palazzo Leporelli also falls in line with the transformation that the dove as a symbol goes through. She is a bejewelled dove, wearing a “long, priceless chain, wound twice round the neck,” a “royal ornament” which becomes the “symbol of differences” between Kate and Milly (565). Those pearls146 represent wealth and power and beauty, and a purity that not everyone can afford—the very things that are out of Kate’s reach and are definitely not in Densher’s either, ever to give her (565). Densher and Kate, let it be added, do not regard this power as ominous; it is still seen as something they can turn to their advantage. That Milly can get something in return for what they want her to give would actually be welcome news for Densher, whose conscience would be more at ease if he could only see that Milly is not being victimized by them and their exchange is far from grossly unbalanced. This is how he envisions Milly, the bejewelled dove:

145 Freedman is much more intent on viewing Lancaster Gate as the symbol of exploitation and an undoubtedly negative influence on Milly, an approach I do not share, as has hopefully been apparent from an earlier chapter entitled “Lancaster Gate revisited: The workers and/or the worked.” Consequently, I would not go as far as to say that Milly also learns how to lie due to the detrimental effect of Aunt Maud and company (Freedman, Professions 216).

146 Note that Bronzino’s Lucrezia is also wearing a pearl necklace.
Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. Yet he knew in a moment that Kate was just now, for reasons hidden from him exceptionally under the impression of that element of wealth in her which was a power, which was a great power, and which was dove-like only so far as one remembered that doves have wings and wondrous flights, have them as well as tender tints and soft sounds. It even came to him dimly that such wings could in a given case—had, truly, in the case with which he was concerned—spread themselves for protection. Hadn’t they, for that matter, lately taken an inordinate reach, and weren’t Kate and Mrs. Lowder, weren’t Susan Shepherd and he, wasn’t he in particular, nestling under them to a great increase of immediate ease? (565)

In fact, the emphasis on the dove’s power makes Milly resemble other winged creatures as well—not necessarily the hawk that Susan would like to have perching on her arm so as to fit more perfectly into the Veronese picture she discusses with Densher (557), but the griffin on top of the cathedral of Verona, or, even more aptly, on St. Mark’s right there in Venice. Indeed, the griffin, as the mixture of an eagle and lion, is the fusion of the human and divine attributes of Christ—a very widespread religious icon applied in architecture and painting and a clear reference to Milly’s resemblance to the Redeemer. It is, of course, the very “winged lion” referred to by Ruskin in his chapter “The Wings of the Lion,” on the tips of the wings of which the setting sun’s rays are seen glittering at the very end of that chapter, referring to the lamented decline of Western civilization represented by the brief splendor and perfection of Venetian art: “[...] and swiftly and utterly, as a rainbow vanishes, the radiance and the strength faded from the wings of the Lion” (222).

Milly’s radiance and strength are also short-lived, and after this very dinner party showing her at her best, the sun of her life starts rapidly setting, and Susan’s vision of their “court life” at the palazzo as the life at “one of those courts of heaven, the court of a reigning seraph, a sort of a vice-queen of an angel” is more apt than ever (560). In point of fact, Milly’s dazzling presence at her dazzling party is an almost superhuman effort to impress and soothe Sir Luke, who has just arrived in Venice and may be said to be the guest of honor. Although Densher is “deceived” by appearances, Kate tells him that Milly has not in the least been better lately, but worse: the reason why she is “beautiful” and “wonderful” that night is because “‘she’s doing it for him [the doctor]’ [...] ‘she wants to be for him at her best’” (566).
Milly’s eclipse does not, however, point to the waning of her powers. On the contrary: the more her health fails her, the more she becomes the *belle dame sans/avec merci* and it is at her very death that her “decadent career” reaches its climax. It is, of course, in the “lump” sum she leaves to Densher that her mercy and her cruelty are conflated: “Milly seeks to employ her wealth to endow Densher and Kate with precisely the ‘mercy’ that the *belle dame* withholds; but by doing so, she ironically deals those lovers precisely the cruel blow it is the *belle dame*’s mission to impart” (Freedman, *Professions* 222-3): the radical change that Densher’s vision undergoes concerning both Kate and Milly prevents a mutual happiness they had been endeavoring to reach through her. Moreover, Kate’s destruction of Milly’s first letter unwittingly assists the latter in coming to resemble that other decadent icon, the sphinx. With Milly’s words remaining forever irretrievable, the ambiguity and mystery that had been increasingly surrounding her from the outset become so potent that they bring Densher under her spell. Indeed, “the more she withdraws from the social world she has entered, the more power she is able to wield in it” (Freedman, *Professions* 222). Thus, her complete withdrawal—her demise—signals her power to be at its greatest. Densher, who was still Kate’s cavalier when the latter left the Venetian scene, becomes Milly’s “knight palely loitering.”

Kate, whose “pure talent for life” (536, 658) had spurred her to be as ambitious as to want to please everybody and not to make any sacrifices (264), loses the most precious thing she has (451), the raison d’être of her whole campaign: Merton Densher.

As to Milly’s alleged loss and self-sacrifice, what exactly does she lose? She loves and lives according to her own preference and leaves the world behind with the best impression she could ever have wished to make on everybody—especially her beloved. With a great deal of imagination and a great deal of economic power, she has literally gotten all that caught her fancy and has made her brief career into a brilliant one. True, she is deceived by her friends but, first of all, let us remember her tendency to find pleasure in remaining in ignorance as to concrete details and thereby being allowed to guess at her leisure and to let her imagination roam freely. We have said that by way of this preference to remain silent and to have others do so concerning the verification of certain statements Milly not only facilitates the benevolent conspiracy of those around her, but literally invites others to “dupe” her. Indeed, her “beautiful delusion” (467) is deliberately brought about. Secondly, by having thus had her share of not only the sweet but also the bitter aftertaste of the cup of experience, she can be said to have experienced both sides of social interaction and lived more fully—and

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147 From Keats’s “Belle dame sans merci.”
successfully, if we consider her ultimate triumph over her deceivers. Be it revenge or forgiveness, cruelty or kindness, the victory belongs to Milly and she flies towards the sphere that her romantic/idealistic temper has always preferred.

7. But what about the biblical allusions?—a very short chapter

Apart from Milly’s Christ-like attributes and the religious significations of such icons as the dove and the griffin, the actual expression “wings of the dove”148 from Psalms fifty-five and sixty-eight cannot be completely overlooked even in the case of an author undeniably indifferent to religion.149 Indeed, it would be difficult to put a finger on any character, plotline, or any other part of James’s oeuvre concerning more serious religious considerations. Occasionally we may come upon a rubicund priest or two devoting his attention to the joys of the palate at the dinner table of a Jamesian scene—there is Father Mitchell in The Golden Bowl “prattling and twiddling his thumbs over his satisfied stomach” (Matthiessen 99)150—but he is “the minimus of minor” characters in each case.

True, Pansy Osmond in The Portrait “is a little convent-flower” (454), but her education by the good nuns had for its primary goals the preservation of the young girl’s purity and the shaping of a completely submissive nature. Osmond does not care for religion, and neither is Claire de Cintré’s religious upbringing the decisive factor in her resolution to take the veil in The American; it has more to do with her endeavor to quit the “worldly world” and find shelter among the somber walls of a convent. All in all, Jamesian characters seek

148 In fact, the King James version has “wings of a dove,” and the New International version has “wings of my dove” in Psalm 68: 13. As to Psalm 55, in the King James version we find “wings like a dove,” while the New International version uses “wings of a dove.”

149 There are, of course, critical attempts at gauging the (allegedly) existing religious depths of Jamesian fiction. To furnish an example, Edwin Sill Fussell’s The Catholic Side of Henry James focuses on the Catholic imagery of James’s oeuvre, on the basis of which he claims that there is a salient line of development concerning the writer’s preoccupation with religious issues. Narratives of his early career that revolve around Catholic conversion (supposedly) reach their climax in The Golden Bowl, which is seen as the novel most deeply preoccupied with Catholicism.

150 Bertonneau also makes a point of this. He calls the Ververs’ Catholicism “nonfungctional” and describes Father Mitchell in the following manner: “[G]ood holy man’ he might be, but […] while Maggie ponders moral action he merely prattles over the salmon mayonnaise at dinner” (16).
religion as a last resource against the corruption/danger that the life of a member of society entails. In fact, the very general distinction between the outlook of Catholics and Protestants does resurface in his ever-recurring comparison between morals, manners and mores of Europe and America, respectively, but the focus, once again, is on the secular dimensions of each religion, which does not have devout characters or theological considerations as its corollary. (Surface) Catholicism, corruption, and a rigid observance of forms (customs, tradition) often go hand-in-hand, while the children of the Puritans crossing the Atlantic tend to be pure, practical and persevering. Still, even without taking the liberty of a hardcore reader-response critic and transforming—in the “Fussellian vein”—The Wings into an artwork redolent of religious undercurrents, the conscientious James scholar should devote a section however brief to the obviously religious roots of the novel’s title.

It is the first half of Psalm fifty-five that seems to bear more relevance to The Wings, while in Psalm sixty-eight only the image of the bejeweled dove should be highlighted; there we have “the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold” (KJ Bible, Ps. 68: 13). According to the Reverend Charles Spurgeon, the subject of Psalm fifty-five is a song about the time of Absalom, with King David remembering his betrayal by his trusted counselor—“the spiritual eye ever and anon see[ing] the Son of David and Judas, and the chief priests appearing and disappearing upon the glowing canvas of the psalm.” The first fourteen verses relate the suppliant’s spreading his case before God (KJ Bible, Ps. 55: 1-8), portraying his enemies (KJ Bible, Ps. 55: 9-11) and mentioning the special traitor (KJ Bible, Ps. 55: 16-19). It is verse six that contains the notorious expression “wings like a dove,” and its explanation revolves around the emotion of fear, the desire to escape, and the preference of purity to wickedness: “If he could not resist as an eagle, he would escape as a dove. Swiftly, and unobserved, on strong, untiring pinions would he fly away from the abodes of slander and wickedness. His love of peace made him

151 However, Anglican Protestantism, being so close to Roman Catholicism, is not accentuated as Protestantism when it comes to Europe. If for anything, the old continent stands for (Roman) Catholicism, while American protagonists are portrayed as Puritan offspring.

152 The best examples of the European respect for form are the Europeanized Americans. Mrs. Touchett wishes Isabel not to stay up late with two young men (Ralph and Warburton) alone because it is not comme il faut; Osmond’s life is a worship of form; and Isabel also becomes “infected” by this kind of respect, making one think that her transformation is akin to that of a Romantic into a Modernist, with the latter’s belief in the solace of form.

153 More precisely, the first fourteen verses out of twenty-three.

154 As to Freedman’s consideration of the biblical allusions, he actually only refers to this Psalm, signalling the “admixture of economic and aesthetic language the novel grimly adopts […]” (Professions 217). Furthermore, he points to an important detail as well: “in the fourth edition of Pater’s Renaissance, the line ‘Yet shalt ye be as the wings of a dove’ was added as an epigraph” (Professions 217).

sigh for an escape from the scene of life” (Spurgeon). As it is not inconveniently lengthy, I hereby quote those fourteen verses so as to facilitate the attempt at seeing a resemblance to Milly’s fate:

(1) Give ear to my prayer, O God: and hide not thyself from my supplication.
(2) Attend unto me and hear me: I mourn in my complaint, and make a noise;
(3) Because of the voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked: for they cast iniquity upon me, and in wrath they hate me.
(4) My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.
(5) Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me.
(6) And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest.
(7) Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah.
(8) I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest.
(9) Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongues: for I have seen violence and strife in the city.
(10) Day and night they go about it on the walls thereof: mischief also and sorrow are in the midst of it.
(11) Wickedness is in the midst thereof: deceit and guile depart not from her streets.
(12) For it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him:
(13) But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance.
(14) We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.

With a bold stretch of the imagination we may hear Milly’s voice upon her finding out from Lord Mark about her betrayal by Kate and Densher. She “make[s] a noise [b]ecause of the voice of the enemy,” with the “voice” referring to Lord Mark and the “enemy” including not only the bringer of bad news but also those who had duped her. The “wrath” may be that of Lord Mark, who has been refused by both Kate and Milly, with the very same man always in his way; his act of revealing the true nature of Densher and Kate’s relations is partly fuelled by revenge. Lying and revenge bring down suffering on Milly and “fearfulness and trembling are come upon [her], and horror hath overwhelmed [her]” in consequence. She wants to fly away from all this wickedness, having realized that life (“the city”) is full of (ill-hidden) “violence and strife.” The “going about”—which is downright “prowling” in the New International version—may refer to the carnivores of Lancaster Gate set with Kate as the
prime panther (402), which furthermore stands for the whole of society. The “walls” are the city-walls here, however fitting to our previous ruminations concerning towers and fortresses it would be to imagine them as the walls of Milly’s tower, the Palazzo Leporelli. “The city” (outside world) is teeming with “wickedness,” “deceit and guile,” and “mischief also and sorrow.” The worst of it all is that it is Milly’s “guide[s],” and “acquaintance[s],” with whom she “took sweet counsel together” who betray her; to find out that her friends are her enemies is what really hurts.

Milly viewed this way is not in line with my approach. Rather, it may be likened to the Milly of those critical interpretations that claim that she “turns her face to the wall” as a result of having been betrayed and consequently having realized how corrupt/evil the world is—her flight is that of a dove who chooses to preserve her purity instead of staying and sharing its taint. Ironically, however, even the religious would not applaud her for her choice; Spurgeon’s admonition supports my view instead, when he reminds us that God “gives thee thy portion of suffering, accept it with cheerful resignation.” Indeed, (wo)man is to participate in this world and not flee from it, even if it entails her/his contact with corruption.

8. Milly the “beatus artifex”: Yet another tentative conclusion

As a preliminary step on our way to concluding this section of the discussion revolving around The Wings, let us recall the following Paterian-Jamesian-Wildean-“Freedmanian” tenets. Firstly, there is the inevitable subjectivity of each individual and the consequent existence of as many points of view as there are individuals, the corollary of which is the relativity of Truth. The brevity of a life of flux, and art as the greatest treasure-house of the impressions that (wo)man seeks in order to make the best of her/his (short) existence were also pointed out. In other words, (wo)man constructs her/himself from those impressions collected throughout life, thus regarding art as the richest source of the elements with which to construct a self always in the state of becoming as long as (s)he is alive.

Related to this is the ubiquity of aestheticism, which is none other than the previous statement seen in practice; individuals turning to art to live all they can (a constant (re)construction and perfection of their self), thereby viewing life in the spirit of art (reifying vision). The life of the aesthete/critic/artist is thus a life lived to the full, and so a life of contemplation/passivity only seemingly goes against the maxim to try and live all we can. Furthermore, the merging of the spheres of art and life and the taking of artworks as prime
material to construct one’s life and/or create other artworks is recommended, therefore apparent imitation is actual (re)creation. Life, in sum, has been seen as a continual recreation of self based on the impressions collected by each individual—a process which always has to take the inevitable influence of circumstances into account and thereby shape a (temporary) self in harmony with the (momentary) situation.

In connection with “circumstances” and “situation,” the problem of the Other (Rousseau, Hegel, Lacan, Heidegger, Sartre, Freud, Lacan) as a source of self (identification), awe, mystery, fascination is also important to remember. In other words, we have adopted the view of the self as a mask, and of life lived as a performance of sundry roles, which is, finally, the redefinition of the quest for self earlier delineated by Fowler along Lacanian (Freudian) lines, yet still in harmony with the latter’s observations (the fragmentation of all, the self included, consequently the permanent self as an illusion).

Adding all these to our previous thoughts concerning reciprocity (gift exchange), we have viewed the world of The Wings in several lights, amongst which there hopefully have been some new ones. Lancaster Gate and its mistress were seen as less reprehensible, and Milly as probably less innocent than it has hitherto been the critical custom to portray them. A more balanced exchange was claimed to exist between the workers and the worked—a statement that was supported by the systematic analysis of the most important relationships of give and take. There was the probing of Aunt Maud’s inscrutable motives and the pinpointing of the fact that she does not gain anything financially by helping Kate. The demonstration of the multiple metamorphoses of Kate’s motives also took place, as well as the transformation of Densher’s stance and feelings. Susan’s relations with her “quondam schoolmate” and her good-natured assistance of her ailing friend were scrutinized and the question of the wrong she may have unwittingly caused Milly was raised.

Focusing on Milly Theale, we have discussed her initial reactions to the fragmented nature of the world surrounding her (to the presence of the Other) and to the need to construct a self which is also doomed to be fragmented and impermanent, and in need of constant renewal in the shape of choosing the appropriate roles/masks. The fitness of the roles/masks available (offered) to her due to her orphanhood, her wealth, and her illness were looked at, as well as those that she selected in her endeavor to make the best of the brief existence allotted to her. Keeping in mind Milly’s penchant for aestheticism intensified by Mrs. Stringham’s influence, Milly was seen as the Pre-Raphaelite woman turning into a Paterian aesthete, which was then followed by a metamorphosis into a Wildean critic, as well as a decadent belle dame sans/avec merci. Dying rich American girl, princess, Byzantine lady, dove, sphinx, belle
dame, aesthete, critic, artist. Milly’s “brilliant if brief career” culminated in her apotheosis into the perfect critic, who is none other than a “happy artist”; contemplative, isolated, safe, breathing the purified air of art, surrounded by beauty, above the humdrum existence of other mortals. Thus closer to the world of ideals, she succeeds in turning herself (her life) into an artwork and in leaving behind the best impression possible: outwardly merciful, but at the same time avenged for the treachery against her, she quits this world after having tasted both the bitter and the sweet.

By having redefined the quest for self delineated by Fowler, we may say that the American girl of The Wings does, in a certain respect, succeed in hers (despite the initial fear to the contrary stemming from her fatherless state). Without the hope to establish a permanent self, Milly tries on numerous masks and ultimately finds the one ideal for her: that of the (Wildean) artist/critic/aesthete. An even more important corollary to the outcome of her quest is based on the fusion of the processes of aestheticization and commodification, which not only leads to the conclusion that Milly as the arch-commodifier/aesthete/artist/critic is far from being exploited, but at the same time to the welcome realization that her thus joining the marketplace of Lancaster Gate without being exploited signals some sense of reciprocity. During her brief career she is both a worker and a worked. She gives, but she also takes.

There is no real cause for jubilation, however. Milly may have chosen a seemingly fitting self/mask/role (artist/critic/aesthete) and she may both have given and taken, but she is still fundamentally afraid to engage in any social interaction that entails close human contact. Even if her choice does not lead to exploitation, it does lead to isolation. Although ideally “the increased importance of the aesthetic in James does not signify a growing retreat from life to the ivory tower” (Fluck, “Power” 31), Milly’s full-blown aestheticism/artistry does not come up to the mark as Maggie’s final version of aestheticism that she exchanges for her initial, narrow/exclusive aestheticizing will (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 147). Indeed, Milly’s kind of social interaction consequently remains an abstraction. Its characteristics, however, are very much in key with the artist/critic/aesthete’s usual—yet fundamentally paradoxical—place in society. The artist’s isolation and elevation, which is coupled with her/his diffusion of beneficial influence as giving and the utilization of others in her/his search for prime material/experience/impressions as taking, is an attitude that is more of a recipe for increasing loneliness as far as close human contact goes. The “happy artist’s” joy derived from such an existence is of the spiritual kind and not due to any “warm and fuzzy” feeling deriving from
social interaction. If Milly was seen as having realized her perfection in constructing her ideal self, it is more than telling that the achievement led to her death.

The reason why we may still retain that she has chosen the right role/mask/self is due both to the brevity of her life (which had been foreseeable from the outset) and her general inclination towards ideals. From the Aristotelian standpoint hailed by Nussbaum—focus on the particulars, the context—one may concur that from her point of view, in her situation, Milly may have made the best of it. From a sociological standpoint, however, Milly is far from a laudable example of the mastery of the fundamental virtue(s) of reciprocity (and gratefulness) and the sense of fulfillment/happiness derivable therefrom.

PART V. THE GOLDEN BOWL

1. Intro

Three years, three major novels; James’s output was awe-inspiring between 1902 and 1904. The Wings was soon followed by The Ambassadors, and then by The Golden Bowl, his last finished novel, “the most done of [his] productions,” which, while he was writing it, he actually thought would be “the best book [he] ha[s] ever done” (Letters 15,156 qtd. in Edel 585). An even more than usual amount of time, care, thought, and energy went into the creation of this book—more than in the case of the previous two. Instead of writing The Golden Bowl in “less than a year” as had happened with The Wings and The Ambassadors, James “spent more than a twelvemonth” over it, “rewriting almost every page,” producing “200.000 words ‘with the rarest perfection’ ” (Edel 585).

Whether this enormous “labor” had proved counter-effective and produced the ultimate testimony to the charges—so scathingly and concisely put by Leavis (154-72)—of “over-treatment,” lifelessness, ineffectuality, ambiguity, and a fatal slip of moral taste, is one of the hobby horses of James criticism ever since. The novel did not please contemporary critics (and became a commercial failure) (Edel 586), and it has continued to sharply divide critical opinion. Be it the peculiar style of the major phase brought to its highest pitch, or the moral ambiguity of theme (adultery, “human acquisitions”), of the characters (the Ververs),

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156 Edel here quotes James’s enthusiastic letter to his agent, J. B. Pinker, written on May 20th, 1904. The phrase “with the rarest perfection” quoted by him below is also from this letter, as well as the expression “over-treatment” that I refer to concerning the charges that Leavis (amongst others) levelled against James—not just the charge but the very way of putting it, as it seems, told to the Master himself.
and of the author, or simply the credibility of the figure of Adam Verver as the innocent millionaire, *The Golden Bowl* is a goldmine of controversial issues.

Apart from Leavis’s multifold grievance concerning all the “charges” enumerated above, there is Matthiessen questioning the verisimilitude of Mr. Verver (88-92), along with John Bayley (249) and Ferner Nuhn (130, 138), for instance. Then there is the moral issue. Or, to be more precise, there are three of them: the acquisitiveness of the Ververs resulting from Adam’s (and consequently Maggie’s) “monistic standard” concerning objects and human beings (Mull 142-4), the victory of Maggie at the cost of Charlotte’s suffering, and “the adulterine element in the subject,” which James himself was aware would make it difficult to publish his work in *Harper’s* (Donoghue xi-xii). Interestingly, however, the adulterous spouses are more often defended against their “monstrous purchasers” and—besides James’s brother William—no critic, to my knowledge, who was bent on analyzing the moral dimensions of this novel has spent nearly as much time on questioning the behavior of Charlotte and the Prince as on discussing the ambiguity of the Ververian ethic.

I shall do otherwise; the insolvent sposi are, in my view, far too conveniently exonerated of responsibility under the guise of victims of circumstances and/or the rapacious aestheticism of their “benefactors.” I would certainly not go so far as to agree with the distorting definition of the story as “a shabby intrigue by which two lovers who are not prepared to live poor-but-honest contrive to maintain their sexual relation by having a wealthy man pay for two marriages” (Donoghue xx), however condemnatory it is to the adulterers. Yet I find it surprising to have Leavis haranguing about immorality and simultaneously stating that “if our sympathies are anywhere they are with Charlotte and (a little) with the Prince, who represent what, against the general moral background of the book, can strike us as a decent passion” (160). Jean Kimball seconds Leavis when she depicts Charlotte in the likeness of Isabel Archer; she is looked upon as the innocent heroine victimized by Osmond-Adam (449-68).

To furnish some more examples, Mull’s handy list of those critics who especially condemn the Ververs includes James Firebaugh and Tony Tanner (117-20). Focusing more explicitly on Maggie’s “cruel conquest” are Leo Bersani, Laurence Holland, and Ágnes Kovács, for instance. In fact, Kovács—who enumerates Bersani and Holland in her own

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157 A possible exception to the lenience shown by critics towards the sposi is Bertonneau, who also considers them ungrateful, treacherous, and cunningly hiding behind the convenient excuse of being “‘a perfectly passive pair’ whom others have forced, as ‘victims’ and ‘against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid’ ” (2, 4). More about this in chapters “Passive Prince placing himself in the lurch” and “Charlotte as the embodiment of the ‘force of circumstances.’ ”
summary as a prelude to her discussion of the novel—makes the observation that a welcome endeavor to leave aside value judgments and thereby come out of the trenches where the representatives of the opposing readings concerning moral issues have positioned themselves, can be detected from the 1980’s—or even earlier, as Fogel would suggest (Kovács 161-2). The interesting thing is that Kovács’s own noble attempt to desist from such judgments nevertheless ends in the painting of a rather condemnatory picture of the Ververs, especially Maggie (177-81). Instead of being surprised at it, I would just suggest that, apart from its inevitability, there is nothing wrong in taking sides, and I act accordingly; my place is amongst those who applaud Maggie for her effort and view her achievement as something positive (Krook, Fowler, Fogel, Nussbaum), who do not partake in an “Osmondization” of the Ververs (Mull, Nussbaum), and who do not find Adam Verver a non-credible Jamesian creation (Edel, Mull, Nussbaum).

In relation to my approach, however, the following aspects of this novel are to be considered in detail throughout Part V., after they have been cursorily explained in this Intro: the international theme, the American girl, marriages versus filial-paternal bonds, the American male millionaire as collector/connoisseur/aesthete/benefactor, the fusion of aestheticism and commodity culture (collecting (wo)men and things), the question of the gift, the issue of gratitude, the re-thinking of the concept of erotic/sexual capital, and, less exhaustively, the uses and abuses of power in the shape of (gift) giving.

Firstly, along Fowlerian lines that have served as part of the basis for my inquiry into the moral education of the chosen Jamesian heroines concerning whether they acquire the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) or not, there is once again the international theme with the American girl in the midst. In fact, not only is The Golden Bowl James’s last finished novel, it is at the same time the last and only one where the perennial international theme in the shape of a “mixed” marriage between the representatives of the New World and the Old (America and Europe, respectively) has a successful outcome (Edel 585). Indeed, it is here that the American girl of Jamesian fiction undoubtedly succeeds in her quest to “face the whole assault of life” and continues to partake in this world in the shape of establishing (and maintaining) close human contacts. Whether Maggie is likewise victorious in her quest to attain the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) remains to be seen.

Leaving aside the international dimension, the marriage issue is a recurring one in another way; it appears as a threat posed to unusually strong filial-paternal bonds. Father-daughter relationships become endangered by potential spouses appearing on the horizon.
Apart from real-life models, such as Francis and Lizzie Boott with Frank Duveneck as the daughter’s husband, or even James’s sister Alice with Henry James Senior and “the loyal Aunt Kate” (sister of his deceased wife Mary), there are several novels and short stories preceding *The Golden Bowl* in which this has already been the central issue (Edel 583). To name a few, there is Catherine Sloper and her overbearing father, Dr. Sloper, in *Washington Square* (1880), as well as Pansy in the hands of Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait*—sheltered, subjugated and forbidden to marry Rosier. Or, conversely, we may mention Adela Chart bent on preventing her father’s remarrying at any cost in the tale “The Marriages”158 (1891).

Similarly to these instances just enumerated, the corollary to the presence of the father in the case of Maggie Verver is also her being an “exposed maiden” in a different sense compared with the situation of Isabel and Milly; although, similarly to the heroines of *The Portrait* and *The Wings*, this kind of American girl is also motherless, it is of equal importance to see that she is being “exposed” to a father’s potentially damaging presence due to an excessively strong bond. Albeit cause and effect are different in the 1892 plotline and *The Golden Bowl*—originally, father and daughter were supposed to console each other due to the adulterous bond that had been formed between their respective spouses, while the final story leaves ample room to view the adultery as the effect and not the cause for consolation—one of the central concerns of *The Golden Bowl* is the relationship between Maggie and Adam Verver. Indeed, it all revolves around their cherished past with Adam’s strong influence on Maggie’s outlook resulting in the notorious Verver ethic, as well as around their present with their misbehaving spouses, and it also revolves around their future that holds an inevitable separation either between husbands and wives or between father and daughter without any trace of such a rupture on the apparently harmonious surface.

Besides the international theme, the American girl, and the marriage issue, there is the re-appearance of the “American male millionaire,” already encountered in the figure of Christopher Newman and Rowland Mallet, or even Ralph Touchett. The latter two are reborn in Adam Verver by virtue of the fact that not only is Adam a rich American—even the richest in the Jamesian universe—but he is a topping connoisseur (aesthete) as well, whose reifying vision and monistic standard enable him to become the most exquisite collector in Jamesian fiction. This characteristic is what exposes him to the danger of resembling the Osmondian kind of aesthete/connoisseur/collector, thereby providing grounds for critics to view Verver as the reincarnation of Osmond. From our point of view, the fusion of aestheticism and

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158 Interestingly, “The Marriages” was, for a while, one of two possible titles for *The Golden Bowl*, the other being “Mystification” (Armstrong 140).
commodity culture (consumerism, collecting (wo)men and things) is to be of central importance; already very much observable in the case of Milly Theale, it is to reach its climax with the Ververs.

Furthermore, it is here that “the gift” is at the very heart of the whole story and is therefore to be exhaustively analyzed in this Part V., just as the issues of benefactors and beneficiaries were put in the foreground in Parts II. and III., and the exchange mechanisms between the workers and the worked—in other words, the general give and take observable in social associations—were discussed in Part IV. How many gifts are destined to be given in the story? How many are actually given? What about the quality of the gift? What is the corollary to the completed exchange? What are the feelings of donor and recipient prior to and after the gifts have been received? What kinds of gifts are they—things or people? If it is a human being, what are her/his feelings about the exchange?

Apart from the question of the gift, it is in this Part that the issue of gratitude, another central theme of our sociological inquiry, is also to receive a more in-depth treatment. This is what the (as yet rhetorical) question concerning the feelings of donor, recipient, and “gift-person” may partly refer to. To give a few examples, besides a general inquiry into the nature and function of gratitude in social associations, it will be seen how the Prince is not only a gift from Adam to Maggie, but a recipient of the chance given to him by Adam in the shape of making him his wealthy son-in-law—a position he actively solicited definitely not only for the sake of Maggie’s charms. Does he react in the spirit of gratitude?

Similarly, Charlotte is a return-gift from Maggie to Adam so as to re-create the equilibrium that her father’s gift (Prince) has brought about in their lives, which has been to the detriment of the donor—Adam is (relatively) neglected and thereby exposed to “husband-hunters.” At the same time, however, Charlotte, indirectly by her old friend Maggie and directly by Adam, is given what she has wished for: an excellent match that provides her with home, money, the possibility to shine in society, and the company of the love she has earlier been forced to give up owing to her impecuniousness. Again, does she reciprocate properly? Is hers a grateful behavior?

Maggie, as the recipient of Adam’s gift (Prince), proves her gratitude (and filial devotion) by the very gesture of trying not to reveal the questionable quality of her present (the flaw in the Prince’s moral rectitude resulting in his ungrateful act of betraying his benefactors) and to save the donor from the pain of both the knowledge and the consequences. Similarly, provided that Adam knows and plays along—another evergreen debate in Jamesian
criticism—he is likewise behaving in the spirit of grateful recipient of a flawed gift (ungrateful adulterous Charlotte).

On the contrary, both the Prince and Charlotte eventually show ingratitude to their benefactors, and they do not fulfill the requirements of the principle of reciprocity. Or do they? It will be seen how one may argue that the very ambiguity surrounding the terms of the Prince’s bargain and the apparent lack of opportunity given to him to reciprocate (he is forced into a position simply to be and not to do) serve for many people (including himself) as pertinent excuses for his conduct. Furthermore, Charlotte may also be partially exonerated by saying that, contrary to the Prince’s, her bargain was clear and she continued to live up to it; it was to be the social representative of the two Verver households, and to do everything possible to make it easy and pleasant for Adam and Maggie to remain in each other’s company—to create/protect the cocoon around her innocent (ignorant) benefactors, that is.

As to the uses and abuses of power in the shape of (gift) giving—very much in line with the hitherto frequently emphasized issue of “domination”—let me provide the following hints and illustrate them with an example. Schwartz refers to the gift as a generator of identity; the donor imposes an identity on the recipient and simultaneously expresses her/himself and thereby demonstrates her/his own identity (1-2). As long as it is a negative image that is being offered (forced on) someone, the act of giving is an unfriendly act (Schwartz 5-6). Although to refuse a gift is to refuse the identity offered (forced on) one (Schwartz 3)—possibly in the name of L. Becker’s maxim concerning the morally acceptable course of refusing evil offered to us (97)—yet to refuse a gift is more often considered an offence in itself (Mauss 13-4). Not to reciprocate properly is also an offence, however.

The insolvent recipient, therefore, is put in an impossible situation; (s)he cannot refuse, but has to reciprocate with something that does not result in gross imbalance (Blau 108). The only way to do so is to use the capital of “willing compliance” (Blau 21-2), in other words, to place her/himself in the power of her/his donor—as has been the case with Kate Croy faced with Aunt Maud’s benefactions. Indeed, besides the show of gratitude, both the Prince and Charlotte are in possession of this kind of capital, namely that of “willing compliance.” Not having refused the identity offered (forced on) them, it is with this kind of payment that they could redeem their debt. Certainly, to (ab)use the power that wealth thus

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159 To give a few examples, Matthiessen (100) and Sarbu (Lélektani 201) agree in stating that the reader does not get any direct hint about how much Adam knows, while Fogel claims that Adam knows and simply plays along (102-3).

160 Hyde also touches upon this, but in a more simplified manner. For him, the identity that gifts carry is only that of the recipient, which means that a gift should be refused in case it was an undesired new identity that it stood for (57).
offers to anyone in the shape of giving is one of the fundamental reasons to give at all (Lévi-Strauss 87), and whether Adam and Maggie use it within the bounds of morality or not, also remains to be seen.

2. Gifts: Quantity and quality

Sundry questions have been posed in the Intro concerning the phenomenon of the gift in this novel. How many are destined to be given, first of all? Hopefully not rousing indignation when adopting Adam’s monistic standard, if we count both objects and humans that are meant to be given, there are ten gifts between the four main protagonists—not counting Fanny Assingham’s “gifts” that are none other than the consequences of her matchmaking (meddling). There is Charlotte’s planned wedding gift to Maggie; the Prince’s offer of a “ricordo” to Charlotte during their “hunt” (83); Charlotte’s offer to the Prince during the same event; Maggie’s birthday gift to Adam bought but never given; Adam gifting the Prince to Maggie; Maggie gifting Charlotte to Adam; Charlotte’s original intention of giving up for good and thus handing over the Prince to some other (financially) more appropriate woman, who turns out to be Maggie; Maggie’s gift to her penniless childhood friend Charlotte of such a good match with her father; the Prince giving himself to Charlotte after her marriage; and Charlotte giving herself to the Prince after their respective marriages.

The most obvious one is Charlotte’s intended wedding gift to Maggie, “some little thing with a charm, [but absolutely right, in its comparative cheapness” (71). That it is also an excuse to spend an hour or so alone with her beloved that she is about to lose, is not beside the point: what Schwartz emphasizes as the bonding of more people receiving one gift (11), is inversely true in the case of more individuals teaming up to buy a present for one person. There is complicity, shared experience, and memories that the donors “receive” by their act of giving—here especially, because the whole “expedition” is supposed to remain their secret (72, 84). It is Charlotte’s express wish to do so and it is nothing less than the sowing of the seed of discord between the newlyweds on her part, since the Prince thus goes into wedlock with already something to hide.
This bonding, of course, would be further heightened by actually finding something and bringing the gift-giving to its happy completion. It is not, however, the case with Charlotte and the Prince, which may serve as a bad omen for their future (the fate of their adulterous relationship). Their joint project does not bear fruit; no gift is bought and presented to Maggie. There is an interesting contrast, once again based on monistic standards, with the immediate “product” of the marriage of Maggie and the Prince, namely the Principino. Then again, the fruitless gift-hunt may actually foretell that Charlotte’s original intention to give her blessing to their marriage and give up and hand over the Prince to her friend (rival) is to transform itself into keeping (seducing) him. It also paves our way to seeing the analogy between the bowl and the Prince; Charlotte intends both to buy the bowl for Maggie and give up the Prince, thus the accomplished fact of the purchase and the gifting of it would have sealed her surrender in connection with her beloved.

The same event harbors the possibility of other gifts to be given. In fact, they would be by the same donors, this time destined to each other. Already in the shop but before they come upon the golden bowl, Charlotte does not seem to find anything that may suit Maggie. The Prince asks her whether she could find something for herself that he may offer her “as a small ricordo […] of this little hunt” (83). Charlotte refuses to accept any gift from the Prince, claiming that only a gift from her to him would have any “reference” (83). As the Prince likewise refuses to accept anything from her, they reach a sort of stalemate and abandon their quest to offer something to each other for the time being. The appearance of the bowl turns their attention to the original recipient, but the Prince deems it unworthy to be considered at all and quits the shop, and Charlotte soon follows suit, finding the exquisite crystal beyond her modest budget.

Outside the shop, they resume the conversation about giving something to each other. Charlotte is surprised to hear that the Prince spotted the flaw right away, while, try as she might, she could not detect it. The giving of a cracked gift is worse than no gift at all in the opinion of the superstitious Italian, especially when it is supposed to be a wedding gift; it would be a bad omen, a threat to his marriage, or to his whole existence, to “everything” (91). Charlotte observes that if cracks that are not detected by either donor or recipient are dangerous, then the whole gesture of giving is doomed: there may always be a potential crack we do not know of and so “we can never then give each other anything” (91). The Prince rather smugly retorts that he as a donor is not to be feared because anything he gives “shall be perfect” (91). Charlotte would have liked the bowl, in fact, but as “that won’t do there’s nothing” (92). He then adds that he would like to give her something for her own marriage,
which makes Charlotte say that in that case she would marry even if it is only to have something from him in all freedom (91).

All along, the ambiguous conversation leaves ample space for hidden meanings. As it has been indicated, the golden bowl, amongst other things, may stand for the Prince himself. Looked at this way, the Prince’s fear of the flawed object is an abrupt turning away from his unpleasing reflection that may foreshadow the future. Furthermore, Charlotte’s desire for the bowl (Prince) and her obtuseness (to see the crack) are also tell-tale because they anticipate her conduct to come; she will obtain her desired object (the Prince as bowl) for a while and she will remain in the dark concerning Maggie’s (and Adam’s) knowledge. The Prince boasts of giving something perfect to her on the condition of her marrying, which yet again may be taken as a coded message, even if it is unintentional on his part. He will give himself to her after she is married, just as he allows her to give something (herself) to him on the same condition (83).

The day at Matcham is what “he wishe[s] to make as an offering” to Charlotte, which is not only likened to “a large fragrant flower that he had only to gather” (264), thereby recalling Charlotte’s “flexible waist, the stem of an expanded flower” (37), but the consummation of their passion on that day is, of course, also symbolized by a “great gold cup that [they] must somehow drain together” (266). In fact, they actually do make the connection between the “gilded crystal bowl in the little Bloomsbury shop” and their day at Matcham pregnant with the promise of desire soon to be satisfied—the Prince even gives voice to his hope that she does not, by drawing such a parallel, mean “that as an occasion it’s also cracked” (267). What is interesting is that no mention is made of the bowl originally being meant for Maggie; the Prince recalls it as “the treacherous cracked thing [she] wanted to palm off on [him]” (267), suggesting that Charlotte wanted to give it to him.

All turn out to be cracked, however. The Prince’s flaw is his participation in the adultery, just as it is Charlotte’s. The marriage, the happiness of which he feared for, is flawed by their very act of adultery. On top of it, their adultery itself (“the occasion”) turns out to be flawed as soon as he returns home; Maggie’s slight departure from custom signals a crack on the hitherto smooth surface of their wedded life, and her suspicions are proved true due to the purchase of the self-same “treacherous cracked thing” (267).

Thus, both things and humans which are meant to be—or are actually—gifted turn out to be flawed. Moreover, it is always the objects that are only destined but in the end never given. The last such object to mention is Maggie’s birthday gift to her father, which, coincidentally, almost becomes the very golden bowl of the “little Bloomsbury shop” (267).
This time it is bought, but before it is given to the recipient, its flaw is pointed out by the repentant shop-man. His appearance at Portland Place brings about the recognition scene when he happens to spot both the Prince and Charlotte on photographs displayed in the room. Maggie’s presenting her father with a cracked gift is prevented—at least as far as the golden bowl itself is concerned. Yet the very proof of her husband’s and her stepmother’s adultery points to the fact that both Maggie and Adam had given each other flawed gifts: the Prince as well as Charlotte turn out to be “treacherous cracked thing[s]” (267), and Maggie—without the possibility to undo the acts—decides not to undeceive her father about the “bad quality” of their mutual offerings in the past.

Concerning the quality of gifts, Schwartz observes that it is not supposed to be as important as the gesture of giving; the form/ritual should matter and not so much the content (1). Platitudes, such as “never look a gift-horse in the mouth,” remind us of that. However, along the lines of gift-giving being the donor’s imposition of identity on the recipient as well as a self-expression, a shabby gift speaks volumes. Not only does the offer of such an unpleasing image offend the recipient, but it paints a likewise negative picture of the donor—Emerson’s reference to the gift as conveying “a man’s biography” because it is “a portion of thyself” (287) partly alludes to the latter consequence. Indeed, even if there is no harm meant and the imposition of an offensive identity is unconsciously done by the donor and forgiven by the recipient, as gift-giving is nothing less than a judgment of taste (Berking 5), the donor inevitably damages her/his own public image. Furthermore, the language of gift-giving can be considered “the language of our conventional morality” (Berking 4), and so a shoddy gift may suggest the immorality of the giver, or, more generally, the values and mores of the social circle (s) he comes from.

James’s reference to “fears and riguardi” typical of Italians in particular and Europe in general (Notebooks 73, original emphasis) is reflected in the Prince’s superstition. Whether one shares Amerigo’s beliefs, or rather holds that gifts are imbued with spirits (hau) as the Maoris did (Mauss 10-3), or that it is not the spirit of the gift but the spirit of the giver conveyed by it (Yan 216-7), largely depends on cultural context. It is beyond doubt that a gift—both the gesture of giving it and its quality—conveys some sort of message, some kind of emotion. The Prince’s theory of gifts stems from his awe of bad omens and thus for him the quality of a present is meaningful, while Adam, who is without “fears and riguardi,” looks upon the issue in a different light. For him the ugliest objects transmit the “tenderest” emotions on the donor’s part:
[...] his sweet theory that the individual gift, the friendship’s offering, was by a rigorous law of nature a foredoomed aberration, and that the more it was so the more it showed, and the more one cherished it for showing, how friendly it had been. The infirmity of art was the candour of affection, the grossness of pedigree the refinement of sympathy; the ugliest objects in fact as a general thing were the bravest, the tenderest mementoes [...]. (416, original emphasis)

Maggie, who recalls this, also admits that “there was always of course the impossibility of finding him anything, the least bit ‘good,’ that he wouldn’t already long ago in his rummagings have seen himself” (416), which makes his attitude akin to benevolent condescension. Nevertheless, it is also touching if one considers that a person who can buy anything under the sun cherishes such ugly-tender mementoes “in glass cases” (416), which bears testimony to his appreciation of the gesture. Adam is certainly not afraid of flawed objects and would surely not be offended by receiving one, particularly if the donor is unaware of the imperfection. In fact, “the infirmity of art” is what we often admire—or at least take as part of the beauty—when we behold a Greek statue, say, with an arm or a nose missing. If the golden bowl is an aesthetically pleasing object, a crack on it—especially if it does not immediately strike the eye, if at all—should not disqualify it, either.

3. The Gratitude Issue

As to the relationship between (gift) giving and reciprocity, I have already taken sides and posited that they always go hand-in-hand; there is no gift without strings attached, which is to say that it is at all times accompanied by the obligation to reciprocate—a crucial detail kept in mind both by donor and recipient. To take it a step further, we may pose the question of what the connection between (gift) giving, reciprocity and gratitude is. Is reciprocity always to be accompanied by gratitude? Better still, are reciprocity and gratitude synonymous, making the latter a moral obligation as well? Is reciprocation per se an expression of gratitude or is the latter an added plus? If the second case is true and gratitude is an extra on top of reciprocating, does the feeling of gratitude suffice or does it have to be expressed? (And note that by expression we do not mean a mere mechanical “thank you.”) If it has to be expressed, when? Immediately upon receiving what is given to us or later?
The answer at first sight appears obvious: surely, we should express our gratitude at the very moment of accepting a gift, but this, in turn, gives rise to some complications. Firstly, reciprocation should never be “posthaste” (Blau 29, 99); one has to bear staying under obligation for a while before returning a favor/gift, otherwise it becomes counter-effective to functioning as a moral cement in long-lasting social relationships. This timing issue seems to suggest, then, that the expression of gratitude and reciprocation cannot be one and the same thing, since the former should take place immediately upon receiving something while the latter should be postponed until a bit later so as not to seem overeager to be quits.

Yet if we agree with Robert A. Emmons and under gratitude we do not mean a single fleeting emotion but an intellectual effort which begins in retrospect (5, 25, 61), then it lands us in the predicament of not showing it at the right place and at the right time. Furthermore, it seems to make it impossible for our gratitude ever to become spontaneous. A partial resolution to these dilemmas may be to point out the difference between emotion and disposition. Let us not forget what we have said about a disposition as such in connection with the fundamental virtue of reciprocity: what would at first seem to be a conscious and therefore not spontaneous behavior opening up the dreary possibility to reduce every human relationship to “book-keeping” and artificiality of emotions, is, on the contrary, a disposition that ideally becomes like second nature and enables one to behave quite spontaneously. This is why it is a disposition, after all; “it is rarely even necessary [to keep score], once the habit of reciprocating is well ingrained, any more than sounding out the syllables is necessary for fluent readers. We just learn to keep relationships in balance without the sort of calculations that destroy spontaneity” (L. Becker 137-8).

Indeed, the same goes for gratitude. It is an attitude, an approach to life that enables us to be appreciative and let nothing be lost on us—an outlook which has quite a Paterian ring to it, but which is attributed to G. K. Chesterton by Emmons (19-21). To have a grateful disposition is to believe that life is full of gifts, which are waiting for us at every corner, and it is up to us to notice and appreciate them. More importantly, it makes an individual happier by helping her/him put her/himself in context. Keeping in mind what Blau has posited in connection with social interaction’s fundamental importance for the individual residing in it being a source of most pleasures in the shape of “social rewards” (14-5), it is easy to see that any disposition that strengthens one’s feeling of interconnectedness and facilitates social bonding is a key to happiness.

What is certain is that acquiring and maintaining a grateful disposition is hard work—it should have kept the Prince and Charlotte busy enough. Instead of complaining about the
passivity that was allegedly forced on them, they should have practiced gratitude, which is an active state, if there ever was one. Similarly (once again) to the disposition to reciprocate, it is not inherent—children are notoriously ungrateful before they are taught to be otherwise (Emmons 50-1)—and even after having acquired it, it requires a constant effort to keep it up. One may run an etymological circle with Emmons in order to justify Heidegger’s saying “Denken ist Danken” (“thinking is thanking”): “The French expression ‘je suis reconnaissant’\(^{161}\) is translated as a three-part construal: 1. ‘I recognize’ (intellectually), 2. ‘I acknowledge’ (willingly), and 3. ‘I appreciate’ (emotionally). Only when all three come together is gratitude complete” (5). One of the reasons why it is a demanding intellectual activity to maintain this disposition is connected to adaptation. When it comes to unpleasant things, it is a blessed characteristic of mankind, but when it concerns pleasurable situations, it leads to a surprisingly quick return to what Emmons calls one’s “set-point”: “Initially, people react strongly to changed circumstances, but, over time, their emotional reactions dampen and lose power. They adapt; in other words, they take good things for granted and overcome the obstacles life throws at them, returning to the happiness level that is natural to them” (22).

In a way, this is what happens to the Prince and Maggie. The former entered the marriage in all good faith and meant to start a new life and to keep clear of any type of depravity allegedly part of his familial heritage. Initially, the Prince appreciated the chance given him and he wanted to be a good husband and son-in-law. In my view, it was not only the feeling of being neglected, but also the adaptation to his circumstances that egged him on towards an adultery that was not a one night’s slip but a premeditated and long-lasting relationship. In other words, the Prince started to take for granted the ease, the indulgence, and the goodwill that had lately surrounded him. I do not mention Charlotte here because, to anticipate the next chapter’s contents, I do not believe in her innocent intentions and the “force of circumstances” she conveniently blames for many of her actions.

As to Maggie, she starts out on the wrong footing concerning Amerigo; she has to find herself on the verge of losing him so as to realize how much he means to her. It is her ordeal that eventually teaches her to appreciate her husband. To anticipate a bit more, her “awakening” and successful quest for an autonomous (albeit fragmented) self that views itself in context will be seen to simultaneously result in her acquiring the fundamental disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful), which turns her into a full-fledged aesthete (artist) on whom nothing is lost. This means that she is to obtain a complete vision instead of

\(^{161}\) It is the same with the Italian *sono riconoscente.*
her previous focus on only the simple, the good, and the beautiful, due to which she had remained blind not only to the presence of evil in the world that is crucial to any human being’s existence, but also to “certain features of persons—namely their separateness and their qualitative uniqueness—on which their specific personal value might be thought to rest” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 132-3). These personal character traits surely make life complex and complicated, but they are also fundamental to an individual’s genuine social interaction (taking part in life). Maggie has to open herself to the Prince’s “particular self,” which contains further traits for admiration, even if it might simultaneously make things more bewildering and less purely good.

One may, nevertheless, still have certain reservations concerning the moral necessity to feel and express gratitude. When we engage in this intellectual activity upon receiving something, what is it exactly we should feel grateful for if we are under the obligation to reciprocate anyway? If the original donor has expectations towards us and we are to give in return, why do we have to feel grateful at all? For one thing, the donor has taken a risk when (s)he offered us something. Not only is there the humiliating chance of a refusal to accept, but, despite the moral obligation, we may very well not reciprocate or do it insufficiently: “Since there is no way to assure an appropriate return for a favor, social exchange requires trusting others to discharge their obligations” (Blau 94). Indeed, to give is to trust the recipient, and “the other’s reciprocation validates this trust as justified” (Blau 107)—which is unfortunately not the case with the Ververs’ trust towards their spouses. Secondly, the donor, when giving, has made a sacrifice that did not have to be made; (s)he could simply not have given, or given it to somebody else. By giving to us, (s)he has made a statement: her/his gift is none other than the expression of her/his desire to enter into relation with us.

What we “re-cognize” when working on our gratitude is the existence of something positive in life, which stems from another human being’s positive approach towards ourselves. This is a composite pleasure if we consider that to say that “the other cares for me” means that: 1. (s)he cares (at all); 2. (s)he cares (it is (s)he of all people); and 3. (s)he cares for me (of all people) (Emmons 41). By having located the source of pleasure outside, the self concentrates outward and learns to view her/himself in context. Gratitude thus always points away from the self towards others, and this is how it favors interconnectedness and social bonding (Emmons 54). It does this also by virtue of the fact that it is a mutual benefit (a social reward) for both giver and recipient; we do not only make our benefactor happy by expressing our gratitude, but we are also made happy simply by feeling it (Emmons 7, 10). In theory, then, ingratitude is a kind of sadomasochism.
Interestingly enough, however, while ingratitude is unanimously regarded as a vice (crime), the opinions concerning gratitude are very much divided (Emmons 15-6). Let us nevertheless keep in mind that there is a great difference between what Emmons calls “nongratitude” and ingratitude. The former is non-action due to forgetfulness, the omission of returning good for good received (141). The latter is action of the worst kind; it is returning evil for good, which may be of the more harmless sort, such as finding fault with a donation, but may also take the shape of deliberately hurting the donor (Emmons 144). I would say that the Prince and Charlotte’s adultery falls into the latter category: not only is it ingratitude, but it is of the sort that intentionally hurts their donors. One way to rush to the defense of the cheating spouses is to posit that the Ververs’ treatment of them is not good but evil received; buying them and putting them in the corner so as not to be incommoded by their presence, which is not only unnecessary, but downright disruptive to their original close-knit father-daughter union. Yet even if this is the case—an opinion I do not share and will subsequently discuss in more detail—two other moral rules condemn the Prince and Charlotte’s behavior: “Evil received should be resisted” and “evil received should not be returned with evil” (L. Becker 94, 97). This is to say that because they entered into marriage with the Ververs with their eyes open, they should not have been surprised by the “evil” received—if they considered it an evil, they should have resisted it by not getting married to their benefactors. Furthermore, even if they had received evil, they should not have returned it with evil—the misconduct of the Ververs does not justify the misconduct of their spouses.

As to reservations concerning gratitude that may lead an individual to nongratitude at best and ingratitude at worst, the following reasons may be listed. Adaptation (“set-point”) has already been mentioned as an obstacle inherent in human nature, against which a lifelong battle has to be waged. Setting that aside, the biggest charge against gratitude is that it implies a lack of self-sufficiency; by being placed in the position of a recipient, the individual seems to be dependent on the help of another and so (s)he appears weak (Emmons 29). This is the stance we have earlier indicated concerning Aristotle, Emerson, and Nietzsche—the one initially adopted by self-reliant Isabel.

Connected to this—also because Isabel was not guiltless of it either—is the narcissism factor: “Since at least the time of Seneca, a prevailing view has been that an overly high opinion of oneself is the chief cause of ingratitude” (Emmons 148). As a kind of “spiritual blindness,” narcissism prevents the individual from acknowledging that (s)he “has been the recipient of benefits freely bestowed by others” (Emmons 149). It is a sense of deservingness, that of being entitled, which makes the person forget to appreciate that the other cares—with
all that it implies (cares at all, (s)he of all people, about her/him of all people). George Eliot, in fact, may have had something akin to “spiritual blindness” in mind when positing that egoism is “moral stupidity” and the aim of an initially egoistic individual’s moral education is to learn to see her/himself in context (Hardy 81). The taker is to learn to reciprocate, namely to give as well as to take.

Charlotte, and to a lesser extent Kate, can be said to be tainted by this vice. Their pure talents for life—all the prime material, such as looks, exuberance, intelligence, that they have at their disposal—coupled with their lack of opportunity due to insolvency make them regard the position of their benefactors, or the one offered by them, as theirs by right. Still linked to this is the feeling of “victimhood” that stems from thwarted narcissism; whatever good finally comes my way amidst my sufferings, society owes to me (Emmons 137). It is an asocial, self-centered outlook on life, and, paradoxically enough, the individual’s making comparisons is not so much a way out of it, but something that exacerbates this tendency. How come (s)he “lives lavish” while I am wasting away in squalor? What made her/him deserve to live healthily and happily while I am ill and lonely? Kate’s feeling towards Milly—especially at the sight of the latter as the bejewelled dove at the Palazzo Leporelli—and Charlotte’s towards Maggie are partially colored by such emotions. Making comparisons is only productive in terms of building a grateful disposition if the individual draws a parallel between her/his situation and that of someone less fortunate. This helps appreciate what we do have and does not let us focus on what we do not (Emmons 137).

There are two—more admissible—objections to gratitude. Firstly, too large a donation may result in the feeling of having to remain under “eternal indebtedness” to one’s donor; the reciprocity imbalance can be so considerable as to force the recipient into a position of irremediable inferiority. Admittedly, part of the rule of fittingness and proportionality concerning reciprocation is that returns must not only not be in kind—money for money, invitation for invitation, flower for flower—but that their value depends on the amount of sacrifice it took for the giver to supply it (L. Becker 105-8). This is to say that if Maggie Verver invites Charlotte for a fortnightly stay at their splendid abode, the latter does not have to throw up her hands in desperation because she cannot do likewise and feel eternally indebted and not even try to reciprocate; within her means, Charlotte can make a gesture that is relatively as demanding for her as the original donation had been for the first giver. Indeed, Charlotte’s idea of a wedding present—as long as it is not an excuse to show up and lure the Prince on a clandestine twosome—is a noble and fitting attempt at return.
Unfortunately, not only nothing comes of it, but her eventual reaction to Maggie’s kindness is, as it has been pointed out, returning evil for good.

Secondly, and once again closely tied to this, is the dilemma caused by gifts that are not so much meant to benefit the recipient as to make the donor feel good about her/himself. A more sinister version of this is the donation that is meant to put the beneficiary under one’s control, but to refuse such a gesture, or at least refuse to reciprocate it, has already been dealt with in connection with resisting evil offered to us and/or not returning evil for evil. Even if not expressly with the wish to dominate, many, so-called altruistic, donations, are not given with the eye on the beneficiary; their being offered is governed by the giver’s wish to collect such social rewards as the admiration and the gratitude of others. One may receive an expensive gift simply because the giver knows that it will be handed over in the company of a lot of people, in front of whom (s)he wishes to shine. A millionaire may construct a church, a library, or a museum for the same reason—and Adam Verver is not completely exempt from this charge. Somebody may adopt a needy child so as to be warmed by her/his gratitude—recall Roger Lawrence and Nora, with the latter’s situation being likened by Hubert to that of someone having to groan forever under the overload of the “monstrous burden of gratitude” (110).

I repeat, if the main reason for such behavior is not the subjugation of the recipient but the social reward—the feeling of being looked up to and/or appreciated—it is not necessarily reprehensible and can even be called constructive regarding the welfare of the community. Nevertheless, the donor, by behaving thus, is not so much socially orientated as self-centered; to appear as an exemplary social being is the social reward (s)he covets, and the actual benefit that others derive from it is a by-product, an ancillary matter. In any case, the emphasis should still be on the fact that due to such an attitude on the donor’s part nobody is exploited. Everybody is a worker and a worked; both giver and recipient gives and takes something during such an exchange.

An excessive variety of this is the individual who becomes something of a “social reward junkie.” As an insecure narcissist, (s)he fully depends on the approval (opinion) of others (Emmons 153-4). Admittedly, the disposition of gratitude is a glad sense of reliance, of interdependence (Emmons 131), but becoming wholly interdependent (reliant) on other people’s gratitude (approval) towards us is far from laudable. Especially when it is masked as self-reliance, as it has been the case with Gilbert Osmond: Isabel “had never seen any one who thought so much of others […]. He was unable to live without it [society], and she saw
that he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even when he appeared to be most detached from it” (634).

4. An inquiry into the issue of humans as gifts and what they think (/how they feel) about it

i. Passive Prince placing himself in the lurch

The Ververs are often charged with treating the Prince as a beautiful objet d’art, thereby forcing him into a passivity that not only offends his manhood, but brings about his need for an outlet in the shape of adultery as well (Matthiessen 96). The Colonel, with his customary bluntness, asks his wife: “What in the world did you ever suppose was going to happen? The man’s in a position in which he has nothing in life to do” (207). It is a pertinent question, yet it does not mean that Amerigo did not covet such a position and it was the naughty-naughty Vners who forced him into it. What I would like to prove here is that the type of capital the Prince has to offer in exchange for the economic variety of the Vners is, unfortunately, just the thing that lands him where he finds himself rather uncomfortably enmeshed. Furthermore, it is not even a misunderstanding, as Amerigo is aware of this crux from the beginning and still wishes to be “purchased” (The Golden Bowl 6, Mull 126).

Firstly, let us turn to what the Prince has to offer, or, in other words, of what kinds of capital his “value” is constituted. In order to do so, it is in place to recall the figure of Valentin Bellegarde and his relationship with Christopher Newman because there are instructive similarities and differences between the “fields,” to use Bourdieu’s expression, of The American and of The Golden Bowl. Both Valentin and Amerigo are the offspring of ancient European families with all that it entails: pedigree, prestige/status, social connections, the hereditary custom of steering clear of “whatever has to do directly with the everyday work
of getting a livelihood” (Veblen 1, 5), and its corollary of obligatory leisure on the one hand, and the possibility of not being able to finance it, on the other. (True, while Valentin’s misfortune is to have a family constantly reminding him of his position and his duty to “beautifully exist and not to do,” it is not so literally forced on Amerigo, whose people are far less meddlesome—one more reason not to blame it on the “force of circumstances.”)

Both the young Frenchman and the Italian are men of “conspicuous leisure” who cannot afford to be men of “conspicuous consumption” and find it ever more difficult even to remain at leisure. On the “evolutionary scale,” they are both of the kind that has imbibed the education necessary to consume in style and for whom the accumulation of money by one’s own effort is not considered a basis for repute and esteem anymore—unlike Newman, whom we have identified as belonging to an earlier stage where the making of money and the lack of refinement as to consumption are the most salient characteristics.

Apart from the difference as to the “pushiness” of families, the impoverished young noblemen also find themselves face to face with slightly different transactors. Newman, first of all, is trying to find favor with Valentin’s sister, and by associating with her younger brother he hopes to have a few good words said for him. As it has been said, Claire’s “topping pedigree” is not only not the kind of capital he covets, but it turns out to be the main obstacle in his way. As long as his “trophy wife” has that into the bargain also, all well and good, but as soon as it turns out to be the very gulf that divides them, Newman has to realize that Claire’s specific combination of social, cultural, symbolic and erotic capital is not reachable after all—the best of Europe comes hand-in-hand with irritating rigidities in the shape of the Bellegarde family’s finicky care for their status (symbolic capital). Newman’s interest in Valentin’s future is, therefore, not tied to the latter’s symbolic capital162; the American can, in fact, readily sympathize with the Frenchman’s complaints concerning the boundaries that he constantly knocks against, and his offered help is none other than assisting Valentin to get out of such suffocating position and to become a “new man.”

Contrary to this, Prince Amerigo’s main attraction in the eyes of Adam (and Maggie) Verver is the very thing he wants to get rid of. His wish to become a “new man” is not furthered by his partners in exchange because for their romantic imagination it is his “envelope,” his supposed social/context self that is of real interest. Adam and Maggie are (fortunate) people of conspicuous leisure and consumption, who even have the (self)

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162 I have been referring to “symbolic capital” in the Prince and the Bellegardes’ case, but let us recall Bourdieu’s observation in “Forms”—before he coined the term “symbolic capital” in Distinction—concerning the symbolic function of embodied cultural capital as well (186). In fact, symbolic capital, embodied cultural capital, and status are nearly synonymous.
education necessary to be able to consume in style. The Prince’s cultural and symbolic capital is just what they want—and later on the erotic variety, as far as Maggie is concerned—and the Prince knows this “full well.” During a playful but significant conversation with his betrothed, the Prince is assured that it is the part of him that he defines as “made up of the history, the doings, the marriages the crimes, the follies, the boundless bêtises of other people”—what Maggie thinks is his context self, in a word—that she fell in love with and so “where, therefore […] without [his] archives, annals, infamies, would [he] have been?” (9-10, original emphasis). Apart from the fact that Maggie’s words should not be taken literally, since they are words of banter and a consequence of her youth and inexperience in love/passion and of her shyness when faced with serious issues (Mull 121), it is normal to be attracted by what we take to be the social/context self of people. That is the part of oneself that is initially available to others, and the alleged core/personal self can be got at in the course of increasing intimacy. If there is such a thing as a core self, that is. In Milly’s case, along Freudian-Lacanian lines, we have questioned the existence of a stable/core self. We have reached the conclusion that every variety of the self is fluid and depends on the momentary context, therefore the private/personal/core self is just another version of the fluid/context self. To put it differently, the self is always a context self, but it is “assembled” according to the particular situation. Maggie’s ordeal will be to realize that generally as well as particularly in the case of the Prince, her initial vision of both the personal and the context selves has been faulty (Mull 123).

To proceed, the Prince wants to become a new man and start a new life financed by the economic capital he would receive for the “old self” that he would shed like a coat and sell and leave behind:

What was this important step [engagement to Maggie] he had just taken but the desire for some new history that should, so far as possible, contradict, and even if need be flatly dishonour, the old? If what had come to him wouldn’t do he must make something different. He perfectly recognised—always in his humility—that the material for the making had to be Mr Verver’s millions. There was nothing else for him on earth to make it with; he had tried before—had had to look about and see the truth. (15, emphasis added)

Amerigo’s pitfall is the nature of such capital. We have seen how the symbolic variety (honor/status/prestige) is unfortunately both non-transferable and fragile. In spite of the fact that it is inalienable and enhances the value of the individual who acquired it in the first place
and who thereby seems to be sure of having a value of which (s)he cannot be robbed, it is not only a constant effort to live up to one’s attributed value based on such type of capital, but it also has to be accepted that it can actually be depleted/expended (Blau 132-3). Indeed, the Prince’s “job” is to keep on “being it twenty-four-seven” and thus it is an insidious and hard position and not merely “leg-dangling” that Matthiessen and the Colonel Assingham saw in it. It is a ceaseless doing of sorts, more difficult than a “life of doing” where deeds are occasional and salient. Here it is not clear what exactly “being it” entails because there are no appointed tasks to deal with. Yet the Prince is aware of all this: of the non-transferability (15), of the expectation of his “being it” (20), as well as of his intention to leave it behind (15)—a contradictory position into which he puts himself with eyes wide open. Moreover, although at first glance it may seem a happy thing to be “invested with attributes” and “not to be tried and tested” (20), it gives rise to the added problem of self-evaluation (Mull 131). Precisely because value is relative (Simmel 47-9), one finds oneself at sea if there is no possibility to find a point of reference. Being considered as “an old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used” (20), the Prince is withdrawn from circulation and does not have the benefit of comparison and the occasion to test his strength in the marketplace.

Although Lewis Hyde belongs to the “sentimental camp” regarding the relationship between gift (giving) and commodity (exchange), the Prince’s predicament can be nicely demonstrated along the lines of his remarks in connection with exchange/market value. In Hyde’s opinion, two opposing spheres can be drawn up: 1. that of gifts, worth, and use value; and 2. that of commodities, price, and exchange/market value. His use of the term exchange/market value is of key importance in connection with the Prince; “a thing has no market value in itself except when it is in the marketplace, and what cannot be exchanged has no exchange value” (78). The Prince is a classic gift, then. He is not meant to be further exchanged by the recipient. Without any exchange/market value, the only value the Prince consequently has is his use value, which is the togetherness of his characteristics—the set of capital at his disposal—that has originally been attributed to him. The problem, of course, still remains that he does not know exactly what those are and he is not helped by the option to make comparisons that would facilitate the process of self-evaluation.

Even if Amerigo “has married for money rather than love (his thick meditations in the book’s early portion can at least hardly be said to be crowded with tender thoughts of Maggie),” he is by no means a “crude fortune-hunter” (Mull 125). Admittedly, the Prince has “expended a considerable effort to achieve [the] status” of a valuable objet d’art (Mull 126)—“he had been pursuing [it] for six months as never in his life before” (6)—but he is grateful
and satisfied to have succeeded in winning the hand of Maggie and he is very much bent on fulfilling the terms of his bargain (Mull 126-7). He does respect the “principle of reciprocity” and it baffles him all the more to have it “taxed to such small purpose” by his fellow transactor(s) (6). Or, to put it differently, it is taxed by them in a way that is by its very nature ambiguous and contrary to his ambitions; to keep on beautifully being what he does not want to be, namely the representative of “his race,” the embodiment of “his antenatal history” (15). One of the problems is that the Ververs’ vision—what Amerigo calls “incredibly romantic” (11) and Kovács refers to as a product of their “white American imagination” (164)—of such a “being” (a form of existence) does not include the sinister elements that the Prince knows to be inextricable from the positive aspects; depravity taking the form of adultery and the consequent exploitation of benefactors are examples of the former and they will prove his misgivings to be well-founded.

In fact, a closer look at the word “prestige” tends to back up the Prince’s eventual treachery. Firstly, recall the already analyzed pair of the Latin word praestare (“to lend”) and the Maussian term “total prestation” (any form of exchange), which suggested the equation between giving, exchange, and lending. Secondly, keep in mind both the fragility and the inalienability of prestige (symbolic capital, status); it is fragile because it is a kind of capital that is only lent to its owner who has to keep on earning it by constantly living up to it, and it is non-transferable and so it can only be lent to another transactor interested in its owner. Now note that both the fragility and the inalienability of prestige (symbolic capital, status) restrict it even more than any other variety to lending. Thus, the symbolic variety is the capital par excellence that exemplifies Mauss’s tenet of any kind of exchange being an act of lending (“prestation”).

Furthermore, prestige is not only “lent” to its original owner because it has to be lived up to all the time, but because it is, originally, nothing more than an illusion, a borrowed glamour, a trick, a form of deceit. “Prestige” was a derogatory term all the way until the nineteenth century. The Latin præstigious stood for “full of tricks” in the fifteenth century, and præstingere meant “to blindfold, to dazzle.” In the sixteenth century it was used in French as the synonym of “illusion,” and only in 1815 was “prestigious” used as a positive epithet for the first time in order to describe Napoleon, denoting “dazzling influence.” The illusion that had lent a deceptively pleasing attribute to a trickster thus became “high status or reputation achieved through success, influence, wealth, renown,” referring to its owner’s “power to impress,” her/his “glamour” (Collins Dictionary 1171). The Prince’s prestige,
then, may be said to turn out to be nothing more than an illusion at best, or a piece of deception at worst.

Even if he is not actively deceiving his benefactors, Amerigo’s passivity does not seem to be in key with gentlemanlike behavior (Mull 150). Never has the word “passivity” been used to describe so many different attitudes. To start with, Amerigo’s is neither the kind of passivity hailed by Wilde in “The Critic as Artist,” nor the one enjoyed by Adam and Maggie when they opt for the silent pleasures of the hearth instead of the hubbub of social life—“a flattered, passive state,” thanks to having successfully delegated the social representation to Charlotte (and him) (235). In this latter sense, passivity stands for blissful inaction while the “doers” are sent out to participate in social life. Nor, in fact, is Amerigo’s the passivity of the same Adam and Maggie in the hands of Charlotte and him as soon as the latter two embark on their journey of adultery in the belief of being masters of the situation. In this particular sense, passivity denotes helplessness; being manipulated without one’s knowledge of it.

The Prince’s is a twofold passivity both towards his benefactors and towards his accomplice. Not only is he passive towards Maggie and Adam because he realizes that they expect him to “stay beautifully put,” but also because he agrees with Charlotte in being thus put/positioned by them, and so it is Maggie and Adam who “have done to [them]” all that brought about the inevitable nearness of the two spouses: “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” (215). In this light, Maggie and Adam are not the helplessly passive ones but the doers who are the perpetrators of their own betrayal by having forced the betayers in the position to do it. Indeed, Charlotte eases her conscience by blaming it all on the “force of circumstances” as well as on Adam and Maggie, who seem to her as its embodiment, and then acts on her conviction. She seduces the Prince, who all the while remains as passive as possible, thereby putting the blame on her, yet “intensely hoping” that it would take place (220).

Thus, the Prince complains because: 1. he is expected to be passive; 2. he was forced into passivity; 3. he was forced into passivity by people who should be treated as passive themselves; 4. he is forced into treating them so by an accomplice who finds herself in the same predicament—and whom he will punish by “taking the step of sheer inaction, of not reporting to her the fact of Maggie’s knowledge” (Mull 125, emphasis added), yet another instance of his passivity. Furthermore, what has brought about this multiply uncomfortable
position is the multiply problematic nature of Amerigo’s aims and means in the first place: 1. the kind of capital at his disposal (non-transferable, fragile, unwanted by him); 2. his expectations (to leave it behind); and 3. the exchange partners’ expectations (vague and naïve but clearly interested in his keeping it).

ii. Charlotte as the embodiment of the “force of circumstances”

Charlotte’s situation is slightly different. Not only does she have different types of capital at her disposal, but the terms of her bargain are also clearer from the outset and the fulfilling of them are actually pleasant for her—despite her complaint about the “force of circumstances,” which is none other than a euphemism for “her own doing.” Hers is a very different case from Isabel’s and Milly’s where we emphasized the mitigating effect of their circumstances when offering an opinion about their conduct. Along with Aristotle and Nussbaum, we have remarked that in their specific situation, in that particular context, their decisions are more understandable than they might have seemed at first, and a hasty judgment based on abstract principles would have been out of place. However, Charlotte turns this upside down by creating circumstances favorable for her (ungrateful) behavior and then outwardly blaming her misconduct on their irresistible pressure.

To begin with, Charlotte’s impecuniousness and her apparent loss of the love of her life (Amerigo) make marriage attractive to her. On her arrival at Fanny’s place prior to Maggie’s wedding, Charlotte tells Amerigo that she really has tried to get married but “nobody would have [her]” (45). True enough, at that time she holds that marriage is not the only form of existence and “the position of a single woman to-day is very favourable” (45), but both the accomplished fact of the Prince’s marriage and the conversation she has with him during their gift-hunt referring to his giving her something upon her wedding eventually make marriage a desirable option. Similarly to Kate Croy with her “pure talent for life” (The Wings 536, 658), Charlotte is also a vibrant young woman whose natural habitat is the dazzling social scene (158). It is her talent, the main element of her set of capital. Indeed, apart from
the erotic variety—she is very attractive and knows how to dress in order to highlight her charms—she has plenty of cultural\textsuperscript{163} capital: her skill with languages (43), her experience (“world-quality” [76]) and erudition, her love of the beautiful, her keen sense of observation (160), her sparkling conversation, and her ease with people make her an admirable companion. Her social capital is also considerable, as she has a very wide range of acquaintances. Alas, she is short of the economic variety—“materials to work with” (184)—which makes her willing to get married so as to find financial security (164), but also makes her an unfortunate candidate until she approaches Adam Verver in the most opportune moment; just as he has started feeling “robbed of his daughter,” neglected, and exposed to less ideal candidates (Mrs. Rance, the Lutches etc.).

In fact, we cannot really be sure whether Charlotte was telling the truth as to her repeated endeavors to find a husband; we never get to see things from her point of view, except for the first chapter in Book Third of Volume One. This, characteristically enough, has a party as its setting with Charlotte shining and mingling on the side of Amerigo, with whom she has already been “thrown together.” My point is that Charlotte may very well have lied, just as she is, in my view, manipulating far more than it is generally admitted.\textsuperscript{164} Firstly, she shows up just before Maggie and Amerigo’s wedding, like the uninvited bad fairy in the story of Cinderella, allegedly seeing Maggie through. In reality, however, Charlotte is either bent on preventing the whole thing or she is trying, at least, to imprint her memory on her ex-admirer’s ardently desired clean sheet (new life) by creating a bond between them during their gift-hunt.

Then, a few months having elapsed, Charlotte again turns up like a bad penny. She gets herself invited by Maggie—“Charlotte writes me, practically, that she’d like to [come] if we’re so good as to ask her” (134), Maggie tells her father. Whether it is only to see the Prince again, or to find out how their marriage is functioning, or with express designs on the rich widower father of her friend/rival, is hard to say. Probably all three motives have something to do with the desired visit. Admittedly, it is Maggie who warms the field for Charlotte as far as marriage prospects with Adam are concerned, but it is Charlotte, I repeat, who once again “places herself” so as to be “used.”

Then, with the utilization of all her capital—erotic, cultural, social—Miss Stant succeeds in being proposed to, and the terms of this marriage are all she could wish for: 1. she

\textsuperscript{163} In this context, we could just as well use human/educational capital. Let us remember the overlapping between these terms when it comes to denoting forms of knowledge, skills and education.

\textsuperscript{164} I have already mentioned Bertonneau’s less lenient approach to Charlotte and the Prince. Apart from him, Armstrong is another possible exception: he does refer to Charlotte’s manipulation of the events (156–7).
contrives to be near her beloved Prince; 2. she finds ample financial security (jackpot); 3. she shines in the light of a “ministering angel” by helping out her friend Maggie (the daughter’s bad conscience pushing her to regain the equilibrium by finding a lovely wife for the father); 4. she not only gets to dazzle on the social scene she so much enjoys (235), but 5. she is downright “employed” to do so (235), and, to make it even more perfect, 6. she is to do it in the company of the Prince, in twosome, being trusted by her husband who is “in truth of a sweet simplicity” (231). In a word, “it’s too beautiful […] it’s all too wonderful” (232)—and, they are right with the Prince, “it’s sacred,” and exactly because of that it should be respected and not exploited. Yet what does Charlotte do but turn up at the right place and at the right time once again? One rainy afternoon, knowing Maggie is still at Eaton Square with Adam (226-7), she jumps in a cab and “places herself” within convenient reach for the Prince whom she knows not only to be at home but also full of feelings of being neglected in general.

Such an advantageous position should not be consecrated by betraying the faith put in someone, but by remaining true to the original bargain. Because it was a clear-cut case this time, and no ambiguity or clashing interests can be dragged in as an excuse for Charlotte’s behavior. I fully agree with Mull in stating that Adam’s “proposal indeed lacks the passion which some find essential to the idea of marriage; but it has the virtue of complete honesty about its terms, and Charlotte is certainly more aware than Amerigo of the terms on which she is marrying […]” (145). Adam is perfectly outspoken both about his wish to “relieve Maggie of the burden of feeling that her marriage has made her neglect her father” (Mull 145)—“ ‘To put her [Maggie] at peace is therefore,’ he [Adam] explained, ‘what I’m trying, with you [Charlotte], to do.’ […] You’ll effectually put out of her mind that I feel she has abandoned me.’ ” (167)—and about the task of social representation that would await his wife. “Mrs. Verver was definitely and by general acclamation in charge of the ‘social relations’ of the family […]. They had brought her in—on the crudest expression of it—to do the ‘worldly’ for them […]” (235-6). She even asks the Prince: “What could be more simple than one’s going through with everything […] when it’s so plain a part of one’s contract? I’ve got so much, by my marriage […] that I should deserve no charity if I stinted my return” (236).

In connection with this, it is interesting to note Blau’s differentiation between economic and social exchange. While “social exchange entails unspecified obligations […] the economic transaction rests on a formal contract that stipulates the exact quantities to be exchanged” (Blau 93, original emphasis). Between the two extremes there are the economic transactions that involve services (employment contracts) where the range of duties to be
performed “are not specified in detail in advance,” which places them “generally somewhat closer to social exchange” (Blau 93). In this sense, Charlotte’s “contract,” if not a purely economic transaction, is akin to this latter case, while the Prince’s is definitely closer to a social exchange with all its unspecified obligations to tackle. Blau furthermore observes that in all cases where exact quantities are not stipulated in advance, exchanges require “trusting others to discharge their obligations” (94). Indeed, even if it was self-interest that made one embark on an exchange with an associate in the first place, trust—exactly because it is so essential to the successful outcome of it—is generated. This means that social exchange often brings people together, as it “engenders feelings of personal obligation, gratitude and trust” (Blau 94). That the opposite may happen and trust may be abused is amply demonstrated by Charlotte and the Prince’s dealings with the Ververs.

Naturally, when it comes to “doing the ‘worldly,’ ” Charlotte does not in the least mind observing the terms of her “contract,” just because it is pleasant for her to fulfill it. As to respecting the “sweet simplicity” of her husband (and daughter-in-law) and abiding by the (moral) rule of “hands off” concerning her son-in-law, she chooses to interpret the Ververs’ attitude as a clear call for their being “spared” and left alone in order to enjoy each other’s company without the spouses around. Even if this is so—father and daughter do enjoy each other’s company without the spouses around—it does not equal the giving of the green light to go ahead and cheat on them. When Charlotte tells the Prince that the Ververs want her to keep him company, it is a mighty jump to reach the conclusion that adultery is what it stands for: “‘Keeping you company in your solitude. How can we understand anything,’ she went on, ‘without really seeing that this is what they must like to think I do for you?’ ” (228).

As to the nature of Charlotte’s types of capital, the fragile and non-transferable symbolic variety (prestige/status) is not among them, or at least it does not constitute her greatest value, and she does not want to rid herself of it like the Prince. This is to say that—on top of being far less ambiguous—her position is not in the least as contradictory as the one Amerigo lands himself in. Concerning capital and the issue of breach of contract, moreover, it is pertinent to recall the insolvent recipient’s capital, “willing compliance” (Blau 22), which is at an individual’s disposal in the case of an exchange between two associates in possession of unequal amounts. As we have pointed out when discussing Kate and Aunt Maud’s relationship, “willingness to comply with another’s demands is a generic social reward, since the power it gives [her/him] is a generalised means, parallel to money, which can be used to attain a variety of ends” (22). Both the Prince and Charlotte resort to this variety upon their respective marriages and “rob” their exchange partners of it when they commit adultery.
Maggie’s endeavor to preserve appearances is, in fact, an attempt at hiding from her father that he (they) has (have) been short-changed in both transactions; not only are the gifts/partners “cracked”/flawed, but they are far from compliant. The “principle of reciprocity” is, therefore, gravely violated.

5. A brief excursus on erotic capital

So far, erotic/sexual capital was seen as a source of power drawn from one’s own sexual attractiveness to other individuals. It is one’s “intrinsic desirability,” the value of a person “as a love object” (Blau 79). Attraction and desirability, however, are relative terms, and they certainly do not merely refer to physical attributes. Far from fixed and tangible, they largely depend on the behavior of an individual in a given relationship. Unfortunately, not only are they context specific, but even in an apparently favorable situation they are doomed to perish, or at least decrease. This is what Blau terms “the dilemma of love,” which parallels the more general “dilemma of approval”: “Just as a person is expected to give approval to his associates, but his doing so too freely will depreciate the value of his approval, so is a woman under pressure to give evidence of her love to her admirer, but if she does so too readily the value of her affection to him will suffer” (79). In key with this, Fanny observes that the Prince “doesn’t care for Charlotte […] because men don’t, when it has all been too easy” (289, 296). Likewise, Maggie wakes up to caring for the Prince as soon as she is on the brink of losing him—or, we may say that she realizes that, so far, she has not bothered to care for him and she has not valued/appreciated him as long as she believed the appearances, namely that he was easily had.

This may all seem to be resolvable by being ungenerous in expressing affection in order to safeguard its value and thereby increase one’s attraction/desirability (Blau 80). The problem is that both a given love exchange (relationship) and one’s general popularity “in the market” feeds on the very bestowal of the attention; instead of a continual increase,

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165 This title was suggested by Blau’s chapter “Excursus on Love,” discussing the very “dilemma of love” referred to here (76-85).
166 Blau adds that this is of course valid not only in the case of men’s orientations to women but also the other way round, yet “sex role differences” make it harder on women; frequent and quick demonstrations of affection/attraction are more easily overlooked in the case of men, or even applauded as a sign of virility, while women are still often labeled by it as promiscuous (79).
withholding it also results in eventual loss of interest (unpopularity). “The challenge of conquest is an important element” but the conquest has to be made at some point (Blau 81). An individual’s attraction may grow due to the delay of the desired response, but infinite postponements not only give rise to frustration, they fall short of an actual exchange as well. Similarly, one cannot be popular as a result of repeated irresponsiveness—and popularity is an important factor concerning erotic/sexual capital because it enhances one’s value in the other’s eyes (Blau 79). Then again, the more often a person is conquered, the less value the next conquest will have.

Erotic capital, therefore, is a much more slippery concept than it would seem at first glance. Since it depends as much on behavior as given physical characteristics, not only can it be decreased by tactlessness, but it can also be increased by cunning/intelligent conduct—Charlotte’s and Maggie’s “careers” may be taken as examples of this decrease and increase, respectively. The Prince will, at last, fall in love with his wife, seeing nothing—definitely not Charlotte, whom Maggie is talking about at the time—but Maggie at their final embrace (574). What is more, Maggie’s brilliance will ensure the apparent growth instead of decline of her father’s wife’s erotic capital; father and daughter will part “on Charlotte’s value” (570), thereby preserving Adam’s serenity and the fragile equilibrium Maggie has secretly worked for.

Two closing remarks. Firstly, it would be rather cynical to equate love and sexuality. Yet love in a romantic relationship can hardly ever be kindled without a measure of sexual attraction between two individuals. (At least at the outset; how long it lasts is another matter.) Hence the interest in the other’s erotic capital is of fundamental importance in any kind of romantic relationship. Secondly, one has to add, in all fairness to both the Prince and Charlotte, that it is difficult to play “hard to get” when the other most probably would just not bother. This is to say, regardless of moral dimensions, Charlotte has to resort to extreme measures in order to seduce Amerigo because he would not only not make any effort to have her back, but he would actually be relieved to be left alone with his plan to become a new man and start a new life. Similarly, the Prince can hardly want to make it challenging to the Ververs to get him; they would simply look for someone else. This, then, is another dilemma: how A can contrive not to seem too easy yet awaken the interest of B who is in possession of a heftier set of capital—better looking, richer, more intelligent—and can therefore pick and choose and furthermore shows only a mild interest in A.
6. “Human acquisitions”: The point of view of the giver—Verterian monism, reification, solipsism

Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer [...] than this application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions; all the more indeed that the amiable man [Adam] was not without an inkling, on his own side, that he was, as a taster of life, economically constructed. He put into his one little glass everything he raised to his lips, and it was as if he had always carried in his pocket, like a tool of his trade, this receptacle, a little glass cut with a fineness of which the art had long since been lost [...]. (147-8)

Mull points out that “Adam’s monism is imaged here by a diminutive version of the bowl” (143). Due to “the aesthetic principle [...] at bottom, in him,” Adam’s love of the beautiful flares up at the sight of anything “visibly perfect in its kind” (147), be it a person or a thing. That it is usually “followed by appropriation” is thanks to his “rare power of purchase” (148, 567) and it should not so much be laid at the door of his ambiguous morality as at the general human tendency to want to possess whatever we happen to be impressed by. Surely, the idea to do so is most of the time not even entertained, since it is rather ridiculous to want to possess and inhabit a royal palace or to be married to an illustrious person who is about as attainable as “prince charming.” That Adam can do so is not a moral defect but a very fortunate circumstance.

Apart from the desire to possess, however, Mr. Verver is regularly charged with not making any distinction between human beings and objects. In other words, he is attacked by way of his little crystal cup, with which he tastes life in a fashion that is said to violate what Emerson termed the “law for man” and the “law for thing”:

There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled, —
Law for man, and law for thing:
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.
’T is fit the forest fall,
The steep be graded,
The mountain tunnelled,
[...]
Let man serve law for man;
Live for friendship, live for love,
For truth’s and harmony’s behoof
[...] (“Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing”)

Adam’s alleged violation of these laws is viewed differently by critics. Mull calls attention to Ferner Nuhn’s Emersonian reference, and points out that for Nuhn, James is supposed to have portrayed Adam as someone who approaches civilization “according to its own spiritual law, what Emerson would call the ‘law of man’ as contrasted with the law of things. It assumes reciprocity of moral feeling, expects value returned for value, faith for faith” (124-5 qtd. in Mull 141). Thus, Nuhn takes Adam’s naivety at face value and puts the blame on James for the lack of verisimilitude of his creation, while Mull emphasizes the ambiguity of Adam’s approach as something deliberate on James’s part (142-3). Other critics, such as Kovács (165-6), Freedman (Professions 229-31), Leavis (160-1), Perosa (158-9), to name a few, regard the Ververs’ acquisitiveness as not only ambiguous, but downright immoral.

Freedman explains this attitude as “Adam’s Osmond-like reifying vision”; the contemplation and appreciation of a fellow human being transforms her/him into an objet d’art (Professions 230). As we have seen in connection with the ubiquity of aestheticism, however, this reification does not always go hand-in-hand with the heartlessness of Gilbert Osmond; Isabel, Ralph, and Milly were all said to have a vision of this kind, despite their benevolence, and so they could just as easily be called immoral. Indeed, I hold that Adam’s little receptacle is far from a sign of depravity; not only is it not conscious, but it does not so much degrade human beings as it elevates objects.

In other words, Adam’s (and Maggie’s) keen appreciation of beautiful objects may be said to enable them to live in the Paterian sense: driven by a passion (for the beautiful), looking at life in the spirit of art, they endeavor to live all they can, letting nothing be lost on them. In this sense, they are not necessarily confusing the “law for man and the law for
thing,” but their understanding of the former—living “for truth’s and harmony’s behoof”—is more inclusive than for others; truth, harmony, and beauty are to be found in the contemplation (possession) of both humans and objects. Or, to put it differently, the elevation of objects is none other than the result of the “law for thing” having been “subtilized to a near-humanistic level” (Mull 142). In any case, if there is a confusing or a conflation of the two laws, it is not humans losing but objects gaining by it. And let us not forget, once again, that the Prince and Charlotte “place themselves” so as to be both appropriated (to be had as impecunious spouses) at the outset, and contemplated at the end of the story (567).

In fact, the question is whether humans really do not lose by the confusing/conflating of the two laws. Departing from the premises of (existential) phenomenology, Armstrong points out that the Ververs’ great mistake is attributable to their solicitude breeding more Sartrean conflict than Heideggerian care despite their good intentions (152-4); the penchant for reification and the desire to possess inevitably leads to even more conflict than care in human relationships. To begin with, in their solipsistic communion they regard each other as one entity, a single Self, (initially) remaining blind to the existence of the (opaque, unknowable) Other and the impossibility of perfect intersubjectivity and transparence (Armstrong 149). In this sense, their monism refers to their unified worldview ignoring the (irreducible) gap between Self and Other.

Not to be aware of the Other is to view others as objects, which does not entail mistreatment in any palpable way here, but a mistaken epistemological certainty that regards other individuals as perfectly knowable/transparent (Armstrong 144-5), who can be cared for by allowing them into their solipsistic communion without any threat to it. Nussbaum, who also defends the Ververs’ aestheticizing against charges of immorality (“Flawed” 131), similarly points to the flaw in their initial moral simplicity/goodness paradoxically striving for flawlessness, which is none other than denying “the living humanity of the people so regarded; it is an aestheticism divorced from active love and a sense of obligation” (“Flawed” 147). In contrast, Maggie’s “new aestheticizing never fails to conceive of its objects as alive, as in need, as having claims to press” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 147). The main reason for the Ververs’ penchant for reification is thus a moral desire for simplification, “consistency and harmony,” the prevention of “claims being pressed”:

[…] this propensity for the aestheticization of persons does not precisely indicate that the Ververs neglect the moral, or reduce the moral to the aesthetic. […] It is rather that the peculiar nature of their moral aim, with its extreme emphasis on flawless living and, because
of this, on consistency and harmony, is best supported by a view of persons that tends to assimilate their properties to certain salient properties of works of art. […] To live with works of art is to live in a world enormously rich in value, without a deep risk of infidelity, disloyalty, or any conflict which might lead to these. It is the Ververs’ brilliantly resourceful idea that the moral life, too, can be flawless and innocent of violation, while remaining full of value, if only persons can be made to resemble aesthetic objects, things to be displayed in a gallery for innocent attention. (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 131-2)\textsuperscript{167}

Still the adherents to their initial imperfect moralism striving for moral perfection/simplicity/goodness and care without complexity/conflict, the Ververs prepare a “bath of benevolence” for the spouses, which the latter two have actually actively solicited, yet they ignore the possibility of Charlotte and the Prince getting out of it, or even putting their benefactors into it—reactions of the opaque Other(s) the Ververs do not take into consideration. By way of an ironic version of reciprocity, the Ververs’ solicitude based on their illusion concerning the knowableness of others is returned by a solicitude also based on an illusion concerning their knowableness. Both because they (would like to) think they are expected to, and also because it helps them in their adulterous affair, the Prince and Charlotte are bent on preserving the Ververs’ solipsistic communion and mistaken epistemological certainty by continuing to present that version of their “being-for-others” that the Ververs take for their only self (being). Indeed, by way of thinking others transparent, the Ververs are unaware of the existence of and discrepancy between any individual’s two selves: the “being-for-others” (context/social self) and the “being-for-one self” (private self, not permanent) and the “being-for-others” (context/social self).\textsuperscript{168}

Reciprocity in this context is rather problematic. Yet I would depart from Armstrong’s line of reasoning and claim that the spouses are not in the least denied the possibility to reciprocate and that there is room left for them to care for the Ververs in return for the solicitude shown to them (146). I agree that Heideggerian care gives way to Sartrean conflict as a result of the Ververs’ mistaken epistemological certainty and solipsistic communion, but not in the way Armstrong envisages it. Linked to this is my claim that if somebody is mistreated as a result of the Ververs’ reifying vision, it is they and not the Prince and Charlotte. If such a mindset is reprehensible, it is so because it exposes the individual to exploitation and prevents her/him from establishing genuine human relationships.

\textsuperscript{167} Similar reference can be found in Nussbaum’s “Perceptive” (188).

\textsuperscript{168} Admittedly, Maggie does, even initially, make a distinction between the Prince’s private and context self—their conversation about it at the outset has already been referred to. Yet it has also been pointed out that Maggie’s concept of these two selves is inappropriate and it will be her ordeal to realize this and attain more genuine knowledge concerning it (Mull 123).
Indeed, not acknowledging the existence of the Other(s) obviously precludes the possibility of socialization. From our sociological standpoint, therefore, solipsistic isolation is far from laudable, and Maggie’s awakening and development is a welcome event, but I would still not condemn her (and her father’s) initial behavior as domineering/exploitative (immoral/amoral). By regarding their associates (Prince and Charlotte) as transparent (object-like), the Ververs are under the illusion that they know exactly both what the other two want and the way (s)he will react in a given circumstance—and, moreover, that the other two also know just as well what the Ververs want. The Prince is to “beautifully be,” and Charlotte is to splendidly “do the ‘worldly,’ ” both of them thereby allowing the Ververs to keep on enjoying each other’s company. The Prince and Charlotte are expected to reciprocate by way of fulfilling these wishes. The harm that the Ververs unconsciously do to their spouses is not the exploitation of them or the robbing them of their freedom by way of denying them the possibility to reciprocate (Armstrong 146), but the bestowal to them of too much freedom; they are simply ignored.

Although the Prince initially views the Ververs as opaque Others behind the “great white curtain” of their American imagination (19), Charlotte succeeds in persuading him to (mistakenly) regard their benefactors as transparent; she boasts about knowing exactly what the Ververs want of them and how they are going to react. The Ververs are to be put into a “bath of benevolence” akin to the one they prepared for the Prince and Charlotte. Care here also takes the form of viewing the other as perfectly calculable, thus an object. Yet, while the Ververs’ reification of their spouses stems from their unconscious ignorant goodwill—the result of their mistaken epistemological certainty and consequent solipsistic communion and unawareness of the problem of the Other, as well as their striving for moral goodness/simplicity/perfection—the reification of the Ververs committed by the Prince and Charlotte is conscious and exploitative.

Despite the fact that they have placed themselves so as to be reified by the Ververs in the first place, the Prince and Charlotte soon have second thoughts as to the quality of the “bath of benevolence” they originally bargained for. Financial security and worldly representation are alright, but the enjoyment of the freedom accorded them within the bounds of faithfulness is not. If the Ververs are interested only in the Prince and Charlotte’s “being-for-others”—which is their “being-for-Ververs”—they are welcome to it; they do not have to know about the Prince and Charlotte’s “being-for-themselves” (“being-for-each other”) if they do not want to. As long as the “being-for-Ververs” is kept up, the lovers think they are
safe and even fair enough; they fulfill their side of the bargain by letting the Ververs enjoy their solipsistic communion and the front (“being-for-Ververs”) presented to them.

At least one of the Ververs, however, refuses to remain in the “bath of benevolence” (334), and turns out to be less knowable and more knowledgeable than Charlotte (and initially the Prince) expect(s). Maggie incidentally catches a glimpse of the lovers’ “being-for-themselves”—what she hitherto considered their transparent “being” is a “worked-out-scheme” (332) hiding something, which leads to her awakening to the existence of the (opaque) Other in general. This brings about (Armstrong 166-8): 1. her awakening to the existence of the irreducibly opaque Other and the impossibility of transparence and perfect intersubjectivity (gap between Self and Other); 2. the realization of her own opacity even to herself (gap existing between reflected and unreflected Self); 3. the dissolution of her self-deceptive solipsistic communion with her father (who is also an opaque Other); 4. her recognition of the Prince as a fascinating Other with whom she desires to enter into close human contact instead of continuing to (benevolently) ignore him (306), and 5. her wish to simultaneously keep on caring for her father by sparing him the pain of both separation (from her) and humiliation (by the cheating spouses), which is to be attained by keeping up appearances: “[T]o 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” (326).

In other words, Maggie would like to continue caring for those around her, but in a different way: 1. she wants to care for the Prince as much as she used to care for her father, although, with her new knowledge concerning the irreducible opacity of any Other, this time she will have to settle for a communion that is neither solipsistic nor perfectly intersubjective; 2. in return she does not want to be spared by the Prince but be really cared for instead of his caring for Charlotte; and 3. she wants to care for her father by way of sparing him (313-4). All this is to be accomplished as a result of her hermeneutical quest, the depicting of which serves as a preliminary to our focus on her Lacanian development.
7. Simply phenomenal: Maggie’s hermeneutical quest

From the standpoint of hermeneutics, existence itself is a constant process of interpretation (Armstrong 165).\(^{169}\) Hence we are to witness nothing less than Maggie coming to life. A fundamental part of this (re)birth is her realizing the opacity of the world she lives in (Other), and her learning to read surfaces so as to penetrate this opacity as much as humanly possible. Characteristically of hermeneutics, her quest had started even before she has taken cognizance of it, as early as the return of the spouses from their Matcham outing; back then Maggie had gained “foreknowledge,” one of the crucial ingredients of the “hermeneutical circle, [which] only allows us to explicate what we already understand in advance” (Armstrong 166).

This foreknowledge—the first hint—is actually the outcome of Maggie’s own doing, however accidental; all she had done that day was to decide “to do something there and then which would strike Amerigo as unusual […] a departure from custom [which] had merely consisted in her so arranging that he wouldn’t find her, as he would expect to do, in Eaton Square” (307). To all outward appearance, both “her small breach with custom” and the reaction of Amerigo had been slight; upon arrival, “he hadn’t in any way challenged her,” but the “uncertainty in his face” was visible to her (313). This little “crumb of life” is enough to shake up the Princess’s faculties, which “hadn’t for a good while been used” (307); as if keeping James’s advice in his “The Art of Fiction” and Strether’s in The Ambassadors, Maggie lets nothing be lost on her from then on. She starts out with one small piece, one aspect, to reconstruct/interpret the whole (Armstrong 166).

Freedman actually pities Maggie for having been “forced by circumstance into the position of a Paterian aesthete” (Professions 232). Not only is she living the “nightmare version of an aesthete” because she must “devote herself to the rigorous inspection of every impression, every sensation, in order to survive,” but also because she must do/act as well (Professions 232). As a kind of participant observer, Maggie watches, contemplates, and acts

\(^{169}\) Fluck also observes that for Jamesian characters “the experience of ‘reality’ becomes, in tendency, that of being exposed to an open, ongoing process of interpretation” (“Power” 31).
under cover of her pretended passivity; she participates in a drama the existence of which it is forbidden to acknowledge by any of the players. It is interesting to compare this aestheticism of Maggie to what we may retrospectively term a kind of “aesthetic idealism” she had shared with her father prior her “awakening”; the keen appreciation of beautiful objects was said to have enabled them to live in the Paterian sense. Being driven by a passion (for the beautiful, the good, the simple, the perfect), they were regarded as individuals looking at life in the spirit of art, who endeavor to live all they can by letting nothing be lost on them. “Nothing,” yes, but only within the realm of the beautiful/good/simple: back then, Maggie’s (and Adam’s) vision was limited to the pleasing “crumbs of life.” She was not disposed to notice or discuss anything “serious” or “disturbing” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 131-2, 147), while now it is just those that she strains her eyes to see under the hitherto appreciated smooth, soothing surface.

Beautifully suggested by the image of the pagoda, the very first thing Maggie—consequent to her “small breach with custom” (313)—awakens to is that hitherto reassuring surfaces hide disturbing depths. Or, to mention the central symbol of the novel in this context, she starts discerning hitherto ignored “realities looming through the golden mist” (324), which reminds one of the golden lining (the Ververs’ ideals) that had so far hidden the crack on the crystal bowl (the Prince, the world) (105). The arrangement (of her life, of the two couples) may not be so perfect after all, and the equilibrium is more of a precarious appearance than reality—what had so far seemed as care may be conflict in disguise (Armstrong 158). In accordance with the nature of the hermeneutic circle (human understanding), Maggie has no facts at her disposal and the only way to arrive at any understanding that may appease her doubtful curiosity is to take inferences as her building blocks: “Maggie’s facts are not independent ‘givens’ […] her belief about the whole is necessary to make sense of the parts, but her assumption about the whole is an inference from those parts” (Armstrong 166).

These inferences Maggie can get via socialization; the Other(s) are not only the object(s) of knowledge but the source(s) of it as well (Armstrong 160). Solipsistic isolation gives way to associating with those around her, and she eagerly collects all the impressions she can get in the process. She starts “doing the ‘worldly’ ” with Charlotte (328-9), she embarks on entertaining at Portland Place by inviting the Castledeans and the other members of the Matcham party for dinner (339, 352-3), and she gets herself and her husband invited to the Assinghams, where she astonishes everyone with her brave efforts at being a dazzling socialite (411).
Although it is an orientation towards the Other(s) away from the Self, it is, at the same time, also a way to better self-understanding. By finding out about one’s differences from and similarities to the Other(s), the individual gets a more explicit picture about her/himself (Armstrong 162)—a tenet recalling Rousseau’s and Hegel’s. As to understanding herself and the nature of the Other(s), Maggie comes to distinguish between the different versions of an individual’s selves: her/his “being-for-oneself” and her/his “being-for-others.” It is important to note that none of these selves is more authentic or truthful or permanent. The emphasis should rather fall on the unfathomable, fluid nature of the Self—be it our own or that of the Other.

What is crucial to realize is the impossibility to arrive at full knowledge and thus to acknowledge that the surface (the current version of the Self) presented to us is not the whole Truth; once again, opacity and not transparence is the order of the day. With that in mind, the individual can consciously construct her/his “being-for-others,” depending on the social context and the amount of information (s)he wants to submit therein. This does not necessarily entail deception; under normal circumstances, it is more of a selection and the right to make oneself more opaque to inquisitive eyes if need be. Just so, Maggie gets to manipulate170 her own surfaces, becoming more opaque to the Prince and Charlotte. She becomes more knowing than known, which is another way of saying that she transcends the transcendence of her existential captors by way of objectifying the subjectivities that have objectified her (Armstrong 171).

Indeed, Maggie refuses to remain a transparent object—the result of the Prince and Charlotte’s reification of her—and regains her existence by becoming an opaque subjectivity instead. To be unfathomable is to be a source of awe and fascination, and the Prince becomes more interested in (in love with) her than ever before. Contrarily, Charlotte fails to transcend Maggie’s transcendence of her and remains an object (of pity)—unaware, groping, and relatively calculable. By turning the ambiguity of which she is also a victim to her own advantage, Maggie becomes the perfect sphinx of the aesthetic iconology; she insinuates only that she knows and does not specify what (how much) (Freedman, Professions 234-6).

In fact, the bigger the “crime” of Maggie’s adversary, the greater the epistemological uncertainty she leaves her/him in (Freedman, Professions 236). Fanny, the benevolent meddler is told almost all. The Prince is notified as to Maggie “knowing” and made into an

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170 As to outwitting her adversaries and beating them at their own game, one of Freedman’s latest tours de force based on game theory is interesting to consider here; he views Maggie’s victory as the result of using “two central tools of game theory, the game tree and the prisoner’s dilemma” (“What Maggie” 103).
accomplice, but he is left guessing as to Adam’s state of mind. As to Charlotte, she cannot help noticing that something is amiss due to the change in the Prince’s behavior towards her, but she is not in the least assisted by anyone when she tries to wade out of the swamp of uncertainty. Completely in the dark concerning who knows what, she is left foundering (Freedman, “What Maggie” 107-9).

The problematic aspect of Maggie’s quest, however, is that her manipulation of surfaces does not stop at selection; she does deceive her fellow humans, which means that she not only holds back certain things, but she also lies (486-7, 536). As to her keeping the front of the “small creeping thing,” I would not call that a deception, because it does remain a fundamental part of her being all along. True, she consciously “grovels” and lets Charlotte take her “for the poor little person she was finding it so easy to appear” (533), while earlier on she was that “poor little person.” Then again, Maggie never completely outgrows her fears and uncertainties, she only becomes more aware and her personality gains other, more daring aspects besides the “fearful one.” But, but, but—apart from selecting facets of self to serve as strategic surfaces, she does lie to Charlotte. Not only does Maggie not tell the truth (by simply withholding it), but she tells “untruths”—to which, let it be added, she is forced to resort due to Charlotte’s panicky behavior jeopardizing the precious appearances Maggie is desperately bent on saving (Freedman, “What Maggie” 109). Yet can the end morally justify the means? Can Maggie (re)construct a mutually caring human relationship where trust is crucial if she bases it on lies?

A way to answer these questions is to ask some others. Does Maggie have any other choice? Is there any other way to save the two marriages and the self-respect of the four members without dissimulation? Could she answer, for instance, Charlotte’s query concerning whether there is anything the matter with something like: “Well, my dear, if you really want to know, I quite mind your sleeping with my husband and cuckolding my dad”? Furthermore, is it Maggie who introduces the method of lying into their relationship? Does she lie to truthful people or to those who have deceived her in the first place? Most importantly, are there no situations in social intercourse where telling the truth is morally more reprehensible than lying?

I agree with Edel when he affirms that “[m]any lies are told to save the marriage of Maggie and the Prince, but they have been, as in The Wings of the Dove and The Ambassadors, ‘constructive lies’—the lies and myths by which civilization holds together. The whole truth, James suggests, could destroy civilization [...]” (587). In the same vein, Fluck points out that for James “forms of imposition and coercion unfortunately, but
inevitably, exist even in the most benevolent forms of social relations and are part of a network of exchange that literally ‘creates’ society” (“Power” 29). As to choices and inevitability, Sarbu also claims that in The Golden Bowl James demonstrates that one cannot stay uncorrupted, living in a vacuum outside this corrupt world; even the purest have to be tainted in order to live (Lélektani 218). In Sarbu’s view, “Maggie’s controversial conduct only confirms what James has been aware of for quite some time: that the moral life and the social entity are incompatible. His approval of the lie is the bitterest, yet most effective criticism. What kind of world is this—he seems to ask—when, to achieve personal fulfillment, even the good must taint themselves with its corruption?” (Reality 7). 171

Similarly humane, Armstrong points out that Maggie’s behavior is the representation of the irresolvable contradiction underlying every relationship: conflict/deception and care/trust are simply the two sides of the same coin (170, 186). This is, in fact, beautifully put by James himself in his Preface to What Maisie Knew:

No themes are so human as those that reflect for us, out of the confusion of life, the close connection of bliss and bale, of the things that help and the things that hurt, so dangling before us for ever that bright hard metal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody’s right and ease and the other somebody’s pain and wrong. (xxvi)

In addition, I find Maggie’s lying and deception not only a necessary tool to fight those who have introduced this weapon into her life and used it against her, but a gesture that makes her akin to the Redeemer; she takes on the guilt of others so as to save them. It is not for her own, but for the common good that she lies, and it is not about her own crimes but about the crimes of those to whom she lies. Nussbaum also points out that “this idea of bearing guilt for love’s sake” not only makes Maggie resemble Christ, “who took upon himself the sins of the world,” but also “the scapegoat of ancient Greek religion, who saves the community by bearing its pollution” (“Flawed” 135). Maggie thus “assumes this world’s burden of sin [...] by seeing that she is sinning, and by bearing, for love, her own imperfection” (“Flawed” 135).

Lying is one thing and consciously inflicting pain on somebody is another. To mention a few extreme cases, there is Freedman labelling Maggie a sadist (Professions 237, 171 Interestingly, while Gordon also “defends” Maggie, he does so by claiming that her triumph—similarly to Isabel and Milly’s—is “to know and not to be corrupted” (146). Matthiessen likewise views Maggie as another heroine who “keeps her innocence intact” (85). He, however, terms her knowledge “unnatural” and questions the credibility of the whole of James’s story (101).
“What Maggie” 110), similarly to Philip Weinstein (185) and Sears (219) who also charge her with cruel sadomasochistic behavior towards Charlotte. Freedman views Maggie as an extreme version of the decadent belle dame sans merci compared with the one embodied by Milly: “[L]ove and cruelty; passivity and power; imaginative freedom and social control” are pushed to the limits here, and Maggie is said to derive enjoyment from the suffering of her victims (Professions 232, 237). Armstrong, on the other hand, holds that cruelty, similarly to lies and deception, is ineluctable under the given circumstances; it is not for Maggie’s private pleasure, hence the charge of sadomasochism is uncalled for (180). Nussbaum is likewise sympathetic towards Maggie’s alleged cruelty; applauding Maggie for her final acceptance of complexity and conflict as part and parcel of the moral/social life a human being should lead, Nussbaum claims that occasional cruelty is inevitable: “If love of your husband requires hurting and lying to Charlotte, then do these cruel things […]” (“Flawed” 135).

It is also important to bear in mind that the “suffering” inflicted on Charlotte is epistemological uncertainty on the one hand (Freedman, Professions 236), and the necessity to follow her lawful husband back to his native place and to resign herself to leaving behind her ex-lover, on the other. The first bit is, let us remember, the lot of every human being to a certain extent, while the second bit should go without saying—the only moral choice is to accompany one’s husband and let one’s ex-lover move on with his life.

Another punishment of sorts that Charlotte undergoes is the “inheritance” of the role of the scapegoat from Maggie (474), the acting out of which is, once again, needful to the cohesion of a community. As Foucault in Madness and Civilization and Sartre in Saint Genet would have it, an outsider unifies the others (qtd. in Armstrong 180). Girard also emphasizes the function of the scapegoat as a kind of safety valve on society to let off steam produced by feelings of guilt, jealousy, and the like, which leads to harmony and greater unity (qtd. in Armstrong 183). It is conflict underlying care yet again. Depending on whether Adam “knows” or not, we can either say that Charlotte becomes the Other while Maggie, the Prince, and “knowing” Adam form a Self with the latter acting as a guardian who accompanies the Other to her (solipsistic) exile (Armstrong 183), or we may regard Maggie and the Prince as forming a union (Self) by excluding Charlotte (Other) from it, who is condemned to go into exile with “unaware” Adam—both in their respective solipsistic isolation. Maggie, in fact, openly raises this issue first to Adam, who assures her he does not in the least feel sacrificed
and then to the Prince in connection with Charlotte, saying that “[i]t’s as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us—as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us” (557).

Bertonneau puts great emphasis on the “sacrificial element” of *The Golden Bowl* and claims that it belongs to a line of “sacrificial novels” in the Jamesian oeuvre:

In this novel “James outdoes himself in piling up his insistent lexicon of crisis-saturated and sacrificial terminology. […] Similar vocabulary registers with much less frequency in *The Tragic Muse* and *The Wings of the Dove* […] In *The Golden Bowl*, as in those earlier ‘sacrificial’ novels, James explores the way in which even the smallest and seemingly most sophisticated human sodality tends to establish and maintain itself through the expulsion—the sacrifice—of a guiltless hence quite arbitrary victim. […] But James likewise demonstrates, through the moral discretion of his central character, ‘how to re-establish a violated order’ without submitting a scapegoat (even a genuinely guilty one) to public and spectacular ‘humiliation.’” (1, original emphasis)

Apart from his consideration of this “sacrificial element,” Bertonneau’s comment just cited is interesting for other reasons as well. Firstly, as it has been pointed out, he—unlike other critics—takes Charlotte’s guiltiness for granted. Secondly, and differently from any other interpretation including mine, Bertonneau does not consider Charlotte’s ultimate fate of having been “packed off” to America as an instance of being sacrificed. She is taken as a “genuinely guilty” person who is not exposed to “public and spectacular ‘humiliation,’” hence she is not made into a scapegoat. This (wrongly) implies that sacrifice is necessarily connected to publicity. Admittedly, Maggie spares Charlotte from public humiliation, but I would not agree with Charlotte not being punished (sacrificed) in the process of re-establishing “the violated order.”

Anyhow, the justness of Charlotte being forced to bear part of the brunt lies in that she is guilty and she is made into a scapegoat as a result. Innocent Maggie, however, “saves the community by bearing its pollution” in the shape of “bearing, for love, her own imperfection” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 135), which is brought about by the guilt of others. In fact, as a corollary, Charlotte cannot fully “inherit” the role of the scapegoat and is really only forced to

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172 Departing from the premise that Adam knows and plays along, Nussbaum views this scene (Adam assuring Maggie that he does not feel sacrificed) as “record[ing] a moral achievement of deep significance […] in an image of delicate beauty and lyricism” (“Finely” 151). Adam’s sacrifice is to act as if he did not feel being sacrificed.
share it with Maggie; the latter’s initiation into the fragmented/imperfect world cannot—and actually should not—be erased. Maggie’s “pollution” remains, which should be looked upon as the positive result of “useful bad”; “painful experiences […] are ‘productive’ in unexpected ways” (Fluck, “Power” 25).

Surely, Maggie does not in the least enjoy the spectacle of Charlotte beating her wings against the bars of the cage of solipsism (546). Or, to use another (Jamesian) image, the sight of her stepmother with the notorious “silken noose” (546) around her neck does not inspire any petty feeling of malicious glee or revenge in Maggie. She lives up to Nussbaum’s Aristotelian exhortations concerning the inevitableness of occasionally inflicting pain: “[…] never cease, all the while, to be richly conscious of Charlotte’s pain and to bear, in imagination and feeling, the full burden of your guilt as the cause of that pain. If life is a tragedy to see […], see that; respond to that fact with pity for others and fear for yourself” (“Flawed” 135).

The Prince first tries not to witness his former lover’s suffering (519), and in the end he is so engulffed in Maggie that he remains indifferent to it, while Adam is either unaware or suffering with Maggie at the sight of Charlotte’s pain—not even Maggie knows how much her father knows. In fact, Maggie does not want to know how much Adam knows (527, 547), but at the end of the day she guesses he knows and plays along. A key scene in this respect is the one when Charlotte “did cicerone” for their guests and “her high voice went on, its quaver was doubtless for conscious ears only [… and it sounded] like the shriek of a soul in pain” (516-7, original emphasis). Maggie seems to detect “strange tears” in Adam’s eyes which testify “to sharp identity of emotion”; they both appear to have “conscious ears” for Charlotte’s pain (517).

The only conflict underlying care may not be the one that concerns Charlotte, however. What can strike us as a balanced human relationship with care and reciprocity as its basis does seem to hide certain elements of domination; the Prince’s “caged state” is not only self-inflicted (551), but also brought about by Maggie, who ends up in a superior position in their relationship once again. Armstrong goes as far as to say that the apparent freedom of choice offered by Maggie to the Prince is severely limited, and so his acts are propelled as much by obedience as by reciprocal care when he becomes his wife’s accomplice against his lover and lets the two women fight it out (173-4).

In my view, however, the Prince’s behavior is not the result of coercion but a very convenient choice in keeping both with his status and his original intentions. For one, he yet again remains in elegant passivity with his decorum spared (540), and so his symbolic capital
(status, prestige) is not depleted. By siding with Maggie, he furthermore testifies to furnishing the capital of “willing compliance” that was tacitly understood to be part of an exchange between transactors in possession of unequal means (Blau 22). Secondly, not only is his set of capital unharmed, but at the end of the novel we also find him getting what he had wanted all along: a marriage that provides him with the economic and erotic capital of Maggie Verver and has him as the center of his wife’s attention, with the ex-lover out of the way and the desired clean sheet for a new life offered him. True, there may be reciprocity imbalance in the end, but so was there at the outset—and to a greater extent at that point.

Thirdly, as we have repeatedly pointed out, the goal is not to be quits; outstanding obligations and slight reciprocity imbalance is the fundamental basis of long-lasting relationships (Gouldner 13). In fact, even Armstrong agrees that, whether we like it or not, care always involves both freedom and bondage (186). Lastly, Maggie is actually surprised at the extent of her victory: “[I]t was for all the world as if she was succeeding with him beyond her intention […]. She had begun, a year ago, by asking herself how she could make him think more of her; but what was it after all he was thinking now?” (552) The Prince views her as an enigmatic, fascinating, awe-inspiring sphinx, even at moments when she “didn’t bristle with intentions” and when “she had truly come unarmed” (552).

8. And the winner is…: Maggie’s (Lacanian) mission completed

To repeat, care always involves both bondage and freedom (Armstrong 186). In line with this, the presence of the caring father and the strong loving bond that exists between him and his daughter form something of a “Greek gift” when it comes to the situation of the American girl’s (Lacanian) quest to grow up and accept the fragmented nature of the world and of herself as an autonomous but simultaneously social being. Indeed, what appears to be a blessing is a source of harm in disguise, and Maggie learns to go by the Virgilian line of “Timeo Danaos, et dano ferentes”—“I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts”—with Adam involuntarily standing for the Grecians who were hiding in the gift horse presented to the Trojans (Žižek 7). As we have repeatedly pointed out, the protective cocoon of the father’s love is downright damaging to the young American girl because the longer the realization of the fearful condition that is concomitant of being human is put off, the more painful it is likely to become.
As the events of the novel prove, it is something that—willingly or otherwise—cannot be forever ignored. Indeed, it is in their very unawareness that Maggie and her father bring about their own “downfall”; their behavior towards the Prince and Charlotte is akin to inviting disaster when, all in good faith, in their benevolent innocence, they manage to get married only to neglect their spouses, whom they consequently congratulate on pluckily entertaining themselves with each other’s company. Or, to use the image of the Greek gift again, harm (experience) is unwittingly introduced into their Eden-like communion in the shape of the Prince first, and Charlotte next. Whether it is Adam gifting Maggie with the Prince or Maggie gifting Adam with Charlotte, both Ververs behave like some unaware Grecian causing her/his own fellow Greek and also her/himself some damage (s)he did not mean to. It is like a donor bringing the fatal gift horse into her/his own household so as to “enjoy” it with the recipient.

The cocoon that Adam provides for his daughter is almost more dangerous than that of Gilbert Osmond’s for Pansy exactly because the former is just as inexperienced (naïve, innocent, American) as the one he is sheltering. As the saying goes, Adam and Maggie’s is the case of the blind leading the blind, and the young woman’s eye-opening experience and her subsequent effort at saving not only herself but her father and their spouses as well is a multiply hazardous quest. With the bravery of a “timid tigress,” she faces “the whole assault of life” and endeavors to prevent her father from having to do so. Adam is to be kept in the cocoon she had hitherto shared with him, and the fragmented reality of the world in general and that of their world—his and hers—in particular is not to be faced by him. Whether Adam does remain in the cocoon or just pretends to in order to help his daughter to complete her quest in other respects—the establishing of an independent (if fragmented) self, the saving of appearances and thereby saving the two marriages—has already been termed a matter for endless speculation. We are, however, not concerned with Adam’s development as an individual, but with Maggie’s, the nature of which is delightfully spelled out for us by James himself through his mouth-piece, Fanny Assingham:

Maggie was the creature in the world to whom a wrong thing could least be communicated. It was as if her imagination had been closed to it, her sense altogether sealed. […] Her sense will have to open. […] To 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. […] They’ll [events] have had to be disagreeable to make her sit up. They’ll have had to be disagreeable to make her
... the way it comes to me is that she will live. The way it comes to me is that she’ll triumph. (284-5, original emphasis)

Fanny’s words may even be taken literally; later on in the story, observing the card-players constituted of Charlotte, Adam, the Prince, and the Colonel, Maggie’s vision of “evil seated all at its ease where she had only dreamed of good” is a recognition scene of sorts (477). All of a sudden, the crack on the surface widens and the unbearable Real is peeping out from behind this imperfect social fiction (the symbolic order, the big Other); “the horror of the thing hideously behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness” (477, original emphasis) becomes visible. At this stage, Maggie had already left the realm of the imaginary, which, in her case, had been something of a mixture of a quasi imaginary and a quasi symbolic order, with the widower father having provided an idiosyncratic version of the symbolic that was more akin to the imaginary order generally associated with the mother.

By the time Maggie has this vision of evil, she has already joined “The” symbolic order—not the one furnished by Adam but the one shared by humanity at large173—and has been acquiring the rules of socialization. The necessity of the acceptance of life lived amidst fragmentation has already been signalled to her; she is to be one of the many small others huddling together and making believe in the big Other to find shelter from the unbearable Real. The reason why the vision beheld at Fawns is disturbing is because it is a reminder of the fictitiousness and fragility of the symbolic order and of the ubiquity of the Real behind it all—it even lurks in the acts of those she loves and wants to protect. At that very moment, it is impersonated by Charlotte, who thereby becomes the representative of the fascinating small other, the big Other, and the Real as well.

Similarly to Kate Croy and Madame Merle, Charlotte Stant is also a vibrant European(ized) female with the special charm that experience (womanhood) entails. From the outset, she has been the embodiment of the positive attributes essential to socialization that Maggie does not have; her style in dress and bearing (manners), the zest and ease with which she mingle in society—never blending in but standing out as the most remarkable one in any social circle. Indeed, Charlotte is so good at “doing the ‘worldly’ ” because she not only has what it takes, but she has it to an exemplary extent—she is the best in the field until

173 In fact, if we posit that Adam does get to know, then he not only joins “The” symbolic order along with Maggie, but he actually becomes the representative of it by virtue of being the best actor and staunchest defender of the social fiction of all.
Maggie enters the arena. It is by virtue of the fact that as a small other, her greatest *forte* is socialization that she may be taken as the representative of the big Other as well; she is the main actor and director of the social fiction immediately concerning Maggie.

As to the Real, Charlotte’s brilliant veneer hides Evil in the shape of falsity (lies, dissimulation), which Maggie has been aware of for a while but *sees* for the very first time. However, accepting the existence of it is not surrendering to it—on the contrary. Maggie acknowledges Evil as part and parcel of the world, but fights it so as to make Good have the upper hand. In order to do so, she takes up the weapons of the enemy (Charlotte) and beats her at her game; it is in the wake of this very scene that Maggie lies for the first time—she has been “humbugging” to her father for a while now (359), but her first real lie is told to Charlotte there and then. Behind what has by now become only a veneer of naïve ignorance, Maggie denies harboring any resentment against her adversary (486-7).

Despite “her entering a fallen world and sharing its taint” (Fowler 139), Maggie the American girl keeps on dreaming about Eden-like innocence and perfection; her fondness of “moral absolutes” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 135) is revealed by her persistent wish to have “the golden bowl—as it was to have been. […] The bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack” (462). Her choice, however, does ultimately bring its reward in the shape of a higher kind of happiness and innocence, namely the “organized innocence” propounded by Blake—which became central to Romanticism and has been taken up by Fogel in connection with Jamesian heroines—that transforms the laughter of innocence and the cry of experience into the complex emotion that may be called “weeping for joy,” which is felt by the individual who has attained goodness without ignorance. Unlike the inhabitant of “the vales of Har” in Blake’s “Book of Thel”—the motto of which may partly have inspired James’s title for this novel—*The Golden Bowl’s* heroine does not shy away from entering the world of the real. Thel, the shepherdess of an idyllic world, is the embodiment of the Blakean state of innocence confronted by the world of experience, whose story may be taken as a description of a human being’s own coming to terms with life and what it must bring (Dover).174

Similarly to the previous Jamesian girls, Thel’s eventual refusal to become “incarnate”—to leave the remote spiritual realm of ideals—is a “no” to taking part in earthly existence and a simultaneous rejection of sexuality, which are one and the same thing. To her question (that constitutes part of the motto) whether love can be put in a golden bowl—which

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174 Richard Dover’s apt remarks concerning “The Book of Thel” can be found on <http://www.newi.ac.uk/rdover/bookthel.htm>.
Pokol Ágnes

anticipates Maggie’s wish to have the golden bowl with all their happiness in it—the answer is a dubious yes. Because the ultimate aim of reaching goodness without ignorance (organized innocence) is only possible if one gains full experience, the bowl, as an emblem of incarnation, is the proper receptacle, even if it entails limitation and imperfection.¹⁷⁵

Maggie’s “incarnation” is a triumph in terms of all the important aspects we have been focusing on. Firstly, she takes her place in a fragmented, corrupted, finite world as an autonomous individual who is in need of constantly recreating herself by choosing the appropriate roles according to the given circumstances—(still) a caring daughter, but also a dedicated passionate wife, and a necessarily resourceful companion on the alert when dealing with Charlotte, yet a Princess to their acquaintances as soon as it comes to social representation. This is to say that, having left behind the cocoon of solipsistic isolation, she has learnt to view herself in context. Indeed, as a social being, she sees herself in relation to others and strives to establish and maintain intimate, lasting human relationships with her fellow associates. Yes, she has acquired the fundamental virtue(s) of reciprocity (and gratefulness); willingly engaging in social exchanges of all kinds, Maggie works and is worked by others, which is to say that she gives and gratefully takes, and gives back, ad infinitum. Instead of letting her fellow small others apparently “spare” her and put her into a “bath of benevolence” while she is being (ab)used and lied to, Maggie learns to turn situations to her advantage without going as far as exploiting or unnecessarily hurting her associates. Considering the human condition with all its imperfections, one may say that Maggie’s way of existence is as good as it can possibly get.

As to conclusions concerning the development of the American girl, Fowler’s reaction to Maggie’s triumph is far from whole-hearted contentment. Significantly, Maggie stays behind in Europe, the land of experience, while Adam, the American male, goes back to his element. Neither he nor his (and her) native land undergo any transformation; America remains Eden-like, innocent/ignorant, and there persists the cleavage between the public male world of materialism and money-making and the private female sphere of culture. Fowler contends that after her successful individual transformation, Maggie belongs to Europe if she wants to live up to her full potential (6). Hers is the story of the American girl who breaks

¹⁷⁵ This is where the biblical allusion may also come in. According to Matthew Henry, Ecclesiastes 12:6 describes the circumstances which take place in the hour of death. Thus, it is a reminder for the individual of her/his mortality (limited, imperfect existence). John Wesley notes that the golden bowl stands for the membranes of the brain—hence it is a container of our substance—which breaks upon death, just like the silver cord (marrow of backbone coming from brain) is loosed and the pitcher (veins containing blood) and the wheel (great artery) are broken. Both Henry’s and Wesley’s commentaries are from <http://www.christnotes.org/commentary>.
with America’s materialistic male world at last, which has psychologically crippled her and regarded her as a mere embroidery on its canvas (6). Indeed, it is a partial triumph as far as the American scenario is concerned, both for the American woman and for the artist.

Along the lines of Freedman’s analysis, Maggie’s figure is, in fact, the fusion of these two. At the end of her quest, she is the embodiment of the (female) artist, who acknowledges the existence of a fragmented world, yet keeps on fighting to impose some order on it. As a modernist par excellence, Maggie, like her maker, turns to the solace of form; she “seeks to gather the shattered fragments of life and remake them into the smooth perfections of aesthetic form, to redeem human passions and frailties by shaping them into significant and symmetrical order” (Freedman, Professions 241). Although her “remaking of a meaningful marriage and James’s reweaving of his fissured text both affirm the artistic imagination’s power to reshape a fragmented world” (Freedman, Professions 243), this tendency is not to be applauded according to Freedman, who views this “ambivalent valorization of art” as a dubious triumph over chaos. By the “positing of art as a principle of order in a world in which such ordering principles are otherwise unavailable,” James was trying to find “resolutions to nonaesthetic problems” on aesthetic grounds:

If the novel specifies art, and more precisely its own performance, as the ultimate ground of value in a world significantly lacking in any redemptive principle, then the resolution of the novel is at once perfect and perfectly limited. The text’s circling back on itself succeeds brilliantly in solving the problems it, and James’s entire career, has posed; but in doing so, it severely circumscribes that solution, instancing only itself as a means to this redemptive end. In seeking to valorize the autotelic, the novel thus succeeds only in rendering itself autistic.

(Freedman, Professions 244)

In key with Freedman’s view of Maggie’s transformation into an artist—but with more positive overtones—is her “pity and dread” in the closing lines of the novel, which may be the complex emotion of Aristotelian katharsis; it is the artist beholding her finished work, which is the reestablished marital harmony with herself as not only the center, but the whole of her

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176 Fowler cites James’s metaphor from The American Scene that refers to the cleavage between men (the world of business and money) and women (culture): “[T]he men supplying, as it were, all the canvas, and the women all the embroidery” (6).
A grown up, a wife, an artist—Maggie’s performance has been successful. She may take a bow.

Before an overly frenetic applause, however, it should be pointed out that Maggie’s achievement is not without flaws. Admittedly, from Nussbaum’s point of view concerning the attainment of a “new moral sense” in the place of Maggie’s old pursuit of moral goodness/perfection with all the limitations it entailed, the last American girl’s quest is said to have a positive outcome. Indeed, as to being “finely aware and richly responsible,” Maggie has acquired the basics of moral realism and she consequently does not shy away from the bewildering complexity, which is the result of “the separateness and qualitative uniqueness” of other people (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 133). She is perceptive, imaginative, intelligent, sympathetic, and devoted. Yet her “perceptive morality” still does not equal “perceptive equilibrium” (between perception and love), which is the ultimate goal (Nussbaum, “Perceptive” 187).

What exonerates Maggie—and me for hailing her as the ultimate victrix—is the fact that the flaw is that of the new moral sense itself, despite its commendability. The purity of vision that is the fundamental of (Aristotelian) perceptive morality strives for wholeness and thereby fits in with Maggie’s old desire for perfection. This is no cause for congratulation, however, as passionate love, in contrast, calls for privacy, exclusivity, narrowness, even blindness—the very things that Lambert Strether was also incapable of surrendering to, despite (or owing to) his new perceptive morality so similar to Maggie’s (Nussbaum, “Perceptive” 190). Significantly, the artist is not exempt from this danger of achieving “a certain clarity of vision at the expense of a certain emotional depth” either (Nussbaum, “Perceptive” 187)—Maggie’s transformation into an artist does not only not solve, but may augment this tendency. This is to say that both Strether and Maggie’s stories demonstrate “the limits of ethical consciousness”; combining “fine perception with the silence and the hidden vision of love” seems impossible in the case of Strether (Nussbaum, “Perceptive” 190), and an arduous task momentarily achieved only at the very end of The Golden Bowl by Maggie.

Nussbaum’s view of the last scene of the novel is different from mine because she argues that until the last scene Maggie “has not yet […] eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is still hanging before her, just before the end” and so she remains “in some significant sense an innocent, though more responsive and more womanly

\footnote{177 Freedman actually views the “re-programmed” Prince himself as Maggie’s finished artwork evoking the Aristotelian emotion of katharsis (“What Maggie” 112).}
than before” (“Flawed” 135). According to Nussbaum’s interpretation, it is only during her final embrace with Amerigo that “she makes for him the last and greatest sacrifice of all. She gives him her purity of vision” when she at last abandons herself to the blindess of love/passion he awakens in her (“Flawed” 137).

To conclude, Nussbaum does not so much rob Maggie of her laurel wreath as she points to the incomplete/fragmented nature of the world she has managed to become part of. The imperfection of the newly achieved perceptive morality—which resides in its being incompatible with love/passion and yet equally vital to human fulfillment—thus falls in with our hitherto emphasized view of the inevitable imperfection of all that is human—morality included.

9. “Outro”

Be it “over-treated” or (morally) ambiguous, James’s last finished novel, The Golden Bowl, has indeed turned out to be a goldmine of interesting issues to consider. Apart from the recurrence of such evergreen Jamesian subjects as the international theme, the figure of the American girl, as well as that of the “American male millionaire,” the problematic relationship between marriage and filial-paternal bonds, the fusion of aestheticism and commodity culture, we have turned our attention to the question of the gift, the issue of gratitude, the re-examination of erotic/sexual capital, and, to a lesser extent, the manipulative dimension of (gift) giving.

Including both humans and objects that were meant to be or were actually given, we have counted ten gifts. While identifying and examining them, we focused on the way gifts can be generators of identity and therefore potent tools to manipulate individuals and our relationships with them. In connection with this, the questionability of Charlotte’s behavior—the “force of circumstances” versus manipulation—was indicated here (and was gradually unfolded as the discussion proceeded). Apart from, but also related to, identity formation and power games, another crucial aspect of the gift was examined: the question of quality versus gesture. As to quality, we do look a gift-horse in the mouth and it is less reprehensible than society likes to make out; as gift giving is a self-expression in many ways, it is not only inevitable but downright helpful to read the coded messages it contains. Amongst other things, the gift conveys information about: 1. what the giver thinks about her/himself; 2. what
public image (s)he is trying to construct based on giving that present; 3. what (s)he thinks about the recipient; 4. how important the recipient (a relationship with her/him) is to the giver; and 5. what the giver’s taste/background is like (conventional morality). Based on the Prince and Charlotte’s conversation, the dilemma concerning the quality of gifts may be that flawed gifts should not be given, yet everything belonging to an imperfect world is suspect to having a hidden crack—an observation that the story proves true: be it objects, individuals, or relationships, fragmentation is behind the apparently perfect veneer.

Starting out with a look at the relationship between (gift) giving, reciprocity, and gratitude, we have seen that the latter is also a disposition to be acquired and consciously maintained. The result of a continuous intellectual effort, a grateful disposition is a fundamental source of socialization and therefore of happiness; because expressions of gratitude are fulfilling for both giver and recipient, the deliberate withholding it—keeping in mind the difference between “nongratitude” and ingratitude—is universally considered an unnatural crime, a vice. Even if ingratitude is unanimously labelled a base act of immorality, gratitude is still an object of debate. Looking at the “cons,” we have seen how the greatest enemies of gratitude are: 1. a desire to be self-sufficient/independent; 2. a sense of deservingness/entitlement (narcissism); and 3. adaptation of human beings to both positive and negative impulses (set-point).

Maggie, Amerigo, and Charlotte all had issues with gratitude. As a crucial step in her quest to grow up, acquire the fundamental virtue of reciprocity and consequently engage in lasting human relationships with their continual give and take, Maggie had, first of all, to learn to appreciate her husband. After a well-meaning start, the Prince’s grateful disposition towards the Ververs soon lost its edge; adapting to his situation, he began taking for granted their goodness/naivety and the consequent splendor and freedom accorded him. Added to his dissatisfaction with his original aims—a paradoxical wish to become a new man, which was to be brought about by selling something that is inalienable (his symbolic capital)—was the (negative) influence of Charlotte on him. Contriving to remain multiply passive (both towards his benefactors and his accomplice), Amerigo did engage in an adulterous affair with her, which was the ultimate act of ingratitude; his gratitude first gave way to “nongratitude,” which eventually became ingratitude.

As to Charlotte, I have argued that she is less a victim of circumstances than a powerful manipulator, whose “talent for life” initially did not have prime material to work with, which is to say that her hefty set of capital lacked the economic variety in order to get on. (Ab)using the trust and the help of the Ververs, she did manage to have it all for a while:
social position, wealth, the love of the Prince. However, her ingratitude did not go unpunished; kept in the dark as to who knows what and how, her adultery was brought to an end first by her lover’s turning away from her and then by her husband’s decision to go back to American city.

The “American male millionaire” returned in *The Golden Bowl* in the shape of Adam Verver, who may be taken as the culmination of the Jamesian aesthete, collector, and benefactor. He not only has an enormous amount of economic capital at his disposal, but he is also both well-meaning and cultivated—this is why he is “more” than any of the similar figures we have encountered in earlier James works. To explain, Newman had money but no cultivation; he was a millionaire and a benefactor but a poor aesthete and collector. Osmond was an exquisite aesthete but had no money to become a collector on a grand scale until he married Isabel, and he was certainly not a “good man” to bother about being a benefactor. Ralph was rich, polished, and kind-hearted, but due to his illness he only had a short interval at his disposal; collecting, in his case, was therefore limited to the “collecting” of Isabel, which, taking the form of leaving her half his fortune, was also an act worthy of a benefactor. Adam, on the other hand, has it all: time, money, cultivation—and all that in the greatest measure amidst similar Jamesian figures. What is even more important, however, is his special disposition: the Ververian outlook on life that has repeatedly been seen by James critics as morally ambiguous.

Having taken a closer look at Adam’s (and consequently Maggie’s) monistic standard, I have contended that his (their) passion for the beautiful should not be labelled an “Osmond-like reifying vision” (Freedman, *Professions* 230), but the well-meaning conflation of the Emersonian “law for man and the law for thing,” by which it is the objects that gain and not humans that lose. Let it be added that this initial Ververian outlook was not regarded as laudable; even if not immoral, it has been seen as asocial and consequently in need of transformation. Based on existential phenomenology, we have pointed out the dangers of the solipsistic communion the Ververs shared at the outset; unaware of the existence of the opaque Other(s) and the impossibility of perfect intersubjectivity, Adam and Maggie initially lived as one entity, a single Self, regarding humans as entities that are as transparent and knowable as (art) objects. This way, life could be lived in the spirit of art; it seemingly brought along value, perfection, goodness, and simplicity, and was fundamentally driven not by a “neglect of the moral,” but, contrarily, by a “strict moralism” (Nussbaum, “Flawed” 131).
Indeed, the Ververs constitute a couple in which the two key figures of Jamesian fiction are present: the “American male millionaire” as the father (Adam) and the American girl as the daughter (Maggie). In this context, the latter’s successful transformation into an adult social being equipped with the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate and to gratefully appreciate (life, others) was viewed first from the point of view of existential phenomenology—Maggie’s hermeneutical quest to realize the existence of the unknowable Other and to penetrate her/his/its opacity as much as humanly possible by way of reading the surfaces of others and choosing/constructing those of her own according to the circumstances. As a Paterian aesthete par excellence, Maggie was seen to both observe/be/see and act/do; having widened her horizon compared with her initial focus on the realm of the beautiful, the simple, and the good, literally nothing was lost on her after her “awakening.”

However, going by the time-hallowed observation that the end does not justify the means, it was mentioned that many critics regard Maggie’s conduct as morally reproachable; she has repeatedly been said to deliberately hurt her fellow humans and even find enjoyment therein. Contrary to this opinion, I viewed Maggie’s actions as: 1. emblematic of the human condition in which Heideggerian care and Sartrean conflict are inevitably interlinked (Armstrong 170, 186); 2. being brought about by the lies of others and their having inflicted pain on her in the first place; 3. devoid of the element of sadistic joy at the sight of the suffering of her adversaries; and 4. resulting in the best possible solution under the circumstances (4.a mutual caring relationship between the Prince and Maggie established; b. the bond between father and daughter loosened to a healthy degree; c. the marriage of Charlotte and Adam saved and strengthened due to their having had to fall back on each other; and d. all along the appearances have been saved and everybody’s dignity spared).

Finally, Maggie’s progress was examined along Fowlerian lines based on Lacan’s tenets. She was said to have been the first American girl in Jamesian fiction to come out victorious when it came to facing “the whole assault of life.” An “exposed maiden” for a different reason than Isabel or Milly, Maggie had to leave behind the cocoon provided by the overprotective father with whom she had been sharing an unnaturally strong bond even after their marriages. Be it a quasi imaginary order furnished by the father in the absence of the mother, or an idiosyncratic version of the symbolic order, the private universe shared by the Ververs had surely been detrimental to the American girl.

Innocent, ignorant, inexperienced, Maggie had not known about: 1. the fragmented nature of the world, including her Self that is to stand apart as an autonomous individual, a subjective “I” (and the consequent necessity to keep on constructing it in the shape of
masks/roles depending on the given circumstance); 2. the existence of Evil (the unbearable Real that we are unaware of while belonging to the imaginary order, and from which we are at least partially protected by the soothing surface provided by the symbolic order we subsequently enter); and 3. the necessity for every human being taking its place in society to share its taint. Although Maggie has succeeded in all these, Fowler viewed her triumph as partial: the cleavage between the public sphere of men/business and the private sphere of women/culture remained, and the American girl stayed behind in Europe, the land of experience, while the American male went back home to the land of innocence.

From a sociological standpoint, I am happy to conclude that Maggie Verver, the last American girl of Jamesian fiction, has successfully turned into a social being who, having acquired the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful), has learnt to see herself in context, and to establish and maintain lasting human relationships by engaging in the usual give and take any such connection entails. Giving with the expectation to get something back and receiving with the consequence to remain gratefully obliged to another individual does not frighten her anymore. She knows that the goal is not to be quits.
PART VI. STOCK-TAKING (CONCLUSION)

The discussion is drawing to a close. Two hundred and something pages have been (hopefully attentively) perused. The question remains whether the kind reader will “drop the finished [study] on the crest of a sigh,” asking: “Is it worth while? What is the point of it all?” In a word, does my effort resemble that of Mr. Bennett, Mr. Wells, and Mr. Galsworthy, the “materialists” in Virginia Woolf’s opinion, whose “magnificent apparatus for catching life” comes down “just an inch or two on the wrong side” (“Modern Fiction” 150)? Has the attempt at a sociological analysis of Jamesian fiction succeeded in coming up with something worth our while? In order to get an answer to such an inquiry, let us retrace the steps of our mental journey and enumerate the highlights of the discussion.

Having emphasized the social and moral function of reciprocity—a fundamental moral virtue to be acquired so as to facilitate the individual’s socialization (the putting her/himself in context and thereby establishing and maintaining lasting human relationships) and endeavor to reach moral excellence—I proposed to examine whether the chosen Jamesian protagonists (most importantly, the three American girls, Isabel, Milly, and Maggie) are equipped with or succeed in acquiring this essential disposition. By approaching the issue of morality so crucial to Jamesian fiction in a multidisciplinary spirit and, more particularly, from a sociological standpoint—analyzing the concepts of reciprocity, gift, and gratitude in general,
and in connection with the American girls’ moral education in particular—I aimed at revealing aspects of James’s works hitherto neglected by James criticism. My method and focus were intended to shed a new light on the (moral) conduct—particularly the motives of the (non) actions—of several characters besides the three American girls of central importance; there were Maud Lowder, Lord Mark, Prince Amerigo, Charlotte Stant, and Adam Verver. I have attempted to fuse literature, moral philosophy, and sociology (as well as anthropology and political economy to a lesser extent), which was said to have been also the case with James himself; the keen observer of society, the believer in the moral aspect/task of literature, Henry James has been taken as nothing less than an exemplar of disciplinary fusion.

As the theoretical framework due to my multidisciplinary approach is built up of various systems of thought, I have provided an overview of my most important sources. Because the terminology of such inquiry is notoriously “slippery,” I also offered a preliminary clarification of my understanding of the terms “reciprocify,” “gift,” and “(types of) capital,” which was, in the course of the discussion, complimented by the scrutiny of such key concepts as the “benefactor” and the “beneficiary,” the dynamics of “give and take,” and “gratitude,” respectively.

The three novels in focus (The Portrait of a Lady, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl) were preceded by a look at earlier pieces of Jamesian fiction; “A Light Man,” Watch and Ward, Roderick Hudson, The American, and “Longstaff’s Marriage” formed the first main Part, “‘Capital’ Beginnings,” and “Georgina’s Reasons” received an in-depth treatment preliminary to the analysis of The Wings in Part IV., owing to the instructive similarities and differences that it bears to that novel.

The first Jamesian girl in focus, Isabel Archer, was seen as benefactor, beneficiary, and also as gift—her relationships with her fellow beings necessitated that these roles be acted out, however willy-nilly. The stance that may be said to have come closest to hers was probably that of Wilde’s new individualist, but, in any case, both her initial position—her belief in an unfettered self and consequent aversion to appurtenances, be they humans or objects—and her final outlook (life/experience/relationships as sources of suffering) proved to be inadequate. She not only failed to acquire the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful), but she thereby also (unconsciously) forwent the possibility to be happy. From a psychological point of view (Lacan), she was seen as an individual reluctant to grow up and come to terms with the fragmented and corrupted nature of the world. Whatever variety of capital happened to be at her disposal—economic, social, human, educational, cultural, symbolic, erotic/sexual—if she bothered becoming engaged in

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any exchange with another associate, she always contrived to come out on top. To be in a superior position is the next best thing to remaining independent, as one’s self-sufficiency is not jeopardized and it is a gesture that may be included under the heading of generosity—a much “safer” virtue.

Similarly, Milly Theale’s “career” could not be called an epitome of success either. She was likewise reluctant to engage in lasting human relationships, which would have entailed the taking of her share in a corrupt and fragmented world. Not that she remained inexperienced and exploited; I was bent on proving that Milly was less of a victim and Mrs. Lowder (Lancaster Gate) was less of an unscrupulous social climber than critical opinion generally allows for. The system of “the workers and the worked” was seen to yield a far more balanced exchange than critics usually would have it; both Milly and Aunt Maud gave and took and nobody remained with empty or overly full hands.

However, just because Milly did engage in the give and take of socialization, it does not mean that her life can be taken as a model for young individuals “facing the whole assault of life” and trying to be instructed concerning the ethical dilemma of “how to live.” So as to overcome the terrifying thought that: 1. the world (and the self) is fragmented; 2. it is in a constant state of flux; and 3. the individual has to keep on choosing the adequate masks/roles in her/his endeavor to (re)construct a self according to the given circumstances, after experimenting with being the dying rich American girl, a princess, a Byzantine lady, a dove, Milly eventually opted for the role of the Wildean critic as artist, which strengthened her original tendency towards idealism, leading to her isolation and untimely death. Increasingly passive and aloof, she came to resemble other icons of aestheticism, like the sphinx and the belle dame sans/avec merci.

Maggie Verver has been “nominated” the winner. James’s last finished novel depicted a morally ambiguous world through the ordeals of four main protagonists, whose relationships with each other were saved by the endeavors of this brave American girl. Putting much more emphasis on the culpability of the insolvent spous of the Ververs than James critics usually do, I was trying to prove that, despite the questionable morality of the Ververian outlook—monistic standard conflating humans and objects; solipsistic union with each other regarding the Other(s) as perfectly knowable; the striving for moral goodness/simplicity/perfection in order to forego complications/conflicts/complexity—Maggie grew up to be a responsible human being who: 1. has acquired the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) and was thereby ready to engage in lasting human relationships; 2. has adopted the new (Aristotelian) perception-based
morality that does not neglect particulars and does not, therefore, steer clear of possible conflicts (Nussbaum); 3. has learnt to know and accept Evil as concomitant of this (complex, imperfect) world; but 4. kept on striving to have Good prevail; and so 5. she was neither unnecessarily vindictive nor cruel. It was not for her private pleasure that she lied and inflicted pain on those who had lied and hurt her in the first place, but because Sartrean conflict is the other side of the coin that has Heideggerian care on its shinier side (Armstrong).

Indeed, while discussing the issue of gratitude (another closely related but separate fundamental disposition to be acquired that facilitates the individual’s finding happiness via socialization), I have concluded that the conduct of the Prince and Charlotte was deeply unsatisfactory. With the former putting himself in an impossible situation (trying to finance his fresh start by exchanging his non-transferable and fragile symbolic capital and remaining multiply passive in his endeavor to get along) and the latter consciously manipulating events and simultaneously blaming all on the “force of circumstances,” they became guilty of base ingratitude. Whether both benefactors were aware of this remains an enigma. Adam, the culmination of the Jamesian collector—male millionaire, aesthete, connoisseur, who is good-natured in the bargain—either knew and played along or remained blissfully ignorant of the whole affair. Maggie, however, utilized it as the painful experience that had been needed to wake her up, learn to appreciate (be grateful for) her husband, and realize that the excessively strong bond tying her to her father had to be loosened so as to let her grow up and establish an autonomous (even if fragmented) self that sees itself in context and is ready to engage in the give and take called (social) life.
PART VII. WORKS CONSULTED


Blunden, Andy.  *Bourdieu on Status, Class and Culture*.  


Armstrong 182. Print.


Nussbaum, Martha C.  “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of


