

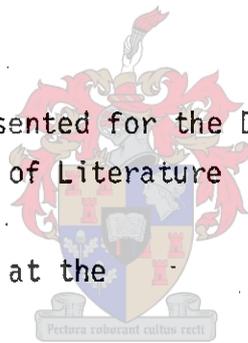
Unresolved Irony and the Late Novels
of Henry James

by

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To my mother:

Summary

This thesis examines the late novels of Henry James in the light of a distinction between "resolved" and "unresolved" ironies. The first chapter aims to clarify this distinction, arguing that in "traditional" ironic works the dominant irony is characteristically "resolved": that is, such works are structured upon the gradual enlightenment of the protagonist, to issue in the extinction of irony as such a protagonist achieves equality of insight with the reader. Such resolution, it is argued, is dependent on the author's access to and acceptance of a stable system of values. Conversely, where such stable communal values seem to the writer to be inconsistent with the unstable reality he perceives, the dominant irony of the work, in not being based upon a clearly defined or implied norm, is likely to remain "unresolved".

The second chapter approaches the nineteenth-century novel as the product of a society generally perceived to be based on firmly established values. Resolved irony thus predominates in these novels, but not as the vehicle of a complacent view of society: the irony is usually dependent on the perceived need for change in society, its resolution being posited on a belief in the possibility of such change. As such a belief weakens, an unresolved element becomes more evident in these novels, to predominate by the end of the century.

The third chapter uses James' The Ambassadors to show how unresolved irony can result from an author's exploration of his subject beyond the confines of his declared intention. In this instance, it is argued, the unresolved irony is a function of a more complex view of his protagonist than James seems to have foreseen.

The fourth chapter develops this enquiry by showing that in The Wings of the Dove James' subject once again grew beyond the projected outline, but in this case with James fully aware of the development. Unresolved irony, though still a product of "unintended" meanings, thus more consciously reflects a critical view of its subject.

The fifth chapter adduces The Golden Bowl as James' most sustained work of unresolved irony. It is the aim to demonstrate that the novel's meaning is entirely a function of this lack of resolution, the controlling vision being that of a society in which professed values are hopelessly at odds with true motives.

Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence are consistently used for comparison and contrast with James, partly to demonstrate their awareness of the attractions and dangers of irony as a response to perplexity, and partly to claim for James a place next to them as a profound commentator on the early twentieth century.

There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

W.B. Yeats: "Lapis Lazuli"

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Preface

The title of this thesis is intended to suggest the weight given to the theoretical aspect of an enquiry that is fundamentally a critical one. One of its aims is to arrive at an understanding of a particular mode of irony - what I have called unresolved irony - which occurs, of course, also in works other than these novels by Henry James. On the other hand, the study attempts to demonstrate that these difficult novels are made more accessible by a reconsideration of the nature of their ironic strategy. Thus, although the main body of the thesis consists of a fairly detailed discussion of James' last three completed novels, the discussion is preceded by and interspersed with more theoretical matter than would have been necessary in a more single-minded consideration of James.

The theoretical bias of the study has also led to the relative isolation of these three novels from the rest of James' oeuvre: frequent Early-Middle-Late comparisons have had to be abandoned as distracting from the argument, whatever their intrinsic interest. In so far as this thesis is concerned with an evaluation of James' achievement, such an assessment is based on his response to a particular era rather than on his development as a novelist. I have thus attempted to "place" the late novels in relation to works by James' contemporaries and predecessors, rather than in relation to his own earlier works. As far as the very limited period covered by this thesis is concerned, chronology has been preserved to the extent of discussing the late novels in their order of composition rather than of first publication.

In preparing this thesis I have generally adopted the recommendations of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (New York: MLA, 1977). The most important exception to this practice concerns punctuation within quotations: I have included within a quotation only such punctuation as occurs in the original. Thus full-stops or commas belonging to the structure of my sentence rather than to that of the quoted sentence have been placed outside the quotation marks.

Where a work is frequently referred to, I have in general footnoted only the first reference, and incorporated further references into the text, without announcing my intention of doing so. Where, however, such incorporation could have led to confusion, I have resorted to footnotes. In this I have allowed considerations of clarity and brevity of reference to

outweigh the requirements of absolute consistency.

I wish to acknowledge most gratefully the guidance of my promoter, Prof. J.B. Thompson, whose meticulous supervision of this thesis contributed greatly to the clarification of my ideas. He is not, of course, to be held responsible for such obscurities as I have persisted in.

I am also much indebted to Miss E. Oosthuizen for the skill and patience with which she deciphered a particularly palimpsestic manuscript.

Chapter I

"What are the Gods?":

Resolved and Unresolved Irony

Irony is, as Wayne C. Booth has commented, "a very messy subject."¹ There have been attempts to clear up the mess, notably by Booth himself and by D.C. Muecke,² and this thesis owes much to the terms and distinctions made available by such theorists. Unfortunately, however, every ironologist has his own ironology, his system naturally varying according to his principle of selection. Even a single writer may change his emphasis and thus his nomenclature from work to work, as Muecke does from The Compass of Irony to Irony and the Ironic; indeed, in a single work we may find different groupings of irony overlapping with one another. Orientation in relation to existing systems can thus at best be a matter of selecting such terms and definitions as best suit one's purpose; since the intention of this chapter is neither to develop an alternative taxonomy of irony nor to give a complete account of existing taxonomies, I shall ignore distinctions that do not bear upon the substance of my argument.

Since this study is by its nature restricted to irony as it occurs in literature, it will exclude what Muecke calls "Situational Irony", which, according to him, "does not imply an ironist but merely 'a condition of affairs' or 'outcome of events' which ... is seen and felt to be ironic."³ This is perhaps the loosest form of irony: depending on the observer (or reporter), almost any incongruous or even unintentionally apt event can be "seen and felt to be ironic", from a library being named after an illiterate to a town being washed away after a day of prayer for rain. As Booth remarks, "The irony is that such ironies, defined with such ironic indifference to precision, multiply on every hand, leaving the ironic critic caught in the ironic trap of defining a term that will not stay defined."⁴ Muecke, writing

¹ A Rhetoric of Irony (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 2.

² The Compass of Irony (London: Methuen, 1969) and Irony and the Ironic (London: Methuen, 1982).

³ Compass of Irony, p. 42. In Irony and the Ironic he includes this as a main type of "observable irony" (p. 19).

⁴ Rhetoric of Irony, p. 2 n.

as an ironologist rather than as a literary critic, is more tolerant of this type of irony: he merely points out that it is a relatively late development of the concept, irony up to the end of the eighteenth century having been "thought of as essentially intentional and instrumental, someone realizing a purpose by using language ironically".⁵

Muecke's reference to intention raises more questions than can be resolved at this point,⁶ but the type of irony I shall be concerned with can be seen as a variant of this earlier "instrumental" irony in depending on the presence of an ironist, that is, "someone ... using language ironically". To narrow this down to language used in a literary work, I shall refer to it as "literary irony". Situational irony can, of course, appear in a literary work, in which case it becomes a feature of literary irony, since the situation is being presented by an ironist: whereas the irony of a man's eviction from the house he has given his daughter lies purely in the situation, it becomes a literary irony when someone writes a play about it.

Literary irony can for my purposes be divided into structural and non-structural, or "local", ironies. Structural irony is, as the name indicates, a function of the development of the work in which it occurs, and can only be appreciated in terms of the whole work. The best-known form of such irony is dramatic irony. Lady Macbeth's "A little water clears us of this deed"⁷ is not self-evidently ironic: its effect is dependent on its complement in the sleep-walking scene. As Muecke puts it, in a slightly different context, "Until an ironic message is interpreted as intended it has only the sound of one hand clapping"⁸; and a structural irony can be thus interpreted only with knowledge of its context.

Local irony, on the other hand, inheres in a statement, description or situation of which the ironic point is immediately apparent, at any rate to the acute reader. The most famous example of this, without which no study of irony is complete, is Jane Austen's opening sentence to Pride and Prejudice: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."⁹ Such local

⁵ Irony and the Ironic, p. 19.

⁶ I discuss the problem of "Intention" in Chapter III.

⁷ Macbeth, II, ii. 67.

⁸ Irony and the Ironic, p. 39.

⁹ Pride and Prejudice, ed. with introd. Tony Tanner (1813; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 51.

irony is sometimes called "verbal irony", but the term is probably best avoided, since it can also be used (and is used by Muecke) to refer to any form of irony that uses words as its medium, in other words any non-situational irony.

For my purposes structural irony can be further divided into "resolved irony" and "unresolved irony", a distinction which the rest of this chapter will attempt to clarify. Since these types of irony are defined in terms of what happens to them, as it were, in the process of the work, they need to be demonstrated by reference to certain key works of literature. Such a demonstration will occupy most of this chapter, but it may be useful first to describe both types in purely theoretical terms.

The most general quality of all literary irony is the double or multiple awareness upon which it is posited: the responsive reader notes the apparent meaning of a statement or situation, rejects it as inadequate in terms of the total context, and reconstructs a full meaning. This new meaning will incorporate the inadequate meaning: it consists more often of a tension between two simultaneous meanings than of a simple substitution of the "correct" meaning for the "incorrect". It is this pattern, with the concomitant pleasure derived by the reader (or spectator) from his intellectual command of an ambiguous situation, that has characterised irony from its earliest occurrences, even before the word existed, as Muecke points out:

The phenomenon was responded to before it was named and consequently before there could have been a concept of it; and the word existed before it was applied to the phenomenon.¹⁰

As for the word itself, its origins in early Greek comedy point to a similar delight in the ability to see beyond the apparently simple meaning of a situation, a delight shared in Greek comedy by the spectator and the stock character of the eiron. The eiron was, of course,

the natural antagonist of another stock figure, the boastful alazon, who sought to achieve his ends by deception through exaggeration.

¹⁰ Irony and the Ironic, p. 15. Muecke cites an example of what we would call irony from the Odyssey.

The eiron was an underdog - small and frail, but sly and resourceful; he regularly triumphed over the bullying alazon by his ingenuity, his skill in dissembling his knowledge and his powers.¹¹

The "skill in dissembling his knowledge and his powers" has survived in the modern eiron, that is, the author who "pretends" to mean something simpler than he in fact does: Jane Austen pretending to accept as a "truth" the wishful thinking of mothers with marriageable daughters, or Shakespeare allowing Lady Macbeth to believe that a murder is expunged by washing one's hands. In both cases, the reader, like the spectator of Greek comedy, shares with the author the sense of superior insight. In the case of a local irony such as Jane Austen's, however, the alazon becomes a theoretical fiction: our pleasure in decoding the irony presumes, in a sense, the existence of somebody (Mrs Bennet? A literal-minded reader?) imperceptive enough to be misled by Jane Austen's straight face. The alazon of a dramatic irony, on the other hand, is readily identifiable; we experience the irony as a tension between the ignorance or blindness of the alazon and the insight of the eiron, whose privileged position we are allowed to share. From this it will be obvious that the alazon has lost most of his original boastful character. An element of it may remain, in some cases, in the form of a certain presumptuous confidence, but in general the essential quality of the alazon is simply the ignorance that makes him vulnerable to the eiron.

The distinction between resolved and unresolved irony is based on whether or not the alazon eventually overcomes his blindness. In the former he moves, in the course of the work, towards the insight which has supplied the necessary opposite pole to his ignorance. As he reaches that insight, the tension disappears and the irony is extinguished. The name "resolved irony" is intended to stress this element of extinction: it implies completion, but unlike the word completed, which etymologically contains the idea of filling up, resolved has etymological undertones of loosening and disintegration. The musical meaning of resolved is also appropriate: having been in discord with the values or insights implied by the work, the protagonist's actions are resolved into concord. Resolved irony thus corresponds closely to Muecke's term Specific Irony, one of the qualities of

¹¹ H.M. C[hevalier], "Irony", Dictionary of World Literature, ed. Joseph T. Shipley, new and rev. ed. (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1968), p. 233.

which is that "When the victim is dealt with the incident is closed, the irony is over."¹² It also has much in common with Booth's category of "stable irony":

... the stable irony with which we shall now wrestle does not mock our efforts by making general claims about the ironic universe, or the universe of human discourse. It does not say, "There is no truth". ... On the contrary, it delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse.¹³

The difference between this and resolved irony is, of course, that stable irony need have no structural significance whatsoever: Jane Austen's opening sentence and Lady Macbeth's statement are equally stable in that "we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse."

The simplest distinction between resolved and unresolved irony is that in the latter type the alazon never achieves the insight necessary to defuse the irony. In practice this often, though not invariably, means that the values which the protagonist transgresses are less overtly defined in the work; in extreme cases we may be left with a pervasive irony that denies the possibility of any stable value. In such cases the irony is defined not by placing the protagonist's aberration against a fixed value, but often by undercutting the protagonist's illusion of a fixed value with the depiction of a reality incapable of accommodating such a value. In this respect unresolved irony approaches Muecke's category of General Irony, which is a vision of "life itself or any general aspect of life ... as fundamentally and inescapably an ironic state of affairs".¹⁴ Muecke's General Irony, however, is not necessarily a structural or even a literary irony: it inheres in a particular "state of affairs", whether or not that state is depicted in literature. For Muecke, the "General" nature of the irony is partly a matter of its subject matter, its "province" being "not so much the manners of men as 'the morals of the Universe'".¹⁵ Unresolved irony, on the other hand, is defined by reference to its outcome in the work; "the

¹² Compass of Irony, p. 119.

¹³ Rhetoric of Irony, p. 6.

¹⁴ Compass of Irony, p. 120.

¹⁵ Compass of Irony, p. 120.

manners of men" may also give rise to unresolved ironies, as the late novels of Henry James demonstrate.

Wayne Booth's category of "unstable ironies" resembles, in many respects, both General Irony and unresolved irony, but an important difference, for my purposes, lies in the indeterminacy of meaning he ascribes to unstable ironies:

... the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony. The author - insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed - refuses to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: "this affirmation must be rejected," leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really "mean what it says."¹⁶

Whereas certain instances of unresolved irony may well lead to such a denial of all stable meaning, it need not produce such a total collapse of meaning as is envisaged by Booth. Indeed, it is central to my argument that an understanding of unresolved irony may enable us to extract a clearer meaning from certain works than is yielded by expectations of resolution. The meaning may well not be as finite as that implied by resolved irony; but it is determinate enough to be shown to be founded on the text. The most notable example of this for me is The Golden Bowl, whose notorious elusiveness I believe to be due to the lack of resolution of its ironies, but whose meaning similarly resides in that lack of resolution.

The clearest approach to unresolved irony probably lies through the more positively defined area of resolved irony, which has the further advantage, for purposes of demonstration, of being represented by some of the most famous of "ironical" works. What has come to be regarded as the archetypal ironical work, Sophocles' King Oedipus, may serve as the prototype of resolved irony. In this play, the famous irony that Oedipus, in seeking to escape his destiny, unwittingly fulfils that destiny, is secondary to the irony actually enacted in the play: Oedipus, in seeking the cause of the

¹⁶ Rhetoric of Irony, p. 240-41.

plague upon Thebes, is unwittingly searching for himself. His discovery of the identity of the murderer of Laius constitutes, in a different sense, his discovery of his own identity. What the audience see is a man slowly moving towards the knowledge they themselves possess, and the resolution of the irony occurs when Oedipus arrives at that knowledge. The irony is horrifically emphasized by his blinding of himself at the moment of vision.

In King Oedipus, then, the pattern of resolved irony may be seen in its starkest form: the movement from blindness to insight, with the irony, felt as the tension between the knowledge of the audience and the ignorance of the alazon, resolved at the moment of insight, as the protagonist achieves equality with the audience.

Related to this achievement of equality is the stable and shared scale of values underlying the irony. Oedipus has sinned against a code accepted alike by himself, Jocasta, Creon, the citizens of Thebes and the audience; it is Oedipus' acceptance of his own guilt in terms of this communal code that makes possible the resolution. If we were to question the justice of Oedipus' fate on the grounds of his ignorance, the focus of the irony would change decisively: instead of a man moving inexorably towards a knowledge we possess in advance, the play would present the victim of a cosmic practical joke groping towards a revelation of the full horror of the joke and, in assuming responsibility for deeds engineered from above, abjectly failing even to see his own victimisation. His destiny would become as absurd as that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play.

This more "modern" interpretation may of course present itself as the obvious one to the modern reader, as anybody will know who has discussed the play with students. Such readers may fail to be intimidated even by a classical scholar's brisk dismissal of their anachronistic sense of justice:

The question of acting in ignorance need not detain us, since for Sophocles in this play, as for Aeschylus, psycho-physical defilement follows the deed without regard to intention.¹⁷

There will always be readers who reject this kind of scholarship as irrelevant to their experience of the play, and maintain that the work means more to them as a comment on the absurdity of existence than as a revelation

¹⁷ John Jones, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 206.

of human blindness. This is a privilege one cannot deny them; but it is in my interests to dissociate myself from this kind of reversal, lest my tracing of unresolved ironies in other works appear equally arbitrary. A truly unresolved irony is not simply a resolved irony turned on its head: it needs to be supported much more strongly by the text than my hypothetical "modern" reading of the Oedipus is. Such a reading, in fact, destroys the shape of the tragedy, dependent as that is on the process of enlightenment, and puts in its place an interpretation based on nothing more demonstrable than what we "feel" about Oedipus' situation. There is no support in the play for the view that Oedipus has been unjustly treated. He accepts without question his guilt and the enormity of his sin:

Incestuous sin! Breeding where I was bred!
 Father, brother, and son; bride, wife, and mother;
 Confounded in one monstrous matrimony!
 All human filthiness in one crime compounded!¹⁸

Against this is placed no exculpation on the grounds of ignorance. Having moved out of line with the values of the community as embodied in the play, he moves back into line - or, to exploit the musical meaning of the word "resolved", having been in discord with those values, his actions are resolved into concord. Oedipus, the once proud and imperious ruler, accepts the will of Creon and the citizens with absolute humility. The question of the justice of Oedipus' fate is not introduced overtly; in Oedipus at Colonus, on the other hand, where the question does serve Sophocles' dramatic purpose, it is openly stated:

Or tell me: if my father was foredoomed
 By the voice of heaven to die by his own son's hand,
 How can you justly cast it against me,
 Who was still unborn when that decree was spoken?
 Unborn? Nay, unbegotten, unconceived,
 And if, being born, as I was, for this calamity,
 I chanced to meet my father and to kill him,
 Not knowing who he was or what I did -
 How can you hold the unwitting act against me?¹⁹

¹⁸ Sophocles, King Oedipus in The Theban Plays, trans. with introd. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), p. 64, 11, 1405-08.

¹⁹ Oedipus at Colonus, The Theban Plays, p. 101, 11, 968-76.

Even here, Oedipus is not accusing the gods: he is angrily exculpating himself to Creon. But the point is that such an exculpation, if inserted into King Oedipus, would have deflected the impact of the discovery, and left the irony unresolved. In that the resolution is dependent upon our not questioning the code by which the protagonist is judged, resolved irony resembles Specific Irony, which Muecke describes as involving

single exposures of aberrancy in a world otherwise safely moving on the right track, or at least in a world whose own possible aberrancy was, for the purposes of the irony, not in question. ... When the victim is dealt with the incident is closed, the irony is over. In these instances of irony the victim is isolated; he is 'in the wrong' and over against him are the rest of society or mankind who are 'in the right' and safe. ... [Specific Irony] is characteristic of, though by no means confined to, a society with a more or less 'closed ideology', that is a society whose values are more or less established, whose members, as a body, are 'assured of certain certainties'.²⁰

Thus the possible shortcomings of the "closed ideology" upon which Specific or resolved irony is based are "for the purposes of the irony, not in question". It is this point that my factitious "modern" interpretation of King Oedipus was intended to demonstrate: this type of irony requires something for the protagonist to offend against, and somewhere for him to return to after his aberration - even if, as in the case of Oedipus, that "return" paradoxically consists of banishment.

The need to accept that the protagonist is isolated by his aberrancy from "the rest of society or mankind who are 'in the right' and safe" may seem to suggest that resolved irony is based on an unyielding, even smug piety. We need go no further than King Oedipus, though, to see that this is not necessarily the case: "established" values need not exclude compassion, a fact to which Sophocles' plays owe much of their power. Although his plays move towards a reconciliation of human suffering with the divine will, he never denies the reality of that suffering. The words of Odysseus in the Ajax upon seeing his enemy, Ajax, humiliated by a gloating Athena, may serve to sum up the quality and source of this compassion:

²⁰ Compass of Irony, pp. 119-20. My underlining.

I think of him, yet also of myself;
 For I see the true state of all us that live -
 We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.²¹

Resolved irony, in other words, though it tends towards conformity, need not lack complexity.

It is in Aeschylus, however, that the potential complexities of resolved irony are most fully realised. The Oresteia is explicitly concerned with the conflict between apparent absolutes: fidelity to one value involves transgression of another. Thus every act, unlike the acts of Oedipus, becomes susceptible to two scales of value, in such a way as to threaten the stability of a community based on "a more or less 'closed ideology'". Consequently, the ironies are not simple dramatic ironies revealing only the ignorance of the character uttering them. They are, in other words, based not only on the tension between ignorance and knowledge but also on the tension between two rival ethical claims.

One scene from the Agamemnon will serve to demonstrate the involved nature of the ironies generated by this conflict. Clytemnestra, triumphant in her killing of Agamemnon, answers the concern of the chorus over the lack of funeral rites with bitter sarcasm:

CLYTEMNESTRA:

But, as is fit, his daughter
 Shall meet him near the porchway
 Of those who perished young;
 His loved Iphigenia
 With loving arms shall greet him,
 And gagged and silent tongue.

CHORUS:

Reproach answers reproach; truth darkens still.
 She strikes the striker; he who dared to kill
 Pays the full forfeit. While Zeus holds his throne,
 This maxim holds on earth: the sinner dies.
 That is god's law. Oh, who can exorcize
 This breeding curse, this canker that has grown
 Into these walls, to plague them at its will?

²¹ Sophocles, Ajax, trans. John Moore, from Sophocles II, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 13, ll. 124-26.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

The sinner dies: you have reached the truth at last.
 Now to the Powers that persecute
 Our race I offer a sworn pact:
 With this harsh deed and bitter fact
 I am content; let them forget the past,
 Leave us for ever, and oppress
 Some other house with murderous wickedness.
 I ask no weight of wealth;
 For me it will suffice
 To purchase, at this price,
 For our long sickness, health.

Enter AEGISTHUS

AEGISTHUS:

O happy day, when Justice comes into her own!
 Now I believe that gods, who dwell above the earth
 See what men suffer, and award a recompense:
 Here, tangled in a net the avenging Furies wove,
 He lies, a sight to warm my heart; and pays his blood
 In full atonement for his father's treacherous crime.²²

Thus the outrage of the chorus, not only at the murder of Agamemnon, but also at the absence of fitting funeral rites, is mockingly met on both charges: Agamemnon has got and will get what is "fit" for a man who has killed his daughter. Accustomed to an unambiguous socio-religious norm, the chorus have the double awareness of irony, with its characteristic questioning of absolutes, thrust upon them: "Reproach answers reproach; truth darkens still." They almost instinctively move towards an absolute to assuage their perplexity; their heavily reinforced appeals to divine authority are clearly intended to ward off the darkness: "While Zeus holds his throne,/This maxim holds on earth: the sinner dies./That is God's law." The statement is, like all maxims, very general; but Agamemnon's death being the death at issue, "God's law" puts them into Clytemnestra's camp; she, at any rate, triumphantly seizes upon their maxim to vindicate herself: "the sinner dies: you have reached the truth at last."

This "truth" is defective only in begging the question of who the sinner is, and if for strategic reasons Clytemnestra can not afford to admit that she realises this, her offer of a pact with "the Powers that persecute/Our race" nevertheless shows an uneasy awareness of her succession to a bloody

²² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon in The Oresteian Trilogy*, trans. with introd. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), pp. 96-97. 11. 1555-84.

inheritance. The pact she offers is almost naively one-sided: "I am content; let them forget the past"; and her concession ("I ask no weight of wealth") all too evidently an attempt to "purchase, at this price" immunity from the principle she has just invoked.

Her claim to divine sanction is shaken rather than reinforced by the triumphant entry of Aegisthus. In essentials they agree, of course: Agamemnon's death was ordained by the gods. But he advances a different justification: "his father's treacherous crime." And the "net the avenging Furies wove" was in fact woven by Clytemnestra for reasons unconnected (in her mind, at least) with that crime. The gods may well have settled two scores with one death, of course, and two people may desire the death of the same person for different reasons; but the different interpretations, both valid as far as they go,²³ by their very vehemence attempt to divert attention from the unspoken common motive behind the common purpose: Aegisthus' usurpation of Agamemnon's throne and bed. It is this silent knowledge that charges his statement, as it does Clytemnestra's self-vindication, with the main dramatic irony of the scene:

gods, who dwell above the earth,
see what men suffer, and award a recompense.

The stage is set for the entry of Orestes.

The ironies permeating this scene are resolved on one level when Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are killed by Orestes, and the justice of the gods whom they have invoked thus descends upon them. The pattern is similar to that of King Oedipus, but here the irony is only a local incidence of a deeper irony, which remains unresolved until the end of the trilogy: an act can be both right and wrong at the same time.

This is the dilemma confronting Orestes, as appears from his interchange with his mother: the stichomythia, a form perfectly adapted to the juxtaposing of rival claims, culminates in Clytemnestra's desperate threat and Orestes' unanswerable rejoinder:

²³ Aegisthus' claim is in fact exactly the same as that of Orestes: he is avenging a crime against his father, to which the Furies, as guardians of the blood-tie, compel him.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

Beware the hounding Furies of a mother's curse

ORESTES:

How shall I escape my father's curse if I relent?²⁴

The dilemma is embodied in the Furies who will pursue Orestes once he has killed his mother - and would have pursued him had he not killed her.

To the modern mind this seems like a prima facie case against the gods, a demonstration of the unresolved absurdity of a universe in which man is a stranger, and free only to rebel, however futilely.²⁵ To Aeschylus, however, the fate of the individual is secondary to the need to resolve the conflict: the deadlock must be broken if the house of Atreus, representative of human society, is not to be utterly destroyed.

Nevertheless, the trilogy is not concerned only with the apparently impossible demands of the Furies: against these implacable "old gods" are set the Olympian gods, Apollo and Athena, representing what seems to us a more humane and rational justice. But again it would be a mistake to see them as superseding the Furies, as the New Testament is sometimes seen to supersede the Old. The hideous appearance of the Furies does emphasize the unattractive aspect of the savage principle of justice they pursue ("evil for evil"), but they cannot simply be disregarded. They make it clear that society ignores them at its peril, and their claim is taken seriously, their place in society eventually guaranteed by Athena's offer of a shrine in Athens.

The trial of Orestes is thus not a victory for either side: the human jurors are divided, and the deadlock remains. Aeschylus resolves the opposition between rationality and retribution by coming to terms with it and incorporating the two principles: society needs the implacable punishment of wrongdoers to protect the just, as Athena admits in her entreaty to the Furies:

Sternly weed out the impious, lest their rankness choke
The flower of goodness. I would not have just men's lives
Troubled with villainy.²⁶

²⁴ The Choephoroi in The Oresteian Trilogy, p. 137, ll. 925-26.

²⁵ See, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre's reworking of the Orestes myth, Les Mouches, of whose burden this statement is a rough summary.

²⁶ The Eumenides in The Oresteian Trilogy, p. 177, ll. 907-08.

The renaming of the Erinyes (Furies) to Eumenides (Kindly Ones) is more than an exercise in public relations: it is a recognition of the double aspect of the oldest of society's principles, the bond of blood, as celebrated by the Furies:

Let all together find
 Joy in each other;
 And each both love and hate with the same mind
 As his blood-brother;
 For this heals many hurts of humankind. (pp. 179-80, ll. 983-87)

The trilogy can end on an affirmation of reconciliation, of conflict resolved:

Thus God and Fate are reconciled.
 Then let every voice
 Crown our song with a shout of joy! (p. 182, ll. 1045-1047)

Thus, although the acquittal of Orestes does not in itself settle anything except his personal fate and that of his house, the subsequent reconciliation of "God and Fate" does reassert a stable scheme which had been violated by the history of the house of Atreus. The multiple ironies of the trilogy can be seen to have derived from this disruption, and to have strained towards this unironic celebration. It is necessary, though, to stress the word "strained": we feel that the resolution has been achieved against the powerful drift towards negation. The "modern" reading so inappropriate to King Oedipus becomes a real possibility, though a possibility averted, in the Oresteia.

Of the three extant Greek tragedians, it is of course Euripides who has proved most congenial to the modern mind, a phenomenon which Philip Vellacott ascribes to

the differences which divided Euripides from his contemporaries, and which similarly in our day separate the radical thinker not only from the masses but from many of the more traditional minds among his fellow-intellectuals; ... the more significant gulf lies not between the ancient world and ours, but between the lonely critic of society and the average member of society in any century.²⁷

²⁷ Ironic Drama (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 15. As will become apparent, my reading of Euripides has been heavily influenced by Vellacott. Controversial as his interpretations are, they seem to me consistent and cogent.

The circumstances of Euripides' life, to confine myself to those for the time being, would seem to support Vellacott's analogy. His self-imposed exile from a troubled Athens prefigures the migrations of Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, James and T.S. Eliot - to limit the list to the early and major representatives of this displacement. Furthermore, the lack of appreciation for Euripides amongst his contemporaries, followed by his great popularity after his death, reminds us of the novelists of the turn of our century who no longer felt themselves identified with their public to the same extent as their immediate predecessors. We are told that Sophocles appeared publicly in mourning for Euripides upon report of his death; the fact that this was noted and handed down suggests that it was seen as an act of courage, something like E.M. Forster's generous tribute to Lawrence upon the latter's death.²⁸

These parallels, of course, do not "prove" anything, but they do put into sharper perspective Euripides' relative estrangement from those communal values which we have seen the earlier Greek dramatists to maintain, with whatever difficulty. If there is validity in the connection I have suggested between the values available to an author and the nature of his irony, we can expect Euripides to resort more and more to unresolved irony.

A useful comparison with the Oresteia is offered by Euripides' handling of the same material in his Orestes. Most of the doubts felt by a modern reader in the face of Orestes' dilemma are in fact spelled out, in all bitterness, by Electra at the beginning of Euripides' play:

Then Apollo spoke.
He induced Orestes - was the god wrong? Why should I
Accuse him? - to perform an action which has not
Gained universal applause: to kill his own mother,
And yet he killed her in obedience to Apollo. ...²⁹

Orestes himself, in his confrontation with Menelaus, has fewer scruples in accusing Apollo:

²⁸ Letter to the Nation and Athenaeum, 29 March 1930, rpt. in H. Coombs, ed., D.H. Lawrence: A Critical Anthology (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): "... no one who alienates both Mrs Grundy and Aspasia can hope for a good obituary press." (p. 219).

²⁹ Euripides, Orestes in Orestes and Other Plays, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 301, ll. 28-32.

ORESTES:

What are the gods? We don't know - but we are their slaves.

MENELAÛS:

Well, you obeyed him; doesn't he now come to your help?

ORESTES [sarcastically]:

Oh yes - he's going to help me. That's the way of gods. (pp. 314-15, ll. 418-20)

From the start then, the command of the god is not, as in Aeschylus, merely inscrutable, hiding a larger purpose, but irrational and suspect. Even Orestes, in his sane moments, can recognize that the vengeance wrought in his father's name was futile:

I believe my father, had I asked him face to face
Whether I ought to kill her, would have gripped my hand
And begged, implored me not to lift a sword against
My mother; since that could not bring him back to life,
While it doomed me to the agonies I now endure. (p. 310, ll. 287-91)

The chorus confirm this view, by describing revenge as insanity:

Pitiful son, what is this agony,
This blood-hunt, this persecution?
There is a fiend of vengeance
That drowns your life in tears,
Sinks your house in your mother's blood,
Destroys your mind with madness. (p. 311, ll. 332-37)

Later their condemnation of his act and of the whole attitude that underlies revenge is even more explicit:

'Crime in a just cause' is an impious sophistry,
An insanity breeding in evil hearts. (ll. 823-24)

In Aeschylus this sentiment might have been uttered anxiously, as one of the terms of the debate which the trilogy dramatises; here it is an uncompromising rejection. In fact, like so much else in Euripides' play, this statement would seem to be a reply to a question raised by the Oresteia, in this case the interchange between Electra and the chorus in The Choephoroi:

CHORUS:

Pray simply, 'Let one come to shed blood for blood shed.'

ELECTRA:

Would not a prayer like that seem impious to the gods?

CHORUS:

Why? Evil for evil is no impiety. (p. 108, ll. 124-26)

The rejection of this view in the Orestes provides such moral guidance as we have in a play remarkably destitute of moral positives. It is in the light of the chorus' revulsion from the idea of "Crime in a just cause" that we must interpret the degeneration of the hitherto pitiable Orestes and Electra, under the tutelage of Pylades, into psychopathic killers.

Orestes and Electra, having been sentenced to death by an assembly of citizens, irrationally turn their resentment on Menelaus, who was not even present at the assembly, and who can at most be accused of not giving them assistance (which it was arguably not in his power to give). By the logic of revenge, it is an easy step from this to the plot to kill the defenceless Helen. Neither of the men has ever met her, but they pronounce upon her frivolity with a confidence born, presumably, of trust in the kind of popular opinion which has just sentenced Orestes and Electra to death:

PYLADES:

Let's kill Helen - and send Menelaus raving mad.

ORESTES:

How can we do it? I'm ready, if the plan will work.

PYLADES:

Why, with a sword. She's here now, hiding in your house.

ORESTES:

She is, yes - making a list of all the valuables.

PYLADES:

When she gets Hades for a lover, she'll stop that. (p. 339, ll. 1127-31)

This salacious moralising would have been unpleasant enough even if Helen had been everything the young men assume her to be; but, as Vellacott points out, the only scene in which Helen appears establishes her as a mature and compassionate woman, by whose side Electra seems at best strident, at worst

deranged. Certainly Electra's refinement upon Pylades' plan - using the gentle Hermione as hostage and if necessary cutting her throat - shows her to be in every way the equal of these inventive males. She thus refutes Pylades' chauvinistic generalisation "I've no faith in women" (l. 1125), as Orestes points out approvingly:

Oh, what a manly spirit and resolve shines out
From your weak woman's body! (p. 342, ll. 1203-04)

A manly spirit, we remember from the Oresteia, was what Clytemnestra died for; here it qualifies Electra to become Pylades' prize:

Pylades, this is the wife you'll die to lose,
Or live to win as a rich blessing on your house. (ll. 1205-06)

The "rich blessing" of such a wife is in fact what Apollo bestows upon Pylades when he appears at the end to hand out the prizes. It is not the only element of the ostensibly "happy" ending that is dissonant with what has gone before; the more important one is Apollo's justification of the ways of gods to man (and woman):

For Helen's beauty was to the gods their instrument
For setting Greeks and Trojans face to face in war
And multiplying deaths, to purge the bloated earth
Of its superfluous welter of mortality. (p. 359, ll. 1641-44)

This strikes the modern ear as appallingly callous. How it would have struck an Athenian audience is open to debate, but Vellacott argues convincingly that the play should be seen as "the poet's last personal address to the Athenians" (p. 53) before leaving for Macedon. Certainly the more thoughtful citizens of an Athens sated with the bloodshed of the Peloponnesian War which, by the time the Orestes was produced in 408 B.C., had lurched on for twenty-three years, could hardly have been consoled by an assertion that the gods were using war "to purge the bloated earth/Of its superfluous welter of mortality" - the less so since the Spartans were within sight of Athens and seemed likely to reduce a fair number of the Athenians to such superfluity. This they did four years later.

Given, however, the natural human desire for a happy ending, as well as

the reluctance of the majority of citizens, then as now, to question the meaning of a war to which they have sacrificed so many lives, it seems likely that many members of the original audience would have seen no irony in this ending. As Vellacott says, "the nature of irony, as Euripides uses it, implies that some will see it and some will not" (p. 81). To those who didn't see it, the play was probably a sensational spectacle of bloodshed with a happy ending; to those who did see it, the play was an expression of profound despair at a society that seemed to have gone mad with the desire for revenge and bloodshed.

The ironic reading has the virtue of making sense of the otherwise arbitrary reversal whereby Orestes and Electra turn into cold-blooded murderers, and the chorus abandon their own insight into the impiety of revenge to enter mindlessly into the blood-lust of the main characters, and yearn to see "with [their] own eyes/The dead body of Helen bleeding on the palace floor" (p. 348, ll. 1360-61). It is in the capitulation of the chorus that Vellacott finds the conclusive evidence for Euripides' disillusionment:

We may surmise that what drives the poet from his city is not only the degeneracy of the state, the vanishing of public glory, but the corruption of ordinary people by the miasma of violence. (p. 72)

In this opening out of the play's implications to include the chorus, itself not traditionally a moral agent in Greek tragedy, Euripides extends the focus of his irony from individual to communal aberration. In Muecke's terminology, the Specific Irony becomes General. From the slightly different perspective of unresolved irony, it can be said that whereas in the Oresteia the chorus ends the play with an affirmation consonant with the developed moral meaning, here the discredited chorus can serve no such purpose. In a universe where even the gods are shoddy, the ordinary citizen is not likely to possess the truth.

Unresolved irony will thus always by its very nature be problematic: since what it reflects is a perplexity which metaphorically, and sometimes literally, "drives the poet from his city", the reader is given little overt guidance. The characters evolve in apparent freedom from a moral pattern, and are often at their most unreliable when they claim to have discovered such a moral pattern:

How justly divine vengeance
Has fallen upon Helen! (Orestes, p. 348, ll. 1364-65)

In their complacent equation of human cruelty with divine justice, the chorus may stand as representatives of the eternal alazon of unresolved irony: the character who believes that whatever is, is right in being explicable in terms of a moral or divine purpose. Such a belief need not be merely obtuse, as in the case of the chorus: it may take the form of a crude rationalisation of blood-lust, as in Pylades' justification of his "honourable" plan (p. 340, ll. 1132-53); but it may also be pathetic, as in Iphigenia's dignified acceptance, in Iphigenia in Aulis, of her father's reasons for sacrificing her - reasons that the rest of the play has shown to be false:

Greeks were born to rule barbarians, mother, not barbarians
To rule Greeks. They are slaves by nature; we have freedom in
our blood.³⁰

The "freedom" of the Greeks has in fact proved to be so circumscribed by the tactical demands of a dubious war that Iphigenia is about to be sacrificed against the wish of every major character; while we admire the dignity of her capitulation to the inevitable, we note the hollowness of the ideals which she has accepted from her elders. The note of confident piety rings false, as it does throughout these plays of Euripides, and as it could not have done in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The false note of unfounded piety, that is the note of unresolved irony, sounds whenever the religious, moral or philosophical framework available to a character (or his author) can no longer accommodate the reality dramatised in the work. It is the note we hear centuries later in Chaucer's The Knight's Tale, in Theseus' attempt to ascribe Arcite's death to a rational order of things:

What maketh this but Juppiter the king,
That is Prince and cause of alle thing,

³⁰ Iphigenia in Aulis in Orestes and Other Plays, p. 419, ll. 1399-400.

Converting al unto his propre welle,
From which he is derived, sooth to telle?³¹

Since Chaucer has taken pains to present Arcite's death as caused not by Jupiter, but by the malignant Saturn, in order to settle a squabble amongst the gods, Theseus' claim seems like pious nonsense. Even the comprehensive framework of Boethius' De Consolatione to which Chaucer allows him access, fails to accommodate and resolve the ironies that have been generated. In spite of Theseus' elaborate justification of the ways of the gods to man, Palamon's simple lament is not disposed of:

What governance is in this prescience
That gilteles tormenteth innocence? (p. 48, I, 455-56)³²

Since the ironic mode adopted by an author is a function of his deepest beliefs, it would seem safe to assume, as I have been doing, that a single author writes in either a "resolved" or an "unresolved" mode. But it is of course possible that an author may have found certain questions more amenable to resolution than others, or may at different times have responded differently to the same questions - as is shown, for instance, by the disparity between the attitudes to truth, and thus the very different courses run by the ironies in Ibsen's The Pillars of the Community and The Wild Duck. It is even possible for a single work to contain two patterns of irony, one resolved and one unresolved, leading to almost infinite self-qualifications. It is with a certain consciousness of predictability that one offers Shakespeare as the terminus of such a preamble; but if a discussion of some of his plays is unlikely to reveal hitherto unsuspected aspects of his genius, it may nevertheless provide insights into the effects of irony that will be of value in my discussion of Henry James. The "mixed" nature of Shakespeare's ironies, for instance, may shed some light on James' practice in The Wings of the Dove, while his mastery of both comedy and tragedy may provide insight

³¹ Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader, 2nd ed., ed. E.T. Donaldson, p. 102, ll. 2177-80.

³² For a strong statement of this view, see Elizabeth Salter, Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale (London: Edward Arnold, 1962). For a contrary view, see Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) p. 184: "The actions and speeches by the central figure are the normative ones. ... it is Theseus who expounds the resolutions."

into their relation to each other and to irony that will be relevant to a discussion of The Golden Bowl.

Unresolved irony, as we have seen, occurs when the interpretation offered of an event appears to be merely an evasion of the complex reality it presumes to pronounce upon. What Edgar finds to say about Gloucester's suffering in King Lear must stand as a classic of the type:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us. (V. iii. 170-71)

This takes its place readily with the chorus' "How justly divine vengeance/ Has fallen upon Helen" in the Orestes, and with Theseus' "What maketh this but Juppiter the king ...?" In all these cases, the speaker ascribes a stable pattern to an unstable reality. At best this seems facile, at worst callous - and in Edgar's statement, with its sick variant on the "eye for an eye" concept of justice, rendered even more unpleasant by the inverted salaciousness of puritanism: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes." (V. iii. 172-73).

By Edgar's philosophy, we get what we deserve, and the irony lies in our blindness to the fate we are preparing for ourselves - a callous version of the Oedipus pattern, in short. Whatever the merits of Edgar's motives, his reasoning fundamentally resembles the attitude underlying Regan's refusal to prevent her father from venturing out into the storm:

O sir, to wilful men
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors. (II. ii. 301-03)

In Gloucester's despairing view, on the other hand, no such heuristic intention inheres in the scheme of things: man is the victim of malign powers, and the irony lies in his blindness to the ultimate meaninglessness of the suffering which he tries to understand:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods,
They kill us for their sport. (IV. i. 36-37)

The conflict between such statements is not exceptional in itself - the

Greek tragedies contain many such - but what distinguishes King Lear is that the play seems to dramatise both these interpretations of human suffering impartially, in that it contains a double pattern of irony. It would need a full analysis of the play to show with what consistency the double vision is sustained; I can here only mention a few of the key terms that in their ambiguity express the two-sidedness of the play's universe.

"Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?" (III.vi. 75) asks Lear; whereas Edmund, by claiming "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" (I. ii. 1) would seem to suggest that making hard hearts is what nature is best at. On the other hand, Lear is reminded that he has

one daughter
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to. (IV. vi. 208-210)

In that man is also an animal, it is as "natural" to be cruel as to be kind. If he is more than the animals by virtue of his reason, which can restrain his cruelty, the same reason also enables him to exercise that cruelty with a calculated ingenuity of which animals are incapable. In spite of all the animal images in the play, the most telling image of cruelty remains that of "wanton boys" killing flies for "sport". The play supplies no clear answer to Lear's question "Is man no more than this?" (III. iv. 100-01): even "more" is a paradoxical concept in a world where Cordelia's "Nothing" (I. i. 86), has been opposed to Goneril's "more" (I. i. 54), and where it is possible to be "most rich, being poor" (I. i. 250).

These paradoxes are more than word-play: they are the vehicles of two sharply differentiated interpretations of human existence. It is this double vision that makes it so perilous to pronounce on Shakespeare's "world view". Even as great a critic as A.C. Bradley seems to me to attempt the impossible in his scrupulous quest for "the substance of a Shakespearean tragedy, taken in abstraction both from its form and from the differences in point of substance between one tragedy and another."³³ He finds, at the centre of the tragedies, a constant affirmation of a "moral power":

In Shakespearean tragedy the main source of the convulsion which produces suffering and death is never good: good contributes to this convulsion only from its tragic implication with its opposite in one and the same character. The main source, on the contrary,

³³Shakespearean Tragedy (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 1.

is in every case evil; and what is more ..., it is in almost every case evil in the fullest sense, not mere imperfection but plain moral evil. ... Tragedy, on this view, is the exhibition of that convulsive reaction; and the fact that the spectacle does not leave us rebellious or desperate is due to a more or less distinct perception that the tragic suffering and death arise from collision, not with a fate or blank power, but with a moral power, a power akin to all that we admire and revere in the characters themselves. (pp. 25-26)

Though Bradley is not concerned with irony here, his view of the moral substance of Shakespearean tragedy has something in common with Muecke's description of Specific Irony as involving "single exposures of aberrancy in a world otherwise safely on the right track". Where, according to Bradley, the "convulsive reaction" is presumably designed to expose and expel the evil that caused the convulsion, Shakespeare's tragedies, in so far as they are ironical, would operate, in my terminology, in terms of resolved irony.

It is of course true that such irony is to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies, notably in Macbeth, which is the tragedy that conforms most closely to Bradley's model in being a process of moral recognition, with Macbeth's vision of the ultimate futility of life placed in a larger and morally meaningful context. The pattern persists even in King Lear, where it lends to Edgar's statement such validity as it possesses. The play's main plot does up to a point sustain this pattern. Lear's crude soliciting of public displays of devotion, the distorted values that lead him to misjudge his daughters, his assumption that his humanity guarantees him the dignity hitherto accorded his position: all these can in a real sense be seen as causes of his suffering, although we would hesitate to call them "evil".

By this view, the climax of the tragedy, with Lear being sustained by the daughter he rejected, is also the moment of enlightenment. As Lear discovers himself "most rich, being poor", he sees the emptiness of the world he is leaving behind, and envisages himself and Cordelia as spectators of human vanity:

so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too -
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out -
 And take upon's the mystery of things
 As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out
 In a wall'd prison packs and sects of great ones
 That ebb and flow by th' moon. (V. iii. 11-19)

This withdrawal from the vanity of human aspirations into god-like serenity and even amusement, would in fact be an assumption of the role of ironical observer, as finely described by Muecke:

The ironist's awareness of himself as the unobserved observer tends to enhance his feeling of freedom and induce a mood perhaps of serenity, or joyfulness, or even exultation.³⁴

As Muecke points out, "[t]he pure or archetypal ironist is God", and those who share His elevated position can afford to indulge in "laughter from on high at the darkness and misery of a world the laughers have escaped."

(p. 221) From being the victim of the irony of the gods, then, Lear has grown into god-like detachment and insight, which enables him to defy even his captors:

The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep. (V. iii. 24-25)

So far the play is consistent with Bradley's model: if the play had ended there we would not have been left "rebellious or desperate". But in the event Lear re-enters, his detachment shattered: "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" (V. iii. 257) That this entrance with the dead Cordelia should immediately follow Albany's "the gods defend her" suggests that Lear is still subject to the ironical sport of the gods; for him, as for Gloucester, the only escape is in death, as Kent recognizes and Edgar does not:

KENT:

Break, heart; I prithee break.

EDGAR:

Look up, my Lord.

KENT:

Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (V. iii. 311-14)

It would take an Edgar to see in Lear's death, or in Cordelia's, Bradley's

³⁴ Compass of Irony, p. 218.

"moral power, a power akin to all that we admire and revere in the characters themselves." These deaths can not be contained in any acceptable interpretation of the justice of the gods. The tragedy shifts from that of the deluded individual to that of man's existence.

In what I have called Shakespeare's mixed irony, then, the resolved ironies supply answers that are themselves questioned by the unresolved ironies. One of the effects of such sceptical subversion is to blur the distinction between tragedy and comedy, or to put it more accurately, to bring out the intimate connection between tragedy and comedy. As Muecke remarks:

Of course Othello and Oedipus Rex are not comedies. They are however, spectacles of blindness, and calling them tragedies cannot take from them what they have in common with blind-man's buff: comic pleasure with overtones of sadism and voyeurism.³⁵

This may be a rather lurid account of our response to these plays, but it does enable us to see that the decisive difference between tragedy and comedy lies not in their essential pattern, but in our interpretation of that pattern, or rather our orientation in relation to that pattern. In the case of King Lear, the spectacle with which Lear intends to divert himself and Cordelia is a comic one - from their perspective - and the amusement is premised upon their immunity from the illusions they observe. Lear's ironic vision, of course, is in turn ironised by our knowledge that he in fact possesses no such immunity to illusion as he imagines. Thus Shakespeare superimposes a tragic irony upon a comic irony - a reversal of the process whereby he has consistently, through the Fool, applied a comic perspective to the tragic.

Thus a situation can be seen as either tragic or comic, depending on whether we identify with the eiron or the alazon. Malvolio is as much the victim of irony as Lear; the difference is that we are on the side of the ironists. In Gloucester's horrifying vision, the gods enjoy their "sport"; who can tell what mirth they derived from their sport with Lear? And conversely, who can tell what Malvolio suffered? He, at least, does not feel obliged to accept Fabian's interpretation of his humiliation:

³⁵ Irony and the Ironic, p. 47.

How with a sportful malice it was follow'd
 May rather pluck on laughter than revenge,
 If that the injuries be justly weigh'd
 That have on both sides pass'd.

OLIVIA:

Alas, poor fool, how have they baffl'd thee!

....

MALVOLIO:

I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.

EXIT.³⁶

The "sportful malice" of a fellow human being may be less devastating than the sport of the gods, but it still requires near-inhuman detachment on the part of the victim to laugh with the mockers. In short, the irony has not as comfortably resolved itself for Malvolio as for the others - which may account for the slight awkwardness that remains after his exit. It is possible that the joke at Malvolio's expense is pushed beyond the point where we identify with the jokers, and we change sides. Of course, the play never does enter the realm of tragedy, but nor do we feel particularly comfortable in laughing at Malvolio; the unresolved element of the irony disturbs our orientation.

Usually, of course, we are sure enough of whose side we are on to know how to react to the blindness of the protagonist. We snigger with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew at Malvolio's delighted "By my life, this is my lady's hand" (II. v. 79), but generally refrain from laughing when Duncan says to Lady Macbeth "Fair and noble hostess/We are your guest tonight." (Macbeth, I. vi. 24-25). In comedy we look forward to the disillusionment that we know the victim will suffer, in tragedy we await it apprehensively; but in either case we experience a certain tension which calls for resolution. We are thus left troubled if the protagonist's disillusionment is not accommodated within a context larger than itself, a context which can transform disillusionment into enlightenment. Whereas resolved irony tends to supply such a context in the form of the communal values violated by the protagonist, unresolved irony characteristically gives us no such vantage point from which to judge and place the action; consequently the distinction between comedy and tragedy begins to waver. Our uncertainty may, of course, be merely a result of the

³⁶ Twelfth Night, V. i. 352-56, 363.

clumsiness of the author, as when a tragically intended effect turns into bathos because the values asserted are not adequately supported by the presented reality (the death of Little Nell is probably the most famous example of this). More interestingly, though, an uncertainty about genre can be created by the author's sense that a situation is capable of both a comic and a tragic interpretation.

When consistently executed, this can be a most elusive form of irony. The reader who cannot fix the genre of a work finds his confidence in seeing a meaning which escapes the characters continually undermined by his sense of a further meaning which ironises his meaning, and which cannot be held simultaneously with it. As E.D. Hirsch has pointed out, our interpretation of a work is likely to be influenced by our assumptions about the genre to which it belongs:

By classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits a general horizon for its meaning. The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning components.³⁷

It follows that where the genre is not fixed the "general horizon" shifts disconcertingly, changing our own orientation towards it. As readers we have been jolted out of the privileged position we share with the eiron, and we ourselves become the alazons of a particularly sophisticated form of irony.

The liveliest example of such inexhaustibly unresolved irony is Chaucer's The Nun's Priest's Tale, that mock-tragic, mock-epic, mock-philosophical comedy which systematically undermines every conclusion reached by the characters or the narrator, except perhaps the conclusion that one should keep one's eyes open and one's mouth shut. In Chaucer's tale, however, we still have one stable generic convention, that of the fable, to guide us: we are unlikely to take Chauntecleer's situation quite as seriously as he takes it himself. An even more tantalising example of ironic undermining, where we have no such guidance, is the conclusion of Antony and Cleopatra. Our interpretation depends on the degree of our identification with Antony,

³⁷"Objective Interpretation", P.M.L.A., 75, no. 4, Pt. 1 (September 1960), 463-79; rpt. in On Literary Intention, ed. David Newton - De Molina (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 36.

on whether we believe that he has triumphed over his destiny, or is yet again a strumpet's fool and the dupe of his own self-image. "Comedy" may seem too strong a word for this second possibility, but in fact, once we have adopted that perspective, a surprising number of details confirm it. What actually happens on stage before and after Antony's death?

Cleopatra, having "sold" Antony "to the young Roman boy" (IV. xii. 48) can yet not bear to lose his love, and tests her power over him by having Charmian tell him that she has killed herself - "and word it, prithee, piteously" (IV. xiii. 9) - and report back "how he takes my death."

Antony, believing the report somewhat against his better knowledge of Cleopatra, imagines walking with her "where souls do couch on flowers" (IV. xiv. 51), while we know that Cleopatra is in fact alive and well and hiding in a monument. In an attempt to prove that "I am conqueror of myself" (IV. xiv. 62), he orders Eros to perform the conquest. When Eros shows greater courage than he, the chastened Antony delivers a humble speech ("And Eros,/ Thy master dies thy scholar: to do thus/[falling on his sword]/I learned of thee" - IV. xiv. 101-03), only to prove that the scholar has learnt his lesson badly:

How! not dead? not dead?
The guard, ho! O, dispatch me!

The guards, however, also seem reluctant to deprive Antony of his conquest of himself: crying "Alas, and woe!" they promptly flee the scene - all except Decretas, who pauses just long enough to filch the sword that will "enter" him with Caesar (IV. iv. 112). Upon being summoned by the belatedly concerned Cleopatra, Antony delivers a touching farewell to his followers which ignores their late desertion of him (IV. xiv. 135-140). Since Cleopatra "dare not" descend from the monument "Lest I be taken" (IV. xv. 23), Antony is heaved up to her, where he with difficulty wins the privilege of having the last word on his own death ("... let me speak a little" - "No, let me speak ..." - "One word, sweet queen ..."), and dies believing himself "a Roman, by a Roman/Valiantly vanquished." (IV. xv. 57-58).

Moved by his death, and inspired by his belated patriotism, Cleopatra resolves to meet death "after the high Roman fashion" (IV. xv. 86) that has just been demonstrated to her. In spite of this resolve she takes pains to find out what Caesar intends to do with her. She delivers a hyperbolic

eulogy on Antony to Dolabella, which abruptly yields to practical matters once Dolabella shows that he has been moved by it:

DOLABELLA:

... I do feel
By the rebound of yours, a grief that smites
My very heart at root.

CLEOPATRA:

I thank you, sir.
Know you what Caesar means to do with me? (V. ii. 103-06)

After this it transpires that Cleopatra has reserved "some lady trifles" (V. ii. 165) from the list of her possessions given to Caesar - "enough to purchase what you have made known." (V. ii. 148) Upon another warning from Dolabella about Caesar's intentions, she kills herself, having, we are told in the last speech of the play, "pursued conclusions infinite/Of easy ways to die." (V. ii. 354-55)³⁸

Much as such an interpretation offends against our actual experience of these scenes, it is based only on what is undeniably present in the play. Moreover, it corresponds to the more sceptical view of the lovers' claims that has been maintained throughout the play, mainly through the level gaze of Enobarbus.

The point may be that we are not encouraged to detach ourselves in this way. It is perhaps significant that there is no Enobarbus-figure in these last scenes: Shakespeare allows his lovers some of his most rapturous poetry without any overt reminder of the shakiness of its foundations. The irony is confirmed rather than resolved: that is, where the normal process of resolution starts with blindness and ends in clear-sightedness, we are here at the outset given the least flattering view possible of "this dotage of our general's" (I. i. 1.), and at the conclusion encouraged to surrender to the charmed vision of the lovers. It is as if Shakespeare, having scrupulously established the impersonal cross-checks of the total context, can afford to proffer a love that validates itself by the magnificence of its assertions rather than by the truth of its claims. Cleopatra's lament on Antony (IV. xv. 63-68) remains beautiful in spite of, and oddly because of, our knowledge

³⁸ The audience is not likely to question at such a moment the nature of these experiments. Plutarch tells us that Cleopatra tried out various poisons on condemned prisoners.

of her falsehood to Antony while he was alive: we, like Antony throughout the play, gladly believe that this time she is sincere - or otherwise, like the "holy priests" reported by Enobarbus, we simply "bless her when she is riggish." (II. ii. 245-46) And in admiring Antony's generosity (which quite literally vanquishes Enobarbus) we willingly forego the reflection that he is as generous in his assessment of himself as of others.

Both perspectives remain, however: to believe that love conquers all is to ignore the fact that it hardly conquers anything in this play; but to believe that conquest is more important than love is to elect Octavius Caesar as the moral centre of the play.

As I am in danger of demonstrating, one could go on forever piling qualification upon qualification. The play defies a stable equilibrium: it refuses to commit itself finally to any one scale of values, and leaves the reader anxiously examining his own scale of values. Like the drunken Lepidus, we try to take the measure of something which "is shaped, Sir, like itself, and ... is as broad as it hath breadth" (II. viii. 43-44). And if "the tears of it are wet" we may not notice that they are crocodile tears.

To ascribe such instability of meaning to the play is of course not to deny that it has any meaning: it is simply to maintain that the meaning is irreducible to the kind of certainty that resolved irony derives from a commonly accepted standard of judgement. But if Antony and Cleopatra is a dazzling process of ironic undermining, it is also an exhilarating demonstration of the potentially liberating effect of unresolved irony. If the consciousness of the relativity of all things can, as we shall shortly see, lead to barren cynicism, it can also lead to a supreme freedom from dogmatism and a delight in "infinite variety". It is a reminder that if, as Muecke says, the Supreme Ironist is God, then the human ironist can be god-like in other ways than killing flies for sport. The more humane aspect of such god-like irony is presented by E.T. Donaldson in describing the qualities Chaucer has in common with his Nun's Priest. Donaldson's description of Chaucer inevitably projects a more benign image than we have of Shakespeare, but it does convey one aspect of the ironic clear-sightedness that Shakespeare has in common with Chaucer. If it leaves out the Shakespeare of King Lear, it also leaves out the Chaucer of The Knight's Tale. The ironist sublime, according to Donaldson,

can survey the world as if he were no part of it, as if he were

situated comfortably on the moon looking at a human race whom he knew and loved wholeheartedly but whose ills he was immune from.... It is almost as if the Creator were watching with loving sympathy and humorous appreciation the solemn endeavours of His creatures to understand the situation in which He placed them.³⁹

To wonder what His creatures would make of this would be to cross yet again the faint line between comedy and tragedy, and to end where we started, with Orestes saying "What are the gods? We don't know - but we are their slaves."

It will have appeared that unresolved irony has existed for as long as man has sensed a discrepancy between his view of himself and the gods' view of him, between what the gods seem to promise and what they do. There have been, in all periods, individuals whose sense of the complexity of things was greater than their belief in the frameworks available to them for the ordering of that complexity, and who thus have been aware of ironies that could not be resolved. It seems likely, however, that such an awareness was more prevalent at certain periods of history than at others: at times when the discrepancy between society's professed values and its behaviour seemed so strong as to bring into question not only the behaviour but the values themselves. Athens towards the end of the Peloponnesian War may have experienced such a time; and so, certainly, did Europe in the fourteenth century, ravaged as it was by the Black Death and by interminable wars - wars declared Holy by a pope whose authority was being challenged by an antipope in Avignon. Few situations can be more conducive to an ironic perspective, which is to say more subversive of absolute belief, than the spectacle of rival popes.

At such times the alazon will be less often the person who violates communal values, and frequently the person who tries to live according to them. As Conrad shows in Nostramo, it is Captain Mitchell with his belief in "civilised" values, rather than a glorified bandit like Pedrito Montero, who is out of touch with reality in the lawlessness of Costaguana. Unresolved irony, as we have seen, does not ironise the unstable in terms of the stable: it ironises the illusion of stability in terms of manifest instability. It is thus likely to thrive in the wake of such an illusion -

³⁹ Editor's notes, Chaucer's Poetry, p. 1108.

at times, in other words, when belief at large is still both strong enough and ignorant enough to act as alazon.

The turn of our century was such a time, still floating on the momentum of Victorian confidence and Victorian values; while the Great War was the cataclysm that effectively destroyed the belief with the ignorance:

When the effort was over, illusions and enthusiasms possible up to 1914 slowly sank beneath a sea of massive disillusionment. For the price it had paid, humanity's major gain was a painful view of its own limitations.⁴⁰

If, as Muecke maintains, all ironic tragedies are "spectacles of blindness",⁴¹ then the Great War, as arguably the most catastrophic spectacle of blindness in history, is also the supreme ironic tragedy. Paul Fussell sees such an apprehension as decisive in forming this century's way of thinking:

I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.⁴²

As Fussell's interesting book shows, there is a good deal of truth in this. An event that shakes man's confidence in himself and the universe so violently must make it more difficult for succeeding generations to adopt a simple view of human values. Even at the time, the outbreak of the War figured, to the few who were not swept along by the national hysteria, as a grim refutation of human aspirations. Fussell quotes a letter written by Henry James on the day after the outbreak of war:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness... is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.⁴³

⁴⁰ Barbara Tuchman, The Proud Tower (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 463.

⁴¹ Irony and the Ironic, p. 47

⁴² The Great War and Modern Memory (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 35.

⁴³ The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols. (New York, 1920), II, 384, quoted by Fussell, p. 8.

We could hardly wish for a clearer statement of the ironic aspect the War presented to a perceptive observer, even before it had revealed its unimaginable horrors. After 1918, when it became evident how little had been achieved at such tremendous cost, the ironic view certainly became more general, as witness, for instance, the recognition of Wilfred Owen, at the expense of Rupert Brooke, as the supreme war poet.

But to limit the origins of the modern ironic habit of thought to the Great War is to see the "Edwardian weekend" simply as a time of total blindness, in which Victorian confidence (itself a questionable generalisation) continued unabated, to be abruptly confronted with a completely unexpected war. There are enough clichés and platitudes surrounding fin de siècle pessimism to suggest otherwise; but without resorting to these, it can be shown from the literature of the time that the disillusionment of the War was the culmination of a progressive disenchantment with the values that had in the previous century provided the writer with a frame of moral reference, with whatever reservations on the writer's part. In a manner of speaking, the War can even be seen as the resolution of an irony that had been operative in the years preceding it; certainly James' letter expresses that achievement of insight towards which all resolved irony moves. We cannot expect the clarity of ironic hindsight from works written before the War, amidst involvement in the ironic process itself; but we may find evidence of disquiet that is, if not exactly prophetic, at least indicative of a growing sense of the disparity between society's professed principles and its practice. The irony that was finally resolved, for minds like James', in the catastrophe of the War may have presented itself as an unresolvable irony to minds loth to contemplate such a resolution.

This is a way of saying that the writers of the period may have had an increasingly helpless ironic view of their subject matter. The "helpless" needs to be qualified, of course; but there is a sense in which irony ceases to be a choice and becomes an instinctive way of viewing one's material. The point is well made by Muecke:

For most 'serious' writers, whether poets, novelists, or dramatists, irony is now much less of a rhetorical or dramatic strategy which they may or may not decide to employ, and much more often a mode of thought silently imposed upon them by the general tendency of the times. ... They may consciously resist it. Or they may find it congenial. But whatever their response to this pressure, it is

there as it cannot be said to have been even in the eighteenth century.⁴⁴

This kind of thing is by its nature difficult to demonstrate in operation, but there is evidence that authors have been aware of this "imposition" of an ironic habit. I am thinking of D.H. Lawrence's creation, in Women in Love, of Gudrun, in whom he dramatises exactly this helpless subjection to irony:

But even as she lay in fictitious transport, bathed in the strange, false sunshine of hope in life, something seemed to snap in her, and a terrible cynicism began to gain upon her, blowing in like a wind. Everything turned to irony with her: the last flavour of everything was ironical. When she felt her pang of undeniable reality, this was when she knew the hard irony of hopes and ideas.⁴⁵

Gudrun's tragedy is that for her, irony has turned into cynicism - that is, the characteristic scepticism of irony has degenerated into a total denial of all traditional values. She observes herself trying on the possibilities of fulfilment in traditional terms, "the strange, false sunshine of hope in life", while knowing that "undeniable reality" renders this vision laughable. Similarly, after Gerald's death she observes herself going through the motions of grief:

Gudrun hid her face on Ursula's shoulder, but still she could not escape the cold devil of irony that froze her soul.
'Ha, ha!' she thought, 'this is the right behaviour.' (p. 577)

Gudrun never does escape the "cold devil of irony": it is her fate to "always see and know and never escape. She could never escape." (p. 565)

Gudrun is of course a character in a novel, and is not to be confused with her author. Lawrence's novel implicitly rejects Gudrun's barren cynicism; but what makes Gudrun such a disquieting figure is exactly that so many of her insights are so valid. Her "hard irony of hopes and ideas" merges naturally with Lawrence's own reflections on the state of society:

⁴⁴ Compass of Irony, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Women in Love, ed. with introd. Charles L. Ross (1921; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 511.

Young as she was, Gudrun had touched the whole pulse of social England. She had no ideas of rising in the world. She knew, with the perfect cynicism of cruel youth, that to rise in the world meant to have one outside show instead of another, the advance was like having a spurious half-crown instead of a spurious penny. (511-12)

The "perfect cynicism of cruel youth" is recognised as such, but its insights are not questioned: the image of the half-crown and the penny is as much Lawrence's as Gudrun's.

Lawrence's novel, though set before the War, was of course written in the midst of it, and in his own words, "actually does contain the results in one's soul of the war".⁴⁶ It may thus be said to have had its ironic vision sharpened by hindsight; but its relevance to my argument lies in its dramatisation of that withdrawal into irony which can become the last refuge of an acute mind confronted with a reality that makes all beliefs suspect: at best naive, at worst dishonest.

It is, of course, Conrad who gives us the most sustained exploration of the dangers of such clear-sightedness, but also our sharpest recognition that it is clear-sightedness. This balance is finely maintained in Sophia Antonovna's words in Under Western Eyes:

'Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action. ...'⁴⁷

The novel upholds Sophia Antonovna's judgement, whereas Razumov's habitual irony is seen to be an evasion of self-knowledge; but the unironical vision is ascribed to "women, children, and revolutionists", that is, people who are unaware of the complexities surrounding their enthusiasms, people like Kurtz's deluded Intended or poor Stevie. Similarly, in Victory, Axel Heyst's ironic withdrawal is ultimately seen to be a barren evasion; but it is impossible not to feel the weight of authorial support behind statements like this:

Great achievements are accomplished in a blessed, warm mental fog, which the pitiless cold blast of the father's analysis had blown

⁴⁶ Letter to Waldo Frank, 27 July 1917; rpt. in D.H. Lawrence: The Rainbow and Women in Love: A Casebook, ed. Colin Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 30.

⁴⁷ Under Western Eyes (1911; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 233.

away from the son.⁴⁸

The pitilessness is recognised as such, and "the infernal mistrust of all life" is finally placed against the need "to hope, to love - and to put one's trust in life" (pp. 324, 326); but the "blessed, warm mental fog" lingers on as an unflattering image of the unironical mind.

This is to say that if irony is, in Muecke's words, "imposed upon" the modern writer, then Lawrence and Conrad, at least, "consciously resist it" by impersonally dramatising it. But the need to resist it is itself indicative of the distance we have come from the comic self-effacing dissembling of the original eirōn of Greek comedy to this "negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action". Not that the element of pleasure has disappeared completely: in spite of their agony, both Gudrun and Razumov derive a sardonic satisfaction from their consciousness of being, at least, not deluded, the barren consolation of the self-consciously superior mind - "cultured minds", in the words of Conrad's Decoud, "to whom the narrowness of every belief is odious".⁴⁹ It is a consolation and a fate they share with some of the most disturbing figures of their era: Decoud, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. What is said of Decoud can be said of all of them: each in his or her way is a "victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity" (p. 501).

I intend to study the late novels of Henry James against this background, in order to determine to what extent these novels are shaped by such an unresolved ironic vision, how this can help us to understand these novels, and how it influences our assessment of James' achievement. That achievement, however, needs to be measured not only against James' contemporaries but also against his predecessors of the Victorian age. This was, by common consent, the great age of the novel - an age of which James and his contemporaries may be seen as representing either the final splendid flowering or the decadent offshoot.

There may be no such simple choice of alternatives; but if we believe that the "Great Tradition" of the English novel is a living institution rather

⁴⁸ Victory (1915; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 87.

⁴⁹ Nostramo (1904; rpt. London: J.M. Dent, 1947), p. 187.

than an exclusive club which remains unchanged while its members come and go, we shall expect to find our sense of the common concerns of these novelists enriched by a recognition of their differences. Since irony is so much a matter of the writer's relation to the values of his society, a study of the nature of irony should enable us to locate both the common ground and the differences, and to locate them where they matter most to the literary critic - that is, in the structure of the novels themselves. It would be a simple matter to abstract statements from, say, Middlemarch and The Wings of the Dove to demonstrate that George Eliot was less sceptical about society than Henry James, but this would account for little in our experience of these novels. A consideration of the resolution or lack of resolution of irony, on the other hand, may help us to see how these novels are shaped by the beliefs or lack of belief underlying them.

Very broadly speaking, I believe that the Victorian novelist's commitment to communal values is strong enough to allow for a predominance of resolved irony. Since "the Victorian Novelist" is an aggregate of some of the most acute and original minds of the time, such a commitment is unlikely to be at all uniform either in its intensity or its manifestations; but some central belief may be posited, with whatever tentativeness, to serve as a basis for the enquiry. Such a basis is in fact provided by Henry James' reference to "the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering". Fussell sees James' statement as embodying "the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century."⁵⁰ To talk of a "Meliorist myth" is to reduce a complex and varied process to a catch-phrase; but, while bearing in mind the over-simplification it entails, I shall adopt the phrase as a useful short reference to that aspect of Victorian belief which shapes so many of these novels: the belief that society can - and should - change.

⁵⁰ The Great War and Modern Memory, p. 8.

Chapter II

"I Want You to Change":

Meliorism and Irony in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

It would be ludicrous to imagine a sudden change of ironic mode at the beginning of the twentieth century, as if all novelists were overwhelmed by the solemnity of the occasion and stopped resolving their ironies. At most we can expect to find a gradual shift in values, reflected through subtle changes in ironic technique; and even then such a shift is highly unlikely to be an orderly, chronologically determined progression from novelist to novelist, or from novel to novel.

It is nevertheless self-evident that the novel did change from Jane Austen to Henry James, and that the change was in some sense a function of the novelist's attitude to society. To approach these novelists through the "Meliorist myth" is not to attempt to isolate a monolithic ideology underlying their novels: at most the phrase provides a focus for an enquiry that is intended to go further than their political or social preconceptions, towards a consideration of the means by which a novelist embodies, consciously or unconsciously, such preconceptions in the novel.

In technical terms, this is a matter of the nature of the irony employed. Since resolved irony, as we have seen, traces a process of change on the basis of certain implied or explicitly stated values, we can expect a Meliorist tendency to be manifested in the dominance of such a resolved pattern. Unresolved irony, on the other hand, would suggest either a failure on the part of the author to reconcile his material with a stable value system, or a belief on his part that such reconciliation is impossible.

The first point to made about Meliorism is that, whatever bland optimism has come to be associated with it, it is in the first place based on the far from complacent conviction that society is in need of improvement, and only in the second place on the belief that it is capable of such improvement. To generalise broadly, I think that the attitude underlying the great Victorian novels can be bluntly summed up in Felix Holt's presumptuous statement to Esther Lyon: "I want you to change."¹ This is to say that the attitude is the reverse of conservative; but its radicalism is of the kind precisely defined by George Eliot in Felix Holt the Radical: a desire for

¹ George Eliot, Felix Holt the Radical, ed. with introd. Peter Coveney (1866; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 211.

change that yet does not sever society's connection with its "roots" in the past. As Felix Holt insists that Esther should change, but appeals to her in the name of ideals which he hopes they have in common, so the Victorian novel characteristically addresses, even harangues, its readers on the basis of values that the novelist assumes he shares with his readers.

These shared values enable the novelist to employ irony as a moral instrument: the readers are taken to be capable of "reading" the moral content of the irony. But nor is the reader invited merely to observe detachedly or with amusement the spectacle of blindness beneath him: the ironies are seldom quite settled enough for that. Although the ironic pattern is generally resolved in terms of the values implicit in the novel, a certain tension between what is and what should be remains in the form of a more or less unresolved element. As the novelist loses confidence in the community or beliefs which united him with his reader, this unresolved element becomes more prevalent, until by the end of the century it predominates.

At one end, the far end, of this development is Jane Austen, who, even in terms of my somewhat tolerant abstractions, can hardly be regarded as a Meliorist. To say that she did not regard the world as capable of improvement would be to give an unduly sombre emphasis to her wry acceptance of the knaves, fools and snobs she sees everywhere; and to say that she did not think it in need of improvement would be to ignore the sharp critical edge of that acceptance. And yet, there is something of both pessimism and tolerance in her attitude: since the world is not likely to change, and since, imperfect as it is, it contains much that is to be valued, the mature individual will learn to adapt to this world, not sacrificing integrity, and hoping for the companionship of other sensible people to make tolerance tolerable. There is no suggestion that society should or could reorganize itself to accommodate the exceptional individual. This is what Elinor Dashwood knows, and what Marianne has to learn in the course of Sense and Sensibility. This may explain why we, who believe that a compromise with society entails a sacrifice of integrity, tend to prefer Marianne; and Marianne's attractiveness suggests that there was nothing facile in Jane Austen's nevertheless vindicating Elinor.

It may be that Jane Austen would not have understood the word society in our sense. Although in her time the word had already acquired its modern meaning of "the body of institutions and relationships within which a

relatively large group of people live",² in her novels no such abstraction is to be found. Society there still seems to consist of the four and twenty families with whom Mrs Bennet claims to dine, in spirited refutation of Mr Darcy's condescending "In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society."³ The point of this is that society did not present itself to Jane Austen as the monolithic abstraction to which we pay theoretical obeisance: to her it was simply the aggregate of the often disconcerting individuals that it was necessary to live with from day to day: Miss Bates, Mr Woodhouse, Mrs Allen, Mrs Jennings, Sir John Middleton - beyond improvement, above rejection. The amused acceptance shows in the static quality of the irony applied to such characters: it is based on a pattern of repetition, not modulation. Mrs Bennet breathlessly delighting in Mr Darcy as prospective son-in-law - "Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray apologize for my having disliked him so much before" (p. 386) - is exactly the same as the Mrs Bennet who decided not very long before this that "he is such a disagreeable man that it would be quite a misfortune to be liked by him." (p. 66) Mrs Bennet has not reached an insight; all that has changed is the occasion that reveals her magnificently consistent stupidity and her undeviating allegiance to the one norm by which she judges every man: whether or not he is likely to marry one of her daughters. Mr Woodhouse sighing "Ah! poor Miss Taylor! 'tis a sad business" on the occasion of the latter's marriage, does not undergo any conversion in order to give a "much more voluntary, cheerful consent [to Emma's marriage] than his daughter had ever presumed to hope for"⁴: matrimony only comes to seem less of a threat to the status quo than poultry-thieves. Jane Austen creates these characters complete and incorrigible.

It does not necessarily follow from this that she prefers them like that, but the ironic strategy of the novels is to leave no scope for development. Each irony at the expense of these characters is local, self-contained, independent of the movement of the plot. This completeness of the errant characters has led Virginia Woolf to see Jane Austen as in fact revelling in

² Raymond Williams, "Society", *Keywords* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), p. 243. Williams notes that "[t]he tendency towards the general and abstract sense ... seems inherent, but until [the late eighteenth century] the more active and immediate senses were common." (p. 244)

³ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 88.

⁴ *Emma*, rev. ed. with introd. by Mary Lascelles (1816; rpt. London: Dent Everyman, 1964), pp. 6 and 426.

their aberrations:

She encircles them with the lash of a whip-like phrase which, as it runs around them, cuts out their silhouettes for ever. ... Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off. She is satisfied; she is content; she would not alter a hair on anybody's head, or move one brick or one blade of grass in a world which provides her with such exquisite delight.⁵

This is an attractive reading, deficient only, when taken out of context, in not discriminating sufficiently between the artist delighting in her creations and the moralist realising that such delight is founded on the violation of values she holds sacred. My point is that Jane Austen's irony enables the artist to accommodate the moralist, and to meet her readers on the common ground of shared values. As Reuben Brower says of the ironies in Pride and Prejudice, they are "linked by vibrant reference to basic certainties."⁶ In the essay referred to above, Virginia Woolf spells out these "certainties":

It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unfailing good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature. (p. 177)

But the delight does not lie in anticipating the disillusionment of the ironised character: it consists of catching Jane Austen's eye behind the stolidly unsuspecting back of the victim.

In his influential essay on Jane Austen, D.W. Harding maintains that the perceptive reader will at times discern a glint of hatred in the eye that he catches, a hatred that Jane Austen takes some pains to hide from her more obtuse readers:

... how easy it is made for them to forget or never observe that Jane Austen, none the less for seeing how funny [Mrs Bennet] is, goes on detesting her. The ... ruling standards of our social group leave a perfectly comfortable niche for detestable people and give them sufficient sanction to persist. ...⁷

⁵ The Common Reader, 3rd ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), pp. 176-77.

⁶ The Fields of Light (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 164.

⁷ "Regulated Hatred", Scrutiny, 8, No. 4 (1940), 352.

Harding would seem to find a more subversive implication in Jane Austen's humour than I have done, a profounder dissatisfaction with "the ruling standards of our social group", and thus less common ground with her reader:

... she is a literary classic of the society which attitudes like hers, held widely enough, would undermine. (p. 347)

My argument does not essentially take issue with Harding on this point: the apparent disagreement stems from two different uses of the word society. Harding uses it in Jane Austen's own sense of "the relationships of everyday social life", and concedes that she had "a genuine respect for the ordered, decent civilization that they upheld." (p. 351) This larger context of "ordered ... civilization" which contains "everyday social life" is closer to our sense of society, "the modern notion, in which the laws of society are not so much laws for getting on with other people but more abstract and more impersonal laws which determine social institutions."⁸ My argument is that society and social laws in this sense are not stringently challenged by Jane Austen's irony.

It is true that, as Harding implies, Jane Austen's "attitudes ... , held widely enough, would undermine" the social prominence of, say, Mrs Elton: she would not be invited to any picnics. But even Emma realises that there are considerations which override her impulse to express her dismay at Mr Weston's inclusion of Mrs Elton in the outing to Box Hill:

... it could not be done without a reproof to him, which would be giving pain to his wife; and she found herself therefore obliged to consent to an arrangement which she would have done a great deal to avoid. ... (p. 310)

Admittedly this "outward submission" hides "secret severity" (p. 310) and, in Hardings's words, leaves "a perfectly comfortable niche for detestable people"; but Jane Austen, as Harding also recognises, would not tear down the wall to destroy the niche:

Her object is not missionary; it is the more desperate one of merely finding some mode of existence for her critical attitudes. (p. 351)

⁸ Keywords, p. 244.

However different this desperation is from the "supreme delight" Woolf ascribes to Jane Austen, the two critics would seem to agree that Jane Austen's humour provides "some mode of existence for her critical attitudes." My only contribution to this is to suggest that in the covert-yet-shared nature of irony she found this refuge, much as Mr Bennet escapes from Mrs Bennet through irony - with this difference that Mr Bennet does not need to share his irony. Furthermore, Jane Austen, unlike Mr Bennet, does not escape into moral irresponsibility, and does not allow her heroines to do so.

The heroine has to come to terms with this imperfect, unchanging society; and where her own imperfections, rather than society's, prevent this, the static, non-structural irony encapsulating the comic monsters is complemented by a structural irony at the expense of the heroine, premised upon her ability to change.

Thus there is nothing ironical, on the face of it, in Emma's exclamation "Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax! ... - Mr Knightley must not marry! - You would not have little Henry cut out from Donwell? - Oh! no, no, Henry must have Donwell. ..." ⁹ There is no internal inconsistency, as in the case of Mrs Bennet's comments on Darcy, to alert us to the character's mistake: the irony is only revealed, simultaneously with its extinction, as the heroine achieves the insight from which to look back and smile, with the reader, at her former self: ¹⁰

It is remarkable, that Emma, in the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider Donwell Abbey, was never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded. Think she must of the possible difference to the poor little boy; and yet she only gave herself a saucy conscious smile about it, and found amusement in detecting the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr. Knightley's marrying Jane Fairfax, or any body else, which at the time she had wholly imputed to the amiable solicitude of the sister and the aunt. (p. 396)

⁹ *Emma*, p. 196.

¹⁰ Edwin Muir, though not explicitly concerned with irony, has made a similar point as the basis of a distinction between the structure of Pride and Prejudice and that of a novel like Vanity Fair:

... Jane Austen's scene can only be completed by other scenes towards which it is leading up; while Thackeray's is in a sense complete in itself.

(The Structure of the Novel, new ed. [1928; rpt. London: Hogarth Press, 1957], p. 56.)

This humorous appreciation of the finer ironies of the situation is made possible only by Emma's release from the pain of the first "undeception", as C.S. Lewis calls it.¹¹ The comic outcome of the pattern should not blind us to its tragic potential, its similarity, in short, to the Oedipus pattern. This is simply another way of saying that these are dramatic ironies, but it is also a way of stressing the moral component of the irony: the "mistakes" of Jane Austen's heroines are not just errors of fact, but are often potentially disruptive moral misjudgements.

This differs, of course, from novel to novel. In the first place, the "perfect" heroines are obviously, by virtue of their perfection, immune to this kind of irony. Anne Elliot makes her mistake outside the novel, as it were, and even then under the persuasion of Lady Russell; Elinor simply makes no mistake; and Fanny Price is Fanny Price, which is to say that she is a problem heroine who requires a discussion all to herself.

As for the flawed heroines, it follows from the moral basis of the irony that the quality and intensity of the irony will vary with the degree and seriousness of the heroine's mistake. It would be a stringent moralist, for instance, who could declare Catherine Morland's naive misconceptions culpable; but they are potentially harmful, to herself if not to others. She thus needs to be instructed, if not in the basic questions of good and evil, then at least in their probable distribution in ordinary life. She is as mistaken about human beings as King Lear himself, but since she lacks both the power and the arrogance to manifest her judgement in action, the consequences are minimal, and do not threaten her little world for long. The irony is directed as much at her choice of reading matter as at her moral discrimination; in fact, it is part of the novel's point that they often amount to the same thing. The effect is to weaken the structural significance of irony in the novel; it is richly present in individual scenes, but it cannot really be said to propel the novel.

Elizabeth Bennet's misjudgement of Darcy, though certainly less grotesque than some of poor Catherine's imaginings, is taken more seriously. Because she is more confident, more intelligent and more articulate than Catherine, she can be more thoroughly mistaken. A strong mind on the wrong track causes more damage than a weak one, and certainly takes longer to get back onto the right track.

¹¹ "A Note on Jane Austen", Essays in Criticism, 4, No 4 (1954), 362.

This is most consistently, most comically and most seriously demonstrated in Emma: scene after scene shows Emma floundering, not like poor Catherine through naivety, but because she uses her formidable mental powers to rationalise her emotional promptings. Thus, while poor Harriet is fluttering on about mermaids and sharks, Emma briskly solves Mr Elton's charade, only to miss its real point, its application to herself:

'... Thy ready wit the word will soon supply.

Humph - Harriet's ready wit! All the better. A man must be very much in love indeed, to describe her so. ...' (p. 62)

This ability to twist a valid observation to promote a false interpretation is what makes Emma's quickwittedness more dangerous than Harriet's befuddlements: "A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress." (p. 360) This statement in fact applies to her realisation that she is in love with Mr Knightley, but it could equally have applied to any of the misconceptions engendered by the rapid progress of her mind. Emma's persistence in error sustains the irony of the novel for longer than Elizabeth's mistaken judgement propels her novel; but ultimately, like Elizabeth, she survives to pass judgement on her mistakes. Both heroines have developed beyond their author's irony; but the comic monsters surrounding them are going about their business as usual:

... [Lady Catherine] condescended to wait on them at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city.

With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. (Pride and Prejudice, pp. 395-96)

... Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own wedding. ... But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (Emma, p. 427)

The Gardiners, the "small band of true friends": stronger perhaps than the famous "regulated hatred" is Jane Austen's barely concealed dream of a small circle of sympathetic friends that can leave Lady Catherine and Mrs.

Elton to rampage harmlessly outside.¹² The "niche" is ultimately provided not for the "detestable people", but for the heroine: the detestables invariably take up plenty of social space. And yet the heroine's niche is firmly place inside a larger structure; it is very different, for instance, from the "some few other people - a little freedom of people" that Birkin posits as an escape from the lost civilisation of Women in Love (p. 452). Jane Austen's vast assembly of fools still inhabit a rational universe: the values implicit in the novel supply us with a standard to measure them by. The resolution of irony is consequently the reaffirmation of these implied values by the outcome of the novel. It is this, as much as the marriage of the hero and heroine, that makes the endings of Pride and Prejudice and Emma so satisfying.

It may be an absence of this sense of the fitness of things that prevents most readers from rejoicing in the marriage of Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram. We are likely to agree (even with a touch of vindictiveness) that they deserve each other and will no doubt be very happy in their way, but we do not feel, as we do with the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, that the energies of the novel have been brought to a stable equilibrium.

The problem is, of course, Fanny. It is fairly commonly agreed that she is Jane Austen's least attractive heroine (though such critics differ in the degree of vehemence with which they maintain this¹³), but it is difficult to be sure whether our displeasure is directed merely at Fanny or at her author as well: do we simply get impatient with Fanny, or do we resent Jane Austen's apparent expectation that we should admire Fanny? It seems to me that there is something of both: we feel that our irritation with Fanny is imperfectly shared by an author whom we normally trust to be on our side. This creates

¹² D.W. Harding, in his introduction to Persuasion (1818; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) discusses "Jane Austen's concern with the survival of the sensitive and penetrating individual in a society of conforming mediocrity." (p. 17) He rightly stresses the value of romantic love in this, but seems to me to neglect the invariable adjunct of "a small band of true friends".

¹³ Lionel Trilling says flatly "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of Mansfield Park." (The Opposing Self [London: Secker and Warburg, 1955], p. 212; Tony Tanner finds her "a poor sort of heroine" (Introd., Mansfield Park [1814; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966], p. 9); C.S. Lewis calls her "insipid (yet not a prig)" ("A Note on Jane Austen", p. 367); and Kingsley Amis uninhibitedly describes her as "a monster of complacency and pride" ("What Became of Jane Austen?", The Spectator, October 4, 1957; rpt. in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963], p. 140).

an interesting exception to the pattern of resolved irony in the novels I have discussed: all the ironies at Fanny's expense remain unresolved, and disrupt the novel's moral scheme.

To talk of ironies at Fanny's expense is to take issue with Lionel Trilling's influential view that

one might say of this novel that it undertakes to discredit irony and to affirm literalness, that it demonstrates that there are no two ways about anything.¹⁴

Trilling in fact builds a persuasive case on this premise, as does Tony Tanner in what is in effect an elaboration of Trilling's reading. If we grant their assumption that "Jane Austen, usually so ironic about her heroines, in this instance vindicates Fanny Price without qualification",¹⁵ we have to admit that what the novel affirms are "the stoic values of control, stability, endurance." (p. 35) Even as it is, whatever we think of Fanny, the ending of the novel would seem to suggest that Jane Austen intended the sober orthodoxies that Trilling and Tanner ascribe to the novel.

But I do not believe that the dissatisfaction of most readers with the novel is solely due to the fact that, as Trilling says, "[t]here is scarcely one of our modern pieties that it does not offend." (p. 210) The vindication of Fanny Price offends us not merely because we get impatient with her headaches and can't see the harm in home theatricals; it is not even only that the values upheld in the novel are antipathetic to the values we delighted in in Pride and Prejudice: our disappointment stems from our sense that Fanny Price fails even in terms of her own novel. More damagingly, we suspect that Jane Austen realises this, but allows Fanny to get away with it, as no other heroine of hers does. Fanny is in fact quite often treated ironically by her author, but never achieves insight into the shortcomings that have made that irony possible; in other words, the irony is not resolved.

The most explicit irony at Fanny's expense occurs in relation to her gloomy reflections that Edmund and Mary Crawford are likely soon to reach an understanding, since "the scruples of his integrity" and "the doubts and hesitations of her ambition were equally got over": "His good and her bad

¹⁴ Opposing Self, p. 208.

¹⁵ Introduction, Mansfield Park, p. 8.

feelings yielded to love, and such love must unite them." Of course, if Mary's "bad feelings" really did yield to love, Edmund's "good" feelings would not be unduly compromised by the marriage; thus the suspicion that Mary may just redeem herself has to be resisted with all Fanny's moral earnestness:

Her acceptance must be as certain as his offer; and yet, there were bad feelings still remaining which made the prospect of it most sorrowful to her, independently - she believed independently of self.

In their very last conversation, Miss Crawford, in spite of some amiable sensations, and much personal kindness, had still been Miss Crawford, still shewn a mind let astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so; darkened, yet fancying itself light. She might love, but she did not deserve Edmund by any other sentiment. Fanny believed there was scarcely a second feeling in common between them; and she may be forgiven by older sages, for looking on the chance of Miss Crawford's future improvement as nearly desperate. ...

Experience might have hoped more for any young people, so circumstanced, and impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford's nature, that participation of the general nature of women, which would lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected, as her own. - But as such were Fanny's persuasions, she suffered very much from them, and would never speak of Miss Crawford without pain.¹⁶

The irony is gentle, and the emphasis is on the reality of Fanny's suffering. Nevertheless, the tell-tale stumble on "independently - she believed independently of self" alerts us to Fanny's half-suppressed consciousness of one source of her "sorrow" which has nothing to do with Mary's imperfections. Certainly the fact that she derives so little comfort from Mary's improvement suggests that Edmund's happiness is not her only or even her main concern. She has in fact demonstrated that she is not averse to seeing him suffer as long as his suffering stems from disagreement with Miss Crawford:

It was barbarous to be happy when Edmund was suffering. Yet some happiness must and would arise, from the very conviction, that he did suffer. (p. 284)

This only means that Fanny is human after all; but in her musings on Mary's benightedness she is less clear-sighted about the cause of her misery than

¹⁶ Mansfield Park, p. 362.

she is here about the source of her happiness. Jane Austen is clearly counting on the indulgence of "older sages" with their detachment born of "experience"; the implication is that Fanny is simply young, inexperienced, and more involved than she can admit to being. Her lack of insight is offered to us as of the same order as Catherine Morland's misinterpretations or Emma's anxiety for her nephew's inheritance. But the irony is more damaging than this. Neither Catherine's misconceptions nor even Emma's rationalisations are premised on the moral superiority of the heroine, whereas Fanny's self-deception rests entirely on her "sorrowful" consciousness of Mary's "mind led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so". The applicability of this to herself again could have been taken in the same humorous spirit in which we accept Emma's violent objection, in Mrs Elton, to what are in essence her own faults writ large; but in Fanny's case, the ending of the novel asks us to accept this youthful fumbling as mature moral judgement.

The fact that Fanny is shown to have been "right" about the Crawfords tends to obscure the extent to which her moral judgement was assisted by her love for Edmund. This is perhaps a fortunate alternative to love's more usual habit of blindness to the fault of the beloved, but such sharp-sightedness can seem unattractively like a readiness to make the most of small occasions.

In the case of Henry Crawford, Fanny's conscience, untrained to deal with anything as presumptuous as a personal preference, has to transform her indifference to him, based largely on her impermissible love for Edmund, into disinterested moral disapproval. Thus "the dignity of angry virtue" (p. 327), which his undeniable imperfections have enabled her hitherto to maintain, finds itself challenged by his procurement of William's commission. It may be only to a modern distrust of nepotism that this act of Crawford's seems at least as dubious as flirting with the Miss Bertrams; in any case, we do not expect Fanny, emotionally based as her judgements are, to question anything that ministers to the happiness of William. The point is that Fanny now finds it more difficult to sustain the disapproval she needs to sanction her refusal of him, and seems almost relieved to conclude that he is as bad as ever:

Here was again a want of delicacy and regard for others which had formerly so struck and disgusted her. Here was again a something of the same Mr Crawford whom she had so reprobated

before. How evidently was there a gross want of feeling and humanity where his own pleasure was concerned - And, alas! how always known no principle to supply as a duty what the heart was deficient in. Had her own affections been as free - as perhaps they ought to have been - he never could have engaged them.
(p. 327)

The moral fervour of this seems disproportionate to its occasion: Crawford's "gross want of feeling and humanity" consists of his having assured her that he does not intend to stop loving her. Jane Austen seems quite consciously to present Fanny as anxious to condemn Crawford: the rhetoric of the passage, and possibly the lapse of syntax, belong to Fanny herself rather than to her author. Furthermore, Jane Austen makes a point of contradicting Fanny's conviction that she never could love Crawford, by telling us later that "there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him" if Edmund had married Mary and he had "persevered, and uprightly" (p. 451).

As a more succinct demonstration of Fanny's bias, we have Fanny's release from "so horrible an evil" as having Crawford witness her family's table manners (which are apparently of such a nature as to put Fanny herself off her food):

She was nice only from natural delicacy, but he had been brought up in a school of luxury and epicurism. (p. 399)

This sentence, tellingly placed at the end of a chapter, trenchantly sums up the double standards Fanny consistently brings to bear on the Crawfords. This is so characteristically the kind of moral obliquity that Jane Austen delights in, and delights in exposing, that it is disconcerting to find her in this instance rescuing Fanny from exposure by sinking Crawford, Mary and all. It is as if Catherine Morland were to discover that General Tilney had murdered his wife after all.

Fanny's reaction to the "horrible evil" (p. 429) of Maria and Henry's elopement is yet another example of a "correct" judgement warped by emotion (it may be noted that "horrible evil" has been slightly devalued by its previous occurrence in reference to the possibility of Crawford's "taking his mutton" with the Prices - p. 398):

... it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of! (p. 430)

Whatever Jane Austen may have thought of adultery, the vocabulary here is not hers, any more than the speculation about the state to which Mansfield is likely to be reduced by Maria's deed:

Fanny thought it scarcely possible for them to support life and reason under such disgrace; and it appeared to her, that as far as this world alone was concerned, the greatest blessing to every one of kindred with Mrs Rushworth would be instant annihilation. (p. 430)

These are not rational judgements; they are the emotional reactions of a very earnest young girl. This is not to say that Jane Austen thought Maria's adultery of little consequence; but her characteristic tone is surely to be found in her famous "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (p. 446), rather than in such effusions of moral outrage as she dwells on for two chapters. In fact, there is plenty of evidence of high amusement at all the "shock" and "horror", brought into relief by the total unconcern of the Prices (Fanny's missing her breakfast through a combination of the household's dilatoriness and Edmund's agitation - "He had already ate" - is a representative touch - p. 433).

Fanny's horror is of course not to be held against her; but in the light of the irony with which such an extreme reaction is treated, it is difficult to see Mary's failure to express a similar horror as quite meriting Edmund's revulsion:

'... To hear the woman whom - no harsher name than folly given! - so voluntarily, so freely, so coolly to canvass it! - No reluctance, no horror, no feminine - shall I say? no modest loathings! ...' (p. 441)

Since Mary's crime consists partly of "coolly" broaching a subject which has occupied two chapters of the novel, Edmund's delicacy would seem to exceed that of his author. Jane Austen certainly shows few "modest loathings" in pronouncing, quite as coolly as Mary, on what is, in effect, Crawford's "folly":

Had he done as he intended ... he might have been deciding his own happy destiny. (p. 451)

In short, in feeling himself "[e]qually in brother and sister deceived"

(p. 445), Edmund is succumbing to the moral hysteria afflicting all of Mansfield (even Lady Bertram, "guided by Sir Thomas" saw "in all its enormity, what had happened" - p. 436). With such encouragement, it is not surprising that Fanny should enter into the spirit of things and show a bit of modest loathing where she most feels it: "'Cruel!' said Fanny - 'quite cruel!'" (p. 442) Her own tenderness for Edmund's feelings nevertheless does not prevent her, "now at liberty to speak openly", from giving him "some hint of what share his brother's state of health might be supposed to have in Mary's wish for a complete reconciliation." (p. 445) Since the "hint" amounts to telling him that Mary wanted him for a title and an estate, it seems considerably crueller than Mary's unthinking shallowness. Since, furthermore, it badly misrepresents the fact that, much as Tom's illness had enhanced Edmund's advantages in Mary's eyes, she had fallen in love with him long before that, Fanny's hint shows a surprising elasticity of principle.

The disturbing fact is that all this is simply ignored in the ending that Jane Austen, "impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort" (p. 446), contrives. That formulation leaves room, of course, for Fanny's immaturity of judgement, but nothing else in the final chapter suggests any qualification of Fanny's vindication. Sir Thomas sees in her an illustration of the "sterling good of principle and temper" (p. 455) and of "the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure." (p. 456) Jane Austen restricts her own endorsement of the marriage to a mention of "true merit and true love" (p. 456), but her lack of rapture is less unusual than the unilluminated state in which she leaves her heroine. One would not necessarily want to see Fanny driven from Mansfield Park like Catherine from Northanger Abbey; but where the Miss Bertrams are so severely treated for their lack of "self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" (p. 55), one would not have expected Fanny's equal lack of at least two of these qualities to escape comment. Fanny is unique amongst Jane Austen's heroines in escaping self-knowledge; and Mansfield Park is unique amongst her novels in leaving a major irony unresolved.

Mansfield Park remains interesting as a great writer's attempt to straitjacket her moral imagination, arguably in the interests of an orthodoxy that did not engage her creative sympathies. The point is stated strongly by Marvin Mudrick, perhaps the severest of Jane Austen's admirers:

Mansfield Park was to be a novel vindicating the ethical foundation of Jane Austen's world.

... Mansfield Park itself is the symbol of stability, discipline, order : universal catchwords of theology.¹⁷

Mudrick sees this as leading to a renunciation of irony: "the current of irony has failed" (p. 106). Though agreeing with Mudrick about the apparent intentions of the novel, I have tried to show that irony does assert itself - that is, that Jane Austen's ironic habit creates a perspective on Fanny that she may not have foreseen. As I shall argue more fully in the next chapter, the creative process, especially in the hands of an habitually ironic writer, may generate ironies not necessarily intended by the author, if only the unresolved irony of a disjunction between professed and instinctive values. The numerous questions begged by this formulation will be more fully considered in that discussion; for the time being, Mansfield Park serves as an instructive aberration not only from the rest of Jane Austen's novels, but also from that conjunction of belief and imagination that gives the nineteenth-century novel its poise and energy.

At the risk of qualifying that generalisation out of existence, it should be mentioned that Mansfield Park is by no means the only exception to this model. Vanity Fair, for instance, represents a much more extreme failure of belief than Jane Austen's novel. In the figure of Amelia, Thackeray tries, and quite consciously fails, to oppose the vanity of his world with a vital alternative. Losing faith in Amelia, not daring to commit himself to the dangerously alive Becky, he shrugs it all off in a totally ironic ending that collapses upon itself in flat disillusionment. It is not a novel that can be dismissed in a paragraph; but its unappeased spirit will hover over the discussion of The Wings of the Dove, which is where it belongs.

If it is true that the Average Man is an abstraction of which no individual example exists, it may also be true that the Victorian Novel is a similar abstraction, to which all Victorian novels approximate to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless, one novel comes close to being the essential Victorian Novel: Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South.

¹⁷ "The Triumph of Gentility: Mansfield Park", from Jane Austen (University of California Press, 1968); rpt. in The Nineteenth Century Novel, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 100.

The novel confronts, through the experience of its central figure, the profound social change of its era, the transition from the settled, rural existence associated with the South to the clamorous, restless industrial world of the North. Its heroine has retained enough of the breeding and propriety of her forebears not to offend against the sensibilities of readers schooled in Jane Austen, but she has independence of spirit enough not to look feeble next to Jane Eyre. In Margaret Hale we are given the prototype of the heroine who takes responsibility for her own life, and who sees that responsibility in the wider context of a changing society: no longer Jane Austen's four and twenty families, but an alien, at times hostile mass, impossible to patronise or ignore. In other words, the individual's relation to society, which has become such a cliché in relation to the nineteenth-century novel, is in North and South still an anxiously pondered question, with nothing of the formulaic "social-problem" air about it. It is a question that George Eliot was to ponder with greater profundity, Dickens with greater originality, and, ultimately, Lawrence with greater incisiveness; but nowhere is the question approached with greater concern and sincerity.

The note of concern, the evident desire to inform her readers and to appeal to them on the basis of shared principles of fairness, is part of what makes Mrs Gaskell so representative of the Meliorist strain in Victorian fiction: there is a strong belief that social conditions could be improved through mutual understanding, but an equally strong insistence on the imperfections of those conditions. It is in its Meliorist aspect, of course, that North and South differs most decisively from the novels of Jane Austen - say, from Pride and Prejudice, with which it has much in common in other respects. In both novels mutual misunderstanding arising from pride and prejudice forms the basis of the plot, and the resolution of the irony depends on the clearing up of that misunderstanding. In North and South, however, the central relationship is more dynamically linked with its social context: the initial antipathy between Margaret and Mr Thornton is part of a larger antipathy in society - in its broadest terms between North and South, but also between "masters and men" and between men and women.

The novel is as closely structured around a central theme as Pride and Prejudice, but in this case the secondary characters do not statically represent simplified versions of the concerns of the main characters: they are actively engaged with the same problems as the main characters, and are as subject to change - or where they are not, as in the case of Mrs Hale,

Dixon and Edith, their very resistance or immunity to change makes a point about them. This is to say that the structural ironies are not confined to the main characters.

The novel's central concern is with authority; and the extension of this to all the relationships, personal and social, sexual and industrial, anticipates the similar, if more complex, patterns of George Eliot and ultimately of Lawrence. In this case, the relationships in the novel present variants on the struggle for authority between Margaret and Thornton: Mr Hale's weak overruling of his wife, Edith's conventional submission to her husband (to liberate his ego into letting her have her way), Mrs Thornton's assumption of the dominant position in her marriage (only to yield to the greater strength of her son), Margaret's struggle of wills with Dixon. On a less personal level, Mr Hale's religious doubts and Frederick's mutiny become peripheral examples of the revolt against authority represented by the strike and subsequent riot.

Margaret's calm assumption of social superiority is set against Thornton's personal assertiveness and position as a "master": in both cases, the naturally forceful personality is reinforced by a social structure not recognised by the other. To Thornton, who tends to see life as a series of battles, this presents a challenge. At their first meeting, as he tells his mother, she "held herself aloof from [him] as if she had been a queen, and [he] her humble, unwashed vassal."¹⁸ This leads him, on their second meeting, to imagine a reversal of these roles:

She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh. ... She handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; ... and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. (p. 120)

The erotic overtones of this scene clearly arise from Thornton's fantasy of the subjection of the queenly Margaret. In the same scene he talks to Mr Hale about "the war which compels, and shall compel, all material power to

¹⁸ *North and South*, ed. Dorothy Collin, introd. Martin Dodsworth (1854-55; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 117.

yield to science." (p. 122) The battle of the classes is thus extended, on the one hand, to the battle between man and woman, and on the other to the battle between man and inanimate matter.

Against this background, Mr Thornton's proposal presents itself as an affront, a threat to Margaret's self-sufficiency: reflecting that "their intercourse had been one continued series of opposition" (p. 256), she sees his declaration of love as a continuation of this battle:

And she shrank and shuddered as under the fascination of some great power, repugnant to her whole previous life. She crept away, and hid from his idea. ... She disliked him the more for having mastered her inner will. ...

And so she shuddered away from the threat of his enduring love. What did he mean? Had she not the power to daunt him? She would see. It was more daring than became a man to threaten her so.
(p. 257)

The presentation of Mr Thornton and Margaret's relationship is similar enough to Lawrence's depiction of Gerald Crich and Gudrun to suggest that North and South is as much a Victorian Women in Love as a Victorian Pride and Prejudice.¹⁹ But to draw the comparison is to note the decisive difference in emphasis: Lawrence sees in the confrontation of his lovers the will to power and the will to self-destruction that culminated in the Great War; Mrs Gaskell sees a conflict that can be resolved with understanding and compromise. Between these two acute observers of industrialisation lie all the lessons of the Industrial Revolution. Lawrence's Gudrun starts with the conviction "I shall know more of that man" (p. 62), and ends by destroying him because "knowing him finally she was the Alexander seeking new worlds." (p. 550). In Lawrence, the search for knowledge is a search for power, and can become destructive. In Mrs Gaskell, knowledge of others and of oneself resolves antipathy.

Like Elizabeth Bennet, Margaret Hale has to be enlightened as to the real nature of her feeling for the man she abhors: she cannot see that the violence of her reaction to his proposal is a tribute to his power over her. The main structural irony of North and South is that Margaret has to submit

¹⁹ The similarities extend to the whole relationship, but there is a particularly striking correspondence between Thornton's view of man's battle against "material power" and Gerald's: "This was the sole idea, to turn upon the inanimate matter of the underground, and reduce it to his will." (Women in Love, p. 301).

to the humiliating recognition that the opinion of the man to whom she had assumed a natural superiority matters supremely to her, that moral distinctions are more important than class distinctions: "nothing but chaos and night surrounded the one lurid fact that, in Mr Thornton's eyes, she was degraded." (p. 355) In turn Thornton, who has achieved and measured his independence by money, must submit to receiving financial aid from her.

The resolution of this conflict is as much a resolution of irony on the basis of achieved insight as the ending of Pride and Prejudice. In the nature of things, this resolution cannot be paralleled by a similarly complete resolution of industrial tension. Nevertheless, the terms in which Thornton describes his proposed scheme to bring employers and employees together, transfer to that sphere the principles upheld in the personal relationship: "'We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more.'" (p. 525)

With the wisdom of hindsight, it may be possible to reject this tentative optimism as facile, and in the lurid light of revolutionary theory we may, like John Lucas, find "Mrs Gaskell's grey dream of reconciliation" unexciting.²⁰ It is no doubt true, as Raymond Williams maintains, that her novels reveal a "fear of violence which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time"²¹ (and which, apparently, the twentieth-century intellectual has now overcome). This, however, can be seen as a literary weakness only if we accept that the political views implicit in a novel determine its literary value, as Arnold Kettle seems to do:

That intensity of indignation which breaks through in Dickens and adds an artistic dimension to his novels is muffled in Mrs Gaskell by her Christian resignation and her passive acceptance of the eternal laws of the economists.²²

By this criterion, the "intensity of indignation" of, say, Allen Ginsberg's

²⁰ "Mrs Gaskell and Brotherhood" in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, eds. David Howard, John Lucas and John Goode (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 205.

²¹ "The Industrial Novels" in Culture and Society (1958; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 102. Williams' emphasis.

²² "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel" in From Dickens to Hardy, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 182-3. My underlining. Kettle is here referring to Mary Barton, but he applies the same criticism to North and South.

"Howl" would be more "artistic" than the "Christian resignation" of the Four Quartets; but more to my purpose than these priorities is Kettle's use of terms like "muffled" and "passive resignation" to refer to what I would call the "resolved" element of Mrs Gaskell's novels. The terms demonstrate exactly what resolution is not: the suppression of a vital response to a presented situation. The energies of North and South are indeed directed at resolution in terms of values like rationality and good faith; but if a belief in these values makes possible that hope of "reconciliation" that seems so tame to modern critics, it also forms the basis of Mrs Gaskell's reminder to her readers that the society they inhabit is not perfect. There is indeed little "intensity of indignation" in this reminder; but "I want you to change" can be said in a variety of tones of voice.

To draw a distinction between Mrs Gaskell and Dickens, as Arnold Kettle does, on the grounds of "that intensity of indignation" which "adds an artistic dimension to his novels" is to be as unfair to Dickens as to Mrs Gaskell: if it disregards the nature of her artistry in an insistence on a particular emotional quality, it also reduces Dickens' genius to the passion of the soapbox orator.

There is indignation in Dickens, of course, as there is not in Mrs Gaskell, but it forms only one aspect of his complex art. It is that aspect that is often called caricature, and that led E.M. Forster to pronounce Dickens' characters "nearly all flat".²³ It is what Raymond Williams, in comparing Hard Times with Mrs Gaskell's novels, more helpfully calls "less imaginative observation than imaginative judgement".²⁴

Williams' term "imaginative judgement" defines by implication the aim of serious caricature, and aptly characterises the technique whereby Dickens presents a figure or setting in terms that contain as much moral assessment as description. It is impossible, for instance, to judge Mr Bounderby independently of Dickens' description of him: he is presented to us prejudged:

He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not.

²³ Aspects of the Novel (1927; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 79. In context this judgement is of course much less dismissive than my truncation makes it seem.

²⁴ Culture and Society, p. 104.

A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. ... A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.²⁵

We need only compare this with the presentation of Mr Thornton to see how little interested Dickens is in fairness: Bounderby's wealth and position and even his moral qualities simply become conflated with his physical properties, so that in hating him we hate all that Dickens makes him stand for. This is to say that he is a member of the gallery of Dickens villains who exist by virtue of their vices and would disappear if they had to reform: Mr Pecksniff, Pumblechook, Uriah Heep, Podsnap ... The fact that the list could be extended considerably, and would include some of the best-known figures in English fiction, still does not make this type of characterisation the mainspring of Dickens' art.

Against such "imaginative judgements" may be set, for instance, the apparently very similar presentation of Mr Gradgrind:

Thomas Gradgrind, Sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds on the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. (p. 2)

Again the character seems eternally fixed, judged irrevocably upon introduction. In the event, of course, this proves not to be the case: Mr Gradgrind changes as Mr Bounderby does not. The difference, obvious as it is, points to two conflicting impulses in the novel, each proceeding from a different assumption about the society depicted. Mr Bounderby and his kind imply a static society, or, as John Lucas puts it, "the system he serves is seen as a fixity rather than a process so that any attempt to change it is doomed to failure".²⁶ This assumption affects the nature of the irony directed at Bounderby. The main irony at his expense is, of course, that the man "who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man" (p. 12) has been bribing his mother for years not to reveal his respectable origins.

²⁵ Hard Times (1854; rpt. London: J.M. Dent, 1907), p. 12.

²⁶ The Melancholy Man, 2nd ed. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 242.

The irony is structurally based in that this fact only comes to light at the end of the novel, but it remains, as it were, an extended local irony in that it involves neither moral discovery on the part of the character nor real enlightenment on the part of the reader: it merely confirms and reinforces our unfavourable judgement of Mr Bounderby. This is similar to Jane Austen's technique of presenting, say, Mrs Bennet; but in Dickens the static secondary character is supplemented not only by the dynamic central character, but also by other secondary characters who are capable of change.

In Gradgrind's case, the irony is, of course, that his "realities" prove to be woefully inadequate to the task of bringing up children: Sissy Jupe turns out to have had an essentially sounder education than either Louisa or Tom Gradgrind. In this instance the revelation of the irony does entail moral discovery on the part of Mr Gradgrind:

And he laid [his daughter] down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet. (p. 196)

Here the irony is fully resolved, in that Gradgrind achieves equality of insight with reader and author; from this point on he can only do the little that is in his power to undo the effects of his system.

On the one hand, then, the figure of Mr Bounderby seems to imply that things are what they are and are likely to remain so. On the other hand, the treatment of Mr Gradgrind seems to suggest that things are as they are because people are misguided: where there is good faith, people and things may change. I am not putting this forward as an untenable contradiction: we do not expect of a novelist to project a single and simple conviction on such matters. The coexistence of the two impulses clearly distinguishes this novel from the more single-minded North and South; but it also distinguishes it from the sort of political tract that is so often read - and criticised - as.

The history of James Harthouse represents yet another impulse: the impulse towards ironic withdrawal. Like Decoud after him, he believes that he alone is clear-sighted enough to see through the hollowness of the ideals and professed ideals surrounding him. Although Dickens clearly shares some of his views, his withdrawal into cynicism and moral irresponsibility is unsparingly dealt with, and symbolically defeated by Sissy Jupe's "blending of gentleness and steadiness" (p. 209). The irony of this "defeat" is compounded by the further irony that Harthouse is incapable of seeing it as the

nearest he has ever come to a moral victory:

A secret sense of having failed and been ridiculous - a dread of what other fellows who went in for similar sorts of things, would say at his expense if they knew it - so oppressed him, that what was about the very best passage in his life was the one of all others he would not have owned to on any account, and the only one that made him ashamed of himself. (p. 211)

This irony remains unresolved; unlike the very similar Eugene Wrayburn in Our Mutual Friend, Harthouse is not redeemed by love. But Harthouse's cynical clear-sightedness is nevertheless placed against a much more overt value structure than Conrad, for instance, feels able to provide for Decoud. Industrial relations may remain, in Stephen Blackpool's dying words, "Aw a muddle!" (p. 244), and Dickens does not propose any solution to it. But in *Sissy Jupe* and in *Mr Sleary*, whom F.R. Leavis describes as figuring as "a humane, anti-Utilitarian positive",²⁷ Dickens does overtly, even didactically, introduce a stable, if unspecific, scale of values:

"... that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-intereth after all, but thomething very different; ... that it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating. ..." (p. 262)

The adequacy of this, which has been much debated, is not at issue here. My point is that the novel's structure depends wholly on its presence: it is the insight towards which the novel's central irony develops.

The part played by such an apparently simple positive in the structure of a novel can be more fully appreciated in Dickens' most perfect novel, Great Expectations. This novel is unswervingly directed by a central, fully resolved irony: it is as deliberate an exposure of human blindness and eventual enlightenment as King Oedipus. Just as Oedipus tries to flee his origins and identity and by so doing discovers them anew, so Pip has to learn that his truest identity is the one he discovers as the novel starts: "So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip."²⁸ This self-elected identity becomes submerged in the various identities bestowed upon him by other people ("Boy!"; "Mr Pip"; "Handel"; "Sir"; "Pip ... Sir"; "Young

²⁷ Dickens the Novelist (1970; rpt. Harmondworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 261.

²⁸ Great Expectations, ed. and introd. Angus Calder (1860-61; rpt. Harmondworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 35.

man"), only to be reaffirmed at the end of the novel, as Pip once again "comes to be called Pip" - or "dear old Pip, old chap" (p. 488) to be precise. To put it differently, Pip discovers that he was closest to being a "gentleman", in the special sense established by the novel, when he was merely Pip and took pity on a hungry convict. All the related ironies - and there can be few novels that rely so heavily on irony for moral definition - ultimately derive from this central "mistaken identity".

One example of this will have to stand for the many. In stipulating that Pip is to retain his name after being elevated to a "gentleman", Magwitch presumably tries to fix the identity of the boy who has remained constant in his memory. The fact that, as gentleman, Pip is called "Mr Pip" signals Magwitch's mistake and failure: his own misplaced values have temporarily obscured the Pip whom he was trying both to retain and to reward.

There are elements in the novel of a more fatalistic irony, suggesting that Pip is at the mercy of forces beyond his control. The most explicit statement of such an interpretation is contained in the ironic fable with which Pip introduces Magwitch's disconcerting return. In the tale, "the heavy slab that was to fall on the bed of state in the flush of conquest" is prepared meticulously years in advance, all the machinery put into place to effect its fall, and "the hour come", it crashes down on the unsuspecting victim:

So, in my case; all the work, near and far, that tended to the end, had been accomplished; and in an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me. (p. 330)

This does conform to that aspect of the work's irony that hinges on Pip's innocent unawareness of the destiny being shaped for him independently of his own hopes and illusions. But it leaves out of account Pip's own actions which have, as it were, made him vulnerable to the blow. The fable, in other words, conveys Pip's own feelings at this stage, but not the later sense of his own complicity which most of the subtler ironies in the novel enforce. The most important point about the present irony, in fact, is that it is itself ironically reversed: Magwitch's return heralds not Pip's death, but his rebirth. This is to say that the relatively amoral irony of fate is qualified by an intricate network of morally based ironies.

The pattern of the novel is very complex, but, as in Hard Times, the ironies come to rest on relatively simple values, those values from which

Pip has deviated in his career as a gentleman. As all Pip's expectations are stripped away, so are the ironies, until his last and, he thinks, most modest expectation - to marry Bidy - ends in his final lesson that in this instance too he can never, never undo what he has done. All that he can do is ask Joe and Bidy for that forgiveness that offers, in this novel as in Little Dorrit, liberation from the chain of transgression-retribution - remorse that binds so many of the characters:

'... Dear Joe, I hope you will have children to love, and that some little fellow will sit in this chimney corner of a winter night, who may remind you of another little fellow gone out of it for ever. Don't tell him, Joe, that I was thankless; don't tell him, Bidy, that I was ungenerous and unjust; only tell him that I honoured you both, because you were both so good and true, and that, as your child, I said it would be natural to him to grow up a much better man than I did.' (p. 488)

This apparently simple plea derives its force from the fact that it draws on values that have been defined through Pip's upbringing by Joe, and implied through Miss Havisham's warped education of Estella: in short, the positives have been created by the novel. Against Pip's own education as gentleman is set the ideal of education through love: "to grow up a much better man" is seen as more "natural", given the natural goodness of the parents, than growing up a "gentleman". The qualities invoked here, such as love, gratitude, generosity and constancy have been part of the novel's design from the start, but they have been brought into relief by the insight that comes to Pip as he looks at the shackled Magwitch:

... I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (pp. 456-57)

With such precise definition as is provided by the complex interlinking of the plot, Pip's apparently broad "so good and true" has nothing vague or unfocused about it: we know exactly what it means, even though its richness escapes formulation.

Perhaps because it is more exclusively concerned with the growth of a single individual, Great Expectations is more strongly dominated than Dickens' other novels by a redemptive movement. The capacity for change, in terms of

values common to Dickens and his readers, is inherent in the design of the novel and implicit in its fully resolved ironies. In the other novels, we more generally have, as in Hard Times, the coordination of static and dynamic patterns. The patterns are, of course, part of the fabric of the novels, but can conveniently be isolated in the conclusions of the major novels.

The two narratives of Bleak House embody these two principles most clearly. The novel ends twice, as it were: once on the Dedlock estate, "with so little change under the summer shining or the wintry lowering", on the words "dull repose"; and once on the rather overpowering briskness of Esther's narrative, concluding on the unfinished phrase " - even supposing -", implying an ongoing development.²⁹

In other novels Dickens contrives to contain both impulses in a single concluding sentence. Thus Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, having escaped from the prison Mr Dorrit and so many other characters never leave,

went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.³⁰

This contrast is repeated in Our Mutual Friend. Mortimer Lightwood, having been enlightened by Wrayburn's experience, once again confronts Society - a Society totally unchanged, since our first view of its representatives around the bran-new dinner-table of the Veneerings, except for Twemlow, who has at last broken out of his subservience:

When the company disperse - by which time Mr and Mrs Veneering have had quite as much as they want of the honour, and the guests have had quite as much as they want of the other honour - Mortimer sees Twemlow home, shakes hands with him cordially at parting, and fares to the Temple, gaily.³¹

The equilibrium of the two impulses is very delicate, the lightest

²⁹ Bleak House, ed. Norman Page, introd. J. Hillis Miller (1853; rpt. Penguin Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 931-32, 935.

³⁰ Little Dorrit, ed. and introd. John Holloway (1856-57; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 895.

³¹ Our Mutual Friend, ed. and introd. Stephen Gill (1864-65; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 892.

pressure on either of them tending to disturb the balance. Thus H.M. Daleski, in his illuminating account of Our Mutual Friend, calls the novel a "sustained plea for life" - a life, though, that is threatened by Podsnappery: "and it is to Podsnap that Dickens very nearly gives the last word in the novel."³² In most other novels "very nearly" would have been near enough, but in this case the actual "last word in the novel" is very deliberately arranged, at some inconvenience to the syntax, to be "gaily". This does not, of course, invalidate Daleski's main point, which is that the presence of Podsnap on the last page "places the stories of individual regeneration in perspective" (p. 336); it merely stresses mine, which is that these complex concluding sentences, like the double ending of Bleak House, are very consciously designed to incorporate two visions at the same time. What is very nearly the last word and what is in fact the last word may stand diametrically opposed. What John Lucas says of Bleak House applies to all these novels:

... Bleak House denies the possibility of freedom, either from history, society or the self. But in forcing us to accept this, Dickens also forces us to accept the truth that human beings are not inevitably crushed by the social forces they encounter and that despair is therefore ill-judged or an improper and Dedlock-like declaration of preferences.³³

One cannot altogether escape the impression, however, that Dickens spent much of his writing energy keeping at bay the darker forces, what Lucas calls "the social pressures which surround and threaten the individual." (p. 253) Ultimately nothing in Little Dorrit really dispels the powerful prison-image: if Arthur Clennam is redeemed, Mr Dorrit, Mrs Clennam and Mr Merdle are not, except by death. In Bleak House much of Esther's narrative rings so false that we find the Dedlocks a relief, which is presumably the exact opposite of Dickens' intention. In Our Mutual Friend Bella Wilfer's better nature turns out to be disturbingly like simpering idiocy, and Mr Boffin's decline is far more consistent with the novel's implication of the corrupting influence of money than his rehabilitation.

But the significant fact remains that such hope as there is in the novels

³² Dickens and the Art of Analogy (London: Faber, 1970), p. 336.

³³ The Melancholy Man, p. 243.

is not tacked on, but part of the total vision: as we have seen, it is an inextricable part of the design of the novels, the point towards which the action moves - or at least one point towards which it moves. If this proves nothing else, it proves the intensity of Dickens' desire to believe in the possibility of redemption; and in the dramatisation of this desire he still has available to him a set of simple absolutes on the basis of which to address his audience and upon which to construct his ironies.

In George Eliot's novels "the social pressures which surround and threaten the individual" are as strongly present as in those of Dickens, but in her case these pressures are seen also as potential supports or inspirations. In her works there is a general irony in the individual's aspiration towards self-fulfilment in a society that is indifferent, if not actively hostile, to that aspiration; but a deeper irony subsides in the fact that self-fulfilment is possible only in relation to that community. Paradoxically, the ironic tension between the individual's aspiration and his social destiny is resolvable only through his acceptance of his part in the common lot. Thus individual destiny is determined partly by external circumstances, and partly by moral choice. This duality, so central to George Eliot's thinking, is most explicitly stated in a famous passage from The Mill on the Floss:

For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. "Character," says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms, "character is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity notwithstanding many soliloquies. ...³⁴

To Eliot, as to Dickens, there is thus an element of human destiny that is socially determined, a tragic element in the individual's subjection to forces larger than himself. We know that George Eliot was reading Greek tragedy while she was planning Felix Holt,³⁵ and this element in her fiction clearly

³⁴ The Mill on the Floss (1860; rpt. London: Dent, 1908), p. 378

³⁵ Peter Coveney, Introduction to Felix Holt, p. 37.

owes something to the Greek dramatists. But whereas in Greek tragedy the external force takes the form of the will of the gods, in George Eliot's novels it is often as mundane as the whims of one's neighbours. The most extensive exploration of this theme is of course in Middlemarch, but it runs through most of her fiction. In Felix Holt, for instance, the theme is once again, as in The Mill on the Floss, stated explicitly:

... this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. (p. 129)

Since the statement is intended to correct a bias, its formulation is weighted rather heavily towards "public life": the word "determined" and the example of the milkmaid may seem to ascribe an absolute power to public life, against which individual will is helpless. Felix Holt itself, however, supports no such determinism.

Esther Lyon's destiny is indeed affected, in a sense "determined", by the "wanderings of her clan", influenced as those are by events as public as the Napoleonic wars. Ultimately, however, Esther has to choose her own fate: deciding between Felix Holt and Harold Transome means choosing between two very different destinies that seem to have been prepared for her, on the one hand by her mother's "wanderings", on the other by the legal convolutions that make her heir to Transome Court. Thus moral choice takes precedence over passive submission to a predetermined pattern of events. The classically inexorable ironies of Mrs Transome's subjection to the past, like a Clytemnestra destroyed by the return of her son, are supplemented by the less deterministic irony that Esther, granted all that she ever desired of leisure and riches, chooses to return to the humble surroundings she used to despise.

Esther's moral recognition constitutes that change that Felix insisted upon ("I want you to change"): it is the private aspect of the Meliorism of which Felix is the far-from-optimistic spokesman. If society by the end of the novel does not seem much nearer true reform than at the beginning, the possibility of change in the individual, as dramatised in Esther, at least does not seem like an implausible exception to a general rule. The obvious comparison here is with Bella Wilfer in Our Mutual Friend, who also is brought

to choose her own destiny, rather than to submit to that deus ex machina of Victorian fiction, the unforeseen bequest. It is a measure of George Eliot's fuller commitment to Meliorism that Esther's history should not, like Bella's enlightenment, seem to be at odds with the energies of the novel. In both cases, the irony based on the heroine's blindness to her own truest nature is fully resolved by her recognition of non-material values; but in George Eliot the process of moral discovery seems less mechanically contrived. She seems, as it were, to think more naturally in terms of moral regeneration than Dickens does.

Paradoxically, the greater plausibility of Esther's moral growth may derive from George Eliot's profounder insight into the opposite case, the example from which the heroine learns. Mrs Transome is a more instructive, because more convincing, exemplum of moral atrophy than Mr Boffin. This may be another way of demonstrating the point that a belief in the possibility of change is based on a deep understanding of the need for change, on a profound analysis of what it is that must change.

It is, of course, in Middlemarch that the tension between the freely chosen and the socially determined is most fully explored, to form the basis of the dominant irony of the novel. In its simplest form, that irony proceeds from the individual's blithe unawareness of what Destiny has in store:

But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand.³⁶

This "stealthy convergence of human lots" may, of course, be no more than the "calculated irony" of plot contrivance, serving mainly to demonstrate the "sarcastic" omniscience of the author. The sarcastic aspect of George Eliot's Destiny bears a strong resemblance to Dickens' Miss Wade, portentously addressing a mystified Mr Meagles and a shrinking Pet Meagles:

³⁶ Middlemarch, ed. and introd. W.J. Harvey (1871-72; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 122.

'In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to meet us, from many strange places and by many strange roads, ... and what it is set to us to do to them, and what it is set to them to do to us, will all be done.' (Little Dorrit, p. 63)

This element of predestined convergence, which in itself has little more moral significance than Rigaud's "destiny's dice-box" (Little Dorrit, p. 47), is indeed present in Middlemarch, as it is in Felix Holt and Little Dorrit, and in each case is the least admired aspect of the novel in which it occurs: the manipulations which reveal Bulstrode's connection with Ladislaw, the impossibly contrived legal tangle which makes Esther heir to Transome Court, the bewildering convolutions that link Little Dorrit to Mrs Clennam.

But in all these novels, the apparently arbitrary interweaving of human destinies serves a larger vision: what John Holloway calls "one of the greatest intellectual discoveries of the earlier nineteenth century ... the emergence of the whole idea of society as a great unified fabric".³⁷ Geoffrey Hemstedt goes so far as to ascribe the vitality of the Victorian novel to the discovery of the novel's "epic" capacity for "the comprehensive unfolding of interrelated destinies";³⁸ by this theory, the novel proved to be the form best adapted to reflecting society's emerging view of itself. Such generalisations are, in the nature of things, easier to criticise than to prove; suffice it to say that in Middlemarch, at any rate, this "idea of society as a great unified fabric" is indeed the vitalising principle and the key to the organisation of the novel.

The "stealthy convergence of human lots" thus brings with it a vision of the individual as sharing responsibility for the common lot, linked to it not only by a whim of Destiny, but also by moral choice. Individual aspiration is only meaningful in so far as it aims to serve and to alleviate the common lot, as all the relationships in the novel are designed to demonstrate. In Lydgate's case, for instance, this recognition quite consciously, even self-consciously, takes the shape of "the ambition of making his life recognized as a factor in the better life of mankind" (p. 195) - "mankind" perhaps being less real to him than the ambition to be "recognized". In Dorothea's case, allegiance with the common lot takes many

³⁷ Introduction, Little Dorrit, p. 16.

³⁸ "The Novel" in The Victorians, ed. Laurence Lerner (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 3.

exalted shapes (notably the unprepossessing and tragically inappropriate one of Mr Casaubon), but she does finally arrive at the humbler, if less definite, perception of the need to accept her part in a larger whole:

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving - perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (p. 846)

Thus Dorothea escapes Casaubon's fate, "to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self" (p. 314). It could be objected that the liberation is facile: the man with the bundle, the woman with the baby, are so extraneous to Dorothea's concerns that they might seem to have been trundled on merely for the sake of an illumination. But that would be unfair: these figures are merely focused on as extensions of Dorothea's realisation, after a night of wrestling with her disappointment and jealousy at finding Ladislaw and Rosamond together in apparent intimacy, that her grief should not be allowed to enclose her "in the narrow cell of her calamity, in the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of its own." (p. 845) In other words, Dorothea's renewed awareness of "the largeness of the world" is not miraculously awakened by seeing a man with a bundle on his back: she can see and register the man (and guess at the shepherd: she is short-sighted) because she has escaped from "the narrow cell of her calamity".

It is Dorothea's liberation from "a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of her own" that sets her apart from so many of the other characters in the novel. For complementary to the vision of the interconnectedness of human destinies is the recognition that each individual sees himself as the centre of that intricate web, and others merely as the dramatis personae of his drama:

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted

candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent. ... (p. 297)

Laboured as it may be, this statement sums up the principle underlying the most vital ironies of the novel: no longer the "calculated irony" of a sarcastic Destiny, but the common, pervasive irony of the individual's blindness to the limits of his own importance. It is the main source of tragedy in the novel - and as we shall see, to George Eliot it is a tragedy in a very precise, if untraditional, sense.

The clearest example of this ironic tragedy is the history of Tertius Lydgate, as determined by the purposes of the charming Rosamond Vincy, "entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate as he was in himself, but with his relation to her" (p. 196). It is central to the design of the novel that this egocentricity draws into its little vortex not the noble selflessness of the disinterested man of science, but his correspondingly egocentric expectations:

... Lydgate thought that ... he had found perfect womanhood - felt as if already breathed upon by exquisite wedded affection such as would be bestowed by an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them. ... (p. 387)

Whatever George Eliot's later sympathy with Lydgate, in the sharp irony of this passage she clearly prepares his Nemesis for him with some relish. It is consistent with the novel's concern with "moral stupidity" of this sort (p. 243) that Nemesis is not a transformation of Rosamond into a Becky Sharp or an Arabella Donn. She remains the Rosamond whom Lydgate fell in love with; he merely gets to know her better, under circumstances that no longer permit the illusion of the compatibility of their egoisms. In the early days of their courtship, her "I never give up anything that I choose to do" struck him as an "adorable" "constancy of purpose" (p. 385); as he grows into "an amazed sense of his powerlessness over Rosamond", he finds himself defeated by this constancy of purpose - or, as he now calls it, "the terrible tenacity of this mild creature." (p. 631)

Rosamond effectively destroys Lydgate, but in this she is aided by almost all of Middlemarch, who, we are told, "counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably." (p. 183) In the event he is not so much swallowed as spat out; but this is merely another way of discovering the dependence of one's destiny on the purposes of others. In this dependence, the organic nature of society assumes its most ironical and, in George Eliot's sense of the word, tragic aspect.

To become a fashionable physician and to write a treatise on Gout lacks, we should say, the true tragic dimension; but for George Eliot the tragedy of this fate lies exactly in its banality:

... we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind ... (p. 226)

In spite of the implied disclaimer, it is of course exactly "that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency" that Eliot uncovers, in keeping with her awareness that each person is the main actor in the drama of his own life. By this perspective, even as ordinary a lot as heart disease becomes tragic exactly because it falls so far short of the grandeur with which the sufferer invests his own role. There is thus a certain irony in the limitedness of Lydgate's sympathy with Casaubon:

Lydgate ... felt a little amusement mingling with his pity. He was at present too ill acquainted with disaster to enter into the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy except the passionate egoism of the sufferer. (p. 460)

George Eliot is of course as well aware as any tragic theorist that pathos is not a tragic emotion: the "amusement" of detachment takes the place of the "terror" of identification. And yet to Casaubon the dashing of his life's ambition, misplaced as that ambition may seem to others, is as absolute a catastrophe as the coming of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane. Thus there is no absolute measure of tragedy: it is a function of the aspiration of the protagonist. If Lydgate had not set himself the ideal of arriving at the nature of the Primitive Tissue, his treatise on Gout might have given him the same pleasure as Fred Vincy derives from his work on the Cultivation of Green Crops - "but [Lydgate] always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done

what he once meant to do." (p. 893)

It is because the tragic is often a matter of a discrepancy between intention and achievement that Dorothea's destiny remains so ambiguous. By Lydgate's criterion, she is a failure: she also does not do what she once meant to do. But in accepting an alternative criterion, whereby the meaning of one's life is not measured only by one's own aspirations, but also by one's contribution to the aspirations of others, Dorothea frees herself from the narrow egoism that may attend greater achievements and blight similarly modest ones. She frees herself, as it were, from the arbitrary irony that all our aspirations are, in the eyes of our neighbours, merely adjuncts to theirs. This liberation involves the acceptance of a humble role in the drama of life - and, in Mary Garth's case, even the acceptance that one may be acting in a comedy rather than a tragedy:

... having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her peculiar satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact. And she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part. ... She had learned not to make unreasonable claims. (p. 349)

David Daiches, seeing this as a final judgement on Dorothea's aspirations, asks:

In the light of it, what becomes of the Saint Theresa concept with which the novel opened? Surely it is now seen as a form of unreasonable claim on life, which it is the part of moral maturity to forego.³⁹

This, however, is to contract the novel to the limits of Mary's comic vision, and to ignore the tragic vision that informs so much of the novel. Mary's realism does indeed show great moral maturity, but to elevate her attitude to a moral imperative is, for instance, to strip Lydgate's history of its significance. If Dorothea also comes to accept that her earlier idealism was "a form of unreasonable claim on life", this does not neutralise our sense of loss. Nor do we forget that such idealism is only "unreasonable" in

³⁹ George Eliot: Middlemarch (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), p. 57.

an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion.
(Middlemarch, p. 896)

Thus, in an "imperfect social state", an unresolved irony remains in the form of a discrepancy between the potential value of the individual and the scope offered to him by that society. Nevertheless, an acceptance of the smaller role assigned to the individual, on the basis of his common humanity rather than of his exceptionality, may resolve the irony of our universal "moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (p. 243). Such an acceptance may then, in George Eliot's world, enable the individual to achieve the humbler aspiration of making things "not so ill with you and me as they might have been" (p. 896).

It seems facile to say that for Thomas Hardy, if things are "not so ill with you and me as they might have been", then you and I are extraordinarily lucky; and yet that is exactly the burden, or at any rate the conclusion, of The Mayor of Casterbridge:

Her position was, indeed, to a marked degree one that, in common phrase, afforded much to be thankful for. That she was not demonstratively thankful was no fault of hers. Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honour of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness, even when the path was suddenly irradiated at some half-way point by daybeams rich as hers.⁴⁰

But there is little point in once again demonstrating Hardy's gloom. A more fruitful comparison with George Eliot and Dickens, and a way towards analysing this "gloom", may be found in the fact that for him, too, individual fate presents itself in the double aspect of the freely chosen and the socially determined. In his case, of course, the latter predominates, but not always so strongly as to obscure the former - although the two often stand in an uncomfortable relation to each other that in Hardy is invariably called clumsiness.

It is something like this that Robert Heilman refers to as a "pervasive two-tone effect" in Hardy's three last novels:

⁴⁰ The Mayor of Casterbridge, ed. and introd. Martin Seymour-Smith (1886; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 410-11.

The bitonality reflects ... a duality in Hardy's feeling about the sources of misfortune; one kind of feeling leads him into a formal theory, the other rests on his artistic intuition. On the one hand he nags, on the other he perceives and records; on the one hand he blames cosmos and society, on the other he apprehends character as fate.⁴¹

The "duality" may not be quite as clear-cut as this, but it does exist, and it may serve as a basis for a consideration of Hardy, as long as we give due emphasis to Heilman's paradox that it is a "feeling" that "leads him into a formal theory". In other words, we cannot think in terms of a simple opposition between what Hardy thinks he should think and what he feels: the pessimism, which at times does seem rather theoretical, is clearly not extraneous to the energy of the novels.

The obvious comparison to be drawn here is with George Eliot, more specifically with her idea of tragedy. As we have seen, her central concept of the "stealthy convergence of human lots" is much more than a matter of plot mechanics: it is the expression of a deeply felt moral principle, the belief in the power of the individual for good or bad in his interaction with his fellow-individuals. The fortuitous element of this convergence is strictly subordinated to the element of responsibility and choice. This belief prevents the tragic pattern from becoming an absolute principle in these novels.

Jeannette King makes this the basis of her distinction between the relative weight given to the tragic in the works of Eliot and Hardy:

... the novel for her reflects the unending connections of human life, framing the tragic; Hardy's novels are dominated by the form of tragedy, which isolates the tragic pattern.⁴²

This does justice, in broad terms, to the difference we feel between these two novelists, but it oversimplifies Hardy somewhat, in not taking into account the "duality" Heilman refers to. This is to say that the "tragic pattern" in Hardy's novels is at times dominant, but has to contend with a still essentially nineteenth-century, morally-based "character is fate"

⁴¹ "Two-Tone Fictions" in The Theory of the Novel, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 313.

⁴² Tragedy in the Victorian Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 89-90.

concept, which does take into account "the unending connections of human life".

The interaction of these two elements may best be observed in The Mayor of Casterbridge, in which they are perhaps more coherently related than in the two later novels. In the unfolding of Henchard's history, the standards by which the novel judges him undergo a gradual alienation from the standards of the community as presented in the novel, until by the end of the novel, if we are to identify with Henchard (and there seems to be no alternative to doing so), we have to accept his total repudiation of society. To put it more simply: whereas in the early stages of the novel we feel that Henchard's fate is brought about by his violation of what we regard as normal civilised values, as the novel progresses our assessment of him entails an increasingly critical view of those values. The tragic pattern may, as Jeannette King says, dominate the novel, but the pattern changes: from a relatively simple "character is fate" principle, by which Henchard's own actions determine his destiny, the novel moves to the implication that Henchard is the victim of the morality which passes judgement on him.

Laurence Lerner presents the case for a more static interpretation of the role played by Henchard's character in his downfall:

What binds the episodes together is what they all have in common - the fact that they show what kind of man Henchard was. How can we fail, as we read the book, to see him as a man who makes his own destiny?⁴³

Lerner admits that Henchard is "disastrously unlucky" (p. 20), but argues that even in mischance it is Henchard's response which determines the outcome, and for which responsibility accrues to him: circumstances only "permit the consequences of his own rashness to take place when with common good luck they might have been avoided." (p. 57)

This is clearly true of much of the novel: even the return of the firmity woman and of Newson, perversely unlucky and ill-timed as these events are, derive their catastrophic potential from Henchard's own earlier actions. But I cannot see that they "show what kind of man Henchard was", except in a sense that Lerner cannot intend: by showing that Henchard is no longer the same man who committed the offence now visited upon him. Henchard reacts

⁴³ Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge: Tragedy or Social History? (London: Chatto and Windus for Sussex University Press, 1975), p. 19.

completely honourably both to the firmity woman's denunciation and to Newson's return. We start to feel more and more that Henchard is denied a chance to rehabilitate himself, in other words that his fate is no longer a function of his character.

Robert Schweik has argued this case most persuasively. He divides the novel into four "structurally similar 'movements' of progressively diminishing lengths".⁴⁴ In each of these movements, a hopeful situation is followed by a series of events that culminates in catastrophe. Schweik sees a progressive development in these movements which has "the effect of repeatedly shifting our perception of Henchard's character, of the kind of world he inhabits, and of the meaning of the catastrophes which he suffers." (pp. 134-35) Thus the long first movement, culminating in the denunciation of the firmity woman, "does seem to exemplify the dictum that 'character is fate'; it does so largely because Hardy maintains a general correspondence between the changes in Henchard's apparent moral stature and the changes in his fortunes." (p. 137) Crudely speaking, there seems to be a moral justification for what befalls Henchard. In the second movement, according to Schweik, we are still aware of the capacity for reckless violence, but this is checked by a counter-impulse: thus Henchard does not disclose the identity of the writer of the letters he reads to Farfrae; through an "unaccountable impulse" gives way when Farfrae intervenes in his intended greeting of the Royal personage (p. 340); and refrains from killing Farfrae in the wrestling match he arranges to avenge himself. Furthermore, the catastrophe of this section, Lucetta's death, occurs in spite of Henchard's pathetic attempt, "in a state of bitter anxiety and contrition" (p. 358), to prevent it. In the third cycle of the novel, Henchard's dependence on Elizabeth-Jane is stressed, as well as his conscientious struggles against promptings which earlier would have precipitated him to destructive action. In this repentant mood he accepts the prospect of becoming "an inoffensive old man, tenderly smiled on by Elizabeth, and good-naturedly tolerated by her husband" for the sake of the "privilege of being in the house she occupied" (pp. 384-85). When even this is denied him, he leaves Casterbridge in a "state of hopelessness" (388). The modulation of the pattern is completed by the final section, in which Henchard's attempt to

⁴⁴ "Character and Fate in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 21 (1966-67). Rpt. in *Hardy: The Tragic Novels*, ed. R.P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 134.

obtain Elizabeth-Jane's forgiveness is repelled, leading to his lonely death.

From this Schweik concludes that

There is, then, a marked contrast between that image of a morally ordered world, projected by the long opening movement of The Mayor of Casterbridge and the more sombre, disenchanting vision of man's predicament with which the novel closes. ... (pp. 144-45)

Schweik speculates that this apparent inconsistency helped Hardy "to avoid confronting many of his readers with a view of life which would have sharply conflicted with their own assumptions and attitudes." (p. 145) He concedes that this was probably not deliberate: the changes in the novel "came about in the process of composition and were the results of Hardy's efforts to develop his subject and to work out its implications." (p. 146) These changes then reflect Hardy's shift from "the traditional belief in an ethically ordered universe" to "his consciously considered views on man's place in a Darwinian world." (p. 146)

Schweik's reading thus accounts for the "duality" that Heilman finds in Hardy's novels, and incorporates it, in the case of The Mayor at least, into the novel's moral meaning. That meaning is, of course, different to George Eliot's - a point not taken into account by W.J. Harvey in his unfavourable comparison of Hardy's use of the Novalis "aphorism" ("Character is fate") with that of George Eliot:

... The Mayor of Casterbridge as a whole contradicts Hardy's acceptance of Novalis. Granted that a great deal depends upon the character of Henchard, nevertheless the twists and turns of the plot, with its manifold coincidences, suggest some external Fate or Destiny working upon him.⁴⁵

Schweik's reading does not deny this "contradiction", but makes it seem like more than sheer clumsiness.

I have given such prominence to Schweik's argument because it is so relevant to the line I have been trying to trace from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Schweik's interpretation is consistent with my view of Hardy as a transitional figure between the certainties still

⁴⁵ "Idea and Image in the Novels of George Eliot", in Critical Essays on George Eliot, ed. Barbara Hardy, p. 195.

possible to Dickens and George Eliot (albeit certainties held onto with some grimness at times) and the much more radical scepticism of the novelists of the new century. This is not a particularly original view, but it can still, I believe, yield some insight into that relation between structure and belief which inheres in an author's mode of irony. Schweik's analysis shows the change in this relation taking place within the course of a single novel. To put it simply, Henchard's history proceeds in "movements" of diminishingly resolved ironies: the first movement is constructed on a resolved irony based on Henchard's selling of his wife; after that, the ironies gradually lose resolution, until in the final movement it is impossible to ascribe positive moral significance to Henchard's rejection. He becomes the victim of a disguised version of the compassionless "virtue" which destroys Lucetta. Elizabeth-Jane, having stoically, not to say stolidly, survived the vagaries of destiny, becomes the agent of the pitiless "justice" society exacts:

'... and then when he, my warm-hearted real father, came to find me, [you] cruelly sent him away with a wicked invention of my death, which nearly broke his heart. O how can I love as I once did a man who has served us like this!' (p. 402)

Elizabeth-Jane's little harangue demonstrates how unfeeling sentimentality can be when it assumes the cloak of righteousness. Newson himself has called Henchard's trick a "good joke" (having "failed to perceive the enormity of Henchard's crime") (p. 391) and furthermore is not prevented by sentimental considerations from leaving his long-lost daughter three days after her marriage; there would thus seem to be little call for Elizabeth-Jane to be so outraged on his account. But he is her "warm-hearted real father", so it must follow, in defiance of the probabilities, that Henchard's trick "nearly broke his heart". She does not ask herself why the man whom she has come to "love" as her father should "cruelly" tell a "wicked" lie: her moral imagination has exhausted itself in taking these ready-made judgements off the shelf.

Elizabeth-Jane is, in her small way, a descendant of those exponents of official morality that we have seen pronouncing on the murder of Helen and the blindness of Gloucester; and her unimaginative conventionality points forward to the implacable piety that destroys Tess and Jude.

In Tess and Jude the disenchantment with conventional values is not, as in The Mayor, arrived at in the course of the novel: it is there from

the start, and may account for the overtly polemical tone of sections of these novels. The "two-tone effect" mentioned by Heilman becomes more insistent, and results in awkward lapses of narrative tone. Thus Angel Clare's discovery that he likes outdoor life for its own sake, and that it is a relief from his indecisiveness about his career, is seen to make him "wonderfully free from the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power". With similar implausibility Tess' description of "the aspect of things to her" - "And you seem to see numbers of to-morrows just all in a line" - is interpreted by her author as "expressing in her own native phrases - assisted a little by her sixth standard training - feelings which might have been called those of the age - the ache of modernism."⁴⁶ Slightly less obtrusively, Jude's reflections on matrimony also bear the mark of Hardy's sponsorship:

There seemed to him, vaguely and dimly, something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a cancelling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labour, of foregoing a man's one opportunity of showing himself superior to the lower animals, and of contributing his units of work to the general progress of his generation, because of a momentary surprise by a new and transitory instinct which had nothing in it of the nature of vice, and could be only at the most called weakness.⁴⁷

If it is true, as Schweik maintains, that in The Mayor Hardy tries to "avoid confronting many of his readers", it would seem that in Tess and Jude no such circumspection restrains him. The assertiveness of some of his statements suggests, in fact, that Hardy is consciously defying the complacency of his readers. R.P. Draper, maintaining that Hardy "wished to be on good terms with his readers yet felt he could not trust the moral judgement of many of them", cites the subtitle of Tess ("A Pure Woman") as one such defiance of "conventional opinion".⁴⁸ Clearly by Hardy's time serial publication no longer "induced [that] close relationship between author and reader" that Kathleen Tillotson maintains existed between the

⁴⁶ Tess of the D'urbervilles, ed. David Skilton (1891; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 174, 180.

⁴⁷ Jude the Obscure, Introd. Terry Eagleton (1896; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 82.

⁴⁸ Introduction to The Tragic Novels, p. 15.

writers of the eighteen-forties and their audience: Thackeray's description of Dickens' relationship with his readers as "something like personal affection"⁴⁹, must have provided Hardy with some bitter mirth as he supplied a wheelbarrow for Angel Clare to transport the dairymaids across the flooded lane without offending the magazine readers.⁵⁰

Hardy's uneasy relationship with his readers is consistent with my contention that unresolved irony reflects a dissonance between the values implied by the work and a communal body of values. In this respect, as in so many others, he can be contrasted with George Eliot, of whom Isobel Armstrong remarks:

George Eliot's procedure depends upon the constant corroboration and assent of the reader to her sayings. ...

Her success depends ... upon her capacity ... to invoke a general body of moral and psychological knowledge or, rather experience, which can be the corporate possession of both writer and reader. ...⁵¹

Hardy clearly does not have the same faith in the "corporate possession". And yet, it could be argued that the very deliberateness of Hardy's defiant statements represents a hope, however desperate, of bringing his readers to better insights - a hope, for instance, of correcting their false notions of purity. In so far as this hope is present, Hardy could be assimilated with the heuristic tradition of the nineteenth-century novel, the main difference between him and his predecessors being then not so much in his aim as in his tone.

There is something in this argument: those aspects of Hardy's novels that are concerned with the imperfections of human institutions do imply, however obliquely, the perfectibility of those institutions. But ultimately Hardy's novels do not really confirm that implication: they are dominated by an inexorable pattern that shapes all events to its pessimistic conclusion. Tess' purity would not have been an issue in a more enlightened age; but we feel that the President of the Immortals would have got her anyway. Nowadays Jude could be admitted to Oxford, and his landlady would probably

⁴⁹ Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 33.

⁵⁰ Draper, p. 14.

⁵¹ "'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's Wisdom", in Barbara Hardy, pp. 118-20.

not enquire very closely into the legality of his union with Sue; but it is difficult to believe that he or Sue would have been much happier. The lamentation from the Book of Job on which Jude ends his life pronounces on the blight of existence, not on an imperfect social order. In his Postscript to the novel, Hardy seems to confirm this in referring to the marriage laws as "a good foundation for the fable of a tragedy, told for its own sake as a presentation of particulars containing a good deal that was universal".⁵²

Terry Eagleton limits himself to "particulars" in maintaining that Jude's "failure to attain [Christminster] has no 'cosmic' significance whatsoever" and that "the true killer of [Sue's] children [is] the society which turned the family from its lodging-houses." The element of truth in this is nevertheless only one element of the novel; and Eagleton's attempt to explain away the fatalistic aspect - for instance, by asserting that Father Time kills himself and the other children "on the basis of what is really a mistake" - remains unconvincing as an attempt to show that "Jude the Obscure, like all of Hardy's novels, proclaims no inexorable determinism".⁵³ Hardy remains, in spite of Eagleton, as uncomfortable in the Marxist canon as in the Great Tradition.

This is to say that what remains of the "Meliorist myth" in Hardy is heavily qualified by a contrary bent, implying that all change is illusory, the temporary variations within a tragic pattern. George Eliot, though by no means a bland optimist, can still refer, in the closing paragraph of Middlemarch, to "the growing good of the world"; at the end of Jude the Obscure we have only a man totally unreconciled to his fate - and an author who, in the bitter irony of "the joyous throb of a waltz ... from the ball-room at Cardinal" (p. 427), seems to deny the possibility of reconciliation between man's aspiration and his destiny.

What distinguishes Hardy's tragedy from his classical models is that the "tragic machinery" consists not of the inscrutable will of the gods, but, for the most part, of human institutions and systems of belief.⁵⁴

⁵² Postscript, Jude the Obscure, p. 25.

⁵³ Introduction, Jude the Obscure, pp. 10, 19, 20.

⁵⁴ Postscript, p. 25: "The marriage laws being used in great part as the tragic machinery of the tale. ..."

In a different direction, this also serves to distinguish him from the novelists who preceded him: that human community which in George Eliot was seen to restrict and even destroy the individual, but also to form the necessary theatre of his meaningful action, in Hardy becomes more exclusively restrictive. In other words, the "unending connections of human life" reflected in George Eliot's novels, may still be present, but usually to remind us that connections are also bonds which the individual cannot escape, even if he should want to. In this, as in so many other ways, Hardy brings us to the verge of the twentieth century.

Chapter III

The Abandoned Ficelle: Technique and Intention in The Ambassadors

A writer's relation to his time is never as simple as historical generalisation tries to make it seem. Yet some writers conform much less readily than others to the simplifying abstraction. Thomas Hardy, with his ambivalence towards the late nineteenth century, is one such writer: as we have seen, his angry rejection of much of his society stems not from alienation from that society, but from a troubled attachment. In Henry James we have what could be called, perhaps too glibly, the reverse of this ambivalence: instead of an indignant surface overlaying a sense of attachment, an urbane, unruffled surface conceals a radical questioning.

In James the ambivalence relates in the first place, of course, to America and Europe, and in that form shows itself as early as Roderick Hudson, The American and The Europeans. This ambivalence has often enough been analysed in terms of the International Theme. But in the late novels, although the "International" element persists, the old America-Europe distinction, while still accounting for the main plot-line, is less central to the enquiry than in earlier novels. It seems likely that James, having made his own choice by settling in England, found the contrast between the Old World and the New less pressing; certainly we feel that the analysis is going beyond cultural differences: what is being examined is a new cosmopolitan society, in which "American" commercialism is no longer confined to America, nor "European" manipulativeness to Europe. The ambivalence thus takes a modified form: an appreciation of the society which James has found more congenial than any other, qualified by deep misgivings about the moral basis of that society.

The depth of those misgivings has been questioned by critics who feel that James was too much part of the society he was depicting to be truly critical of it. Thus John Goode can, in discussing The Wings of the Dove, declare almost in passing:

I don't think necessarily that James made moral judgments on the world he was depicting, unless it was to endorse its structure by seeing in it the potential of aesthetic contemplation.¹

This uncertainty seems not unduly to affect Goode's admiration for the novel; John Holloway, however, sees such doubt as central to our assessment of the late novels:

His genuineness is completely and splendidly reassuring in the ... Portrait of a Lady (1881). The work of his closing years, however, cannot be seen in quite the same light. He saw deficiencies in the kind of complexity and refinement which characterized this later period; yet these very things seem to colour his later work. As his world becomes more multitudinously self-reflecting and variegated, a doubt more and more preoccupies the reader. The doubt is, whether James's many-dimensional kaleidoscope of surfaces is after all a true revelation of deeper life in the characters, or only a wonderful simulacrum of deeper life. Nor can that doubt but be strengthened by James's growing tendency to invest his interplaying surfaces with all the grandiosity of Edwardian opulence; ... and this not as part of a total view, admire-but-judge, but rather of characters whom he endorses out and out. In the end, one is inclined to conclude that James and Sargent were not near neighbours quite for nothing.²

This implies that James performed for the society he depicted a role analogous to that of a painter of society portraits, the kind of flattery-by-analysis that has been ascribed to Sargent's portraiture:

His greatest activity in portrait painting coincided (and ended) with the Edwardian age and he was to depict it at once glittering and prosaic. ... his skill was of that easy and unerring kind which, while conveying at the time an impression of remorseless truth, rarely failed to please the sitter by its revelations; so that those who went to him because it was the thing to be 'painted by Sargent', dreading the psychological scrutiny, more often than not were relieved to find that they were more interesting than they thought.³

¹ "The Pervasive Mystery of Style" in The Air of Reality, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 297.

² "The Literary Scene" in The Modern Age, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 56.

³ William Gaunt, The Aesthetic Adventure, rev. ed. (1945; rpt. London: Sphere Books, 1975), p. 181.

Perhaps if James was read at all by the kind of people who invited him so relentlessly to dinner, that was the impression they had of his novels: one can imagine Mrs Brookenham, for instance, feeling vaguely flattered by The Awkward Age. James' novels were not calculated, any more than Jane Austen's, to give offence to the society they depicted. It could be argued that they were not calculated to give anything at all, least of all a resentable meaning, to the society they depicted. In his last novels there is a sublime disregard of the reader at large which serves as much as anything else to set him apart from Hardy, and to demonstrate the ambivalence I have referred to. Where Hardy's involvement with his readers shows itself in provocative statements which served to alienate those they were to enlighten, James' serene aplomb, which offended nobody, perhaps hides a more thorough despair of ever being understood by those who lionised him. Though never indifferent to public recognition, he would not have suppressed a single subordinate clause in order to achieve it; and he was as little interested in edifying his public as in pandering to it.

This is to say that direct moral purpose, as manifested variously by Gaskell, Dickens, Eliot and Hardy is not likely to be found in James' late novels, if indeed it was ever a component of his fiction. As early as 1884 he was making gentle fun of Walter Besant's assertion that the English novel contains "a conscious moral purpose":

Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up?⁴

The Oscar Wilde-ish air of this is somewhat mitigated when James, now in absolute earnest, traces the connection between moral sense and intelligence:

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the very obvious truth

⁴ "The Art of Fiction" in Partial Portraits, introd. Leon Edel (1888; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), pp. 404-05.

that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. (p. 406)

The companion piece to this statement is of course its equally well-known elaboration in the Preface to the New York edition of The Portrait of a Lady:

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the "moral" sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to "grow" with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience.⁵

Statements like these do seem to allow for John Goode's assertion that James did not pass "moral judgments on the world he was depicting". The kind of explicit valuation that we associate with moral judgement would seem to James to be far too external to the creative process to be part of the "projected morality". But the process is also much more active than is suggested by Goode's phrase "aesthetic contemplation": the moral intelligence does not merely contemplate, it interprets its material by ordering it. It is in this ordering that a "vision of life" is embodied; and it is in the capacity to order that "the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together".

Of course, such theoretical statements can at best tell us what weight James himself attached to the moral element of a work of art, and what he thought it consisted in. The "amount of felt life concerned in producing it" can ultimately only be judged from the completed work, and many readers of the late novels have found them deficient in exactly this respect. Generations of students who have had to struggle with The Ambassadors have found authority for their recalcitrance in E.M. Forster's strictures:

⁵ The Art of the Novel, introd. Richard P. Blackmur (1907; rpt. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 45.

The beauty that suffuses The Ambassadors is the reward due to a fine artist for hard work. James knew exactly what he wanted, he pursued the narrow path of aesthetic duty, and success to the full extent of his possibilities has crowned him. The pattern has woven itself, with modulation and reservations Anatole France will never attain. But at what sacrifice!

So enormous is the sacrifice that many readers cannot get interested in James, although they can follow what he says (his difficulty has been much exaggerated), and can appreciate his effects. They cannot grant his premise, which is that most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel.⁶

To this F.R. Leavis has added the weight of his formidable discriminations:

It is as if his interest in his material had been too specialized, too much concentrated on certain limited kinds of possible development, and as if in the technical elaboration expressing this specialized interest he had lost his full sense of life and let his moral taste slip in abeyance.⁷

Both Forster and Leavis would thus see the "artistic sense" here impoverished by the absence of "moral sense", in an emphasis on technique that sacrifices "life" to "pattern".

Implicit in this, as in the criticisms of Goode and Holloway, is the charge of aestheticism. The term is of course often little more than a vaguely referential, vaguely emotive label for anything artistic that occurred near the turn of the century; but in a recent study by Michael Bell it is employed with some precision in relation to James. His subject in this section of his essay is "the break up of fictional realism",⁸ and before he discusses James he compares a passage from Middlemarch with a passage from Ulysses to clarify his distinction between realism and aestheticism. George Eliot's realism, he maintains, is "based on an organicist conception of life in which the interconnections of the book's structure, for all that they are created by the author, are modelled on the supposed interrelations of life itself." (p. 6) He analyses Dorothea's vision of "the largeness of the world" (which I quoted in the previous chapter) and concludes:

⁶ Aspects of the Novel, p. 161.

⁷ The Great Tradition (1948; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 178.

⁸ "Introduction: Modern Movements in Literature", 1900 - 1930, ed. Michael Bell (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 4.

The physical structure of the scene reflects inherent moral relations. ... Hence the vision at this moment is continuous with the whole and individual objects come to us imbued with an inherent moral meaningfulness. Eliot's world is value-laden. ... (p. 7)

Bell's fairly specialised (although, as we shall see, not unique) sense of "realism", then, refers to a depiction of that interrelatedness of society which, in the previous chapter, I discussed as central to the shaping of the Victorian novel, in Little Dorrit as much as in Middlemarch.

By contrast with this type of realism, Bell argues that in the scene from Ulysses (one of Bloom's slightly sickening series of culinary associations in "Lestrygonians") the order is not inherent in the scene, but imposed upon it by the patterns of the novel:

The randomness of everyday life is seen in a perspective of serene order but the order is always a creation of the book, of the perceiving mind. For all the minute depiction of Dublin the structure is not strictly derived from external reality but from a consciously artistic creation. (p. 7)

To Bell the difference between the "realist" mode of Middlemarch and the "aesthetic" mode of Ulysses thus lies in the ultimate source of the order created in the novel: in Eliot it mirrors an order perceived in, that is ascribed to, the external world, whereas in Ulysses it is a function of the esoteric internal references of the work.

It is in this self-reflecting nature of the inner consistency of the work that Bell finds Henry James' late novels moving towards aestheticism:

The infinitely self-qualifying plasticity of the language is at once a minute truthfulness to the flux of experience yet the pursuit of an ideal so pure as to become an end in itself. From within the most intrinsic logic of realist form there emerges an aesthetic stance. (p. 65)

By this argument, the late novels become as self-enclosed as Ulysses by pushing to an extreme the realist concern with "truthfulness to the flux of experience": ultimately we become trapped in the flux itself, and no determinate meaning is achieved:

For James there seems never to be an achieved truth but a continuing engagement with the flux of perception. The language does not express thought so much as the process of thinking.
(p. 65)

Raymond Williams makes much the same point, but he is perhaps best approached through Lukács, to whose concept of realism both Williams and Bell seem to owe something, and whose comments reveal more explicitly the ideological application of this concept. For Lukács, the converse of realism is not aestheticism, but modernism, and then more specifically what he calls the "naturalistic character of modernist literature".⁹ His distinction between realism and naturalism "depends on the presence or absence in a work of art of a 'hierarchy of significance' in the situations and characters presented." (p. 34) Naturalism thus presents a reflection of reality that is not structured by a normative purpose: all details are equally important in that all are arbitrary. Lukács also chooses Ulysses as his example:

The perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data, their powerfully charged - but aimless and directionless - fields of force, give rise to an epic structure with its static, reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events. (p. 18)

The "perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data" which are not directed towards a conclusion would seem to have something in common with the "continuing engagement with the flux of perception" that Bell ascribes to James: "modernism" and "aestheticism" meet in their common lack of a "hierarchy of significance".

For Raymond Williams the concept of realism also depends on an element of evaluation implicit in the presentation. For him "the realist tradition in fiction" is exemplified by "the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons."¹⁰ Like Bell, he selects Middlemarch as representative of the organicist principle of the realist novel; he sees the novel as "a complex of personal,

⁹ Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, trans. John and Necke Mander (1955; London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 34.

¹⁰ "Realism and the Contemporary Novel" in The Long Revolution (1961; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 304. Unlike Bell and Lukács, Williams does allow Ulysses into the realist canon.

family and working relationships, which draws its whole strength from their interaction in an indivisible process" (pp. 312-13). Elsewhere Williams sees this interrelatedness as yielding, in the works of James, to "a transfer of process from the signified to the signifier; from the material to the work on material; from the life to the art":

What really matters in James is that act of signifying in which the novel becomes its own subject. ... Consciousness in James, to put it another way, is the almost exclusive object and subject of consciousness.¹¹

I am not for the time being concerned with the concept of realism; but in the roughly similar sense in which it is used by these three critics the term provides a useful short-hand reference to a principle of nineteenth-century fiction that they find missing in later novels, more specifically, with Bell and Williams, in the late novels of Henry James. Whether these critics see the converse to realism as aestheticism or modernism, that converse would seem to bear some resemblance to the "technical elaboration" Leavis deplures, or to what Holloway calls the "multitudinously self-reflecting" quality of the late novels. Roughly speaking, one might say that all these criticisms impute to these novels an absence of reference outwards, an enclosure in the static reality of the novel's own patterning.

This is to see James, in his devotion to his art, as similar to Conrad's inhumanly efficient chief accountant in "Heart of Darkness": "he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order."¹² Like the accountant, "out of the chaos", concentrating on his ledgers and trying not to be distracted by the groans of a dying man (p. 69), James could be seen as scribbling away, absorbed in documents that have admirable internal order and consistency, but reflect nothing of the chaos outside.¹³ Dictating his novels in the serene

¹¹ The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence (1970; rpt. St Albans: Paladin, 1974), pp. 109-10.

¹² "Heart of Darkness", p. 68.

¹³ In a letter James referred to the War as "this great distraction". One might be tempted to see this as clinching the analogy with the company accountant; but James goes on to say of the War that his "job won't at all consent to be done in the face of it. The picture of private adventures simply fades away before the great public." (To Rhoda Broughton, 10 August 1914, Selected Letters, ed. and introd. Leon Edel [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956], p. 252). We know that James immersed himself quite uncharacteristically in public work after the outbreak of war (Leon Edel, The Master [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965], pp. 517 ff.)

seclusion of the Garden Room of Lamb House, Rye, James may seem not even to have needed such elaborate precautions as the accountant against the intrusion of the "horror" outside: he was so remote from it in any case. Interestingly, however, the word or a close relation of it finds its way into climactic scenes of all three late novels.¹⁴ In itself this proves little, of course (we have seen that even Fanny Price was much given to using the word), but it may serve to alert us to deeper currents under the placid surface of the late style.

If we were to look for an alternative to the accountant as Conradian image for the Jamesian attitude, we might consider Marlow - Marlow, the participant-observer, involved yet critical, attracted yet repelled. If at first sight the comparison seems far-fetched, a consideration of Marlow's technical function may clarify the point of the parallel. In Marlow's narrative Conrad dramatises the struggle to extract the significance of an experience, perhaps to pronounce upon it; the narrative embodies the exploratory process by which the author discovers the meaning of his work. In this respect, Conrad's use of Marlow resembles Lawrence's creation of Birkin in Women in Love, in whom, as Leavis has pointed out, "Lawrence ... enacts a tentative or kind of experimental process - a testing and exploring. ..." ¹⁵

What I am suggesting is that the "technical elaboration" that Leavis objects to in later James may be an exploratory process, analogous to Marlow's groping narrative. James, of course never seems to grope - he leaves his reader to do that - but what Bell calls "the flux of perception" may not be as much an end in itself as he suggests. To put it differently, "consciousness" can be seen to be "the exclusive object and subject of consciousness", as Williams maintains, only in the sense that it serves to

¹⁴ The Ambassadors (New York, 1909; rpt. New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1971), II, 257-58: "It was a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up as if in a dream, and it had only to last the few seconds to make him feel it as quite horrible."

The Wings of the Dove (New York, 1909; rpt. New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1976), II, 350: "She made it all out, bent upon her - ... his horror, almost, of her lucidity."

The Golden Bowl (New York, 1909; rpt. New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1971), II, 237: "... the horror of finding evil seated all at its ease where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness."

¹⁵ D.H. Lawrence: Novelist (1955; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 184.

create or modify its own subject in the process of expression. It is in this sense that, in James' words, "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer": there are not certain subjects that are "deeper" than others.

This view of the exploratory function of technique has been persuasively argued by Mark Schorer in his well-known essay, "Technique as Discovery". According to Schorer,

technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it.¹⁶

This description enables us to see precisely in what sense Marlow serves as a technical device: the functions ascribed by Schorer to technique are so clearly also the functions Marlow performs both in "Heart of Darkness" and Lord Jim.¹⁷ It is less clear that this is in fact what James' technique achieves; much of the rest of this chapter will hinge on this question, if not always explicitly.

To proceed from Schorer's discussion of technique to the question of unresolved irony in The Ambassadors, one has to cross the disputed territory of Intention. Schorer clearly provides, in his emphasis on "discovery", for an unforeseen, that is "unintended", meaning to emerge in the process of writing. I have so far taken this as critical common ground - in an interpretation of Fanny Price, for instance, that Jane Austen is unlikely to have intended, or in following Schweik in ascribing meanings to The Mayor of Casterbridge that Hardy may well not have been fully conscious of. In this assumption, I am of course implicitly subscribing to Wimsatt and Beardsley's classic statement in their essay "The Intentional Fallacy": "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art".¹⁸ It is true that here the

¹⁶ "Technique as Discovery", The Hudson Review, I (1948). Rpt. in 20th Century Literary Criticism, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), p. 387.

¹⁷ It seems to me not to apply to Marlow as he is used in "Youth" and Chance.

¹⁸ W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", Sewanee Review, 54 (Summer 1946). Rpt. in On Literary Intention, ed. David Newton - de Molina (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 1.

authors do not mention the relation of intention to the meaning of a work, but the rest of the essay makes clear that their statement is meant also to apply to that.¹⁹ Wimsatt has in fact since reformulated the statement:

The statement in our essay of 1946 should certainly have read:
'The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging either the meaning or the value of a work of literary art.'²⁰

Resistance to this position has generated more ingenuity than can be adequately dealt with here, but it does seem necessary to take brief account of some of these arguments.

Much of the opposition preserves a spurious air of belligerence by assaulting Wimsatt and Beardsley interpretation of the word intention, while in effect granting the essence of their argument.²¹ Such a desire to maintain a belief in the sanctity of the author's intention can strain the semantic elasticity of language to breaking-point:

If we establish the existence of a discrepancy between the interpretation we give to a work of art, and that of the author, we haven't shown that the work has a meaning independent of what the author intends because what the author intends will now be the interpretation given to the work by us and his own statement as to its meaning an aberration.²²

It is difficult to see why such critics cling to the word intention after they have emptied it of all useful meaning, except perhaps as a talisman to ward off the ghost of New Criticism. In the midst of such verbal

¹⁹ Pace E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who, in correcting the "popular version" of this essay, insists that "the intentional fallacy has no proper application whatever to verbal meaning." (Validity in Interpretation [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967], pp. 11-12.)

²⁰ "Genesis: a Fallacy Revisited" in The Disciplines of Criticism, eds. Peter Demetz, Thomas Greene and Lowry Nelson, Jr. (1968). Rpt. in Newton-de Molina, p. 136.

²¹ See, for instance, George Watson, "The Literary Past" from The Study of Literature (1969), pp 66-83, rpt. in Newton-de Molina, pp. 158-73; also Alastair Fowler, "Intention Floreat", Newton-de Molina, pp. 242-55.

²² Frank Cioffi, "Intention and Interpretation in Criticism", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 64 (1963-4). Rpt. in Newton-de Molina, p. 65.

gymnastics, it is a relief to come across what would have been anywhere else a slightly pedestrian statement of the obvious:

In the most common sense of the terms 'intention' and 'intended', the sense in which it would be reasonable to take the term 'intended' in the question we are considering, a meaning in a poem being written could not be 'intended' without the poet 'being aware of' it.²³

Or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley said in 1946, "Intention is design or plan in the author's mind." (p. 1) Theorists who find this definition of intention too narrow are faced with the need to invent a new term for this "narrow" sense. The most popular has proved to be the tautology "conscious intention",²⁴ which in turn yields what Graham Hough calls "the solecism 'unconscious intention'".²⁵ It becomes clear that such an argument can be prolonged indefinitely, since the language game is proceeding unhampered by anything as restrictive as the original issue.

A more substantial argument against the anti-intentionalist position has been voiced by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who has, from his own field of hermeneutics, become something of a spokesman for the author's rights:

For, once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle existed for judging the validity of an interpretation.²⁶

Hirsch distrusts the emphasis on "what the text says" as against what the author means, "since the text can say different things to different readers. One reading is as valid or invalid as another." (p. 11) This argument appears more substantial in the sense of addressing the point at issue, which is whether a work can mean something which the author was not conscious of. It turns out, however, that Hirsch too can only maintain his belief in

²³ Theodore Redpath, "The Meaning of a Poem" from British Philosophy in the Mid-Century, ed. C.A. Mace (1957). Rpt. in Newton-de Molina, p. 17.

²⁴ See, for instance, Watson, p. 169.

²⁵ "An Eighth Type of Ambiguity" from William Empson: The Man and his Work, ed. Roma Gill. Rpt. in Newton-de Molina, p. 223.

²⁶ Validity in Interpretation, p. 3.

the determinant value of the author's intention by conflating "meaning" and "unconscious meaning": "many of my sharable meanings are meanings which I am not directly thinking at all. They are so-called unconscious meanings." (p. 18) From here it is a short step to the familiar "intended but unconscious meanings" (p. 21) - at which point one feels that the author has been brought back from banishment only as a linguistic fiction. It is difficult to see how the author's "unconscious intention" is in any way more readily available "for judging the validity of an interpretation" than "the text's meaning": they seem in fact to be indistinguishable, which enables Hirsch to state, with all the confidence of somebody playing a game invented by himself:

No example of the author's ignorance with respect to his meaning could legitimately show that his intended meaning and the meaning of his text are two different things. (p. 22)

Since "legitimately" here means "according to my definitions", the statement is indeed impeccable: what Hirsch is saying, with a kind of baroque circularity, is that the work means what the critic says the author meant, which is what the work means.

A more straightforward version of the intentionalist position is stated by Wayne C. Booth in his work on stable irony. He clearly, if grudgingly, recognises that meanings unintended by the author may be created in a work, but he distrusts them as he distrusts all invitations to mere critical ingenuity:

... many authors seem finally to create works that go deeper or further than their conscious art could ever plan for, and a complete Rhetoric of Irony would, I suppose, account for the deeper meanings that such works invite us to. Insofar as such instabilities are "intended by the work" (regardless of the author) they would in theory enter our subject, but I'm afraid that what I see done by others when they attempt to describe their reconstructions of such works too often confirms my caution about making the attempt. ... Since in fact most artists know more about their work than most of us ever discover, our subject is still vast enough to keep us humble.²⁷

To fly in the face of such a statement requires a certain amount of

²⁷ A Rhetoric of Irony, p. 241 n.

determination; but it does seem to me that Booth, in his understandable impatience with over-ingenuity, impoverishes the artistic process by denying its exploratory aspect. To go beyond the "conscious art" of the author is not to proceed "regardless of the author": it is merely to stress that element of the author's "prime sensibility" which is involved in the execution of his intentions, and which may "discover" unforeseen meanings. This is not necessarily to cast off all restraint on critical ingenuity: the meaning must still be shown to be derived from and consistently supported by the text. In The Rhetoric of Fiction Booth cites some admittedly inhibiting examples of the kind of liberty taken by critics who regard the author's probable intention as irrelevant; but critical irresponsibility can be fostered by intentionalist and anti-intentionalist assumptions alike. It would be difficult, for instance, to say whether Leon Edel's psychologising distortions of James' fiction owe more to the intentionalist insistence on restoring the author to his work, or to the anti-intentionalist search for unconscious meanings: all we can say is that Edel ignores the limits set by the work itself to its meaning.

The Ambassadors is a particularly challenging work from this point of view, because we have such copious information about James' intentions in the work: a long outline in the Notebooks, as well as an unusually informative Preface, in which James tells us not only what he intended, but also how well he succeeded. By Booth's criteria, the meaning is determined for us by these statements, and the critic's task is to appreciate and elucidate the skill with which James fleshed out these conceptions - technique thus being the process by which a conception is realised as fully as possible without changing its essentials.

I believe, however, that a close reading of The Ambassadors reveals implications that James seems unaware of both in the Notebooks and in the Preface. The process by which these implications are generated is an absorbing vindication of Schorer's dynamic view of technique; it also demonstrates how "unintended" meanings can give rise to unresolved ironies that to an extent liberate the novel from an aestheticist straitjacket.

James' Preface to The Ambassadors is very much concerned, in fact, with the question of technique. He devotes the last part of the Preface to a fond retrospective appreciation of his treatment of Maria Gostrey, that is,

his deliberate use of her as an "aid to lucidity" for the reader.²⁸ To put it simply (which is notoriously not James' aim in the Prefaces), James needed a means of informing the reader of Strether's past, "the whole situation at Woollett and the complex forces that propelled [him to Europe]" (I, xxi), and found this means in Strether's conversations with Maria.

This is an acceptable enough point of technique; but it soon emerges from James' discussion that technique was of such importance in the writing of the novel that it over-shadowed the mere human themes, thus lending support to Leavis' charge that in his "technical elaboration ... [James] had lost his full sense of life". James takes leisurely delight in the fact that he has succeeded in concealing Maria's purely technical function so effectively that she seems to become part of the subject matter of the novel - which, he emphatically states, she is not:

The "ficelle" character of the subordinate party is as artfully dissimulated, throughout, as may be, and to that extent that, with the seams or joints of Maria Gostrey's ostensible connectedness taken particular care of, duly smoothed over, that is, and anxiously kept from showing as "pieced on", this figure doubtless achieves, after a fashion, something of the dignity of a prime idea; which circumstance but shows us afresh how many quite incalculable but none the less clear sources of enjoyment for the infatuated artist, how many copious springs of our never-to-be-slighted "fun" for the reader and critic susceptible of contagion, may sound their incidental plash as soon as an artistic process begins to enjoy free development. ... To project imaginatively, for my hero, a relation that has nothing to do with the matter (the matter of my subject) but has everything to do with the manner (the manner of my presentation of the same) and yet to treat it, at close quarters and for fully economic expression's possible sake, as if it were important and essential - to do that sort of thing and yet muddle nothing may easily become, as one goes, a signally attaching proposition. ... (I, xxi-xxii)

For most readers this sort of "fun" is perhaps too much like an elephant balancing on a ball to be really contagious, but one's more serious misgivings are reserved for the distinction James draws between the "matter" of his subject and the "manner of his presentation of the same". In terms of this distinction, Strether's "relation" to Maria Gostrey belongs purely to "manner" and never forms part of the subject of the novel. James' "fun"

²⁸ The Ambassadors, I, xix.

seems to derive from the illusion he has created that Maria Gostrey, "the most unmitigated and abandoned of ficelles" (I, xix), matters at all beyond this purely technical capacity. In this vein of confidential reminiscence, James reveals that the function of the last scene, Strether's rejection of Maria's offer of marriage, "is to give or add nothing whatever, but only to express as vividly as possible certain things quite other than itself. ..." (I, xxi)

We could hardly wish for a more explicit statement of artistic intention than this. To accept it as it stands, however, is to accept that technique was to James at this stage not so much a matter of transforming into aesthetic terms a felt concern with human issues as of the fabrication of spurious issues for a particular effect. This, of course, is how Leavis sees James' emphasis on technique in The Ambassadors - "a technique the subtleties and elaborations of which are not sufficiently controlled by a feeling for value and significance in living."²⁹

There are, however, suggestions in the Preface that James did not see the whole novel as an exercise in technical elaboration. If Maria is only a ficelle, Strether at least is the stuff of life:

I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into - since it's only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little. (I, viii)

But how confront "a hero so mature" with a lady who has every appearance of appreciating his maturity, and simply rule out the resultant interest as irrelevant? James can see that "as soon as an artistic process begins to enjoy free development" the author's intention ceases to determine the relations generated by his subject matter; but he seems not to accept that what he credits, rather grudgingly, with achieving "after a fashion, something of the dignity of a prime idea", becomes, by dint of that achieved dignity, a prime idea. It is difficult to imagine, in terms of practical effect, the difference between an unimportant subject consistently treated "as if it were important and essential" and an important subject thus treated: in both instances, what James calls the "artist's prime sensibility" is responsible for the realisation of the subject. The only difference can be in the

²⁹ The Great Tradition, p. 178.

author's private attribution of value, not in the achieved effect. To insist in such a case on the author's intention as determinant of meaning, is to do so at the expenses of his creation.

My analysis of the novel will concentrate mainly on the "unintended" meanings created by Maria Gostrey's "ostensible connectedness" to the main subject. This will perhaps give disproportionate weight to her part in the novel, but if, as I believe, the pressures of technique establish the "ostensible connectedness" as a true connectedness, the discussion will inevitably take in much of the rest of the novel.

The "connectedness" can best be demonstrated from what James regarded as the "essence" of the novel (I, v), Strether's impassioned address to little Bilham in Gloriani's garden, his "quiet stream of demonstration that as soon as he had let himself go he felt as the real relief":

It had consciously gathered to a head, but the reservoir had filled sooner than he knew, and his companion's touch was to make the waters spread. There were some things that had to come in time if they were to come at all. If they did n't come in time they were lost for ever. It was the general sense of them that had overwhelmed him with its long slow rush.

"It's not too late for you, on any side, and you don't strike me as in danger of missing the train; besides which people can be in general pretty well trusted, of course - with the clock of their freedom ticking as loud as it seems to do here - to keep an eye on the fleeting hour. All the same don't forget that you're young - blessedly young; be glad of it on the contrary and live up to it. Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It does n't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you have n't had that what have you had? This place and these impressions - mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at his place - well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped that into my mind. I see it now. I have n't done so enough before - and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late. And it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair - I mean the affair of life - could n't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured - so that one 'takes' the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it: one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be,

like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don't quite know which. Of course at present I'm a case of reaction against the mistake; and the voice of reaction should, no doubt, always be taken with an allowance. But that does n't affect the point that the right time is now yours. The right time is any time that one is still so lucky as to have. You've plenty; that's the great thing; you're, as I say, damn you, so happily and hatefully young. Don't at any rate miss things out of stupidity. Of course I don't take you for a fool, or I should n't be addressing you thus awfully. Do what you like so long as you don't make my mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!" (I, 217-18)

James declares the main significance of Strether's speech to lie in the fact that "he now at all events sees; so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision." (I, vi) The "process of vision" is, however, not a simple one: even while Strether claims "Oh, I do see, at least!" he remains blind to certain aspects of his situation. There are, it seems to me, at least three different though related "processes" enacted in the course of the novel, all three of which meet in this scene.

The first "process", most obviously, is the one which James refers to in his Preface, and which culminates in this scene: Strether's growing realisation that Chad's life in Paris has been much richer than anything he ever had. With Strether's recognition of all that Chad has gained and all that he himself has missed, the gentle irony at the expense of his prim Woollett notions is resolved.

The second "process" can be seen to be initiated by this scene; it demonstrates the incompleteness of Strether's vision at this point, and reaches its own resolution when Strether meets Chad and Madame de Vionnet by the river and realises that for all his "seeing" he has been blind, not only to the true nature of the relationship, but to the self-seeking that still remains under Chad's miraculously changed exterior. Thus the first, apparently resolved, irony is reversed, and Strether is left enlightened but disillusioned about what it means to "live".

The third and most problematic "process" is not really a "process" in the strictest sense, since it is static: it consists of a persistent blindness on Strether's part to his own opportunities and the use to which he has put them. The blindness creates an irony which is present in his address to little Bilham and continues to the last scene, where it is

confirmed, but not resolved. We must assume, on the authority of the Preface and the Notebooks, that this consistent irony at Strether's expense was unintentional on James' part. This irony can nevertheless be shown to be constantly reinforced by the details of the text; but such a demonstration is perhaps best approached through a further consideration of the two prominent patterns of resolved irony.

Strether's progress from the blinkered state of Woollett can be said to start at little Bilham's breakfast in Chad's rooms (I, 116-18), where poor Strether has to reconcile his preconceptions about "the fundamental impropriety of Chad's situation" with his impression of Chad's friends and "the way the irregular life sat upon Bilham and Miss Barrace". Not only are they not noticeably depraved, but he simply finds that he likes them, which is disturbing to the Woollett assumption that one naturally and instinctively dislikes the irregular. Strether tries to dispose of this dilemma by generously assuming that they don't actually share in the irregularity - "he was eager to concede that their relation to it was all indirect" - but he is after all clear-sighted enough to see that their presence in Chad's rooms and their "grateful enjoyment of everything that was Chad's" establish a sort of complicity - and, what is more, that the complicity even extends to him: "he himself was sitting down, for the time, with them". The parenthetical "for the time" represents Strether's last grasp at his old moral position: he cannot yet accept that he is sitting down with them for long enough, as it were, to forfeit his seat at the heavy mahogany table of Woollett. Strether's attempts to regain his moral footing are amusingly rendered, as he tries to make a certainty of his very uncertainty: "One thing was certain - he saw he must make up his mind." Upon this he girds his loins with brave but vague resolution:

He must approach Chad, must wait for him, deal with him, master him, but he must n't dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they were.

By "the faculty of seeing things as they were" is presumably meant the ability to fix the identity of things by attaching labels to them; but since the labels are proving so unreliable, Strether seems well on his way to being dispossessed of this faculty. This considerably complicates the procedure

he tries to represent as so straightforward: "... approach Chad ... wait for him, deal with him, master him. ...": The closest he gets to preparing a basis for this determined assault is the rather fumbling injunction to himself: "He must at any rate be clearer as to what - should he continue to do that for convenience - he was still condoning." The parenthetical rationalisation, forestalling the implications of the dread word "condoning", graphically conveys both Strether's quick sense of what he is about, and his hasty shying away from the realisation. His excuse is ready, as it were, before the accusation is made.

By the time Strether delivers his address to Bilham he has at least renounced the simplifying vision of Woollett. He may not be much clearer "as to what ... he was still condoning", but he seems to be less concerned with finding out. In fact, it seems to have ceased to matter: "It does n't so much matter what you do in particular," he advises little Bilham, "so long as you have had your life." This is a curiously amoral statement for Strether to make, and it suggests that he has moved to the opposite extreme of his Woollett notions - notions that earlier prompted him to tell Maria that Chad "wants, as I see him, to be protected. Protected I mean from life." (I, 71) As he now sees Chad, the life that he represents is the thing most worth having - it seems at any price.

It is at this point that the first "process of vision" culminates in the resolution of the first pattern of irony; it is by the same token the point of departure for the second process, posited on Strether's blind idealisation of Chad and his circle. This idealisation is demonstrated slightly later in the same scene when Strether, on the point of expressing a whimsical desire to be like Gloriani, catches sight of Chad and Jeanne de Vionnet:

It was the click of a spring - he saw the truth. ... "Oh, Chad!" - it was that rare youth he should have enjoyed being "like." (I, 220)

The "truth" that Strether sees here is of course only a half-truth, based as it is on his ignorance of what Chad is really "like".

In James' placing of Strether's idealisation of Chad and all he represents lies, I think, the answer to F.R. Leavis' question:

What, we ask, is this, symbolized by Paris, that Strether feels himself to have missed in his own life? If we are to take the

elaboration of the theme in the spirit in which we are meant to take it, have n't we to take the symbol too much at the glamorous face-value it has for Strether?³⁰

What is "symbolized by Paris" and embodied in Chad is simply the "life" that Strether feels he has missed; and if it seems insufficiently realised, that is because "the glamorous face-value it has for Strether" is at this stage our only access to it. But this "face-value", I should say, is presented as such: "the elaboration of the theme" involves the revelation of precisely this truth to Strether and to the reader.³¹ In reacting against the "mistake" of his own youth, as he can even at this stage partially see, Strether is making the very mistake Maria Gostrey warned him against:

"Don't make up your mind. There are all sorts of things. You have n't seen him all. ... Take time - that's the only way not to make some mistake that you'll regret. Then you'll see. He does really want to shake her off."

Our friend had by this time so got into the vision that he almost gasped. "After all she has done for him?"

Miss Gostrey gave him a look which broke the next moment into a wonderful smile. "He's not so good as you think!" (I, 171)

Maria is right, of course, and in his "process of vision" Strether is eventually brought to see this, and even to share her view of "good" - which, in this instance, consisting as it does of remaining faithful to Madame de Vionnet, is the exact opposite of Woollett's. But in Gloriani's garden his charmed vision of Chad and his associates can still, with the simplification

³⁰ The Great Tradition, p. 178.

³¹ David Lodge has made much the same point, on different evidence, in his essay "Strether by the River":

I suggest that what is being realized in the greater part of The Ambassadors is the experience of a man who has himself not fully "realized" the total implications of the experience; and that what might seem inadequate realization in terms of our customary demands on literature, in fact displays a perfect adjustment of means to an end in terms of the overall design of this particular book. (The Language of Fiction [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966], p. 194.)

attributable to his "reaction against the mistake", issue in the impossibly comprehensive moral imperative: "Live!"

For Strether, "life" is what Chad has; he has no clearer conception of it than that. His disillusionment, or clarification, entails a growing understanding of what exactly it means to live as he enjoins little Bilham to do, and as he admiringly sees Chad doing. I am not thinking so much of his not-very-surprising discovery that Marie de Vionnet is Chad's mistress as of his realisation that to live as Chad does is simply to make use of other people:

He habitually left things to others, as Strether was so well aware, and it in fact came over our friend in these meditations that there had been as yet no such vivid illustration of his famous knowing how to live. (II, 264)

What enables him to leave things to others is his easy charm, his polished manner: what Madame de Vionnet has done for him is to enhance his capacity for having his own way by pleasing others.

In Chad's last conversation with Strether it is quite clear that he is aware, in appropriately commercial terms, of what Madame de Vionnet has done for him:

"... Your value has quintupled."

"Well then, would n't that be enough -?"

Chad had risked it jocosely, but Strether remained blank.

"Enough?"

"If one should wish to live on one's accumulations?" (II, 312)

Even as a joke this is chilling: it may not express a firm intention on Chad's part to cash in on his accumulated value, but it does reveal that he is capable of taking this mercenary view of his own "value". It is appropriate that the branch of the family business that appeals to him as "the great new force" should be advertising (II, 315). Advertising, after all, is the "art" ("It's an art like another", says Chad blandly) of presenting a product in a way that makes it seem desirable (we remember that Woollett produces an item that apparently requires a certain amount of presentation to seem other than prosaic), which is what Chad excels at. The progeny of the nineteenth-century robber baron, he is the precursor of the twentieth-century public relations executive. As Woollett can rise in

stolid serenity above the tainted sources of its wealth, so Chad will presumably conceal from Woollett the source of his invaluable polish. It is one of the sharper ironies of the work that Chad should turn out to be, after all, a true son of Woollett: his notions of business are just more up-to-date. The irony is resolved, with a classical simplicity, in Strether's recognition of Chad's personal and moral identity: Chad, Strether comes to see, is "none the less only Chad." (II, 284) With his sharpened "faculty of seeing things as they were", Strether recognises that Chad's moral deficiency lies not in anything Paris has done to him, but in having remained faithful to Woollett. Christopher Newman's defeat at the hand of French subtlety in The American has been revenged.

Chad imperturbably having his life without paying any price for it: this is the view we have of him by the end of the novel, even while he is administering a kick to the prospect of a lucrative career in advertising - a kick which we distrust as we distrust at this stage all manifestations of Chad's boyish exuberance. It is clearly a view which severely qualifies Strether's statement to Bilham that "it does n't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life." Strether comes to see that "having your life" may be a matter of having it at the expense of others.

The alternative offered by the novel is, apparently, not to have one's life, for fear of exploiting others. This is presumably the principle motivating Strether's return to an uninviting America at the end of the novel. Structurally this completes the contrast with Chad, who will return to success and riches in America, having gained all he could from Europe and Madame de Vionnet. That, at any rate, seems to be the scheme according to which the novel was written; and in terms of this scheme Strether's renunciation of Maria Gostrey is to be seen as the clear-sighted act of a man who refuses to gain anything for himself from a mission in which he feels he has accomplished nothing for others.

It does not seem to me, however, that Strether's vision of himself is clear enough to give this renunciation the moral weight James seems to have intended. He has had from the start a deterministic view of himself, a belief in his own failure which relieves him of the responsibility of living up to his own advice. He can, in Gloriani's garden, confidently advise Bilham to "live", on the safe assumption that it is too late for anybody to expect him to do so. He thus ignores his own statement that "The right time

is any time that one is still so lucky as to have." By that definition, the right time for him is now, but he rhetorically covers this implication under the blanket assertion that "I'm old; too old; too old at any rate for what I see." What he sees is the glamorous array of guests at Gloriani's gathering, above all Chad, his idealisation of whom makes him fail to appreciate any more prosaic and attainable reality. It is this failure to "see" that forms the basis of the third pattern of irony in the novel. Set against Strether's increasing insight into both Paris and Woollett is his blindness, not only to what he is "still so lucky as to have", but to the implications of his renunciation of Maria Gostrey. It is, in other words, through the ficelle's assumption of "something of the dignity of a prime idea" that this irony is generated and left unresolved.

What Strether can still have, in spite of his claim that it is "too late", is demonstrated when, after his conversation with Bilham, most of the guests retreat into the house, leaving Strether alone with Maria - and "it was as if our friends had waited for the full charm to come out":

It was nothing new to him, however, as we know, that a man might have - at all events such a man as he - an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures; so that, though it was doubtless no great adventure to sit on there with Miss Gostrey and hear about Madame de Vionnet, the hour, the picture, the immediate, the recent, the possible - as well as the communication itself, not a note of which failed to reverberate - only gave the moments more of the taste of history. (I, 227-28)

These moments, during which all the impressions of the afternoon combine with the charm of the setting and the hour to enhance the pleasure of communication with somebody who can, as it were, appreciate his appreciation: is this not a kind of life for which he is not too old? His vision of "the immediate, the recent, the possible" surely refers back to, and in referring cancels, his lament that "It's too late"? But the occasion passes as only an opportunity to hear about Madame de Vionnet. I am suggesting, of course, that for much of the novel, Strether, for all he "sees", averts his gaze from the fact that he is being offered, through Maria Gostrey, a second chance - not to regain his lost youth, as he futilely tries to do through Chad and Madame de Vionnet, but to make the most of his maturity, to stop envying other people the fact that they are "so happily and hatefully young."

In Strether's words to little Bilham we see something of the habit of

mind that prevents him from profiting by such opportunities - what is called elsewhere "his constant habit of shaking the bottle in which life handed him the wine of experience" (I, 180). His argument splits rather awkwardly into two contentions: that it is a "mistake" not to avail oneself of such opportunities for living as are offered, and, secondly, that one does not have much say in the matter after all: "the affair of life" is "at the best a tin mould, ... into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured". Since a helpless jelly can not be held responsible for flaws in the mould, it is difficult to see what avoidable mistake Strether made. Strether somewhat lamely tries to refer the contradiction to "the illusion of freedom"; but if it is only an illusion, there seems little point in cultivating it.

Strether is, of course, only voicing the age-old perplexity in the face of free will and determinism, and it cannot be held against him that he does not have the solution. But we do note that he does not seem aware of the contradiction, and that the total effect of the speech is to make Strether's position seem thoroughly safe. "What one loses one loses" - and not, it would seem, through any fault of one's own. The helpless jelly runs no risks and incurs no responsibility.

The conflict between choice and determinism underlies, I believe, James' whole conception of Strether. Strether, in terms of James' project for the novel, must be somebody who feels life has passed him by, and to keep the poignancy complete, he must not be in the process of proving himself wrong. On the other hand, to qualify as Jamesian centre of consciousness he must be, in James' words, "still able to live with sufficient intensity to be a source of what may be called excitement to himself, not less than to the reader".³² In order, then, to account for the fact that he does not change - change, at any rate, sufficiently to grasp the opportunity offered him - he has to be provided with a temperament that resists such opportunities. This James does - but the effect is to make his hero seem considerably less clear-sighted about himself than about others. Thus Strether's statement to Bilham does not, as Edel maintains, "give the novel its 'deterministic' post-Darwinian philosophy"³³: it conveys in the first place Strether's habit of seeing

³² *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (1947; rpt. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1955), p. 374.

³³ *The Master*, p. 74.

himself as helplessly determined by his circumstances.

If this habit had been only a tendency to passivity, we might have felt no more than a slightly pitying impatience. But combined with his passivity is an inclination to dwell on the ignominy of his failure, on the "fact that he had failed, as he considered, in everything, in each relation and in half a dozen trades, as he liked luxuriously to put it" (I, 83). His sense of failure has, in short, become an indulgence. One detects the note of luxuriating, of liking the extravagant formulation, in so many of his disarmingly modest statements. Even his name on the cover of the Review testifies obscurely to his insignificance:

"... It's exactly the thing that I'm reduced to doing for myself. It seems to rescue a little, you see, from the wreck of hopes and ambitions, the refuse-heap of disappointments and failures, my one presentable little scrap of an identity." (I, 65)

The rueful self-depreciation does, of course, contain a saving touch of humour - Strether is at least never morose like Waymarsh - but this does not prevent it from coming across as rather facile. What ambitions, on the evidence offered us, what very precise hopes, did he ever have? We don't even know whether he had one good square failure, that is, an unsuccessful but concerted attempt at a definitely formulated goal. Claiming failure at everything is less humiliating than admitting failure in a particular instance, and also less challenging. In making himself as small as possible he gives himself very little to live up to.

I have avoided the word self-pity, because it is such a faded label for so vividly presented and complex a state of mind. At times, however, the word becomes unavoidable:

Had ever a man, he had finally fallen into the way of asking himself, lost so much and even done so much for so little? (I, 84)

It is possible that we are expected to take the much that he claims to have done on trust; but the particular loss he is lamenting here is the death of his son, who "had been banished and neglected, mainly because the father had been unwittingly selfish" - characteristically by devoting himself "to merely missing the mother." In this case, at least, he has nothing because he did nothing. This could have been simply sad, but there is also something

disturbing in his having "finally fallen into the way of asking himself" this self-pitying question: it has become yet another habit. It is intimately connected with his habit of regarding himself as a failure, with the difference that it slips into a more comfortable implication that his failure is not his fault, that he has somehow remained unappreciated by destiny.

To take this even further, Strether's sense of being wronged seems at times to turn into resentment of others who are successful. Even Waymarsh's incongruous flirtation with Sarah Pocock, involving early-morning visits to the flower market, becomes for Strether a case of others enjoying themselves at his expense. The train of thought is characteristic:

... the practice of getting up early for adventures could indeed in no manner be fastened on him. It came to him in fact that just here was his usual case: he was for ever missing things through his general genius for missing them, while others were for ever picking them up through a contrary bent. And it was others who looked abstemious and he who looked greedy; it was he somehow who finally paid, and it was others who mainly partook. Yes, he should go to the scaffold yet for he would n't quite know whom. (II, 185-86)

This presumably means that Waymarsh and Sally are using the opportunity provided by Strether's delinquency to indulge with impunity in the kind of conduct he is held accountable for. This may well be true, but there is something rather egocentric in such an interpretation of such an occasion. And the ramifications of the interpretation are startlingly ingenious. Starting from the recognition that he lacks the initiative for "getting up early for adventures", Strether easily moves to the familiar territory of his confirmed habit of failure, his "usual case", "his general genius", with others "for ever" inexplicably, undeservedly "picking up" things. This leads to the implication that there is something rather gross in this "contrary bent", a grossness that is unfairly ascribed to the "abstemious" Strether, while the truly "greedy" escape, leaving Strether to pay for the meal - pay, if need be, with his life. So from his realisation that it would not have occurred to him to take Maria to the Marché aux Fleurs, he arrives at the conclusion that he is incurably but indiscriminately unselfish. This unselfishness, however, is not a free choice: he does not grab the bill for the meal as much as he gets stuck with it.

This habit of thought is evident also in his "sense of the service he

rendered" (I, 256) to Chad and Madame de Vionnet by taking their side against Woollett. He does not so much blame others for exploiting him as blame himself for being exploitable; but he is certainly sensitively aware of being exploited:

He liked always, where Lambert Strether was concerned, to know the worst, and what he now seemed to know was not only that he was bribeable, but that he had been effectually bribed. The only difficulty was that he could n't quite have said with what. It was as if he had sold himself, but had n't somehow got the cash. That, however, was what, characteristically, would happen to him. It would naturally be his kind of traffic. (II, 69)

We have by now learnt to take the apparently innocuous "he liked" at its literal value. As "he liked luxuriously" to attribute total failure to himself, he here enjoys taking the worst possible view of himself. He is bribeable, he has been bribed, "the only difficulty" being that his condition misses an essential element of bribery: he has not been paid.

Characteristically this prompts the suspicion that he has been cheated in the transaction. Thus he can believe that he is both a knave and a fool, without getting anything either way out of the service he is rendering so agreeably "to those who profited by it". (I, 256)

Strether's luxurious sense of his own deficiencies and deficits does at times yield to a clearer recognition that he is gaining something from the experience:

"... I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that's what has been taking place ever since. I never had the benefit at the proper time - which comes to saying that I never had the thing itself. I'm having the benefit at this moment. ... It's a benefit that would make a poor show for many people. ... But nevertheless I'm making up late for what I did n't have early. I cultivate my little benefit in my own little way. It amuses me more than anything that has happened to me in all my life. ... it's my surrender, it's my tribute, to youth. One puts that in where one can - it has to come in somewhere, if only out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons." (II, 50-51)

The tone characteristically minimises the "poor show" of his "little benefit" and his "little way", but there is at least an admission here that he has gained something, that he is in fact not selling himself for nothing. The

whole speech sensibly contradicts his contention to little Bilham that "what one loses one loses": he now seems to accept that it is possible to make up for one's losses, and even that Maria has been instrumental in this.

The pity is that Strether does not, in the rest of the novel, accept the second chance that is being offered him. Furthermore, even here it is not quite clear whether he realises the full implications of his making his youth "out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons." He seems to be referring only to the youth he experiences vicariously through Chad and Marie de Vionnet, but it is surely true that in a more parasitic way he is "only" cultivating his little benefit out of the life, the conditions, the feelings of Maria Gostrey. That, at any rate, is the way it would have been open for Maria to interpret it if she had had Strether's habit of calculating what she is owed by life.

In this scene Maria comes as close as she ever does to making a demand upon Strether - whether encouraged by his appreciation or exasperated by his obtuseness is not clear. Upon her implying that she, unlike Chad and Madame de Vionnet, will never "fail" him in the sense of leaving him nothing to do for her, he replies:

"... Oh I beg your pardon; you necessarily, you inevitably will. Your conditions - that's what I mean - won't allow me anything to do for you."

"Let alone - I see what you mean - that I'm drearily dreadfully old. I am, but there's a service - possible for you to render - that I know, all the same, I shall think of."

"And what will it be?"

This, in fine, however, she would never tell him. "You shall hear only if your smash takes place. As that is really out of the question, I won't expose myself" - a point at which, for reasons of his own, Strether ceased to press. (II, 52)

Strether's "reasons of his own" clearly relate to the fact that he does not want to be told what service he could render Maria: "constantly accompanied by a sense of the service he rendered" (I, 256), his self-image would make it difficult for him to turn down a request for service. Also, as long as he can believe her to be self-sufficient ("Your conditions ... won't allow me anything to do for you"), she does not rest on his conscience, thus leaving that faculty free to invent admirable reasons for avoiding the responsibility of a relationship based on anything more demanding than his sense of failure.

In his project for the novel, James explains that if Maria's questions

to Strether about his mission have not "fully illustrated for him the kind of turn her interest in himself may be apprehended as capable of taking, that is because he does n't in general jump rapidly to such conclusions."³⁴ In the actual novel, however, his slowness to jump seems to owe less to modesty than to an unwillingness to understand her. The same characteristic appears when he tells Maria that Mrs Newsome provides all the money for the Review:

"I hope then you make a good thing - "

"I never made a good thing!" he at once returned.

She just waited. "Don't you call it a good thing to be loved?"

"Oh we're not loved. We're not even hated. We're only just sweetly ignored."

She had another pause. "You don't trust me!" she once more repeated. (1, 66)

Strether's shying away from Maria's implication shows a complete immersion in his snug habit of self-abasement - we note again how automatically the habit asserts itself in the reply that comes "at once". His ignoring of present opportunity in dwelling on the past is not unlike his loss of his son through grief over his wife.³⁵

This uncharitable view of Strether is of course one-sided, but I believe that it represents a side of Strether that has to be taken into account in assessing his final action of turning down Maria's offer of marriage. Simply to accept Strether's own version of the latter, as a refusal to profit by his failure to carry out his mission, is to ignore a great deal of information that we have been given about him. Granting that he could see acceptance of Maria's offer as tainted by the self-seeking he has discovered under the glamorous surface of Chad's Paris, we nevertheless know by now that Strether's mental processes are seldom as simple as this.

Strether's deterministic view of himself has by this stage been so firmly established by the novel that it is difficult not to find it confirmed

³⁴ Notebooks, p. 385

³⁵ Nicola Bradbury comments on Strether's evasion that "Maria, comically and tellingly, assumes that this is a brilliant sidestepping of the personal issue." (Henry James: The Later Novels [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979], p. 47) It is difficult, however, to see it as anything but a sidestepping, though not notably brilliant: it certainly does not take in Maria.

by the final scene:

"Shall you make anything so good - ?" But, as if remembering what Mrs. Newsome had done, it was as far as she went.

He had sufficiently understood. "So good as this place at this moment? So good as what you make of everything you touch?" He took a moment to say, for really and truly, what stood about him there in her offer - which was as the offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days - might well have tempted. It built him softly round, it roofed him warmly over, it rested, all so firm, on selection. And what ruled selection was beauty and knowledge. It was awkward, it was almost stupid, not to seem to prize such things; yet none the less, so far as they made his opportunity they made it only for a moment. She'd moreover understand - she always understood.

That indeed might be, but meanwhile she was going on. "There's nothing, you know, I would n't do for you."

"Oh yes - I know."

"There's nothing," she repeated, "in all the world."

"I know. I know. But all the same I must go." He had got it at last. "To be right."

"To be right?"

She had echoed it in vague deprecation, but he felt it already clear for her. "That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself." (II, 325-26)

Having seen Strether "shaking the bottle in which life handed him the wine of experience", we cannot but read this scene in the light of that knowledge. We have also seen him "for reasons of his own" refrain from pressing Maria to reveal the nature of the service he can render her; since the service she here offers to render him amounts to the same thing - marriage - we suspect that he simply does not want to marry Maria. This is not a sin, of course, but nor is it to be passed off as noble self-denial. Besides, Strether's scruples seem rather selective: to use Maria as a confidante, without being able to reciprocate the feeling he is creating by doing so, sorts oddly with his determination "not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for [him]self." Strether can tell Chad "more has been done for you ... than I've ever seen done ... by one human being for another" (II, 224), and yet fail to see that he may be under a like obligation to Maria. "There's nothing, you know, I would n't do for you", she tells him - to which he rather blandly and complacently replies "Oh yes - I know." We have in fact seen him availing himself of this knowledge with an insensitivity worthy of Chad. For instance, feeling "lonely and cold" after his meeting with Chad and Madame de Vionnet, he reflects that

Chad and Madame de Vionnet had at least the comfort that they could talk it over together. With whom could he talk of such things? - unless indeed always, at almost any stage, with Maria? He foresaw that Miss Gostrey would come again into requisition on the morrow. ... (II, 265)

The ease with which he takes Maria's services for granted, not really noticing how his afterthought qualifies the loneliness he self-pityingly imputes to himself, gives a certain literal force to the "requisition" that Miss Gostrey will come into on the morrow.

The point of this is that Strether's reliance on Maria's cheerful services has become so automatic that he has no sense of her own possible claims. As he takes for granted her availability as confidante, so he blithely assumes that she will accept his "only logic": "She'd moreover understand - she always understood." Good old Maria.

It is not absolutely clear exactly how much Maria does understand; the reader, at any rate, may find Strether's logic slightly puzzling:

Honest and fine, she could n't greatly pretend she did n't see it. Still she could pretend just a little. "But why should you be so dreadfully right?"

"That's the way that - if I must go - you yourself would be the first to want me. And I can't do anything else." (II, 326)

The paradox poor Lucasta was confronted with was simple compared with this one. If Strether must go, Maria might indeed derive some consolation from his rightness; but since she is in effect questioning the necessity of his going, his reply only sidesteps the essence of her question, and settles on the rather flat "I can't do anything else."

Maria's acceptance of this does not really confirm Strether's confident assumption that "she'd moreover understand". Perhaps she does, but nothing we are given expresses that understanding:

So then she had to take it, though still with her defeated protest. "It is n't so much your being 'right' - it's your horrible sharp eye for what makes you so."

"Oh but you're just as bad yourself. You can't resist me when I point that out."

She sighed it at last all comically, all tragically, away. "I can't indeed resist you."

"Then there we are!" said Strether. (II, 327)

Maria simply has no choice but to accept with good grace ("she had to take it"). Her distinction between "being 'right'" and Strether's "horrible sharp eye for what makes [him] so" may either credit him with moral clear-sightedness or ascribe to him an excessive scrupulousness, depending on the reader's own view of Strether's "rightness". Her inability to "resist" him means only that she finds him irresistible, not, as he seems to mean, that she cannot oppose his logic. Thus Strether's "Then there we are" merely confirms their relative and mutually exclusive positions - his rightness, her hopeless affection. To find here, as Nicola Bradbury does, "an almost existential acceptance of the order of things"³⁶ is to muffle in vague reverence the fact that the "order of things" is entirely of Strether's making, hardly requiring "almost existential acceptance" on his part.

It seems to me, in short, that neither Strether nor his creator has established a consistent case for what Matthiessen calls "Strether's tenuous renunciation."³⁷ James' own comments on the renunciation do not seem to me to provide any firmer a base:

He can't accept or assent. He won't. He does n't. It's too late. It might n't have been, sooner - but it is, yes, distinctly, now. He has come so far through his total little experience that he has come out on the other side - on the other side, even, of a union with Miss Gostrey.³⁸

Since Strether himself claimed "It's too late" considerably earlier in the novel, the repetition of the excuse, even by James himself, seems unconvincing. Furthermore, it's difficult to see how "he has come out on the other side" of his experience - except in the sense of not committing himself to it, which is merely his "usual case".

Accepting this explanation by James, Frederick Crews has put forward an unironical interpretation of the novel's conclusion which seems to me only to reveal the spuriousness of Strether's "only logic":

To marry Miss Gostrey would not in itself destroy his independence, but it would be a symbolic avowal that her world, the European one,

³⁶ The Later Novels, p. 70.

³⁷ F.O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (1944; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 41.

³⁸ Notebooks, p. 415.

corresponds to what he wants. Europe comes closer than America, perhaps, but both fall so far short of the ideal that Strether prefers to forego them both. ... His return to a life that can hold few pleasures ... is his supreme tribute to Life as a whole.³⁹

Never can a woman have been turned down on such theoretical grounds. I don't know why we should look for symbolic avowals here: to marry Miss Gostrey would be a straightforward enough recognition that what she offers is what he wants. Since he turns this down, we expect some more substantial alternative than "the ideal" or a "tribute to Life as a whole". What is this ideal that neither America nor Europe can satisfy? A man who at fifty-four declines two continents because they fall short of "what he wants", presumably wants something more specific than "Life as a whole"; but neither Crews nor the novel defines it.

Crews' vindication of Strether makes him sound rather like Isabel Archer, turning down Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton in pursuit of her "enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life".⁴⁰ To make the comparison is to see that we are being asked to condone, in a mature man, the kind of idealism that James showed to be theoretical and deluded in the case of a presumptuous young person like Isabel Archer. Also, Isabel's return to Osmond at the end of the novel provides a useful parallel with Strether's "return to a life that can hold few pleasures" - useful in establishing a standard by which to measure Strether's renunciation. Whatever we think of Isabel's return to Osmond - even if we see it as the betrayal of the substance of marriage for the sake of the form - we can see that it is truly her "only logic": the decision is totally consistent with Isabel as we have come to know her. The alternatives available to Isabel - life with Goodwood, or even just open separation from the husband she has publicly committed herself to - would be intolerable to her. The alternative offered Strether, on the other hand, has everything to recommend it, unless we are persuaded that it would be violating a principle as sacred to him as consistency is to Isabel. All that the novel offers us, as an ad hoc discovery ("He had got it at last"), is Strether's determination not to have profited by his experience, which, as I have argued, is neither clear-sighted

³⁹ The Tragedy of Manners (1957; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1971), p. 56.

⁴⁰ The Portrait of a Lady (New York, 1908; rpt. New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1976), I, 155.

nor, under the circumstances, particularly unselfish.

Since taking the conclusion on Strether's own terms yields such an unsatisfactory reading, the less flattering interpretation of Strether's decision readily asserts itself: instead of a moral triumph we have yet another of Strether's failures to board the train, presented as a fastidious refusal to travel at somebody else's expense.⁴¹

When read like this, the novel moves out of line with the "heroic" tradition of self-sacrifice to an ethical claim - the renunciations of an Antigone, a Coriolanus, a Daniel Deronda - and approaches the perplexed ironies of a novel like Lord Jim. Strether, offered "exquisite service, ... lightened care, for the rest of his days", finds that "so far as they made his opportunity they made it only for a moment" (II, 325-26): the greater opportunity "to be right" demands that he turn his back on these things. Similarly, Jim turns his back on the devotion of Jewel and the people of Patusan for the sake of his "opportunity"⁴²: a chance to redeem himself in terms of a code of conduct that has no reality for anybody else in the alien environment where he has been offered his second chance. Where Conrad makes the validity of Jim's "exalted egoism", his "shadowy ideal of conduct" (p. 313) an issue in the novel, James does not overtly question Strether's ideal. But, to return to the analogy I drew at the beginning of this chapter, in place of Conrad's Marlow we have James' technique - in Schorer's sense of "the means of exploring and defining the values in an area of experience which, for the first time then, are being given."⁴³ This is to say that the demands of technique - in this instance the need to create an "ostensible connectedness" for Maria Gostrey - do create a total context within which the values overtly affirmed in the novel are subjected to something similar.

⁴¹ For an even more unflattering view of Strether's renunciation, in which Maria's technical function as ficelle is oddly conflated with her identity in the novel, see Bernard Richards, "The Ambassadors and The Sacred Fount: The Artist Manqué", The Air of Reality, pp. 241-42. The relevant comment is worth quoting, if only because it demonstrates the perils of reading the Preface as if it were part of the novel:

Strether thinks he sees an offer of 'exquisite service' and 'lightened care' from Maria Gostrey, but she is probably an old ficelle to the last. ... He is very likely 'renouncing' a niche that is not even offered for his occupation.

⁴² Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (1900; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 312. This is the last of the many occurrences of the word.

⁴³ "Technique as Discovery", p. 388.

to Marlow's "uneasy doubt" (p. 44). Of course the similarities cannot be pushed too far - the two protagonists are just too different - but in both cases we have the disjunction typical of unresolved irony: the disjunction between the presented reality and the "certainties" seeking to stabilise that reality.

Interestingly, in the year after the completion of The Ambassadors, James wrote a tale in which the irony (fully resolved in this case) hinges on the unwitting selfishness of a man involved in a relationship much like that of Strether and Maria. "The Beast in the Jungle" can of course not "prove" any interpretation of The Ambassadors, since it is quite common for a writer to present essentially the same situation from a variety of perspectives and with very different implications; but the tale does show that a more disturbing interpretation of such a relationship was at least apparent to James.

"The Beast in the Jungle", unlike The Ambassadors, is an exercise in traditional tragedy. The tragic pattern, in fact, seems to be a deliberate adaptation of that of Oedipus the King: in trying to avoid the fate ordained for him, the protagonist unwittingly ensures its fulfilment.

The life unlived, which Strether laments in The Ambassadors, is here seen as the consequence of a self-absorbed "watching" for the supremely significant event that is to place its stamp on the life of the protagonist, John Marcher. In Marcher's friendship with May Bartram, and in his acceptance of her undertaking to "watch" for the spring of the beast with him, James, with thinly-concealed irony, reveals the complacent selfishness that masquerades as selflessness:

He had kept up, he felt, and very decently on the whole, his consciousness of the importance of not being selfish, and it was true that he had never sinned in that direction without promptly enough trying to press the scales the other way. He often repaired his fault, the season permitting, by inviting his friend to accompany him to the opera. ... It even happened that, seeing her home at such times, he occasionally went in with her to finish, as he called it, the evening, and, the better to make his point, sat down to the frugal but always careful little supper that awaited his pleasure. His point was made, he thought, by his not eternally insisting with her on himself. ...⁴⁴

⁴⁴ "The Beast in the Jungle", The Novels and Tales of Henry James, New York edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), XVII, 90.

With such self-conscious little gestures Marcher placates his conscience and keeps the friendship alive until May Bartram becomes ill. In this illness which is to prove fatal, May Bartram tries to tell him that she has guessed his fate and that he can yet avoid it: "It's never too late" (p. 105) - never, that is, while he still has the opportunity to love her and accept the love she extends to him. In his self-absorption he fails to see what she means, and it is only after her death that knowledge comes to him. Visiting her grave, he sees the passion of grief shown by a stranger for a dead beloved, and wonders:

What had the man had to make him, by the loss of it so bleed and yet live? (p. 124)

This leads him to an understanding of what May Bartram had tried to tell him:

The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance - he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. ...
 The escape would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived. She had lived - who could say now with what passion? - since she had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of her (ah how it hugely glared at him!) but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use. (pp. 125-26)

My point is that, allowing for the greater starkness of treatment in "The Beast", essentially the same judgement could have been passed on Strether. The difference is that Marcher attains the insight into himself that Strether does not: in keeping with the classical pattern of the tale, the irony constructed upon Marcher's blind "watching" is resolved with his moment of vision (indicated, as in the Oedipus, by the loss of vision: "His eyes darkened").

Strether of course does learn much from his experience: each of the two climactic moments of vision in the novel, in Gloriani's garden and by the river, serves as the resolution of a "process of vision". But, as in confirmation of his own theory of human nature as a "helpless jelly" determined by its mould, he remains blind to, and therefore trapped in, the timid egoism of exaggerated scruple. Where in Dickens the static and dynamic principles were separated out and embodied in different characters according to their capacity for change, in The Ambassadors the two principles

are united in a complex, contradictory protagonist, his insight offset by his blindness, his honesty and integrity qualified by his lack of self-knowledge, the resolved ironies of his situation undercut by the unresolved. This is not to deny such insight and honesty as he undeniably possesses;⁴⁵ it is merely to show how James' technique, as an instrument of moral discovery, creates a hero more complex than could have been foreseen at his conception.

I believe that the discovery arrived at in the course of writing The Ambassadors made it possible for James to compose "The Beast in the Jungle" so single-mindedly. The unambiguously tragic cast of the tale, the explicit conclusion, the classically resolved irony, all suggest that James was dramatising a complete subject - a subject which The Ambassadors enabled him to find. As Thomas Moser says in a different context:

A novel's true subject is the one that, regardless of the novelist's conscious intention, actually informs the work, the one that elicits the most highly energized writing. To put it another way, a novelist has found the true subject of his book when he dramatizes the truth he cannot escape rather than the illusion he longs to make true.⁴⁶

To theorists like Wayne C. Booth it would seem highly presumptuous for a critic to claim to have found a novel's "true subject ... regardless of the novelist's conscious intention". The critic who wishes to justify the practice can, however, claim support from D.H. Lawrence's famous statement:

If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ I would not be taken, for instance, as sharing Bernard Richards' unqualified judgement of Strether as "timid, self-centred, ungenerous, over-diplomatic, untrustworthy and on many occasions untrusting." ("The Artist Manqué", p. 224)

⁴⁶ "What is the Matter with Emily Jane? Conflicting Impulses in Wuthering Heights", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XVII, 1. Rpt. in The Victorian Novel, ed. Ian Watt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 183.

⁴⁷ "Morality and the Novel", Phoenix, ed. and introd. Edward P. McDonald (London: William Heinemann, 1936), p. 528.

This does not necessarily grant the critic licence to presume to remove the nail, but it does at least recognise the novel's potential to assume independence of its creator's conscious purpose. Much the same point is in fact made by Henry James in his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady:

Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form - its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.⁴⁸

In the case of The Ambassadors, then, James may have failed to appreciate the "latent extravagance" of his novel. To see James positively delighting in this extravagance, we have to go to his next novel, The Wings of the Dove.

⁴⁸ The Art of the Novel, pp. 45-46.

Chapter IV

"The Working and the Worked": Realism in The Wings of the Dove

If James in his Preface to The Ambassadors savours the satisfaction of an intention achieved, he seems, in his Preface to The Wings of the Dove, at most to pretend dismay at an intention transcended. Through the thickets of this particularly impenetrable Preface emerges, ruefully but not exactly contritely, James' "scarce more than half-dissimulated despair at the inveterate displacement of his general centre."¹ He laments the missed opportunities and the "makeshift middle", the fact that "one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another" (I, xiii), but like a father pretending to complain of his son's naughtiness, he can't really hide his pride at the exuberance of his offspring:

Such cases are of course far from abnormal - so far from it that some acute mind ought surely to have worked out by this time the "law" of the degree in which the artist's energy fairly depends on his fallibility. How much and how often, and in what connexions and with what almost infinite variety, must he be a dupe, that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master, that of his actual substitute for it - or in other words at all appreciably to exist? (I, xiii)

In this case, James' "prime object", "the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests", is of course the plight of Milly Theale, "a young person conscious of a great capacity for life ... condemned to die under short respite" (I, v). The first step in the expansion of the subject was the realisation "that though [his] regenerate young New Yorker, and what might depend on her, should form [his] centre, [his] circumference was every whit as treatable." (I, xi) The treating of this "circumference", the relation of Kate Croy and Merton Densher, accordingly became the "actual substitute" for the original "centre": in other words, Kate and Merton assumed a disproportionate part of the interest of the novel. This would seem to be a repetition of Maria Gostrey's arrogation to herself of more than her destined share of the novel, with the difference that in this case James seems to have been fully aware of what his novel was doing under his

¹ The Wings of the Dove, I, xviii.

hand.

The full extent to which this shift of emphasis affected the novel can of course only be demonstrated from the novel itself, but as a preliminary it is interesting to watch, in a long notebook entry, the potential of a subject growing, even at the primary level of plot, as the need arises for further elements to support the basic conception. The entry starts with a tentative statement of a possible subject:

Isn't perhaps something to be made of the idea that came to me some time ago and that I have not hitherto made any note of - the little idea of the situation of some young creature (it seems to me preferably a woman, but of this I'm not sure) who, at 20, on the threshold of a life that has seemed boundless, is suddenly condemned to death (by consumption, heart-disease, or whatever) by the voice of the physician? She learns that she has but a short time to live, and she rebels, she is terrified, she cries out in her anguish, her tragic young despair.²

By the end of the entry, James has practically established the whole plot, including the estrangement of Merton Densher and Kate Croy. This is of course still a matter of the barest outline, with little indication of the complexities to emerge, but it provides an interestingly simplified example of James' exploration of the possibilities of his subject, for instance in his feeling his way towards Merton Densher's moral crisis:

The little action hovers before me as abiding, somehow, in the particular complication that his attitude (to the girl) engenders for the man, a complication culminating in some sacrifice for him, or some great loss, or disaster. (p. 170)

Illuminating as the notebook entry is, the main concern of this chapter will be the more complex exploration done by the novel itself, through which the relatively slender subject develops not only into the history of Merton Densher and Kate Croy, but into a comprehensive analysis of a commercial society. I am particularly interested in the way in which the intricate ironies of the work establish that "hierarchy of significance" characteristic, according to Lukács, of the realist novel. The "mixed" ironies - that is, the coexistence of resolved and unresolved ironies - seem to me to be a result of the free development of the subject in James' execution of it; and what they reflect, mainly through the unresolved ironies, is a considerably

² Notebooks, p. 169.

more critical view of society than James projects in his notebook entry. This is to say that the scope of the unresolved irony is here much wider than in The Ambassadors, where it was a function only of James' analytical interest in his hero. In this respect, the irony of The Wings of the Dove prefigures the totally unresolved irony of The Golden Bowl.

The development of the novel beyond its seminal idea may be one of the factors that make it so intractable to interpretation. Critical opinions on The Wings of the Dove may not be much more divided than on most of James' novels, but the divergence does stem from more basic assumptions. John Goode's reading of it as a kind of black comedy is admittedly too extreme to be representative,³ but even more conventional accounts of the novel differ on matters as fundamental as who the tragic protagonist is, or even whether we can see the novel as tragic in the full sense of the word. Matthiessen, for instance, speculating "whether such a theme [as Milly's plight] can yield more than exquisite pathos", concludes:

There is much more of pity than of terror in Milly's confronting of fate. Her passive suffering is fitting for the deuteragonist rather than for the protagonist of a major tragedy, for a Desdemona, not for an Othello.⁴

Frederick Crews, concurring with Matthiessen, says:

She is sacrificed as a martyr, but the choice of martyrdom is not her own. ...

... Matthiessen might have added that The Wings of the Dove does have an Othello of sorts. Merton Densher has allowed himself to be morally swindled no less than Othello was. ... Like Othello, Densher pays dearly for his blindness.⁵

³ "The Pervasive Mystery of Style", pp. 296 - 97:

A right evaluation of the novel depends on seeing it, to the end, as comedy, instead of sentimentalizing it, as most critics do, as tragedy. The effects of Milly's death are very funny.

Goode does not, alas, explain his amusement contagiously.

⁴ The Major Phase, pp. 78, 79.

⁵ The Tragedy of Manners, p. 75.

From this it is a short step to seeing Milly as secondary to Densher in the novel's structure:

If one sees that Densher rather than Milly is the character who acquires a tragic vision, he will agree that Milly's chief importance in the last three books lies in the impression she makes upon Densher. (p. 78)

From this, in turn, it is a short step to deciding, as John Goode does, that

the novel is not about Milly. Two-thirds of it are concerned with the development of Densher's consciousness, and she is absent from both the beginning and the end. ... In this respect, Milly is James's most important ficelle.⁶

Dorothea Krook, on the other hand, for much of her analysis of the novel, places the tragic emphasis strongly on Milly:

The principal tragic theme of The Wings of the Dove, like that of The Awkward Age, is the impact of the worldly world upon the unworldly - its power to undermine, reduce, and (in this instance) finally to destroy those who cannot accommodate themselves to its values.⁷

Krook reconciles this view of Milly as "the principal vessel of consciousness in The Wings of the Dove" (p. 201) with Densher's prominence in the last book by speculating that

it is as if James, having cast him for the part of the male lead to the second leading lady of the drama and kept him strictly subordinate to her up to this point, at last gives him the centre of the stage. (p. 221)

This shift of emphasis produces a different kind of tragedy to complement Milly's: the "gradual, painful disclosure of the differences between Kate Croy and Merton Densher who had seemed such a mutual pair" (p. 228). Krook finds, however, that the painfulness of this estrangement is qualified by "a powerful sense of the bond of passion that still holds them together

⁶ "The Pervasive Mystery of Style", p. 246.

⁷ The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (1962; rpt. London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 200.

right to the end":

The effect, if one follows the process closely enough, is as overwhelming as it is in Antony and Cleopatra, and leaves one with the same sense of an affirmation of life so powerful as to transcend the proper limits of tragedy. (pp. 229-30)

Against this one could place Walter Allen's summing-up of the novel:

The Wings of the Dove is modern tragedy, one could say drawing-room tragedy; yet the characters in literature Kate Croy and Merton Densher most irresistibly call to mind are Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, as Milly Theale suggests Ophelia or Desdemona.⁸

This parallel clearly implies a more sombre interpretation of the ending than the "affirmation of life" Krook finds in it. Examples of such divergences, both major and minor, could be multiplied almost indefinitely, but the above will probably suffice to demonstrate the bewildering aspect The Wings of the Dove presents to the reader.

I do not think there is any point in trying to decide which of these approaches to the novel is the "correct" one, that is, to settle who the tragic hero is or which Shakespearean character he or she most resembles. The need to identify a central consciousness seems to proceed from critical expectations schooled in, say, The Portrait of a Lady, with its firm subordination of its material to the central character. For all the similarities between Isabel Archer and Millie Theale, the "conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny", which James describes as the "single small corner-stone" of The Portrait,⁹ is inadequate as a key to The Wings. In attempting to locate the centre of the novel in one character, whether Millie Theale or Merton Densher, we may miss that major part of the novel's meaning which consists in the fact of interrelatedness, that is, as in Middlemarch, that the individual, though standing at the centre of his own little universe, is necessarily seen by others as subordinate to their purposes. Isabel Archer also discovers that other people have found her useful, but this is in the first place an irony revealing the illusory nature of her independence; only in the second place does it form the basis of a

⁸ The English Novel (1954; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 277.

⁹ Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, The Art of the Novel, p. 48.

generalisation about the society in which she finds herself. Although, that is, Isabel is subject to manipulation, even in the form of Ralph's generous intervention in her destiny, she does not to the same extent as Milly become part of a whole system of manipulation wherein "the working and the worked [are] ... the parties to every relation."¹⁰

Seen as a description of the principle of social interaction in the novel, these words of Kate's seem, to a sardonic view, to anticipate Raymond Williams' characterisation of Middlemarch as "a complex of personal, family and working relationships, [which] draws its whole strength from their interaction in an indivisible process".¹¹ That description of what Williams regards as the representative realist novel in fact applies very precisely to The Wings of the Dove, as does his shorter definition, namely "the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons." (p. 304)

This is not to say that The Wings of the Dove turns out to be a belated Victorian novel: it merely suggests that far from moving towards the "aesthetic stance" Michael Bell ascribes to late James, the novel achieves a form of realism adapted to the nature of the society depicted. If James' analysis of London society has something in common with George Eliot's concept of interrelatedness, it nevertheless differs significantly from the "organicist" principle underlying Middlemarch: James' image is much more mechanical than organic, as Kate's elaboration makes clear:

The worker in one connexion was the worked in another; ... with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled.
(I, 179)

The choice of metaphor implies that the system, however well-oiled its wheels are with charm, even kindness, reduces human beings to objects. If the implication on the one hand takes us back to Dickens (notably the Dickens of Our Mutual Friend with its Lammles, its Fledgeby, its Wegg), on the other hand it anticipates Lawrence's extreme rendering of the mechanisation of human relations in Women in Love, the "participation in a great and perfect system that subjected life to pure mathematical

¹⁰ The Wings of the Dove, I, 178.

¹¹ "Realism and the Contemporary Novel", pp. 312-13. For a fuller discussion of realism as understood by Williams, Lukács and Bell, see pp. 89-92 above.

principles":

It was the first great step in undoing, the first great phase of chaos, the substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic, the destruction of the organic purpose, the organic unity, and the subordination of every organic unit to the great mechanical purpose. It was pure organic disintegration and pure mechanical organisation. This is the first and finest state of chaos. (p. 305)

Although Lawrence is here concerned with industrial relations, the rest of his novel shows the mechanical principle in operation also in sexual relations, notably of course in the Gudrun - Gerald relationship. It seems to me that James approaches the Lawrentian vision of the "chaos" that paradoxically is a result of organisation, the "disintegration" that very precisely means the "loss of integrity" both in individual and society. Of course, the overtly destructive nature of the Gudrun - Gerald relationship is almost as far from the history of Kate Croy and Merton Densher as that history is from the romance of Lizzie Hexham and Eugene Wrayburn or of Dorothea and Will Ladislaw; but the point is that if The Wings contains something of the resolved irony of Our Mutual Friend and Middlemarch, it also contains something of the unresolved irony of Gudrun's bleak vision. This is to set the problematic redemption of Merton Densher between the overt redemption of Eugene Wrayburn (and, less forcefully, of Fred Vincy and Will Ladislaw) and the overt damnation of Gudrun. It is clear that Eugene Wrayburn finds in Lizzie Hexham's love a value that overcomes his bored disenchantment with life; it is as clear that Gudrun's society offers her no single value that she can be unironical about: between these two extremes we have the more questionable redemption of Densher, based as it is on values so elusive as to produce a "hierarchy of significance" almost as unstable as Thackeray's in Vanity Fair, though more lucidly so.

But generalisations about the novel are inclined to hover between the cryptic and the over-simplified. The clearest approach to the labyrinth of "the worker and the worked" probably lies, as in the case of The Ambassadors, through the novel's seminal scene, "the situation of some young creature ..., who at 20, on the threshold of a life that has seemed boundless, is suddenly condemned to death ... by the voice of the physician".¹²

¹² Notebooks, p. 169.

In the event, Sir Luke Strett's verdict is far more ambiguous than this, but the scene retains its seminal quality, both in terms of the action it precipitates and the issues it gives rise to. Its central statement is in fact very similar to that of The Ambassadors, that is, Strether's advice to little Bilham: "Live all you can. It's a mistake not to." In The Wings, the oracular Sir Luke tells Milly: "Well, see all you can. That's what it comes to. ... It's a great rare chance":

"Shall I at any rate suffer?"

"Not a bit."

"And yet then live?"

"My dear young lady," said her distinguished friend, "is n't to 'live' exactly what I'm trying to persuade you to take the trouble to do?" (I, 245-46)

For Milly, of course, "living" contains a crucial ambiguity that it did not have for Strether: for her, to live means in the first place not to die. Nevertheless, this literal meaning of the formula is extended to include also the sense of "experiencing to the full". Sir Luke's reply to Milly seems to shift the meaning to the second of these senses, although we never know if his implication is simply that she should make the most of life while she can, or that she could remain alive if she could supply herself with a motive for doing so - if, that is, she would "take the trouble" to live in the second sense. In Milly's subsequent reflections in the Regent's Park, her wry word-play seems to hinge on this ambiguity:

It was perhaps superficially more striking that one could live if one would; but it was more appealing, insinuating, irresistible in short, that one would live if one could. (I, 254)

It is in her relationship with Merton Densher, of course, that the two senses fuse for Milly: she could have stayed alive if she had been given the motive, by his love, "to take the trouble" to do so. Densher becomes life to her, as Kate with her usual lucidity explains to him:

"She at any rate does love life. To have met a person like you ... is to have felt you become, with all the other fine things, a part of life. ..." (II, 52)

"All the other fine things" cannot sustain Milly when she is told the truth

about Merton and Kate, as Merton recognises:

"The way it affected her was that it made her give up. She has given up beyond all power to care again, and that's why she's dying." (II, 320-21)

The equation of Densher with life is ironically prefigured in Milly's arch statement to Sir Luke, in the course of their second interview: "... when you talk of 'life' I suppose you mean mainly gentlemen." Sir Luke's tactful rephrasing of this remark extends the scope of the irony:

"When I talk of 'life,'" he made answer after a moment during which he might have been appreciating her raciness - "when I talk of life I think I mean more than anything else the beautiful show of it, in its freshness, made by young persons of your age. ..."

Milly herself unconsciously points the irony of Sir Luke's safely generalising phrase "young persons of your age":

"One of our companions will be Miss Croy, who came with me here first. It's in her that life is splendid; and a part of that is even that she's devoted to me. But she's above all magnificent in herself. ..." (II, 128)

"Life" as defined by Sir Luke is for Milly, then, represented by Merton Densher and, in a different way, by Kate Croy; and "the beautiful show of it, in its freshness" is to claim Milly as victim. For Milly's attempt to live is foiled by the fact that she relies on people who, "devoted" as they may be to her, have their own determination to live: they also "would live if they could", and they see her in the light of that determination. Apart, then, from the simple ambiguity that "life" initially has for Milly, it acquires a more profound ambiguity as she comes to realise that it is not a passive property or entity to be pursued on one's own terms: to the extent that it is derived from other people, it makes its own conditions. The "beautiful show of it, in its freshness" is also entirely ruthless.

The extent to which Milly's quest for life is interwoven with the similar quest of other people, is graphically demonstrated in the superb sequence of Milly's visit to the National Gallery, which she has so far

neglected in the pursuit of "life as opposed to learning".¹³ At first she feels that "the benignant halls" offer "the air she wanted and the world she would now exclusively choose", that is, the impersonal world of art; soon, however, feeling "after all too weak for the Turners and Titians", she engrosses herself in the more appealingly human efforts of the lady-copyists: "She would have liked to talk to them, to get, as it figured to her, into their lives. ..." From them her attention strays to the American tourists: "That perhaps was the moral of a menaced state of health - that one would sit in public places and count the Americans." Into their lives she can enter imaginatively - "She would have been able to say where they lived, and also how, had the place and the way been but amenable to the positive" - but the interest they offer is too meagre to sustain her. It is a comment of one of these on "the English school" that draws her attention "in her weak wonder as to what they had been looking at" not to a painting, as she first supposed, but to Merton Densher "tapping his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief" in prosaic demonstration of his humanity. He, like Milly, is not interested in the "schools" ("he glanced absently, as she could see, at the top tier of the collection"): he is looking for Kate Croy, and as Milly notes that he is "too preoccupied to see anything", she becomes aware that she is in turn being "otherwise looked at" - by Kate Croy. The works of art, from the first only a pretext for the lovers to meet (presumably where they are least likely to meet Aunt Maud!), become completely irrelevant to the various human purposes which intersect here in gazes which cross without meeting. In Merton's looking for Kate, Milly's looking at Merton, and Kate's looking at Milly looking at Merton, we have a tableau representing the main ironic intrigue of the novel - with Kate characteristically seeing more, and probably thinking further, than either of the other participants. It is here that Kate conceives the first stage of her plan to use Milly - initially only to serve as a cover to their meetings, but soon for the much bolder purpose which forms the substance of the second part of the novel. Ultimately, the Titians and Turners for which Milly felt "too weak" might have been less demanding than the lives of which she suddenly finds herself a part. Her involvement with Merton and Kate becomes that "question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life" that Susan Stringham foresaw as entailed in Milly's future (I, 125); and a necessary condition of that assault is

¹³ All references to this sequence are to I, 288-93.

taking one's place in the system of "the working and the worked".

It is one of the main ironies of the novel that amidst the confusing London world with its ambiguous values, Milly's own value in the eyes of others should be so pathetically simple: she is fabulously rich. This constitutes the ground of her appeal, even to Susan Stringham. Though Susan is more disinterestedly romantic than any other character, the "harrowing pathos" which "primarily, was what appealed to her" derives from the incongruity of Milly's having "thousands and thousands a year ... and yet to have been reduced by fortune to little humble-minded mistakes" (I, 110). Little humble-minded mistakes do not in themselves make for harrowing pathos; like the rest of Milly's qualities and actions, they derive their complexion from her money. As Susan recognises,

it prevailed even as the truth of truths that the girl could n't get away from her wealth. ... that was what it was to be really rich. It had to be the thing you were. (I, 121)

Milly, then, is money; and through this identification the novel develops as mordant a view of "material interests" as Nostromo itself. But, as in Nostromo, money presents itself in different guises to different temperaments: accordingly, Milly is cast in whatever role best serves the idealising imagination of the observer who, like Charles Gould, "could not believe his own motives if he did not make them first a part of some fairy tale."¹⁴ Thus, for Susan Stringham Milly's wealth transforms her simply into a princess. This may demonstrate the defeat of New England democratic principles by New England romanticism; but Milly's reception in London no less trenchantly demonstrates the defeat of old English class principles by new English materialism. For even the Matcham world treats Milly like a princess - though the title, of course, is less lightly used in England, where it has a precise denotation, than in America, where it remains a wistful metaphor. Whereas poor Aunt Maud, laying her all on the line for an invitation to Matcham, seems destined never quite to buy her way out of the trading classes (unless Kate, suitably dowered, can marry both of them into the upper classes), Milly meets with no resistance. Money on such a scale, and embodied in a figure so helplessly unvulgar, so exempt from the taint

¹⁴ Nostromo, p. 215.

of having scrambled (that is, worked) for it, could overcome stronger prejudices than those of an impoverished aristocracy - the more so that the money is safely American, and thus exempt also from the strictures raised against presumptuous natives.

There is thus a pathetic irony in Milly's surprised sense, upon being accepted by London society, of "being, as Lord Mark had declared, a success" (I, 160). The pathos derives from Milly's assumption that she is valued for herself: she has not yet fixed her own value in the currency of Lancaster Gate and Matcham. Discussing with Lord Mark Mrs Lowder's "fidelity" to her old school friend, she makes the innocent point that Mrs Stringham has nothing to offer Mrs Lowder:

"... it is n't as if she had anything to give."

"Has n't she got you?" Lord Mark asked without excessive delay.

"Me - to give Mrs. Lowder?" Milly had clearly not yet seen herself in the light of such an offering. "Oh I'm rather a poor present; and I don't feel as if, even at that, I had as yet quite been given." (I, 154)

In the most literal of senses, which is Mrs Lowder's sense, Milly is most certainly not "poor": and whether or not Milly feels that she has "as yet quite been given", Mrs Lowder has taken possession. Lord Mark, for instance, gives Milly "the highest place among their friend's actual properties." (I, 157). But at this point Milly cannot give due weight to this; the only explanation that she can find for Mrs Lowder's kindness to her and Mrs Stringham is that "She idealises us, my friend and me, absolutely. She sees us in a light. ..." (I, 161).

Milly may just be right in believing that Mrs Lowder idealises her - to the ultimate materialist, ideals take the shape of fabulous material wealth - but it takes her a while to discover the true light in which Mrs Lowder sees her. It is at Matcham that she starts noticing the subtle social discriminations governing the society she has entered. It is also here that she receives an intimation of her own value, for Aunt Maud, in such a society. Musing upon Aunt Maud's plea to her to "stay among us ... in any position", Milly realises that Aunt Maud, like herself, but for very different reasons, is haunted by the possible impermanence of her tenure on this world - which is, for Aunt Maud, the world of truly high society. Milly's three weeks as a "success" in society seem to her like a

"parenthesis" about to close; but she now dimly sees that Aunt Maud is hardly more settled in the habit of social success:

The parenthesis would close with this admirable picture, but the admirable picture still would show Aunt Maud as not absolutely sure either if she herself were destined to remain in it. What she was doing, Milly might even not have escaped seeming to see, was to talk herself into a sublimer serenity while she ostensibly talked Milly. (I, 210)

More simply put, Aunt Maud fears that her first invitation to Matcham may turn out, upon Milly's departure, to have been her last. James employs his most "late" idiom - "Milly might even not have escaped seeming to see" - to convey both the lightness of the impression and the delicate necessity of not betraying her insight to Aunt Maud. In three weeks Milly has not only formed a clearer idea of the "light" in which Aunt Maud sees her, but also acquired some consciousness of the precariousness of living in such a society.

The most important survival tactic that Milly develops as part of the learning process is to accept and enter into the roles other people choose for her. As she accepts Susan's casting of her as a princess, so she consents, with Lord Mark, to "being popped into the compartment in which she was to travel for him" (I, 157). With Densher she takes refuge in "her own native wood-note":

She became as spontaneous as possible and as American as it might conveniently appeal to Mr. Densher, after his travels, to find her. (I, 295-96)

Most notably, of course, she accepts the role of dove offered her by Kate. It is a rather problematic role, and one can understand Leavis' brusque rejection: "the fuss the other characters make about her as the 'Dove' has the effect of an irritating sentimentality".¹⁵ It must be added, though, that the context in which the "fuss" occurs sheds a wryly ironic light on it, which counteracts the inherent sentimentality of the image: it is Kate who first bestows the title on Milly, and Kate is fully intent on taking advantage of the dove-like nature she ascribes to Milly. As Merton comes to realise later, "Kate was ... exceptionally under the impression of that

¹⁵ The Great Tradition (1948; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962). p. 175.

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." (II, 218) Kate, at least, is not guilty of "irritating sentimentality".

If we see Milly's acceptance of the role of dove as a deliberate strategy, in line with her policy of conforming to other people's impressions of her, it acquires a much keener pragmatic edge: Milly is slowly feeling her way through the intricacies of the system intent on exploiting her; or, as Kenneth Graham puts it in his firmly unethereal reading:

Milly takes up the image as one of the best of her defensive weapons. ... And the first act of the dove is to tell a lie. ... This will be part of her 'form' and her 'manner' - her contribution to the great honeycomb of social relationships. ... It will be Milly's own little conspiracy: she will manipulate the system, giving and taking, and challenging it radically only where necessary.¹⁶

To see what other people are seeing (as Kate also did in the National Gallery) is to exchange the role of alazon for that of eiron, which is what Milly very gradually does. At Matcham, for instance, apart from recognising her own usefulness to Mrs Lowder, she realises that Lord Mark, for all his social expertise, does not understand her response to the Bronzino portrait; and in her slightly condescending appreciation of his uncomprehending kindness she seems the more socially adept of the two:

Though he still did n't understand her he was as nice as if he had; he did n't ask for insistence, and that was just a part of his looking after her. (I, 221)

But if the scene demonstrates how much Milly has learned, it also shows how much remains to be learned. Lord Mark's "looking after her" is subject to the general rule of social living he himself enunciated to Milly: "Nobody

¹⁶ Henry James: The Drama of Fulfilment (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 200. Graham's level-headed discussion of James, and in particular of The Wings, succeeds admirably in his declared aim "to be fair to the James of 'the natural, the fundamental, the passionate things', and to suggest that high style and spiritual vision can be made to take their place among these things." (p. xiv) Graham's statement of critical priorities in his Introduction provides much-needed clarity in the deepening murk of James criticism - indeed of literary criticism in general.

here, you know, does anything for nothing" (I, 160). In time Milly comes to realise that "looking after her" can present itself to others, to Lord Mark no less temptingly than to Eugenio, as a tremendously lucrative occupation. Kneeling at the window of her Venetian palace, with Lord Mark next to her, she at last discovers her true "value" for him:

If he had come to her moreover with the intention she believed [i.e. of proposing to her], or even if this intention had but been determined in him by the spell of their situation, he must n't be mistaken about her value - for what value did she now have? It throbbled within her as she knelt there that she had none at all; though, holding herself, not yet speaking, she tried, even in the act, to recover what might be possible of it. With that there came to her a light: would n't her value, for the man who should marry her, be precisely in the ravage of her disease? She might n't last, but her money would (II, 149)

She thus finds out the full truth of Kate's statement that "everyone who had anything to give ... made the sharpest possible bargain for it"; but she also discovers for herself that, as Kate put it, "this might be, in cases, a happy understanding. ... People could quite like each other in the midst of it." (I, 179) In the midst of her suspicion that Lord Mark may be mainly interested in inheriting her money, she finds it impossible to recoil in indignant horror from the "ugly motive" she imputes to him:

... there was a beautiful reason - indeed there were two - why her companion's motive should n't matter. One was that even should he desire her without a penny she would n't marry him for the world; the other was that she felt him, after all, perceptively, kindly, very pleasantly and humanly, concerned for her. ... he liked her. (II, 150)

Thus Milly, protected from Lord Mark's designs by her relative indifference to him, can even value the genuine, if shallow, amiability that serves to make palatable this exploitative social system. In coming to terms with this bewildering system, Milly ceases to be simply its dupe; nor is she motivated by an all-embracing charity. She has merely learned to survive to "live" in the only way open to her, by extracting the sting of the ugly motive and cherishing the kindness that it is oddly compatible with.

In keeping with the clarity of Milly's own perception of her situation, the reader has, in the whole of her conversation with Lord Mark, an impression of a more forceful, less role-determined Milly, more directly and

vividly presented than elsewhere in the novel. As Milly ceases, for the moment, to be mainly the object of other people's designs, she also ceases to be the Princess, the Dove, or the American Girl, and states simply: "I'm very badly ill." (II, 155) A major irony of the novel is resolved as she confronts the ugly truth that her "value" may lie in what she has seen as the denial of all value, the hitherto unmentionable "ravage of her disease". In mentioning it, she liberates herself, in this one relation at least, from the elaborate pretense that has attended her glittering progress across Europe.

But it is characteristic of this novel that an irony is resolved only to reveal a further irony. If Kate's description of the system as "in cases a happy understanding" would seem to be vindicated by Milly's coming to terms with it here, it nevertheless remains a system that allows for no stronger feeling than "quite liking" the other members. Its good-natured reciprocal exploitation provides no basis for anything less superficial than amiable social living. Milly may feel that mutual liking is a satisfactory basis for her relationship with Lord Mark, but he does not; and in his jealous disappointment he avails himself of the weapon that Milly has unwittingly provided in betraying to him her ignorance of Kate's engagement to Densher. The blow is aimed at Densher, but, as Lord Mark could have foreseen, Milly is its first victim. The fact that "he liked her" does not oblige him to spare her.

The system, then, breaks down when one party feels that he is not getting his due. This precipitates the supreme test of Milly's accommodation to the principle of reciprocity: the revelation that the man she loves has been acting towards her in accordance with that principle. The fact that, upon this revelation, Milly ceases "to take the trouble" to live, might seem to support Crews' contention that her end is not "to be taken as a conscious moral decision"¹⁷, that is, that it lacks the element of active choice associated with the tragic protagonist.

This, however, is to assume that the last we hear of Milly is that "she has turned her face to the wall." (II, 270) In fact, of course, she summons Densher to her palace, to see him "face-to-face" (II, 327), as if to take to the last "full in the face the whole assault of life" (I, 125). Densher says of this conversation that Milly "showed nothing but her beauty and her strength", as if Milly has briefly acquired something of Kate Croy's

¹⁷ The Tragedy of Manners, p. 75

qualities in the supreme effort of sending Densher away:

"If it was somehow for her I was still staying, she wished that to end, she wished me to know how little there was need of it. And as a manner of farewell she wished herself to tell me so." (II, 327)

In itself, Milly's act of sending away the man she loves "forgiven, dedicated, blessed" (II, 343) shows a courage and magnanimity that make her more than a passive victim or martyr; but this suggestion is further reinforced by one of those intricate verbal patterns, made up of apparently trivial phrases, that serve, especially in James' late novels, to define and develop major meanings. In this instance, Milly's deprecation of Densher's "staying" is the culmination of a series based on variants of "coming", "going" and "staying", usually "for" somebody.

This particular verbal complex is introduced relatively early in the novel, in Aunt Maud's plea to Milly in London: "You must stay on with us. ... Above all you must help me with Kate, and you must stay a little for her. ..." (I, 215) Here "staying" is established, frankly enough, as a service - in this instance a service intended to advance Kate's (and Aunt Maud's) social career. This becomes unnecessary as they leave with Milly for Venice - where Merton's staying behind after Kate's departure becomes crucial to their plan. As Kate says to him, "All you'll have to do will be to stay" (II, 227) - his staying thus constituting both his pleasing of Kate and his tacit deception of Milly. In return for this Merton demands that Kate come to him: "I'll stay, on my honour, if you'll come to me. On your honour." (II, 230) - and "she had come, that once, to stay, as people called it" (II, 235). In return for Kate's "coming to stay", that is, Densher undertakes to "stay". The quid pro quo basis which the relationship assumes is starkly revealed in the simple verbal echo; Milly is a mere commodity in this bartering process.

After this, the pattern shifts slightly to reveal the conflict of loyalties that is to contribute to Densher's separation from Kate. Thus he overcomes his initial reluctance to allow Milly to "come to him" in the rooms he associates with Kate's visit: "You can come ... when you like." Upon her telling him "We want you not to go", he replies "I won't go."

"Then I won't go!" she brightly declared.
 "You mean you won't come to me?" (II, 247)

Thus Milly's not coming to Densher becomes the counterpart of Kate's coming, in both cases as response to his "not going". Metaphorically, although of course unwittingly, Milly is renouncing the opportunity to take Kate's place. Densher, on the other hand, quite conscious of the implications of his offer, needs to prove to himself his continuing loyalty to Kate; ironically, the form this proof takes brings him as close as he ever comes to expressing attachment to Milly: "Is n't it enough ... to stay after all for you?" (II, 250) To stay, then, is, contrary to Kate's promise, not all he has to do: he has, to show his loyalty to Kate, to spell out the lie that up to this point has been tacit:

So was it, by being loyal, another kind of lie, the lie of the uncandid profession of a motive. He was staying so little "for" Milly that he was staying positively against her. (II, 250)

Thus, in the light of the thematic significance of Merton's "staying", Milly's request to him not to stay "for" her signals the fact that she has assumed some measure of control over the comings and goings which have comprised the plot against her. The "Princess" is at last exercising her royal prerogative - or, more simply, Milly at last extricates herself from the system of the "working and the worked".

Milly's bequest to Densher is in the spirit of this liberation from a society in which "nobody ... does anything for nothing". It is also in the spirit of her earlier strategy to enter into the role bestowed upon her by other people: having finally been illuminated as to her value for Merton and Kate, she simply accepts that value. In doing this, she acts in accordance with her tribute to Kate, expressed in her innocence to Sir Luke: "It's in her that life is splendid"; she loves Densher enough to wish him to have the life that she was not to have.

This point is obscured, though not necessarily contradicted, by Dorothea Krook's view of Milly's act as exemplifying "the power of the good ... to abase the proud by answering it with forgiveness, loving-kindness and sacrificial death."¹⁸ Described like this, such "power" sounds too much like moral one-upmanship to accord with our (and, no doubt, Dorothea Krook's) impression of Milly. Furthermore, "the proud" seems a rather inaccurate abstraction in this context: it may just apply to Kate, but she is not

¹⁸ The Ordeal of Consciousness, p. 221.

abased by Milly's forgiveness as much as by Densher's ultimatum; whereas Densher, who is abased, is not conspicuously proud. And there is surely a decisive difference between the generous bequest of a dying person and "sacrificial death", unless we were to accept that Milly died in order to leave Densher her money. The descent of the Dove, in short, is not a form of deus ex machina, but the forgiveness extended by Milly Theale to a young man whom she still loves even after discovering his duplicity.

The ironic pattern of the deluded heroine, enlightened at last, making a free choice which confirms her previous deluded choice, is familiar from The Portrait of a Lady. It is a measure of the complexity of The Wings of the Dove that this pattern forms only one element of a larger design, one aspect of the process by which the novel, in Williams' words, "creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons." The creation and judging are, of course, to be seen as taking place simultaneously, and there is perhaps no clearer demonstration of James' ability to fuse the two functions than in his ironic use of "setting" in The Wings of the Dove. This is to say that each setting derives its significance not only from local detail, but from its relation to other settings in the novel - and of course from the characters inhabiting or observing those settings. One way of describing this technique is to say that it combines Lukács' "hierarchy of significance" with the mimetic function of realism. On the one hand this differs from Dickens' description of, say, Coketown, in being more firmly based on observation of detail;¹⁹ on the other hand it differs from, say, Thackeray's use of setting in Vanity Fair in extending beyond the elementary "social" gradations. Thackeray obviously knows that Russell Square is an appropriate setting for a stockbroker's family, and makes a point of distinguishing it from the more aristocratic Grosvenor Square; he knows that Vauxhall Gardens is where his characters would go for an outing, and can give us a lightly satirical description of it; but the settings have little more real significance than the town of Pumpernickel in defining the values of the novel. By contrast, each scene in The Wings of the Dove, from Chirk Street to the Palazzo Leporelli, has its place in a moral frame of reference.

¹⁹ The example is of course not entirely representative of Dickens at his best. His settings are frequently much more "realistic" than Coketown, without sacrificing anything of their metaphorical significance.

The setting that dominates the novel is, of course, Lancaster Gate, and this in spite of the fact that much of the action takes place in Venice. Lancaster Gate becomes so firmly established as the seat of certain values, that its influence travels, as it were, with the characters, to be felt even in the Piazza San Marco. Our introduction to it, through Merton Densher, is perhaps the most straightforward example in the novel of the definition of value through setting:

Lancaster Gate looked rich - that was all the effect; which it was unthinkable that any state of his own should ever remotely resemble. He read more vividly, more critically, ... the appearances about him; and they did nothing so much as make him wonder at his aesthetic reaction. He had n't known - and in spite of Kate's repeated reference to her own rebellions of taste - that he should "mind" so much how an independent lady might decorate her house. It was the language of the house itself that spoke to him, writing out for him with surpassing breadth and freedom the associations and conceptions, the ideals and possibilities of the mistress. Never, he felt sure, had he seen so many things so unanimously ugly - operatively, ominously so cruel. ... He could n't describe and dismiss them collectively, call them either Mid-Victorian or Early - not being certain they were rangeable under one rubric. It was only manifest they were splendid and were furthermore conclusively British. They constituted an order and abounded in rare material - precious woods, metals, stuffs, stones. He had never dreamed of anything so fringed and scalloped, so buttoned and corded, drawn everywhere so tight and curled everywhere so thick. (I, 77-79)

To describe Lancaster Gate as "ugly" would seem to be merely an understatement of the obvious, but in a novel where "beauty" is such an ambiguous quality, an unequivocal judgement of anything as "unanimously ugly" establishes at least one firm point of reference.

Nor is it merely a point of aesthetic reference. Densher's "aesthetic reaction" is more than an effete shudder at the vulgarity of Aunt Maud's taste: the judgement being passed clearly has a moral element. His apprehension of the "cruel" assertiveness of this massive display of indifference to non-commercial values explains why he should uncharacteristically "'mind' so much how an independent lady might decorate her house": it represents a morality different from his own, ultimately hostile to his own:

But it was above all the solid forms, the wasted finish, the misguided cost, the general attestation of morality and money, a good conscience and a big balance. These things finally

represented for him a portentous negation of his own world of thought. ... (I, 79)

Lancaster Gate is, then, the concrete (or "rosewood and marble and malachite" - I, 79) embodiment of the philistine, "conclusively British" spirit of trade, the well-appointed counting-house of "Britannia of the Market Place" (I, 30). As such, it is as central to the novel as the Marshalsea is to Little Dorrit.

It is worth noting in passing, in anticipation of the rift that is later to develop between the lovers, that Kate's misgivings about Lancaster Gate are described merely as "rebellions of taste", as against Densher's morally based revulsion. She can live in Lancaster Gate, as Densher could not, because it does not offend against her essential values; just as he feels that he, unlike Kate, "could have lived in such a place" as Mrs Condrip's poverty-stricken home (II, 365). But at this early stage of the novel the lovers are still jointly distinguished from the overbearing ugliness of Lancaster Gate, a point overlooked in Dorothea Krook's reference, in the same breath as it were, to the "beautiful, gracious circle of Lancaster Gate" and "the bright beauty of Kate Croy and Merton Densher".²⁰ This is more than a quibble: it is essential to the tragedy of Densher and Kate that their very real beauty is at first set against the ugliness of Lancaster Gate, to be ultimately vanquished by it. Initially, Lancaster Gate, like the system of values it represents, provides no refuge for "the bright beauty of Kate Croy and Merton Densher". It is in fact significant that their meetings do not take place there: their love finds its proper metaphorical setting in Kensington Gardens:

Suddenly she said to him with extraordinary beauty: "I engage myself to you for ever."

The beauty was in everything, and he could have separated nothing - could n't have thought of her face as distinct from the whole joy. Yet her face had a new light. "And I pledge you - I call God to witness! - every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life." That was all, for the moment, but it was enough, and it was almost as quiet as if it were nothing. They were in the open air, in an alley of the Gardens; the great space, which seemed to arch just then higher and spread wider for them, threw them back into deep concentration. (I, 95)

²⁰ The Ordeal of Consciousness, p. 216.

This moment recalls Sir Luke's characterisation of life as "the beautiful show of it, in its freshness", and confirms Milly's tribute to Kate: "It's in her that life is splendid". The two principal values of the novel, "life" and "beauty", are for once manifested unambiguously. With its beauty that is "in everything", the scene forms the positive counterpart to the "unanimous" ugliness of Lancaster Gate. Kate's unconditional pledge of her "faith" and "life" figures as an affirmation that, for the moment, renders the "ideals and possibilities" of Mrs Lowder irrelevant. True, this is not the unfettered passion of the Yorkshire moors - we are reminded by the slight concussion of "in the open air" against "in an alley of the gardens" that the lovers' freedom remains circumscribed by the artifice of a sophisticated society - but of the various locations in this very urban novel, this one is the most "natural".

At the risk of oversimplification, one might say that the "hierarchy of significance" of the novel is based on the two opposed absolutes of Lancaster Gate and Kensington Gardens. But if the open spaciousness of Kensington Gardens is contrasted with the cluttered pomposity of Lancaster Gate, it is contrasted with different effect to the "grim breathing-space" Milly finds in the Regent's Park after her visit to Sir Luke (I, 250). The Park is, like Kensington Gardens, a respite from the artificiality of social living: "the real thing was to be quite away from the pompous roads". But the reality that Milly finds in the Park with its "shabby grass", its "smutty sheep", the "scattered, melancholy comrades ... down on their stomachs in the grass", is clearly a far more sombre reality than that of Kate and Densher: "one would live if one could" is the moral Milly extracts from it (I, 250-54). Milly's pathetic little foray into "real" life thus reinforces by contrast the strength and vitality of the lovers' moment in Kensington Gardens.

Against this must be set the more complex relation between Kensington Gardens and Matcham - on one level again a contrast between natural and artificial, with the refined artifice of Matcham embodying an older, more tasteful ideal of social living than the vulgar opulence of Lancaster Gate. It is not simply a contrast, though: Milly's experience of Matcham also has certain elements in common with the ecstatic betrothal of Kate and Densher:

Once more things melted together - the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon. (I, 220)

In both cases the experience is of a merging of all the elements of the scene into one overwhelming whole: for Milly "things melted together", as for Merton "the beauty was in everything, and he could have separated nothing". Both scenes represent "a sort of magnificent maximum"; but Densher has been led to it by the beauty of Kate's living face, whereas Milly's "apotheosis" is prompted by the Bronzino portrait resembling herself. Where Densher "could n't have thought of [Kate's] face as distinct from the whole joy", Milly realises that the subject of the portrait was "unaccompanied by a joy." And against Kate's pledge of faith ("I give you every drop of my life") is placed, in its terrible conciseness, the starkest meaning of the portrait: "And she was dead, dead, dead." Kate can "give" her life and be the stronger for it; the portrait can give Milly only the dead beauty of a work of art. (I, 221)

The Matcham scene stresses in the first place the contrast between Milly's career and that of the lovers; in its implied contrast between the living beauty and that of art it points forward to the scene in the National Gallery, and beyond that, to Milly's retreat into the serene artificiality of the Palazzo Leporelli, in apparent acceptance of her kinship with the Bronzino portrait.²¹ But the pairing of Matcham with Kensington Gardens also produces a more ironic relevance to Kate and Densher. Milly's simple summary of her experience at Matcham, "I shall never be better than this" (I, 221), becomes, in retrospect, also a comment on their "magnificent maximum": for them, too, the "apotheosis coming so curiously soon" is a maximum which can only diminish. As Milly's moment in front of the Bronzino contains everything that she faces the prospective loss of in her "I shall never be better than this", so the moment in Kensington Gardens contains everything that Kate faces the actual loss of in the declaration that concludes the novel: "We shall never be again as we were!"

The moment in the Gardens turns out to have been only a respite from Lancaster Gate, not an escape from it. In the novel's precise topography, Lancaster Gate overlooks Kensington Gardens; and, in retrospect, Kate's insistence that they should meet virtually under Aunt Maud's windows shows a deference to that Lady's opinion which is incompatible with her unconditional pledge of faith to a man of whom her aunt disapproves. There

²¹ The point is stressed by Mrs Stringham's comparison of Milly's life at the Palace to "a Veronese picture" (II, 206).

are, in short, other impulses in Kate that, though yielding temporarily to her love for Densher, nevertheless assert themselves readily - almost immediately after her brave declaration. There is a slight fumble as the lovers become aware of Lancaster Gate looming through the trees:

They had exchanged vows and tokens, sealed their rich compact, solemnised, so far as breathed words and murmured sounds and lighted eyes and clasped hands could do it, their agreement to belong only, and to belong tremendously, to each other. They were to leave the place accordingly an affianced couple, but before they left it other things still had passed. (I, 95)

The "other things" so casually introduced as an afterthought concern Densher's "horror of bringing to a premature end [Kate's] happy relation with her aunt". This is partly the generosity of somebody who would not like to see his happiness cause unhappiness to others, and who feels strong enough to make concessions to the less fortunate. Such generosity, in a society where generosity is taken advantage of as a weakness, is akin to naïvety: in the event, to put it bluntly, his loss of Kate can be traced back to her "happy relation with her aunt". The irony at his expense derives in the first place from his assumption that Aunt Maud is so weak as to need his concessions, but in the second place from his apparent unawareness of the fact that Kate is considerably more reluctant than he to sacrifice her "happy relation with her aunt". Having early in the novel seen "as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her" (I, 28), and nevertheless determined to make Densher's "long looks. ... most completely her possession",

she reasoned, or at all events began to act, as if she might work them in with other and alien things, privately cherish them and yet, as regards the rigour of it, pay no price. (I, 61)

Thus even the clear-sighted Kate misjudges her own strength: to assume that in such a society where "nobody ... does anything for nothing" it is possible to "pay no price", is almost as naïve as for Densher to make concessions to Aunt Maud: it fails to reckon with Aunt Maud's determination to "get back ... her money", as Lord Mark put it to Milly (I, 160).

At any rate, the lovers' combined motives issue in a decision to keep their engagement a secret - which, by the odd logic of rationalisation,

presents itself to them as a proof of strength:

They were practically united and splendidly strong; but there were other things - things they were precisely strong enough to be able successfully to count with and safely to allow for; in consequence of which they would for the present, subject to some better reason, keep their understanding to themselves. (I, 97)

Again the "other things" seem like trivialities in the face of their united strength; but these conveniently vague "other things" include, of course, Kate's unacknowledged reluctance to sacrifice the material benefits attendant upon Aunt Maud's blessing. And from the moment that Aunt Maud's blessing becomes necessary to their purpose, their relationship, for all that they are "practically united and splendidly strong", becomes a commodity in that market place of which Aunt Maud is the pastmistress. Their tragedy is simply summed up in one sentence: "It was impossible to keep Mrs Lowder out of their scheme." (I, 62)

If we were to imagine (without much effort) Aunt Maud availing herself of the opportunity for surveillance of the lovers in Kensington Gardens, it would graphically represent her position through much of the novel: looking down upon the lovers with the confident detachment of the eiron. This is to say that all the attempts of the lovers to "square" her become subject to the irony that ultimately they will do so only by accepting her terms. It is in attempting to "work" her that they are most "worked".

It is Mrs Lowder's presence that betrays itself, so soon after their total commitment to each other, in their feeling of the need to lie to her. And their whole scheme of using Milly, of course, originated in an elaborate lie for Aunt Maud's benefit. She is, in fact, ever-present; Densher's confrontation of Kate in the middle of the Piazza San Marco, with Aunt Maud probably watching from the shop where she is buying lace, sums up this aspect of their relationship. Until Aunt Maud is fully "squared" all their meetings, with the notable and significant exception of Kate's visit to Densher's rooms in Venice, take place, if not under her watchful but tactfully averted eye, then behind doors shut, as it were, with her consent. Nor does Aunt Maud have to assert her power overtly: she knows people in general, and her niece in particular, well enough to realise that her wealth speaks for itself, albeit in the brazen accents of Lancaster Gate. Aunt Maud has power over the lovers only because Kate acknowledges her money as a value.

This is not to say that Kate is, after all, a true child of Lancaster Gate. She is set apart from it by that quality which Densher sees as also distinguishing her from him: "She had more life than he to react from" (I, 66). This "pure talent for life" as he later calls it (II, 176) may have something in common with Aunt Maud's crude vitality, but it also includes the ability to recognise Merton Densher's value in non-financial terms. Nevertheless, it is Kate's tragic paradox that this "pure talent for life" which distinguishes her from Lancaster Gate as a panther is distinguished from a herd of domestic animals, also impels her towards it. Her talent for life demands favourable conditions for its expansion, material to feed on - and for Kate these conditions include the "material things" offered by Aunt Maud.

Thus the attempted unification, as it were, of Kensington Gardens and Lancaster Gate necessarily involves the reconciliation of 'life' and commercial values; and in so far as "life" is a matter of survival on one's own terms ("they would live if they could"), and Kate's terms include the material, the law of the jungle combines with the law of the market place in the great consort of "the working and the worked".

It is part of the ambiguity of "life" that the brutality necessary for the exploitation of Milly is also part of the beauty of the lovers at their most vital. Milly discerns something of this quality in noting that Kate is "the least bit brutal" and "that there might be a wild beauty in that, and even a strange grace" (I, 181-82). In this instance the brutality reveals itself as an indifference to the mild Susan Stringham; later, of course, Milly herself becomes its object. "I'm a brute about illness", says Kate (II, 54), and once again the brutality is registered as the adjunct of strength, the unscrupulousness of the strong in the face of the weak:

She looked at him now a moment as for the selfish gladness of their young immunities. It was all they had together, but they had it at least without a flaw - each had the beauty, the physical felicity, the personal virtue, love and desire of the other. (II, 54-55)

In this context the selfishness almost seems natural: it is of the essence of their kind of love that it is ultimately indifferent to all but the loved object. Their "virtue" is presumably more a matter of elemental strength than of conventional rightness of conduct, but the ambiguity supports one's feeling that the very vigour of the lovers constitutes a

value: "their young immunities" seem to include, for the time being, immunity from the judgement that could be passed on the conversation they have been having about Merton's "consolation" of Milly. Their strength allows them a moment of pity for "the poor girl who had everything else in the world, the great genial good they, alas, did n't have, but failed on the other hand of this." (II, 55) It can even present itself to them as only kind that something of their abundance should be shared with the poor girl - in return, as Kate if not Densher must already be calculating, for something of the "great genial good they, alas, did n't have".

So this apparently most self-sufficient of relationships becomes subject to the principle of the market place, whereby, as Kate explains to Milly, "every one who had anything to give ... made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return." (I, 179) In London society the bargain is usually comparatively uncomplicated: the "values" traded tend to be quite easily indentifiable. Thus Aunt Maud and Lord Mark are warily negotiating the time-honoured transaction between money and rank. But Kate and Densher are trading in a more intangible value - life. It may be this that prevents them from seeing the essentially commercial nature of their undertaking, and from applying to it the basic law of such transactions: each party has to sacrifice something in return for what he or she gets. Kate and Densher fail to see that each of them may have to surrender "the beauty, the physical felicity, the personal virtue, love and desire of the other" in return for "the great genial good they, alas, did n't have".

At Lancaster Gate a certain genteel discretion still makes it possible, for much of the time, to ignore the mercenary nature of such transactions. It is, ironically, the appalling Lionel Croy, apparently representing everything that Kate is trying to escape, who most vigorously propounds, in their unadorned squalor, the principles of the society in which Kate seeks refuge:

"... There was a day when a man like me - by which I mean a parent like me - would have been for a daughter like you quite a distinct value; what's called in the business world, I believe, an 'asset'." He continued sociably to make it out. "I'm not talking of what you might, with the right feeling, do for me, but of what you might - it's what I call your opportunity - do with me. Unless indeed," he the next moment imperturbably threw off, "they come a good deal to the same thing. Your duty as well as your chance, if you're capable of seeing it, is to use me. Show family feeling by seeing what I'm good for. ..." (I, 17-18)

The "use" to which Croy cynically suggests he should be put, his view of himself as "quite a distinct value; ... 'an asset'", his imperturbable equation of what Kate might do for him with what she might do with him - these are only the Chirk Street equivalents of Lancaster Gate procedures. Croy's values are Lancaster Gate values "chalk-marked by fate like a 'lot' at a common auction" (I, 4), mercantile values gone bankrupt.

Important as this opening chapter is in establishing sympathy for Kate Croy, its ironic function goes deeper than that. Lionel Croy's sleazy rapacity, his unscrupulous exploitativeness is not only what Leavis calls "one of the pressures driving her",²² it is also a threadbare version of what she is driven to. And in Lionel Croy we recognise a debased version of Kate's "talent for life", which in him manifests itself as an insolent persistence in surviving - beautifully - against the odds:

He had kind safe eyes, and a voice which, for all its clean fulness, told the quiet tale of its having never had once to raise itself. Life had met him so, half-way, and had turned round so to walk with him, placing a hand in his arm and fondly leaving him to choose the pace. (I, 8)

This is the domestic animal rather than the panther, the vapid benevolence of Matcham with its "kind, lingering eyes" rather than the vivid brutality of Kate Croy; but it is Lionel Croy's style of employing a talent of which his daughter has her share. Even his lodgings, with all their redolence of "the failure of fortune and of honour" (I, 4), strike Kate as "a medium, a setting, and to that extent, after all, a dreadful sign of life" (I, 13) - not, indeed, as ostentatious a sign as the more copiously padded upholstery of Lancaster Gate, but distinguished from it only by its failure of fortune: the failure of honour is not a function of setting. Ultimately, Lionel Croy's petty deceptions differ only in their pettiness from his daughter's grand deception of Milly. To Kate, however, the contrast between Chirk Street and Lancaster Gate is absolute: in the language of material things, the failure of fortune is the failure of honour. The connection Kate is incapable of making is made for the reader by the linking of "the ugliness - so positive and palpable that it was somehow sustaining" (I, 12-13) of

²² The Great Tradition, p. 174.

Chirk Street with the "unanimous" ugliness Densher discerns in the furnishings of Lancaster Gate.

Of course, ugliness being in the eye of the beholder, Densher and Kate are also placed by their reactions to these settings. As Lancaster Gate proclaims to Densher a spirit inimical to his values, so "the faint flat emanation of things" in Chirk Street represents an intolerable denial of Kate's sense of life. As Kate, despite her "rebellions of taste" can live in Lancaster Gate, so Densher could presumably live in Chirk Street, there being in neither case a violation of essential values. Similarly, in Densher's Venetian lodgings, the "ancient rickety objects, ... refined in their shabbiness, amiable in their decay" (II, 178) perhaps owe their refinement and amiability mainly to Densher's appreciation; it is unlikely that Kate would find them so.²³

What I have called the technique of "ironic setting", then, entails the use of the resources of realism to place the concrete details of an environment in moral relation to its inhabitants, to produce that "total view" which John Holloway denies to late James.²⁴ The quality of attention paid to Lancaster Gate and Mrs Lowder is exactly the same as that paid to Chirk Street and Lionel Croy - that is to say it is something quite other than the "aesthetic contemplation" John Goode ascribes to the novel. The "hierarchy of significance" emerges unobtrusively, through the ironic network of implicit contrast and correspondence, but it is as much present as the "pattern ... of moral significances" that Leavis traces in *Nostramo*.²⁵ Though setting is, of course, by definition static, the pattern is nevertheless potentially dynamic in that it consists of interaction between character and setting. Ultimately, whether such irony is resolved or not will depend of course on the characters' awareness of the values embodied in setting.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to a consideration of the "moral significances" enacted in Kate and Densher's progress through the

²³ This adds a further point to Densher's insistence on Kate's coming to him from the Palazzo Leporelli - she must quite literally meet him on his own ground in return for his frequenting the Palace.

²⁴ "The Literary Scene", p. 56.

²⁵ The Great Tradition, p. 211.

novel's rich variety of settings - a "progress", however, that leads both of them back to where they started: Kate to Lancaster Gate, Densher to his meagre lodgings, though now with free access to Lancaster Gate. The significance of their progress may perhaps best be summed up in Kate's own insight - though it is an insight applied to her sister, with an irony of which Kate turns out to be the alazon. She sees in Mrs Condrip, clinging to the values of their more prosperous times in the same spirit as she retains the chandeliers reaching almost to the floor of her reduced quarters,

a state of the spirit that perhaps marked most sharply how poor you might become when you minded so much the absence of wealth.
(I, 34)

The phrase "how poor you might become" implies a process; and it is such a process of impoverishment that we witness in the lovers' successful plot to gain the wealth they lack. Initially, their love is founded on "some sense, on the part of each, of being poor where the other was rich" (I, 50): the metaphor is precisely chosen to convey the non-material value they find in each other, and their generous acceptance of a corresponding poverty in themselves. Ultimately, it is Kate's minding "so much the absence of wealth" that deprives each of the riches offered by the other.

In the course of the novel the enriching reciprocity of the lovers' complementary qualities yields to the exploitative reciprocity of the working and the worked - a system into which Kate is drawn by every human tie, other than Densher, that she possesses. Her father, sister, and aunt are "working" her, in their different ways, for all she is worth; in return, she "works" Aunt Maud, Milly, and ultimately even Densher. In the case of her aunt, this is merely an acceptance of the rules of a game between equally adept participants. Her exploitation of Milly, of course, is much more devious; and yet, this is not only what we measure Kate's fall by. Her use of Milly is not inconsistent with that brutality which, as we have seen, is inseparable from her beauty; thus, ruthless as it is, it is yet not a violation of the essential value that she represents in the novel. It is in her "working" of Merton Densher that she miscalculates and destroys her most beautiful possession. In a sense like Milly, she does not realise that the London system, although it allows one to "quite like" the other parties to the bargain, does not allow for one's truly caring for them. Her mistake is summed up in her glib explanation to Merton Densher:

"... You're what I have of most precious, and you're therefore what I use most." (II, 52)

The disarming candour of this does not compensate for the speciousness of the logic whereby the preciousness of a loved one is equated with the usefulness of an object. What is intended as a tribute to him is in fact a subordination of him to the scheme that is supposed to unite them. The same confusion of priorities is evident in her warning to Densher:

"I verily believe I shall hate you if you spoil for me the beauty of what I see!" (II, 30)

Here the "beauty" of the scheme takes precedence over the raison d'être of the scheme - her relationship with Densher. In the event, of course, Densher does not spoil the beauty of what Kate sees; but Kate spoils the beauty that once, in Kensington Gardens, emanated from her, and yet "was in everything".

The loss of that beauty is most starkly dramatised in Densher's attempt to recreate "their simpler and better time", to recover "the clearness of their prime" (II, 345), by meeting Kate in their old trysting place in the Gardens. The midwinter setting forms the objective correlative to a relationship that is beyond revival by such means as Densher's insistence that they should get married immediately, before Milly's death:

"... We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our feeling for ourselves and for each other, not to wait another day. ..."
(II, 347)

Ironically, the death of the relationship is most evident in Kate's failure to see how the plot against Milly has defiled their relationship, in her claim that nothing has changed:

"I don't see, you know, what has changed." She had a large strange smile. "We've been going on together so well, and you suddenly desert me?"

It made him helplessly gaze. "You call it so 'well'? You've touches, upon my soul - !"

"I call it perfect - from my original point of view. I'm just where I was; and you must give me some better reason than you do, my dear, for your not being. ..." (II, 348)

Kate is right, of course: she is just where she was; it is Densher

who has changed. Having conceived the plan to benefit from Milly's death, she can see no reason to flinch from the consequences. With a kind of terrible innocence she assumes that he wants to get married immediately because he knows that he will inherit the money: "We need n't, I grant you, in that case wait; and I can see what you mean by thinking it nicer of us not to." (II, 349)

If we come to share Densher's "horror, almost, of her lucidity" (II, 350), that lucidity is nevertheless part of what Densher recognises as her "imperturbable consistency" (II, 348). Kate has always been Kate, and has known herself from the start; we, like Densher, have simply got to know her better and to take the full measure of her "talent for life" - and its limitations. Kate is clear-sighted enough eventually to see that she has lost Densher to Milly, but to the end she has no real perception of what she has done to Milly, nor of what she has done to Densher. She has instinctively valued Densher for "all the high dim things she lumped together as of the mind" (I, 50), but she has developed no clearer sense of what these things consist of. She does not realise that they enable Densher to pass judgement on her, that what he is "rich" in enables him to assess what she is poor in. What Strether says of Mrs Newsome at the end of The Ambassadors applies also to Densher's view of Kate:

"She's the same. She's more than ever the same. But I do what I did n't before - I see her." (II, 323)

Kate's characteristic "lucidity" never deserts her; it is present, for instance, in her incisive "Her memory's your love" and, of course, in "We shall never be again as we were!" (II, 404-05) But these are perceptions, not moral insights: she can see, more clearly than Densher, what has happened to their relationship, but she cannot see why. To her the change is explicable only in terms of Merton's having fallen in love with Milly's memory; she is incapable of the further recognition that his view of her has changed.

For all Kate's clear-sightedness, then, she remains morally blind to the implications of her actions. If, as Walter Allen maintains, the lovers remind us of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Kate retains the direct simplicity of vision of Lady Macbeth before and immediately after the murder of Duncan. "But we've not failed", she assures Densher (II, 333) with as much

confidence as Lady Macbeth reassuring her husband: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we'll not fail." (Macbeth, 1.7.60-61) The irony implicit in her single-minded pursuit of what is to destroy what she had before remains unresolved: Kate has no criterion other than success by which to judge her actions. Her history has its moral, but she cannot pronounce it. James does not give to her the insight that Conrad gives to Mrs Gould in Nostromo, an insight that can serve to sum up Kate's success no less than Charles Gould's:

It was a colossal and lasting success; and love was only a short moment of forgetfulness, a short intoxication, whose delight one remembered with a sense of sadness, as if it had been a deep grief lived through. There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the degradation of the idea. (p. 521)

To apply Conrad's insight to Kate's situation is, of course, to see her behaviour not as an aberration from normal social behaviour, but as an instance of the necessary corruption of ideals in the pursuit of success in a society ruled by "material interests". This is not to exculpate Kate - the determination to succeed in Lancaster Gate terms is her own - but to note that through her James passes a larger judgement on her society as well. In this, James' use of Kate is similar to Thackeray's use of most of his characters (though most notably, of course, Becky Sharp) in Vanity Fair. James' technique also has in common with Thackeray's his essentially static presentation of his character, though his greater skill conceals this more effectively than Thackeray's overt manipulation of his puppets. What Edwin Muir says of the characters of Vanity Fair applies in essentials to Kate Croy:

Their weaknesses, their vanities, their foibles, they possess from the beginning and never lose to the end; and what actually does change is not these, but our knowledge of them.²⁶

This too is a process of discovery, but it is not discovery enacted through the characters; Kate Croy, like Becky Sharp, is never the growth point of the moral consciousness of her novel. An important distinction between

²⁶ The Structure of the Novel, pp. 24-25.

Thackeray's novel and The Wings of the Dove, however, is the fact that Kate is set against, and to a large extent observed and judged, by Merton Densher. In his case we do have the dynamic pattern of change, that is, the redemptive pattern that we have seen, for instance, in the career of Eugene Wrayburn.

Whereas Kate is from the first chapter of the novel possessed of those qualities whose full potential is developed in the course of the novel, Densher is at the outset something of a blank page - or, in James' metaphor, an undetermined value, an unstamped coin.

He suggested above all ... that wondrous state of youth in which the elements, the metals more or less precious, are so in fusion and fermentation that the question of the final stamp, the pressure that fixes the value, must wait for comparative coolness.
(I, 48-49)

Aunt Maud would have recognised the metaphor, but she would have misunderstood it. The value that is to be fixed in the course of the novel is a matter of moral worth, not calculable in her terms, though expressed in imagery that ironically recalls those terms. Indeed, Densher's value in her terms is initially simply non-existent: she has herself applied the "final stamp". If she is not quite as absolute in her rejection of him as Lionel Croy is, the latter's description of him as "some blackguard without a penny" (I, 23) nevertheless reproduces the essence of her judgement on him - as Densher expresses it to Kate, "Her idea, you mean, that I'm a sort of a scoundrel" (I, 60).

Ironically, Aunt Maud comes to reassess his value in the light of Milly's interest in him, in a process parallel to the weighing of his moral value that the novel simultaneously enacts. The more of a "scoundrel" he actually becomes, the less of one he seems to Aunt Maud. He ends up having squared everybody but himself:

"What a brute then I must be!"

"A brute - ?"

"To have pleased so many people."

"Ah," said Kate with a gleam of gaiety, "you've done it to please me." (II, 331)

Kate is right, as she so often is; but her demands are such that Densher can fully please her only by pleasing everybody else. And Densher is also right, in that to please people as Kate demands they should be pleased, is

in this instance to be a brute. He has, in short, been initiated into the beautiful brutality of which Kate is the prime exponent.

The brutality manifests itself, of course, in his complicity in Kate's plot against Milly. But he is after all not enough of a brute to accept his complicity with equanimity; those differences between the lovers that promised to enrich the relationship in its early days become irreconcilable under the pressure of Densher's guilt. Thus there is a terrible moral loneliness even in his attempt to see himself and Kate as united by their consciousness of guilt:

Only Kate at all events knew - what Kate did know, and she was also the last person interested to tell it; in spite of which it was as if his act, so deeply associated with her and never to be recalled nor recovered, was abroad on the winds of the world. His honesty, as he viewed it with Kate, was the very element of that menace: to the degree that he saw at moments, as to their final impulse or their final remedy, the need to bury in the dark blindness of each other's arms the knowledge of each other that they could n't undo. (II, 391-92)

But Densher is disregarding the chasm that now exists between him and Kate: it is only his knowledge that needs to hide itself; Kate seems unappalled by such knowledge as she has gained. Once again we are reminded of a Lady Macbeth capable of saying "A little water clears us of this deed", of a Macbeth capable of imagining the horrid deed blown in every eye ("abroad on the winds of the world" in Densher's modification of the image).

An important part of the novel's final meaning, as Frederick Crews and Dorothea Krook amongst others have shown, resides in Milly's unintentional defeat of the lovers through forgiveness, and in Densher's consequent redemption from the system of the "working and the worked". But such a reading runs the risk of over-simplifying the estrangement, and seeing it only in terms of Milly's influence. Thus, in referring to "the abyss that has opened between Kate and Densher as a result of his last interview with Milly",²⁷ Dorothea Krook leaves out of account, once again by making the descent of the Dove stand in for psychological process, the much subtler and more gradual estrangement that takes place in the course of the novel. This

²⁷ The Ordeal of Consciousness, p. 226.

estrangement is a function of the plot against Milly, but it does not derive from any action of Milly's: it consists of the gradual erosion of good faith on Merton Densher's part, not only in relation to Milly, but also in relation to Kate. As he becomes aware of being "worked", he starts "working" Kate, and thereby contributes to the destruction of their relationship.

This is not to deny that Densher is initially drawn into Kate's plan purely by his love for her: at the outset he is portrayed as helplessly under her spell. So, as Kate turns her back on him, impatiently bidding him "do what you like!", he realises that

he was prepared to conform, by almost any abject attitude or profitable compromise, to his companion's easy injunction. He would do as she liked - his own liking might come off as it would. (I, 74-75)

In the event he goes a long way towards this "abject attitude"; but it is still not quite true that, as Crews maintains, "all his guilt has consisted in allowing Kate to overrule his conscience."²⁸ We would be as little interested in a Densher only led into sin by Kate Croy as in a Macbeth corrupted, against his better nature, by Lady Macbeth.

What in fact happens is that what Kate "likes" becomes more and more "abject" to Densher, leading him to rebel against the subordination of his "liking" to hers. Thus, on her suggestion that they might use Milly to facilitate their meetings, he confronts her with his challenge: "Why won't you come to me?" (II, 29) The challenge is perfectly understandable, as is the urgency of his desire as he asks "of his spirit and of his flesh just what concession they could arrange"; but in his resignation to her "intelligence" there is an element of resentment:

... it was he who was stupid - the proof of which was that he would do what she liked. (II, 30)

What had earlier been a testimony to Kate's beauty, now becomes a proof of his own stupidity; and gradually there grows in him a sense that he is being disregarded. Where earlier he was prepared to disregard himself, he now resents her doing so; and by the time he is in Venice, dutifully

²⁸ The Tragedy of Manners, p. 80.

visiting Milly at Kate's bidding, his sexual desire and his resentment at being manipulated are curiously indistinguishable:

There glowed for him in fact a kind of rage at what he was n't having; an exasperation, a resentment, begotten truly by the very impatience of desire, in respect to his postponed and relegated, his so extremely manipulated state. (II, 175-76)

We notice that Densher rebels, not against what he is being led into doing to Milly, but against the fact, as he sees it, that he is getting nothing in return. His desire for Kate we can, of course, assume to have been part of the relationship from the start; but this "impatience of desire" is subtly corrupted by his "smothered soreness" (II, 177). He does not simply want Kate, he wants Kate because he thinks it is his due, because he feels himself humiliated by not showing more spirit. He feels, in short, that he is being "worked" without "working" in return:

... whereas he had done absolutely everything that Kate had wanted, she had done nothing whatever that he had. (II, 177)

"Nobody here" as Lord Mark told Milly, "does anything for nothing"; and Densher's assertiveness in enforcing his bargain is a sign that this spirit of trade has infected him too. He feels like somebody swindled by a shopkeeper: partly sore at not getting his side of the bargain, but mainly angry at having been made a fool of, at having shown himself lacking in acuteness.

Densher demonstrates his new-found sense of purpose in his tense confrontation of Kate in the Piazza San Marco. Ostensibly an outdoor setting recalling Kensington Gardens, the Piazza, with its air of "a great social saloon, a smooth-floored, blue-roofed chamber of amenity" (II, 189), in fact belongs firmly to the drawing-room milieu of Lancaster Gate - a connection that is reinforced by Aunt Maud's probably-watchful presence in the shadows of the surrounding arcade. What might strike her as a stolen interlude between lovers, in truth has the grim mood of an ultimatum:

"Why not have done with it all and face the music as we are?" It broke from him in perfect sincerity. "Good God, if you'd only take me!"

... "We've gone too far," she none the less pulled herself

together to reply. "Do you want to kill her?"

He had an hesitation that was n't all candid. "Kill, you mean, Aunt Maud?"

"You know whom I mean. We've told too many lies."

Oh at this his head went up. "I, my dear, have told none!"
(II, 199)

It is possible to question the absolute candour of Kate's qualms (a cynic might note that her objection to killing Milly is more to its timing than to its morality), but what is more striking here is Densher's loss of good faith - his lapse from the sincerity of his plea to "have done with it all" to the shuffling equivocation of his hesitation, culminating in his prompt exculpation of himself, at Kate's expense, by grasping at the barren technicality of not actually having told a lie. The self-righteousness merges into blackmail, only to be defeated by Kate's refusal to take the bait:

"Rather than lay myself open to the least appearance of [telling a lie] I'll go this very night."

"Then go," said Kate Croy.

Kate is once again right: if it is his integrity he is concerned about, the only way of salvaging it is to withdraw immediately. By calling his bluff, she forces him to reveal his true motive and press his real claim:

"I'll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if you'll only come to me." (II, 200)

Thus the one relationship that seemed to be exempt from the principle of trade issues in the starkest statement of that principle: integrity is being traded against chastity, in what Crews calls "a simple business transaction".²⁹ The business is, of course, a form of prostitution.

At this point, however, Densher is marginally in the weaker bargaining position, his threat to leave Venice having failed of its desired effect. His pleading tone ("I'll tell any lie you want ... if you'll only come to me") has something of the desperation of an avid buyer emptying his purse on the counter in an attempt to bring down the price of a coveted object. But the relative bargaining positions are to change.

²⁹ The Tragedy of Manners, p. 71.

At Milly's glittering reception a variety of circumstances combine to strengthen Densher's position and his resolve. In the first place, Susan Stringham innocently confirms to him his potential power over Milly, and thus ironically his value to Kate: "You can do everything, you know" (II, 211) she encourages him, thus unwittingly delivering her protégée over to betrayal. In the second place Milly, determined to prove to Sir Luke that she is "taking the trouble" to live, fails to convince the person most interested in the question: Kate Croy. "She is n't better. She's worse" she says to Densher (II, 219); but what poor Milly's splendour does bring home to Densher is what she represents to Kate - something but tenuously connected with the image of the dove that Kate, a trifle mechanically perhaps, has reintroduced:

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. (II, 218)

From this follows Densher's sharpened realisation of how acutely his lack of wealth matters to Kate Croy, "how", as Kate herself realised long ago, "material things spoke to her". Milly's pearls become "a symbol of differences. ... pearls were exactly what Merton Densher would never be able to give her." (II, 219)

The stage is thus set, against the background of Milly's expensive music and inconveniently sociable guests, for Densher's strangely delayed realisation of exactly what Kate's beautiful idea entails. "If you want things named you must name them" she tells him, and he names the thing in the starkest possible terms:

"Since she's to die I'm to marry her?" (II, 225)

Upon this, in one terrible moment, constituting a rearrangement of the grouping in the National Gallery, the lovers are united in the full knowledge of their intentions against an innocent Milly:

[Kate] turned her head to where their friend was again in range,

and it made him turn his, so that they watched a minute in concert. Milly, from the other side, happened at the moment to notice them, and she sent across toward them in response all the candour of her smile, the lustre of her pearls, the value of her life, the essence of her wealth. It brought them together again with faces made fairly grave by the reality she put into their plan. (II, 229)

But having "brought them together again", Milly's smile, with all it implies, irrevocably divides them. In forcing Densher to face so squarely the "reality" of their plan and of his involvement in it, Kate has created a moral climate in which scruples seem irrelevant: Densher, now fully aware of the strength of his own position, can confront her with all the lucid pragmatism instilled in him by her example:

"If you decline to understand me I wholly decline to understand you. I'll do nothing."

"Nothing?" It was as if she tried for the minute to plead.

"I'll do nothing. I'll go off before you. I'll go tomorrow."

He was to have afterwards the sense of her having then, as the phrase was - and for vulgar triumphs too - seen he meant it. She looked again at Lady Wells, who was nearer, but she quickly came back. "And if I do understand?"

"I'll do everything."

She found anew a pretext in her approaching friend: he was fairly playing with her pride. He had never, he then knew, tasted, in all his relation with her, of anything so sharp - too sharp for mere sweetness - as the vividness with which he saw himself master in the conflict. "Well, I understand."

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

"You'll come?"

"I'll come." (II, 230-31)

The participants in this "conflict", ending in the "vulgar triumph" of one over the other and in the legalistic sealing, in a horrible parody of "honour", of the coerced agreement, seem like different people from the couple who so freely pledged their love to each other in Kensington Gardens. When we look back, we realise how much more we have witnessed than the betrayal of Milly: we have experienced the slow erosion of a relationship by the attempt to reconcile it with the claims of a materialistic world. The repeated "nothing", recalling Lord Mark's formula, signals Densher's successful début as one of the workers.

Milly can extend her forgiveness to Densher and signify that forgiveness by giving him freely what he sought by deceit from her; but Densher can

never be absolved from having taken from Kate Croy what she did not give him freely. His use of Milly is a conscious suppression of a conscience that duly reasserts itself; but his use of Kate derives from a corruption so complete as to make it impossible for him to evaluate his own conduct. What he triumphantly tastes as "too sharp for mere sweetness" is the forbidden fruit. The truly fallen, it is said, are not aware of their own fallen state; and in this Densher is truly fallen.

The irony that in gaining Milly's money, Densher loses Kate, is fully resolved by his recognition of the superiority of Milly's generosity to Kate's "talent for life"; but the irony that in his resentment at being "worked", he calculatingly "works" ("and for vulgar triumphs too") what was most precious to him, cannot be resolved, in that he has no insight into it. If Kate is degraded by the end of the novel, he has contributed to that degradation by his use of her, not in honest passion but in spirit of venality.

To stress Densher's corruption by the values of Lancaster Gate is not to deny the contrary tendency of much of the novel, Densher's growing awareness of the enormity of their intended exploitation of Milly, and his redemption, through Milly's forgiveness, from that particular sin. In this respect, we can accept Matthiessen's statement that "like the hero in any great tragedy he has arrived at the moral perception of what has befallen him."³⁰ But, even waiving for the moment his lack of insight into his use of Kate, it does not seem to me that the novel ends, as Dorothea Krook maintains it does, on "a redemption of the suffering and loss by the saving power of a human passion reinforced by courage, dignity, intelligence, and good faith."³¹ One would not want to deny Milly these admirable qualities; it is just that it is very difficult to see them as constituting "a redemption of the suffering and loss".

The "saving power of a human passion" seems less appropriate to the possibilities of James' world than those of, say George Eliot's: it is what is expressed, for instance, in Gwendolen Harleth's last words to Daniel Deronda:

You must not grieve any more for me. It is better - it shall be

³⁰ The Major Phase, p. 77.

³¹ The Ordeal of Consciousness, p. 231.

better with me because I have known you.³²

We do believe that it will be better with Gwendolen because she has known Deronda (though we may not find him as inspiring as she does): his example provides her with the impetus to seek, on however humble a level, that "larger life" that for George Eliot lies beyond the exclusive concern with self.

By contrast, the world which Densher inhabits offers almost none of this "larger life"; what there was of it, was represented by Kate Croy, as he realised on first falling in love with her:

Having so often concluded on the fact of his weakness, as he called it, for life - his strength merely for thought - life, he logically opined, was what he must somehow arrange to annex and possess (I, 51)

The formulation stresses the incongruity of such a rationalistic determination ("he logically opined") to "annex and possess" something as elusive as life. Densher would also live if he could; but if, unlike Milly, he succeeds briefly in annexing and possessing it, he does so only on such conditions as make the possession worthless. The particular emphasis given to his moral awakening is fairly rendered in James' outline of the novel:

In the light of how exquisite the dead girl was he sees how little exquisite is the living.³³

This emphasises the negative, even incapacitating effects of this discovery: it comes too late to affect Densher's relationship with Milly, but it does alienate him from Kate. As Kenneth Graham comments, "to reject Kate and her values represents an irreparable loss and possibly a perpetual unfitness for ordinary living."³⁴

In short, Densher's "redemption" does not liberate him, like Eugene Wrayburn or Gwendolen Harleth, into purposive action; all it leaves him is the "memory" which creates, incongruously, a bond with Mrs Lowder. It is

³² Daniel Deronda, ed. and introd. Barbary Hardy (1876; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 882.

³³ Notebooks, p. 173.

³⁴ The Drama of Fulfilment, p. 224.

perhaps the most mordant irony of the novel that Densher should be drawn to Lancaster Gate by the consequences of an act that was to have rendered him independent of its goodwill - and that he should go there for the comfort of Aunt Maud's materialistic sentimentality:

It was almost as if she herself enjoyed the perfection of the pathos; she sat there before the scene, as he could n't help giving it out to her, very much as a stout citizen's wife might have sat, during a play that made people cry, in the pit or the family-circle. What most deeply stirred her was the way the poor girl must have wanted to live.

"Ah yes indeed - she did, she did: why in pity should n't she, with everything to fill her world? The mere money of her, the darling, if it is n't too disgusting at such a time to mention that - !"

Aunt Maud mentioned it - and Densher quite understood - but as fairly giving poetry to the life Milly clung to: a view of the "might have been" before which the good lady was hushed anew to tears. She had had her own vision of these possibilities, and her own social use for them, and since Milly's spirit had been after all so at one with her about them, what was the cruelty of the event but a cruelty, of a sort, to herself? (II, 341)

This defines with sardonic precision the limits of the tragic in the world represented by Aunt Maud, in which Densher must find such solace as he can. The closest Aunt Maud can come to strong feeling is the luxurious kind of sentimentality which enjoys a good cry, and can thus respond copiously to "the perfection of the pathos". To her, human suffering is something one watches comfortably from a privileged, if economically-priced, position in the family-circle. Aunt Maud's definition of poetry doesn't admit of recondite distinctions between tragedy and sentimental melodrama: whether it is King Lear or La Dame aux Camélias, it is categorised only in terms of its most general effect, as "a play that made people cry". She is, of course, quite sincerely "stirred" (as opposed, perhaps, to being "moved"?) by the easy inverted nostalgia for "what might have been". Her scanty imagination is aided by the fact that "she had had her own vision of these possibilities, and her own social use for them". There is after all nothing quite as stirring as a loss in which one participates; the stout citizen's wife is left with the slightly aggrieved sense that through some mismanagement she has been deprived of her money's worth by the premature death of the leading lady.

Aunt Maud's response to Milly's death is almost comically untragic:

an apprehension of the tragic depends on an understanding of the value of what has been lost. For Aunt Maud, we know, value has only a material connotation: "The mere money of her, the darling" adequately sums up the nature of the loss over which she sheds tears. It is not, of course, the last word on the significance of Milly's death, nor does it detract from the force of Densher's own response; but it is also more than a revelation of Aunt Maud's vulgarity. It has something of the effect of Judge Brack's outraged disappointment at Hedda Gabler's suicide - "But people don't do such things!" - whereby poor Hedda's one attempt at a "beautiful" deed is trivialised into a breach of social decorum. The comparison is oversimplified, of course - Hedda's motives are in themselves more ambiguous than Milly's - but James, no less than Ibsen, acknowledges that complacent bourgeois morality does not provide the proper conditions for tragedy. In Densher's finding solace in the lush sentimentality of Aunt Maud, amidst the rosewood and marble and malachite, is an irony that threatens to subvert whatever moral resolution the novel has achieved. It does not ultimately do so; but the two patterns of irony create an equilibrium as precarious as that of King Lear.

If, then, the novel grew from an intention to render the pathos of Milly Theale's situation, we can see not only how much richer it became in the process, but also how much more sombre. James may have sacrificed something of that unity that he admired so much in novels - in, of his own novels, The Ambassadors, for instance. But The Wings of the Dove is, more satisfyingly than The Ambassadors, a vindication of James' statement which I quoted earlier on "the high price of the novel as a literary form - "

its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject matter, ... but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.³⁵

The strain shows, in this novel, in the importance assumed by Kate Croy and Merton Densher, an importance that threatens to usurp Milly's centrality in the novel. But James allows the interest to develop with a freedom that he seemed to begrudge Strether and Maria Gostrey in their relation to each

³⁵ Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, The Art of the Novel, pp. 45-46.

other. Also, if the development of Merton Densher's character requires darker strains than could have been foreseen at its inception, James does not flinch from them as he does from the less admirable aspects of Strether that emerge in the course of the novel. They take their place in the complete "hierarchy of significance" that James creates in this most "realist" of novels.

Chapter V

"The Misfortune of Being Too, Too Charming"
and the Advantages of a "Rare Power of Purchase": The Golden Bowl

The crucial question about The Golden Bowl, as Matthiessen recognised, is "What sort of world is being portrayed, and how are we to judge it?"¹ The question points to the "realist" element the novel has in common with The Wings of the Dove, but it also serves to distinguish between the two novels: as applied to The Wings, the question would be near-rhetorical, whereas in relation to The Golden Bowl it expresses the very real puzzlement felt by most readers. Difficult as the novel's immediate predecessors are, they do provide us with certain relatively clear pointers to a judgement on the society portrayed - for instance in Strether's gradual recognition of the deceptions underlying the glamour of Paris, or in Kate's explanation to Milly of the principles activating London society. But in The Golden Bowl we have no such guidance: we are, for the most part, helplessly dependent on the perceptions of the characters themselves. This is, of course, one of James' best-known and most cherished devices: the use of a "centre of consciousness" can be traced back as far as Roderick Hudson. But in The Golden Bowl this device, what James calls with monumental understatement "a certain indirect and oblique view of my presented action",² is more deceptively used: the apparent reliance on alternative perspectives, notably that of the Assinghams, tends to conceal the extent to which "the whole thing remains subject to the register, ever so closely kept, of the consciousness of but two of the characters." (I, vi)

This does not necessarily mean that we "see" through the eyes of these characters, as we do through those of Strether or any other central "consciousness" in James' earlier explorations of "point of view". In The Golden Bowl there are certain passages, notably those describing the early history of Adam Verver, which are clearly not filtered through any consciousness but that of the character immediately presented. But in being "subject to the register" of either the Prince or Maggie, such passages conform to a particular predisposition on his or her part towards the subject: we see the subject, as it were, only as he or she might have seen it. Where his or her

¹ The Major Phase, p. 87.

² Preface to The Golden Bowl, I, v.

understanding is incomplete - as it so often is - every "insight" offered will be subject to qualification by the rest of the novel.

This is to say that The Golden Bowl is James' most sustained piece of irony, an irony that devastates the pretensions of every character in the novel. Like so many other examples of unresolved irony discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, The Golden Bowl derives its energy from a tension between the values professed by the characters and the actions performed under cover of those values: once again, the self-conscious justifications of the characters are undercut, their belief in the stability of their values ironised.

The novel dramatises, in Fanny Assingham's phrase, "the misfortune of being too, too charming" (I, 392²⁹¹); and, as in Antony and Cleopatra, the lack of resolution of the irony admits a comic element to the misfortune. In this apparently most undramatic of novels, James avails himself of the dramatist's privilege of standing back and allowing the characters to speak for themselves - leaving us to judge for ourselves. Our task is considerably complicated by the fact that we are, for most of the time, in much the same position as the victims of this pervasive irony, privileged above them only in having two partial views of the novel's action. As James explains this privilege, it does not seem altogether to confer upon us the god-like omniscience of the eiron:

It is the Prince who opens the door to half our light upon Maggie, just as it is she who opens it to half our light upon himself; the rest of our impression, in either case, coming straight from the very motion with which that act is performed. We see Charlotte also at first, and we see Adam Verver, let alone our seeing Mrs. Assingham, and every one and every thing else, but as they are visible in the Prince's interest, so to speak - by which I mean of course in the interest of his being himself handed over to us. With a like consistency we see the same persons and things again but as Maggie's interest, her exhibitional charm, determines the view. (I, viii)

This method of presentation creates comparatively few problems in the first volume, since most readers are inclined to distrust the Prince in any case; but the temptation to see Maggie's vision as more authoritative than the Prince's can totally destroy the point of the novel. The potential confusion inheres mainly in one relation: that of Maggie to her father.

For our interpretation of the novel is a function of our assessment of Adam Verver: he determines the "sort of world" that the novel portrays, and as we judge him, we judge it. Even our judgement of Maggie is to a certain extent dependent on our view of Adam, since so much of her energy is expended in loyalty to his cause. As Brian Lee says, in reviewing the divergent critical interpretations of Adam Verver, "these contradictory views of him do entail, for the people who hold them, different versions of the novel as a whole".³

The Golden Bowl is dominated by Adam Verver as The Wings of the Dove is dominated by Mrs Lowder - in fact more so, since in his exclusive little world, more than ever a world of "the working and the worked", he is the supreme worker. In a novel no less concerned than The Wings with power and success, Adam, with his "rare power of purchase" (II, 360), is powerful and successful beyond Mrs Lowder's most avid dreams. He is also considerably more subtle than Mrs Lowder in his manipulation of everything that he touches: whereas there is, for much of the time, a brash amorality about her exercise of power, Mr Verver manages to envelop his power in an aura of sanctity. It is once again a matter of "morality and money, a good conscience and a big balance."⁴ But as Mr Verver's "balance" is stupendous compared with Mrs Lowder's, his "fine eminent 'pieces' in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze" (I, 141) immensely superior to her "gilt and glass, ... satin and plush, ... rosewood and marble and malachite" (I, 79), so his "conscience" is proportionately more sublime. She, in short, is "Britannia of the Market Place"; he the American robber baron turned philanthropist. Her wildest dream is to have constant access to Matcham; his lucid ambition is to found a dynasty.

I am suggesting, to put it bluntly, that Adam Verver is the corrupt centre of the novel, even, as Frederick Crews has suggested, "likened to God Himself."⁵ This is startling, but ultimately misleading only if we entertain the odd idea that James is trying to justify the ways of God to

³ The Novels of Henry James: A Study of Culture and Consciousness (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 105. Lee himself rather non-committally decides that "It is indeed hard to reconcile any other view of Verver than the ironic with what James has given us of this type before", unaccountably ignoring what James actually gives us of Verver himself.

⁴ The Wings of the Dove, I, 79.

⁵ The Tragedy of Manners, p. 107.

man in casting Him as a millionaire American art collector - if, that is, we believe with Dorothea Krook that Adam is "so to speak, a figure of the Just God of Judaism and Christianity as Maggie is a figure of the Loving God".⁶ In fairness to Crews, I should add that he does not share this view: he reminds us that everything in the novel is observed through "one or another imperfect character", and thus "we ought to maintain a willingness to see some of the religious overtones as hypocritical or ironical." (p. 106) In the case of Adam, I should say that the overtones are completely ironical. As Crews says:

Adam "created" the world that Charlotte, Amerigo, and Maggie inhabit; his money is the primum mobile of everything that happens in the novel. (p. 107)

The obvious enough conclusion to be drawn from this (though Crews does not do so) is that "everything that happens in the novel" is thereby irredeemably tainted. If Adam's name has any relevance to his function in the novel, it lies, not in his "innocence", but in the fallen state of an Adam aspiring to be as God. Not that money is necessarily and by its very nature evil, as has long been taught for the chastisement of the rich and the consolation of the poor; but money as used by Adam Verver, for the acquisition and manipulation of human beings, is an instrument of evil - in Fanny Assingham's words if not quite in her sense, "Evil - with a very big E" (I, 385).

In its mordant depiction of the idealisation of "material interests", The Golden Bowl, like its predecessor, invites comparison with Nostromo: but a closer parallel amongst Conrad's works may perhaps be found in "Heart of Darkness". Gabriel Pearson has compared these two works, but chiefly in order to establish what he regards as an essential difference between the two novelists:

It is instructive to cite Conrad at this juncture as a novelist chronologically adjacent to James and technically sympathetic to him, who is yet operating through and beyond the illusions of the civilization that James's practice upholds. For Conrad, bourgeois civilization is sustained by power and protected by lies. To the

⁶ The Ordeal of Consciousness, p. 286. I discuss Krook's long and scrupulous analysis more fully later.

initiate into its underlying realities, it is a hollow cheat, one which it is, however deviously, the main impulse of his fiction to confess. The lie in James is sanctified by what it salvages and the disaster it postpones.⁷

By my reading of the novel, the lie is exposed, not sanctified, and James' practice upholds neither the society that he depicts nor its illusions. It is true that the novel contains no equivalent to Kurtz's final pronouncement: the most obviously "Conradian" statement in the novel, the Prince's "Everything's terrible, cara - in the heart of man" (II, 349), is too heavily compromised by his own situation to be simply accepted as a judgement endorsed by the author.⁸ It is in fact symptomatic of the society presented by James that it contains no protagonist with the insight and authority to pronounce on it. Instead of Marlow's musings or Kurtz's "The horror!" we have only Maggie's little pronouncement: "It's success, father." (II, 366) But given what that success has been shown to consist of, the irony behind the statement is almost as devastating as Kurtz's outcry. We are once again reminded of Mrs Gould's reflections on success:

There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea.⁹

The Golden Bowl is the account of Maggie's "successful action", and its irony consistently exposes "the moral degradation of the idea": success is a matter of acquisition and control attended by self-righteousness. If the Golden Bowl be broken - why, then "if there had been anything to hold [the pieces] the bowl might still quite beautifully, a few steps away, have passed for uninjured." (II, 182-3) The novel is concerned with, and sardonically critical of, the mechanism by which the bowl is held so as to pass quite beautifully for uninjured.

The golden bowl stands, of course, for the superficially beautiful but essentially flawed relationships in the novel - notably, but not exclusively, the marriage of Maggie and the Prince. This does not mean that James'

⁷ "The novel to end all novels: The Golden Bowl" in The Air of Reality, ed. John Goode, p. 302.

⁸ The statement does, of course, have a particular function in its context. I discuss this later.

⁹ Nostramo, p. 521.

interest in his subject is limited to the exhaustive unpicking of a particular knot of relationships, isolated from any larger context: in spite of the meagre cast of characters and the severely truncated social spectrum, the novel achieves a range of reference comparable to that of "Heart of Darkness".

This wider perspective on the extremely limited action of the novel is introduced at the outset. Like "Heart of Darkness", the novel starts in London - starts, like Conrad's tale, on a complacent assessment of "the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth"¹⁰:

The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him; he was one of the Modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber. Brought up on the legend of the City to which the world paid tribute, he recognised in the present London much more than in contemporary Rome the real dimensions of such a case. If it was a question of an Imperium, he said to himself, and if one wished, as a Roman, to recover a little the sense of that, the place to do so was on London Bridge. ... (I, 3)

Like Conrad, James invites the long historical view: the Prince, linked with the power of Rome both in its Imperial days, when London was one of its more dismal outposts, and in its days of a corrupt but powerful papacy, when London was anathema - the Prince pays tribute to London, the New Rome, supreme in military and economic power. Around him in the shop windows of Bond Street cluster "objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold ... as tumbled together as if, in the insolence of the Empire, they had been the loot of far-off victories." (I, 3)

But the Prince's pleasant historical reflections (he is clearly the least chauvinistic of Romans) are out of date: around him sprawls the London of Edward, not of Victoria. This may seem a mere quibble, but in a novel so centrally concerned with power, it is important to locate the source of power - and here it is not, as in The Wings of the Dove, Victorian commercialism or "the insolence of the Empire":

The new king, Edward VII, was not very interested in his Empire, and the Edwardian age never did recapture the flair, conviction or vulgarity of the great enterprise. ... The Edwardian gentleman

¹⁰ "Heart of Darkness", p. 45.

of England, though truly an ornament of western civilization, lacked the effrontery of Empire.¹¹

This, of course, is not James's own emphasis, but it is the reality from which the opening of his novel derives its irony. It is also implicit in the fact that the British presence in the novel is limited to Colonel Bob, his rank like a decoration won in a forgotten battle, and his role reduced to impotent spectatorship. The power of Empire is in fact yielding to a new power: "the power of the rich peoples" (I, 18). The irony is that the Prince does not realise that he has just yielded to it himself, in signing the contract (or treaty) drawn up by his lawyers and those of the Ververs. That he has sold his title and his name for an immense consideration he realises, of course, but he has as yet the vaguest of notions of what that consists of. "If it was a question of an Imperium, ... and if one wished, as a Roman, to recover a little the sense of that ..." - then perhaps one could do so at first hand by becoming one of the subject races. Not, of course that the Prince envisages his own subjection: ever adaptable, he is only too ready to enter a new era of history:

What was it but history ... to have the assurance of the enjoyment of more money than the palace-builder himself could have dreamed of? (I, 10)

The city to which the world, like the Prince, is to pay tribute is American City, which Adam Verver is already supplying with the "loot" of his own victories, the "insolence" of his conviction that "a world was left him to conquer and that he might conquer it if he tried." (I, 141) The conquest is to be benevolent, of course, and the conquered, like the Prince, are mainly left in pleased bewilderment at the high price they fetched. But the conquest is also absolute, as the Prince, not to mention Charlotte, is eventually to discover.

These points will be developed in due course; for the moment it is enough to note that this apparently self-enclosed domestic drama in fact deliberately extends the significance of the characters beyond themselves. At times this is done quite explicitly:

¹¹ James Morris, Farewell the Trumpets (1978; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp 105-06.

[Mr Verver] looked, at the top of his table, so nearly like a little boy shyly entertaining in virtue of some imposed rank, that he could only be one of the powers, the representative of a force - quite as an infant king is the representative of a dynasty. (I, 324)

The mild aspect is, of course, deceptive: Mr Verver, having made it "the business of his future" to "rifle the Golden Isles" (I, 141) is well on his way towards establishing his own dynasty - complete with a Prince and a Principino to succeed him. "Stout Cortez" (I, 141) with the demeanour of an infant king: the ambiguity of a power that can present itself as so benevolent, so innocent, so child-like, and yet can be so absolute in its domination, is central to the novel. From this ambiguity derives much of the elusiveness of the novel; for, beguiled by the apparent benevolence of this power, all the characters pursue their various courses on the blithe assumption of their own freedom of action. And since we absorb their assumptions while we share their points of view, it takes us almost as long as it takes them to discover the illusory nature of their freedom, the limits of their silken halters.

Adam's motives and criteria are expressed in some passages that are surprisingly explicit for a novel that as a rule eschews direct statement. It may be their very obviousness that has caused them to be so often explained away. The following extract, for instance, makes perfectly clear on just what basis Adam Verver accepted the Prince as his son-in-law:

Representative precious objects, great ancient pictures and other works of art, fine eminent "pieces" in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze, had for a number of years so multiplied themselves round him and, as a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation, so engaged all the faculties of his mind, that the instinct, the particular sharpened appetite of the collector, had fairly served as a basis for his acceptance of the Prince's suit.

Over and above the signal fact of the impression made on Maggie herself, the aspirant to his daughter's hand showed somehow the great marks and signs, stood before him with the high authenticities, he had learnt to look for in pieces of the first order. Adam Verver knew by this time, knew thoroughly; no man in Europe or in America, he privately believed, was for such estimates less capable of vulgar mistakes. (I, 140).

That Adam should here be making one of the "vulgar mistakes" he fancies

himself immune to, could have been only an ironic example of common human proneness to error; but, apart from its hubristic element, the misjudgement is distinguished, say, from Isabel Archer's "generous mistake"¹² or Catherine Sloper's naïve infatuation in not originating in misplaced trust, but in the application of a non-human criterion to a human being. The parallel with Gilbert Osmond seems inescapable; but we surely do not even need such recourse to other novels to recognise in Verver's inability to distinguish between human beings and objects the most sinister manifestation of the "sharpened appetite of the collector". There is really nothing disinterested about his love of beauty: "representative precious objects" present themselves to him not as objects of delight or humble admiration, but as "a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation", presumably in that order. That this passion for possession should have engaged "all the faculties of his mind" suggests a pitch of materialism, a seriously impoverished humanity, that would seem to "place" Adam Verver, at least, too definitely for critical disagreement. In fact, of course, there are as many interpretations of Adam Verver as of everything else in the novel, which means that further illustration may not be entirely a labouring of the obvious. Here, for instance, are his criteria in selecting a wife:

Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer, had we time to look into it, 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 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. ... As it had served him to satisfy himself, so to speak, both about Amerigo and about the Bernardino Luini he had happened to come to knowledge of at the time he was consenting to the announcement of his daughter's betrothal, so it served him at present to satisfy himself about Charlotte Stant and an extraordinary set of oriental tiles of which he had lately got wind. ... It was all at bottom in him, the aesthetic principle, planted where it could burn with a cold still flame; where it fed almost wholly on the material directly involved, on the idea (followed by appropriation) of plastic beauty, of the thing visibly perfect in its kind. ... (I, 196-97)

To be constantly surprised at the perversity of other critics is one of the

¹² The Portrait of a Lady, II, 417.

conditions of James criticism, but "nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer" than the critical reluctance to give due weight to such passages - almost the only instances in the novel of James' intruding observations beyond the scope of his characters. Matthiessen says merely that James "notes once that this collector applies 'the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets ... and new human acquisitions,' but he never probes the implications of that anomaly."¹³ Since, in fact, the whole novel is a constant probing of "the implications of that anomaly", it is not surprising that Matthiessen should devote so much of his chapter to wondering why the novel is so unsatisfactory.

Leavis duly notes the most explicit judgements passed on the Ververs, but concludes that

though James can on occasion come to this point of explicitness, our attitude to the Ververs isn't meant to be ironical. We are to feel for and with them. ... That in our feelings about the Ververs there would be any element of distaste Henry James, in spite of the passages quoted, seems to have had no inkling.¹⁴

The "passages quoted" seem to me to constitute considerably more than an "inkling" of distaste; for once James' intention seems relatively clear. As Joseph Firebaugh says in his brisk demolition of the Ververs, if "the 'general moral background of the book' is offensive to readers as sensitive as Mr. Leavis, that is because James wanted them to be offended by it."¹⁵

It may be unsafe to assume that what is offensive to Leavis was necessarily so intended by the offending author, but in this case there really would seem to be only one way of taking Adam Verver's "application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions". James never lost his comic sense - though critics may lose theirs in reading him, thereby missing also the

¹³ The Major Phase, p. 100. Interestingly, in his chapter on The American Scene Matthiessen quotes James' suspicion "'of all attempts, however glittering and golden, to confound destroyers with benefactors'" (p. 110), without seeming to note its possible bearing on Adam Verver.

¹⁴ The Great Tradition, p. 178.

¹⁵ "The Ververs", Essays in Criticism, 4, No. 4 (1954), 401.

serious purpose which the humour serves. It can hardly be conceived that James is asking us to admire, or even to regard as a harmless peculiarity, the grouping of Adam's prospective wife with "an extraordinary set of oriental tiles". But amusing as this anomaly is, its ruthless aspect is clearly enough implied by the ominous parenthesis in which we are told that Adam's "idea ... of plastic beauty" is necessarily "followed by appropriation".

To see Adam's grossly materialistic aestheticism as the mainspring of the novel is not to suggest that the other characters are mere victims of this amoral power, any more than Kate Croy is a helpless victim of Mrs Lowder. They are only too willing to form part of Adam Verver's collection, believing that to be acquired is to be admitted to the seat of power. The Prince, having, as we have seen, assisted at the signing away of his freedom, complacently reflects on the symbolic value of a crank lowering an iron shutter over a display of "objects massive and lumpish" in Bond Street:

There was machinery again, just as the plate glass, all about him, was money, was power, the power of the rich peoples. Well, he was of them now, of the rich peoples; he was on their side - if it was n't rather the pleasanter way of putting it that they were on his. (I, 17-18)

He is "of them", of course, mainly in being "theirs", and they are on his side only in the sense that all people are on the side of their possessions: they fight for them in the face of illegitimate claims, and protect them with plate glass and iron shutters. In this the wishes of the possessions are not consulted: they are emblems, not sharers of power. But at this stage the Prince has no reason to pursue the implications of his pleasant conceit: it is enough for him to have been admitted to this realm of money and power. So far, he has only seen the "machinery" from the outside.

The Prince is not even deterred, though he is vaguely puzzled, by his dim apprehension of the nature of his value for the Ververs:

He had stood still, at many a moment of the previous month, with the thought, freshly determined or renewed, of the general expectation - to define it roughly - of which he was the subject. What was singular was that it seemed not so much an expectation of anything in particular as a large bland blank assumption of merits almost beyond notation, of essential quality and value.

It was as if he had been some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, stamped with glorious arms, mediaeval, wonderful, of which the "worth" in mere modern change, sovereigns and half-crowns, would be great enough, but as to which, since there were finer ways of using it, such taking to pieces was superfluous. That was the image for the security in which it was open to him to rest; he was to constitute a possession, yet was to escape being reduced to his component parts. What would this mean but that practically he was never to be tried or tested? (I, 23)

This sheds an ironic light on the Prince's belief that the rich are on his side as he is on theirs: the pleasant reciprocity of that formulation yields to the potentially disquieting realisation that "he was to constitute a possession". The Prince is not unduly discomfited by this, relying complacently on the Ververs' sense of his "essential quality and value" to see him through. But the image of the coin, "wonderful" though it be, is less flattering even than the equation of "new human acquisitions" with "old Persian carpets". The coin is, paradoxically, useful to the Ververs only because it is "no longer used": his value to these people, who have more "mere modern change" than they can sensibly spend, resides in his quaint impotence, the decorative and historical value of "glorious arms" that no longer signify any real power. His own power as a Prince of an antique civilisation has become, like the rest of his value as a morceau de musée, best appreciated in a room of the British Museum, to which his wife pays proprietary visits (it is the sole inconvenience of the Prince's impoverished state that he has become separated from his certificate of authenticity).

But again the Prince does not scrutinise his own figures of speech. Furthermore, he overlooks the fact that he is entering into a contract with a business man who did not become a millionaire on the strength of his American innocence alone. Adam Verver is too astute to hang on to a bad investment, as a later modification of the coin image indicates. The Prince, having drifted into adultery with Charlotte, finds more of the business man and less of the art collector in the mild gaze of his father-in-law:

This directed regard rested at its ease, but it neither lingered nor penetrated, and was, to the Prince's fancy, much of the same order as any glance directed, for due attention, from the same quarter, to the figure of a cheque received in the course of business and about to be enclosed to a banker. It made sure of the amount - and just so, from time to time, the amount of the Prince was certified. (I, 324-25)

Adam Verver is, as it were, biting the antique coin assessingly; but the substitution of the image of the cheque for that of the coin introduces a more disquieting implication: the Prince realises that Mr Verver, for all his aesthetic fervour, would soon notice if his investment ceased to yield a healthy return. Later, looking at the shattered fragments of the golden bowl, the Prince asks Maggie: "But shall you at least get your money back?" (II, 198) He should know that the Ververs always get their money back.¹⁶

Charlotte, too, initially makes the mistake of assuming that because Mr Verver's use of her is so convenient to her, she has not sacrificed any freedom of will in consenting to be used. Like the Prince, she seems to think that Mr Verver's power is transferred to his possessions.

Our first view of Charlotte after her marriage finds her glittering triumphantly at the grandest of official functions:

She was herself in truth crowned, and it all hung together, melted together, in light and colour and sound: the unsurpassed diamonds that her head so happily carried, the other jewels, the other perfections of aspect and arrangement that made her personal scheme a success, the proved private theory that materials to work with had been all she required and that there were none too precious for her to understand and use - to which might be added lastly, as the strong-scented flower of the total sweetness, an easy command, a high enjoyment, of her crisis. (I, 246)

She is waiting for the Prince, who has, "as in common kindness bound" (I, 245), seen his wife off to return to her father, and who "his duty performed, would know where to find her." Charlotte, of course, finds this distribution of couples, "crisis" though it may be, highly satisfactory, adding piquancy to the "success" of her "personal scheme". That there is an incongruity in her enjoyment both of Adam's riches and of his son-in-law does not seem to occur to her, because she can still see her present glory as the outcome of her "personal scheme". In fact, of course, we know that she is throughout subject to Adam's personal scheme, or his "idea", as he calls it ("Isn't a man's idea usually what he does marry for?" - I, 224). The worker and the worked still derive their respective benefits from the

¹⁶ In this, of course, they resemble Mrs Lowder: "'She'll get back,' [Lord Mark] pleasantly said, 'her money.'" (The Wings of the Dove, I, 160)

mutually satisfactory arrangement - Maggie and her father are presumably as happy at home as Charlotte and the Prince are at the reception.

Charlotte's short-sightedness consists in an inability to see that the "materials to work with" granted to her, precious as they are, are merely decorations embellishing the human materials Mr Verver works with - of which there are truly none too precious for him to understand and use. In acting, as she does here, under the illusion of freedom, she overlooks the fact that she, too, is merely a "representative precious object", subject ultimately to Mr Verver's control. The success of his personal scheme ("It's success, father") will eventually require her removal to America.

Thus the Prince and Charlotte are quite willing to be made use of, because they cannot as yet see the use that is to be made of them as incompatible with the use they intend to make of their situation. Yet their complicity does not exculpate Mr Verver; his standard of judgement determines the participants in the stifling domestic drama that he sponsors and directs, and his "idea" animates it throughout. Maggie, of course, holds herself responsible, her culpability consisting of getting married. This, however, is hardly reprehensible in itself, and in any case could not have happened without Adam's sanction. But the more important point is that the crucial step in establishing the intolerable situation is Adam's marriage to Charlotte, which, though to an extent engineered by Maggie, is unequivocally presented as his independent decision. That decision, of course, is taken in the interests of "putting his child at peace" -

... and the way to put her at peace was to provide for his future - that is for hers - by marriage, by a marriage as good, speaking proportionately, as hers had been. (I, 208).

If, as I have argued, Adam Verver's power owes part of its insidiousness to the compliance of its subjects, a further, and perhaps more potent reason for its paralysing efficacy lies in the fact that it clothes itself in the shining robes of righteousness. Mr Verver, "caring for precious vases only less than for precious daughters" (I, 188), can persuade himself that this one non-aesthetic passion of his life¹⁷ justifies any use to which he puts

¹⁷ To see this quotation as implying a non-aesthetic basis to his love for Maggie is to give him the benefit of the doubt as to whether he distinguishes between his daughter and his vases in terms of kind or degree of preciousness.

whatever material, human or otherwise, presents itself for his acquisition:

He had seen that Charlotte could contribute - what he had n't seen was what she could contribute to. When it had all supremely cleared up and he had simply settled this service to his daughter well before him as the proper direction of his young friend's leisure, the cool darkness had again closed round him, but his moral lucidity was constituted. (I, 208)

The aesthetic in Mr Verver, we note, does not preclude the utilitarian: he saw, as it were, Charlotte's usefulness before he saw her use. What he now sees her as able "to contribute to" is, of course, the greater domestic snugness of the Ververs. The cool insolence with which he "simply settle[s] this service to his daughter as the proper direction of his young friend's leisure" reduces Charlotte to a mere instrument. His "moral lucidity" presumably consists of his complacent assumption that his use of others in his daughter's service is shining selflessness:

To think of it merely for himself would have been, even as he had just lately felt, even doing all justice to that condition - yes, impossible. But there was a grand difference in thinking of it for his child. (I, 208 - 09)

The irony in that last sentence, concluding Adam's rationalisation (and the chapter) with a slight swagger, is surely at Adam's expense. The self-satisfied little nod with which he has settled that selfishness on his own account would have been "- yes, impossible", is undercut by the strong placing of "for his child": intended to make the "grand difference" between unthinkable selfishness and admirable selflessness, it only succeeds in echoing with an effect of identification, "for himself." For Adam, the two may well come to the same thing. At any rate, Maggie presents herself to him insistently as an extension of himself, "his child" (in the course of the paragraph just quoted, Maggie is referred to twice as "his child" and once as "his daughter"). This extension of the parental self to the child is common enough, but in Adam it reaches the point of a complete identification of Maggie's own interests with his. The Prince discovers something of this in his reflections on the "services" Mr Verver has rendered him in his married life. His insights are worth holding on to in our reading of the second volume of the novel, in which the Prince is not to be given a hearing:

Mr Verver then in a word took care of his relation to Maggie as he took care, and apparently always would, of everything else. He relieved him of all anxiety about his married life in the same manner in which he relieved him on the score of his bank-account. And as he performed the latter office by communicating with the bankers, so the former sprang as directly from his good understanding with his daughter. This understanding had, wonderfully - that was in high evidence - the same deep intimacy as the commercial, the financial association founded, far down, on a community of interest. ... Those people ... were of the same large lucky group, as one might say; they were all at least of the same general species and had the same general instincts; they hung together, they passed each other the word, they spoke each other's language, they did each other "turns." (I, 292 - 93)

This "large lucky group", then, but more specifically here Adam and Maggie Verver, can advance their "community of interest" in the beautiful belief that they are being selfless. Whereas selfishness in its more obvious forms is frowned upon, in the hallowed disguise of parental love it fills everybody, including those who practise it, with admiration. This is part of the aura of "goodness" that surrounds - and conceals - Adam, part, perhaps of the "great white curtain", the "white mist" which obscures, for the Prince, "the state of mind of his new friends" - "that element of the impenetrable which alone slightly qualified his sense of his good fortune." The Prince, native of a country of darker but more straightforward intrigue, having "never known curtains but as purple even to blackness - but as producing where they hung a darkness intended and ominous", is at a disadvantage in this realm of "light, concealing as darkness conceals". (I, 22-23)

This ambiguous image, reminiscent of the illusory value of light in "Heart of Darkness", is central to the ironic inversion at the heart of the novel, whereby evil is perpetrated in the name and guise of traditionally hallowed values. Thus Adam's illumination as to Charlotte's proper use ("the idea shone upon him" - I, 208) is preceded by an extraordinary hallucination on the terrace of Fawns:

Light broke for him at last. ... He was afterwards to recall how just then the autumn night seemed to clear to a view in which the whole place, everything round him ... lay there as under some strange midnight sun. ...

... The sharp point to which all his light converged was that the whole call of his future to him as a father would be in his so managing that Maggie would less and less appear to herself to have forsaken him. (I, 207 - 08)

The light, then, is intimately associated with the elaborate "idea" in terms of which Maggie will be deceived (in the highest of causes) and Charlotte will be used (in the same cause). Like that light, his "moral lucidity" is an hallucination. Adam is not the only creature of this deceptive light - light permeates the novel - but he is, as it were, at the heart of light, unfathomable, impenetrable, the God, to recall Crews' formulation, of this "tiny world".

The fact that the light surrounding Mr Verver "conceals as darkness conceals" effectively hides the true nature of his power, even from himself. Thus Adam's career is neatly, if misleadingly, described in terms of a progress from darkness to light:

It was the strange scheme of things again: the years of darkness had been needed to render possible the years of light. (I, 144)

The years of darkness comprise not only his years of toil and cultural benightedness, but also the years spent with the wife whose influence, he reflects with covert satisfaction, had been "in the strange scheme of things, as promptly removed." (I, 143) The strange scheme of things has been good to Mr Verver:

A wiser hand than he at first knew had kept him hard at acquisition of one sort as a perfect preliminary to acquisition of another. ... (I, 144)

We have seen the extent of this second kind of acquisitiveness; but what is more striking here is the blandness with which this acquisitive power is referred to a higher hand, how Adam's interests are seen as sanctioned by a beneficent scheme of things.

The apparent beneficence of Mr Verver's power is admired by all who come into contact with it - not surprisingly, since so many of them benefit personally by it. But Mr Verver's bounty receives more than the tribute usually paid to generosity by its beneficiaries: it figures as a force from which a more comprehensive virtue emanates. Thus the Prince foresees in his alliance with this great new power, apparently so different from the often corrupt power of his ancestors, a moral regeneration, a belated purification of the taint of his race:

What was his frank judgement of so much of its ugliness, he asked himself, but a part of the cultivation of humility? What was this so important step 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 would n'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. (I, 16)

The vices that he is so ready to disown, we have just been told, are "arrogance and greed". The Prince's "good faith", which he later so sincerely defends to Maggie, in this instance consists of the reasonable belief that with Mr Verver's millions at his disposal he will escape these vices, because they will not be necessary. His humility consists of the recognition that his only way of not being greedy is to have enough money - and his concept of enough is truly princely.

Mr Verver is probably not to be held responsible for this odd interpretation of humility and its attendant virtues. It is merely one of the comfortable illusions made possible by his mild omnipotence, so different from the horrid excess of, for instance, "the wicked Pope, the monster most of all" (I, 10) whom Maggie, with considerably less humility than the Prince, finds so picturesque a part of the history of her fascinating new acquisition. One wonders, though, what beautiful sanctions, even sanctifications, the wicked Pope extended to himself and his allies, in the name of his sacred office.

We are shown, in any case, what extraordinary self-delusions the Ververs foster, in others as in themselves. Adam and Maggie's belief that their devotion to each other is an absolute value sanctioning anything done in its name, contaminates everybody drawn into its sphere of influence. The Prince and Charlotte, for reasons of their own, find that the arrangement beautifully suits them, not only in terms of the opportunities provided them, but also in terms of the amiable light it sheds on their adultery:

"... Tender as I am for her too," she went on, "I think I'm still more so for my husband. He's in truth of a sweet simplicity - !"

The Prince turned over a while the sweet simplicity of Mr Verver. "Well, I don't know that I can choose. At night all cats are grey. I only see how, for so many reasons, we ought to stand toward them - and how, to do ourselves justice, we do. It represents for us a conscious care - "

"Of every hour, literally," said Charlotte. She could rise to the highest measure of the facts. "And for which we must trust

each other - !"

"Oh as we trust the saints in glory. Fortunately," the Prince hastened to add, "we can." With which, as for the full assurance and the pledge it involved, each hand instinctively found the other. "It's all too wonderful."

Firmly and gravely she kept his hand. "It's too beautiful."

And so for a minute they stood together as strongly held and as closely confronted as any hour of their easier past even had seen them. ... "It's sacred," he said at last.

"It's sacred," she breathed back to him. ... Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge. (I, 311-12)

The Ververs can clearly not be held responsible for the cloud of blasphemous euphoria on which their spouses waft beatifically into adultery. The Prince and Charlotte are all too evidently parading their contempt for the "sweet simplicity" of the Ververs as "sacred" solicitude; and in so far as the "pledge" which they seal so passionately constitutes anything beyond the occasion for an embrace, it amounts to an agreement not to let the Ververs find out the lengths to which they have taken their conjugal duties. But if the Prince and Charlotte are exploiting the situation and violating the vocabulary of righteousness, it remains a situation created by the Ververs. "Wonderful" and "beautiful" are the epithets, we remember, bestowed by Charlotte upon Adam's "idea" at the time of his proposal - the idea that she is now using to justify her adultery. Thus Adam's "beautiful and wonderful" idea leads to the "wonderful" and "beautiful" union of his wife and his son-in-law; the devotion of father and daughter provides an absolute for others whereby to justify their actions.

By a trick of perspective, everybody in the novel seems blameless - a point of view that Fanny Assingham valiantly defends in the face of her husband's scepticism. Her unintentionally comic analysis reduces to absurdity the moral position of all the main actors:

"Are the 'forms' you speak of - that are two thirds of conduct - what will be keeping [Charlotte] now, by your hypothesis, from coming home with [the Prince] till morning?"

"Yes - absolutely. Their forms."

"'Theirs' - ?"

"Maggie's and Mr. Verver's - those they impose on Charlotte and the Prince. Those," she developed, "that so perversely, as I say, have succeeded in setting themselves up as the right ones."

He considered - but only now at last really to relapse into woe. "Your 'perversity,' my dear, is exactly what I don't understand."

The state of things existing has n't grown, like a field of mushrooms, in a night. Whatever they, all round, may be in for now is at least the consequence of what they 've done. Are they mere helpless victims of fate?"

Well, Fanny at last had the courage of it. "Yes - they are. To be so abjectly innocent - that is to be victims of fate."

"And Charlotte and the Prince are abjectly innocent - ?"

It took her another minute, but she rose to the full height. "Yes. That is they were - as much so in their way as the others. There were beautiful intentions all round. The Prince's and Charlotte's were beautiful - of that I had my faith. They were - I'd go to the stake. Otherwise," she added, "I should have been a wretch. And I've not been a wretch. I've only been a double-dyed donkey."

"Ah then," he asked, "what does our muddle make them to have been?"

"Well, too much taken up with considering each other. You may call such a mistake as that by whatever name you please; it at any rate means, all round, their case. It illustrates the misfortune," said Mrs. Assingham gravely, "of being too, too charming."
(I, 391-92)

The "abject innocence" with which Fanny credits everybody consists at most of an absence of deliberate malice; it is perfectly compatible with appointing other people to one's own use. Thus the "beautiful intentions all round" amount mainly to a belief that the situation should be as pleasant to others as it is to oneself. If these people are "too much taken up with considering each other", that is only because for a long time they can believe that the interests of others are identical with their own. When it transpires that this is not necessarily the case, the "misfortune of being too, too charming" turns out to be no lighter than the misfortune of being downright nasty. It is simply rendered more insidious by its air of righteousness.

If I have been stressing this point unduly, this is because it seems to me so central to the ironic strategy of the novel. James is dramatising something more subtle than hypocrisy: he is rendering the perversion of values resulting from the new-found power of money being combined with a Puritan heritage, the conquest by philanthropy that was such a strong feature of the rampant success of America. Like Conrad's Holroyd, Verver is a breed of man with "the temperament of a Puritan and an insatiable imagination of conquest";¹⁸ but where, in Mrs Gould's words, Holroyd "looked upon his own

¹⁸ Nostramo, p. 76.

God as a sort of influential partner, who gets his share of profits in the endowment of churches" (p. 71), and in his own words, he was working for the "purer forms of Christianity" (p. 80), for Verver it is "the passion for perfection at any price" that represents "the religion he wished to propagate" (I, 146). Mr Verver, in short, is recognisably the robber baron turned philanthropist to whom America owes so many of its cultural and religious institutions.

James was quite as aware as his critics of the discrepancy between the large philanthropic gesture and the means that made it possible; if we need more explicit proof of this than is offered by The Golden Bowl, we have it in The Ambassadors, in the pointed ironies at the expense of Woollett's high moral tone. To complain that "Mr. Verver's moral tone is far more like that of a benevolent Swedenborgian than it is like that of either John D. Rockefeller or Jay Gould"¹⁹ is to ignore the fact that it was Quentin Anderson, not James, who turned Mr Verver into a Swedenborgian.²⁰ Similarly, to see him as "a visionary figure, eloquent of the difference between the American millionaire as he was and as James would have liked him to be" and then to complain that he is "improbable",²¹ seems unfair to James, when Verver is in fact quite "probable" as a heightened depiction of the American millionaire "as he was" - that is, a financially unscrupulous manipulator conspicuously returning a small part of his gains to the community he gained it from. As Caroline Gordon says, though apparently intending it as a compliment to Verver, "He is the spiritual ancestor of the philanthropists of our day".²²

Maggie is the second-generation heir to this ethos, which is to say that she is far enough removed from the actual business of making money not to take cognisance of what it entails, and close enough to the maker of money to experience, without fully understanding, the kind of power required to amass

¹⁹ Matthiessen, p. 90.

²⁰ The American Henry James (London: John Calder, 1958).

²¹ John Bayley, The Characters of Love (London: Constable, 1960), p. 249.

²² "Mr. Verver, Our National Hero", Sewanee Review, 63 (1955), 35. In the same approving vein Gordon notes that "Mr. Verver was tempted to take the little English church he so admired back to American City long before John D. Rockefeller II thought of transplanting a mediaeval abbey to the heights above the Hudson." (p. 35) It seems worth risking an intentional fallacy to wonder, as Gordon does not, what James would have thought of such an enterprise.

such wealth. Her half of the novel dramatises, amongst but in relation to other things, her growing understanding of that power, and her successful suppression of her own understanding - an understanding not only of her father, but of what she has inherited from him, spiritually speaking. We are given the apparatus with which to defend ourselves against the distortions attendant upon this process of vision-and-revision, but we have to bring it with us from the first volume. Thus to believe, like Nicola Bradbury, that "Maggie, at least, we must trust, if we are to follow the novel at all",²³ is to grasp at a particularly flimsy straw, and to ignore one half of the novel that we are trying to follow. It also assumes that James abandons his ironic mode in the middle of his novel.

In the first place, the first volume makes clear the extent to which Maggie is the child of her father's spirit, and shares his passion for collecting. We should perhaps not take too seriously her bantering assertion that it was the Prince's value as a morceau de musée that had attracted her in the first place, but she certainly shares her father's view of him as an acquisition, rather quaintly furnished with histories and traditions. We have Fanny Assingham's recollection of how Maggie's much-vaunted "romanticism" (a trait she shares with her father) responded to the discovery of the Prince's first name:

"... The connexion became romantic for Maggie the moment she took it in; she filled out, in a flash, every link that might be vague. 'By that sign,' I quite said to myself, 'he'll conquer'. ..." (I, 79)

Fanny finds this "a lovely note for the candour of the Ververs", which only shows how determined she is to see everything the Ververs do in the best possible light. A more disinterested observer might have reflected that a veneration for "old" names is supposed to be practised by corrupt Europeans rather than by democratic Americans. But the Ververs, of course, are no democrats, in spite of Adam's dedication to releasing the "grateful ...

²³ The Later Novels, p. 194. Bradbury sees Maggie's authority as "based upon this: that the process is analogous for heroine and reader." How, given such an assumption, does one read "Daisy Miller", "The Aspern Papers", "The Liar", "The Turn of the Screw" - to mention only a few of the tales which require the reader to dissociate himself from the narrator/centre of consciousness?

thirsty millions" of his countrymen from "the bondage of ugliness" (I, 145). No democrat takes such delight in his or her ability to produce a Principino (I cannot recall a single occurrence of the titled infant's real name, but it is bound to be Amerigo). For American purposes, Amerigo must take precedence even of Columbus on the social register. Matthiessen makes the sound point that "Prince Amerigo's name symbolizes how he must be a re-discoverer of America, or of what may prove even harder, of Americans";²⁴ he could have added that this time, in fact, the Americans discover - and annex - Amerigo.

Of course, this is not the sole ground of the Prince's appeal: he is also a very attractive man, and Maggie is sincerely susceptible to his virile charm. Nevertheless,

she never admired him so much, or so found him heartbreakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had originally and fatally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute her substance. (I, 165).

The tendency to see the value of her possessions enhanced by the envy of others hardly sets Maggie apart from the rest of humanity; but it does provide an ironic perspective on her moral posturings in the second volume of the novel. Her outraged reaction to her discovery of the Prince's infidelity disregards what the first volume suggests: that Charlotte does not so much alienate the Prince from Maggie as renew Maggie's interest in the Prince. Maggie's aesthetic appreciation of the Prince is quite happily compatible with his being admired by the rest of the world - until she is forced to realise that her morceau de musée is capable of feeling neglected by his rightful owner and reciprocating the interest of an appreciative outsider. Then her sexual appreciation of him is startled into possessive self-assertion.

Thus Maggie is, no less than any other character, a victim of her own inadequately considered "good faith". Even in the first volume, the trust she places in the Prince is easily, and we feel not unfairly, interpreted by him as a kind of complacent obtuseness. Whatever his motives, we can see the point of his resentment at

²⁴ The Major Phase, p. 88.

the extraordinary substitute for perception that presided, in the bosom of his wife, at so contented a view of his conduct and course - a state of mind that was positively like a vicarious good conscience cultivated ingeniously on his behalf ... (I, 333)

In the second volume, of course, this "substitute for perception" yields to the real thing, as far as the Prince's "conduct and course" is concerned. But this arguably leads merely to the ingenious cultivation of a "good conscience" on behalf of her father and herself.

Initially she does seem capable of realising that her and her father's neglect of their marriage partners stemmed from exactly the same preference for each other's company as that shown by the Prince and Charlotte. "What if I've abandoned them, you know?", she asks herself (II, 25) - but nevertheless proceeds to act like a wronged wife. Or rather, and worse, she starts to abstain very self-consciously from acting like a wronged wife. Her vague realisation of her own responsibility is soon dissipated in her growing awareness that the Prince and Charlotte "were treating her, that they were proceeding with her - and for that matter with her father - by a plan that was the exact counterpart of her own." (II, 41)

Hitherto, of course, the compatibility of her plans (for instance the plan of marrying off her father to Charlotte) with theirs has not struck her, because it has not occurred to her that they may have plans of their own. Understandably, she does not enjoy the situation of being dealt with, where she had imagined herself to be the one doing the dealing:

... she sat there in the solid chamber of her helplessness as in a bath of benevolence artfully prepared for her ... (II, 44)

Maggie has apparently already forgotten her earlier qualms at having abandoned them: she is only aware that "Amerigo and Charlotte were arranged together" (II, 45), without asking herself who arranged them thus, and for what purpose.

Maggie's way of dealing with the bath of benevolence is not so much to get out of it as to pull everybody else into it, while trying not to make too much of a splash. The performance has something comical, not to say childish, about it. A good example of her over-ingenuity are the complications she creates around her and her father's naïve plan to "do something lovely" together" (I, 46), that is, go off to Europe, leaving the Prince and Charlotte

to mind the baby. Under the circumstances, even she now recognises that this would constitute "a last expression of an ecstasy of confidence" (II, 47). She cannot tell her father this, since she is determined that "I must do everything ... without letting papa see what I do - at least till it's done" (II, 38), like a little girl knitting her father a pair of socks for Christmas. She nevertheless realises that his silence about the project could constitute "proof conclusive that he too was n't at ease" (II, 48); but when he eventually does dispose of the scheme on the grounds that "it's getting so pleasant here" (II, 53), she fails to accept this as the proof that she has been dreading. She tries, instead, to pass it off as, of all things, her father's reluctance to leave the Prince - "It's not to leave you, my dear - for that he 'll give up anything. ..." (II, 57)

Maggie obviously does n't believe this, nor can she really expect the Prince to: in so far as her elaborate fantasy is intelligible at all, it is a manifestation of "the throb of her deeper need to know where she 'really' was." (II, 57) She wants to see which way the Prince will jump, and he is trying to refrain from jumping. In the event he goes one better than Maggie, involving Charlotte as well in the conspiracy of benevolence by suggesting that she should convey to her husband Maggie's suggestion that the two men should go off to Europe together. This is perfectly in keeping with the former understanding, whereby each member of the foursome was figured as amenable to common use. But Maggie has changed the rules; now that it has been brought home to her that Charlotte has an identity distinct from that granted to her by the Verver view of her usefulness, it is no longer permissible for the Prince to invoke her as casually as this:

"... The only person either of us needs is the other of us; so why as a matter of course in such a case as this drag in Charlotte?" (II, 76).

If their need of each other had indeed been so exclusive of others, Maggie would hardly have suggested to her husband that he take her father off for a holiday. Furthermore, since her plan also entails depriving Charlotte of her husband, it would seem natural to "drag in Charlotte". Not that this is necessarily the Prince's reasoning; but his dissembling at least assumes a rational guise.

It is left to Adam to extricate himself from a European tour with his

son-in-law, and all of them from the toils of Maggie's ingenuity, without giving the lie to the unanimous professions of devotion:

The point he made was his lack of any eagerness to put time and space, on any such scale, between himself and his wife. ...
Therefore unless it was for the Prince himself - ! (II, 89)

Upon which poor Maggie is left with the alternatives of seeming to imply either that her husband is eager to get away from her, or that he has somehow developed a tremendous desire for his father-in-law's company. All she can do is to deny, at any rate, the first possibility:

"Oh I don't think it would have been for Amerigo himself. Amerigo and I ... perfectly rub on together."
"Well then there we are."
"I see" - and she had again with sublime blandness assented.
"There we are." (II, 89)

Where they are is exactly where they were, all avidly watching one another, having gone round in a futile circle to the crack of Maggie's whip.

In its apparently needless elaboration of obscure motives this comparatively trivial incident would seem to represent late-Jamesian subtlety at its most infuriating; but we must distinguish between James' own over-elaborateness and the self-defeating subtlety of his main character. Admittedly the distinction is not always self-evident; but in this instance, Maggie's "ingenuity" is explicitly presented as such, and serves as a cautionary example for the reader of the extraordinary mental processes at whose mercy he will be for the rest of the novel. Maggie is all the time, we need reminding, acting on the conviction "that she must never intermit for a solitary second her so highly undertaking to prove [to Adam] there was nothing the matter with her." (II, 79-80) Since she has already recognised that his change of mind about their projected trip signals at least a suspicion on his part, her "proof" consists only of a refusal to admit to her father what he suspects anyway. Since, furthermore, her way of hiding her feelings consists of proposing a plan for which she can advance no sensible reason, it is more likely to arouse suspicion than to allay it. And since Adam refrains from asking her the obvious question of what on earth she has in mind, it should be finally clear to her that he does know something. Throughout, she

assumes that the Prince and Charlotte are capable of the most prodigious feats of manipulation, not stopping to consider that the whole absurd situation has been set up by her.

What this means is that Maggie is suffering from delusions of martyrdom: not only is she being imposed upon, she is also nobly sparing her father the knowledge. What she does not recognise, is that every practical decision taken, is taken by her supposedly ignorant father: he decides that he and Maggie will not go on their European trip; he decides that nor will he and the Prince do so; he takes the whole family to Fawns, and, having established his mastery over Charlotte, takes her into exile in American City. All Maggie can do is to protect, ever more desperately, her own cherished image of her "divine" (II, 81) father by preventing any open confrontation from taking place. Whatever her "good faith" (and whatever that may be worth in a novel where everybody claims to have it), she is guilty of wilful blindness to her father's true nature - partly to protect her idealised view of him, and partly to preserve her belief in the righteousness of her own actions. If she were to open her eyes to what her father does know, and thus to the callousness that sits under his impeccable white waistcoat, she could not face herself.

Thus we repeatedly see Maggie shirking the more and more awful question of what Adam actually knows. Fanny has said about Maggie that "She'll know - about her father; everything." (II, 136) Fanny is not always right, of course, but in this case we do feel that Maggie knows more than she is prepared to acknowledge:

No other name was to be spoken, and Mrs. Assingham had taken that without delay from her eyes - with a discretion still that fell short but by an inch. "You know how he feels."

Maggie at this then slowly matched her headshake. "I know nothing."

"You know how you feel."

But again she denied it. "I know nothing. If I did - !"

"Well, if you did?" Fanny asked as she faltered.

She had had enough, however, "I should die," she said as she turned away. (II, 304-05)

Maggie does not, we note, deny the identity of feeling that Fanny by implication ascribes to her and her father; instead she pleads ignorance as to her own feelings as well as to his - because to admit to one would be to admit to the other, and would destroy the basis of her actions.

For to the end there is never any doubt that Maggie is acting from Adam's power, from her identification with him:

He was strong - that was the great thing. He was sure - sure for himself always, whatever his idea: the expression of that in him had somehow never appeared more identical with his proved taste for the rare and the true. ... The sense that he was n't a failure, and could never be, purged their predicament of every meanness. ... was n't it because now also, on his side, he was thinking of her as his daughter, was trying her, during these mute seconds, as the child of his blood? Oh then if she was n't with her little conscious passion the child of any weakness, what was she but strong enough too? It swelled in her fairly; it raised her higher, higher: she was n't in that case a failure either - had n't been, but the contrary; his strength was her strength, her pride was his, and they were decent and competent together. This was all in the answer she finally made him.

"I believe in you more than any one." (II, 274-75)

This ends on another of those embraces with which various pacts, most of them deceitful, are sealed in this novel. In this case, the embrace marks Maggie's undertaking never to allow herself to cease to believe in her father - that is, never to fathom her father's motives.

The passage makes clear why her idealisation of her father is so necessary to her self-esteem: "his strength was her strength", which implies also the moral validation of her actions: "they were decent and competent together." In him is contained their whole value system, based as it is on his "proved taste for the rare and true"; to question that would be to question the moral validity of their power over the Prince and Charlotte.

This dependence on her belief in her father explains the discrepancy between her claim to Fanny to know nothing of how her father feels, and her demonstrated ability to see through his eyes and to reconstruct his thought processes. The most famous instance of this ability is, of course, the chilling vision, shortly after her declaration of faith in her father, of Charlotte's being led by "a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck." (II, 287) This is followed by the sinister little speech she "overhears":

"Yes, you see - I lead her now by the neck, I lead her to her doom, and she does n't so much as know what it is, though she has a fear in her heart which, if you had the chances to apply your ear there that I, as a husband, have, you would hear thump and thump and thump. ..." (II, 277-78)

The concomitant of her vision of her father is the imaginative sympathy which enables her to interpret Charlotte's "high coerced quaver" (II, 294) as "the shriek of a soul in pain." (II, 292) In this novel about moral blindness, this perception of Maggie's is an important achievement; and yet, since the novel is mainly concerned with demonstrating that there are none so blind as those who will not see, we have to ask ourselves what use Maggie makes of her perceptions. Acute as her insight is into Adam's smirking assertion of mastery over Charlotte, she oddly never wavers in her belief that "his strength was her strength", maintaining to the last her complicity in that power of her father's that is slowly revealing its true ruthlessness.

Maggie's shying away from her own newly-awakened perceptions is dramatised for us most powerfully in her vigil outside the smoking-room at Fawns, where the others, "really charming as they showed in the beautiful room", are playing cards. Maggie reflects on her own suppressed "horror of finding evil seated all at its ease where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness." (II, 237) This could be seen as James' own comment on the true nature of the "charming" and "beautiful" society he portrays, and the final effect of the whole scene is in fact to reinforce that reading; but if we see in it such a comprehensive judgement, we are seeing more than Maggie allows herself to see. She is locating the evil exclusively in the Prince's and Charlotte's deception of her and Adam. But shortly after this, Charlotte joins Maggie outside and they look at the same scene:

Side by side for three minutes they fixed this picture of quiet harmonies, the positive charm of it and, as might have been said, the full significance - which, as was now brought home to Maggie, could be no more after all than a matter of interpretation, differing always for a different interpreter. As she herself had hovered in sight of it a quarter of an hour before, it would have been a thing for her to show Charlotte - to show in righteous irony, in reproach too stern for anything but silence. But now it was she who was being shown it, and shown it by Charlotte, and she saw quickly enough that as Charlotte showed it so she must at present submissively seem to take it. (II, 243-44)

Again, then, Maggie arrives at an important insight - in this instance, indeed, at a crucial one: that Charlotte may have her own interpretation of the scene, that for her too, evil may be seated all at its ease where she had

only dreamed of good. Maggie's realisation of this, and her grasping of the principle that "the full significance ... could be no more after all than a matter of interpretation, differing always for a different interpreter", could have redeemed her from the incompleteness of vision that is such an important aspect of the human condition for James. But again the curious check operates whereby Maggie merely registers her insight without acting on it. Her view of Charlotte's possible view reduces itself to a matter of pretending to submit to the demonstration: "as Charlotte showed it so she must at present submissively seem to take it." She gives no real weight to the possible legitimacy of Charlotte's reproach.

The rest of the scene, in fact, seems to confirm Charlotte's implied grievance. For Charlotte is "showing" Maggie the whole room; it is Maggie who fixes on Adam as the focus of Charlotte's indignation. The object of her own resentment, the Prince, is forgotten - not in sympathetic identification with Charlotte's vision, but in her interpretation of the demonstration as a challenge to her possession of her father:

Not yet since his marriage had Maggie so sharply and so formidably known her old possession of him as a thing divided and contested. (II, 244)

This is decidedly odd: Maggie, having felt aggrieved at Charlotte's bid for possession of the Prince, now simply loses sight of this in her sense that her own possession of Charlotte's husband is "a thing divided and contested." One might wonder exactly what Maggie expected from Adam's marriage - but we know, of course: the first volume has made clear that she expected it to make no difference whatsoever to her possession of her father. Our only surprise is that at this late stage, and just after her "illumination", she can still show so little real insight into the significance of her own possessive reaction and its relevance to what Charlotte is showing her. Of course, any indignation on Charlotte's part may seem like a refinement of hypocrisy; but the point is exactly that she may have just as flattering a view of her own infidelity as Maggie has of hers. And instead of recognising that Charlotte's case is the exact counterpart of her own, Maggie once again assumes the martyr's role:

Straighter than ever thus the Princess again felt it all put upon her. ... (II, 245)

What she feels put upon her, presumably, is the responsibility for restoring Adam to Charlotte and the Prince to herself, thereby preserving her view of herself as scapegoat. The rest of the novel shows us Maggie toiling to achieve this end. And if her sense of martyrdom depends on a certain blindness to the legitimate claims of others, so her sense of purpose involves a blindness to her own ineffectuality. She seems to be unaware of the part her supposedly ignorant and innocent father plays in the resolution she imagines she has brought about.

Maggie's sense of her own impeccability and of her success is exposed in a sharp little scene with Fanny Assingham. The latter momentarily liberates herself sufficiently from her social thralldom to the Ververs to be fairly honest with Maggie. The fulsomeness is still there, but barely covers the sharper edge of her insights; since Mr Verver is about to depart and Fanny has only been tolerated for her usefulness in diluting the company slightly, she probably realises that she doesn't have much to lose by her frankness: she'll be dropped anyway:

"You think, both of you, so abysmally and yet so quietly. But it's what will have saved you."

"Oh," Maggie returned, "it's what - from the moment they discovered we could think at all - will have saved them. For they're the ones who are saved," she went on. "We're the ones who are lost."

"Lost - ?"

"Lost to each other - father and I." And then as her friend appeared to demur, "Oh yes," Maggie quite lucidly declared, "lost to each other really much more than Amerigo and Charlotte are; since for them it's just, it's right, it's deserved, while for us it's only sad and strange and not caused by our fault. But I don't know," she went on, "why I talk about myself, for it's on father it really comes. I let him go," said Maggie.

"You let him, but you don't make him."

"I take it from him," she answered.

"But what else can you do?"

"I take it from him," the Princess repeated. "I do what I knew from the first I should do. I get off by giving him up."

"But if he gives you?" Mrs. Assingham presumed to object. Does n't it moreover then," she asked, "complete the very purpose with which he married - that of making you and leaving you more free?"

Maggie looked at her long. "Yes - I help him to do that."

Mrs. Assingham hesitated, but at last her bravery flared. "Why not call it then frankly his complete success?"

"Well," said Maggie, "that's all that's left me to do."

"It's a success," her friend ingeniously developed, "with which you've simply not interfered." (II, 333-34)

At moments like this Maggie's celebrated subtlety ("You think, both of you, so abysmally and yet so quietly") becomes difficult to distinguish from moral and intellectual stupidity. Her reasoning is certainly very eccentric. By what definition of "saved" can Charlotte and the Prince be said to be thus blessed - what definition, that is, that does not equally apply to Maggie and her father? And conversely, by what definition that does not equally apply to Charlotte and Amerigo can Maggie and her father be said to be "lost"? The difference for Maggie lies, of course, not in the fact of separation but in the justice of it: to be "saved" is to be forced into a right course of action, however painful, whereas to be "lost" is to suffer in innocence. Maggie's "lucidity", like Adam's "moral lucidity" in discovering Charlotte's usefulness, consists of the ability to adopt the view most flattering to herself. Her serene assumption that Amerigo and Charlotte are only getting what they deserved, whereas she and her father are like two innocent and bewildered children, comfortably disposes of every valid insight she has had in the course of the novel - and this just after she has complacently told Fanny: "Only - you know it's my nature - I think." It does not even occur to her that her very habit, reasserted in this scene, of thinking of herself and her father as a couple opposed to the Prince and Charlotte, may have encouraged those two to adopt the same view. But Maggie's belief in the Verver innocence is only Maggie's consistency: it is the fiction on which she has built her whole plan.

It is not her only fiction, of course. Once again, as in her farcical project to send her father and husband off on a jaunt together, she apportions to herself the responsibility for what her father has wrought. Fanny Assingham relentlessly pursues this unflattering implication in this interchange, but without visibly ruffling the serene surface of Maggie's satisfaction. Nevertheless, in the course of the conversation Maggie is forced, almost comically, to change the grounds of her self-congratulation several times.

Fanny's catechism systematically deprives Maggie of her illusion that "she had done all" (II, 318), even of her illusion that submission to Adam's actions constitutes a choice on her part. As Fanny points out, Maggie is not "making" Adam go, she is at most allowing him to go - a consent that is purely theoretical where she has not been consulted on the matter. Her sacrifice of Adam may amount to no more than Adam's sacrifice of her; and, for all her grand claim of planned and independent action ("I do what I knew

from the first I should do"), all that is "left [her] to do" is to recognise that she has "simply not interfered" with Adam's grand design. Ultimately, Maggie's independence of action proves to have been as illusory as that of the Prince and Charlotte; she too, whose happiness Adam was trying to ensure, has been the puppet of "the very purpose with which he married". He is the unacknowledged eiron of the world he has "created"; she remains the alazon of an irony she dare not resolve.

The rest of Maggie's conversation with Fanny is no less revealing of her motives and illusions. She yet again denies that she knows what her father knows; but the more important denial this time concerns the Prince. Having "with tears in her eyes" agreed that Charlotte is "held" in a "torment" by her ignorance of what Adam knows, and having stated that the Prince shares this ignorance, she is confronted with Fanny's last and perhaps most uncomfortable question:

"But the Prince then - ?"
 "How he's held?" Maggie asked.
 "How he's held."
 "Oh I can't tell you that!" and the Princess again broke off.
 (II, 336)

Maggie is understandably unwilling to ascribe her hold over her husband to her father's power, to the Prince's terror at how much Adam knows. And yet this suggestion is perfectly consistent with the main implication of the whole scene, that all Maggie's efforts have been but vain splashings on the surface of her father's "unfathomable" power. It is also consistent with her earlier perception that "his strength was her strength", although in a less elevated sense than she imagined at the time: her hold on the Prince is ultimately dependent on Adam's money. We have seen the Prince's slightly uncomfortable sense of being "made sure of" by his father-in-law, shortly after the recommencement of his relationship with Charlotte:

The net result of all of which moreover was that the young man had no wish to see his value diminish. ... Certainly ... everything must be kept up to it; never so much as to-night had the Prince felt this. (I, 325)

"Everything" will involve the sacrifice of Charlotte, as it has done before:

she is the one luxury he can't afford.

This reduces Maggie's achievement in winning back the Prince to a matter of letting him see that she suspects something; from that moment he toes the line meticulously, making up to Maggie in the only way he knows: by making love to her. Maggie herself realises that the Prince uses his sexuality as a weapon or an argument to persuade her not to tell her father. If, then, he is "held" by his uncertainty as to what Mr Verver knows, Maggie's master stroke in this guessing game is her reply to her husband's anxious question "Then does any one else know?" - "Find out for yourself!" (II, 202-03)

The Prince, at any rate, does his best to reassure Maggie by word and deed (but mainly by deed, which is what he is best at) that he loves only her. A less ingenious thinker than Maggie might have found something disturbing in his readiness to betray a woman to whom he presumably also professed love; his denial of Charlotte is as suspect as it is heartless:

"She's stupid," he abruptly opined. (II, 348)

Thus Charlotte's prophecy at Matcham, almost the last words we heard her speak to him, on the day that turned out to be the last day of their affair, has been fulfilled:

"Ah for things I may n't want to know I promise you shall find me stupid." (I, 363)

Whether or not the Prince makes the connection (the fact that his abrupt little betrayal makes him "quickly change colour", as well it might, suggests that he does) and realises that Charlotte may have been keeping up her own act; whether or not, even, he believes what he says - can the reader really rejoice in Maggie's retrieval, by such means, of such a man?

But perhaps it doesn't really matter whether the reader rejoices or not; it is clear that Maggie, at any rate, is now in love with him, and if it is success to get what one wants, then Maggie has succeeded. But the last section of the novel questions even that success, severely qualified as it already is. The Prince's newly awakened appreciation of his wife seems to contain a strong element of cowed submission to her show of strength. Maggie herself, in another of her suppressed perceptions, recognises in the Prince's situation, "in his 'own' room, where he often sat now alone",

the virtual identity of his condition with that aspect of Charlotte's situation for which, early in the summer and in all the amplitude of a great residence, she had found with so little seeking the similitude of the locked cage. (II, 337-38)

She distinguishes between the two, though, on the grounds of "his lurking there by his own act and his own choice" - whereas Charlotte has been forced into her cage. She refrains from drawing the obvious enough conclusion that the cage is chosen as a refuge from his wife, although she does notice "his starting at her entrance as if even this were in its degree an interference" (II, 338). "Even this" - what else can he be fleeing from but her presence?

Maggie, at any rate, feels secure enough in Charlotte's imminent departure and her own power over the Prince to praise her husband's ex-mistress to him: "But shan't you then so much as miss her a little? She's wonderful and beautiful. ..." (II, 346) By this stage, of course, this formula is so thoroughly tainted that even if we had not been told that it is intended as a "challenge" to the Prince, we should have doubted its sincerity. It is, in fact, a fairly direct echo of the "conscious perjury" of Maggie's reassurance to Charlotte: "You must take it from me that I've never thought of you but as beautiful, wonderful and good." (II, 251)

In this context, even the Prince's famous statement ("Everything's terrible, cara - in the heart of man" - II, 349) is suspect: it is too facile to convey any very specific insight, and as a reply to Maggie's "I see it's always terrible for women", it merely expresses the Prince's bland responsiveness to everything Maggie says at this stage. It also conveniently relegates his treatment of Charlotte to the metaphysical sphere of Man's Fallen State.

Given a situation fraught with such unexpressed tensions and uncertainties, it remains for them to establish a basis on which to spend the rest of their lives together. The Prince offers something conveniently intangible and irrefutable:

"If ever a man since the beginning of time acted in good faith - !"
But he dropped it, offering it simply for that.

For that then when it had had time somewhat to settle like some handful of gold-dust thrown into the air, for that then Maggie showed herself as deeply and strangely taking it. "I see." And she even wished this form to be as complete as she could make it. "I see." (II, 350)

It is possible that "this form" is yet another of the forms that Maggie preserves in the interests of her elaborate pretense, and that in fact she only pretends to believe her husband. But whether she believes him or not, we at least have seen the exact extent of the Prince's good faith, culminating in his "beautiful" pact with Charlotte to commit adultery for the Ververs' sake.²⁵ In his assurance to his wife, his good faith seems equally suspect: at best is he deceiving himself, at worst trying to deceive her. That there is, in any case, an element of deception, is hinted at by the comparison of his statement to "some handful of gold-dust". In a novel whose central symbol suggests the deceptive quality of gold, this is not a reassuring image; and as for dust, it is mainly known as a medium to be thrown into the eyes of those we wish to blind. In this context, the compound image also sounds a disturbing echo of Maggie's "translation" of Charlotte's "tap against the glass": "... why was I myself dealt with all for deception? Why condemned after a couple of short years to find the golden flame - oh the golden flame! - a mere handful of black ashes?" (II, 329-30) Maggie, at least, has gold-dust instead of black ashes - perhaps a substitute for the "silver mist" that, earlier in the novel, she saw as no longer adequately hiding the general deception:

They would then have been all successfully throwing dust in each other's eyes; and it would be at last as if they must turn away their faces, since the silver mist that protected them had begun to grow sensibly thin. (II, 48)

Such images of blindness give a certain edge to Maggie's repeated "I see". If she truly sees, that is, that her husband's "good faith" is an insubstantial foundation for their marriage, her form consists of "humbugging" him that she believes him, as she will have to humbug herself

²⁵ Fanny Assignham has had one of her more incisive interchanges with her husband on the subject of this good faith:

"I think there's nothing they're not now capable of - in their so intense good faith."

"Good faith?" - he echoed the words, which had in fact something of an odd ring, critically.

"Their false position. It comes to the same thing" (I, 376)

for the rest of her life that her husband really loves her. If she does not see, and accepts that his good faith nullifies his adultery and disposes of Charlotte, she is already humbugging herself. In either case she is keeping alive a fiction about her husband, as she is keeping alive a fiction about herself and her father.

Bleak as this interpretation is, it is completely consistent with the final scenes of the novel, which otherwise, in more bracing readings, have to be elaborately explained away. I am thinking in the first place, of course, of the final interchange between Maggie and her father, preceded by the description of the Prince and Charlotte as collector's pieces, finally taking their proper places in the collection, under the delighted gaze of their owners:

The two noble persons seated in conversation and at tea fell thus into the splendid effect and the general harmony: Mrs. Verver and the Prince fairly "placed" themselves, however unwittingly, as high expressions of the kind of human furniture required aesthetically by such a scene. The fusion of their presence with the decorative elements, their contribution to the triumph of selection, was complete and admirable; though to a lingering view, a view more penetrating than the occasion really demanded, they also might have figured as concrete attestations of a rare power of purchase. There was much indeed in the tone in which Adam Verver spoke again, and who shall say where his thought stopped? "Le compte y est. You've got some good things."

Maggie met it afresh - "Ah don't they look well?" (II, 360).

This is the final comment on the "general harmony" that has been established: it is a matter of appearances. By this aesthetic criterion it doesn't really matter what the Prince and Charlotte can find to say to each other in the light of their knowledge of each other, just as it doesn't really matter what coercion has been used to reduce them to such submissive "human furniture": all that matters is the aesthetic requirement of "such a scene". It is the final restatement of the aesthetic theme that James introduced so early in the novel and has never lost sight of. In Maggie's concurrence with her father that "they look well" we have the admission of what has been implicit all along: as long as the golden bowl looks like the real thing, it doesn't matter to the Ververs that it is a cracked crystal. Adam's much-vaunted "instinct for authenticity", we have been told, ultimately consists only of a concern "that a work of art of price should 'look like' the master to whom it might perhaps be deceitfully attributed". (I, 146-47)

What remains for Maggie to do in the general tidying-up of human furniture is to reassure her father that she does not resent his wife, and that he did not make a mistake in marrying for her sake:

"Father, father - Charlotte's great!"

It was not till after he had begun to smoke that he looked at her. "Charlotte's great."

They could close upon it - such a basis as they might immediately feel it make; and so they stood together over it quite gratefully, each recording to the other's eyes that it was firm under their feet. (II, 364)

The slight discomfort betrayed in Mr Verver's delay in looking at Maggie is soon dissipated as they get used to their new "basis" - the fiction that is to sustain them, their ignoring of the knowledge that he is deporting his wife to get her away from his daughter's husband. "Gratefully" they may well stand over it; it enables them to pretend to the very end:

"You see," he presently added, "how right I was. Right, I mean, to do it for you."

Thus the crooked is once again humbugged straight, and a humiliating mistake made into an occasion for self-congratulation. As usual in this novel, the moment of wilful blindness is celebrated with declarations of clear-sightedness all round:

"Well now," he smoked, "we see."

"We see." (II, 364)

As Adam sounds, to Maggie's satisfaction, "the note of possession and control" in speaking of Charlotte, she finds a basis also for her parting from him, "some last conclusive comfortable category to place him in for dismissal": "his ability to rest upon high values"; the high value, not to mention the high price, of Charlotte being in question. This opens up an equally comfortable - for Maggie - category to place Charlotte in for dismissal:

... she was n't to be wasted in the application of his plan. Maggie held to this then - that she was n't to be wasted. (II, 365-66)

Being wasted is, we remember, what the Ververs decided long ago Charlotte should be saved from; now that the use then found for her has palled upon everybody, she will be employed "in the application of his plan" - his other plan, the first one having developed complications. In American City Charlotte's "high coerced quaver" will not be audible to Maggie, nor will the silken loop around her neck be visible: Maggie's last murmur of conscience subsides under the pleasant conviction that showing off Adam's treasures to the inhabitants of a country she hates is just what Charlotte was made for.

Maggie's last words to her father can thus emphatically reassert her "sense that he was n't a failure" and that "she was n't in that case a failure either" - a sense we have seen to be essential to her self-respect:

"It's success, father."

"It's success. And even this ... even this is n't altogether failure!" (II, 366)

"This" is the Principino - the offspring of the union between buyer and bought, money and history, power and picturesqueness, America and Europe, the heir to a New World dynasty. He will need all the guidance he can get from Miss Bogle.

Upon this note of wrongs covered up, of uncomfortable recognitions stared out of countenance, the Ververs depart, the beautiful fiction of their beautiful lives re-established to everybody's satisfaction - except perhaps to Charlotte's. Of course, her fate is no more than she accepted the possibility of when she married Adam Verver: we cannot really feel that deportation to America is in itself an injustice done to her. The real cruelty of her fate lies in her coolly being reduced to an object of the other three's moral righteousness: she, not Maggie, is made to bear the guilt of the other three, and alleviate them of the burden:

They thus tacitly put it upon her to be disposed of, the whole complexity of their peril ... to lift it off them and take it; to charge herself with it as the scapegoat of old, of whom she had once seen a terrible picture, had been charged with the sins of the people and had gone forth into the desert to sink under his burden and die. (II, 234)

That fantasy is of course Maggie's vision of herself, not of Charlotte; she

cannot allow herself to see how much more accurately the role applies to Charlotte than to herself. If anyone is sent into the desert, Charlotte is - if not quite to die, then to an oblivion that approximates death: "I feel somehow as if she were dying. Not really. ... But dying for us - for you and me" says Maggie (II, 346). "Dying for us" presumably only means (as a reminder to the Prince?) "dying as far as you and I are concerned", but the ambiguity allows us to see Charlotte's "death" as a sacrifice "for" the others. She is not a willing victim, of course, but then, nor was the scapegoat of old. All three need her to believe in their own innocence: Adam can believe (one assumes) that the only flaw in his beautiful plan for Maggie's comfort was Charlotte's refusal to restrict herself to the function that they "got her for"; Maggie can believe (one assumes again) that Charlotte seduced the Prince, and that she herself is therefore blameless; and the Prince, whatever he believes, can offer Charlotte's head on a platter to Maggie as proof of his repentance. At the separation of the couples Charlotte is used as a moral justification: as long as they can all pretend to love and admire Charlotte, no uncomfortable qualms need arise.

It may be the unpleasantness of this use of Charlotte that has led critics to explain it in allegorical terms. Rather than assume, like Matthiessen, that James was guilty, in condoning such behaviour, of an insensitivity "nothing short of obscene",²⁶ they prefer to take the action out of the sphere of human judgement altogether:

The Ververs depart, and Maggie and the Prince are left alone. The allegorical meaning of this episode is that divine wisdom (Mr. Verver) has taken the evil-idolized human self (Charlotte) into captivity, thus freeing divine love (Maggie) to consummate marriage with natural man (the Prince). The baby Principino represents the humanity to come, divine-natural man.²⁷

The trouble with such an interpretation is that it casts such a very dubious light on the nature of "divine love" to see it as manifested in behaviour

²⁶ The Major Phase, p. 100.

²⁷ Francis Fergusson, "The Golden Bowl Revisited", Sewanee Review, 64 (1955), 26-27. Fergusson is here approvingly summarising Quentin Anderson's reading. He does add that such an interpretation does not reflect our actual experience of the final episodes, and accounts for the allegorical significances as "fleeting intuitions [sic] of felicity" (p. 27).

that we would regard as "obscene" in a human being. This is difficult enough to accept in as stylised a work as The Clerk's Tale, where we are asked to accept, in terms of religious parable, connubial behaviour that would be grotesque anywhere else; given the much more realistic surface of The Golden Bowl, the "parable" becomes a flat contradiction of the presented reality of the novel. It is very difficult, for instance, to make sense, with Dorothea Krook, of Charlotte's "punishment" in terms of "an aspect of the inherited Judaeo-Christian scheme of salvation (with all the necessary 'humanist' modifications) which is perhaps more distinctively Judaeic than Christian and has a prominent place also in the view of the human condition of that other great source of spiritual wisdom in our civilisation, the Greek."²⁸ This portentous preamble leads to the orthodox enough contention that God is not only a God of Love, but also of Justice, and thence to the explanation of Charlotte's fate as "a function of the quasi-divine justice executed by Adam Verver by the exercise of his power." (p. 286) Krook seems to avoid committing herself fully to the religious reading by granting Adam only "quasi-divine" status, as she elsewhere buffers her religious interpretations with "as the religious would say" parentheses. This may be what she means by "all the necessary 'humanist' modifications"; but such concessions to the claims of realism only detract from the consistency of the allegorical reading, without making Adam's treatment of Charlotte any less repulsive in human terms.

Even critics who accept the most obvious interpretation of this behaviour as the correct one, and do assume that James shared the distaste felt by most readers, tend to regard Maggie as somehow exempted from the unpleasantness because she loves the Prince. Thus Crews can state that "[a]t the end of the book Maggie is more convinced than ever that Adam's pasty world is the only beautiful one, and she intends to preserve it as best she can", and yet maintain that "[i]n spite of this, Maggie's achievement is a moral one, and indeed a great one."²⁹

I cannot see that such deliberate blindness as Crews implies here and as is in fact dramatised in the novel's closing episodes can be compatible with a "moral" achievement. At most, the departure of the Ververs simplifies

²⁸ The Ordeal of Consciousness, pp. 284-85.

²⁹ Tragedy of Manners, p. 110.

the "forms" that have to be observed. As Maggie goes to the balcony, too late to see the departing carriage, she looks "only at the great grey space on which, as on the room still more, the shadow of dusk had fallen." (II, 366). The emptiness lacks, at least, the insistent light that suffuses almost all the other scenes of the novel. There is a new clarity as Maggie takes stock of "her reason for what she had done": "their freedom to be together there always" (II, 367). The Prince's freedom, of course, is not unlike captivity, since he has no choice in the matter - but with Maggie's undivided attention he may be less bored than he was before. Like Charlotte, he settles down to the terms of his contract.

The forms have been established, at any rate, on a more workable basis than before. Maggie can now surrender to her husband's sexual power, which she has so tenaciously resisted up to now as a threat to her freedom of action. Where before she was acting for her father, and had to resist her husband's power as a threat to that allegiance, she need now no longer fear that power. Undistracted by the claims of her father and of Charlotte, unconfused by the moral intricacies of trying to justify herself in terms of a cause other than herself, she can indulge the "selfishness" of her passion for her husband.

The "golden fruit" that looms as her "reward" is, like all things golden in the novel, slightly ominous; but if there is a flaw in it, Maggie has learnt not to notice. Their final embrace in the novel, like all the others in the novel, takes place over abysses of deception, of suppressions, of betrayals; but Maggie's passion, at least, and the Prince's desire to please her, are genuine:

It kept him before her therefore, taking in - or trying to - what she so wonderfully gave. He tried, too clearly, to please her - to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: "'See'? I see nothing but you." And the truth of it had with this force after a moment so strangely lighted his eyes that as for pity and dread of them she buried her own in his breast. (II, 368-69)

What she "so wonderfully" gives is a basis for their relationship, yet another of her categories for dismissal: Charlotte is "splendid" and can therefore be disregarded. Maggie will not make her into an occasion for reproach. The Prince, though trying "too clearly, to please her" seems less

apt than Adam to recognise the proffered basis. In short, he seems not to know what she means, in spite of his attempt "to meet her in her own way" - so he meets her in his own irresistible way, by taking her in his arms. His "I see nothing but you" is almost the last act of wilful blindness in the novel: he pledges himself to ignore whatever may distract his regard from the wife he is to serve with his body till death them do part.

The "truth" that Maggie reads in his eyes is thus not only, if at all, his devotion to her, but his submission to her power - a truth that for the last time in the novel Maggie evades, in a gesture that combines her love for him with her avoidance of facing the cost of it: "as for pity and dread of [his eyes] she buried her own in his breast." The embrace of the Prince and Maggie represents, no less than that of Densher and Kate Croy, "the need to bury in the dark blindness of each other's arms the knowledge of each other that they could n't undo."³⁰ If Maggie has grown from naïvety to a full knowledge of evil, she has herself succumbed to that evil by opting for its preservation under the forms of harmony and decency. Her averting of her eyes "as for pity and dread" is an evasion of this truth.

The evocation of the tragic emotions at this point is as ambiguous as everything else in the novel: instead of the "pity and dread" based, as in Sophocles, on a recognition of "the true state of all us that live", we are given a deliberate self-blinding. Following upon Maggie's and Adam's "We see" and the Prince's "'See'? I see nothing but you", Maggie's avoidance of seeing becomes as significant to this work as Oedipus' literal self-blinding is to King Oedipus - the significance, however, being the exact opposite of that of Oedipus' symbolic release from the blindness which afflicted him while he could see. In short, in the Oedipus the irony is resolved; here it is reinforced.

Maggie's gesture is in effect very much like Marlow's lie in "Heart of Darkness", in denying every insight reached in the course of the work. The difference is that Marlow's lie consciously preserves something which is beautiful in itself, albeit based on delusion: the Intended's belief in the nobility of Kurtz is itself noble in its selflessness, however grotesquely Kurtz has betrayed that trust. Without the Intended's illusion, Marlow feels, "It would have been too dark" (p. 162): we are left with something like

³⁰ The Wings of the Dove, II, 392.

Malcolm's "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell"³¹ - and though we may feel that angels are hopelessly out of their element in the heart of darkness.

Maggie's lie, on the other hand, preserves only the "forms" - forms, admittedly, which make possible the continuation of social relationships, but which in themselves have no moral content, since the social relationships in the novel have no moral basis. There are no grounds for believing, with Pearson, that the lie is "sanctified by what it salvages and the disaster it postpones." Marlow's unselfish lie "salvages" the nobility that makes the illusion possible; what Maggie's lie salvages is the illusion itself, her own willed belief in a piece of cracked crystal as a golden bowl.

The Golden Bowl is a novel about success and its price; and in showing how the pursuit of success can subvert all values to the service of that success, it is a study of moral bankruptcy. The rhetoric of righteousness concealing the exercise of power is, as Euripides could see, a principle of all wars, from the Trojan to the Peloponnesian; and as Conrad could see, it is the moral strategy of colonialisation. James was not thinking of war, but of benign conquest, and the colonialisation he is concerned with is more like Holroyd's in Nostramo than the brutal exploitation of "Heart of Darkness"; but all these can be seen as merely different metaphors for the same subjection of others. The "rare power of purchase", despite its guise of philanthropy and patronage, is as absolute as any more traditional form of power. James' exploration of the degeneration of "beautiful intentions all round" places his novel with the masterpieces of Conrad and Lawrence, as a profound and disenchanting reflection on "the hard irony of hopes and ideas."³²

³¹ Macbeth, IV. ii. 22.

³² Women in Love, p. 511.

Conclusion

To adduce The Golden Bowl as an example, indeed a masterpiece, of a totally unresolved irony that subverts all values proclaimed in the novel, is to admit that ultimately James seems to have yielded to the total scepticism of a Decoud or a Gudrun. The novel lacks that hope that Lawrence managed to sustain in Women in Love through the presence of Birkin and Ursula; it lacks even the consolation of illusion, severely qualified as it is, accepted by Marlow in "Heart of Darkness". There is no "choice of nightmares" in The Golden Bowl, no figure like Mrs Gould to represent a disinterested idealism. This curtailment of human possibilities will inevitably make the moral range of the novel seem smaller than the comprehensive analyses of Conrad and Lawrence: its irony is not placed, like theirs, in a larger context.

In insisting, then, that the late novels show nothing of the "loss of sureness of moral touch" that Leavis ascribes to them,¹ I am not claiming for all of them the full "hierarchy of significance" of The Wings of the Dove. I am suggesting, however, that James' "sureness of moral touch" manifested itself in his use of "technique" as an instrument of moral exploration, and that the disillusioned vision of The Golden Bowl is the result of such exploration. I have tried to show that in the late novels the more disturbing implications are never, as we at times feel with Hardy, imposed upon the subject as a theoretical "pessimism": they emerge, even in spite of James' intentions, from his pondering of his subject with all the acuteness of a formidable moral intelligence, the "prime sensibility" of a great artist. In the same spirit of artistic integrity, his novels do not include, in the interests of a theoretical "balance", those possibilities of fulfilment tentatively maintained by Lawrence or the "few simple notions" held on to by Conrad. Their novels may, in this respect, dramatise a sincere desire rather than a sincere conviction; if this was not James' way, that may be because, paradoxically, this most anxiously circumspect of novelists was, to a greater extent than either Conrad or Lawrence, at the mercy of his material - that is, his material as it defined itself through the explorations of technique.

In accepting the law of such exploration, that is that "one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another", James freed his imagination to uncover implications hidden even from himself. In The Ambassadors such implications

¹ The Great Tradition, p. 176.

remained unacknowledged; in The Wings of the Dove they were unplanned but consciously observed; and in The Golden Bowl, I believe, subject and technique were fused from the start in a final exploration of his life-long belief that as any perception is but a product of the interpretation of the perceiver, so any "truth" is likely to be at best a selection from, at worst a distortion of the available perspectives. Thus the unresolved ironies which in the earlier two novels could be seen as the more or less rough edges of a novel breaking from its mould, form part of the seamless fabric of The Golden Bowl, the vision of a society incapable of providing a resolution to the conflict between its professed beliefs and its quest for power.

If our final impression of these novels is nevertheless not quite as gloomy as such an outline would seem to suggest, that may be because to the ironist even gloom itself can become the subject of irony. The tragic gesture may collapse under the sceptical gaze of irony, but usually with a certain consciousness, on the part of the ironist, of the comic possibilities of the collapse. Even Gudrun in her most barren moment, when she is most conscious of being the alazon of her own irony, retains a flicker of the resilience of the eiron:

Gudrun hid her face on Ursula's shoulder, but still she could not escape the cold devil of irony that froze her soul.

'Ha, ha!' she thought, 'this is the right behaviour.' (p. 577)

The emphasis is heavily on the constricting effect of such irony, and Gudrun's mirthless "Ha, ha!" is hardly the laughter of comedy: it has something of the desperation of Hedda Gabler's playing a dance tune before she shoots herself. But it also represents, however meagrely, something of that detachment that liberates man's wits from his passions and illusions.

Perhaps irony, even if it is only rarely as exhilarating as in Antony and Cleopatra or The Nun's Priest's Tale, is the last victory of a human spirit incapable of taking itself seriously. It may be a hollow victory: we remember Sophia Antonovna's rejection of irony as "the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action". But irony may itself be a "saving instinct", a wry compromise with the inevitable. Without denying the cost of such a compromise, we may find something liberating in the lucid wit with which James anatomizes his society. Mrs Lowder's lament for Milly does, in its crass commercialism, cheapen the emotion it is

intended to express; but it is impossible not to delight in the acuteness with which it is observed. And if "the misfortune of being too, too charming" lacks tragic dignity, the very mordancy with which it is presented acts as an antidote to despair. Perhaps our final vision of James himself is best rendered in his own description of Maria Gostrey "sigh[ing] it at last all comically, all tragically away."

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