Henry James and the Queerness of Style

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INTRODUCTION

On the Erotics of Literary Style

A great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if this is his native tongue. At the limit, he draws his strength from a mute and unknown minority that belongs only to him. He is a foreigner in his own language: he does not mix another language with his own language, he carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language within his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.

—Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered”

Henry James and the Queerness of Style seeks to trace such a “nonpreexistent foreign language” in the writings of Henry James and thereby to find in James’s style a queerness that, not circumscribed by whatever sexualities or identities might be represented by the texts, makes for what is most challenging about recent queer accounts of culture: a radical antisociality that seeks to unyoke sexuality from the communities and identities—gay or straight—that would tame it, a disruption that thwarts efforts to determine political goals according to a model of representation, the corrosive effect of queerness, in short, on received forms of meaning, representation, and identity. To perceive such a potential, it suffices to engage in that most old-fashioned and, by now, almost marginalized activity: close reading—in the very disgrace to which it has been consigned now that, no longer synonymous with literary study tout court, it seems almost an antique curiosity (at best irrelevant, and at worst a pernicious, or somehow complicitous, indulgence), in, as D. A. Miller writes, “its humbled, futile, ‘minoritized’ state.” Through such a marginal, wasteful form of attention to James’s texts, and to the foreign language murmuring audible there, this book seeks to delineate what it calls the queerness of style.

Henry James’s writing continually throws the reader off balance with disorienting mixings of register and sudden shifts of tone, with unexpected syntactical inversions and equivocal reifications that hover at
Henry James's style is perhaps nowhere more importunate than in his 1905 novel The Golden Bowl. The novel's redoubtable linguistic texture—especially the densely metaphorical language of narrator and characters alike—and the formalism of its structure can cause one momentarily to forget its startlingly lurid premise: its plot has a billionaire and his daughter (Adam and Maggie Verver) each marry other people, the better to sustain their own incestuous relationship. Or, from the perspective of the victims, a couple (Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant), whose poverty leaves them unable to marry each other, marry instead a billionaire and his daughter—partly for the money but partly to transform their commonplace affair into one bordering on incest: marriage allows the Prince to have sex with his wife's stepmother, and Charlotte, with her husband's son-in-law. (Were gay marriage able to make such things possible, one might be tempted to embrace it.) The affair, however, soon gives way to—or reveals the story as always having been—a closet drama. The novel's plot often boils down to the striving of variously embattled characters to refrain from speaking of what they know (about, in particular, what others know)—and to the implications of that effort in the registers of desire and power. Betrayal refers not principally to the violation of marriage vows but to the "giving away" of knowledge: betrayed spouses are of less interest to the story than betrayed secrets. The text could have been subtitled "Epistemology of the Closet," and its plot—insofar as it has one—is a paranoid one, a "vicious circle" centered on the unspeakable.

The recessive, elliptical quality of James's late style makes it particularly well suited to such a story; however, the relation of plot to style extends beyond any accord between medium and message. In a novel focused largely on the deciphering of secrets and on the consequences—thrills, terrors, pleasures—of their detection or betrayal, the potential for the
The Burden of Residuary Comment: Syntactical Idiosyncrasies in *The Wings of the Dove*

For D. A. Miller’s *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, free indirect style is of interest in large part because of its power to catalyze effects of shame; the virtuoso shadings of a narration’s proximity to and distance from its characters excite a fantasy of imperturbable remove—a total depersonalization that threatens, from the very start, to collapse into personification and abjection. (Shame emerges as one travels that circuit back toward personification.) Discussing Austen’s *Emma*, Miller describes the free indirect mode as a dynamic of identification: “For, no less than close reading, the close writing that is free indirect style is also given over to broaching an impossible identification. In the paradoxical form of an impersonal intimacy, it grants us at one and the same time the experience of a character’s inner life as she herself lives it, and an experience of the same inner life as she never could.” The most “daredevil feats” of this narration occur

when, in the course of vainly aspiring to narration, a character in turn inspires it [the narration] with an equally impossible desire to renounce its condition for her own, as a fully representable person; in other words, in a case where it seems that if the structural bar of antithesis ever slipped away—and it never does—its place would be immediately taken by a mirror. (59–60)

The “open secret of an impossible identification between the No One who is narrating and the most fully characterized Person in all Austen” (that is, Emma Woodhouse) sustains, by virtue of the impossibility of that identification, the equilibrium that Miller describes as Style’s transcendent impassivity. In *Persuasion*, on the other hand, the narration falls into personification. The movement from *Emma* to *Persuasion* is enacted in Miller’s
Hover, Torment, Waste: Late Writings and the Great War

Why does poetry matter to us? The ways in which answers to this question are offered testify to its absolute importance. For the field of possible respondents is clearly divided between those who affirm the significance of poetry only on the condition of altogether confusing it with life and those for whom the significance of poetry is instead exclusively a function of its isolation from life. . . . Opposed to these two positions is the experience of the poet, who affirms that if poetry and life remain infinitely divergent on the level of the biography and psychology of the individual, they nevertheless become absolutely indistinct at the point of their reciprocal desubjectification. And—at that point—they are united not immediately but in a medium. This medium is language. The poet is he who, in the word, produces life. Life, which the poet produces in the poem, withdrawals from both the lived experience of the psychosomatic individual and the biological unsayability of the species.

—Giorgio Agamben, The End of the Poem
(translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen)

The last essay that Henry James prepared for publication was an introduction to Rupert Brooke’s Letters from America. This remarkable tribute to a beautiful dead young poet, killed by blood poisoning while serving in the British Army, offers various enticements to biographical reading. It joins a series of James’s essays written during World War I—many of them collected in Pierre Walker’s important collection Henry James on Culture—which tempts one to read them as radically distinct from, if not opposed to, the other late fictional and critical writings. Here, at last, so a reader might think, is the writer in his own voice, bereft of a narrator’s ironical remove, speaking about the real world without the subtleties (or evasions) of fiction—a revelation that might inspire, depending
Lambert Strether’s Belatedness: *The Ambassadors* and the Queer Afterlife of Style

Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds you lay on,
but also those longings for you that
shone clearly in the eyes,
that trembled in the voice—and some
random obstacle put them off.
Now that everything is in the past,
it almost seems that you have also given
in to those longings—how they shone,
remember, in the eyes that gazed at you;
how they trembled in the voice, for you, remember, body.

—Cavafy, “Remember, body . . .”
(translated by Anna Seraphimidou)

Critics of James’s work have been less circumspect about the search for “the Man” in “the Poet”—less attentive to the search’s paradoxes and perils—than is the author himself in the late essays. And thus the tale of belatedness and equivocal aesthetic recompense offered by *The Ambassadors* has often served to reinforce a current in James studies that—more or less explicitly and to vastly different effects—understands James’s style in biographical terms: its opacities or seeming evasions point to the way the man himself diffused, postponed, avoided, sublimated, or more or less missed “life.” The novel is particularly available to such readings because of Strether’s strikingly rigorous—and, for many critics, frustrating—renunciation, which has often been read as a failure to be adequate to his experience: Strether, the “exemplar of the life of the senses,” Richard Blackmur argued, is “not finally up to that life,” a diagnosis that is often extended to the author who created that temporizing American pilgrim. F. W. Dupee suggested that if James “drew on Howells for Strether’s sentiments, he drew far more on
Acknowledgments

To attempt to acknowledge the debts occasioned by the writing of this book has been inescapably to register the many rich affordances of the intellectual world that has sustained it and me; if the book falls short of the promise of that richness, it can only be that my own capacities have proven inadequate to friends who lead one to wonder what book could be adequate to such intelligence. Among those who read chapters of the book, those who helped with the research for it, and those who, knowing little of it, nevertheless provided invaluable, and more or less concrete, support for it and me, I would mention in particular Katherine Biers, Ti Bodenheimer, Chris Bolman, Bob Chibka, Leland de la Durantaye, Matt DeLuca, Lee Edelman, Zach Forsberg-Lary, Jim Giguere, Hollis Griffin, Susan Griffin, Megan Holmberg, Sigi Jötkandt, Gregory Kenny, Jim Kincaid, Niko Kolodny, Emma Limon, John Limon, David McWhirter, Suzanne Matson, Pat Moran, Joe Nugent, Rob Odom, Mary Ann O‘Farrell, Peter Rawlings, Joe Rezek, Melanie Ross, Jake Russin, Ken Stuckey, Laura Tanner, Oleg Tcherny, Andy von Hendy, and Judith Wilt. I am also grateful to my teachers, who—though absolved, at last, of any obligation to read any part of this book and therefore exempt from the remotest blame for any bêtise in it—shaped my readings of literary texts in (for me) unforgettable ways, especially Cynthia Chase, Steve Fix, Ellis Hanson, and Chris Pye. I first read Henry James in a tutorial at Oxford with John Sloan; I mention him here because, though he would have no reason to remember me, I remember him, and fondly. This book was begun with a Research Incentive Grant from Boston College and largely written during a fellowship year at the National Humanities Center. I am grateful to Boston College; to the Humanities Center; to the Research Triangle Foundation, which endowed the Benjamin N. Duke Fellowship that funded my year in North Carolina; to Kent Mullikin; to Lois Whittington; to Marie Brubaker; and to the fellows of the Center that year, especially Tom Cogswell, Lynda Coon, Mary Favret,
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