Ethical Dimensions in James's Art of Criticism ; or, Engaging the Other in "The Figure in the Carpet"

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Although attempts to associate James with any kind of aesthetic idealism have, in recent years, been strenuously countered by critics intent on demystifying the "Master" and representing instead an author fully engaged with the social world, one might still wonder to what degree the aesthetic plays a crucial role in shaping Jamesian social consciousness. In what sense, that is, does the social in James's writing become tied to, if not wholly dependent on, the aesthetic point of view? How might his aesthetics, anchored as it is in ways of seeing, in ways of knowing, be understood to be itself indicative of James's responsiveness—and his sense of responsibility—to the social world?

Such questions are meant to imply, of course, that however much James devotes himself to pondering the formal elements of novel-writing, one is constantly made aware of the moral impulse in James's "art of fiction" to address the larger society, an impulse, as it happens, everywhere suggested in his aesthetic theory. As Winfried Fluck contends, the Jamesian aesthetic, despite the ways in which it seems at times to point to the author's self-involvement with strictly formal concerns, is above all "a way of processing reality," and in this respect, it necessarily constitutes "an activity within the social realm" (33).

Like Fluck, other commentators such as Ross Posnock have made equally emphatic claims about James's penchant for processing social reality, and it is perhaps not surprising that these critics have often used as their exemplary case a socially and culturally oriented text like *The American Scene*. Part autobiographical adventure, part travelogue and sociocultural analysis, this work has offered an easy vehicle for portraying James as a kind of pragmatic pluralist of the order of his philosopher brother William ("Affirming" 244). In this travel book, which documents the author's return visit to America after

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more than twenty years of living abroad, James becomes less of an artist in full command of the scene he is describing than a provisional, exploratory self restlessly analyzing "alien" experiences for which his uptown background and sensibility have not adequately prepared him. His measure as a careful observer open to such experiences depends mainly on his ability to surrender himself to the apparently foreign world of his own native country (especially as experienced amid the vast immigrant population of "down-town" New York), and to begin to see from the point of view of the Other. No text does more to exhibit James's own sense of authorial alienation, his loss of artistic mastery, his lack of what some critics would rather see as his "imperial consciousness" (Millgate 100-01). Furthermore, as Posnock argues, *The American Scene*, far from demonstrating any kind of conservative politics, elitism, or racial bias on the part of the author, shows James as embracing, however anxiously, the Other's point of view and, moreover, seeing the Other as part of an ever-changing social landscape that has the potential to reshape both the nation's, as well as his own personal, identity.

What Posnock recognizes as James's fluid self and his general "politics of non-identity" (*Trial* 285) partly derives from James's radical curiosity (*Trial* 21-22), a curiosity which keeps an otherwise unified, essential subject in a continual "process of inquiring and modification," embedded as it is in a "preexisting object world" and thus given over to the "primacy of interaction" (*Trial* 94). As James opens himself to experience and consequently begins to "fuse his identity" (Buelens 151) with that of the "alien" within his native land, his uncanny experience with his own homeland becomes, more than anything else, suggestive both of his engagement with the "finer complexity" (*AS* 136) of history and of his ethical responsiveness to the Other.

If James's surrendering himself to the alien scene of turn-of-the-century America signals something of the ethical dimension within his work, it is this dimension that might be said to be very ground of the social in James. Jamesian aesthetics, as a way of seeing and of embracing and immersing oneself within the contingency of experience (see Posnock *Trial* 137), or the vagueness of history, amounts, in Martha Nussbaum's words, to a "politics of perception" (200). In her analysis of an overtly social work of fiction like *The Princess Casamassima*, she connects James's moral imagination, his moral vision as related in his "art" of fiction, directly to his engagement with the social world.[1]

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[1] Just as Nussbaum ties Jamesian aesthetics to his sense of ethical engagement, Posnock argues that James, far from embracing aesthetic idealism, "topples the aesthetic from contemplation to make it practice." In *The American Scene*, in particular, inasmuch as he "experiences language in its materiality," James employs "a literary form that embodies the

Yet, while such texts as *The Princess Casamassima* and *The American Scene* have traditionally served as convenient examples of James at his most socially conscious, we might do well to examine James when he appears to be most involved with aesthetic concerns, as he is for example in such works as "The Art of Fiction" (1889), "Criticism" (1893) and (to use a work of fiction that alludes to a literary aesthetics closely resembling James's own) "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896). For we might wonder, to what extent do such works directly addressing Jamesian aesthetics—and so not expressly articulating social themes—bespeak the kind of ethical responsiveness that underlies the Jamesian social? How, at the very moment that James seems most concerned with formalism and appears most like the "Master," does he also betray a social consciousness that would undermine his masterly position? How, that is, does he indicate a desire to surrender his authorial ego to the human scene before him and thus to practice a certain sociality, a certain ethics that is born in a concern with the Other and, more generally, with the otherness of experience?

In "The Art of Fiction" James, it would appear, tries to assert his authorial identity by making a case against Walter Besant's views regarding the chief rhetorical tasks of the novelist. But if James shows an ability to take artistic command of the literary scene, he does so not to demonstrate, egoistically, his own literary dominance or authority but, more generously, to open up the possibilities of novel-writing that Besant, subscribing to his own peculiar "laws of fiction" (395), would otherwise wish to curtail. James's is a call to the kind of artistic freedom and openness that would not only dismantle those artificial literary divisions that Besant rigorously advocates—for instance, what James calls the "clumsy separations" (402) between incident and character, romance and realism—but would also encourage the novelist to break with any sort of artificial restrictions, such as those that would limit a writer to certain literary models or types of subject matter considered as "appropriate" or being in good taste. After all, as James says, "Humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms" (397).

Echoing aspects both of Walter Pater's theory of aestheticism as well as of his brother William's pragmatic philosophy, Henry goes on to suggest that the writer's task is to give himself over to impressions (for "impressions are experience") and to "guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern. . ." (398). That such an artistic sensibility would convert the "very pulses of the air into revelations"

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waywardness of his experience" ("Affirming" 226, 230): while embracing the chaos and contingency of experience, he thus reveals the type of pragmatism and engagement with material existence that his brother William describes in his philosophical essays.

(397) implies not merely the writer's desire to collect or consume experience but also his ethical obligation to face reality and to *respond* to experience, whatever it might entail, in the most wholehearted way. James's advice to the novice—"Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (399)—is indeed not so much a reflection of James's exceptional ability to discern, and thereby acquisitively control, the "scene" of human experience. It is, more importantly, a statement about the novelist's responsibility to the various challenges of writing, and in particular to the demands of the novel as an open form reflective of the novelist's own openness to impressions (whatever they are), and thus as a form having "no limit to [...] possible experiments, efforts, discoveries. . ." (395).

James's argument against artistic limitations, despite his liberal view toward subject matter, does not leave aside a notion of morality, as he would understand it. Unlike Besant, James does not hold a narrow, moralistic view of art. On the contrary, as the essay "The Art of Fiction" spells out, "questions of morality" (411) in literature have all to do with the writer's obligation to explore *all* the truth—never mind how scandalous that truth might be. At the core, or *heart*, of James's conception of the writer-artist is his or her outwardly directed sense of "wonder" about the subject being investigated, which is to say, a certain "sensibility" that the artist possesses that establishes what Dorothy Hale has called an "economy of relation between viewer and viewed." And it is this economy which becomes "the basis for [...] the appreciation of alterity" (86), for one's ethical relation to that which is exterior, to that which is Other.

For James, the serious artist views his subject, as well as his own art, with the discerning eye of the critic, and thus it is not surprising that the two activities—fiction-writing and criticism—are described in similar ways. The critic, James says, is the "real helper of the artist [...] the interpreter, the brother" ("Criticism" 420). And just as the critic helps the literary artist come to a better understanding of his work, the artist stands at the "window of his [character's] wide [...] consciousness" and assists *him* (*AN* 37) to see. The artist's critical discernment, this means, does not translate into subjective possession of the narrative scene: for his is a relationship with the scene that is plainly inter-subjective, in the sense that his authorial identity is enfolded *into* the character's—the author giving himself over to his creature.

Though James may describe the relation between author and character as the "personal possession of one being by another at its completest," the author's role nevertheless becomes, like the critic's, "sacrificial." Like the Jamesian critic whose role is to "lend himself, to project himself and steep himself, to feel and feel till he understands. . ." ("Criticism" 421), so the literary

artist's aim is not only to "assist" the center of consciousness, but to become utterly absorbed by him—the "intensity of the creative effort" being to "get into the skin of the creature" (*AN* 37). Peering through the window of his own character's "wide consciousness," or through one of the million windows within the "house of fiction" (*AN* 46), the author, then, may be said to mirror exactly his "brother" the literary critic, who similarly gazes upon the narrative scene and practices his own interpretive art. For like the literary artist, the critic "lives *in*" his metaphorical "house," translating his many "impressions" into the "liveliest experience," his purpose being to give himself over to the authors and texts he analyzes, and so to deal with "the experience of others, which he resolves into his own" ("Criticism" 421-22).

It is precisely the manner in which the critic approaches *others*, or the otherness of the art work, that becomes the most prominent issue within "The Figure in the Carpet." In this fictionalized reflection on the art of criticism, James's young narrator-critic, in trying to uncover the secret of Hugh Vereker's writing, becomes reminiscent of such Jamesian searchers of the truth as the narrator-critic of *The Aspern Papers* and John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle." Such characters are driven to pursue, hunt down, the object of their quest, and their obsessive struggle to discover the truth becomes a vehicle for James to represent their mainly self-absorbed, egotistical relationship with others. In "The Figure in the Carpet," as in *The Aspern Papers*, James turns his ethical attention specifically toward the act of literary criticism, and more generally toward the kind of epistemological concerns one usually encounters in James. Early in the story, the narrator's search for the "figure in the carpet" demonstrates his acquisitive, self-serving appetite for fame—for being the critic who, within the pages of the journal called "The Middle," will unlock the mystery of Vereker's latest literary masterpiece. His passion, then—contrary to that of James's ideal critic—is directed not toward giving himself over to the author, not toward sacrificing any part of himself for the sake of knowing the author's work. Rather, his is a desire to conquer Vereker, to take critical command over the author's art and, in the process, to possess the author himself (or his final intentions).

If the young critic of James's story fails to obtain Vereker's secret, this is due not only to a failure of analytical skill that results in a "little study" (362), a review, that Vereker mockingly labels as journalistic "twaddle" (362), but, more importantly, to an ethical failure to respond to the Other in ways perhaps best described in the moral philosophy of Henry James's brother William—especially in such essays as "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes a Life Significant" (1899). In these works, William argues that we are blind to "the

feelings of people different from ourselves," insofar as "the subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see" (629-30). We are all too often "insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other" (630). The "vast world of inner life" (634), one's "inner significance" (635), born of a passionate response to experience, is mainly inaccessible to the judging spectator. But the fact that such "inner secrets must remain [...] impenetrable by others" (646) only makes it all the more imperative to acknowledge, or respond to and respect the Other's alien nature. Of course, as far as James's story is concerned, the very secretiveness of the other, or of the other's literary art, is precisely what produces the narrator's desire. It is this secret, what Tzvetan Todorov calls the story's "absolute and absent cause," its "essential secret" (145), that impels interpretation and, hence, the passion to narrate a critical response to the "subject judged." This passion, which is repeatedly suggested in the text through images of fire (364, 365, 373), is important to define, as it is crucial for an understanding of the ethical implications of James's story.

For the narrator, the passionate quest for Vereker's secret is less a matter of sympathetic engagement with the object of his interest than a case of "avidity" (387). It is indeed a proprietary gesture that is figured, initially, in terms of sexual seduction. The young critic may be said, suggestively, to desire the *body* of Vereker's work. With his "tremendous eye" (363), he acts as the consummate reader who sits up "with Vereker half the night" (359), and, soon after meeting him, converses with the great author in the narrator's own bedroom, next to the fire—"the ardent young searcher of truth," blushing to the roots of his hair, trying to know Vereker, to lay him bare (369), to get his "point," to find the "passion of his passion" (365). From the narrator's perspective, theirs is the most intimate of meetings: "I can see him there still, on my rug, in the firelight [...] his fine clear face all bright with the desire to be tender to my youth," saying words "he had never uttered to anyone" (364). Later, when he cannot get what he wants from Vereker, his feelings turn to frustration, jealousy, and hatefulness—suggestive of the emotional tumult experienced over unrequited love. All the clues Vereker gives to the narrator—spelled out only in figurative language, in similes that act as "bait on a hook" or "cheese in a mousetrap" (368)—become temptations to further acts of desire; and when Vereker refers to the obscure "thing" behind his writing as the "organ of life," the human heart (an "element of feeling" rather than of "form" [368]), the narrator still fails to distinguish this organ from the phallus, or his phallic desire to appropriate, "deep down" (376), some "buried treasure" of "gold and gems" (384).

What Vereker calls the "passion of his passion" is not anything like the narrator's all-consuming desire, his intellectual lust; rather it is a certain middle-ground between the libidinal and the intellectual. The name of the journal (the "organ of our lucubrations" [357]), "The Middle," perhaps designates that place between such points of opposition, the place that would become the basis for the kind of critical inquiry that might more responsibly approach the work of literary art. Only the responsive insight of the heart—of which the narrator proves incapable—might allow for a proper engagement with the otherness of Vereker's art, with what Colin Davis might refer to as its "textualized alterity" (39).

It is George Corvick, editor of "The Middle," who gains access to Vereker's secret, though while first pursuing the secret in the same way as does the narrator: like an avid competitor, a game-player sitting across from Vereker's "ghostly form," on the other side of a chessboard; or like a hunter determined to "bring down with [his] own rifle" (377) a wild beast. But Corvick obtains the truth only when, on a business trip, he visits India, where, while experiencing a "difference of thought, of scene" (381), and hence a world foreign to his Western eyes, the desired knowledge is *not* "brought down" forcibly but rather "had sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle" (381).

The truncated message he telegrams back to his finance Gwendolyn Erme after meeting Vereker in Italy—that Vereker "pressed me to bosom" (383)—suggests not a subduing of his beloved author but a surrendering of himself, as he meets the Other, "face to face" (384), on a middle-ground where he becomes exposed to the *heart* of Vereker's art. When, later, it is affirmed that such knowledge can only be conveyed to Gwendolyn following their marriage, one might assume that this knowledge is of a mystical order, an intimate sharing of the other's secret essence. For as the narrator wonders: "was the figure in the carpet discernible only for husband and wife—for lovers supremely united?" (391).

With its allusion to a Vishnu temple that Corvick visits, the story may be suggesting the idea that critical knowledge is dependent on just this sort of spiritual connection to the Other, or on what Hawthorne would call the "truth of the human heart" (xi). But, at the same time, one should understand that James's teasing narrative, which never gives up the secret, never announces it to the reader, may be arguing for a more complicated relation to the Other, one more radical than that which James describes in his essay "Criticism."

As Corvick's knowledge of Vereker's secret is kept undisclosed through the successive deaths of Corvick (who never finishes his critically interpretative portrait of Vereker) and of Gwendolyn, James signals forth the idea that art's

secret, which amounts to the secret of the artist's self, is always something alien, and that the secret of Vereker's art is precisely its own secretiveness. If Corvick obtains any knowledge at all, it is of the sort that might best be understood through the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. According to Levinas, ethics begins in the face-to-face encounter with what he calls the "infinitely other in the other person" (97), an encounter that, from an ethical point of view, implies an "irreducible concern for the other" (97, 98). The other, that is, cannot be completely fathomed, and the ethical is found in recognizing the permanent exteriority of the other and in the responsibility one has for the other who will never be known, who will never ultimately be assimilated by one's self. Facing this infinite otherness, and so coming to terms with one's social involvement, becomes a necessary step in the direction of an ethical relationship with the world. James's story, in this regard, serves as an illustrative example of a *failure* of ethical vision on the part of the narrator: the denial of his ethical role within the social world, his egotistical attempt to assimilate and lay claim to the other.

For the young narrator-critic, Vereker is a figure that the critic, in his supreme egoism, fails to see, a figure whose experience cannot, as James's essay on "Criticism" would have it, be "resolved into [the critic's] own," cannot be assimilated. Insofar as Vereker becomes himself a *figure for* the "figure in the carpet" within his art, he is necessarily at a certain remove from the real thing; and then, when he finally recedes behind the other figures of Corvick and Gwendolyn, he becomes but a ghostly presence. Though the narrator fails to perceive the futility of his quest for the secret knowledge, Gwendolyn, author of the novel "The Overmastered," seems to articulate the problem with his venture. For, when the narrator selfishly appeals to her for access to the secret once communicated to her by the now deceased Corvick, she can only tell him that, in making this request, he is offending "The Dead" (392)—thus calling attention to Vereker's secret in terms of its pure alterity, of its being something infinitely other.

Unable to experience the sort of ethical awakening of, say, John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" or of George Stransom in *The Altar of the Dead*—both of whom come to acknowledge their obligation to others and who finally, in the last moments of their depicted lives, see their need to sacrifice for the other—James's narrator-critic of "The Figure in the Carpet" refuses to give up his "tremendous eye," his desire for mastery, failing as he does to comprehend that his "I" cannot help but be "overmastered" by the Other. In the end, as the narrative comes to a close, he can only try to seduce Gwendolyn's new husband Drayton Deane into sharing his proprietary pursuit

of Vereker. As he feels himself a victim of "unappeased desire" (400), his final passion is not love, but, as the text plainly states, "revenge" (400). Hence his ethical failure to become the critic who would, ideally, be something of a "brother" to the artist, who would, in short, respect his artist-brother *as other*.

As a final point to the story of the way in which Jamesian aesthetics and ways of seeing have implication for a certain ethics in James's writing, it may be interesting to note how the two James brothers, that is, the aesthetically oriented fiction writer Henry and the ethical philosopher William, tended to read each other. William, as it turns out, was not always the ideal critic for his novelist brother; and in a 1905 letter to William, Henry complains of the way his brother misreads his literary work, or at least reads it unsympathetically. For William, as Henry says, seems "condemned to look at [my work] from a point of view remotely alien to mine [...] and to the conditions out of which, *as* mine, it has inevitably sprung." Despite their different vocations, despite to what "different ends [the brothers] have had to work out [...] [their] respective intellectual lives," Henry, unlike William, reveals a desire to respond to and recognize the singularity of William's difference, his otherness. While William may not find affinity with, or even wish to read, Henry's novels, Henry, on the other hand, declares in a tone that shows his longing to make a sympathetic connection: "... yet I can read *you* with rapture" (661). Henry concludes his letter by extending himself both intellectually and emotionally to his brother, affirming to him: "Philosophically [...] I am 'with' you, almost completely, and you ought to take account of this. . ." (662). Giving himself over to his brother, Henry is "with" him, and he wishes he could be recognized in an equally sympathetic light.

To read passionately, and beyond the limits of self, and to respect and offer oneself up, "almost completely," to the other: it is likely that this ethical lesson is one that Henry encounters within his brother's own writings, reading as he does—with the brotherly eye of the critic—William's ethical philosophy perhaps more productively than William has been able to read it himself.

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