



James and Entitlement

Jeremy Tambling

► To cite this version:

Jeremy Tambling. James and Entitlement. Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 2003, Henry James and Other Essays, 23, pp.91-100. hal-02344249

HAL Id: hal-02344249

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344249>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

James and Entitlement*

Titles launch explanation, or the possibility of it, and so they have an indeterminate relation to the novels they introduce. In George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) one aspiring writer, who thinks of the market, suggests that the title is everything: "Can't we invent a good title—something to catch eye and ear? The title would suggest the story."¹ That is one view of the function of titles, and how they help. Robert Maguire, speaking about Gogol, discusses the differences between his "low key" titles versus "the cryptic or teasing titles with which, say, readers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are familiar." In the latter,

we are prepared for strange and unusual happenings, yet find that the stories end in very ordinary ways. [...] Gogol, on the contrary, moves from a title that seems perfectly plain and obvious, to the conclusion that nothing can be fully understood, that the ordinary yields to the extraordinary, and that puzzlement is the normal condition after things have run their course.²

How do titles work out in James, a contemporary of Doyle and Gissing, but a writer with the power of puzzlement of Gogol?

"There is no greater work of art than a great portrait," James said in relation to John Singer Sargent in 1893.³ (But that does not make portraiture inherently the best: it must be a "great" portrait). This judgement would make *The Portrait of a Lady* paradigmatic of James's art, and it would make the title like the frame of the portrait; it frames the text, as Isabel Archer appears to Ned Rosier: "Framed in the gilded doorway she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady" (IV: 105).⁴ But this assumes that the subject-matter of the novel is Isabel Archer, and that it is a representation of her character. It could just as easily be shown that the text argues how she comes to be reduced to being a

* This paper was read at the 2002 International Henry James Conference in Paris.

¹ George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993) 76.

² Robert A. Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 203.

³ Quoted by Charles Caramello, *Henry James, Gertrude Stein and the Biographical Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 1.

⁴ Except the quotations from *The Sacred Fount*, all our references to James's novels are taken from the New York edition.

portrait, which would imply something dead, reduced to stillness. The title is ambiguous, in spite of the fact that, like so many other of James's titles, it seems to be so finished, so precise and specific, that they do seem to belong to an art exact and circumscribed as portraiture. They are not quite readable, even though they seem, as Matthiessen claimed, to "extend a metaphor into a symbol."⁵

Jonathan Freedman connects Rossetti's lyric "The Portrait" which contains the words: "This is her picture as she was/It seems a thing to wonder on," via *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the picture of "the man with the mask in his hand" in *The Sacred Fount* (1901), to the "wonderful," the "mysterious" Bronzino portrait in *The Wings of the Dove* (XIX: 220).⁶ This picture has been identified with Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi in the Uffizi. Milly Theale, treated as a commodity herself on account of her wealth, sees the picture, which is also an aspect of the worship of the commodity as "unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. 'I shall never be better than this'" (XIX: 221).

In *The Sacred Fount* the picture of the man with the mask is not identified. It shows "a young man in black—a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown. In his hand he holds an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure and ambiguous work of art, but that on second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human."

In late medieval texts, this presentation of a death's head, which seems to be there both in the figure and in what he is holding, would make the text one cognizant of death existing within writing (the *memento mori* theme). Mrs. Server wants to call the picture "The Mask of Death" (which would connect with Edgar Allan Poe). The narrator would rather call it "The Mask of Life" since "it's the man's own face that's Death. The other one, blooming and beautiful [...] is Life, and he's going to put it on, unless indeed he has just taken it off."⁷ This life/death antithesis would fit with the place given to the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which may be James's source for the title of *The*

⁵ F.O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944) 70. Pages 70 to 73 refer to allegory and symbolism in James.

⁶ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 203, 211-2.

⁷ *The Sacred Fount*, John Lyon (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 4: 34.

Ambassadors.⁸ In the case of *The Ambassadors* it recalls that early plans for it as a story placed it in a collection called *Les Vieux*.⁹ And a draft title—James called it a “label”—for *The Wings of the Dove*, was, in December 1895, *La Mourante* (N: 146).

But neither the picture in *The Sacred Fount* nor the picture in *The Wings of the Dove* are identified. They remain untitled. And this implies two things: first, that the absence of a title allows the pictures to be taken as ascriptions of death. Second, that the rush to entitle a picture might mean that titles become titles of death. This would be true of Mrs. Server, of course, since she wants to call the picture “The Mask of Death,” but it is also true that the desire to name the unnamed, the desire to entitle, is the desire to kill off the artwork, by giving it a complete interpretation, to destroy what is in the work. The narrator wants to call the picture the mask of life, but he is forced to say that the life which the figure of death is about to put on is “artificial.” This means that life cannot be seen as natural, which means that it is not life. And Mrs. Server might be more right than she thinks in her choice of title, since the title might be a mask, like “the mask and not the face of the house,” as the facade of Gilbert Osmond's villa is described in *The Portrait of a Lady* (III: 325). And is not a façade like a title? Or it might be like the death's head in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which, like a smear, has the power to obliterate the sense of life within the text.

Putting these together, and from the conversation in *The Sacred Fount*, comes the idea of the title as a mask. It says nothing; it conceals. This is linked to the mutuality of relationship which has been established between pictures—as emblemizing death—(*The Wings of the Dove*) and titles as evoking death or death-dealing. The association finds more substance when the title announces itself as a picture, as in *The Portrait of a Lady*, or when the title, which evokes a precious artefact, as in *The Ivory Tower*, evokes death in the adjective, like Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*. The unfinished *The Ivory Tower* describes the novel, just as the artefact is described in it.¹⁰ Throughout James, there appears the attention to art in titles: *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875); *The*

⁸ See on the pictorialism in James: Adeline R. Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993). For James and Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (thinking of both title and subject-matter) see my *Henry James: Critical Issues* (London: Macmillan, 2000) 46-7.

⁹ Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (eds.) *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). “Or what shall I call it in English—*Old Fellows*? No, that's trivial and common.” 31 Oct. 1895, 141. Further references in the text.

¹⁰ Title for *The Ivory Tower*—*The K.B. Case and Mrs. Max* (N.256)—Katherine De Kay Bronson. cp. N: 203, and note N: 222. She was a figure associated with Venice for James.

Madonna of the Future (1875); *The Europeans: A Sketch* (1878); *Daisy Miller: A Study* (1878); *The Point of View* (1883); *Portraits of Places* (1883); *A Landscape Painter* (1885); *Partial Portraits* (1888); *Picture and Text* (1893); *The Beldonald Holbein* (1903); *The Two Faces* (1903); *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* (1903); *The American Scene* (1907).¹¹ Similarly, the numerous titles in James which evoke people, predominantly female, indicate the interest in portraiture. A draft title for *The Bostonians* (1886) was *Verena*.¹² Of *Daisy Miller*, Donatella Izzo writes:

the female character is both central, as the title shows, and virtually deprived of a voice of her own. All characters discuss her and evaluate her behaviour all the time, but the reader is never offered direct access to her consciousness and motives.¹³

And Daisy Miller is also dead by the end. Izzo draws attention to the nexus of “gaze-woman-beauty-*objet d’art*” in James, which she relates to the prevalence of motifs of painting, collecting and museums, and to another nexus, that of “woman-speaking-silence-sexuality,” where portraiture and death are again associated.

What is a title? The dialogue from *The Turn of the Screw* will be remembered when the houseguests ask Douglas about the story he is about to read them:

“What’s your title?”
 “I haven’t one.”
 “Oh I have” I said. (XII: 151)

From this cryptic statement, it may be said that having a title implies:

- First, possession of a title, such as a title to property which would give possession (contrast what happens to Miles, who is properly the “owner” of Bly: “his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”). James’s critique of the English titled system is evident, as in *An International Episode* and *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* where an aristocratic title is

¹¹ This was originally to be called *The Return of the Native*. See my *Lost in the American City: Dickens, James, Kafka* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 107.

¹² “I haven’t even a name for my novel and fear I shall have to call it simply *Verena*: the heroine. I should like something more descriptive—but everything that is justly descriptive won’t do—*The Newness—The Reformers—The Precursors—The Revealer—etc.*—all very bad, and with the additional fault that people will say they are taken from Daudet’s *Evangeliste*.” So runs the Notebook entry for September 1884 (N: 30).

¹³ Donatella Izzo, *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) 23.

given and withheld in the name “Lord (title) Mark”: (no name: just a mark, like an x). The titled system becomes an image to think through what titlement and non-entitlement means.

- Second, possession of a name. The governess, like women potentially, and like her class and profession in particular, is unnamed.
- Third, the entitlement to tell a story. This includes Douglas's lack of entitlement to tell the governess's story, and the lack of entitlement of the narrator to pass on the story that Douglas has retold. A title would be a password, a permission to proceed. Telling a story cannot be authorized; narratives have no authority, no entitlement to their existence; author and title are both additions to the text, which try to stabilize it.
- Fourth, to have a title gives a licence to interpret, like Mrs. Server and the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, and Shoshana Felman's analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* makes clear that no-one can interpret—for interpretation is only possible within what Foucault calls “the discourse of truth.” Hence the importance of having no title.

But in any case, the title cannot be established here as authorizing, for the meaning of the title *The Turn of the Screw* cannot be understood apart from the conversation in the novel: “if the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children?” (XII: 148). Its meaning is generated after the story has been told, though in the conversation quoted, the narrator of the frame-narrative thinks of the title before she hears the story (I assume the gender of the narrator here: since the narrator is also untitled, it will be seen that title links to the assigning of gender, as part of the will to interpret). So, the title does not make sense unless the story has been heard; the story creates the meaning of the title. Further, the title can come before the story is heard which means that the title constitutes the story, as the letter constitutes the subject in Lacan's reading of “The Purloined Letter.” And finally, the act of giving a title is arbitrary, coming from an unnamed person with no entitlement, save that in England, titles may be hereditary, passed on after death. The governess and Douglas both pass on the text as an act in relation to their deaths. But to pass on the text and to pass on an interpretation, as in a title, are two different things.

The Turn of the Screw is an example of a title which “doesn't tell” in any “vulgar” sense. This means that it does not stand separate from the text as giving a meaning which could be intuited, and it becomes paradigmatic of a problem. The title of a text, which elevates it into a book, into something complete, (if a painting is called “untitled” it is still a title and the picture is

thereby finished), is the parergon, like the frame which is both part of the painting and not part of the painting. The title is neither inside the work nor outside. Though the word implies a superscription, it comes at the end, written afterwards (separate from the writing, as James's revisions of titles will indicate). It draws its existence from the work without which it can be said to have no existence, Titles fail to relate to contents, and titles kill off the contents. From the outside perspective, the title cannot stand alone, it is a metonym for the work it tries to sum up as though in a metaphor. It is interesting that the narrator in *The Turn of the Screw* finds the title before the contents, a title which she must feel enables her to pass the story on. But even her freedom is illusory, for the title *The Turn of the Screw* does not apply to the story the governess tells (which remains untitled and unauthored, in the text), but to the narrative including the frame narrative in which she herself plays a part, alongside Douglas, the story-teller. Her attempt to write a title, to entitle herself, fails. Her statement "Oh I have" is illusory: no-one has titles; though the British class system conceals the point, which is part of James's fascination with the "international theme," where a society with no titles (America) meets one which makes pretensions to them, with the idea that the subject can be authorized.

The "American countess" who appears briefly in chapter 18 of *What Maisie Knew* might be, apart from the comedy it suggests, a comment on the inevitable catechresis involved in all naming, or titling. The narrator in *The Turn of the Screw* cannot stand outside, anonymous and unknown, since she is part of the text she wishes to have the vantage-point of standing outside, through assigning a title. As there is no "outside text" (Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*),¹⁴ the title interprets her too. A similar point might be made about *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903), whose name was changed from *John Marcher*. The draft name would make this the portrait of a man; the changed title reifies the metaphor that he lives by and gives it a status so that his own creation, which in his own perception overwhelms him at the last, now truly enframes him. And yet it is a title without a referent.

The Turn of the Screw is highly abstract as a title. It seems that there is a tendency towards two things which are related: to abstraction and towards value. We move, in James, from *The American* (1877)—which as a title implies "the naive aggressiveness of the national type"¹⁵—to the abstract *The Golden*

¹⁴ See note by Derek Attridge (ed.), *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 102.

¹⁵ Charles R. Anderson, *Person, Place and Thing in Henry James's Novels* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977) 54.

Bowl. The James titles which have to do with value include those which imply the work of art, but also include *The Aspern Papers* (1888), and *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897; serialized as *The Old Things* (N: 80), but before that, given the Bunyan-inspired allegorical and ironic title of *House Beautiful* (N: 155). The notion of value applies to *The Golden Bowl*, once called more neutrally, and yet quite ironically, *The Marriages* (N: 146); while *The Ivory Tower* as a title follows on from that one. Value and the commodity are hinted at in the title *The Wings of the Dove* and are implied in the opulence necessary for the title *The Ambassadors*.

Value and abstraction both seem marked by death, and this appears in the “major phase” novels: *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). The title in the first does not relate to the events in Paris, except through hyperbole: it ironizes those events as it ironizes both Massachusetts and Paris. In a related case, *The Jolly Corner*, the title expresses something in excess of any signified, the adjective being almost hysterically different from the contents of the text. In the case of *The Golden Bowl*, the title has both an independent life as a memory of Ecclesiastes 12.6 and another as evoking an object which is a symbol in the text—a symbol of a symbol. But the symbol it conjures up also fails, since the golden bowl as a signifier of something complete is a catachresis; the bowl is cracked, and the title fails to be a title.

In the case of the second novel of the major phase, *The Wings of the Dove*, which I want to examine more closely, the title has an entirely opposite value. It is absolutely precise, as a metonym (the wings), which relates to a name (another metonym) given to one of the characters by another. Kate Croy calls Millie Theale a dove (XIX: 283), so that the word “dove” is a metonymy for a woman; the title, which evokes Hilda's doves in *The Marble Faun*, is itself a de-realizing of the character—it takes away something from her, and the title, in that it comes out of Kate's conceit, is, like the title *The Beast in the Jungle*, an instance of a metaphor which returns to entrap Kate, as much as it continues to keep Millie Theale as a part-object. In the second reference to the character as a dove, Kate says “one somehow doesn't think of doves as bejewelled,” while at the same time Densher reflects on the “element of wealth” in Millie Theale “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” (XX: 218). Mrs. Lowder describes Millie's death euphemistically—she “has folded her wings”—which turns out not to be a description of her death at all, but a reference to what she has done with her money in dying—hence Mrs. Lowder continues her sentence “unless it's more true [...] that she has spread them

the wider" (XX: 356), meaning that Millie Theale may have left her money. In both these cases the wings are the display of conspicuous consumption: the title, which *could* have been *The Portrait of a Lady*, on account of the Bronzino portrait, translates as "the money of the woman." In this it contradicts or questions the Biblical uses of the "wings of the dove" (Psalm 55.6: "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away and be at rest" and Psalm 68.13: "though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver and her feathers with fine gold"). Kate thinks of the wings at the end: "Well, she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us" (XX: 404). The activity of stretching out the wings is inseparable from death: death, the money, the woman are aligned, but Kate, covered by the wings which she and Densher have evoked, is also now entrapped.

The title ("dove") that is given to Millie Theale and which she accepts limits her forthwith—it is a way for the characters to try to possess her by titling her (as opposed to entitling her). The contest in the novel is for possession. Densher makes Kate Croy come to him to show his possession of her. Possession and dispossession work analogously to having a title and not having one. They are the same, for the novel dramatizes, as does *The Turn of the Screw*, the impossibility of thinking that one can be in possession without simultaneously being dispossessed. Millie Theale seems to be in "a state of uplifted and unlimited possession" (XIX: 124) but is wondering "if I shall have much of it" (XIX: 130). The title is the spectral, or the uncanny at the heart of James that makes the title to a text uncanny too as the uncanny is spectral; the title is both that which enables (as being familiar) and which takes away the sense (as unfamiliar). It is both absence and presence, a figure for the text.

We name to confer distinction; it is part of the investment we make in the concept of the isolatable, discrete single subject that "we" consider ourselves to be. It is noticeable that James' titles tend to be unitary in nature (*The Wings of the Dove* is of a different order of titles from, say, *Romeo and Juliet*), there is a clue given by the dialogue between Mrs. Server and the narrator. The same picture can be given opposite titles—"the mask of death" or "the mask of life." (Does death mask life, or does life mask death?). The point is that the picture is dual, containing a face and a mask, but implying that the face may also *be* a mask, another one. If so, the title cannot point to anything unitary, either in itself or in what it represents. The unity of symbolism is broken.

This breakdown, and the deadness within titles, which do not relate to what they signify, and which may be given a plural or riddling meaning or contain an ambiguity about the referent, are all suggestive. Who are the

“Bostonians” of the title, and who is the pupil in *The Pupil* (1892)? *The Other House* (1896), originally called *The Promise* (N: 146) implies a question, so does *What Maisie Knew* (1897)—where the title re-poses as a non-statement an answer to Mrs. Wix’s question. It says of the book: *this* is what she knew, and interpret it if you can. Some titles enforce a sense that the story is all there is to say—*The Real Thing* (1893) and *The Real Right Thing* (1900), but in doing so, imply a lack of fit with the text, something not quite right or ironic, or enigmatic: that the title as an image implies something riddling, like a Renaissance emblem. The tendency towards allegorical titles is in Hawthorne, as in *The Scarlet Letter*, where the very “letter” may be “A” for allegory. It raises the question of the presence of allegory (for all his critique of it in Hawthorne) in James. The feeling against allegory is resistance to the idea of the status of things being that of *figura*; the move towards allegory, if it is there in James, is the acceptance of the spectral, the non-real.

The Renaissance emblem, which resists interpretation, and one form of which appears in the Holbein *Ambassadors*, and in allegory, is the subject of Walter Benjamin. He discusses allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and again in his work on Baudelaire, part of the *Arcades* project. Benjamin opposes allegory to the symbol.¹⁶ The symbol exists in an ideal world which seems to yield a total truth, but allegory, as the despised “other” of symbolism within romantic theory, because it seems to confront death, and its most representative image is the death’s head, which suggests the picture in *The Sacred Fount*, is the fragment, a ruin. In allegory, “any person, any object, any relation, can mean absolutely anything else” (Benjamin 175). Titles lose their specificity—or works lose their specificity in relation to titles; uniqueness is gone. This means that the title, as one image, is juxtaposed to the text which it cannot however complete; the illusion of a unity between the title and the text—which would be a unified work of “art”—is broken.

The value of connecting titles with allegory is that in Benjamin allegory is the state for thinking of those things which no longer possess life: fragments, shards, ruins, which cannot be assigned a total significance. But to speak of “life” at all is suspect, for what is valuable in the context of high capitalism is not life but the commodity, which, according to Benjamin, is the fetish.¹⁷ The fetish can be thought of through the work of Marx or Freud, but the task of allegory is to indicate that the commodity is such. The object invested with life conceals

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977) 166. Further references are included in the text.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973) 171.

its artificial status. Those objects of value in James, which attract the collector, a significant figure in James's work (as in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Ivory Tower*) are prize achievements of high capitalism, but while the text records them, they are also criticized by it, as when Millie Theale sees death in the priceless Bronzino.

The allegorist, then, both shows the fetish-like nature of what is valued as the symbol, and then performs another work on the object, in discovering a connection with it, which would be to reinvest it with value. Benjamin compares the allegorist with the collector, and this might be a point for thinking of James as a collector too. But not like Adam Verver who works in the sphere of the obviously valuable, and is interested in those things which seem to preserve life and unity, like symbols, and not in those things from which value has leached out, which are fragmented, like allegory. James's titles uniquely point out the ambiguous value of what they point to and in that sense they are not only allegorical, but fragments themselves, indicative of meanings that have disappeared.

Jeremy TAMBLING
University of Hong Kong

