

Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*: Nouveau Roman avant la Lettre?

H. A. BOURAOUI, *York University, Toronto*

At a first glance, *The Sacred Fount* strikes the reader as an atypical Henry James novel. Although it has a central intelligence who resembles, in some ways, Lambert Strether, his vision is not fleshed out by fully developed characters. If we think of James as the father of the modern novel, it is of the novel of manners or psychological novel in a more or less traditional sense. In most of his best known works, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Ambassadors*, he dramatizes changes in the characters which lead to their growth into instruments of fine perception. In *The Sacred Fount*, however, the narrator's perceptions are baffling because they are fragmented, almost by a technique of *gommages*. He builds up a complicated structure, a theory, only to have it demolished by the uncooperative acquaintances he is trying to fit into it. His vision is constantly being modified and corrected until it becomes many-layered and blurred, like the rococo style in which Newmarch, the estate where it all takes place, is built and ornamented. Such a work as *The Sacred Fount*, constructed à *hâchures*, invites the reader to construct his own critical theory similarly, so that he can easily understand the wide range of critical interpretations, even including the theory that the novel is a parody or a "self-satire that misfired."¹

If we can for the moment divest ourselves of preconceptions about James's manner and characteristic concerns, we may find that there is a side of James that has not yet been brought sufficiently to light, a side which is found principally in some of his short stories about artists and writers and again in *The Sacred Fount*. In these he employs certain techniques and themes which do not seem, at least at first, to be consonant with those found in James's other major works.

In a letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward, which has been quoted both by Leon Edel and by Jean Blackall, James affords us grounds for supposing that he conceived of this novel as an exploration of the function and limits of fiction. Although he calls the book itself "a *consistent* joke," he also takes care to affirm that it has "its own little law of composition."² It is, in fact, a *stripped* novel, almost a Flaubertian "livre sur rien," in which *only* the principle of composition really matters. It is defined at least as much by what it lacks as by what it possesses, and grows out of concerns which are implicit in all of James's novels, and explicit in his essay, "The Art of Fiction," and in *The Stories of Artists and Writers*, which immediately precede *The Sacred Fount*.

William Dean Howells once claimed he had the clue to James's intention and principle of composition, but never revealed his secret.³ Most critics, like Edel and Mrs. Blackall, have claimed that if the novel has any significance, it is as a working sketch for *The Ambassadors* and "The Beast in the Jungle," both written shortly after *The Sacred Fount*. They also divide roughly into two camps on the theme of the conflict between art and reality. Some, like Wilson Follett, feel that reality, in the person of Mrs. Brissenden, triumphs and completely routs the "atrocious" imagination of the narrator; while others, like R. P. Blackmur and Edward Sackville-West, feel that, although the narrator's

artistic vision excludes reality, it is also superior to it. Actually, the date of composition of the work, combined with the internal evidence of the text, may suggest just what James's little "joke"—and perhaps the narrator's—was. The narrator sees himself as a "pantaloons,"⁴ but since James himself describes the work as a "consistent joke," he may be underlining the idea that the narrator is also an artist figure, perpetrating a joke. Despite the high seriousness of James's view of fiction, he frequently focuses, in his short stories as well as his novels, on the irony and ambiguity of the artist's plight. Placing *The Sacred Fount* within the context of James's aesthetic theory at this period may help to clarify the intention of this enigmatic work.

The Sacred Fount was never really understood in its own time, nor has it achieved any wide popularity today. Yet if we assumed that it had been published in the 1950's or '60's, instead of 1901, it might take on rather a different coloration for us. It might look, in fact, remarkably like a French "new novel," rather like, most notably, Nathalie Sarraute's *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956). Both have been compared to intellectual detective stories. Both focus briefly but significantly on a mysterious anonymous portrait, and both examine a world in which "things" or surface can overwhelm our inner lives. Finally, and most importantly, both novels take place entirely within the mind of a first-person narrator who may or may not be truly worthy, who tries to bring to the surface the "substratum" underlying our social amenities and everyday life and conversation.

Although there seems to be no *direct* evidence that Nathalie Sarraute had James's novel in mind when she wrote *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, from the internal evidence of the text such as interpretation seems feasible. At the very least, the parallel suggests that James was conducting a fictional experiment similar to those of Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and Butor, and that his experiment was not so much an artistic failure as it was ahead of its own time. In her essay, "What Birds See," Sarraute mentions James, together with Marcel Proust, as pioneers in the interior monologue which has had so tremendous an impact on contemporary fiction: "It suffices to recall what a revelation the interior monologue was for us; the wariness with which we regarded and at times still regard the efforts of Henry James or Proust to take apart the delicate wheelworks of our inner mechanisms."⁵ Indeed, her first person narrator in *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, like James's narrator, never identified by name, also, like James's narrator, suspects the existence of a vampirical love-hate relationship, this time between father and daughter. Like James's narrator, he seems on the verge of falling in love with his creation, the daughter as he has conceived her, when his vision is nullified—or is it?—by her engagement to a commonplace, older, prosperous bourgeois.

Although it would be impossible within the scope of a short article to deal with all of James's works concerning the problem of the artist, *The Sacred Fount* is his fullest exposition of this theme. A close examination of the workings of the narrator's creative imagination may help to account for the apparent lack of *épaisseur* or opacity of the other characters, as well as for our constant awareness of the rococo setting of Newmarch itself.

One key artistic analogy explored by the narrator seems to be a concrete embodiment or microcosm of his own technique of *gommages* and of angles of vision which are completely blurred or *embrouillés*. Although it is never mentioned again and establishes no pattern of imagery, its influence, like that of Nathalie Sarraute's *portrait d'un inconnu*, pervades the entire novel.

It is a portrait of a young man in black, archaic dress, with pale, thin face and a stare "like that of some whitened old-world clown" (p. 55). We learn the identity neither of the artist nor of the subject, as is the case also with the Sarraute portrait. He holds a wax human mask in his hand, resembling "some obscure, some ambiguous work of art" (p. 55). Mrs. Server thinks of it as a "Mask of Death" and implies that it resembles the face of some man at the party—possibly the narrator, whose keen insight she fears. He, on the other hand, sees the man's own face as Death, and the mask as Life, "blooming and beautiful" (p. 56). Obert and the narrator see the mask as a lovely lady, probably Mrs. Server, but she exclaims it wears "an awful grimace"—which the narrator sees later on her own face as she keeps up her pretense of wit and cleverness. It is on this portrait too that Gilbert Long delivers an aesthetic lecture. Since the narrator imagines that Long is May Server's lover and that he is draining her intelligence to feed his own, he is ready to believe that Long's discourse—which he does not, moreover, actually hear—gives evidence of his sharpened wit.

In fact, the portrait may suggest *all* of the characters as their lives intertwine in the writer's imagination. The mask would easily be the product of that imagination, a work of art open to multiple levels of interpretation. In perceiving it, each of the characters sees himself and his own plight. Various aspects of the portrait appear in characters throughout the novel, suggesting this fusion. The narrator, for instance, as we have already seen, describes himself at one point as a "pantaloan," or old-world clown (p. 111). But Lady John, with her wit as pointed as a hairpin, also resembles a "clown bounding into the ring" (p. 18). She is really, Mrs. Briss would have us believe, in the role the narrator would assign to Mrs. Server, and some readers would assign to Mrs. Briss herself—that of Gilbert Long's mistress.⁶ But Lady John simply does not interest the narrator—she is transparent like a shop-window, and therefore not fit material for the imagination which, "in her presence, was but the weak wing of the insect that bumps against the glass" (p. 17). But Briss and Mrs. Server, who are the victimized counterparts, are also both identified with the grimacing mask, for Briss, like the mask, is like "plastic wax" (p. 126) in the narrator's hands. Similarly, the narrator also speculates that Long and Mrs. Briss are counterparts, "each a mirror for the other" (p. 294). Ford Obert, the painter, assumes the narrator's clandestine appointment at the end of the novel is with Mrs. Server, not Mrs. Briss, so that time and again, in all this role-playing, we have the feeling that the women are doubles for each other. The doubling of all the characters, together with the malleability of the mask in the portrait, suggest the workings of the narrator's artistic imagination. The portrait is itself a microcosm of the entire novel, which bears only a tangential resemblance to reality, and in which the narrator is free to choose the characters worthy of peopling his vision and to effect constant erasures and substitutions.

The crucial question is judging whether the narrator is indeed poetically inspired, as we have been supposing, or whether he is mad, as Mrs. Briss asserts in the climactic interview at the end of the novel, is whether he is aware of the discrepancy that must necessarily exist between artistic perfection and the sordidness of most human affairs. To answer this question we need to know what sort of man he is, and this we must piece together from miscellaneous bits of evidence dropped by himself and various other characters, and from the workings of his imagination. He is evidently a man alone in the world, like many of James's artists who are wedded to their vocation. No woman is customarily invited to accompany him to house parties, and he seems

to subsist on the lives of others. There is a wistful thread of a potential love story with May Server, perhaps resembling John Marcher's with May Bartram in "The Beast in the Jungle," but he says that he is "quite too sorry for her to be anything but sorry" (p. 95). Like Strether in *The Ambassadors* or Paul Overt in "The Lesson of the Master," he renounces any possibility of emotional fulfillment for the "personal privilege" of understanding (p. 273). If he is attached to Mrs. Server, it is as a predator is "attached, morally, to one's prey" (p. 93), or as an artist is attached to his creation. She is, in fact, his very principle of composition, for he speaks of "the so salient little figure of Mrs. Server, still the controlling image for me, the real principle of composition, in this affluence of fine things" (p. 167).

His tendency to substitute images and analogies for documentary realism is so amply demonstrated that a listing of the key metaphors would be a study in itself. The entire plot he dreams up is based, in the first place, on an analogy between the legitimate relation of Mr. and Mrs. Brissenden, in which he sees the one draining the other of youth and appearance, and the more sinister hypothetical relationship between Mrs. Server and Gilbert Long, in which the one drains the other of wit and intelligence. Clearly, James himself, like the narrator, is more fascinated by the intellectual than by the physical vampirism. This perception of an analogy leads the narrator in turn to the metaphor of the sacred fount, which, as Leon Edel explains in his preface to the Grove Press edition, is derived from the legend of Egeria, a nymph from whom King Numa drew wisdom.⁷ Patterns of water imagery reinforce the theme of depletion suggested by the central metaphor. The narrator sees in Mrs. Server, for instance, "a sponge wrung dry and with fine pores agape" (p. 136). She is also, according to him, a potential shipwreck whose "attractions so great might float her even a long time after intelligence pure and simple should have collapsed" (p. 99).

The metaphor of the fount also has religious associations, which the narrator frequently exploits. He says of both Guy Brissenden and Mrs. Server, "They had truly been arrayed and anointed, they had truly been isolated, for their sacrifice" (p. 169). The crucial aspect of the fount metaphor, however, is that it is emblematic of a *spiritual* feast rather than of the mere *physical* gifts accorded to Mrs. Briss by Guy. The improvement in Mrs. Briss's appearance and self-confidence is, moreover, easily explained and recognized by others as well as the narrator; the alterations in Gilbert Long and Mrs. Server are neither so clearly defined nor so consistently evident to the other characters. It may well be that the narrator is aware all along that the relations between Long and Mrs. Server exist only in his own imagination, in the realm of art; and the corollary to this interpretation of his conduct is that he (like most of the Jamesian artists) has little interest in the mere realism in which the relationship between Mrs. Briss and Guy exists.

It is, however, the artistic analogies, rather than the various other patterns, which most clearly reveal the bent of the narrator's genius. He frequently suggests parallels between his activities and those of artists, as when, in the central house party scene, the entire group is listening to a pianist: ". . . and so it was that, while our pianist played, my wandering vision played and played as well" (p. 169). More importantly, he constantly invites comparison of his own verbal art with Ford Obert's pictorial art. As he says facetiously to Obert, who is going to vie in perception with him: "I only talk . . . as you paint; not a bit worse!" (p. 30). Later he agrees with Obert that he, the verbal artist, is the more knowledgeable of the two.

The narrator also frequently uses architectural imagery to describe his sense of relations, speaking of "that special beauty in my scheme through which the whole depended so on each part and each part so guaranteed the whole" (p. 223).⁸ He creates a "perfect palace of thought" (p. 311), which Mrs. Briss treats as a "house of cards" and tries to turn into "a pile of ruins" (p. 312). Much of the architectural imagery is suggested by Newmarch itself, that "funny house" where "one may do what one likes" (pp. 244-245).

If the characters seem to exist only as objects for the narrator's observation and as pawns to display his narrative skill, the setting, similarly, remains undefined, schematized, puzzling. Its primary function seems to be that of a storehouse of artistic, architectural, and natural analogies to the imagined situations of the characters. Newmarch is the traditional English country house so favored by James from *The Portrait of a Lady* onward, but Newmarch, unlike Gardencourt, seems to have no visible host or hostess. It merely provides the occasion for a gathering of the leisure class, and is a showcase of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century paintings and statuary. It also has grounds replete with geometric gardens and spacious vistas through which the other personages can conveniently present themselves to the narrator's observation. As we shall see, James's use of this setting is not unlike Alain Robbe-Grillet's exploitation of endless corridors, doors opening upon surprising scenes, geometric and labyrinthine gardens in his screenplay for *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. There is in both artists a Flaubertian preoccupation with the world of *things* and with a character's attempt to define himself and others through a suggestive connection with these things—objects d'art, furniture, statuary, and so on.

Although the narrator first receives food for his imagination on the train from London, his fancy really takes wing only because he is heading towards Newmarch, and scarcely takes cognizance of reality again from the moment he sets foot on the estate. If Newmarch can be seen as a storehouse of materials for the Jamesian novelist of manners and morals, *The Sacred Fount*, far from being atypical James, is the Jamesian novel par excellence, abstracted into two entities: the observer, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost,"⁹ and the observed. It may be in this way that the novel can be interpreted as "an apologue or parable,"¹⁰ as the narrator calls it. And what the narrator observes at Newmarch may reveal the novelist's power "to guess the unseen from the seen."¹¹

When we first see Newmarch, the impression is one of richness, of a darkness to be penetrated by the imagination's inner lights: "The picture without was all morning and August, and within all clear dimness and rich gleams. We stopped once or twice, raking the gloom for lights . . ." (p. 37). We have a sense of spacious architecture, the overarching ceiling resembling that of the dome of St. Peter's which, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, has often been taken as an analogue of the heroine's far-ranging curiosity and intelligence: "The high frescoed ceiling arched over a floor so highly polished that it seemed to reflect the faded pastels set, in rococo borders, in the walls and constituting the distinction of the place" (p. 50). Moreover, the reflecting mirror of the floor suggests the power of art as a reflector of the human experience.

The two principal women, May Server and Mrs. Briss, are often likened to the faded pastels of two centuries ago. Mrs. Server is compared to a

Greuze painting, and is seen as "an old dead pastel under glass" (p. 51). As she looks up at "the painted dome" (p. 51), she seems almost herself to be the spirit of the place. It seems, says the narrator, to meet "her special taste," and she seems "more than ever a person to have a lover imputed" (p. 51). The date of the place, which is "a triumph of the florid decoration of two centuries ago" (p. 51), may suggest its special hold on her spirit, for the narrator sees her as a woman belonging to a king's court, perhaps that of Louis XIV, as a sort of courtesan perhaps. Like a courtesan, too, she can become a kind of profane religious sacrifice to expediency, and seems almost to be worshipping her own past at this shrine: ". . . a kind of profane piety had dropped on her, drizzling down, in the cold light, in silver, in crystal, in faint, mixed delicacies of colour, almost as on a pilgrim at a shrine" (p. 51). Moreover, in the one reference to the actual color of the women's costumes, which comes at the crucial moment when Mrs. Briss recognizes that it is her husband with Mrs. Server, we learn that Mrs. Briss is dressed in pink, Mrs. Server in blue—both pastels.

The narrator is evidently trying to place human beings within an artistic framework, for which Newmarch is the ideal location. May herself seems to him to be constantly "repeating her picture in settings separated by such intervals that I wondered at the celerity with which she proceeded from spot to spot" (p. 91). Newmarch is, in fact, a kind of concretization of the narrator's Palace of Art or "House of Fiction," as James calls it in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. The attributes of Newmarch are "noble freedom," "overarching ease which in nothing was so marked as in the tolerance of talk" (p. 90). It offers vistas of opening doors, both literally and spiritually, of "great dim chambers" (p. 92), and of "sweeps of view" (p. 93). He admits that it literally offers a "favouring frame" for his vision of May Server's plight. It is a spiritual home for the mature, the witty, the sophisticated, and the accomplished.

The key to the setting is that it renders all combinations possible: "Was any temporary collocation, in a house so encouraging to sociability, out of the range of nature?" (p. 181). It feeds the narrator's imagination, even when he knows a "temporary collocation," on the literal level, may be merely fortuitous. Newmarch provides endless opportunities for dialogues and confrontations between and among the various participants, willing and unwilling, in the narrator's guessing game, and the confrontations constitute the basic structure of the novel. In this vast "world of observation" (p. 181), it is no wonder that Mrs. Briss and the narrator can both gather materials without their paths intersecting. The book comes full circle in that it both begins and ends with a lengthy confrontation between the narrator and Mrs. Briss, who endeavors to nullify his entire sense of order and pattern in human relations, and thereby propel him on his way back to London. If Newmarch itself feeds the narrator's need for harmony, beauty, and richness, Mrs. Briss then seems characteristically to wish to poison his design with the chaos and disorder of reality. For the narrator Newmarch is his crystal palace, a mythological labyrinth at the end of whose vistas he imagines he has conjured up Mrs. Server as by an enchantment: "It was exactly as if she had been there by the operation of my intelligence" (p. 129). When he encounters the hostility of the visitors he is observing at Newmarch, such as Mrs. Briss, he sometimes lapses into thinking of it as a social prison, not malleable by his imagination;¹² but for the most part he transcends the social limitations, using the house as a source of poetic inspiration. In this sense it is itself perhaps the sacred fount of the title.

If the narrator is a madman, as Mrs. Briss asserts, or a figure of fun, a "pantaloon," as he himself says, it is only in the sense that his own game backfires on him. Like any would-be novelist, he is trying out an imaginative creation, based on implications drawn from life but not literally true, on various of his acquaintances whom he deems worthy, that is, witty and wise. A clue to this attitude appears when he and Obert agree that the challenge is to restrict oneself to the "psychologic evidence" because "What's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole" (p. 66). He is constantly seeking to transform real materials into a finer, more delicate creation. He is, as a would-be novelist, a skilled creator of dialogue, or perhaps we should say interior monologue, when he makes up a "speech" for Mrs. Server: ". . . if I could in this connection have put the words into her mouth, here follows something of the sense that I should have made them form" (p. 141). Time and again he uses fairy tale imagery to describe his perceptions and creativity, suggesting that he is aware of the gulf that must exist between reality and art. The house is magic, a setting for a Cinderella story in which he and Mrs. Briss are the messengers and heralds about to fit the glass slipper on the right lady (p. 260). He recognizes that life itself is rarely that interesting, and admonishes himself for his "idle habit of reading into mere human things an interest so much deeper than mere human things were in general prepared to supply" (p. 156).

His egotism would indeed seem mad unless he recognized the unreality of his speculations: "I alone was magnificently and absurdly aware—everyone else was benightedly out of it" (p. 177). The setting encourages his feeling that his imaginative activities are harmless on the level of reality. The irony of the novel, however, is that he is too clever, too persuasive, so that when he tries out his "story" on various listeners, they confuse it with literal truth, and feel threatened and menaced at his approaching so close to what they know is factual. Since style is the man, he unwittingly succeeds in persuading them that he has indeed come to grips with reality, instead of merely using it as a springboard to higher poetic truths. The whole story spirals out of control from the moment he confides in Mrs. Briss, who is as deeply anchored in reality as a woman of keen perception can be. His artist's motive appears when he thinks uneasily about her initial enthusiastic response: "I hadn't in the least had it in mind to 'compromise' an individual, but an individual would be compromised if I didn't now take care" (p. 47).

Such a reading of his motives, and their results, would be consistent with his intentions in a number of short stories written slightly earlier, and novels written slightly later. Of the *Stories of Artists and Writers*, mostly written in the 1890's, *The Sacred Fount* most closely resembles "The Middle Years" and "The Real Thing." James's "joke," mentioned in the letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward, may be tucked away in a reference to "the real thing," which "goes on," says Mrs. Briss, between Long and Lady John, under "the appearance of other little friendships" (p. 10). Mrs. Briss again uses the phrase with reference to Mrs. Server who will not, she says, cultivate the appearance of one particular friendship because this would be dangerously "like the real thing" (p. 79). The "real thing," as Mrs. Briss finally reveals it, is a tawdry adultery without the redeeming factor of anyone's spiritual improvement or redemption.

In the short story, "The Real Thing," an artist seeks aristocratic models and thinks he has found them in the Monarchs, a couple who are the "real thing," a pair of down-at-the-heel socialites who have undergone "the deep intellectual repose of the twenty years of country-house visiting."¹³ Mrs.

Monarch, in fact, was known at the time of her marriage as "the Beautiful Statue" (RT, p. 172). The model who really serves the artist's purpose, however, "was a meagre little Miss Churm, but was such an ample heroine of romance" (RT, p. 176). She is a Cockney, but also a skilled actress who can take the print of the artist's requirements. Mrs. Monarch, on the other hand, is "the real thing, but always the same thing" (RT, p. 180). And the artist gives us the clue to *The Sacred Fount* as well: the world of appearance may be *more* real than reality, because it is representative and varying. As he admits, he has "an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure" (RT, p. 174). But this does not suggest an exclusion of life: Miss Churm is a Russian princess, because she has the power of becoming one imaginatively, whereas Mrs. Monarch remains a statue.

An equally revealing passage occurs at the beginning of "The Middle Years" when Dencombe, the dying artist, watches a party of three on the beach and imagines their relationship: the old lady, an "opulent matron," is the mother of the young man with her, and the young woman, a "humble dependent," "nourished a secret passion for him."¹⁴ In fact, he is almost all wrong: the young man is the old lady's doctor, and the young woman a secretary-companion who is not in love with him, but has a secret passion for the money he may inherit from her mistress. But actually Dencombe has perceived quite accurately the *spirit* of the relationship, though he is all wrong about the facts. He has perceived sensitively that the old lady loves the doctor as if he were her son, and the secretary *does* have a passion—for money. Only his vision is of a morally informed life resembling, yet somehow better than, the reality. The analogy to *The Sacred Fount* is clear, as to *The Ambassadors* in which Strether is, on one level, mistaken about the innocence of Chad's union with Madame de Vionnet, yet, in a sense, right, for it is more a union of taste and spirit than anything else. Similarly, in *The Sacred Fount*, the narrator is essentially correct about the Brissendens, but mistaken only about the hypothetical relationship. Yet is he mistaken? Or is the morally informed vision he presents the right one for Mrs. Server and someone—perhaps himself—if not Gilbert Long? James may, in fact, be suggesting that what really matters is the moral and aesthetic vision of general truth, not the trivial and rather sordid relationships his hero actually witnesses, with their restrictive, small truths. Art can sometimes teach a lesson to reality by giving it form and order.

The possible readings of the novel are not exhausted, however, by viewing it as the capstone of James's *Stories of Artists and Writers*. Although he originally projected it as a short story, in a sense it backfired on him as well as on his narrator, for it expanded into a novel and one which James himself saw as essentially unsuccessful. As a novel it also resembles two works which immediately follow it, *The Ambassadors*, published in 1903, and "The Beast in the Jungle," written a year later.

The name of the house, Newmarch, may reveal a connection in James's mind between *The Sacred Fount* and the two later works which it so closely resembles. The syllable "new" may remind us of Chad Newsome, whose relationship with an older, more sophisticated woman, comparable perhaps to May Server, creates in him refinement, taste, and sensitivity to the arts. His mistress, Madame de Vionnet, is in fact depleted in the process in much the same manner as the narrator suspects May Server's "sacred fount" is being

drained. The first syllable in both "Newmarch" and "Newsome," moreover, may also recall the earlier Christopher Newman, in *The American*, who is the "New Man" created by the New World, and is now in search of old Europe. In *The Sacred Fount*, however, James seems to be describing not a new man, but rather a new direction to be taken by his fiction.

The second syllable, "-march," may, as Jean Blackall also points out,¹⁵ suggest a kinship between the narrator and John Marcher, the egoist of "The Beast in the Jungle," who is too preoccupied with his own fine perceptions and awed expectations of something tremendous that is about to happen to him to see that the "something," the beast about to spring, is merely the recognition that he has never lived, that nothing is going to happen. He realizes this at the grave of May Bartram—and the similarity of the women's names is surely not coincidental—a woman whom he *could* have loved and who would have given meaning to his life. Yet in *The Sacred Fount*, unlike *The Ambassadors* or even the more schematized "Beast in the Jungle," we are given no real sense of the "felt life" of the other characters. They seem to exist for us, as they do for the narrator, only as *disponibles* or variables in an equation.

The fact that in these similar later works James nevertheless does not attempt to push the function of the novel to its limits, that he *does* restore the opacity of the characters, may provide further evidence that *The Sacred Fount* did indeed backfire on James as well as on the narrator. If the narrator begins mistakenly to persuade himself as well as others of the literal validity of his complex and constantly shifting theory, James may, by the same token, have realized that in trying to embrace *all* the problems of the artist in one work, through the total emphasis on the narrator's consciousness, he was violating one fundamental need of the novel: to create a private world which is a totality in which the reader can believe utterly during the period he is reading the novel. In this recognition, too, James may have been ahead of his time, for he anticipates not only the experiments of the French "nouveau roman," but also their greatest problem: their creation of a hermetic private consciousness which reduces for the reader the temporary sense of completeness and believability on which the novel has always subsisted. James may, in fact, be anticipating the warning of Nathalie Sarraute that the "nouveau roman" may have no future at all unless it finds a new substance to match its new technique.

NOTES

¹⁵F. W. Dupee, *Henry James: His Life and Writings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 164. Leon Edel, in his preface to *The Sacred Fount* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), considers that the central metaphor of the novel, the sacred fount, represents sexual vitality and thereby implies that in any passionate relationship one of the partners plays the role of a vampire (pp. v-xxxii). Charles G. Hoffmann, in his *Short Novels of Henry James* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957), does a formal analysis and complains that the novel is thin and lacks the "richness and range of human experience and emotion" (p. 106). Jean Frantz Blackall, in possibly the most penetrating study of the work, *Jamesian Ambiguity and The Sacred Fount* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), considers that the narrator is an artist who completely deforms the reality he observes so that his artistic vision borders on madness. Numerous critics, baffled by the obscurity of the novel, adopt Wilson Follett's theory that *The Sacred Fount* represents James's attempt at self-scrutiny, at throwing "a searchlight on Henry James" (quoted by Edel, p. vi). In other words, the novel is seen as a parody of James's own work. Our interpretation differs from the points of view cited above. In our opinion, James does not parody his narrator, but the failure of the novel (if indeed there is a failure) stems from its technique, which was well in advance of its time.

²Quoted by Blackall, p. 144.

³Leon Edel, "An Introductory Essay," *The Sacred Fount*, pp. v-vi.

⁴Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), p. 111. All subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text.

⁵Nathalie Sarraute, "Ce que voient les oiseaux," *L'Ère du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 162.

⁶See, for example, Blackall, p. 61.

⁷Edel, p. xxvii.

⁸His architectural metaphor suggests clearly his identification with the Jamesian artist, since James himself not only describes his "House of Fiction" in *The Portrait of a Lady*, but also parallels his heroine's development to the vicissitudes of her relations with others in a whole series of houses ranging from Gardencourt to the Roccanera (Black Rock). For a detailed study of the architectural imagery in *Portrait*, see Elizabeth Sabiston, "The Provincial Heroine in Prose Fiction," Diss. Cornell 1969, pp. 391-494.

⁹Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Future of the Novel*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 13.

¹⁰Richard P. Blackmur, as well as Edmund Wilson and others, sees the novel as a parable of the problem of the artist (see Edel, pp. vii-viii). Parker Tyler, however, sees it as a parable of James's own "erotic" experience (see Blackall, p. 21), and there are many divergent readings of James's hint.

¹¹"The Art of Fiction," p. 13.

¹²This might support the contention of Oscar Cargill in his *The Novels of Henry James* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), that the novel describes the corruption of British high society in a similar manner to James's sardonic treatment in *The Awkward Age* (pp. 280-286). In our opinion, however, such a reading fails to account for the ambiguities of the text and for its oblique, indirect technique.

¹³Henry James, "The Real Thing," *The Portable Henry James* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), pp. 151-152.

¹⁴Henry James, "The Middle Years," *Stories of Artists and Writers* (New York: New Directions), p. 193.

¹⁵Blackall, pp. 169-170.