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'The dreadful done': Henry James's style of abstraction

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, when the late novels of Henry James became a touchstone for the ethical turn in literary criticism, ethical critics of different persuasions, such as Martha Nussbaum and J. Hillis Miller, homed in on certain complex terms and ambiguous avowals in James's prose in their efforts to hold him up as an 'exemplary' writer, committed to 'ethical' values such as particularity and singularity. In doing so, these critics overlooked the prospect that at this point in his career James was testing a new sort of literary abstractionism. Like painterly abstraction, literary abstraction makes room for the material and the particular at the same time as it denies them. To illustrate this, I examine a cluster of Jamesian keywords – 'do/doing/done' – from *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and elsewhere, to dispute the view that James systematically shuns abstraction. Instead, I propose that abstraction – depending for its effect on absorption, entanglement, and bewilderment – be read not as a withdrawal from life into 'the vague', cerebral, imaginary, or purely aesthetic realm, but a move to create deep involvements between characters and between readers and texts, and as such should be regarded as a central motivation of James's evasive late style.

KEYWORDS Henry James; ethical criticism; style; abstraction

They have no tone but their moral tone. They are highly animated abstractions, with the extraordinary, the brilliant property of becoming when represented at once more abstract and more living.

– Henry James on the characters of Henrik Ibsen, 'London Notes: January 1897' in *Harper's Weekly* 41 (6 Feb. 1897), pp. 134–35

It was natural that he should care nothing for any abstract speculation or inquiry; he was an artist throughout, desiring only the refracted light of human imperfection, never the purity of colourless reason.

– Percy Lubbock on Henry James, Introduction to *The Letters of Henry James* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920), Vol. I, p. xxvii

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In the 1990s, the turn to ethics in literary criticism also entailed – as part of its *modus vivendi* – a turn to the late novels of Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Over the next decade, ethical critics began to seize on the various ethically inflected terms commonly encountered in James's prose – abstract nouns such as 'the good', 'the right', 'the true', 'the real', 'interest', 'value' – which have significance in a number of discourses including but not restricted to ethics (e.g. aesthetics, metaphysics, economics, sociology, theology). In their efforts to cast James as an 'exemplary' writer, animated by an 'ethical' vocabulary and pledged, like themselves, to an ethics of reading based on values such as particularity and singularity, these critics failed to notice that James was experimenting with a new kind of literary abstractionism, seemingly at odds with the concrete and particular, and bound up with his rejection of realism. Like the painterly tendency towards abstraction that was emerging in James's day, literary abstraction celebrates the matter or materials of its aesthetic practice at the same time, curiously, as it denies them – as part of a process of withdrawal and idealisation.¹ Given that contemporary reviewers often dismissed James for 'abstraction-mongering' and that academic criticism of James at least until the mid-twentieth century tended to frame him as irredeemably abstract (cerebral, disconnected from life, formalist in his literary ethos), the work of ethical critics and 'thing-theorists' has been a welcome corrective, returning James to the social, material world.² I contend, however, that these corrective measures have gone too far, since they pass over the positive effects of James's style of abstraction. Jamesian abstraction depends for its effect on the absorption, engrossment, and bewilderment not simply of its characters but of its own texture, creating a dynamism between withdrawal and engagement that vitally contributes to the interest and animation of James's prose – as he said of the characters of Ibsen's drama. To illustrate this, I look closely at Jamesian 'doing', a key abstract term which informs an effort on the part of his fictional characters and his own persona to be punctilious (i.e. concerned with points of conduct as well as expressive detail and formal correctness) even as its very abstractness evades signification, encouraging a generalised attentiveness from the reader that is, strangely, without object. Jamesian 'doing', as I show, has a wider tonal range than the merely 'moral'.³

In what follows, I contest the view that the prose style of Henry James is somehow inimical to the procedures of abstraction in its various forms (philosophical, literary, artistic). Further, I suggest that the framing of James's style as 'exemplary', and consequent to this as 'ethical', obscures what is perplexing and devious and ensnaring about Jamesian style. William Empson remarked in passing of Henry James's late style that it was 'sweetly funny in its way, but a patent attempt to cheat'.⁴ One might wonder in which features of James's prose this 'cheat' resides. Perhaps Empson is recalling Locke's 'perfect cheat', the *coup de langue* in Locke's arraignment of a figurative and allusive style of

speechifying, which for him did little else than ‘insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed [is] perfect cheat’.⁵ In 1934 Edmund Wilson denounced James’s ‘dreadful’ novels of the 1890s as exercises in ‘a lifeless trickery of logic’ and his style as a ‘diversion’ – of the devious rather than the amusing kind (‘that tendency on James’s part to exploit the mysteries of technique for the purpose of diverting attention from his shortcomings’).⁶ Using milder if still incriminating terms, F. R. Leavis asked this leading question of James’s late style: ‘Isn’t there, in fact, something evasive about James’s inexplicitness?’⁷ In his 1909 Preface to *The Ambassadors* James is quick to pre-empt this kind of criticism (ubiquitous in the review journalism of his day) by putting us on our guard, rather, against the ‘inevitable treachery of even the straightest execution’.⁸ Certainly, if it is a matter of James’s late style, evasiveness is one effect of his ambiguity, obliquity, subtlety, and prolixity. Yet, as Ezra Pound observed in the commemorative issue of the *Little Review* of 1918–19 that was devoted to James: ‘Be it said for his style: he is seldom or never involved when a direct bald statement will accurately convey his own meaning, *all of it*. He is not usually, for all his wide leisure, verbose’.⁹ If the remarks of both Empson and Pound pertain, one might reasonably ask how it is possible to be ‘direct’ *and* ‘devious’, or, for that matter, ‘direct’ *and* ‘leisurely’, at the same time?

One compelling answer lies in the peculiar power of the abstract language and sentence forms to which James increasingly turned in his later writing, be it fictional or nonfictional. Like Empson’s ‘complex words’, James’s favourite abstract terms have the quality of being ‘not recondite words, but often the most common’.¹⁰ Both James and Empson rescue ‘common’ words from ‘crude’ usage. Empson clarified what would become his own trademark critical procedure in the coda to *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930):

People sometimes say that words are now used as flat counters, in a way which ignores their delicacy; that English is coming to use fewer of its words, and those more crudely. But this journalist [*sic*] flatness does not mean that the words have simple meanings, only that the word is used as at a distance, to stand for a vague and complicated mass of ideas and systems which the journalist has no time to apprehend.¹¹

The idea of words carrying ‘systems’ or ‘doctrines’, rather than simply ‘senses’ or ‘meanings’, was something that Empson, after two books exploring ambiguity, was to fully set out in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). The suggestion that words may be used ‘flatly’, yet in a way that enhances their delicacy (‘as at a distance’), is helpful in coming to terms with Jamesian verbal complexity, which in part works on the types of ‘equations’ found in certain words – in a dynamic of false equivalence – and in part on abstraction, a mode of Jamesian ‘distancing’, or, as James puts it in several of his Prefaces, of ‘delicacy’ and ‘indirection’. James’s verbal distancing is motivated by his desire to uphold the

‘proprieties’ and ‘decencies’ of expression (in respect to his characters’ treatment of each other in dialogue, and to his own ‘treatment’ of them in prose), and also by his desire to handle his peculiar set of terms at a ‘critical remove’, some would say with irony.¹² His method of setting up then ‘going behind’ surface flatness, I believe, is evident down to the basic level of word choice and arrangement.

All this is not to suggest too great an affinity between the ‘complexities’ of the two writers. Whereas for Empson his purpose was to bring to light what he called the ‘equation’ or the relation between two or more *senses* that had come to be lodged in the everyday usage of a word (such as ‘delicate’ or ‘wit’) at a certain moment in its evolution, for James the point was to show how certain words, always abstract in nature (such as ‘form’, ‘relation’, ‘interest’ or ‘value’), invite the identification or confusion of two or more *fields of discourse*. Such words are typically prone to being taken in starkly absolute terms (as concepts) rather than in context-specific ones (as words). As James wrote in a letter to the American scholar of neologism, Leon Mead, author of *How Words Grow* (1897):

I have attempted only to write in a language already existing & consecrated, & have found that a literary task abundantly, & superabundantly, difficult by itself. [...] I have never had anything to say which some word or other already forming a part of human speech has not had, to my sense, something to contribute of its own.¹³

James’s quasi-devotional attitude to these words – their ‘consecration’ through usage – is palpable in his prose; indeed, ‘his’ complex terms, as part of their arrest, give rise to the characteristic difficulty of James’s texts and, through a dynamic of misunderstanding and clarification, much dramatic suspense. In this sense, James’s ‘difficulty’ is passed on to his readers.

James’s conceptions of experience and sensibility, as we know from his statements in ‘The Art of Fiction’ essay of 1884, become increasingly visionary, even mystical, especially his emphasis on ‘the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things’.¹⁴ Like painterly abstraction, James’s style of abstraction is heavily invested in ‘implication’ – as ‘the fact of being implied or involved, without being plainly expressed’ – and it is easy to see how ‘the condition of being involved, entangled, twisted together, intimately connected or combined’ has applications in a literary or figurative context as well as in a logical one (i.e. as ‘a relationship between propositions such that the one implies the other’).¹⁵ Logical language and metaphors clearly appealed to James as much as quasi-theological ones. As I mentioned earlier, it is my sense that James pursued forms of creative abstraction such as engrossment and bewilderment to stage not so much a total withdrawal from life into ‘the vague’, or the purely cerebral or imaginary, but to achieve something closer to entanglement: that is to say, deep involvements between characters and between readers and texts. In my view, it is something of a

category error to attempt to prove that the aesthetic ‘involvements’ of abstraction are really, by their nature, ‘ethical’, or vice versa; James’s ‘ethics’ (if he even subscribed to such a thing) would have been unhelpfully idiosyncratic, founded on the creative value of an evasive or elliptical style of abstraction designed to make us self-conscious about the forms of language we commonly fall back on and appeal to, in ways that are often unthinking and unfeeling. Does James want to *improve* us by making us query these terms? And *are we* improved? What are the ‘implications’ for *us*? These are the questions taken up by ethical critics of James. My position is that Jamesian implicature, ushered in through his abstract terms and syntax, works *like* philosophical implicature, but is ultimately very unlike the ‘implications’ (understood as ‘consequences’) of a practising ethicist – though it is easy to see how these may be confounded. James’s style of abstraction might even be said to mischievously invite this order of confusion.

The ‘standing terms’

In her pioneering 1983 essay ‘Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy’, Martha Nussbaum sets out her reasons for choosing neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics as a guiding principle in her criticism of Henry James:

I choose this conception of moral inquiry not only because I find it appealing and broadly correct, not only because I hope that it will be sufficiently inclusive to command wide agreement, but also because it describes [James’s] conception of his own authorial task in language which brings him into intimate connection with the Aristotelian enterprise. In the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, he describes his end as the production of an ‘intelligent report’ of human experience, i.e. of ‘our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures’. We can then hope to be assessing James’s text against the background of a conception of moral writing that is at once powerful and one to which he himself lays claim.¹⁶

This is a strong assertion to make on behalf of James; however, Nussbaum doesn’t cite the relevant line or passage from Aristotle’s *Ethics* that James’s remark about the ‘intelligent report’ is meant to echo. Neither does she describe the features of this phrase which make it a striking or unusual way for James to reconceive of fiction: for example, the privileging of ‘intelligence’ over sensuous perception (which, of course, comes down to James’s method of focalisation through the mind of an ‘intelligent observer’, in this case, Hyacinth Robinson); or the collapsing of generic distinctions so that the novel becomes a ‘report’ – a conveniently non-fictional form, like philosophy itself. Nor does Nussbaum address the not unimportant question of whether James ever read Aristotle or found him congenial to his own outlook on life.¹⁷ Further along, Nussbaum argues that

to show forth the force and truth of the Aristotelian claim that ‘the decision rests with perception,’ we need, then – either side by side with a philosophical ‘outline’ or inside it – texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice.¹⁸

This is where (a text such as) *The Golden Bowl* becomes instrumental, since

[t]his task cannot be easily accomplished by texts which speak in universal terms – for one of the difficulties of deliberation stressed by this view is that of grasping the uniqueness of the new particular. Nor can it be easily done by texts which speak with the hardness or plainness which moral philosophy has traditionally chosen for its style.¹⁹

What is troubling about these claims is that Nussbaum does not explain what it means for a text to ‘speak in universal terms’. While hers is a seductive argument capable of eliciting an easy consent – yes, moral philosophy speaks in a language that is hard and plain and abstract; yes, James speaks in a language that is malleable and rich yet also precise – it is weakened by her reluctance to produce germane examples from James’s novel. In a later, defensive essay (defensive, because of the cross-disciplinary controversy that ensued), Nussbaum returns to *The Golden Bowl* to make this point on behalf of the ideal novelist who is deemed ‘exemplary’ for the practice of ethical criticism:

The terms of the novelist can help us to discover ourselves precisely because they are not the shop-worn terms of ordinary discourse, all too often relied on by abstract philosophizing – terms that James calls ‘the standing terms’ in order to indicate both their habitual character and their inertness.²⁰

Here, too, Nussbaum takes a phrase from James’s Prefaces – this time, ‘the standing terms’ – and makes it serviceable to her own project, neglecting all kinds of possibilities centred on the appeal of the ordinary and the abstract to this particular writer.²¹

What, then, are ‘the standing terms’ to which James refers in this passage from the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*? In another reading, ‘the standing terms’ are the texts of earlier versions of James’s novels. The 1909 Preface is, after all, preoccupied with the act of revision. Here, James writes:

What it would be really interesting, and I dare say admirably difficult, to go into would be the very history of this effect of experience; the history, in other words, of the growth of the immense array of terms, perceptual and expressional, that, after the fashion I have indicated, in sentence, passage and page, simply looked over the heads of the standing terms – or perhaps rather, like alert winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to a clearer air.²²

There is something disingenuous about James’s etherealisation of this deliberate, worldly act of revision. It sounds like a disavowal of agency: the novelist’s original ‘terms’ are somehow already ‘standing’ (established), while the

revised terms are the product of a mysterious 'growth' or efflorescence. Throughout *Love's Knowledge* (1990) Nussbaum returns to this conceit of James's, still reading it as a certain kind of philosophy: something that stands in opposition to 'the terms of the novelist'. It is indeed true that James creates an analogy between philosophical revelation and the act of revision, which he finds to be (in his words) 'almost as enlivening, or at least as momentous, as, to a philosophic mind, a sudden large apprehension of the Absolute'. He then ponders: 'What indeed could be more delightful than to enjoy a sense of the absolute in such easy conditions? The deviations and differences might of course not have broken out at all, but from the moment they began so naturally to multiply they became, as I say, my very terms of cognition'.²³ It may be seen from this where Nussbaum takes her cue, linking James's 'standing terms' with the 'absolute' terms, say, of 'abstract philosophising'. Yet where do the 'terms of cognition' fit into this scheme? If the 'deviations and differences' between the original incarnation of the novel and its reclaimed/reasserted or else reimagined/rewritten form are the 'very terms of cognition', then it is not a straightforward matter of there being two sets of 'terms' (two kinds of language or discourse). Furthermore, the philosophical analogy may be less of an invitation to view James's writing in philosophical terms than merely this, an analogy, made in one of the dominant registers of his day: the language of abstract philosophical speculation.²⁴ In this reading, James is not setting a philosophical language against a novelistic one but describing the process of revision – which for James, we know, was as much about reaffirming the 'standing' or pre-existing 'terms' as it was about altering or embellishing them. By this reasoning, many of James's standing terms are left to 'stand'.

Of course, Nussbaum's broad argument in *Love's Knowledge* is that James's late novels are unique in steering a course between general moral rules and particular human situations. As a moral philosopher, she does not claim to escape the perniciousness of the 'standing terms' of moral discourse; indeed, she characterises her own philosophising, as well as her paraphrasing of James, as falling prey to the 'standing terms'.²⁵ She even describes the 'rules' of moral philosophy, in language that recalls James's expression, as 'standing obligations', 'standing conception[s] of value', 'standing commitments' and indeed 'standing terms':

It is not just that the standing terms need to be rendered more precise in their application to a concrete text. It is that, all by themselves, they might get it all wrong; they do not suffice to make the difference between right and wrong [...]. By themselves, trusted for and in themselves, the standing terms are a recipe for obtuseness.²⁶

Hers is a critique, it transpires, not so much of Jamesian texts as of conventional moral-philosophic discourse – especially, one suspects, post-Kantian

idealism. Yet it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish Nussbaum's claims from those she makes on behalf of James: 'So if James is right about what moral attention is, then he can fairly claim that a novel such as this one not only shows it better than an abstract treatise, it also elicits it'.²⁷ Remarks such as this reveal the expediency of James for Nussbaum's argument; yet, in her eagerness to quieten such 'general' terms, Nussbaum overlooks the possibility that one of the singularities of James's prose is the prevalence of exactly these 'general', 'plain', 'hard', 'shop-worn', 'abstract' terms that he is supposedly repudiating. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, one of Nussbaum's sternest critics, keenly draws attention to such contradictions. Rather cynically, he views Nussbaum's desire to collapse the boundaries between moral philosophy and literary criticism as motivated by a megalomaniacal ambitiousness, an 'almost unfathomable hunger':

In her work the cohabitation of different academic disciplines generates, or is intended to generate, a super-discourse oriented not toward the cultivation of increasingly refined vocabularies and distinctions but toward action in 'the sphere of things that can be done'.²⁸

The merging of the ethical and the aesthetic is of course not unique to Nussbaum and the neo-Aristotelian ethical critics. It is my belief that this wider trend, the too-easy collapse of ethics and aesthetics, might be sidestepped by a study of James's abstract terms, precisely because they *are* abstract and have applications in multiple discourses. James's style of abstraction may be the very thing to enable the two disciplines to return to a state of productive tension.

'Do' / 'doing' / 'done'

The epigraph to J. Hillis Miller's *Literature as Conduct* (2005) is drawn from another of James's arresting statements from the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*: 'the whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn. [...] we recognize betimes that to "put" things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them'. Miller draws our attention to an allusion, nestled within this familiar quotation, to 'a high-minded book by Emerson': *The Conduct of Life* (1860). The passage from the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* in which James, as Miller contends, 'emphasizes the superiority of putting things in words, as a form of doing, over other forms of social behaviour', is crucial to Miller's thesis that 'literature is a form of conduct', and also that 'literature may conduct its readers to believe or to behave in new ways'.²⁹ James's best-known Preface contains those memorable phrases that ethical critics of all stamps have found so enticing: 'the conduct of life' and 'the religion of doing' chief among them.³⁰ In their glossing of the final paragraph the stress invariably falls on ethical expressions,

such as ‘the *conduct* of life’, ‘behaviour’, ‘acts’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘freedom’; their intention, perhaps, is to bring home the moral force of James’s radical stance on literary acts. Yet such readings don’t account for the importance of the extended analogy to the Jamesian imaginary.³¹ That the topic of this passage – indeed, the final Preface itself – is the writerly process of *revision* barely warrants a mention, and the casting of James’s ‘religion of doing’ as a philosophy ignores the veiled jibe at those *other* contemporary ‘religions’ of *doing* to which James may be offering a (wounded) challenge: pragmatism, for one,³² and Rooseveltian machismo, for another.³³ Miller’s emphasis on the *conduct* element of Jamesian ‘doing’ is in keeping with the way in which action is given prominence in contemporary moral philosophy – even if it enlarges the sphere of action to include speech acts.³⁴

The stretch of Jamesian ‘doing’ is something that remains untested in ethical criticism of James to date, with its more literal-minded understanding of doing as *acting* (Nussbaum) and writing as the rehearsal of speech *acts* (Miller). What is missing from such accounts, and what James still finds room for in his ethical analogy, is that written ‘acts’ – ‘our really “done” things of this superior and more appreciable order’ – are not really comparable to our social actions. My reading centres on James’s ‘interminably’: the term usually bypassed in his trio of ‘exactly and responsibly and interminably’. James begins his final paragraph by stating that words, like deeds, are ‘interminable’: boundless and endless in their ramifications; and words, like deeds, may be disavowed. Yet unlike our actions, which tend to ‘lose themselves’, our connections with our writings may be traced and reasserted, reviewed and revised, upheld and maintained. Writing, *unlike* acting, is ‘conduct with a vengeance’ – a term whose etymology, via ‘avenge’, suggests ‘to claim as one’s own’ – and this is exactly what revision amounts to for James: *reclamation*. James is aware of the artist’s exceptionalism (his ‘incomparable luxury’) in this ethical scheme he uses to illustrate his point, and he concludes this last Preface with the assertion that for the literary artist ‘the whole chain of relation and responsibility’, his ‘connections’ to his work, ‘are employable for finer purposes than mere gaping contrition’.³⁵

Such accounts as those mentioned above inevitably glide over that specialised sense of Jamesian writerly ‘doing’: the Flaubertian ‘done’ or ‘finished’ thing. Of course, one can find moments in James in which the ‘done’ thing is indeed synonymous with the exemplary thing, but ‘exemplary’ only in the sense of being ‘exact’: ‘consummate, finished, refined, perfect’ (*OED*, sense 1). There is a whole chain of words that indicates both a moral and an expressional fastidiousness; for a term such as ‘scrupulous’ the *OED* even demarcates the *non*-moral, so that sense 4.: ‘Of actions, etc., Rigidly directed by the dictates of conscience; characterized by a strict and minute regard for what is right’; is set against sense 5.: ‘Minutely exact or

careful (in non-moral matters); strictly attentive even to the smallest details; characterized by punctilious exactness.’ This is perhaps why the ethical analogy works so well for the matter of artistic *finish*. It is not that James necessarily views writing as an ethical act, but his pursuit of written perfection certainly *resembles* moral perfectionism in its rigour and integrity and intensity. Take, for instance, this passage from James’s 1902 essay on ‘Gustave Flaubert’:

Madame Bovary has a perfection that not only stamps it, but that makes it stand almost alone; it holds itself with such a supreme unapproachable assurance as both excites and defies judgement. For it deals not in the least, as to unapproachability, with things exalted or refined; it only confers on its sufficiently vulgar elements of exhibition a final unsurpassable form. The form is in *itself* as interesting, as active, as much of the essence of the subject as the idea, and yet so close is its fit and so inseparable its life that we catch it at no moment on any errand of its own. The work is a classic because the thing, such as it is, is ideally *done*, and because it shows that in such doing eternal beauty may dwell.³⁶

Here, many of the terms arise that James later uses in his Prefaces (1907–09): ‘form’, ‘done’ and ‘doing’ (as a gerund), ‘interesting’ and ‘active’. Yet in the case of Flaubert’s masterpiece, its perfection *sets it apart* – from other works by Flaubert and from works by his contemporaries, certainly, but also from the author himself: it ‘stand[s] almost alone’ and is ‘unapproachable’. It is not, James qualifies, unapproachable in the sense of being *morally* exemplary: the subject of *Madame Bovary* (like Madame Bovary herself) is not ‘exalted or refined’ but ‘vulgar’. Miller might counter that its ‘treatment’ (another term that is both moral *and* aesthetic) is what makes Flaubert’s handling of his low subject *ethical*. Yet why revert to ethics when James enjoys an analogy that keeps both pursuits (ethics, aesthetics) in a state of play, through his choice of a phrase (‘ideally *done*’) in which the verb form (‘to do’) is not simply made into a past participle (‘to have done’) but an abstract adjectival compound (‘is ideally *done*’)? The category error that is entailed in the attempt to collapse the distinctions between ethics and aesthetics works both ways: the poetic analogies, say, in Aristotle’s *Ethics* (in which ‘*ergon*’ is both *task*, or *function*, as well as *work*, ‘the done thing’) are the corollary of James’s ethical analogies. Importantly, James’s accentuating of *Madame Bovary*’s ‘form’ as both ‘active’ (normally a property of plot) and ‘essential’ draws on the abstract language of philosophical idealism (the Hegelian-sounding ‘in itself’, the Platonic-sounding ‘as much of the essence of the subject as the idea’) as a way, ironically, of retreating from the issue of actions in the real world, echoing James’s earlier quasi-mystical statements in ‘The Art of Fiction’. Just as the term ‘vulgar’ wards off, to an extent, the moral aspect of Flaubert’s perfectionism, so too does the ‘inseparability’ of its baseness and its beauty obstruct the aspect of ‘art for art’s sake’

(the motto of nineteenth-century Aestheticism). Like Lambert Strether, the punctilious hero of *The Ambassadors* who refuses to take from his diplomatic mission anything for himself, we ‘catch’ the formal perfection of *Madame Bovary* ‘at no moment on any errand of its own’: that is, in service of neither ethics nor aesthetics.³⁷

One vital aspect of the ‘done’ thing about which James’s final Preface is rather reticent is its apparent ‘dreadfulness’. This is something James addresses, rather, in his 1908 Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*:

Which is the work in which he [the novelist] hasn’t surrendered, under dire difficulty, the best thing he meant to have kept? In which, indeed, before the dreadful *done*, doesn’t he ask himself what has become of the thing all for the sweet sake of which it was to proceed to that extremity?³⁸

‘Dreadful’ is probably being used here in the sense of ‘formidable’ or even ‘awe-inspiring’, rather than in the modern colloquial sense of ‘awful’; there is a certain fear registered in the phrase ‘before the dreadful *done*’, as though the creator is standing before his creature, terrified that this ‘thing’ may have a life of its own. In this way, James surely refers to the anxiety that he feels, as an artist, once he has decided that he cannot do any more work on a piece, that he is unable to go further in pursuing his aims – even that he has reached the point where he must accept that those aims are unachievable. Thus, what emerges is a horror at the dire ‘extremity’ of the finished work, with its record of betrayals and compromise (‘the surrendered’, the not-‘kept’). Present and looming is the anxiety as to the fate of the artwork at the hands of audience and critics, and ultimately the verdict of time and history – the biblical inflections of ‘dreadful’ here resonating with a doom-laden fear of consigning one’s work to the moment of ‘judgement’. James continues this theme in another late Preface, that of *The Wings of the Dove*:

The residuum of comfort for the witness of these broils is of course meanwhile in the convenient reflexion, invented for him in the twilight of time and the infancy of art by the Angel, not to say by the Demon, of Compromise, that nothing is so easy to ‘do’ as not to be thankful for almost any stray help in its getting done.³⁹

Here, his ‘alert winged creatures’ are recast as ‘the Angel’ – or indeed ‘the Demon’ – ‘of Compromise’, or even as the *Dirae* (dire sisters) of the previous passage, with its invocation of ‘dire difficulty’. But importantly, as this passage shows, ‘the done’ thing is not, unequivocally, the ‘exemplary’ thing in James, despite his assertion to the contrary in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (‘art is nothing if not exemplary’); as we saw in the case of *Madame Bovary*, if it is ‘exemplary’, it is so because it is, formally speaking, ‘admirable, commendable; excellent, outstanding, perfect’ (*OED*, sense 1a), but there is no suggestion that the novel should be ‘intended as a model or guide’ (*OED*, sense 4a). What’s more, there is a weariness registered here in the

endless toil of ‘doing’ – with ‘do’ given inverted commas either for its colloquial usage or for the irony of this small word being made to bear such a load.

Jamesian abstraction

It is against her personal history of recoil against Anglo-American analytic philosophy that one should view Nussbaum’s exalting of James’s late style, her setting it apart from a certain style of abstract philosophising.⁴⁰ Nussbaum does not address the enigma that many of James’s late works – from the novels and tales to the Prefaces, essays and reviews, biographies, travelogues, letters and notebooks – display passages written precisely in ‘a style correct, scientific, abstract’, the kind of style that she dismisses for betraying ‘Anglo-American fastidiousness and emotional reticence’.⁴¹ While James’s distinctly literary abstraction is clearly not identical to philosophical abstraction, which aims for the ‘fixing’ of meaning rather than its ‘unfixing’,⁴² Nussbaum’s strenuous emphasis on Jamesian particularity and concreteness is made at the expense of recognising this equally Jamesian trait of abstraction. James’s supposed ‘claim’ that, in Nussbaum’s terms, ‘only language this dense, this concrete, this subtle – only the language (and the structures) of the narrative artist, can adequately tell the reader what [he] believes to be true’, would appear then to go against James’s own creative practices. Disappointingly, despite her insistence that James’s particularity ‘focus[es] our attention on each word’, Nussbaum rarely gets down to the business of close reading for ‘vivid and subtle nuance’.⁴³

James’s fondness for abstraction was such that it was jeeringly remarked by journalists writing for the newspapers and magazines of his day. Witness, for example, this anonymous reviewer of *The Sacred Fount* (1901) writing in the American periodical *Current Literature*:

Everybody talks [...] in that brilliantly tedious tongue which the James characters always use, filling three hundred pages with abstractions, innuendoes, hair-splitting distinctions, and what are probably epigrams, all so arranged that it is possible to read three pages without getting a scintilla of an idea as to what they are driving at;

or Francis Thompson, reviewing *The American Scene* (1907) for the more upmarket British magazine *The Athenaeum*:

The language invented, and the manner of thought developed, for his psychological subtleties he uses for matters the most familiar, and so reduces them to a strange, phantasmal abstraction of their workaday selves, bafflingly implying subtlety which is not in them.⁴⁴

The novelist Vernon Lee, an admirer of James and one of his first serious critics, points out the prevalence of abstract nouns in his novels (‘form’, ‘relation’, ‘degree’, ‘sense’ and ‘consequence’), writing in mock exasperation:

'I almost believe that my analysis is less abstract than this sentence out of a *bona fide* novel!'⁴⁵ Importantly, Lee observes a technique in the novel that 'enables the Reader to live on through more abstraction': the alternation between the 'abstract' and the 'concrete' (or, elsewhere, the 'abstract' and the 'metaphorical').⁴⁶ This point is something most modern critics of Jamesian style have taken up – notably Ian Watt, Dorothea Krook and Seymour Chatman – but also more recently Emily Zubernis, who argues that Jamesian abstraction is what makes his novels 'minimalist': 'not as a thing of terse flatness or truncated form but as an extravagantly intricate withdrawal from the novel's meaning-making functions'. Abstraction as withdrawal, as pulling away from the material rather than as simple inwardness, is a topic to which I shall return.⁴⁷

In his renowned explication of the first paragraph of *The Ambassadors*, Ian Watt, like Vernon Lee, describes the tedium resulting from the many instances of abstract language in the novel. After carefully enumerating the most distinctive 'verbal idiosyncrasies' in James's opening paragraph, such as the high frequency of non-transitive verbs, negatives and near-negatives, as well as abstract nouns such as 'question', 'understanding', 'business' and 'principle', Watt reassures his reader that his own purpose is far from pedantic: 'I detail these features only to establish that in this passage, at least, there is a clear quantitative basis for the common enough view that James's late prose style is characteristically abstract [...]'.⁴⁸ Watt rehearses an excellent hypothesis in this essay: that James's abstractionism stems not so much from literary-formalist as from socio-political imperatives, the author's 'awareness that behind every petty individual circumstance there ramifies an endless network of general moral, social, and historical relations'. Watt's point hinges on his discernment of the multi-perspectivalism of James's prose, in this case, the combined impressions of Strether and the narrator, who de-emphasises what is 'single and particular' about Strether's perceptions by 'translat[ing] what he sees there into more general terms', creating several effects at once, which pull in different directions: an 'ironic distance' between narrator and protagonist, a comic puncturing of Strether's inflated 'representativeness', and a serious investment in the 'larger import' of the events being narrated. The abstraction of James's style, Watt argues, can therefore be seen as 'a supremely civilised effort to relate every event and every moment of life to the full complexity of its circumambient conditions'.⁴⁹ James's style of abstraction, in other words, can be grasped as a material incarnation of a deeply 'ramified' or diversified linguistic awareness that is informed by a profound social commitment. Versions of this idea have been advanced by recent thinkers who adopt a historical materialist position on the question: Elizabeth A. Barnum, for instance, argues that James's abstract language 'can gesture toward a space in which people can reclaim their full humanity and reject the reification

of life' as part of her argument that Jamesian style offers an implicit critique of capitalism;⁵⁰ by contrast, others have argued that his characteristic 'mystification' resembles the very processes of capitalism, with one crucial difference: James keeps this process self-reflexively in view.⁵¹

As Watt notes, Dorothea Krook's work on James's style in the 1950s was instrumental in shaping his own critical position on Jamesian abstraction. Like Watt, Krook identifies in James the rare ability to generalise particulars, or as she puts it 'the power to generalise to the furthest limit the particulars of experience, and to render these without loss of particularity in the light of the most inclusive generality'.⁵² She puts this down to the 'singularity' of James's 'quest', which 'in its logical or philosophical aspect shows as a pursuit of the highest generality, in its poetic aspect as a search for that which is at once the ground and end of a man's life'.⁵³ With this, Krook attempts to re-write the 'abstraction' smear against James – both in his own day, and in hers, by critics like F. R. Leavis who preferred the early style to the late – in distinctly ethical terms. But her interest, rather, is in another branch of philosophy: logic.⁵⁴ Like Watt – who, as we recall, sees James's abstraction as being motivated by the 'effort to relate [...] every moment of life to the full complexity of its circumambient conditions' – Krook argues for the importance of 'aspects', 'conditions' and 'internal relations', both to James's theory of the novel and to the novels themselves. To speak of the 'logic' (and even the 'metaphysics') of James's late fiction and non-fiction is not exactly to posit James as a philosophical novelist. As Krook clarifies, his use of 'logical terms and images' comes not from the idealist philosophers of his day (F. H. Bradley or T. H. Green, say), or any other individual or school, but from 'the ambient air of nineteenth-century speculation, whose main current was the preoccupation with the phenomenon of self-consciousness'.⁵⁵ The exploration of self-consciousness was naturally not confined to philosophy; as Krook shows, James read his novelistic contemporaries – Balzac, George Eliot, Turgenyev, Howells, Bourget, Mrs Humphry Ward, Edith Wharton – 'with a passion of interest that stands in marked contrast with his always languid response to the logical edifices of systematic philosophers'.⁵⁶ Indeed, this is verified by James himself, who in his autobiographical *Notes of a Son & Brother* (1914) confessed that his own mind was 'as receptive [...] of any scrap of enacted story or evoked picture as it was closed to the dry or abstract proposition'.⁵⁷ Ultimately, Krook links James's tendency towards abstraction and the language and thought-processes of logic to his notorious obliquity, which in her view enacts a kind of ethical 'consequentialism': 'if this is the fundamental logic of James's mature thinking, the method of oblique or indirect presentation may be seen as yet another instance of that high, rare consequentiality which is the characteristic expression of his genius'.⁵⁸ Krook doesn't explain or develop this proposed link between obliquity and consequentiality, and it

remains unclear whether she means ‘consequential’ in the sense of ‘substantial’ or ‘momentous’, or in the sense of ‘ensuing’ or ‘resultant’ (or both). One thing that the oblique and the consequential share is that they both may take some time to manifest.

Krook’s singular remark about consequentialism may well have been prompted by her reading of the Pragmatist philosopher William James, for whom, like his brother Henry, the abstract always underwrote the concrete. In Part XIII of *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) William James proposes that abstract concepts

are salient aspects of our concrete experiences which we find it useful to single out. Useful, because we are then reminded of other things that offer those same aspects; and, if the aspects carry consequences in those other things, we can return to our first things, expecting those same consequences to accrue.⁵⁹

Both the abstract and the concrete, according to William, are indispensable to any conception of the real and any method of philosophy:

Without abstract concepts to handle our perceptual particulars by, we are like men hopping on one foot. Using concepts along with the particulars, we become bipedal. We throw our concept forward, get a foothold on the consequence, hitch our line to this, and draw our percept up, travelling thus with a hop, skip and jump over the surface of life at a vastly rapider rate than if we merely waded through the thickness of the particulars as accident rained them down upon our heads. Animals have to do this, but men raise their heads higher and breathe freely in the upper conceptual air.⁶⁰

This passage is a wonderful instance of the way in which the strange hybrid of ‘animate abstraction’, in Mary Cross’s phrase, appealed to the Jamesian (family) sensibility. In such constructions, abstract concepts such as ‘consequence’, ‘percept’, ‘life’, etc., are endowed with figurative properties, so that they become concrete: the vivid ‘hopping’ objects of the meandering sentence.⁶¹ Part of William James’s broader point about abstractionism is that, in isolation and without the aid of concretes or particulars, it is hopelessly metaphysical and stranded in an angelic realm without practical application. As a philosopher, his own writing relied on novelistic techniques perhaps more than he’d have cared to admit. One thing is certain: he had a lifelong disdain for the style of abstraction characteristic of his brother’s fiction.⁶² Upon reading Henry’s second novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), he wrote to him with what had become, even at this early stage, a common complaint: ‘I am again struck unfavorably by the tendency of the personages to reflect on themselves and give an acute critical scientific introspective classification of their own natures and states of mind [...]’.⁶³ When it came to Henry James’s magnum opus, *The Golden Bowl* (1904), he was grudgingly admiring of its ‘brilliance’ but lamented ‘the method of narration by interminable elaboration of suggestive reference’ and found himself longing

rather for ‘absolute straightness in the style’.⁶⁴ Henry was clearly wounded by this remark, and seems to allude to William’s verdict on his late style when he came to write his 1909 Preface to *The Ambassadors*, where he asserts – pointedly, adversarially – the ‘inevitable treachery of even the straightest execution’.⁶⁵ Yet in 1905, Henry’s riposte was comprehensive:

I’m always sorry when I hear of your reading anything of mine, & always hope you won’t – you seem to me so constitutionally unable to ‘enjoy’ it, & so condemned to look at it from a point of view remotely alien to mine in writing it, & to the conditions out of which, as mine, it has inevitably sprung – so that all the intentions that have been its main reason for being (with me,) appear never to have reached you at all [...]. I see nowhere about me done or dreamed of the things that alone for me constitute the interest of the doing of the novel – & yet it is in a sacrifice of them on their very own ground that the thing you suggest to me evidently consists.⁶⁶

Here, Henry criticises William by using the latter’s own pragmatistic principles: the importance of circumambient conditions; the ethos of a text being more important than its details; ‘the doing of the novel’ functioning (grammatically, at least) like an act in the world. Typically, Henry adverts to his own peculiar informing conditions in the abstract: as ‘conditions’, ‘intentions’, ‘interest’. In his final plaint (‘I see nowhere about me done or dreamed of [...].’) he sounds the charge of Hamlet (Act I, Scene v): ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy’.

‘Dreadful things to do ...’

To illustrate James’s style of abstraction, I shall pursue the ‘do’/‘doing’/‘done’ triad through the pivotal third chapter of Book 5 of *The Golden Bowl*, a novel that in many ways revolves on, or crystallises itself around, a consideration of ‘the done thing’. This chapter immediately follows the extended evening sequence at the country house Fawns when Maggie – privately struggling to assimilate the adultery of her husband Prince Amerigo with her school-friend, now her father’s wife, Charlotte – has had to make a crucial decision: and chooses denial of the truth. She evades the chance to bring the affair into the open when confronted by her mother-in-law – an instinctive deceit, necessary in order to protect those she loves, and herself:

She saw she was right – that this *was* the tone for her to take and the thing for her to do, the thing as to which she was probably feeling that she had in advance, in her delays and uncertainties, much exaggerated the difficulty. The difficulty was small, and it grew smaller as her adversary continued to shrink; she was not only doing as she wanted, but had by this time effectively done it and hung it up. All of which but deepened Maggie’s sense of the sharp and simple need now of seeing her through to the end. “‘If’ you’ve been mistaken, you say?” – and the Princess but barely faltered. ‘You *have* been mistaken.’⁶⁷

Here James uses ‘doing’ and ‘done’ in a complex formulation which shows Maggie affirming to herself that she has chosen ‘to do’ the correct thing, in the right ‘tone’; also, that she has both realised her best course of action and acted simultaneously. Her epiphany is indivisible from the moment that she actively enters the lapsarian world by acting mendaciously and manipulatively. Tellingly, there is the desperate, one might say Trollopian, irony attaching to ‘She saw she was right’ – only, not ‘right’ as against her husband’s ‘wrong’: ‘right’ in her move to forgo recrimination and save her marriage.⁶⁸

In the next chapter, Maggie, having entered this different moral universe, rapidly demonstrates a newly liberated sense of agency, where ‘doing’ and ‘done’ abound; talking with her father in the garden on the day following her scene with Charlotte, she begins to formulate and enact a plan to separate the lovers. She re-perceives the strength of the union that she has with her father, even as she begins to realise that it must be sacrificed, and hypothesises a question which is almost menacing in its implications:

They *had* after all, whatever happened, always and ever each other; each other – that was the hidden treasure and the saving truth – to do exactly what they would with: a provision full of possibilities. Who could tell as yet what, thanks to it, they wouldn’t have done before the end?⁶⁹

Her self-belief and self-justification grow, likewise her understanding that her father’s deep emotional connection with her has allowed him to divine the best solution for her – one towards which she is herself moving – without perhaps full knowledge of their situation, or at least without open acknowledgement of it between them:

[...] she saw more clearly with each lapsing instant what they were both doing. He was doing what he had steadily been coming to; he was practically *offering* himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice – he had read his way so into her best possibility [...].⁷⁰

The paternal self-sacrifice is based upon the perceptions which are explicitly described by James as an act of ‘reading’; the loving empathy of Mr Verver with his daughter allows him to achieve this insightful discrimination and to collaborate with her instinctively. Exactly who conceives the plan for Adam and Charlotte to return to America, and when, is not spelt out; the creative fusion of its origin lies literally between the lines.

‘Dreadfulness’ immediately arises again here in conjunction with the verb ‘to do’; Maggie finds vindication in the incriminating action of the adulterers: ‘if something dreadful hadn’t happened there wouldn’t for either of them be these dreadful things to do’.⁷¹ For her, ‘the done thing’ is both the invidious thing (the adultery) and the proper thing that puts it right (the separation of the lovers); like countless women in fiction before her, she overlooks the sin of her husband not because she is immoral (or so the ethical reading runs),

but because she is trying out a new kind of enlightened morality, one that has the best interests of the quartet at heart. But another reading might be that Maggie is cloaking her actions with an ethical language that is self-deceiving (at best) and self-serving (at worst). Arguably, Maggie shows great emotional maturity in letting go of her complaint against Charlotte and her husband, but at the same stroke she is brutally complicit in having Charlotte literally shipped away. The ‘done thing’, the consummate thing, including or especially *consummation* – in all its forms – is truly dreadful to Maggie. She articulates the fear of Jamesian characters when faced with ‘things to do’, with taking steps of irrevocable action. There is an inherently civilised quality to their ‘doing’, a hesitancy which registers the potentially damaging ramifications of what it is ‘to do’; yet it is only masking the ruthlessly self-protective actions they have admitted they are prepared to undertake.

Maggie herself becomes one of the ‘alert winged creatures’, and indeed a teetering Angel of compromise, in this section, where James uses the same words that he employed in his description of the process of revision in the novel’s Preface – this time to describe his protagonist’s own narrative revision of the past. Of Maggie’s tenacious refusal to admit her knowledge of their spouses’ mutual infidelity when tested by the interrogative stare of her father, the narrator, focalised in this section through Maggie’s consciousness, remarks that ‘as if perched up before him on her vertiginous point and in the very glare of his observation, she balanced for thirty seconds, she almost rocked [...]’.⁷² By holding up to her father’s hard inspection a patched-up façade of willed non-admission she enables them to get past this strained period and reach a better (for them) phase of life, without the acknowledgement of their partners’ wrongdoing, which could have precipitated a much more dramatic destruction of relationships. The effort of dissimulation is not easy: ‘She held herself hard; the thing was to be done, once for all, by her acting now where she stood.’⁷³ In this passage, Maggie steels herself, like Lady Macbeth – afterwards haunted by her action as much as by the phrase itself: ‘What’s done is done’ – to do the ‘dreadful thing’, reconceived as the ‘right thing’ and formulated in a passive infinitive verb form (‘was to be done’).⁷⁴ It is clear why Maggie would want to drain this thought of all agency. Nestled within that phrase, the inflexional verb form ‘to be done’ is both an injunction to act and the presumption of a certain futurity where the ‘done thing’ – is once and for all behind Maggie. The effort and horror of ‘doing’ – of performing actions which irrevocably commit, and entrain consequence – extends from the authorial act of writing itself, of committing oneself to the page, to the actions of characters in an aesthetic arena where drama unfolds from ethical, or less than ethical, choices.

One may find in these passages from Book 5, Chapter 3 of James’s last great novel the fullest elaboration of his style of abstraction, taking in the stylistic idiosyncrasies explored by Ian Watt, Dorothea Krook, Seymour

Chatman, and others. Following the turning point for Maggie in the previous chapter – her notorious encounter with her step-mother on the terrace at Fawns – James is here concerned with her examination of her own and her father’s states of mind. To look at one paragraph in particular (‘At this it hung ...’),⁷⁵ terms of mental evaluation proliferate, in many abstract nouns such as: ‘impression’, ‘intention’, ‘vision’, ‘attitude’, ‘observation’. This subset of nouns crosses over into those from another field of discourse, a medical lexicon: ‘dizziness’, ‘symptoms’, ‘vigilance’. Then there is another register which is altogether more unnerving: ‘unrest’, ‘pressure’, ‘warning’, ‘suspicion’, ‘secret’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘intensity’. The anxiety of the Ververs, which these nouns help to express, derives from the unvoiceable, unanswerable questions as to the extent of each character’s knowledge regarding the others, and further, the extent of each protagonist’s grasping towards options which might enable or force a solution serving their own best interests. These complexities are not easily expressed by the characters, due to their inherent intangibility, the disquiet they entail, and their evolving status: ambiguity swarms. Indeterminate nouns such as ‘thing’, ‘things’, ‘something’, ‘nothing’, and vague words such as ‘space’, ‘possibility’, ‘matter’, hamper the reader’s clear comprehension at the same time as they express the characters’ mental confusion. Not only is it the language that is abstract, but the syntax too: James’s sentences in this lengthy paragraph are typically meandering and multi-clausal, freighted by multiple modifiers. Whereas so many of the terms in the Jamesian sentence are ‘abstract’ in the sense of ‘conceptual’ (*OED*, sense 1b), the sentence constructions seem ‘abstract’ in another sense: ‘Lacking awareness of or concentration on what is happening around one; distracted, preoccupied, faraway’ (*OED*, sense 4). In the first sentence, James makes extensive use of personal and impersonal pronouns:

At this it hung before her that she should have had as never yet her opportunity to say, and it held her for a minute as in a vise, her impression of his now, with his strained smile, which touched her to deepest depths, sounding her in his secret unrest.

James forces the reader to differentiate constantly, at the most basic level, between subject and object and various pronouns, which the tested reader might be tempted to label as dismayingly dislocated. More often than not, agency is ascribed to aspects of consciousness themselves – which has the effect of withdrawing Maggie from her situation: abstracting her, as it were. And Maggie’s withdrawal from immediate action into the reflection that precedes it establishes a pattern for that of the ideal reader. The necessary absorption, engrossment and bewilderment experienced by James’s reader in trying to decipher his text reflects that of his characters, as they struggle to manoeuvre through their circumstances, equipped only with

the acuity with which they can perceive, realise, and convert meditation into self-assisting action.

In his book on *The Later Style of Henry James*, Chatman sounds a querulous note: ‘But surely “difficulty” is a consequence, not a formative principle or “motive”, of a style ...’.⁷⁶ My argument has been that James’s abstraction is precisely this: a ‘motive’ of his style. James’s motivating abstraction, which reaches its apotheosis in *The Golden Bowl*, represents a pulling away from the concrete and the particular, away even from narrative and representation, at the same time as it keeps these things in view: in the ideal, perfectly ‘done’ thing that it aspires to be. In this connection, James emerges as a proto-modernist: his abstraction is a key part of his avant-gardism. Yet this stylistic method or ‘motive’ pre-dates literary modernism. As far back as 1868 George Eliot had reflected on the appeal of abstract language in her notebook: ‘Abstract words and phrases which have an excellent genealogy are apt to live a little too much on their reputation and even to sink into dangerous impostors that should be made to show how they get their living.’ This bringing to account, in Eliot’s view, was best achieved by plotting the relation of the senses of abstract words to each other: ‘to any but those who are under the dire necessity of using the word and cannot afford to wait for a meaning, it must be more fruitful to ask, what relations of things can properly be included under the word’.⁷⁷ James was interested in dramatising these relations, which is why so much of his dialogue sounds portentous, suggestive – and, by the same token, scrupulously discreet. So, alongside the possibility of an avant-garde abstractionism running through James, there is a more conservative mode of artistry at work: abstraction in the service of decorum or delicacy. In both readings, one finds James pulling back or away, offering disclosures that complicate more than they clarify, that stall or stymie more than they point the path to virtuous action. Regardless of its provenance, Jamesian abstraction functions as a challenge to Nussbaum’s and Miller’s claims that the singularity and specificity of Jamesian prose is what enables a working ‘ethics’ to emerge from his style, or from the activity of reading him. Jamesian abstraction, far from condemning James to the cerebral or philosophical or even the purely aesthetic, reveals his pursuit of an enriching engrossment in states of relatedness which transcend the representational only to settle, finally, in his own awful worship of ‘the dreadful done’.

Notes

1. As far as I’m aware, there have been no studies of the influence of early Abstraction (from the 1890s onwards) on Henry James. Neither of the

classic treatments of James and visual art, Viola Hopkins Winner's *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970) nor Adeline R. Tintner's *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), consider the influence of the British and French avant-garde on James's style. Similarly, more recent studies, such as Jennifer Eimer's *The Continuum of Consciousness: Aesthetic Experience and Visual Art in Henry James's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), focus on characters' responses to individual paintings as an index more generally of heightened consciousness. Perhaps the best discussion of the impact of visual art on James's style is in Peter Brooks' *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), in which Brooks likens James's narrative technique to Cubism and other kinds of 'radical perspectivalism' (p. 134).

2. See particularly Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) as representatives of two very different schools of ethical criticism; and Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Thomas Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006) as representative 'thing-theorists'.
3. There has been a notable critical drive in recent years to re-invest the denigrated or disregarded literary abstractionism of certain Victorian and Modernist prose writers with political, economic and aesthetic value and significance. See, for instance, J. R. Hall, 'Abstraction in Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground"', *The Modern Language Review*, 76.1 (1981), pp. 129–37; Anne Fernihough, "'Go in fear of abstractions": Modernism and the Spectre of Democracy', *Textual Practice*, 14.3 (2000), pp. 479–97; David Kurnick, 'Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading: Drifting through *Romola*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 42.3 (2009), pp. 490–96; Ilana M. Blumberg, 'Stealing the "Parson's Surplice"/ the Person's Surplus: Narratives of Abstraction and Exchange in *Silas Marner*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 67.4 (2013), pp. 490–519; and Ben Parker, 'Value and Abstraction in Thomas Hardy', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 79.2 (2018), pp. 205–26.
4. William Empson, 'Still the Strange Necessity', in John Haffenden (ed.), *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), p. 126.
5. John Locke, 'Chapter X: Abuse of Words', in Peter Nidditch (ed.), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 508.
6. Edmund Wilson, 'The Ambiguity of Henry James', *Hound and Horn*, 7 (1934), p. 181.
7. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine-Penguin, 1962), p. 125.
8. James, Preface to *The Ambassadors*, in Richard P. Blackmur (ed.), *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 325.
9. Ezra Pound, 'A Shake Down', *The Little Review*, 5 (1918–19), p. 21.
10. Jonathan Culler, introduction, *The Structure of Complex Words*, by William Empson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. viii.

11. William Empson, 'Coda', in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 236.
12. Seymour Chatman, for instance, who writes in *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972):

At best they are slightly ironic, in the sense that they are too 'strong', too hyperbolic, for a lightweight world of manners and social situations. James's plots and characters and atmosphere do not seem to justify – except ironically – the intellectual freight that such words bear, and that is perhaps partly the 'intention'. (p. 10)

13. Henry James to Leon Mead, 22 March 1899, in Philip Horne (ed.), *Henry James: A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1999), p. 315.
14. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in Morris Shapira (ed.), *Selected Literary Criticism of Henry James* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine-Penguin, 1968), pp. 85–86.
15. See 'implication' in the online *OED*: sense 2a; sense 1; sense 2c.
16. Martha Nussbaum, 'Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy', *New Literary History*, 15.1 (1983), pp. 40–41.
17. James did not own any Aristotle. In the catalogue of his library, now largely dispersed, one may instead find Benjamin Jowett's five-volume *The Dialogues of Plato* (Oxford, 1892) and G.H. Lewes's *Aristotle: A Chapter from the History of Science* (London, 1864), alongside a handful of philosophical texts (by Mill, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Santayana). See Leon Edel and Adeline R. Tintner, 'The Library of Henry James' (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).
18. The topic of Jamesian 'difficulty', stemming from his narrative style, has a long history; as Dorothea Krook notes in *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 'at least one explanation of the difficulty' is 'a certain baffling abstractness' (p. 55). Different kinds of ethical critics – from neo-Aristotelian to deconstructive – all show that encounters with narrative 'difficulty' (difficult style, certainly, but only as difficult style signals difficult subject matter) are instrumental to the processes of both ethical and literary judgement. See Matthew Flaherty, 'Henry James at the Ethical Turn: Vivification and Ironization in *The Ambassadors*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 69.3 (2014), pp. 366–93, for a helpful summary of these various positions. Surprisingly, Flaherty identifies even in late James what he describes as 'realist tendencies towards analysis, understanding, and abstraction' (p. 371).
19. Nussbaum, 'Flawed Crystals', p. 43.
20. Martha Nussbaum, 'Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism', *Philosophy and Literature*, 22.2 (1998), p. 344.
21. Cf. Dorothy Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics', in which the author mounts a critique of Nussbaum based on her misquotation of Dickens' phrase from *David Copperfield*, 'reading as if for life' – which Nussbaum casts as 'reading for life':

To forget the 'as if' is to equate reading with life, to disavow the ideological nature of reading, the particular social conditions that encourage Nussbaum to believe that there could be no significant difference between life and its fictional representation, between reading as a private and individual experience and reading as cultural work. (p. 899)

22. Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 339.
23. Ibid., p. 337.
24. Nussbaum has a tendency to literalise, and hence neutralise, James's analogies. Witness this passage from *Love's Knowledge*: 'James often stresses this analogy: the work of the moral imagination is like the work of the creative imagination, especially that of the novelist. I want to study this analogy and to see how it is more than analogy [...]' (p. 148).
25. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 155.
26. Ibid., pp. 156–57.
27. Ibid., p. 162.
28. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum', *Representations*, 77 (2002), p. 53.
29. J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct*, pp. 1–2.
30. Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 347.
31. Indeed, as Nussbaum asserts:

Again we can see that there is more than analogy here. Our whole moral task [...] is to make a fine artistic creation. James does not give linguistic representation pride of place [...] But he does insist that our whole conduct is *some* form of artistic 'putting' and that its assessable virtues are also those for which we look to the novelist. (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 163)

32. See Ross Posnock, ch. 4: "'The Religion of Doing': Breaking the Aura of Henry James', *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 80–104.
33. See Philip Horne, 'Henry James and "the forces of violence": on the track of "big game" in *The Jolly Corner*', *The Henry James Review*, 27.3 (2006), pp. 237–47.
34. Cora Diamond laments: 'It is a striking fact that many moral philosophers wish to define the sphere of the moral by tying it in some way to action'. Diamond, 'Having a Rough Story about what Moral Philosophy Is', *New Literary History*, 15.1 (1983), p. 160.
35. Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 347.
36. Henry James, 'Gustave Flaubert', *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 262.
37. Flaubert's tale 'Un cœur simple' or 'Le perroquet' from *Trois Contes* (1877) does not come off as well in this essay ('Gustave Flaubert has written a story about the devotion of a servant-girl to a parrot, and the production, highly finished as it is, cannot on the whole be called a success.') Cf. James, Preface to *The Awkward Age*, *The Art of the Novel*: 'The thing 'done' artistically, is a fusion, or it has not *been done*' (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 116).
38. James, Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 126.
39. James, Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 298.
40. Nussbaum describes the style that dominated her graduate education in the Philosophy Department at Harvard University as 'a style correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid, a style that seemed to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all could be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged' (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 19).
41. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 20.

42. Angela Leighton makes this excellent distinction in her monograph *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). In her chapter on Wallace Stevens, Leighton writes that

To be abstract [...] is to pull away from any fixed idea or thing. It is to set a word vibrating, moving, changing, in relation to its reference. This is almost the opposite of philosophical abstraction, which pins down ideas to a single meaning: the good, the beautiful, the true. By contrast, Stevens aims for an unfixing of meaning, as well as a disclosure of that unfixing. (p. 188)

I am not sure that James was also aiming for an ‘unfixing of meaning’, as deconstructionism might insist, but something more like an attentiveness to meaning’s contingency.

43. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, pp. 5, 47, 34.
 44. Kevin J. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 353–54, 455.
 45. Vernon Lee, ‘Henry James’ *The Handling of Words* (London: Bodley Head, 1923), p. 247. The sentence to which Lee refers is from Book 4, Ch. 2 of *The Ambassadors*:

Little Bilham once more pervaded the scene, but Little Bilham became, even in a higher degree than he had originally been, one of the numerous forms of the inclusive relation; a consequence promoted, to our friend’s sense, by two or three incidents with which we have yet to make acquaintance.

46. Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 247.
 47. See Emily Zubernis, ‘Henry James’s Minimalist Novel’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 49.3 (2016), pp. 467–85. Harold Osborne, in his penetrating distinction between modes of abstraction, points out that ‘abstract’ art as a designation has an evolving meaning and did not always refer to non-figurative or non-representational artforms, as it does today, but also invoked degrees of departure (or withdrawal) from naturalism. See his *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 25–27.
 48. Watt, ‘The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication’, *Essays in Criticism*, X.3 (1960), p. 256. Cf. Mary Cross on the word ‘principle’ in *Henry James: The Contingencies of Style* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 2. Cross’s suggestion is that this word is used for its ‘effect’ not its ‘meaning’.
 49. Watt, ‘An Explication’, pp. 260, 264, 268, 261.
 50. See Elizabeth A. Barnum’s doctoral thesis, ‘Non-Reified Space: Henry James’s Critique of Capitalism Through Abstractness and Ambiguity’ (University of North Dakota, 2015), p. vii. See also Ryan Heuser’s postdoctoral paper presented at King’s College, Cambridge University, on 18 February 2020 entitled ‘Abstraction: A Literary History’, in which he coins the term ‘abstract realism’ to describe a style of eighteenth-century abstraction in which abstract nouns repeatedly assume the subject position of sentences, using the example of ‘insinuation’ (as against x ‘insinuates’) to show that such nominalizations ‘tend to transform private action into a kind of public property, converting individual events into generalized phenomena’ (p. 25). James’s nominalisations might be viewed as similarly ‘disembodied’ representations of social relations, though Heuser doesn’t consider James in this context.

51. See John Alberti, 'The Economics of Love: The Production of Value in *The Golden Bowl*', *The Henry James Review*, 12.1 (1991), pp. 9–19 (p. 11) for a summary of the proponents of this critical position.
52. Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, p. 412.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*, p. 395.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 410–11.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 411.
57. Henry James, *Notes of a Son & Brother* (London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 179. James, we gather, was an anomaly in the family triangulation of Henry James Senior, William James, and himself; his father, James tells us a few pages before this, was wonderfully contradictory and various, alternating between 'the abstract' and the concrete:

He could answer one with the radiant when one challenged him with the obscure, just as he could respond with the general when one pulled at the particular; and I needn't repeat that this made for us, during all our time, anything but a starved actuality.

58. Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, p. 408. The *OED* online suggests that there is more ambiguity in the term 'consequentiality' (as either 'logical sequence and consistency of thought' or else 'air or assumption of importance') than in the more technical term 'consequentialism' ('an ethical doctrine which holds that the morality of an action is to be judged solely by its consequences'). What the oblique and the consequential may be said to have in common is that both methods are 'not direct or immediate', but 'eventual' (see the *OED* entry for 'consequential', adj. and n., sense 2).
59. William James, 'Abstractionism and "Relativismus"', in Ignas K. Skrupskelis (ed.), *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 300.
60. William James, 'Abstractionism and "Relativismus"', p. 300.
61. Mary Cross, *Henry James: The Contingencies of Style*, p. 37. Cf. Hazel Hutchison in *Seeing and Believing: Henry James and the Spiritual World* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006) on the 'concrete-abstract construction': '[James] has a tendency to fuse the concrete and the abstract together in a single phrase to create a varying range of effects: comic, dramatic, ghostly, and ineffable' (p. 13).
62. William James expressed his 'aesthetics' to the architect and psychologist Henry Rutgers Marshall (1852–1927): 'Surely imitation in the concrete is better for results than any amount of gabble in the abstract. Let the rest of us philosophers gabble, but don't mix us up with the interests of the art department as such! Them's my sentiments' (7 February 1899). See *The Letters of William James*, ed. (by his son) Henry James (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2 vols., Vol. II, n.p.
63. William James to Henry James, 12 Dec. 1875, in Ralph Barton Perry (ed.), *The Thought and Character of William James* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1936), 2 vols., Vol. I, p. 363.
64. William James to Henry James, 22 Oct. 1905, in Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (eds), *The Correspondence of William James: William and Henry* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), Vol. III, p. 301.
65. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 325.

66. Henry James to William James, 23 Nov. 1905, in Philip Horne (ed.), *Henry James: A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking, 1999), pp. 426–27.
67. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), Vol. II, Book V, Ch. II, pp. 248–49.
68. James had read Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), describing it in his 1883 essay on the writer as 'the history of an accidental rupture between two stiff-necked and ungracious people – "the little rift within the lute" – which widens at last into a gulf of anguish'. See 'Anthony Trollope', in Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (eds), *Henry James: Literary Criticism* (New York: Library of America, 1984), Vol. I, pp. 1326–54 (p. 1351).
69. *The Golden Bowl*, Vol. II, Book V, Ch. III, p. 255.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
73. *Ibid.*
74. See also Macbeth's lines in Act III, Scene ii: 'there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note' to which Lady Macbeth replies: 'What's to be done?' (ll.48–50). I would like to thank Alex Dougherty for reminding me of this exchange.
75. *The Golden Bowl*, Vol. II, Book V, Ch. III, pp. 267–69.
76. Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James*, p. 2.
77. George Eliot, 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868), in Rosemary Ashton (ed.), *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 355.

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