

“Vast Impropriety”: Tragedy, Camp Negation, and the Double Entendre in Henry James’s *The Sacred Fount* and *The Golden Bowl*

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I. Jamesian Tragedy, Jamesian Camp

The final paragraph of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* has long divided readers.¹ The question is simple: Is the ending happy? Or not? If you think it is, then you will find the typically Jamesian note of renunciation here reduced to a dark shadow in an otherwise sunny scene—a happily resolved heterosexual comedy. If, on the contrary, you think *The Golden Bowl* is, as a friend put it to me, “a black book” (Thomas Koenigs, pers. comm.), you will emphasize instead James’s introduction of “pity and dread”—those watchwords of tragedy—into the ultimate sentence. The Prince and Maggie have been discussing the disposal of Charlotte, whom Maggie has declared “splendid.” “That’s our help, you see,” she added—to point further her moral.”

It kept him before her therefore, taking in—or trying to—what she so wonderfully gave. He tried, too clearly, to please her—to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: “‘See’? I see nothing but *you*.” And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast. (James [1904] 2009, 567)

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1. For a brief overview of disputes over the ending of *The Golden Bowl*, see McWhirter 1989, 142–45, 181.

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The problem is one of genre—is this tragedy or comedy?—but the solution of course cannot inhere in anything as naive as casting about for the “correct” generic label, like tragicomedy, or melodrama, or what have you. John Frow (2007, 1631) observes that responding to “genre cues” “is always a matter of interpretation, not of recognition: *Robinson Crusoe* can be read plausibly either as an adventure story or as a salvation narrative, and choosing between these generic frames makes a crucial difference.” In other words, genre is produced in the interaction between text and reader, and ambiguity results from the hesitation between frames. In a work like *The Golden Bowl*, in which the textual mechanisms generative of ambiguity are unusually numerous and intense, genre cues are accordingly unusually indeterminate. The concluding sentence, in which James smuggles what he knows his readers will recognize as the normative criteria of Aristotelian tragedy into a situation that does not appear to justify them, shows James at his most deliberately mischievous. Tragedy is explicitly announced, but the reader is unsure how to take the announcement. After all, there is no misrecognition, no tragic flaw, and no body count. There’s a restored marriage, and a hug.

The point is not that *The Golden Bowl*’s genre can be fixed by the abstract generic markers indicated in James’s invocation of “pity and dread” or that a reader can decisively resolve the novel’s murky affective ambiguities by seizing on the final paragraph as evidence in one direction or another. All readers will have recognized long before the final paragraph that *The Golden Bowl* will not satisfy any such narrow generic expectation, that it is complexly hybrid. And not even the most optimistic reader could think that, had James left out “pity and dread,” *The Golden Bowl*’s ending would be uncomplicatedly comic. But I want to insist that James’s bold highlighting of “pity and dread” is meant to alert the reader to the process of generic framing as an active part of reading—to make the reader more acutely aware than she or he would otherwise be that self-consciousness about genre (and specifically tragedy) is not just a source of the novel’s power but also one of its themes. When “for pity and dread” of Amerigo’s eyes Maggie “buried her own in his breast,” she—like us—is grasping around for the magic labels that might help make sense of irreducibly multifarious experiences and emotions.

This essay proposes that the category of camp can provide one way for thinking about the encounter between affective complexity and generic framing in James. In “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag (1966, 287) asserts that James, being

camp, can never be tragic: “Camp and tragedy are antitheses. There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist’s involvement) and, often, pathos. The excruciating is also one of the tonalities of Camp; it is the quality of excruciation in much of Henry James . . . that is responsible for the large element of Camp in his writings. But there is never, never tragedy.” It is a curious passage in that it excludes camp from a generic category, tragedy, but without proposing a positive genre (comedy, say, or farce) to which camp might rather belong. Instead, Sontag enumerates “tonalities”—“seriousness,” “pathos,” “excruciation,” “but never, never tragedy”—proper or improper to camp. (I will have more to say about Sontag’s “excruciation” below.) One result of this not entirely coherent implicit taxonomy is that tragedy itself has been downgraded from a genre to a tonality.

Despite a certain looseness in her thinking, Sontag has identified one of camp’s signal effects: its destabilization of generic categories or, as Frow might have it, its frustration of a reader’s capacity to select an appropriate generic frame. For Hugh Stevens (2008, 163), Jamesian camp occasions sudden swerves in genre, causing the fiction to “break with its own narrative procedure, as it swings out of a realist mode into comic melodrama,” for instance. Genre-bending mutability is a sign of camp. With Frow’s analysis of genre frames in mind, we might call *camp* the effect of the reader’s uncertain oscillation between frames. Camp is metageneric insofar as it names an ironic suspension between frames. It is also allied to ambiguity, itself an effect of a text’s potential participation in multiple generic frames.²

A line, a scene, or an entire work that is tragic from one angle and comic from another might be thought of as a kind of double entendre, as might the sort of seriousness that, when viewed askew, dissolves into silliness and laughter. This article proposes that the tragic intensity of James’s major phase—an intensity marked by highly recursive nuances of represented psychology, by a frankness about the power of erotic love both to redeem and to destroy, and by elaborate metaphoric conceits that in their mysterious richness remain unrivaled in the history of the novel—is always accompanied by, is indeed deeply enmeshed with, a contrary tendency that is bawdy, unserious, low. I isolate the obscene

2. I have borrowed *participation* from Jacques Derrida (1980, 230), who writes, “Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, and yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (quoted in Frow 2006, 25).

double entendre as the linguistic device by which James most directly conducts the bawdy countercurrent in his late fiction, a countercurrent I will read in terms of Jamesian camp. Ultimately, I will suggest, a full account of the effects of a novel like *The Golden Bowl* must acknowledge the generic destabilizations wrought by a system of double entendres threaded throughout. The point is not merely to observe and unpack these dirty jokes but in light of them to reassess the major phase in terms of such generic categories as tragedy, melodrama, and realism. If Jamesian tragedy and Jamesian pathos are bound up with that moral exigency all readers of the late novels have sensed, this seriousness has its underbelly or smirking reverse face. We should be attendant to James's bawdy smirk.

II. *The Sacred Fount:* Double Entendre as Theory of the Jamesian Novel

For Martha Nussbaum, to read late James as tragedy is to undergo a course of training in the exercise of the ethical imagination. Whatever one thinks of Nussbaum's insistence that the Jamesian novel provides a necessary supplement or corrective to theories of moral reasoning, any reader of James will nod in agreement with her observations about what one might call the moral texture of Jamesian perception. Who could plausibly disagree with Nussbaum's (1992, 154) assertion that for James "a responsible action . . . is a highly context-specific and nuanced thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic"? Who could feel otherwise than that James enjoins us, as a kind of moral duty, to "see clearly and with high intelligence," to "respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination" (134)? Writing of *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum invokes this ethical perceptiveness in terms of tragedy: "If life is a tragedy . . . see that; respond to that fact with pity for others and fear for yourself" (135).

In fact of course a contrary pattern of response has long been available, from Louis Umfreville Wilkinson's deflationary, pornographic parody "The Better End" (1912)³ to Maxwell Geismar's (1966, 14) rebuke that James's "vision of sex was essentially voyeuristic" to Allon White's (1981, 136) confession that

3. For Wilkinson's parody, see Haralson 2003, 19.

late James can often seem not a rarified encounter with tragic intensity but rather tawdry, cheap, even degrading:

As a reader of late James, I occasionally halt at points in the text where relative clarity of narration suddenly afflicts me with a sense of what is almost bathos. What on earth did Strether imagine was going on between Chad and Mme de Vionnet? Why, after all, couldn't Maggie just come straight out with a direct challenge to Amerigo and Charlotte, accuse them of having an affair, produce a good row, and sort things out "sur place"? And at times it troubles me deeply that "The Wings of the Dove" is one of the most sordid and miserable of tales—a failed confidence trick on a dying woman.

What upsets White is the apparently bathetic imbalance between the finely wrought, relentlessly indirect texture of Jamesian sentences and the "sordid" nature of the facts on the ground. White's valuable study goes on to track the formal and linguistic strategies by which James converts the sexual topic into an occasion for elliptical patterns of concealment and subterfuge. But here I am only interested in highlighting White's half-embarrassed admission that there is something unseemly in James—an unseemliness that inheres not only in the topics themselves (adultery, confidence tricks) but in the bathetic gap between sordidness of topic and complexity of style.

White's subjective response—his embarrassed detection of a bathetic imbalance in James—provides a crucial supplement to critical accounts of James unsure of how to handle his dirty jokes and sexual humor. In an introduction to *What Maisie Knew*, Paul Theroux (1986, 12) writes, "One of [Ida's] infidelities is disguised as a match she is playing abroad, and in an aside James—unconsciously of course—makes one of the clearest statements of her sexual character and leaves us with a bewitching image of 'other balls that Ida's cue used to send flying.'" The disbelief encapsulated in Theroux's "unconsciously of course" has governed decades of criticism about sexuality in James, although more recent critics have recognized that, as Kevin Ohi (2011, 34) puts it, "knowingly tittering at an author who could *inadvertently* name a character Fanny Assingham" is a less than adequate response to James's penchant for this kind of crude humor (emphasis mine). Nevertheless, with the important exception of Stevens's (2008, 119–23) analysis of the bawdy implications of James's names, no systematic study of James's double entendres has been attempted.⁴ Stevens's compilation and anal-

4. Looking over lists of names in James's notebooks, Stevens observes James's fondness for "erotic (even if sometimes ambiguous) double entendres" (120). "James," Stevens writes, "seems fully aware of the subversive innuendo his fiction deploys" (119).

ysis of Jamesian names as dirty jokes ought to settle once and for all the question of James's putative sexual naïveté: he had none.

An account of the double entendre and the pressure it places on Jamesian morality in the major phase should begin with *The Sacred Fount*, that perverse, farcical opening to the novels of the new century. James's own assessment of that novel as "a consistent joke," "the merest of *jeux d'esprit*" (quoted in Blackall 1965, 10) might seem to authorize its neglect in considerations of the more serious work to follow—it is at best a rehearsal for the dramas of epistemology treated in *The Ambassadors* and at worst a cul-de-sac retreated from so that better work could commence. But in fact this "merest joke" affords a blueprint for recognizing the naughtier registers in all of late James and particularly, as I will show, in *The Golden Bowl*—registers that threaten to deflate the balloon (to recur to James's familiar image from the preface to *The American*) of high romance.

The unnamed narrator of *The Sacred Fount* indulges frankly magical theories about the vampiric transference of properties between lovers, but he would be the first to admit that this metaphysical mechanism resembles other, more prosaic sorts of communion: "It was of course familiar enough that when people were so deeply in love they rubbed off on each other—that a great pressure of soul to soul usually left on either side a sufficient show of tell-tale traces" (James 1901, 16). We have here in deflated miniature the quintessential operation of the Jamesian sexual double entendre: an obscene meaning (the exchange of body fluids between lovers, plausibly deniable as instead the contagion of personality traits) is offered in substitution for a higher, more abstract phenomenon (one lover mystically siphoning off the life force of another that is *The Sacred Fount*'s central premise). However old-fashioned his Freudian schema, Geismar's (1966, 204) reading of *The Sacred Fount* as about the "juvenile fantasy that the loss of human sperm impairs the health and vitality of the human organism" accurately gets at the persistently material substrate of so much of Jamesian language, which in such double entendres as "rubs off on" exhibits a downward tropism. Such turns toward the body—in phallic, vaginal, and excremental puns—mirror or complement the Jamesian process by which, as Bill Brown (2003, 161) observes, "thought assumes a physicality of its own," for instance, in *The Golden Bowl*'s likening Maggie Verver's passion for her husband to glowing jewels. These reifying metaphors (and their extended cousins, like *The Golden Bowl*'s pagoda or the silver leash around Charlotte's throat) are elevating even when they are pain-

ful or dark. The double entendre, conversely, effects a demystifying movement downward.

The embarrassment at James's bawdy double entendres that has caused so many readers to suspect that James himself was not in control of his own dirty meanings receives, in *The Sacred Fount*, a kind of theorization. Here is the narrator wincing as Mrs. Brissenden (nicknamed Mrs. Briss) too enthusiastically joins him in his own game:

It was by [Mrs. Briss's] insistence in fact that my thought was quickened. It even felt a kind of chill—an odd revulsion—at the touch of her eagerness. Singular perhaps that only then—yet quite certainly then—the curiosity to which I had so freely surrendered myself began to strike me as wanting in taste. It was reflected in Mrs. Brissenden quite by my fault, and I can't say just what cause for shame, after so much talk of our search and our scent, I found in our awakened and confirmed keenness. (James 1901, 45)

Our narrator's "revulsion" and "shame" at the bad taste of Mrs. Briss's and his eager inquiries anticipate the interpretational "bad taste" that insists on rooting around in James's supersubtle narratives for bawdy double entendres—the evident reductiveness involved in such a reading strategy might strike a reader as sophomoric or repellent. The question of bad taste is figured as one of privileging materiality over intellection. The painter Obert—perhaps vocationally attuned to the weaker potential for scandal in the verbal as opposed to the material—offers this distinction in response to the narrator's anticipated embarrassment:

“We ought to remember,” I pursued, even at the risk of showing as too sententious, “that success in such an inquiry may perhaps be more embarrassing than failure. To nose about for a relation that a lady has her reason for keeping secret—”
 “Is made not only quite inoffensive, I hold”—he immediately took me up—
 “but positively honourable, by being confined to psychologic evidence.” (66)

And the narrator finishes the formulation: “If I had a material clue I should feel ashamed: the fact would be deterrent” (66).

The shame of the “material clue” is avoided by substituting for the certain evidence derived from peeping at keyholes the less concrete but more “psychologic evidence” derived from gossip. (One of *The Sacred Fount*'s central jokes is its wedding of the social conventions of gossip to the forms of logical proof. This is but a parodically precise distillation of the rhetorical conventions of all Jamesian conversation.) As Patricia Meyer Spacks (1985, 40) observes in her study of gossip, “Sex and gossip alike comprise modes of intimate commu-

nication; both epitomize the unpredictable and uncontrollable. . . . Passionate attacks on the secret life of words parallel warnings about the secret life of the body.” The double entendre represents those places in which the material/sexual substrate—“the secret life of the body” that Jamesian gossip both points to and avoids—breaks through, makes itself obscenely felt. “That we had suddenly caught Long in the act of presenting his receptacle at the sacred fount seemed announced by the tone in which Mrs. Brissenden named the other party” (James 1901, 39) is perfectly comprehensible within the special terms our narrator has developed. It is also comprehensible, although not strictly translatable, as a euphemistic description of a sexual act. Gossip itself, as if refusing to remain severed from the sexuality that is its motivation, can prove bizarrely erotic. “You excite me too much,” Obert says to our narrator. “You don’t know what you do to me” (215). Gossip, one might say, *wants to be* sex itself; the “psychologic” wants to be the material. Obert, impregnated by talk, says, “Well, as you had planted the theory in me, it began to bear fruit” (219).

Cornelia Atwood Pratt ([1901] 1998, 307) called *The Sacred Fount* “sublimated gossip” all the way back in 1901, but if sublimation renders the material immaterial, transforms the hard fact into something airier and more dignified, then much of James’s humor depends on reversing or exposing this process. Mrs. Brissenden refers to the narrator’s gossipy analytic method as a contagion, a disease whose symptom is sublimity: “That’s only because it’s catching. You’ve *made* me sublime. You found me dense” (James 1901, 81). “Dense” here means stupid, but it also connotes the facticity of the material world, which stands in vulgar opposition to the “sublime” constructs of the “psychologic” or the imaginative. This dichotomy is spelled out when Mrs. Briss explains that she broke with the narrator’s theory “as soon as I was not with you—I mean with you personally,” to which the narrator replies: “I think it was much more my theory that gave its charm to my person. My person, I flatter myself, has remained through these few hours—hours of tension, but of a tension, you see, purely intellectual—as good as ever” (287–88). The *other* kind of tension, implicitly sexual, suggests some slippage here between *person* in the sense of personality and *person* in the sense of body. This slippage is implied only to be rejected. All tension, the narrator contends, is “purely intellectual.” This is a realm of minds without bodies. But an earlier remark to Obert gives the lie to the purity the narrator insists on: “Our hands are not clean” (212). This figure of speech suggests that the “purely

intellectual” handling of other peoples’ sex lives is impossible, that contamination by the material is inevitable.

It further suggests the ethical risks involved in gossip, understood both in terms of the potential reputational costs to the subjects gossiped about and the degrading effects on the gossipers themselves. Gossip might be shamefully interested in other people’s sex lives, but there is a concern that it is not really serious about them. “Almost anyone would do,” as the narrator says—anyone, that is, might be identified as “the sacred fount” and thus fill in the theory. *The Sacred Fount* illustrates the purely formal aspect of gossip; people are mere markers in a conversational game. The narrator, however, hopes to release gossip from the worry that it does not really care about people. His entirely self-conscious efforts in this direction bestow upon both gossip and voyeurism a redemptive moral richness: “The only personal privilege I could, after all, save from the whole business was that of understanding. I couldn’t save Mrs. Server, and I couldn’t save poor Briss; I *could*, however, guard, to the last grain of gold, my precious sense of their loss, their disintegration and their doom” (273). In shifting into the tragic register, the narrator attempts, as it were, to wash clean his dirty hands. The conversion of the objects of gossip from sources of titillation to figures of tragic grandeur is, from one perspective, the work of the serious novel of manners. What *The Sacred Fount*’s narrator at one point calls “the vast impropriety of things” (258)—an impropriety that is first and foremost sexual—will in *The Golden Bowl* bear enormous weight.

III. The Unserious *Golden Bowl*

The mischievous work of the double entendre, an “impropriety” in a decidedly low register, regularly pierces the seriousness. And just as inappropriate laughter can, once it gets started, refuse to be quelled, so too can a reading of the Jamesian text in terms of hidden obscene meanings threaten to burst the bounds of interpretational propriety—to run wild. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1993, 99) ingenious readings of James’s “extremely dense” and “highly charged associations concerning the anus” convince until they do not. It is difficult to know how to assess the claim, for instance, that a line from *The Wings of the Dove* “plac[es] the reader less in identification with the crammed rectum and more in identification with the probing digit” (102). My point is not that Sedgwick is simply wrong, but that

a certain kind of dizzying overreading, in her case psychoanalytically informed, responds, in however overwrought a fashion, to something real in the Jamesian text. The Jamesian double entendre induces an interpretational paranoia, a frenzy of unmasking.⁵

The impulse toward revelation is the signal experience of reading James. White (1981, 134) understands it in terms of the rhetorical processes by which the vulgar, in the sense of sexual blatancy, is rendered sublime. Jamesian indirection elicits “a drama of decipherment, the ‘cryptadion’ of which is an active sexuality, an ‘affair’ which must exist without overt signification” (143). Peter Brooks (1985, 172) similarly observes that “the apparent blankness of referential meaning repeatedly becomes a central issue in the drama, the unspecifiable source of its most potent extrapolated and metaphorical meanings.” But this exalted end point has a lesser cousin in euphemism, which, White (1981, 138) writes, “operates by substituting polite and vague expressions in place of direct statements of fact.” As a middle term between the (never expressed) raw fact of sexual intrigue and full-blown sublimation, euphemism interests me here because, unlike the sublime metaphors to which it is related, it is almost always comic.

The Jamesian double entendre might be considered a subspecies of euphemism insofar as it constitutes a coded naming of the unnameable, but it might also be considered a kind of antieuphemism insofar as it *directly* names the unnameable but in such a way as to maintain plausible deniability. When the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* says, “It was of course familiar enough that when people were so deeply in love they rubbed off on each other,” or when Maggie says, “Amerigo and I perfectly rub on together” (James [1904] 2009, 364), the nonsexual meaning is privileged insofar as we can assume it is the sense in which, in the narrative diegesis itself, the statement must be received. Shlomith Rimmon Kenan defines “verbal ambiguity as a combination of inherent (potential) ambiguity arising from various phonological, lexical, and grammatical factors, and the contextual permission given to discordant isotopies to unfold concurrently” (Rimmon 1977, 75–76). “Rubbed off on” and “rub on together” are in this sense ambiguous at the level of readerly interpretation, but they are not ambiguous for the characters themselves—they lack the “contextual permission” to be so. This is certainly not true of all verbal ambiguity in James—characters are constantly receiving

5. This interpretational paranoia might be one response to the surveillance apparatus—the “imminent policing”—that Mark Seltzer (1984, 18) has influentially seen at work in *The Golden Bowl*.

statements as ambiguous—but it is always true, I think, of his bawdy double entendres. The double entendre can be perceived and interpretatively resolved only by the reader. My favorite example is in *The Golden Bowl* when Maggie, waiting for Amerigo to return from Charlotte at Castledean, resolves to restore her marriage by “go[ing] to balls again”:

It had come to the Princess, obscurely at first, but little by little more conceivably, that her faculties had not for a good while been concomitantly used; the case resembled in a manner that of her once-loved dancing, a matter of remembered steps that had grown vague from her ceasing to go to balls. She would go to balls again—that seemed, freely, even crudely, stated, the remedy; she would take out of the deep receptacles in which she had laid them away the various ornaments congruous with the greater occasions, and of which her store, she liked to think, was none of the smallest. She would have been easily to be figured for us at this occupation; dipping, at off moments and quiet hours, in snatched visits and by draughty candle-light, into her rich collections and seeing her jewels again a little shyly, but all unmistakably, glow. That in fact may pass as the very picture of her semi-smothered agitation, of the diversion she to some extent successfully found in referring her crisis, so far as was possible, to the mere working of her own needs. (James [1904] 2009, 303)

Maggie here expresses to herself a renewed erotic commitment in language that, to us but not to her, has concrete sexual referents. To put it “freely, even crudely,” “balls” in this passage are both dances and shorthand for male genitalia, a fact that once admitted makes available a whole series of bawdy meanings: “faculties” are *ars erotica*, “jewels” are vaginal, and “dipping” is masturbatory.⁶ Or perhaps my insistence that the verbal ambiguity exists not diegetically but only at the level of readerly interpretation is misplaced. It seems possible that some if not all of the sexual referents encoded in this passage are available to Maggie herself. Verbal ambiguity here has something of the perplexing insolubility often associated with free indirect discourse, in which at moments it is impossible to say where an author’s voice ends and a character’s begins.

For the reader alive to such registers, the “balls” joke and the related series of double entendres might register a distinct rhetorical downshifting, a slide from the high psychological to, briefly, a comic bawdiness, but the passage taken in its entirety is not at all funny. On the contrary, Maggie’s meditations represent late Jamesian style at its most sublime. But by ensconcing the crude within layers

6. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* dates *balls* in the sense of *testicles* to 1250, though it claims that the first usage of the verb *to ball* in a sexual sense, transitive or intransitive, appears in print only in 1955 in William Gaddis’s *Recognitions* (s.v., “ball,” n.1, v.4, accessed April 4, 2018, www.oed.com). I suspect this is considerably later than the actual use of *to ball* in American or English slang, though it does seem unlikely that the term would have been current in James’s time.

of the sublime, James renders transparent the logic of sublimation. The result is deeper than a joke. The effect is rather one of disquiet, which is a more positive way of valuing the recoil at the “sordid” to which White confesses. Verbal ambiguity in James is a means toward a certain disturbance. I am reminded of Paul de Man’s (1996, 168–69) discussion in his lecture “The Concept of Irony” of an extended sexual double entendre in F. W. J. Schelling’s novel *Lucinde*:

What is it, then, in *Lucinde* that gets people so upset? . . . There is in the middle of *Lucinde* a short chapter called “Eine Reflexion” (A reflection), which reads like a philosophical treatise or argument . . . but it doesn’t take a very perverse mind, only a slightly perverse one, to see that what is actually being described is not a philosophical argument at all but is—well how shall I put it?—a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse. Discourse which seems to be purely philosophical can be read in a double code, and what it really is describing is something which we do not generally consider worthy of philosophical discourse, at least not in those terms—sexuality is worthy of it, but what is being described is not sexuality, it’s something much more specific than that.

The bawdy double entendre calls attention to and even traverses the gap between sexuality as a concept or force and “something much more specific than that”—the material facts on the ground whose proper genre is pornography. The basic problem is related to the one of psychosexual narratological economy to which Slavoj Žižek (1992, 110–11) points when he claims that, for instance, classic Hollywood films could not absorb a pornographic interruption and sustain narrative coherence. The double entendre is a way around this dilemma, a way of answering Bob Assingham’s impatient question to his wife, “But what the deuce did they *do*?” (James [1904] 2009, 53), without violating either social or narratological prohibitions on the representation of sex.

The Golden Bowl riffs internally on the problem of prohibition, primarily in those passages of comic relief depicting Fanny and Bob Assingham’s colloquies. Even in the context of that comic American tradition in which, as Constance Rourke (1931, 245–46) has observed, the suggestive name frequently features, “Fanny Assingham,” triply associated with the backside, female genitalia, and stupidity, goes rather far.⁷ It is *The Golden Bowl*’s most blatant double enten-

7. According to the *OED*, the earliest known usage of *ass* as a corruption of *arse* dates to 1860. The earliest known usage of *arse* itself dates to 1530 (s.v., “ass,” n.2, accessed April 4, 2018, www.oed.com). *Ass* in the sense of a stupid or stubborn person appears quite frequently in James’s novels and across the whole span of his career, four times each, for example, in *The American* and *The Wings of the Dove*. It does not appear even once, however, in *The Golden Bowl*—as though James worried that resorting to that colloquialism would bring the silliness of Fanny Assingham’s name into too sharp

dre, ironic because Fanny would like to be the subtlest of Jamesian observers. She is stymied by a crudeness her loquacity cannot mask and by her husband, who won't even try to play her game. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell (1976, 91–92) has it, “[Bob’s] literal-minded reductionism cannot account for the complexity of thought and feeling which lie beneath the surface of his world—a complexity which Fanny, in her grotesque fashion, at least struggles to articulate.” The valorization of affective and cognitive complexity is of course an article of faith for all readers of James. Bob’s repeated insistence on privileging the material facts of the sexual relationship, right down to its duration (“Does it take so much time?” he asks [James (1904) 2009, 54]), can only indicate his own psychological impoverishment.

But it doesn’t take a very perverse mind—“only a slightly perverse one”—to reverse Yeazell’s formulation and to insist that such “complexity of thought and feeling” is the mere epiphenomenon of the elaborate speculation Fanny burlesques. This is one of the lessons of *The Sacred Fount*, a lesson that, when brought to bear on the novels that follow it, can seem to gnaw away, termite-like, at the moral architecture of the Jamesian house of fiction. The Assinghams, from their name on, encapsulate and enact the threat of bathos in late James, a bathos always traceable to the disproportion between the “material clue” and the sophisticated superstructure erected around it.

While the name Assingham is James’s way of acknowledging this bathos and even of containing it by relegating it to comic scenes that any reader will recognize are not to be taken as hermeneutically instructive, the effect of double entendres like the ones strewn throughout Maggie’s resolution to “go to balls again” cannot be so neatly described. They contribute to the overall texture of disquiet, of anxious intellection, even of a certain terror marking Maggie’s thought throughout the novel. Not all dirty jokes are funny. Stevens (2008, 164) concludes his study of sexuality in James with some suggestive comments about Jamesian camp, a designation that depends, crucially, on the appearance of coded sexual meanings where we do not expect them, meanings that “lie like violent surprises, fractures, land mines in a deceptively serene landscape.” “Camp,”

relief. *Fanny* did not mean *backside* until the twentieth century and then only in the United States, though in British usage it had been slang for *female pudenda* since at least 1860. The lexicographer Eric Partridge (2002) suggests a derivation from John Cleland’s *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* (1749), though this is disputed. The two most famous fictional Fannys in English literary history, Hill and Price, rather suggest a mutually complicating lineage for poor Mrs. Assingham.

Stevens observes, is “ironic about prohibition”; of *The Ambassadors*, “I’d like simply to note the novel’s spirit of camp affirmation in the face of prohibition and constraint” (165). For my part, I would counter Stevens’s reading of camp affirmation with one of camp *negation*, an emphasis I offer as complementary, not corrective. As Stevens’s own figures—“violent surprises, fractures, land mines”—suggest, irony about prohibition can be as disturbing, as disquieting, as it can be affirmative.

Double entendres are the smallest units in James’s camp. They are also the most exemplary, the ground unit on which the edifice of Jamesian camp is constructed. “Doubling” is a frequent focus in discussions of camp. At the level of theme one might begin with camp’s association with androgyny, with doubleness of gender. At the level of address, too, camp involves a doubleness. As David Bergman (1993, 10) observes, the camp dynamic is a solution to the question “How does one speak to a double audience?” historically salient for gay writers. This split address divides camp’s audience into those who take a text at face value and those who perceive its coded meaning. As Gregory Woods (1993, 128–29) puts it, camp “proposes the scandal of a *privileged gay consumer*.” Such doubleness is productive of, is practically the very definition of irony. What separates camp from irony tout court is camp’s historically determined anchoring in the problems of a proscribed sexuality. Thus the doubleness of reference that Sontag (1966, 280) captures in her famous observation that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks” should not be divorced from camp’s originary queerness. The scare quotes around all of existence are, for camp, primordially rooted in the queer problem of the double life.⁸

A final doubleness in camp is constituted by disproportion, since camp, as Sontag (1966, 278) has it, offers “a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form.” Mark Booth (1999, 69) elaborates, “*To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits.*” Such disproportion is what White experiences as bathos in the mismatch between James’s heightened language and the sordidness of his top-

8. A comprehensive overview of the cultural history of camp lies outside the scope of this essay, but there is undoubtedly a diffuse if imprecise relationship between what Matthew Tinkcom (2002, 4) calls “the tactics through which queer men of a particular historical epoch have made sense of their frequent omission from representation” and the patterns of periphrasis or obscurity I associate with Jamesian double entendres. A proper historicization of James’s relationship to camp as a self-consciously invoked category of aesthetic response would emphasize, I think, his role as an ancestor of these tactics of oblique representation.

ics. White's recognition of Jamesian bathos makes him a kind of sober double or reverse of the reader of Jamesian camp. In moments of disappointing clarity, he is endowed with the double vision that lets him perceive the real meaning of the code, the grime beneath the glitter.

The problem of the split address and of its attendant double vision unites two of the signal procedures indicated above: syntactic/psychological complexity (which I understand as a single feature insofar as Jamesian syntax enacts Jamesian psychology) with the double entendre. A long-standing problem in the theory of camp concerns the question of its objectivity. Is it a feature of aesthetic objects, or is it a subjective disposition, a way of receiving aesthetic objects not intrinsically campy? The recognition of the bawdy double entendre in James focalizes this problem. Is Sedgwick (1993, 103) right to discover in *The Wings of the Dove* an anal "double entendre whose interest and desirability James . . . appears to have experienced as inexhaustible"? Am I right to insist that "balls" in *The Golden Bowl* means, well, balls? Or are we succumbing to the distortions of an angle of vision—call it camp—that insists on extracting a coded meaning even where one may not exist?

IV. Tone, Reader Response, and Camp Negation

James's double entendres (some, I am certain, quite intentional, others, no doubt, confections of an overeager interpreter) crystallize the potential for overreading built into his prose. In a different way, so does White's recoil at Jamesian sordidness. In a moment of discomfort, White confesses to seeing *too much* in James (too much sex, too much tawdriness) and *too little*—he wonders why he should work so hard for such low, meager stuff. Both the overreading that dwells on dirty jokes and the disappointed underreading that finds James bathetic rather than ennobling open questions of reader response, questions that should direct us above all to the problem of James's *tone*. Sianne Ngai (2005, 41) observes, "The affective-aesthetic idea of tone . . . is reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story." Tone hinges, rather, on the nebulous mechanisms by which the textual object both creates and is created by readerly affect.

Ngai observes that tone—"a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world" (43)—arises via the gap between reader and text across which a text is recognized not as mere communication but as a specifi-

cally aesthetic object. “The creation of distance in turn produces fresh affect and ensures that aesthetic engagement will be maintained—in a feedback loop made possible by *a momentary disconnection in the circuit*” (85). We might think of White’s disappointed pause while reading James as just such a productive “disconnection” whereby the problem of tone occupies the foreground of the reading experience. The problem, among other things, is one of assessing the degree of irony, the extent to which James is making fun. As Ngai puts it, “The conceptual difficulty that tone poses seems most powerfully exemplified in irony (always an admixture of affective attitude and meaning, as well as a dialectic between the said and unsaid . . .)” (366n31).

Camp might be thought of as tonal rather than generic—we have already seen Sontag’s identification of camp “tonalities” imply as much—though ultimately any readerly encounter with tone will involve negotiating generic frames, and any decision about genre will take tone under consideration. In what follows, I want to supplement Ngai’s account of tone by way of Wolfgang Iser’s theory of reader response. Iser goes largely unmentioned these days, but his phenomenological account of textual interpretation powerfully complements recent criticism, like Ngai’s, informed by the philosophy of aesthetics.⁹ Iser’s phenomenology of reading is particularly well suited to elucidating such “problematic” responses as White’s recoil at Jamesian bathos or my own “overreading” of double entendres.

For Iser ([1974] 1980, 51), the “literary text” is distinguished from other forms of written communication insofar as it is marked by ambiguities requiring a certain amount of work on the part of the reader: “A literary text must . . . be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself. . . . In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play.” Iser (1989, 6) wants this formulation to be axiomatic for all literary texts, though it is hard not to suspect that such a definition could only have appeared under the aegis of modernism, and indeed, for Iser, “modern” literature is distinguished from earlier literature by the “expansion” of reader-straining indeterminacy.

Many readers of late James have felt “overstrained” and have “left the field

9. Despite engaging in a literary-critical practice often informed by a German phenomenological tradition encompassing Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, critics like Ngai and Brown have ignored Iser completely.

of play,” but might even those who remain suffer a variety of “overstrain”? Iser ([1974] 1980, 53) goes on to claim that the “special quality” of literary sentences is due to the fact that “in their capacity as statements, observations, purveyors of information, etc., they are always indications of something that is to come, the structure of which is foreshadowed by their specific content.” A beautiful definition of the literary in general, this formulation dovetails nicely with certain deep assumptions about James in particular. Brooks (1994, 38), for instance, has his own take on the Jamesian “something beyond what [the sentence] actually says”: “The very rhythm and punctuation of late Jamesian conversation . . . suggest the need to postulate meanings in the margins between words, a desire to make the reader strain toward making darkness visible.” Iser’s and Brook’s shared emphasis on “strain” recalls Sontag’s description of camp’s “quality of excruciation.” Jamesian excruciation is manifold. There is the sheer difficulty of the sentences. There are the psychological subtleties that seem not to exist outside the world of his fiction. There is a certain sadism: Isabel, Maggie, Charlotte, even Maisie are all women “in the cage,” as it were, of a punishing social and sexual system that James both reproves and delights in. And there is the excruciation of immersing oneself in a text marked by rigorously maintained periphrasis, in decoding a text saturated in sex but nowhere admitting it—the excruciation that White finds bathetic. In Maggie’s probing meditation on her marriage, all of these varieties of excruciation are present at once. When a reader becomes what Iser calls “overstrained,” the bawdy double entendre can offer a kind of resting place from the efforts of reading, can relieve some of the tension of the sustained encounter with James’s represented minds.

The “excruciating,” I would argue, is a tone in Ngai’s sense. It is neither purely subjective nor decisively locatable in the text itself. As a tone, it is the sign of that interruption in the circuit between text and reader by which a text becomes aesthetic—an interruption caused in this case by cognitive overstrain. Overstrain can be relieved by a campy mode of reading in which the text is reduced to a tissue of dirty jokes. Once one starts looking for them, Jamesian double entendres seem to crop up everywhere. What *are* our narrator and Mrs. Briss talking about when she explains: “You were saying just now what you were full of, and I can do the same. I was full of *him*”? The narrator’s reply is positively panting: “Yes? He had left you full as he walked away?” (James 1901, 291). Oh my! Such overstrained overreadings are fun, and they respond to something real in the text, but like Bob Assingham’s insistent literality, they are perhaps clarifying and falsify-

ing in equal measure. They reflect an unwillingness to be caught out, to miss the joke. They respond, in other words, to the interpretational anxiety de Man (1996, 165) identifies as a hallmark of any encounter with an ironic text: “How do I know that the text with which I am going to be confronted is going to be ironic. . . . It’s very important to know that: lots of discussions turn around this and one always feels terrible when one has read a text and one is told later on that it’s ironic.” What one might call, after a well-known joke from the television comedy *The Office*, the “that’s what *she* said” method of reading late James can mask a rearguard action designed not to liberate the sexual from a text that everywhere represses it but rather to fix meaning in place, to reduce to manageability what Iser would call the “expansions” of an “indeterminacy” that threatens to become infinite. Reading James for his double entendres has the potential to neutralize his irony by declaring: this *is* ironic, and I recognize it as such.

But a more encompassing reading of James’s double entendres recognizes that they ramify outward in ways that are themselves excruciating. Excruciation, for a reader of James, is an affect corresponding to the uncomfortably sustained encounter with the negative spaces in a text, with its gaps and silences, with the implied and the unsaid. Iser calls “negativity” the “unwritten base” upon which a text’s openness to interpretation—its literariness or, as Ngai would have it, its status as an aesthetic object—depends. “[Negativity] enables the written words to transcend their literal meaning, to assume a multiple referentiality, and so to undergo the expansion necessary to transplant them as a new experience to the mind of the reader” (Iser 1978, 226). “Negativity” is a feature of all literature, but modern works tend to force a reader into protracted awareness of the way interpretation issues from a confrontation with a text’s “blanks and negations” (211).¹⁰ For Iser, negations are intimately related to “the structure of duplication. . . . What is revealed appears to be a sign for what is concealed” (227). To encounter these suggestive blanks is to undergo “that keen disturbance so often experienced in reading serious literature” (Iser 1989, 3). And while amplified negativity has a range of generic uses, Iser suggests in a reading of *As You Like It* that it is particularly essential to comedy:

10. Technically, Iser (1978, 225–31) distinguishes between *negativity* and *negation*. *Negations* are specific, localizable instances whereby a readerly expectation is aroused and disappointed, thereby inciting interpretational interest (e.g., ambiguous speech by characters). *Negativity* provides an ontological grounding for specific kinds of negation.

Language . . . becomes the medium for comedy—not because it is comic in itself but because the interplay between manifest and latent can only be conveyed through a form that seeks to represent something that cannot be conveyed through any form. Comedy as a string of failed actions indicates that the structure of double meaning itself can never be cast in any form, since it is the generative matrix of language which defies translation into the symbolic order of language. (125)

This “generative matrix of language” is another name for *negativity*. Comedy would thus seem to have ur-generic force for Iser. (In this it is related to de Man’s [1996, 165] definition of *irony* as the “trope of tropes,” as a formal ground for all other tropes.) If *The Golden Bowl*’s genre presents difficulties, then the double entendre is the smallest but also the densest unit of the problem. As Iser (1989, 125–26) goes on to say, in comedy “the spoken is constantly untoppled by the unspoken. . . . The less the characters know about how language functions, the more they are caught up in comedy that makes their unconscious language use rebound on them.” The bulk of the double entendres in *The Golden Bowl* are indeed perpetrated without their characters’ recognition, thus conforming to Iser’s model. But the problematic nature of *The Golden Bowl*’s comedy is that, unlike *As You Like It*—in which, as Iser puts it, “every failed action bears with it the promise of restitution” (126)—its comic doubleness of language *does not clearly assure reconciliation or restitution*. It is the site of what I call “camp negation,” an *apparently* comedic kernel occasioning a bleak disturbance.

Camp negation elicits the excruciations of a comic irony that threatens to become infinite. Its comedy masks terror. Its destabilizing irony is at once put in motion and arrested by the bawdy double entendre, which opens the possibility that nothing in the text says what it means even as it insists that “meaning” can be reduced to the fact of sex. Isn’t this what Maggie confronts in her meditation on her marriage? Maggie’s unease becomes, for her and for us, a question of scale not unrelated to the disproportion White calls “bathos”: “That in fact may pass as the very picture of her semi-smothered agitation, of the diversion she to some extent successfully found in referring her crisis, so far as was possible, *to the mere working of her own needs*” (emphasis mine). That the mere working of one’s own needs—the desire to have one’s jewels handled, to go to balls—should generate arabesques of probing cognition, grand structures of suffering and sublimity, is an irony most succinctly captured in the double entendre. Scaled up, this disproportion indicates the unsuitability of such material for tragedy, as James (1914, 252) himself suggests when, of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s adultery drama *Francesca da Rimini*, he observed that “the meagre anecdote here furnishing the

subject, and on which the large superstructure rests, does not really lend itself to those developments that make a full or an interesting tragic complexity." Maggie has no shortage of causes for "agitation," but among those causes is the sense she shares with White that the form she finds herself in, the Jamesian narrative at its most magisterially sublimated, might be absurdly disproportionate to the real scale of her "crisis," to the mere working of her needs. She needs, as the British say, a good seeing-to; she gets *The Golden Bowl*.

I am not the first to observe that camp is a way for James to get around the assurances of comedy. Eric Haralson (2003, 47) writes of *The Europeans's* successful marriage plots that "James alleviates his sense of impending complicity in the dominant discourse by resorting to camp, a mode of self-exemption that both facilitated and complicated literary expression for gay authors." Camp in this reading permits James to write a heterosexual comedy while maintaining a certain mischievous remove. Like *The Europeans*, *The Golden Bowl* is a heterosexual comedy, but the quality of camp remove is of a different order. The muted hope of its semielegiac final movement breaks with the tonal conventions of comedy. Maggie and the Prince's compromised, difficult, adult, and above all *modern* renewed marriage might be read as a novelistic anteroom to such "realistic" twentieth-century portrayals of marriage as John Updike's *Rabbit* novels (comedies insofar as the central marriage is renewed and sustained with whatever difficulties) or Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (a tragedy insofar as marriage cannot be resolved and leads to death). Thus one might find *The Golden Bowl's* realism inhering in its refusal to permit its reader to settle on the overdetermined arcs of either comedy or tragedy as generic frame.

But a reading of *The Golden Bowl's* Part Sixth that highlights the camp double entendre suggests a very different way of refusing such overdeterminations. Camp can suggest that there is always something comic, *de trop*, about tragedy itself even as there is something rather painful about the comic. Part Sixth begins, "'I'll do anything you like,' [Maggie] said to her husband on one of the last days of the month" (James [1904] 2009, 532), and the reader alert to it hears the offer of a sexual favor. Let this set the tone, and a bawdy current will be seen to underlie and undermine all of the painful, emotionally intense negotiations that make up this final book. James uses scare quotes to indicate his game: "It was extraordinary how scant a series of signs she had invited him to make of being, of truly having been at any time, 'with' his wife . . . a reflection under the brush of which she recognised her having had, in respect to him as well, to 'do all,' to

go the whole way over” (533). Words under the pressure of nearby bawdy meanings puncture the serious business of Jamesian psychologizing. “The ‘end’ that the Prince was at all events holding out for was represented to expectation by his father-in-law’s announced departure for America with Mrs Verver” cannot but suggest that the Prince’s access to Maggie’s bottom is what is at stake. When a few lines down Maggie is said to have “eyes at present but for the clock by which she timed her husband” (534), we might recall Mr. Assingham’s “Does it take so much time?” When Mrs. Assingham asks Maggie what is going on between her and Amerigo, Maggie responds with what might be read as James’s most quintessential description of the sexual act, both circumspect and hilariously direct: “‘The reduction to its simplest expression of what we *are* doing’”—that’s what [Amerigo] called it. Therefore as we’re doing nothing, we’re doing it in the most aggravated way—which is the way he desires.’ With which Maggie further said: ‘Of course I understand’” (535). This passage encodes the deniability of every double entendre—“the ‘something’ you think I’m saying is in fact ‘nothing,’ but what an ‘aggravated’ nothing!”—even as it links it to “desire.” As Part Sixth proceeds, James goes on increasingly to theorize and clarify the text’s reliance on inadmissible bawdy meanings. Fanny, for instance, in response to Maggie’s assertion that the Prince “doesn’t funk” (meaning “to cower or tremble with fear”),¹¹ says: “What is there—as you’ve ‘fixed’ it—to funk? Unless . . . it’s her [Charlotte’s] getting near him; it’s—if you’ll pardon my vulgarity—her getting *at* him” (536). Beginning with her name, Fanny Assingham’s primary function in *The Golden Bowl* is to enable vulgarity, a role she here performs by allowing us to hear *fuck* as *funk*’s echo. As their conversation continues, Maggie makes quite clear that she knows what there might be between the Prince and Charlotte to funk, as she indicates in response to Mrs. Assingham’s lascivious pressure (“But for what purpose is it your idea that they should again so intimately meet?”): “For any purpose they like. That’s *their* affair” (540). As the conversation continues, Fanny experiences, via the transitive properties of the double entendre, the vicarious pleasures of the sex they are just barely not talking about: “Fanny Assingham took it in deeper—for what it immediately made her give out louder” (541). By the time Maggie has explicited the text’s proto-Freudian logic—“I get off by giving him [my father] up” (541)—the texture of the prose, the rhythm of

11. *OED*, s.v. “funk,” v.3, accessed April 4, 2018, www.oed.com.

the dialogue, has become a kind of parodic burlesque overperforming its refusal to name.

“Then do you yourself know?”
 “How much—?”
 “How much.”
 “How far—?”
 “How far.” (542)

It might be objected that, in substantiating a claim about the function of coded double entendres, I have cited a passage that is transparently—that is, not covertly—about sex. True. But what I hope to have highlighted is the way a language of euphemism and avoidance (“How far—?”) used in James’s diegetic dialogue to talk about sex can slide into other kinds of ambiguous language (above, “get off,” “funk,” “took it in deeper”) whose ambiguity resides not at the level of diegesis but at the level of readerly interpretation. As with Maggie’s “go to balls again” meditation, “get off” and “funk” are interestingly marginal cases—that is, it is hard to say whether their bawdy ambiguities are available to their speakers or not.

Unlike the “go to balls again” passage, though, all of these instances occur in dialogue with the gossipy busybody Fanny Assingham. Recalling both the triviality and the insistent materiality associated with gossip, we might suspect that double entendres at their most flagrant are proper in *The Golden Bowl* only to those scenes of semicomical relief involving the Assinghams, in which case the bawdiness in Maggie’s meditation is either the exception that proves the rule or evidence of interpretational overreach. On the contrary, my contention all along has been that, while double entendres appear with humorous blatancy mainly in passages involving the Assinghams, the most profound force of their effects is found elsewhere, in those passages of psychological intensity marked by lyric metaphorization and symbolism. In the novel’s penultimate chapter, when Maggie tells Amerigo that, during his final meeting with Charlotte, “You’ll be able to do as you like,” the Prince submits this permission to a perplexed analysis that reprises in a grander key the problematics of the bawdy double entendre: those of “taste” and of semiotic ambiguity:

[Maggie] had so shuffled away every link between consequence and cause, that the intention remained, like some famous poetic line in a dead language, subject to varieties of interpretation. What renewed the obscurity was her strange image of their common offer to him, her father’s and her own, of an opportunity to separate from Mrs Verver with the due amount of form—and all the more that he was, in so pathetic a way, unable to treat himself to a quarrel with it on the score

of taste. Taste, in him, as a touchstone, was now all at sea; for who could say but that one of her fifty ideas, or perhaps forty-nine of them, wouldn't be, exactly, that taste by itself, the taste he had always conformed to, had no importance whatever? (549–50)

The Prince, in short, doesn't know how to take Maggie's offer; doesn't know what the right "form" with Charlotte might be; doesn't know "how far," to recur to Mrs. Assingham's language, he is meant to "go"; and above all can no longer discern the distinction between good "taste" and bad. Most alarmingly, Maggie's "ideas," whatever they imply, might include the suggestion that "taste" itself is no longer a valid rubric for organizing behavior. If Jamesian seriousness is indeed inflected by a bawdy smirk, is it too much to hear, in Amerigo's anguished consideration of what at bottom is Maggie's authorization of a final sexual encounter between Charlotte and him, James's own interrogation of the proscriptions "taste" imposes on novelistic treatment of the sexual topic?¹² The bad "taste" of the double entendre lodges a humorous protest against such proscriptions, but as in Maggie's "balls" meditation, the traces of this protest condition *The Golden Bowl* even in passages not at all comic. The final sentence of this penultimate chapter cannot resist the temptations of the bawdy double entendre, though its doubleness here has perhaps been transformed from something smirking to something exalted and rare, like that "poetic line in a dead language, subject to varieties of interpretation": "She had saved herself and she got off" (556).¹³

To return to the questions of generic frame, might the bawdy double entendre be the key to a kind of realism less reductive than either the romance, to which realism is normally opposed, or the twinned genre binary comedy/tragedy, which remains generically overdetermined in comparison to a realism that can accommodate life in its messy actuality? I would suggest something slightly different. Insofar as this passage is a signal instance of realism, it is not because it refuses the neater arcs of comedy/tragedy but because it burlesques them via the destabilizing bathos of camp, here encapsulated in the inappropriate smuggling of the signal effects and affective investments necessary to tragedy—"pity and dread"—into a situation not at all justifying them. This solemnity, this intensity,

12. As Stevens (2008, 3–4) observes, James's ambivalence about material from which we ought to "avert our heads" is articulated most clearly in his review essays on Charles-Pierre Baudelaire and on D'Annunzio.

13. The *OED*'s earliest attestation for a sexual application of the verb phrase *to get off* is 1867, in Alfred Doten's journals ("She didn't get off at all—too much in a hurry"; s.v., "get," v., accessed April 4, 2018, www.oed.com).

this “pity and dread” are all bathetically disproportionate to the nature of the case, a married couple undergoing the vicissitudes of adultery and reconciliation. Thus the bathetic disproportion theorized in *The Sacred Fount* and put into practice in late James—that disproportion by which Maggie’s marital problems can assume the stature of tragedy—threatens always to make itself felt, to interrupt rudely the rarefied zone of Jamesian nuance. If this is realism, it can only become so because of its rude reminders that tragic seriousness is a fantasy depending for its consistency on the exclusion of crude details that might undermine its effects. There is a family resemblance between this definition and the kinds of formal realism or reality effect described by Ian Watt and Roland Barthes, but whereas the reality effect describes the tricks by which a fictional world can resemble the real one, I am interested in something like the reverse: the process by which an apparently consistent generic world can come to seem artificial or incoherent.

V. Coda: Jamesian Melodrama and Camp Morality

One generic label for the bathos White recoils from is *melodrama*, as evidenced by the colloquial use of *melodramatic* to refer to affect that is exaggerated with respect to a basically trivial situation—as, in other words, bathetic: Oh, do you have to be so melodramatic? Brooks’s (1985) famous examination of the “melodramatic imagination” in James and others does not have this colloquial sense of *melodramatic* in mind. But what is more appropriate than to ask of Jamesian narrative, of Jamesian dialogue, even of James’s prefaces, Do you have to be so melodramatic? In closing, I want to supplement Brooks’s discussion of melodrama as a generic mode with a sense of the melodramatic as exaggerated, histrionic, dubiously disconnected from a realistic appraisal of the stakes of a situation. Doing so can help us gain a more complete sense of Jamesian camp and its relationship to the moral content of his fiction.

In Brooks’s influential account, melodrama permits James to smuggle the romantic into the realistic. Brooks draws on James’s preface to *The American* to make his case: “The striking characteristic of ‘the romantic’ as the realm of knowledge reached through desire recalls central themes in our description of melodrama, a form that facilitates that ‘circuit’ of desire, permits its break through repression, brings its satisfaction in full expression” (154). For Brooks (1994), the Jamesian “melodrama of consciousness” translates melodrama proper

onto the plane of consciousness, thereby sublizing and psychologizing melodrama's moral content. "The tendency in all James's later fiction [is] to intensify the manichaeistic struggle of good and evil . . . through a reflection of effect that does not designate cause, yet in not doing so creates a large and portentous menace that evokes a tremendous cause" (Brooks 1985, 167). Jamesian melodrama is about the psychologization of the struggle between good and evil. While critics like Nussbaum associate Jamesian morality with realism, Brooks sees, correctly in my view, that morality in James is primarily a question of melodramatic excess. Jamesian implication, Jamesian secret meanings are to do with James's melodramatic moralism. Of a loaded exchange of glances between Maggie and the Prince, for instance, Brooks writes, "So grandiose a moral exchange has never been wrested from so little" (172).

Here, then, is one variety of disproportion. It indicates another. The "grandiosity" of the Jamesian "moral exchange" points to a different kind of disconnect, that between the complex idiom of a psychologized Manichean moralism and the fact of sex as represented by names like "Assingham" or "Goodwood," by phrases like "to funk" or "took it in," by the hilarious ambiguity of "going to balls." What kind of "pity and dread"—what kind of tragedy—can be made out of material like this? The bawdy double entendre cartoonizes Brooks's productive "blankness of referential meaning," turns it to a joke. As readers, we hover between generic frames, unsure what to do with material at once so devastating and so ridiculous, so moving and so silly. In the high-wire act of James's camp fictions, Jamesian bawdiness doesn't *repudiate* Jamesian seriousness. On the contrary, it is its very condition. For readers of James who have never not found him a riot, a persistent bawdy stupidity is a condition of the master's power.

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