The Problem Of Renunciation In The Works Of Henry James: An Existential Approach.

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The problem of renunciation in the works of Henry James: An existential approach

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Lehigh University, 1993

The Problem of Renunciation in the Works of Henry James:
An Existential Approach

by

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Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Lehigh University

October 1, 1993

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

9-24-93
Date

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9-27-93
Accepted Date

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Abstract

Jamesian "renunciation" can best be understood in terms of existential choice. James lived during the century that gave birth to the movement we call existentialism--the century that produced Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. More to the point, his writings provide abundant evidence that he was concerned throughout his career with the same issues that have engaged all existentialists--freedom, finitude, responsibility, and authentic selfhood.

"The Beast in the Jungle," "The Jolly Corner," and The Ambassadors demonstrate James's concern with the issues of freedom and finitude. John Marcher wastes his life because he is terrified to limit himself through choice. Spencer Brydon's dilemma is similar, though his fear of finitude develops as he looks backward to what he "might have been" rather than ahead, as Marcher does, to what he might someday turn out to be. Lambert Strether ultimately reveals an existentially valid acceptance of the paradoxical relationship between freedom and finitude. Catherine Sloper of Washington Square, Fleda Vetch of The Spoils of Poynton, and Isabel Archer of The Portrait of a Lady seem perversely renunciatory to us because they reject the conventional ideals of romance, rationality, and happiness, embracing instead the existential value of authentic, solitary choice. Milly Theale of The Wings of the Dove also shows, through her final, generous gift to Merton Densher, that she understands the importance of authentic selfhood and authentic being-with-others.

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Chapter 1

The Problem of Renunciation

Certainly Jamesian renunciation has already received much critical attention. Indeed, it is difficult to find a study that does not address the issue at least tangentially, since so many of James's protagonists ultimately reject or relinquish the very person or thing or course of action most likely, one would think, to make them happy. In many cases, moreover, the interpretation of a given work of James's hinges on one's explanation of a particular act of renunciation in that work. For example, the "meaning" of The Portrait of a Lady depends on one's reaction to Isabel Archer's decision to reject Caspar Goodwood, who loves her, and to return to Gilbert Osmond, who, as she knows, does not. Similarly, one can make sense of The Ambassadors only by first making sense of Strether's final decision to eschew the expansive Maria Gostrey and Paris in favor of the grim Mrs. Newsome and Woollett. We can judge "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Jolly Corner" only by determining what, precisely, John Marcher and Spencer Brydon have managed to "miss" in life; and we can come to terms with the lingering sadness of The Wings of the Dove and The Spoils of Poynton and Washington Square only by coming to terms with the decisions of their respective heroines, who apparently at last renounce "everything." Such behavior is so common in the fictions of Henry James that critics have come to view renunciation as one of James's major recurring subjects. At

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the same time, however, published criticism demonstrates such widely divergent (and often opposing) interpretations of the renunciatory acts in James's work that the overall pattern of renunciation remains problematical.

The two major opposing critical attitudes towards Jamesian renunciation are 1) that self-sacrifice in James's works represents the highest form of moral behavior, and 2) that renunciation in James indicates, to a pathological degree, timidity, solipsism, weakness, or sexual dysfunction. James's works, of course, are not unique in their capacity to sustain mutually exclusive interpretations. In the case of James, however, both critical extremes seem based on questionable and misleading assumptions.

The first assumption, common to both interpretive camps, is that we all agree on what the word "renunciation" means. Actually, however, the word is so connotatively ambiguous that definition itself becomes the first problem. Denotatively, "renunciation" means a giving up, a disclaiming, or a discontinuing. Renunciation seems to be a way of saying "no," and in that sense, at least, the word inevitably bears a negative connotation. Paradoxically, however, "renunciation" is very often used in a positive or affirming way. For example, as the Oxford English Dictionary points out, Christians, at baptism, renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh. Renunciation is, in that example and in the Christian context generally, a positive moral act--spiritual, Christlike, good. But when we step

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outside a purely Christian context into, say, the sociological or the psychological realm, a renunciatory act can become suspect. Self-sacrifice may be seen not as spiritual enlightenment but as either psychological self-abuse or the cunning manipulation of others. In a psychoanalytic context, renunciation is more likely to take on the negative connotations of inhibition or repression, in which self-denial may represent a refusal or an inability to acknowledge the truths of the psyche or the facts of the world. In a Marxist or feminist context, any renunciatory act would have to be judged in light of select sociological or historical pressures bearing on the situation. Clearly, one's understanding of or reaction to the word "renunciation" depends upon one's cultural background and/or professional perspective and/or political agenda.

To illustrate how complex the concept of renunciation can become, I summarize here some of the main points of William A. Shuey's essay "From Renunciation to Rebellion," a study of eight female characters from nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and drama. Shuey explains, first, that by "renunciation" we usually mean avoidance or abandonment or internalization of conflict--the opposite of "standing one's ground." This sort of renunciation, typically associated with other concepts like "patience" and "self-sacrifice," is exemplified, according to Shuey, by Dickens's Little Dorritt, "one of the great examples of the renunciatory Victorian heroine in all her glory" (143). On the other hand, renunciation can be a resignation or

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repudiation that represents a part of the struggle itself, as does Nora's renunciation of her home and children at the end of Ibsen's _A Doll's House_. Nora's kind of renunciation, however, should not be confused with a third type identified by Shuey, a "pseudorenunciation," which we find demonstrated by Mrs. Clennan, again of Dickens's novel _Little Dorritt_, who uses self-denial and resignation for her own ends. Still another kind of renunciation implies sexual abstinence, which can, itself, seem either wholesome and appealing, as in Little Dorritt, or "extreme" (and by implication perverse), as in Sue Bridehead of Thomas Hardy's _Jude the Obscure_.

Shuey also points out that genuine renunciation of any kind may be externally enforced, as in the case of Mrs. Morel in D. H. Lawrence's _Sons and Lovers_, or voluntary, as in the case of James's Isabel Archer. Thus, renunciatory acts can be committed from a position of strength (Isabel) or from a position of weakness (Mrs. Morel). Yet even when one renounces from a position of strength, one can renounce "submissively," Shuey explains, as Isabel does when she submits to the concept of marriage; or one can renounce "affirmatively," as Ursula does in Lawrence's _The Rainbow_, when she rejects the idea of marriage. Furthermore, renunciation may be conscious (Isabel, Ursula) or unconscious (Little Dorritt). It can be a virtue (Little Dorritt) or a vice (Mrs. Clennan). Indeed, renunciation can be simultaneously virtuous and perverse, as in the case of Isabel Archer, who, in Shuey's words, "chooses to be

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victimized" from her "position of strength" (145-46). In contrast, Martha Quest, the titular heroine of the Doris Lessing novel, as well as Ibsen's Nora, enacts a "feminist renunciation" that is close to rebellion and far from the martyrdom of more traditional heroines.

Shuey's theses--that our perception of female renunciatory behavior has changed radically since the nineteenth century and that certain writers have created heroines to reflect this cultural change--help to highlight certain other critical assumptions regarding Jamesian renunciation. Early reviewers, apparently participating in the nineteenth century's general endorsement of self-abnegation as a moral ideal, did not, by and large, comment on the sacrifices made by so many of James's characters. Oliver Elton, in a 1903 review of The Wings of the Dove, was one of the few to draw attention to those "selfless" acts, and his evaluation of Milly Theale's sacrifices is entirely laudatory. Elton praises Milly's "high generosity" and happily concludes that "Milly, having lost all, regains everything," her early death notwithstanding (Gard 356). The only other notable exception to the early critical silence regarding Jamesian sacrifice is Joseph Conrad's 1905 "Appreciation" of Henry James, in which Conrad celebrates the pervasive element of renunciation in James's work:

> To most of us, living willingly in a sort of
> intellectual moonlight, in the faintly reflected
> light of the truth, the shadows so firmly
> renounced by Mr. Henry James's men and women
> stand out endowed with extraordinary value, with
> a value so extraordinary that their rejection
> offends, by its uncalled-for scrupulousness, those

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business-like instincts which careful Providence
has implanted in our breasts.
(Gargano, Late Novels 65)

Actually, however, Jamesian renunciation seems to have
offended few of James's contemporaries; for not even hostile
reviewers, perfectly willing to attack James for his
"obscurity," his "unpleasant subject matter," his
"immorality," his "timorous ideas" and "painful
psychologizings," or his "impersonality," saw fit to
complain about the sacrificial proclivities of his heroes
and heroines.

Near the end of James's life, however, two highly
literate readers did express dissatisfaction with the
renunciatory flavor of James's work. The first of these was
H.G. Wells, who, in Boon (1915), vented his annoyance with
the passivity, overrefinement, and, by implication,
renunciations of James's characters. Wells lampooned
James's "denatured" and "eviscerated" people, who "never
make lusty love, never go to angry war, never shout at an
election or perspire at poker, never in any way date . . . "
(108). Because it takes the form of whimsical (albeit
vicious) farce, Boon does not offer much in the way of
thoughtful rebuttal to Conrad's praise of Jamesian
renunciation; but a year later, in 1916, Rebecca West more
seriously suggested that there might be something
dissatisfying or confusing about the behavior of many of
James's characters. Nowhere, however, in her 1916 book on
James, does she use the word "renunciation" or its cognates
to describe their choices. Instead she comments, here and

there, on their mystifying passivity. She states, for
example, that _Washington Square_ "expresses the woe of all
those people to whom nothing ever happens, who are aware of
the gay challenge of life but are prevented by something
leaden in their substance from responding" (56). West
suggests, by way of explanation, that an early, irremediable
back injury contributed to James's having "worked out a
scheme of existence. . . by which the one who stood aside
and felt rather than acted acquired thereby a mystic value,
a spiritual supremacy, which. . . would be rubbed off by
participation in action" (20-21). Still, neither passivity
nor renunciation is the focus of West's criticism. When she
disparages _The Portrait of a Lady_, it is because, from
beginning to end, "the conduct invented for Isabel is . . .
inconsistent and. . . suggestive of the nincompoop" (69),
not because Jamesian renunciation has yet acquired the
status of a "problem" or a "theme."

These relatively brief comments by Wells and West
precipitated neither published support nor debate. For
decades after the turn of the century, the kind of
renunciatory behavior exhibited by James's characters
continued to represent, apparently, an unquestioned ideal.
Ford Madox Hueffer, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Percy Lubbock,
H. L. Mencken, E.M. Forster, Andre Gide, Graham Greene--all
of them, between 1910 and 1940, wrote about Henry James, and
none of them mentioned renunciation. Like Rebecca West, Van
Wyck Brooks, in 1925, did comment on the passivity, the
"watching," that pervades James's fictions, but he made no

direct reference or sustained allusion to sacrificial
behavior. In 1927, Pelham Edgar echoed West's complaint
about the "abortive" ending of The Portrait of a Lady; but,
again like West, he focused on James's "implausible
development of character," not on renunciation per se.

Beginning in the mid-1930's, however, several critics--
still without using the word "renunciation"--began to
examine issues that would, some fifteen or twenty years
later, form the heart of the renunciation debate. That is,
they began to try to explain the relationship between
passivity and morality in James's work. Stephen Spender,
for example, in his 1935 book of criticism, The Destructive
Element, tries to make sense of what he calls "the death
theme" in James. Spender sees many of James's characters as
so passive as to be "almost dead"; and he traces this "death
theme" to roots in American Puritanism, which "hunts out and
persecutes the physical side of life" (40-42). At the same
time, however, Spender judges these same "almost dead
characters" to be highly, finely moral in their very
passivity. Their "passive moral quality," Spender says, "is
their ability to feel and to atone for evil by suffering"
(63). Yvor Winters agrees, in Maule's Curse (1938), that
James's moral sense, reflected in his characters, can be
traced to the religious influences--Roman-Catholic and
Anglo-Catholic as well as Calvinist--of early America. For
Winters, however, this intense moral sense is too often
embodied in characters (including Fleda Vetch and Isabel
Archer) whose ultimate choices are "essentially neurotic and

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beyond the margin of the intelligible" (190). Far from

seeing Lambert Strether's "ultimate scruple"--that is, his

giving up of Maria Gostrey so as not to seem to have got

anything out of his sojourn in Paris--as a finely moral act,

Winters calls it a "sacrifice of morality to appearances"

(206-7). Thus Spender and Winters are among the first of

James's critics to question seriously and to debate the

passive, sacrificial behavior of the typical Jamesian

protagonist.

Nevertheless, well into the 1940's, it was still

possible to discuss James's work without addressing the

issue of renunciation. Eliseo Vivas does not mention

renunciation in his study of the relation between the work

of Henry James and that of his psychologist brother,

William; and although Quentin Anderson, in his 1946 essay

"Henry James and the New Jerusalem," talks about the

importance of "renouncing selfhood" for both Henry James,

Sr. and Henry James, Jr., he does not emphasize renunciation

as a special concern of the novelist. Nor does F.R. Leavis,

in The Great Tradition, mention renunciation, even when he

discusses Isabel Archer's final decision to return to

Osmond. In the same year, 1948, Osborn Andreas published

Henry James and the Expanding Horizon, in which he undertook

to find the "figure in the carpet," some underlying thread

of meaning that would connect all of James's works. Andreas

lists ten basic Jamesian themes, and renunciation is not

among them. Interestingly, Andreas cautions that the

subject of renunciation might have already received too much

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critical attention. "Renunciation is all very well,"
Andreas says, "but it is only one of the forms of nobility"
(69).

During the same decade, however, two other important
critics did, apparently, see Jamesian renunciation as an
issue worth looking at. F.O. Mathhiessen, in _Henry James:_
The Major Phase, tries to explain James's proclivity for
creating passive characters in terms of both James's
personal life and the cultural/historical milieu in which
James wrote. Passivity, Mathiessen says, is "one of the most
striking consequences of James's own particular
conditioning." Furthermore, he points out, other writers of
the period, such as Twain and Dickinson, also suffused their
works with the elegiac qualities of detachment, isolation,
and withdrawal. Mathiessen recognizes, then, that the
underlying resonances--"the minor chords"--in James's work
are the themes of "renunciation, of resignation, of inner
triumph in the face of outer defeat" (80).

The other notable critic to talk seriously during the
1940's about Jamesian renunciation was R.P. Blackmur. In
fact, it is enlightening to trace Blackmur's attitudes
toward Jamesian renunciation from 1934, when, in his
introduction to _The Art of the Novel,_ he neglects
renunciation altogether in his discussion of Jamesian
themes. Later, in his 1943 essay "In the Country of the
Blue," Blackmur mentions renunciation but dismisses the
subject as an unfortunate concern of the immature James.
Here Blackmur points out that during James's "dubious

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intermediate period," he wrote chiefly about artists, those
men who were, for James, "most wholly deprived." The more
mature James, according to Blackmur, "took the artist for
granted and portrayed men and women bent not on privation
but on a fullness of being" (615-16). In a 1948 essay
entitled "Henry James," however, Blackmur seems to
have considered more of the complexities of the issue, for
he discusses at some length the relationship of Jamesian
renunciation to Jamesian morality. Blackmur explains that
to James, as to Emily Dickinson, renunciation was a
"piercing value," and that what might appear to be acts of
mere abnegation or disillusionment are really "the
deliberate acts of life fully realized and fully consented
to," acts "done because it is necessary to keep intact the
conviction that life has values greater than any
renunciation can give up or any treachery soil" (114). In
"Loose and Baggy Monsters," published in 1951, Blackmur
further explains Jamesian renunciation in explicitly
Christian terms. James, he says, is following the Christian
pattern of rebirth, wherein sacrifice and renunciation are
the "living analogue of death " (276). Blackmur also
devotes a great deal of his essay to the cultural issues
that contributed to the isolation and detachment of James's
renunciatory characters.

In the fifties, critics were inclined either to ignore
renunciation entirely, as Dorothy Van Ghent, E.K. Brown,
Edwin Bowden, R.W. B. Lewis, and Austin Warren managed to
do; or to address the issue swiftly and concisely in the

context of some other and, to them, larger issue. Arnold
Kettle, for example, in his discussion of The Portait of a
Lady in Introduction to the English Novel, concludes that
James, like Isabel and others of his renunciatory
characters, "rejects life in favor of death." Kettle
contends that for James, the need to "live" in the fullest
of consciousness is paradoxically associated with a sense of
death, of martyrdom. This paradox, according to Kettle, is
the basis of the reader's typically ambivalent response to
Jamesian renunciation; and the paradox itself, Kettle says,
is understandable only in light of James's philosophic
idealism (32). Warren Beach, in the 1954 introduction to
his much earlier The Method of Henry James, briefly touches
on the subject of renunciation as it reflects the ethics of
James's characters, who themselves, Beach contends, never
consider their behavior self-sacrificing. As Beach had
already explained in the 1918 edition of his book, James's
renunciatory characters behave the way they do because "the
ethical values of James are always the most immaterial,"
though they have no more to do with religious than with
utilitarian concerns. Rather, their ethical values, as
reflected in acts of renunciation, have more to do with
"affair[s] of sentiment and taste" (141). Although
Frederick Crews, in The Tragedy of Manners, does not discuss
renunciation as a recurrent theme, he does judge the
renunciatory acts of specific characters as good. He says,
for example, that Milly Theale's renunciation in The Wings
of the Dove is "equivalent to salvation" (80); and that

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"Strether's final renunciation. . . is the perfect reasoning

conclusion to the gradual extension of his awareness" (55).

Richard Chase, on the other hand, says that at the end of

The Ambassadors, "we are left with the sensation of

witnessing another one of those all too gratuitous

renunciations that James prizes so highly" (137-38).

Finally, Quentin Anderson, in his 1957 book on the

philosophical and technical correspondences between Henry

James, Sr. and Henry James, Jr., tries to get to the bottom

of the renunciation problem. Both father and son, Anderson

says, recognized in human beings a mixture of two desires--

the desire to possess the world and the desire to celebrate

it. The uniquely Jamesian aspect of this "celebration" is,

according to Anderson, the root of the public's

misunderstanding of renunciatory behavior:

> The fact that the act of celebration involves
> renouncing material acquisition, the desire for
> personal recognition, and an active sexuality has
> not been clear to James's readers, and some have
> affirmed his creative power and at the same time
> deplored his use of it to describe people who
> renounce these things. The renunciations of
> characters are like his own: they are made in
> behalf of the love "that seeks communications and
> concepts" so that consciousness may be widened. If
> this attitude seems too self-deprecatory to be bio-
> graphically plausible, this is simply because we
> are not aware of the opportunities for covert
> self-gratification the two Jameses found in it.
> They had an abundant satisfaction in their role.
> To compel others to experience life as one con-
> ceives it is the greatest imaginable human power.
> (American Henry James 168)

Perhaps because of such intriguing, yet vague, abbreviated,

and ultimately unsatisfying explanations as these, many

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critics began, in the 1960's and 70's, to make renunciation the focus of their critical discussions of Henry James. Glauco Cambon, for example, in his 1961 article "The Negative Gesture in Henry James," examines the renunciatory acts of Catherine Sloper, May Bartram, and Lambert Strether. Cambon concludes that renunciation in James is really a "negative affirmation of value" and a form of transcendence (340). In Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization, Charles Walcutt calls renunciation James's "dominant preoccupation." Walcutt maintains that, although James sometimes "used renunciation as a "door to self-knowledge and refinement of characters' sensibilities," he too often created works in which "the theme of renunciation has a dominating life of its own." Walcutt concludes that Lambert Strether, Isabel Archer, Catherine Sloper, John Marcher, and May Bartram are inadequately drawn as literary characters precisely because they "enact James's automatism of renunciation" rather than make a decision consistent with a firmly developed personality (211). The thesis of Alice Morgan's 1970 essay "Henry James: Money and Morality" is that "renunciation is the moral equivalent of a financial attitude, and the two appear together, whether they are treated favorably or not" (93).

That renunciation has become, in the last thirty years, a "dominant preoccupation" of Jamesian scholars is evident even from the titles of much of the published criticism. Masunaga Keiichi's 1965 "American Naturalism and James: Centering on Renunciation" asserts that Jamesian

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renunciation represents an attempt to find inner harmony as opposed to social or material success (summarized in Scura 136). In The Ambiguity of Henry James (1971), Charles Samuels includes a twenty-eight-page chapter on The Wings of the Dove and The Spoils of Poynton entitled "The Joys of Renunciation." According to Samuels, "The ideal Jamesian gesture is renunciation"; however, he explains that James, throughout his career, "establish[ed] an important distinction between giving up the world selfishly and giving it up in witness of a higher good" (87). Dennis Lawrence O'Connor, on the other hand, in a 1975 dissertation entitled "Henry James and the Language World of Renunciation," concludes that renunciation in James consistently "posits neither relation nor hope" but instead "registers despair and indicates the lack of wholeness. . ." (130). However, in a book published the same year, Henry James's Psychology of Experience: Innocence, Responsibility, and Renunciation, Granville Hicks Jones reaches the opposite conclusion: renunciation in James's fictions is consistently good--the inevitable consequence of a moral person's encounter with experience and responsibility. Alfred Habegger's 1976 article called "Autistic Tyrant: Howells' Self-Sacrificial Woman and Jamesian Renunciation" asserts that there is a difference between Howells' use of renunciation and James's. Howells, Habegger says, "attacked the ideal of self-sacrifice" (32), whereas James's renunciatory characters merely, and unfortunately, reflect James's own personal tendency to withdraw from the world. According to Habegger,

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James's renunciatory characters (both men and women) are "autistic tyrants" because they withdraw from the real world into themselves and then use self-scacrifice as a way to gain power over others (32-34). When Alwyn Berland, however, analyzes The Portrait of a Lady in Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James (1981), she contends, in a section entitled "The Significance of Renunciation," that renunciation in James represents, in general (and in Portrait in particular), "the pride of preserving, at whatever cost to happiness, one's moral identity" (132). And, startlingly, John M. Warner's 1987 essay on the same novel, entitled "Renunciation as Enunciation in James's The Portrait of a Lady," focuses on Isabel's renunciation of Caspar Goodwood as the key to "the novel's religious implications." Warner sees Isabel's renunciation as an effort to enunciate her (and James's) "relation to a reality larger than her individual self"--namely, "the other elements of four-fold reality: society, world, and God" (354). Obviously, the renunciatory acts that James's readers once apparently understood and tacitly accepted generate, for more recent audiences, ongoing confusion, commentary, and debate.

Thus the issue of Jamesian renunciation has become, and remains, a real and inevitable "problem" to be solved by every new reader. Each act of renunciation, each renunciatory character, must be explicable in the context of any given work as a whole, or the work itself will be impenetrable to us--frustrating and nonsensical. But in

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what context was James himself operating? What value did he
assign to the behavior we have come to identify as
"renunciatory"? The thesis of this study is that Jamesian
renunciation can best be understood as a manifestation of
James's existential vision.

Chapter 2

The Existential Perspective

The term "existentialism" is not much easier to define

than the concept of renunciation. There are at least as

many differences as similarities among existentialist

philosophers, several of whom have, in fact, loudly objected

to being so labeled. In "What is Existentialism?" Jean-Paul

Sartre complained that "the word has been so stretched and

has taken on so broad a meaning, that it no longer means

anything at all" (220). We must remember, however, that

Sartre then proceeded to define and defend existential

philosophy. Existentialism, however slippery its boundaries,

is a recognizable way of thinking about human existence. It

is recognizable not only in the shared convictions of all

its diverse proponents, including Protestants, Catholics,

Jews, and atheists, but in its dissimilarities from other

recognizable ways of thinking, such as, say, Protestantism,

Catholicism, Judaism, empiricism, idealism, pragmatism, and

even humanism.

Probably the simplest way to understand existentialism

is to see it, first, as a reaction against essentialism.

"Essentialism" is a relatively new term used to describe any

philosophy that holds that there are absolute realities,

eternal ideas, which transcend the existence of any

particular, concrete thing or human being. Plato, of

course, was the arch essentialist, and Western history,

though punctuated now and again by debates over the

relationship of existence and essence, has been dominated by Neo-Platonist philosophies, including those of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel. For these and other essentialists, there are in the universe certain unchangeable objective truths, which lie outside of and are separate from the thinking subject and which can be discovered by human reason.

Thus essentialism and rationalism have always been closely connected. During the Middle Ages, theologians sought to justify the ways of God to man--i.e., to reconcile faith and reason. Because the Western world in that period was, indeed, firmly built on a faith in God, buttressed at every vulnerable point by the authority of the Church, the reconciliation was fairly easy. Macrocosm and microcosm operated in harmony. Although the scientific advances of the Enlightenment may have disturbed our ideas about Man's privileged place in the universe, they did not threaten the idea that the "essences" and laws of nature were discoverable by reason and science. Reason may have gained primacy over faith, but Neo-Platonism still reigned. William Barrett, in **Irrational Man**, points out that Enlightenment philosophers were men of "profound mathematical bent," and as such they would naturally find "congenial a philosophy that exalted essence over existence." Barrett explains,

> The mathematician is enthralled by the timeless
> self-identity of essences, and hence always
> gravitates spontaneously to one form of Platonist
> or another. Moreover, the seventeenth century and
> those following it were concerned with the

extraordinary expansion of mathematics and
mathematical physics, and these two disciplines
won prestige beyond that of every other
intellectual enterprise because of the
extraordinary conquests over nature they made
possible: hence this bias toward essence with
which the contemporary era in philosophy began
continued supreme and in fact almost unchallenged
until Kierkegaard appeared in the nineteenth
century. (106)

Specifically, it was against the dogma of the

established Lutheran Church of Denmark, as well as against

the essentialist logic of Hegel, that Soren Kierkegaard,

generally considered the father of modern existentialism,

rebelled in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Kierkegaard's only abiding concern was how he, as an

individual, could become a true Christian; but he found the

answer neither in Church laws nor in reason. Codified

morality and empiricism were equally inadequate and self-

deluding. The abstract had subsumed the concrete,

Kierkegaard argued, and had allowed objectivity to deaden

human subjectivity. Reason threatened to engulf faith. The

truth exists, Kierkegaard said, but the task of each human

being is to discover truth for himself; and to do this one

must stand alone, unmediated, in relation to God. While

Kierkegaard's emphasis always remained man's relationship to

God, his questions necessarily led him into issues of

existence and essence. Just as faith could not be reasoned

into existence, existence itself could not be deduced, as

Hegel had tried to do, from abstractions.

In whatever ways later existentialists, from Nietzsche

to Camus, might differ from the fiercely religious

Kierkegaard, they all insist, along with Kierkegaard, that existence precedes essence--that all a priori philosophical moral, social, religious, and scientific laws are false and damaging. No "essence," universal and absolute and static and ideal, can ever possibly account for existence, which is personal and specific and dynamic and real. Thus, the existentialist says, we err--we fail--whenever we accept, unthinkingly, any system or doctrine or abstract theory as the basis for either our own behavior or our interpretation of the world. However existentialists might differ from each other, they all agree on the necessity for each human being, alone even in the midst of others, to choose, by an act of completley free will, his own values and truths and personal "nature." They also share with Kierkegaard a respect for the human emotions as a source of philosophic truth. Existentialists are particularly concerned with the emotions of guilt and anxiety in the face of freedom, responsibility, absurdity, facticity, and finitude.

When I suggest that the fictions of Henry James might be better understood from an existentialist perspective, I am suggesting, for one thing, that we pay closer attention to these existential concerns, around which, clearly, James builds his fictions. I am suggesting also that we notice the correspondence between some of James's most famous (or notorious) techniques--ambiguity, lack of closure, a human (as opposed to omniscient) center of consciousness--and the existential insistence on the absence of absolute moral standards. Human relations are immensely important, and

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immensely difficult, for so many of James's characters
precisely because Jamesian protagonists are sufficiently
aware, even in the tightest net of social convention, that
morality must be forged, always, in the individual
consciousness. For this reason, their decisions often do
not conform to conventional expectations or standards.
Though their "renunciations" may startle and disappoint us,
James's renunciatory characters are never, from an
existential perspective, passive. For James, as for the
existentialist philosopher, all conscious decision--and,
indeed, all deliberate thought--constitutes action. For
James, as for all existentialists, each fully conscious
human being, in isolation and uncertainty, creates his or
her own values. James's protagonists continually, and
existentially, create and recreate themselves, their worlds,
and their relationships with others.

I am not the first to recognize the existential
resonances in Henry James's fictions. Even Quentin
Anderson, who likes to explain James's works in connection
with Christian, and particularly Swedenborgian, theology,
asks, "What is the general significance of our preoccupation
with the novelist if his father's mysticism
[Swedenborgianism] was in fact the pole-star of his
thinking? How closely is that mysticism related to the
current existentialism?" ("New Jerusalem" 516). Although
Anderson is not really interested in addressing the latter
question, he does say, in his later introduction to a volume
of James's short stories, that James "was as anxious as the

present-day existentialist to establish the belief that men create themselves by their acts. . . " (Selected Short Stories xviii). Glauco Cambon also uses the word "existential" several times in his discussion of "The Beast in the Jungle," although he does not develop the idea to any great extent. Edward J. Jost, however, in "Love and Two Kinds of Existentialism," interprets "The Beast in the Jungle" specifically in terms of the existential philosophies of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Buber, Marcel, and Ong. Adrian van Kaam and Kathleen Healy include, in their book of existential psychological analyses of literature, a chapter on John Marcher in "The Beast." Although van Kaam and Healy focus on a particular short story, they readily make broader statements about the existential quality of James's entire body of work. They say, for example, that the quality in James's writings that T.S. Eliot, using James's own term, identified as "the deeper psychology" is, indeed, "the existential approach to life." Van Kaam and Healy unequivocally state that "the world of Henry James is an existential world" (197-98). Although Leon Edel's focus is never the existential basis, as such, of James's work, he does mention the "existential materials" of which The Wings of the Dove is composed. Elsewhere in his biography of James, Edel says of the ongoing debate between James and George Bernard Shaw, "Implicit also in this debate was James's taking the world as he found it, and seeking to demonstrate its realities and existential absurdities" (Henry James: The Master 120, 376).

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More recently, long after existential approaches to literature became unfashionable, several other critics have been compelled to insist upon the existential quality of James's work. Paul B. Armstrong, for example, in his 1983 The Phenomenology of Henry James, asks, "Does James's moral vision converge with existential theory in such areas as freedom, responsibility, and the dilemmas of personal relations?" (4). Armstrong's thesis is that James is, indeed, an "existential phenomenologist" (8). And although John Auchard's 1986 study, Silence in Henry James: The Heritage of Symbolism and Decadence, does not focus primarily on existentialism, Auchard devotes eight pages of his final chapter to pointing out the existential elements in James's work. In Henry James: A Study of the Short Fiction (1990), Richard A. Hocks suggests the existential quality of James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Jolly Corner" when he talks about the "isolation, angst, and inward journeys" of John Marcher and Spencer Brydon (81); and Millicent Bell, in Meaning in Henry James, agrees that there is "a modern existential quality" to "The Beast in the Jungle" (262). These continued references to Henry James's existential connections add validity, I feel, to the idea that Jamesian "renunciation" might better be understood as existential choice. At the same time, however, existential interpretations of James's works have been, over the decades, relatively rare, so that the idea of Henry James as an existentialist is still probably, to many people, startling enough to demand a considerable amount of defense.

There are several reasons that we might resist taking an existential approach to the works of Henry James. One of these is, I believe, that we have been too accustomed to seeing and explaining Henry James in terms of the New England Puritan tradition. From a strictly geographical perspective, this inclination is as odd as it is misleading, since only by the very loosest definition of the term "New England" can James be said to have had his roots in that region. Henry James's maternal and paternal grandparents came from Scotland and Ireland, respectively, and settled in New York state around the time of the American Revolution. Henry James's father, Henry James, Sr., grew up in Albany; and Henry James, Jr., was born in New York City. Until the family settled, briefly, in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1860, Henry James, Jr., grew up in Manhattan, Albany, and Europe. In 1862 he entered Harvard Law School and found that he liked Cambridge and Boston (if not Harvard itself, from which he soon withdrew). The whole family moved to Boston in 1864, but by then Henry was twenty-one; and he would, within five years, leave New England for the Old World, virtually for the rest of his life. The issue here is not whether James was more "European" than American but only whether he grew up internalizing the culture of Calvinist New England. He did not.

I realize, of course, that those critics inclined to explain Henry James in terms of his Puritan heritage are talking less about geography than about attitude. What is Puritan about Henry James, they say, is his attitude toward

sin and guilt and pleasure and sex; and in supporting this view, they like to point not only to his fictions but to the facts of his whole personal life. Henry James was a bachelor. He was, as far as we know, celibate. In 1886, George Moore wrote,

> The interviewer in us would like to ask Henry James why he never married; but it would be vain tc ask, so much does he write like a man to whom all action is repugnant. He confesses himself on every page, as we all do. On every page James is a prude. (Gard 172)

In 1897, in an equally unenthusiastic evaluation, D.C. Murray wrote that Henry James was "a blend of genuine power and native priggery. . . ." (Gard 264). Another early critic, F.M. Colby, was more explicit about the form this priggery took: James's fictions were "a land where vices have no bodies and the passions no blood, where nobody sins because nobody has anything to sin with" (Gard 337). More recent critics often echo these early reviewers. Maxwell Geismar, for example, explains that the relationship between Charlotte and the Prince in The Golden Bowl contains "the embedded Jamesian notion that sexuality was always linked with crime and sin" (315). James was, according to Geismar, "neurotic and repressed" (364); and Geismar posits the source of this problem in the too-obvious intimacy of James's parents, which was "in fact the original, mysterious abode of sexuality which the Jamesian [fictional] children and adults alike. . . never did quite penetrate, or were always thrown out of" (395). Thus, for these critics, James's works are explicable primarily--and perhaps only--in

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light of James's allegedly warped sexual attitudes, popularly labeled Puritanical.

Many critics, early and late, have explicitly attributed various other qualities of James's fictions to a more literal, though often equally vague and confusing, "Puritan" heritage. For example, in trying to explain the reasons for what she perceived as James's obvious failure in the novel of English manners, a reviewer of The Wings of the Dove wrote, in 1903,

> He is hampered in his judgment, and misled even in his observations, by the influence of a temperament as un-English as it is possible to conceive: by his mystical inheritance, his inveterate habit of minute analysis, and last, though not least, by his inborn, though so deeply overlaid Puritanism.   (Gard 332)

Nearly sixty years later, and in a highly laudatory article, Glauco Cambon would write that the "self-negation of language" in James's work is "one version of that recurrent Puritan gesture--the withdrawal, or denial, of Pilgrim Fathers, of Thoreau, of Hawthorne, Melville, and Emily Dickinson" (343). J.A. Ward recognizes the irony with which James treats so many of his characters who labor under a "New England conscience," but he nevertheless attributes James's own sense of morality to that same Puritan strain. Ward says it is "the obscure and irrational quality in his sense of evil that links James to. . . the diarists of the Puritan theocracy, who relentlessly reflected on their own sins, and to Hawthorne. . . " (8).

Like Cambon and Ward, many critics have reinforced the

idea of a close connection between James, the Puritans, and
Nathaniel Hawthorne. To read James, however, always and
foremost as the successor to Hawthorne wrongly obstructs our
thinking about James as a modern--and existential--writer.
Certainly the James-Hawthorne relation is an interesting and
natural area of inquiry, for not only did James acknowledge
consciously imitating Hawthorne early in his own career, but
he also wrote the first extended critical study of
Hawthorne. Nevertheless, in Hawthorne, James persistently
distances himself from Hawthorne, implying that he had
outgrown Hawthorne in the same way that Hawthorne should
have outgrown American provincialism. Furthermore, James
did what he could to distance Hawthorne from Puritanism.
Although James calls Hawthorne a "capital son of the old
Puritans," who, as such, "lay under the shadow of the sense
of sin," he also says Hawthorne was able to "transmute this
heavy moral burden into the very substance of imagination,
to make it evaporate in the light of charming fumes of
artistic production." In other words, according to James,
Hawthorne's deep, Calvinistic sense of sin existed only for
artistic purposes. James explains that Hawthorne "had ample
cognizance of the Puritan conscience; it was his natural
heritage; it was reproduced in him; looking into his soul,
he found it there. But his relation to it was only, as one
may say, intellectual; it was not moral and theological"
(45-46). That Hawthorne could have subscribed to Puritan
religious doctrine was unthinkable to James, demonstrating,
it seems to me, how very far removed from Puritan morality

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was James himself.

Nevertheless, these two major pronouncements of James's
--that Hawthorne was using the Puritan culture merely as
"background" and that James himself owed little to Hawthorne
as a literary predecessor--inspired two massive critical
debates that have, together, too effectively fused (or
confused) Henry James with both American Puritanism and
Nathaniel Hawthorne.[1] In The Complex Fate, a work arguing
the influence of Hawthorne on James, Marius Bewley makes
explicit the connections that many other critics merely
imply or assume:

> If, for the sake of convenience at this point, one
> were to attempt a definition of Hawthorne's
> tradition in a more narrow sense than has so far
> been undertaken here, one might say that it was
> rooted in the traditional past, a remote. . .New
> England past, in which Europe impinged directly on
> the New World and Calvinistic theology directly on
> moral action. . . . In the end one can say that
> Hawthorne literally gave James a tradition, for it
> was through Hawthorne that James found New England
> artistically accessible. (7)

To see James's work generally in light of Hawthorne and
Puritanism is, of course, to see Jamesian renunciation also
in that light; and for this reason too many critics explain
James's renunciatory characters as analogues to Hawthorne's
Puritans. Richard H. Brodhead, for example, in The School
of Hawthorne, explains Isabel Archer's final decision to
return to Rome in terms of Hester Prynne's return from
Europe to Boston (139). Cambon makes even more sweeping
comparisons: "In her negative affirmation of value, the

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Jamesian heroine has of course Hawthorne as ancestry."

According to Cambon, we "trace Catherine Sloper, Bessie

Alden, Isabel Archer, and Maggie Verver . . . to Hester

Prynne, Owen Warland, and, more distantly, the black-veiled

minister and Wakefield" (340). Cambon's point,

interestingly, is that all of these heroes and heroines,

along with Melville's Bartleby, share a sense of the "absurd

gratuitousness" of existence, an idea I think I would find

exciting if I were as convinced of the existential basis of

Hawthorne's works as I am of James's. Until that

interpretation gains more general acceptance, however, I

believe the only way we can begin to understand the

existential significance of Jamesian renunciation is to stop

identifying James's characters as analogues of Hawthorne's

sin-ravaged Calvinists.

I do not mean, of course, to deny all the similarities,

affinities, and "sympathies" between James and Hawthorne

that critics have been pointing out ever since T.S. Eliot

wrote "The Hawthorne Aspect" in 1918. What I am suggesting

is that we pay some serious attention to one obvious and

inescapable difference between them: the extent to which

they incorporate theology into their fictions. Whatever his

personal, actual involvement with the God of Calvin,

Hawthorne placed that God, along with the doctrines of the

Puritan church, at the center of many of his short stories

and novels--"Sunday at Home," "The Celestial Railroad,"

"Earth's Holocaust," "The Minister's Black Veil," "The

Maypole of Merrymount," "Young Goodman Brown," and The

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Scarlet Letter, to name just a few. The conflict in Hawthorne's works is exactly the struggle of his protagonists either with God Himself or with the church and congregation or with their own guilty consciences in the face of Biblical decrees and warnings. A really striking feature of James's work, on the other hand, is the absence of God, the absence of moral and spiritual authority external to the individual human being. Occasionally James will introduce an icon or official human representative of Christianity--candles, a dove, a nun; but these images, even when they carry symbolic value in the story or novel, never represent, for either James's characters or his readers, an appeal to religious authority. That is, they may suggest "transcendent" (that is, multiple) meanings in the sense that any symbol or allusion does so, but they do not establish a metaphysical context or explanation for James's fictions. Even those works dealing with the supernatural, such as "The Jolly Corner" and The Turn of the Screw, are completely devoid of religious implication. Indeed, in his discussion of The Turn of the Screw, Strother B. Purdy emphasizes that James has "turned his vision of evil here, as elsewhere in his fiction, away from the Christian framework." Purdy continues:

> From the conventional point of view, what is most
> striking about The Turn of the Screw is what is
> not in it. There is not, in short, any of the
> comfort Western man has, or has come to depend
> upon, in the face of horror. There is no appeal
> to religion, there is no appeal to outside help;
> there is no outside. (26)

Thus evil in James is not inspired by Satan any more than virtue or salvation is attributed to Jesus. At the same time, however, James's works are not attacks on religion, either. For James and his characters, God is simply irrelevant.

To get an idea of how conspicuously devoid of any religious sensibility James's works are, we can look, again, to the early reviewers. For every reviewer who complained about James's "Puritanism," there was another who attacked James for his lack of religious sentiment. For example, an unsigned review in 1881 complained about James's "agnostic Art" generally and about its manifestation in The Portrait of a Lady specifically: "The cloven foot of Mr. Henry James's agnosticism,--as artist no less than as thinker,--is shown at the close of his tale, with even more nakedness than he has ever shown it yet" (Gard 95). This evaluation is not unique; other reviewers of Portrait were equally aghast at James's failure to endow his characters with even a modicum of religious feeling, and other works of James's inspired similar critical reproaches. Julia Wedgwood's 1886 review of The Princess Casamassima, for example, called that novel "a study. . . where a languid but wakeful curiosity is the atmosphere through which we regard life, death, man, woman, and the empty space where God has vanished. . . " (Gard 174). Similarly, in an 1882 essay attempting to evaluate James's place in literature, J.H. Morse complained that "the human character is to [James] mechanical. All its springs can be touched. If there is any power behind--any

mighty force that moves even machinery-- he fails to see it, or to believe in it" (Gargano, Early Novels 53). These early reviewers disliked James's work, and they pointed to his obvious lack of religious conviction as evidence of his unworthiness as an author. We need not, however, endorse their pejorative evaluations of James as a writer in order to acknowledge the accuracy of their observations regarding James's agnosticism or atheisim. And having done that, we cannot go on thinking of James primarily as the torch-bearer of Puritan or Hawthornesque traditions.

My purpose in emphasizing this difference between James and Hawthorne is, of course, to facilitate the association of James and existentialism, an association that might still seem implausible or meaningless to anyone inclined to define existentialism either too narrowly or too nebulously. The briefest definitions of existentialism, it is true, focus on Sartre and his contemporaries in mid-twentieth-century. At the other extreme, the most extended definitions identify existentialist precursors even among ancient Greek and Hebrew philosophers. Indeed, as Walter Kauffman has said, existentialism is a "timeless sensibility," one manifested whenever someone seriously asks, "Who am I and what am I doing here?" (12). It is not merely in this sense, however, that I propose the connection between James and existentialism. Assuredly James lived and died before the heyday of popular French existentialism; but he did live in the same century as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It matters little that James probably read neither of these

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philosophers. I am not trying to prove "influence" here,
except to point out that James was bound to be influenced,
one way or another, by the same general conditions of
Western culture that engendered various nineteenth-century
philosophical developments, including the beginning of a
progressive revolt against essentialism.

The dominant historical fact of the period during which
Henry James lived was the Industrial Revolution. Born in
1843, James came of age just as the United States was
beginning its rapid transformation from a largely agrarian
nation to a highly mechanized and urbanized society.
Between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of World
War I, hundreds of thousands of Americans moved from their
farms to the cities to perform, for barely adequate
remuneration, endlessly repetitive tasks at or in the
service of machines. Dependent for survival on the goods
and labor and economic prosperity of others, individuals
were disempowered, dehumanized, and isolated by this same
compartmentalization of labor. While James does not
dramatize the workers' plight against backdrops of slums and
sweatshops (except, notably, in The Princess Casamassima),
he does, in virtually all of his fictions, examine the
concomitant problems of industrialized society--the problems
of rampant materialism, blatant disregard for the past,
sudden changes in wealth or status, and the resultant
shifting mores, ethics, and values.

In this respect, James was like many of his literary
countrymen, who, as the Norton Anthology of American

<u>Literature</u> explains, were forced to "come to terms imaginatively with the individual and collective dislocations and discontinuities" caused by the Industrial Revolution (Baym 2: 10). James's move to England in his early adulthood did nothing, certainly, to alleviate his awareness of the profound disturbances of modern life. Attempting to characterize the mood of industrialized England, the <u>Norton</u> <u>Anthology of English Literature</u> says,

> Despite the industrial and political preeminence of England during the period, it is evident that most perceptive Victorians suffered from an anxious sense of something lost, a sense too of being displaced persons in a world made alien by technological changes which had been exploited too quickly for the adaptive powers of the human psyche. (Abrams et al. 728)

Displacement, loss, discontinuity, anxiety, and isolation--these are the psychological consequences of the Industrial Revolution, and they are reflected in the works of Henry James as well as in the major philosophical debates of the nineteenth century.

In the most simplified terms--that is, in the terms the average nineteenth-century layperson might have been expected to notice and understand--the chief philosophic debates of the period were carried on by the proponents of traditional religion on the one side and the proponents of science on the other. This dichotomy, certainly, was not a new or peculiarly nineteenth-century phenomenon. For three hundred years, scientific advancements in astronomy, geology, medicine, and physics had been undermining philosophic confidence in a divinely planned, human-centered

universe. Discoveries in astronomy, for example, from the sixteenth-century onward, had been providing increasing evidence that Earth and its inhabitants were infinitesimal specks in the vastness and impersonality of space. And ever since the seventeenth century at least, geological discoveries likewise suggested that human life represented a tiny and ultimately insignificant moment in time. During the Renaissance, however, the Catholic Church was strong enough to discredit any scientific theory--or scientist-- deemed heretical.[2] However, as the power of the Church in Western Europe waned (largely because of the promulgation of scientific discoveries it was not quite able either to stifle or explain away), philosophy became more and more concerned with the impact of science on religion.

From a philosophical standpoint, the single most important scientific event of the nineteenth century was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. If the Industrial Revolution had compounded the feelings of alienation and doubt caused by the cumulative scientific discoveries of the preceding three hundred years, those feelings were now freshly exacerbated by Darwin's apparent challenge to Biblical accounts of creation. The Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871) demonstrated that, far from having been perfectly created in God's image, man had, instead, evolved, like all other animals, from lower forms of life. Called into question, suddenly, were God's purpose and design as well as humankind's privileged status in the

cosmos. In <u>Philosophy of the Recent Past</u>, Ralph Barton
Perry indicates the profound impact of Darwin's theory:

> Darwinism . . . created the impression of reducing
> nature to an all-pervading and ceaseless flux
> without refuge or anchorage. Life had always worn
> an aspect of generation and decay, but had been
> redeemed by the Platonic-Aristotelian idea that
> the forms which it embodied were permanent, and by
> the Christian idea that it was a manifestation of
> eternal benevolence. Now all of these moorings
> seemed to be dissolved into a flood sweeping
> blindly on without origin, destination, or
> fixed landmarks. (26-27)

The impact of science on philosophy in the latter half
of the nineteenth century is perhaps most obvious in the
writings of one of Darwin's most vocal disciples, Thomas H.
Huxley (1825-1875). Although in his roles as teacher and
physician Huxley often spoke and wrote as a humanist, he was
fundamentally a man of science--a biologist, a physiologist,
a geologist, and a zoologist. One of his abiding projects
was to popularize Darwin's theories about evolution, and
another was to apply the principles of science to the realm
of philosophy. It was Huxley who coined the word
"agnosticism," and his defense of agnosticism in the essay
"Agnosticism and Christianity" shows the rational,
scientific basis for his denouncement of blind faith in God.
Huxley writes, "It is wrong for man to say that he is
certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he
can produce evidence which logically justifies that
certainty." In the same essay, Huxley emphasizes that he is
objecting on moral grounds even more than on scientific
grounds to the "ecclesiatical gnostic" doctrine that "there

are propositions which man ought to believe without logical satisfactory evidence, and that reprobation ought to attach to the profession of disbelief in such inadequately supported propositions" (310-311). In Huxley we can see clearly not only the application of scientific principles to theological questions, but also the inseparability of intellectual integrity and moral values.

As influential as Huxley was, he was just one of the many writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century to insist upon a rationalistic, and specifically scientific, approach to philosophic issues. Auguste Comte in France, John Stuart Mill in England, and Karl Marx in Germany were all working within the parameters of Positivism, certain that philosophy was, in the nineteenth century, at last emerging from the shadows of religion into the light of scientific certainty. In America, the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James was motivated by the same rationalist impulse. Both of these men were "pragmatic" in the sense that they judged the value of a concept by its practical, observable consequences. It was William James, however, who modified scientific rationalism to include a pragmatic theory of truth. In his 1898 "Will to Believe," James asserted that people have a moral and intellectual right to believe even when evidence for that belief is inconclusive, as long as the practical consequences of that belief are good. Certainly James here departs from the "purely" scientific method of Huxley. Indeed, as James moved away from the pragmatism of Peirce toward his own

"radical empiricism," his philosophy became more and more irrationalist. Nevertheless, what William James always shared with these other nineteenth-century rationalist philosophers was a total unwillingness to accept, without question and challenge, any religious generalities dictated by ecclesiastical or traditional authorities.

Though it is convenient to talk about the philosophical debates of the nineteenth century as a two-sided contest between religion and science, that dichotomy is simplistic and misleading. The blend of rationalist and irrationalist tendencies in William James is but one example of the philosophical complexity of the period. We must also remember that even some of the most devoutly religious thinkers of the period were vociferously challenging the authority of established religion. We have already seen how Soren Kierkegaard, who raged against exactly the kind of rational and "objective" approach to religion that Huxley advocated, nevertheless shared with Huxley a moral aversion to the dictates of conventionalized Christianity. Kierkegaard was reacting to his observation that Christianity had become a weak, vague, meaningless, and at best peripheral interest for nineteenth-century Western man. In the United States, writers like Emerson and Whitman were echoing that lament. In his 1838 "Divinity School Address," Emerson spoke of the "universal decay and now almost death of faith in society" (84); and he tried to explain to his audience of divinity school students the causes of the "decaying church and a wasting unbelief" that were currently

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"casting malignant influences" (88). Like many other thinkers of the nineteenth century, Emerson was advocating the rejection of creeds and doctrines and ecclesiastical hierarchy when he urged his audience to "dare to love God without mediator or veil" (90). No less vehemently, Whitman, in an 1856 letter to Emerson, deplored the "pitiful spectacle" of institutionalized religion: "The churches are one vast lie; the people do not believe them, and they do not believe themselves. . . " (2037). Thus the Transcendentalism of Emerson and the pantheism of Whitman were attempts, like that of Kierkegaard, to revitalize genuine religious feeling in a period when traditional institutions were failing to meet the spiritual needs of most people. It should come as no surprise, then, that this same period would produce Frederich Nietzsche, perhaps most notorious for his proclamation that God was dead in the modern world.

Nietzsche's goal, however, was different from and even more radical than Kierkegaard's or the Transcendentalists'. Nietzsche had no desire to "subjectivize" religion. In observing that God, or any kind of meaningful religious force, was dead, he was also rejecting what Barrett has called "the whole realm of supersensible reality--Platonic Ideas, the Absolute, or what not--that philosophy has traditionally posited beyond the sensible realm, and in which it has located man's highest values" (203-04). And along with the rejection of the idea of eternal and objective truths, Nietzsche was simultaneously rejecting

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(here, like Kierkegaard), scientific rationalism, which held that the universal truths and laws of Nature were discoverable through human intellect. Nietzsche was adamant that even the most scientific description was always based on personal evaluation, and for that reason, he concluded, there were no hard, identifiable "facts" in the universe waiting to be "discovered." Nietzsche was rejecting the essentialist, rationalist assumptions of both religion and science. We choose what view of the world to take, Nietzsche said, and he urged us, in the absence of God, to forge new values in a secular world.

Thus the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of profound and widespread philosophical disturbance. Traditional ways of thinking about truth and reality and humanity were being challenged on every front by such highly influential thinkers as Darwin, Huxley, Marx, William James, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. For anyone deaf to the rumblings initiated by these radical scientists and philosophers, the Industrial Revolution alone would have been sufficient to undermine one's general confidence in traditional authorities, systems, expectations, and values. It would not have been necessary, I submit, that Henry James study nineteenth-century philosophical treatises before being able to sense the changes, insecurities, rebellions, and dilemmas of the period in which he lived.

Henry James's biography supports the likelihood of his receptivity to contemporary ideas and feelings, particularly those consistent with the philosophies of Kierkegaard and

Nietzsche. We might begin, indeed, with Henry, Sr., who, within a year of the birth of Henry, Jr., experienced a moment of emotional crisis that would affect the future religious climate of the family. The elder James himself recounted in dramatic detail the vision of the "invisible shape" of evil squatting in his dining room one afternoon. Because, up to the moment of the vision, he had felt relaxed, unworried, and contented, the apparition seemed all the more inexplicable. Terrified, the elder James was unable to move, for he felt "beat upon by an ever-growing tempest of doubt, anxiety and despair." Although he would later describe his own fear as "a perfect insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause," the emotional distress triggered by the vision persisted; and physicians, as well as the rest and water-cures they prescribed, were unable to help. Only when a friend explained the vision in terms of a Swedenborgian _vastation_ did James begin his recovery (Gunn 55-58).

The elder James's interest in and commitment to the religious teachings of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg is important to the religious development, or non-development, of Henry James, Jr., in at least one important way. Because Swedenborg taught that divine revelation came unmediated to the individual, Henry James, Sr., saw no reason to school his children in the rituals or liturgies practiced by any particular church. As Leon Edel has emphasized, Henry James, Sr., "feared pedantry and rigidity" and had a "horror of dogma and of moral

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judgments" (A Life 37). For this reason, the James children were "throw[n] into many schools" and were left free to attend any church, or none, as they chose. In Edel's words, the "twin institutions" of Church and School therefore "left Henry James Junior relatively untouched"; in fact, Edel says, "Church-going for Henry. . .was essentially a social phemomenon rather than a religious experience" (A Life 35-37). Several critics, over the years, have tried to show that Swedenborgian theology, learned at the knee of Henry James Senior, pervades the work of Henry the novelist. I will discuss the problems with that theory later; at the moment I would merely like to suggest that the most important consequence of the father's Swedenborgianism was to disconnect the novelist from all religious systems, forcing him, as Nietzsche commanded, to "transvalue" all values in a secular world.[3]

When John Auchard, in the final pages of Silence in Henry James, outlined what he perceived as the existential elements in The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl, at least one of his reviewers, Suzanne Nalbantian, complained that Auchard had gone too far. Nalbantian objects to all criticism that views James as a Modernist (or even as "verging on Modernism"). She says, "It is time to be careful with James: not to remove him so totally from the climate in which he belongs" (76). The Nalbantian/Auchard disagreement is really just a continuation of the debate over Henry James's "modernity" that has been carried on

(often as part of the debate over his "Puritanism") for many decades. While critics like Maxwell Geismar and V.L. Parrington have condemned James for being out of touch with the cultural realities of his time, others have recognized that James was, in his own way, dealing in his fictions with the philosophical and social problems of the age. Though relatively few critics have, like Auchard, perceived James's work as a reflection of existential thinking, many of those who have perceived the "modernity" of James's preoccupations explain that quality of his work in terms entirely consistent with existential philosophy. Spiller's _Literary History of the United States_, for example, says,

> [The reality of Henry James's fictions] was his response to the human predicament of his generation, which James felt with unusual acuteness because of the virtual formlessness of his education--the predicament of the sensitive mind during what may be called the interregnum between the effective dominance of the old Christian-classical ideal through old European institutions and the rise of the succeeding ideal, whatever history comes to call it . . . . [James] expressed the decay and sterility of a society pretending to live on conventions and institutions but lacking the force of underlying convictions. (1039)

The "predicament" Spiller has pointed out is precisely the problem preoccupying other nineteenth-century philosophers, including the early existentialists Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

More recently, Strother B. Purdy and Ross Posnock have, in their respective studies of James, argued in favor of our viewing Henry James as a "modern." In _The Hole in the Fabric_, Purdy insists that James is, indeed, "post-

modern" in his "dramatic assertion of the inadequacy of logic" (46) as well as in his assertion of a supernatural "other world without metaphysical location" (12). Purdy also points out that one of the many significant influences of James on later writers is his concern with the "matter of nothingness," particularly in "The Beast in the Jungle" (14). In *The Trial of Curiosity*, Ross Posnock argues against the traditional political and literary evaluations of Henry James as an "antimodernist." Posnock's argument refutes Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton, Charles Beard, Fredric Jameson, and Granville Hicks, who see James as politically regressive and elitist. In building his argument, Posnock relies, in part, on the similarities of the "concerns and strategies" between James and the other great thinkers of the nineteenth century; and although Posnock does not extend his argument specifically to existential philosophy, he does specifically emphasize James's affinities with the widespread nineteenth-century, anti-essentialist, anti-Hegelian philosophic trend to "save the fragile particular from absorption" (Posnock 81).

Merely to acknowledge James's "modernity" does not, I concede, automatically make James an existentialist writer. Indeed, for some readers, the largest obstacle to thinking of James as an existentialist is not the period in which he lived but the characters James created in his fictions. Admittedly, Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether do not look much like the tortured or absurd heroes and anti-heroes we find in the existential fictions of Sartre or Camus, or even

in the nineteenth-century works often called precursors to existential fiction, such as Tolstoy's _The Death of Ivan Ilytch_ or Dostoevsky's _Notes from Underground_. Nevertheless, the issues that preoccupy James's protagonists are indeed existential issues; and the resolutions James provides to those issues, and to his fictions, reflect an existential vision of the human condition.

Chapter 3

Renunciation and the Theme of "Too Late"

Most criticism of "The Beast in the Jungle," "The Jolly
Corner," and The Ambassadors focuses on the issue of
renunciation. Critics generally hostile to James see the
protagonists of these works--John Marcher, Spencer Brydon,
and Lambert Strether--as predictably "Jamesian" in their
ineffectuality, passivity, solipsism, and repression.
Indeed, because all of these works were written late in
James's career, they epitomize for some critics James's
lifelong neurotic preoccupation with neurotically
renunciatory behavior. Friendlier critics are more likely
to discuss renunciation in these works as a function of
theme--the theme of "the unlived life" or of "unrealized
possibilities." Dorothea Krook, however, is one of the few
critics to connect all three works in relation to what James
himself called, in his Notebooks, the theme of "too late."
The two short stories and the novel, she says, treat this
theme "in significantly different, though related, ways"
(332). "The Beast in the Jungle," according to Krook, is "a
deliberately tragic version of The Ambassadors"; while "The
Jolly Corner," by virtue of its relatively happy ending,
turns the "too late" theme into something more like an
"almost-too-late" theme (233-34). Clearly, despite the
obvious differences in genre and tone and resolution, these
three late works of James's do share a concern with the
concept of "what might have been." However, what critics,

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both hostile and friendly, have been slow to acknowledge is that all three protagonists are struggling with the same twin existential dilemmas--the inescapable freedom to choose and the dreadful finitude of choice.

All existential philosophy concerns itself with the paradoxical relationship between freedom and finitude. The concept of freedom may be the cornerstone of existentialism, but no one is so naive as to propose that all possibilities are always open to every human being. Limitation, or finitude, or "thrownness" (Heidegger's term), or "facticity" (Sartre's) is as much a part of the human condition as freedom is. The most startling and persistent fact any human being must confront is undoubtedly existence itself. Not having chosen to be born, we nevertheless find ourselves face to face with the inexplicable fact of our own existence. We are also obviously limited by the more specific situations into which we are born (or "thrown"), such as race or gender or historical period or I.Q. We are further limited by temporality--by the finite nature of human life, the inevitability of death. Thus many aspects of our existence are as "factical"--as "given"--as existence itself. At the same time, however, each human being is constantly and necessarily engaged in the very serious process of choosing among all the real options open to him or her at any given moment. It is in this sense that we are free, and inescapably free, to choose. Yet every time we choose one possibility over another, we limit ourselves to (and by) that choice. We can choose any real option, but we

cannot choose all real options at once, even though we might like to. In this sense, too, we are finite, self-limiting. We are "condemned to freedom," as Sartre has said, but we are subsequently and paradoxically limited by each freely-made choice.

For the existentialist, the ramifications of this paradox are enormous. Given that existence precedes essence, each of us, with every choice, is engaged in the project of defining the self. Before choice, there is no self, "facticity" notwithstanding. We are what we choose; we are the sum of our decisions. Those who make their choices in less-than-full consciousness may delude themselves that they have escaped the necessity of choice. However, even apparent non-choice, or a refusal to choose, is a choice in itself. In Either/Or, Kierkegaard tries to explain that the fundamental choice one must make in order to become an ethical human being is whether or not to be willing to choose in full consciousness and responsibility. If we do not choose to choose, he says, we have merely chosen the aesthetic sphere of existence over the ethical sphere. In any case, however, we have chosen, and in so doing we have defined our selves.

It is important to note that for Kierkegaard, as for Henry James, the ethical human being is distinguished primarily by the willingness to make conscious choices. Of the relationship between choice, ethical awareness, and self, Kierkegaard says,

I should like to say that in making a choice it is

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> not so much a question of choosing the right as of
> the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which
> one chooses. Thereby the personality. . . is
> consolidated. (Either/Or 106)

The "pathos" Kierkegaard mentions results from the awareness
that every choice not only creates but also limits the self.
In his discussion of Kierkegaard, Barrett explains,

> The man who has chosen irrevocably, whose choice
> has once and for all sundered him from a certain
> possibility for himself and his life, is thereby
> thrown back on the reality of that self in all its
> mortality and finitude. He is no longer a
> spectator of himself as a mere possibility; he is
> that self in its reality. (154-55)

Precisely because choice is so inextricably fused with
identity, the freedom to choose often becomes a terrible
burden--a frightening, dizzying, paralyzing responsibility.

There is perhaps in all of literature no character more
frightened of freedom and finitude than John Marcher of "The
Beast in the Jungle." Marcher's paralysis in the face of
the freedom to choose is so complete that he renounces love,
passion, action--in effect, all meaningful involvement in
the world and with others. His withdrawal is conscious and
deliberate, and because it is so extreme, many critics have
sought extreme--i.e., aberrant--motives for his behavior.
Geismar, for example, pronounces Marcher "voyeuristic" and
"frigid," and he explains that Marcher's attitude toward sex
is "pre-oedipal or pre-sexual" (35, 41). Donna Przybylowicz
asserts that Marcher turns May into a "masturbatory fantasy"
and the Beast into a fetish (105, 111). Eve Kosofsky
Sedgwick, on the other hand, argues that Marcher's Beast,
his unspeakable "secret," the "something unknown in his

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future," is his homosexuality (169). Because the Beast remains undefined even to Marcher himself, it lends itself readily to Freudian speculation regarding sexual repression. However, Marcher's paralysis extends far beyond sexuality alone. He fears all conscious choice, and for this reason his fear is more likely to be rooted in the existential issues of freedom and finitude.

Although Marcher himself never consciously identifies his fears this way, he is, nevertheless, excruciatingly aware of a lifelong, pervading anxiety--a chronic uneasiness all the more disturbing for its being vague and unnamable. Ironically, it is this unfocused anxiety that provides the focus of both the story and Marcher's life. Marcher has always been preoccupied by his conviction that "something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and turns of the months and the years, like a crouching beast in the jungle" (336; II). This "something or other" is his unknown destiny, and the metaphor of the beast waiting to spring indicates the degree of anxiety and suspense Marcher associates with his "fate."

James emphasizes the element of fear from the opening pages of the story, when Marcher unexpectedly encounters a woman he knew ten years earlier, May Bartram. May startles Marcher by reminding him that he once confided to her his awful presentiment. Her words echo the fear Marcher has always felt regarding his future: "'You said you had from the earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly

prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen
to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and the
conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you'" (331;
I). Marcher admits to May that he still believes in the
exceptional destiny awaiting him or, more precisely, the
cataclysmic destiny he himself must passively await:

> "[It's something I will] have to meet, to face, to
> see suddenly break out in my life; possibly
> destroying all further consciousness, possibly
> annihilating me; possibly, on the other hand, only
> altering everything, striking at the root of all
> my world and leaving me to the consequences
> . . . ." (332; I)

In spite of all these vague and terrible predictions,
however, Marcher is reluctant to admit that he is
frightened. He confesses to May only that he does not know
whether he is afraid or not. Nevertheless, in the years to
come, Marcher consistently thinks of himself as a man both
tormented and distinguished by his "perpetual suspense"
(336; II), by "the apprehension that haunts [him]" (333; I),
and by his "generations of nervous moods" (341; II). For
decades, Marcher and May together speculate on the possible
forms the Beast might take, and May's word for these
speculations is "fears" (357; V). Late in his life, when
Marcher again opens the subject of his own fear, he
acknowledges that he might originally have been afraid, but
he insists to May, "'I judge, however, . . . that you see
I'm not afraid now.'" He decides, in fact, that he is "a
man of courage." Nevertheless, a moment later, he
acknowledges the ambiguity latent in his use of the term

when he asks, "'But doesn't a man of courage know what he's afraid of--or _not_ afraid of? I don't know _that_, you see. I don't focus it. I can't name it. I only know I'm exposed'" (342; II). At this point the narrator ironically interjects that Marcher's voice, "for a man of courage, trembled a little" (343; II).

Although Marcher is genuinely and profoundly apprehensive about what form the catastrophe will take, he paradoxically looks forward to and depends upon the event for self-definition. Whatever he may appear to be to others, nothing defines him, he feels, except his secret fear and unknown destiny. He considers his day-to-day activities--including his work connected with the "little office under the government," his social engagements, and the management of his libraries and gardens--to be mere "forms" (338; II). He sees himself as set apart from, and superior to, ordinary human beings; and because his only abiding concern is for the "conception of singularity" (337; II) he has for himself, he judges all of his own ordinary behavior to be "a long act of dissimulation" (338; II). Until the Beast springs, Marcher believes, he is nothing but pure potentiality, and the potential he envisions for himself, whatever shape it might take, is tremendous.

It is no wonder, then, that Marcher staggers, late in life, under his own suspicion that the Beast has "stolen away," never to attack at all. Far from being relieved that the Beast is no longer a menace, Marcher is keenly aware of a sense of loss. The narrator tells us,

> What it presently came to in truth was that poor
> Marcher waded through his beaten grass, where no
> life stirred, where no breath sounded, where no
> evil eye seemed to gleam from a possible lair,
> very much as if vaguely looking for the Beast, and
> still more as if acutely missing it. He walked
> about in an existence that had grown strangely
> more spacious and, stopping fitfully in places
> where the undergrowth of life struck him as
> closer, asked himself yearningly, wondered
> secretly and sorely, if it would have lurked here
> or there. (360; V)

Marcher misses the Beast because the Beast has for so long represented self-definition as well as infinite personal potential. If Marcher, by his own evaluation, has been nothing but potentiality and if that potentiality is never to be realized, Marcher is, and has been, nothing. As he himself concludes, "It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonest, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything" (348; III).

For this reason, Marcher's conception of himself as pure potentiality changes, after May's death, to one of pure limitation. May's final assurance to him that the Beast had already sprung without his noticing leaves him as much troubled as ever in regard to his future. Now, though, he is sure that nothing lies ahead. He reflects,

> The change from his old sense to his new sense was
> absolute and final: what _was_ to happen _had_ so
> absolutely and finally happened that he was as
> little able to know a fear for his future as know
> a hope; so absent in short was any question of
> anything still to come. (360-61; V)

Unable to focus on anything but his past, when everything was yet before him, Marcher now thinks of himself as "tormented," "deprived of rest," and "powerless" (361; V).

He spends a year touring Asia, only to discover that "the

world was vulgar and vain" as well as "garish cheap and

thin" (362; VI). This malaise is rooted in his sudden

depreciation of his own worth. He can no longer delude

himself that he is extraordinary, for, as he explains to

himself, "the terrible truth was that he had lost--with

everything else--a distinction as well. . ." (362; VI). So

far has he fallen from the realm of pure potentiality that

he now thinks of himself as totally finite, more like an

object than a human being. Pathetically, he reflects that

"the things he saw couldn't help being common when he had

become common to look at them. He was simply now one of

them himself--he was in the dust, without a peg for the

sense of difference" (362; VI).

On his return to England, his despair at the

"commonness" and limitation of his life is so great that he

can barely tolerate the thought of any personal future at

all. As he visits May's grave on a "dire" autumn afternoon,

he rests with a "heaviness he had not yet known." Indeed,

he rests "without power to move, as if some spring in him

had suddenly been broken for ever." He wants nothing more

than to lie down on the slab of May's grave; for, convinced

that he no longer has anything to wait for or to hope for or

even to fear, he wonders, "What in all the wide world had he

now to keep awake for?" (364; VI).

Clearly, since the beast's perceived absence is as

troubling to Marcher as its perceived presence, the real

source of Marcher's fear and trembling has never been simply

the one, unknown, cataclysmic event that would mark him forever as different from other human beings. Indeed, no single external object or event can be identified as the cause of Marcher's chronic emotional state. He uses the Beast metaphor to focus and control his apprehension, but the Beast turns out to have been, all along, a fiction, a delusion. Had Marcher never invented his Beast, he would still have had to deal somehow with his insecurity, his uneasiness, his "fear." In other words, the Beast has not caused Marcher's anxiety; Marcher's anxiety has created the Beast. And the Beast's disappearance only deepens Marcher's sense of anxious despair.

It is important that we distinguish now between "anxiety" and "fear." I have, to this point, been using the words loosely, chiefly because Marcher and May, as well as Henry James, use the word "fear" in speaking of Marcher's situation. From an existential perspective, however, the lack of a clear, identifiable referent in the objective world defines Marcher's emotional state as anxiety rather than fear. Although there is some variation in the precise ways different existentialists discuss the concept of "anxiety" (or "dread" or Angst or angoisse), all agree that anxiety, unlike fear, lacks a specific object or cause in the physical world. In The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard says, "If we ask. . . what the object of anxiety is, then the answer. . . must be that it is nothing" (96). Similarly, in Being and Time, Heidegger says, "That in the face of which one is anxious is completely indefinite. . . .

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Nothing which is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious" (231). Furthermore, as extreme as Marcher's case may seem, existentialists would agree that the kind of free-floating anxiety James describes in "The Beast in the Jungle" is inherent in the human condition (or is, to use Heidegger's word, "primordial"). And whatever differences we might find among existentialists in regard to the concept of anxiety, all agree that this fundamental characteristic of human being springs from our intuitive grasp of the concepts of freedom and finitude.

Although Kierkegaard explains anxiety in the Christian terms of sin and evil and faith, he insists, always, that anxiety is "freedom's possibility" (The Concept of Anxiety 155). In The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard equates "anxious dread" with despair (158), and he discusses this anxious despair in the dialectical terms of Finitude/Infinitude and Possibility/Necessity (162-175). McQuarrie explains that for Kierkegaard, "[Anxiety] is a kind of instability prior to action. It is descibed as the 'vertigo' or 'dizziness' of freedom. For freedom means possibility, and to stand on the edge of possibility is rather like standing on the edge of a precipice" (129). For Heidegger,too, anxiety is connected with freedom and possibility, as well as with the ideas of finitude, death, and nothingness. Sartre attempts to synthesize the ideas of Kierkegaard and Heidegger: anxiety over freedom and nothingness arises from our conceptions of our selves in the

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future. We are free to choose what we will become.
Possibility is open to us. But because we are not the
selves we will become, we are always, in that sense, not
ourselves. Sartre says, "Anxiety is precisely my
consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-
being" (Being and Nothingness 32). Any one of these
definitions, or all of them together, would help to explain
the consuming anxiety and "renunciatory" behavior of John
Marcher, whom Henry James portrays as trembling, paralyzed,
on the brink of freedom and finitude.

Marcher's anxiety in the face of freedom and finitude,
or of choice and limitation, is evident, first, in the very
constructs of his imagination. He has imagined a fate--a
future--for himself that he is powerless to shape or to halt
or even to hasten to fruition. He can do nothing, in fact,
but remain on guard (and that much, apparently, for no other
reason than to see the Beast approaching as it comes). To
May, Marcher says of his "destiny," "'It isn't anything I'm
to do, to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or
admired for.'" It is instead, he tells her, something
merely to "wait for" and to "watch for" (332-33; I). Later,
he emphasizes again his passive role in his own future when
he insists,

> "It isn't a matter as to which I can choose, I can
> decide for a change. It isn't one as to which
> there can be a change. It's in the lap of the
> gods. One's in the hands of one's law--there one
> is. As to the form the law will take, the way it
> will operate, that's its own affair." (340; II)

Marcher's reluctance to choose is revealed not only in

his delusional attitude toward his future but also in the daily life of his present. Nowhere is his pathological reluctance to choose more evident than in his relationship with May. Because May is the only person in the world to share Marcher's obsession with his personal destiny, the two of them become conspirators. May is willing, apparently, to devote her life to "watching" and wondering and speculating with Marcher about what exceptional fate will befall him. For this purpose, they continue to meet frequently and privately year after year. Marcher concedes to himself that "the real form [his relationship with May] should have taken . . . was the form of their marrying" (336; II). However, on the basis of the inevitable, unknown, and potentially tragic destiny he predicts for himself, he rationalizes that he cannot marry. Furthermore, he refuses to recognize that May would very much like to marry him. To acknowledge May's feelings would force Marcher into making a decision--if not to marry her, then to sever their quasi-intimate, stalemated, and compromising relationship or even, perhaps, consciously to continue exploiting May's generosity. He knows that he takes their "intercourse itself for granted"; but he reasons, like anyone frightened of making a committed decision, that "there was nothing more to be done about that." Their relationship, he tells himself, "simply existed. . . " (336; II).

What Marcher does not realize, however, is that his refusal to make conscious, committed choices does not relieve him of the necessity to choose; for even those

choices made in less-than-full consciousness, or in fear or in resignation or in passivity, are choices nonetheless. Like Kierkegaard's aesthete, Marcher, in deciding that he cannot choose, has merely chosen to deny responsibility for the choices he continually makes. He might tell himself that his relationship with May "simply exists," but he himself, with May's collusion, has narcissistically defined and exploited the relationship from the beginning. Similarly, although Marcher smugly congratulates himself on having fooled the world into thinking he is an ordinary, run-of-the-mill human being engaged in ordinary and trivial occupations, he fails to realize that these "forms" and dissimulations are, indeed, the sum of the choices he has made. His late-blooming suspicion that the Beast might, after all, fail to spring or that it has sprung without his noticing brings with it the revelation that he is, ironically, exactly and only what he has always appeared to be. He can no longer delude himself that it is the Beast that has kept him from doing the "things of importance" he might otherwise have been capable of. He has chosen not to do those things, whatever they were, just as he has chosen instead to do the other things he himself apparently holds in such contempt--such as managing his garden and "caring for his modest patrimony" (338; II). He is what he has chosen. He cannot escape the limitations of choice any more than he can evade the necessity of choice itself.

Marcher's passivity has been labelled "renunciatory" by many critics. In fact, however, his passivity, his

unwillingness to make choices, reflects his reluctance to
limit or define or deny himself in any way. He has rejected
marriage and career opportunities and love and friendship
not because he has wanted nothing for himself but because he
has wanted everything for himself. He has wanted more for
himself than the average mortal experiences; and without a
clear idea of what it was he has been waiting and hoping
for, he has spent his life trying to leave every option
always open to himself. His final "illumination" that May
and love and passion were "what he had missed" in life is
less a declaration of love or grief for a particular woman
than it is a panicked frustration at having missed
"everything," including very ordinary human love.

There is no reason to believe that Henry James ever read
Kierkegaard, and certainly Soren Kierkegaard never read
James. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's discussion of the forms
of despair in The Sickness Unto Death might well serve as a
clinical diagnosis of John Marcher. Kierkegaard explains
that a person suffering from the "despair of infinitude"
fantasizes about himself, projects himself into the future,
to such a degree that "the fantastical. . . so carries [him]
out into the infinite that it merely carries him away from
himself and therewith prevents him from returning to
himself" (164). To such a person, who has failed to
synthesize the finite and the infinite, "possibility then
appears. . . ever greater and greater, more and more things
become possible, because nothing becomes actual. At last it
is as if everything were possible--but this is precisely

when the abyss has swallowed up the self" (169). Thus this projecting person is rendered incapable of action.

By the end of "The Beast in the Jungle," Marcher recognizes that his own sense of self has indeed been swallowed up by the abyss. As he pauses over May's grave in the "garden of death" (363; VI), he acknowledges that the cemetery is where he now feels most at home. The cemetery is comforting to Marcher because, as the narrator tells us, "It was as if, being nothing anywhere else for any one, nothing even for himself, he were just everything here . . . ." The cemetery represents the place he feels he can "still most live," for here he can remember—can call up for companionship—"his other, his younger self," the one who once existed as pure potentiality. Because the present reminds Marcher only that he is old, that his death is inevitable and imminent, that finitude in all its forms is the common human fate, Marcher now feels he must live in the past, "dependent on it not alone for a support but for an identity" (363; VI). Having waited a lifetime for fate and circumstance to define him as great, Marcher has to the last refused to acknowledge that the responsibility for creating and defining the self lies always and solely with that self.

Regardless of their specific approaches to "The Beast in the Jungle," virtually all critics agree that Marcher remains, at the end of the story, "unredeemed." For example, Krook says Marcher is "doomed" because "he learns too late that to 'live all you can' is in the end nothing but to give and to receive love. . . ." (334-35). Those who

more specifically interpret the Beast as a symbol of repressed libido agree that Marcher's graveside "illumination" comes too late. Donna Przybylowicz, for example, in Desire and Repression, says Marcher's "final realization" is mere "passive understanding"; for although Marcher moves "from ignorance to knowledge," he never moves from "passivity to activity," and he therefore remains an observer of his own deadness and apathy" (110). Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for whom Marcher's Beast represents repressed homoeroticism, contends that "in the last scene . . ., John Marcher becomes in this reading the irredeemably self-ignorant man who embodies and enforces heterosexual compulsion" (180). For Van Kaam and Healy, who see the Beast as the evil "other," the demon that every man must discover in himself and acknowledge, Marcher's "final recognition of the waste of a life not lived brings anguish, but not redemption" (222-23). And for Edward F. Jost, according to whose existential interpretation Marcher "has committed the Unpardonable Sin of turning a Thou into an It," the final scene merely "brings [Marcher] face to face with his monstrous egotism" (18).

I point out this unusual concordance among very diverse critics to emphasize that no one, in fact, reads "The Beast in the Jungle" as a "typical" Jamesian celebration of sentimentalized renunciation. The story is not, either, as Maxwell Geismar insists, an unconscious projection of James's own "impacable" and "infantile" neuroses (355, 360). On the contrary, in this story, James is clearly and

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consciously condemning the passive and self-absorbed behavior he is so often accused of glorifying. At the same time, he is also condemning the existential bad faith that results from the cowardly refusal to make committed choices or to take responsibility for inauthentic choices made in the past.

While not all critics endorse Dorothea Krook's claim that "The Jolly Corner" is "The Beast in the Jungle" with a happy ending, many critics do, indeed, discuss the works in tandem. Both stories were written late in James's career, and their protagonists share several conspicuous characteristics. Spencer Brydon, like John Marcher, is an aging bachelor. Also like Marcher, he has ignored for a lifetime the quiet, faithful affection offered him by a woman. Brydon's woman friend is Alice Staverton, with whom he has renewed his friendship since returning to New York after thirty-three years abroad. The purpose of his temporary return is to see to the disposition, in one form or another, of two properties he owns. One of these, the house in which he was born, he now discovers to be haunted by the ghost of his alter ego--by the man he might have been if he had remained in America. In fascination and fear, obsessively and alone, he seeks the ghost night after night, only to flee in horror when the moment of confrontation finally comes. Certain that only one closed but unlocked door separates him from the apparition he has been stalking, Brydon declares to the spirit on the other side, "'I give up. . . .I retire, I renounce. . .'" (392; II). Not

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surprisingly, the plot of this story, along with Brydon's unfortunate choice of words, has provided rich opportunities for critics to sharpen their insights, and sometimes their claws, on the issue of Jamesian renunciation.

According to the collective criticism, Brydon's renunciations are nearly boundless. He has renounced his homeland, for one thing--a circumstance Clifton Fadiman sees as a reflection of James's own "withdrawal to Europe" and "retreat from the American experience" (qtd. in Geismar 358). In so doing, Brydon has also renounced all gainful and committed employment, having financed his dilettante's life abroad by renting his New York properties. He has thus "evaded his fate," as well as his "American past," according to Granville H. Jones (255, 256). Brydon has furthermore, by many accounts, renounced love and sexuality, not only because he has never married but also because, in renouncing the ghost, or his quest for self-knowledge, he evades his "repressed Freudian id" (Kaston 151).

Regardless of whether or not they see Brydon as ultimately "regenerated" (either by his ghostly experiences in general or by Alice's love in particular), critics are likely to discuss the ending of "The Jolly Corner" in terms of what Brydon has given up. To many, including Robert Rogers and Millicent Bell, Brydon's story is another Jamesian lament for the "life unlived," the life in which entirely too much has been neglected or surrendered or denied. Similarly, Joan Delfattore deplores Brydon's "failure to confront," and she sees the ending of the story

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as clear confirmation of his "passivity and psychological immaturity" (340). Maxwell Geismar sneeringly corroborates this view in his analysis of Brydon's relations with the ghost:

> This hero [Brydon], in the typically Jamesian vein, simply "waits," he listens, and he "watches," though now with his eyes bent, and his hands held off, for the "revelation" which is there, and which is denied to him. He retires; he "renounces"--in the best Jamesian resolution of all the great problems and issues of life; I mean of living. (361)

Granville H. Jones, on the other hand, sees Brydon's experience with the ghost as wholesome "confrontation" rather than neurotic evasion. Nevertheless, Jones explains this happy ending in terms of everything Brydon ultimately renounces. For example, Brydon "has renounced," Jones says, "his glorified isolation for the shelter of Alice Staverton's persistent love" (256). Jones then summarizes Brydon's entire New York experience this way:

> Like the narrator of The Sacred Fount, Brydon seeks and finds support for his life of renunciation. But Brydon goes further. He renounces both the facts and the symbols of his whole way of life--his withdrawal, his need for justification, his theoretical aberrations, his haunted, investigative quest--by finally accepting them. (256)

The gist of this argument seems to be that Brydon's ultimate "rejuvenation" is due to his renunciation of all of his former renunciations.

Whether Brydon's rejuvenation at the end of the story is wholesome renewal or pathological regression, his experience with the ghost is clearly another example of

man's existential anxiety over the necessity to choose.
Brydon's crisis, like Marcher's, results from his inability
to come to terms with his own finitude. The only difference
is that Marcher's anxiety is focused on the future, whereas
Brydon's is entirely retrospective. Because Marcher wants
to leave every potential open to himself forever, his terror
over self-limitation keeps him from making any committed and
fully conscious choices at all. Thus Marcher's crisis lasts
his whole life long. Brydon, on the other hand, has
apparently been able to make all the ordinary, necessary
decisions throughout his life without much trouble. In this
sense, he may have been even less conscious than Marcher of
the existential responsibilities involved in choice.
Brydon's awareness, however, finally expands, and his crisis
comes all at once and suddenly, in his fifty-sixth year.
Brydon's ghost and Marcher's Beast are thus both metaphors
for the same existential anxiety.

That James thought of the two protagonists as
contending with the same problem is evident in his repeated
reference to Brydon's ghost as a "beast." For example, in
Part II of "The Jolly Corner," Brydon thinks of his ghost as
"a creature more subtle, yet. . . perhaps more formidable,
than any beast of the forest" (384). As he stalks this
beast, he thinks of himself as a "sportsman," and when he
considers whether or not he might be frightened, he compares
himself to other great sportsmen, those "gentlemen on Bengal
tiger-shoots or in close quarters with the great bear of the
Rockies" (385). Late in the story, after Brydon has

awakened from his terrified swoon, he describes the ghost to
Alice as "'an awful beast; whom I brought, too horribly, to
bay'" (401; III).

Although Brydon's crisis period is much shorter than
Marcher's, his anxiety is not less intense or pervasive.
Like Marcher, Brydon goes through a period of trying to
convince himself that he is not afraid. He reasons that
because he has "turned the tables" on the ghost by becoming
the hunter rather than the hunted, he has control over the
situation (385; II). However, as he gets closer and closer
to finding the ghost, he must try harder and harder to prove
to himself that he is not frightened. He feels he must act,
"to show himself that he wasn't afraid" (388; II). He
thinks of his vigil, his "deliberate wait," as an act that
would "prove his courage" (389; II). Later, he is more and
more aware that "the question of danger loomed;" and he
recognizes that with it also "rose, as not before, the
question of courage" (391; II). And even as Brydon
continues to deny his own fear, the narrator is careful to
emphasize Brydon's "terror of vision" (388; II).

Just as Marcher's fear of the Beast is really a
projection of repressed anxiety over the "nothingness"
inherent in the concept of freedom, so is Brydon's fear of
the ghost. James frequently emphasizes the element of
nothingness in Brydon's crisis. For example, when Brydon
takes Alice with him one day to see the house on the jolly
corner, he is acutely conscious of the emptiness, the void.
He is aware that there is nothing there for Alice to see as

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they walk through "the great blank rooms" except that
"absolute vacancy reigned, and that, from top to bottom,
there was nothing but [the housekeeper's] broomstick, in a
corner, to tempt a burglar" (375; I). More significantly,
when Brydon fantasizes about his moment of confrontation
with the ghost, he imagines that he will find the ghost in
the midst of nothingness. He expects to come upon the ghost
some night after "opening a door behind which he would have
made sure of finding nothing, a door into a room shuttered
and void. . . " (375; I).

Brydon also demonstrates one of the major symptoms of
anxiety--the feeling Heidegger has described as
"uncanniness." According to Heidegger, most of us, most of
the time, manage to tranquilize ourselves into denying the
radicalness and insecurity of the human condition. However,
whenever we are forced to acknowledge the terrible
responsibility of human freedom and possibility, we are
jerked out of our pseudo-securities. Suddenly the concerns
of the everyday world "sink away," become irrelevant and
meaningless, and we feel "uncanny" and "not at home"
(MacQuarrie 130).

Again and again James emphasizes Brydon's sense of
uncanniness, strangeness, queerness. On the first page of
the story, we are told that Brydon feels "assaulted" by the
many "queernesses" of modern New York. He does not so much
mind the mere uglinesses, for these he expected; but even
these he thinks of as "monstrosities" and "uncanny
phenomena." What truly bothers him, however, is that

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"proportions and values" in New York are "upside down." The place strikes him as "overgrown and fantastic"; and his habitual reaction is one of "astonishment" (372-73; I). As he begins to wonder what he might have been like if he had remained in New York instead of moving to Europe, his feeling of uncanniness grows. Alice's suggestion that he might have been quite a success in business sets in motion "the queerest and deepest of his own lately most disguised and muffled vibrations" (375; I). When he begins in earnest to stalk the ghost, many of his thoughts include the words "strange" and "strangeness," "monstrous" and "absurd." We should not make the mistake of thinking that Brydon feels queer and uncanny because he is stalking a ghost. He has, on the contrary, created a "ghost" to represent the feeling of uncanniness that accompanies existential anxiety. It is interesting, too, I think, that when Brydon realizes the ghost will turn and fight, he feels both "terror and applause"--a fact that reminds us of Marcher's paradoxical feelings of sickening fear and eager anticipation at the thought of his "Beast." Brydon "applauds" the ghost's willingness to appear and to confront him, for at least then Brydon will have "something" in the midst of nothingness on which to focus his anxiety.

What Heidegger calls the sense of being "not at home" more popularly goes by the name of "alienation." If Brydon feels "not at home" in New York, he is as much alienated from New Yorkers as he is from the city itself. The first few sentences of the story reveal that Brydon feels unable

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to communicate with the people he has met socially since returning from abroad. He tells Alice,

> "Every one asks me what I 'think' of everything
> . . . . and I make answer as I can--begging or
> dodging the question, putting them off with any
> nonsense. It wouldn't matter to any of them
> really. . . .for, even were it possible to meet in
> that stand-and-deliver way so silly a demand on so
> big a subject, my 'thoughts' would still be almost
> altogether about something that concerns only
> myself." (371; I)

Later, Brydon will reflect that, for all of his social reluctance, he nevertheless manages to be a "dim social success." He finds this fact ironic, for he feels that the people who treat him cordially "had truly not an idea of him." He complains that "it was all mere surface sound, this murmur of their welcome, this popping of their corks-- just as his gestures of response were the extravagant shadows, emphatic in proportion as they meant little . . ." (383; II).

His feeling of alienation from other people is further emphasized by his aloneness in the "haunted" house. He visits the house on the jolly corner sometimes twice a day, once at dusk, and once around midnight. He congratulates himself on his ability to do so without anyone else's knowing about his visits. When he leaves his hotel, the people there assume he is going to his club, and when he leaves his club, the people there assume he is returning to his hotel. No one knows where he is or what he is doing, a fact Brydon savors as a delicious secret. Although on his solitary wanderings through the empty house he usually opens

the shutters to afford him some tenuous connection with the "human actual social," he is aware that he does so only because the social "was of the world he had [once] lived in." Whatever small comfort or support he may still derive from it in his "detachment," he recognizes that that support is "coldly general and impersonal" (386; II).

At the same time that Brydon is alienated from other people, he is also alienated from himself--a condition we would expect to find in a man in existential crisis. MacQuarrie explains that, for the existentialist, alienation is "understood chiefly in inward terms. It is the existent's alienation from his own deepest being" (160). That Brydon is alienated from himself is obvious from the form his ghost takes--that of Brydon's alter ego. Brydon himself thinks of the ghost as the man he "might have been." And although Brydon initially seeks out, in mere curiosity and fascination, this vision of his other self, the relationship between the two selves soon turns adversarial. Nothing else Brydon (or James) could have imagined would indicate so clearly this man's alienation from "his own deepest being."

That the ghost should take the form of Brydon's alter ego also provides the chief evidence that James is working here with the relationship between "renunciation" and finitude. Brydon is obsessed with the possibility that he might have "been" someone else if he had remained in America. Visiting the old house with Alice, he says, "'I might have lived here (since I had my opportunity early in

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life); I might have put in here all these years. Then
everything would have been different enough'" (378; I).
Soon afterward, he acknowledges to Alice the obsessive
nature of his interest, for he realizes that he finds "all
things come back to the question of what he personally might
have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out,'
if he had not so, at the outset, given it up" (378; I).
Brydon himself is aware that his obsession is "vain,"
"morbid," and "absurd." Nevertheless, he allows himself to
be tormented by speculation. He very nearly wails to Alice,

> "What would it have made of me, what would it have
> made of me? I keep forever wondering, all
> idiotically; as if I could possibly know. I see
> what it has made of dozens of others, those I
> meet, and it positively aches within me, to the
> point of exasperation, that it would have made
> something of me as well. Only I can't make out
> what, and the worry of it, the small rage of
> curiosity never to be satisfied, brings back what
> I remember to have felt, once or twice. . .to
> burn some important letter unopened. I've been
> sorry, I've hated it. . . ."   (379; I)

Brydon's anguish here is not due, exactly, to his
remorse over not having become a successful American
businessman, as his ultimate revulsion at the sight of the
ghost proves. Nor is his revulsion due to the inherent
vileness of what he might have become, as is evidenced by
Alice's later calm assurance that, to her, the vision of his
alter ego "was no horror" (402; III). His torment comes
merely from the realization that if he had remained in
America, he would have been someone else. What Brydon
regrets and hates is that he cannot be both those selves.
The ghost frightens him because it represents possibility--

the possibility he has "renounced," the possibility no longer ope   him (or open to him only in a very limited way, even if he renounces now his present way of life and present self). The ghost is so "monstrous" and sickening because it brings Brydon face to face with the terrible necessity to choose and the terrible finitude of choice.

The Ambassadors appears, at first, to be less concerned with existential crisis than is "The Beast in the Jungle" or "The Jolly Corner," chiefly because of the relative normality of its protagonist, Lambert Strether. Always moderate and level-headed, Strether does not seem to be in any sort of crisis at all. Although he possesses a healthfully active imagination, he does not spend an inordinate amount of time fantasizing about his future. He does not flee in panic from imagined terrors or throw himself headlong onto gravesites. He never swoons. Yet Strether shares several important characteristics with both Marcher and Brydon, not the least of which is his tendency toward behavior that critics like to call "renunciatory."

Much of the renunciatory flavor of the novel has to do with the theme of the unlived life or the theme of "too late." Strether, like Marcher and Brydon, has reached a point in his life, around his fifty-fifth year, when he realizes that he has failed to take advantage of many of the opportunities once available to him. He also realizes that he is no longer young and that it is too late for him to seize the opportunities he has let go by. What these missed opportunities are remain rather hazy, perhaps even to

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Strether. He has, after all, had a wife and a son; and although both died long before the novel opens, Strether is not entirely cut off from other meaningful human contact or endeavor in the same way Marcher is. Strether is engaged to his longtime friend and employer, Mrs. Newsome, of Woollett, Massachusetts. His work involves the editing of a little Woollett publication, a sideline to the Newsome family manufacturing concern and, as Strether himself admits, "no tribute to letters" (63; bk,.2, ch.2). As editor, Strether plays a minor role, perhaps, in a minor operation, but he does not seem unsuited to or unhappy with his position. He has, in fact, rather settled in; and if he is aware of unrealized possibilites, he does not seem poised on the precipice of the existential abyss into which both Marcher and Brydon plunge.

Nevertheless, when Mrs. Newsome asks Strether to go to Europe, as an "ambassador" of sorts, to persuade her wayward son, Chad, to give up his scandalous life there and return to the family business, Strether begins to see the world anew. In Europe his eyes are opened to more beauty and more complexity than he has ever seen before. Because Parisian mores are different from those of Woollett, he realizes that many of his former assumptions and values are inadequate, especially in the matter of Chad's alleged delinquency and anticipated reform. Although Strether may remain, to the last, in control of his emotions, he finds himself, amid the splendors and uncertainties of Paris, adrift in a sea of existential ambiguities.

It is not, however, Strether's changing moral code that has inspired most of the critical attacks on the novel. Most critics agree, indeed, that Strether's moral revaluations represent improvement over the rigid and predictable and priggish attitudes common in Woollett. The flaw many critcs see in the novel is, instead, the apparent inconsistencies in attitude and behavior Strether demonstrates at two crucial points.

The first of these bothersome inconsistencies occurs in Strether's famous exhortation to Little Bilham at the artist Gloriani's garden reception. Strether has just assured Little Bilham that he does not wish to be introduced to anyone else at the reception. He wants "to talk with none of them," and the reason he gives for his uncharacteristic unsociability is that it is "just simply too late" (131; bk. 5, ch. 2). When Bilham too facilely replies, "'Better late than never,'" Strether's sharp response is, "'Better early than late.'" Strether confesses that the garden, the people in it, and all the impressions he has received in Paris have shown him what he has missed in life. He is suddenly too acutely aware that "there were some things that had to come in time if they were to come at all," for "if they didn't come in time they were lost forever." With that statement, the floodgates open, and the usually restrained Strether begins to advise Little Bilham on the importance of not "missing the train," as he himself has done. "'It's not too late for you,'" Strether tells him. "'You're young-- blessedly young; be glad of it. . . and live up to it. Live

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all you can; it's a mistake not to'" (131-32; bk. 5, ch. 2).

This part of the message alone is clear, but Strether, as we have already been warned, is a man burdened with "the oddity of a double consciousness" (18; bk. 1, ch. 1). That is, he is a man sensitive to complexity and ambivalence and paradox, and he demonstrates his double vision continuously throughout the novel. For example, on his arrival in Chester, Strether wants very much to see Waymarsh, his friend from home; yet he is aware that he also appreciates very much the time alone--the freedom--afforded by Waymarsh's delay. The narrator tells us that, habitually, "there was detachment in [Strether's] zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (18; book 1, ch. 1). Having been so warned, we should not be too astounded by Strether's apparent self-contradiction as he continues his "exhortation" to Little Bilham.

Although he has just lamented his failure to realize too many of life's possibilities, Strether now says,

> "The affair--I mean the affair of life--couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured--so that one 'takes the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it; one lives in fine as one can." (132; bk. 5, ch. 2)

By describing life in this way, Strether seems to rescind completely his recent hymn to freedom. This apparent inconsistency has moved Oscar Cargill to complain that Strether "urges 'living' with the most superficial notion of

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what he means and he places his urgency in the glib context

of determinism" (315). I believe Cargill is wrong, but,

admittedly, Strether further complicates the issue when he

says,

> "Still, one has the illusion of freedom;
> therefore don't be, like me, without the memory
> of that illusion. . . .I was either, at the right
> time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it
> . . . . Do what you like so long as you don't
> make my mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!"
> (132; bk. 5, ch. 2)

Whatever exactly Strether might mean by his faith in the

"illusion" of freedom, I think there can be no doubt that

the concept he is addressing is the paradoxical relationship

between freedom and finitude.

The issue of freedom and finitude is adumbrated long

before this moment in Gloriani's garden. Almost immediately

upon his arrival in Paris, Strether is keenly aware that the

city produces in him a sense of freedom--produces, indeed,

an "extraordinary sense of escape" (59; bk. 2, ch. 2). He

is further aware that this sense is all the sharper for his

having read the four letters from Mrs. Newsome that were

awaiting him in Paris. Mrs. Newsome had written all four

letters in one week, and Strether feels oppressed by their

length and number. In reflecting that Mrs. Newsome "had

lost no time, had followed on his heels while he moved,"

(59; book 2, ch. 2), Strether confirms an earlier suggestion

by his friend Waymarsh that the great lady from Woollett

follows Strether up "'pretty close'" (33; bk. 1, ch. 2). As

Strether reads the news from home, he notes that Mrs.

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Newsome's tone "fill[s] the air," yet at the same time strikes him as the "hum of vain things" (60; bk. 2, ch. 2). Mrs. Newsome is the voice, the tone, the air of Woollett—the personification of the New England conscience that Strether, in the less restrictive atmosphere of Europe, suddenly finds rather too severe and confining. Strether feels, in fact, that "if he had seen Mrs. Newsome coming he would instinctively have jumped up to walk away a little" (60; bk. 2, ch. 2). Strether luxuriates in the new sense of release and independence he finds in Paris; and he realizes, throughout the novel, that Paris represents to him, among other things, liberality and freedom, just as Woollett more and more comes to represent rigidity and confinement. Thus, while Strether's speech in Gloriani's garden may be spontaneous, it is probably not so incoherent or ill-considered as it might at first sound. Strether has had ample time to reflect on just what he has missed in life, as well as on just what his own role in the "missing" may have been.

What Strether has missed is not, I believe, any particular achievement or thing. He is not an ambitious or acquisitive man. Alwyn Berland notes that it is Strether's lack of acquisitiveness (Woollett and American acquisitiveness) that predisposes him to appreciate the non-commercial, non-utilitarian (i.e., artistic) qualities of Paris; and she quotes his conversation with Maria Gostrey, his expatriate American friend, as evidence. They are speaking of Waymarsh, of whom Strether says, "'He's a

success of a kind that I haven't approached.'" When Maria asks, "'Do you mean he's made money?,'" Strether replies, "'He makes it, to my belief. And I, . . .though with a back quite as bent, have never made anything. I'm a perfectly equipped failure.'" Maria, who has been quite thoroughly Europeanized, expresses a fairly representative attitude of the Parisians Strether meets when she says, "'Thank goodness you're a failure--it's why I so distinguish you! Anything else today is too hideous. Look about you--look at the successes. Would you be one, on your honor?'" (40; bk. 1, ch. 3). Later, Little Bilham will echo this sentiment when he says he would rather die than go home and go into business himself (111; bk. 4, ch.2). Berland points out, furthermore, that "Strether's own indifference to acquisition is made clear enough," since he knows that by antagonizing Mrs. Newsome, by encouraging Chad to stay on in Paris, he will assuredly lose, among other things, the security of her large fortune (Culture and Conduct 207).

Strether's antipathy toward acquisitiveness also reveals itself in his attitude toward the Newsome business in Woollett and its leading representatives, Jim and Sarah Pocock. Strether is embarrassed to name, for Maria Gostrey, the item produced by the Newsome manufacturing firm, (a "'big brave bouncing business,'" a "'roaring trade'"), although he is willing to admit that the article is trivial, ridiculous and vulgar. When Maria asks whether Mrs. Newsome has money, Strether replies, "'Oh plenty. That's the root of the evil.'" And when Maria suggests that Chad may have

left Woollett out of shame over the family business,

Strether can only lamely defend the Newsome enterprise and

its infamous founders by saying, "'But where and when. . .is

"the shame"

--where is any shame--today? The men I speak of--they did

as everyone does. . .'" (49; bk. 2, ch.1).

When the Pococks, Mrs. Newsome's daughter and son-in-

law, arrive in Paris as second-wave ambassadors sent to

negotiate the return of Chad, Strether is suddenly

reawakened to the great difference between the Woollett and

the Parisian concepts of success. Jim Pocock, introduced

several times as a "leading Woollett businessman," is

considered by Strether to be "normal," "cheerful,"

"shallow," "extravagantly common," and "stupid" (212-216;

bk. 8, ch. 2), a man to whom Paris means nothing more than

the Moulin Rouge and the Folie Bergere. Jim Pocock, the

business success, reveals himself all too plainly to

Strether, who, in the cab from the train to the hotel,

indulges Pocock "even while wondering if what Sally wanted

her brother to go back for was to become like her husband"

(214; bk. 8, ch. 2). Jim and Sarah are blind to the

improvements produced in Chad by Paris, and Strether

momentarily fears that he himself has been silly to imagine

such great changes in the young man. He then reflects,

however, that "he would have been silly, in this case, with

Maria Gostrey and Little Bilham, with Madame de Vionnet and

little Jeanne, with Lambert Strether, in fine, and above all

with Chad Newsome himself." He wonders, "Wouldn't it be

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found to have more for reality to be silly with these
persons than sane with Sarah and Jim?" Strether immediately
assures himself that he is "different from Pocock" (212; bk.
8, ch.2), and in so doing he allies himself with the beauty
and art and non-acquisitiveness of Paris against the
vulgarity and commercialism and "succesess" of Woollett.
Whatever it is Strether feels he has missed, then, has
nothing to do with career ambitions or money.

     Nor is it likely that what Strether has missed is love.
He still berates himself for having "stupidly sacrific[ed]"
his young son through neglect, but his neglect of the boy
was the result of his having "insanely given himself to
merely missing the mother" (61; bk. 2, ch. 2). I have heard
it argued that Strether loves his wife better dead than
alive, but I do not find any evidence in the text to support
that assertion. On the contrary, I feel that Strether, in
just this fleeting reflection, reveals that he has early
known more love and more genuine grief than John Marcher
ever experiences. Strether admits that his remorse, his
guilt, over the boy's death is still "sharp enough to make
the spirit, at the sight now and again of some fair young
man just growing up, wince with the thought of an
opportunity lost" (61; bk. 2, ch. 2). At the same time,
however, he realizes that this self-blame is "doubtless but
the secret habit of sorrow," a statement most of us probably
recognize as true. No, Strether is not John Marcher, the
man whom "no passion has ever touched" ("Beast" 365; V).
Strether has known real love and genuine grief, and he knows

them still.

It is equally unlikely that the missed opportunity
Strether laments to Little Bilham is the life of glamor or
sensation. Although he seems to envy the youth and
opportunity of Chad and Little Bilham and although he
tacitly, at least, endorses their Bohemian lifestyle,
Strether supremely values refinement in all matters, moral
as well as esthetic. The entire novel attests to that fact,
but if we should need more specific evidence, we might
recall his disgust with Jim Pocock's aggressive innuendoes
about the thrills of Parisian nightlife (212; bk. 8, ch. 3).

In trying to understand what it is Strether feels he
has missed in life, we would do well to remember, also, some
of his other pertinent comments to Little Bilham in
Gloriani's garden. After fervently urging Bilham to "'live
all you can,'" Strether adds,

> "It doesn't so much matter what you do in
> particular, so long as you have your life. If you
> haven't had that what have you had? This place
> and these impressions--mild as you may find them
> to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad
> and of people I've seen at his place--well, have
> had their abundant message for me. . . ."
> (132; bk. 5, ch. 2)

The "'message,'" Strether explains, is that he is simply
"'too old'." However, another, equally important message
implied in these words is that what he has actually missed
is the opportunity to "'have his life'," to live according
to his own lights, his own goals, his own desires, and his
own moral values instead of somebody else's.

It is not insignificant that Strether has spent the

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several minutes preceding his conversation with Little
Bilham in observing people whose manners and appearance and
attitudes conspicuously differ from those one might expect
to encounter in Woollett. Mme. de Vionnet, for example,
fails to introduce him to the Duchess who interrupts their
conversation, a Duchess who fondly addresses her as "'Ma
toute-belle.'" Mme de Vionnet also abruptly, yet gracefully,
"drops" Strether for an important-looking and polished man--
an "ambassador," perhaps, Strether speculates, and one who
wants very much to know Mme. de Vionnet, the woman Mrs.
Newsome considers a pariah. Left alone upon his bench,
Strether now has "plenty to think of" (129; bk.5, ch.2). We
are told that he "reflect[s] on Chad's strange communities";
he reflects also, I submit, that not all social structures,
or social strictures, or moral laws, are everywhere the
same. He also seems rather surprised to realize that there
might be, even for him, considerations far more significant
in what he has seen than whether or not he has been treated
rudely. I believe he has recognized, in these few moments,
that one might actually have some little say as to which
social expectations and moral codes one might endorse or
ignore. It is the realization of this possibility that
Strether has, for most of his life, been missing.

The day of Gloriani's reception, however, is really not
the first time such an idea has occurred to him. Earlier in
the novel, on his second morning in Paris, Strether becomes
aware of how fatigued he has been for some weeks, and he
wonders if his weariness were not the real reason for Mrs.

Newsome's contriving to send him on this mission to Europe.
With that thought, Strether concludes that he might nicely
continue to use his fatigue to his convenience. He reflects
that "what he wanted was some idea that would simplify [his
life], and nothing would do this so much as the fact that he
was done for and finished." He feels he need do nothing
much, really, if he is no longer good for much of anything;
and he considers that "if he could but consistently be good
for little enough he might do everything he wanted." And
"everything he wanted," he knows, "was comprised moreover in
a single boon--the common unattainable art of taking things
as they came." This "boon," the art of taking things as
they come, is the opportunity Strether feels he has missed,
for he reflects that he "appeared to himself to have given
his best years to an active appreciation of the way [things]
didn't come. . . " (61; bk.2, ch.2). One way to interpret
this statement, I suppose, is that Strether wants only to be
able to resign himself to disappointment and failure.
However, it seems to me that that is exactly what he has
been trying to do for most of his life and exactly what has
so fatigued him. He has pretended, for example, to
appreciate the editorship of a publication of which he is at
least slightly ashamed. He has also pretended to appreciate
the attentions and patronage of a woman who obviously
stifles and intimidates him. In light of his later speech
to Little Bilham--of his insistence that "'it doesn't so
much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have
your life'"--I believe that what Strether really means, in

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regard to his "fatigue," is that he wants to be able to stop living according to the expectations and requirements of others and begin living according to his own inner dictates.

The problem with such an interpretation is, of course, the "'tin mould'" metaphor Strether uses to explain his life to Bilham. How could a man who yearns to live his life freely and authentically justify his "failures" in such deterministic language? We must recognize that Strether is addressing, here, the element of facticity in human life. He laments (too petulantly, it's true) having been born and reared in New England, in a relatively narrow and repressive culture. The culture, the "'mould,'" of Woolett is not "'fluted or embossed, with ornamental excrescences'"; it is, rather, "'smooth and dreadfully plain'." There is little variety in Woollett, even among human beings; for Woollett is a place where there are really only two "types," exactly --male and female (44; bk. 2, ch. 1). Strether's visit to Paris, however, has shown him how different life and human beings can be; for Paris is a "jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked" (64; bk. 2, ch.2). Being born in one place, such as Woollett, rather than in another, such as Paris, necessarily gives characteristic "form" to the "helpless jelly" of human consciousness. As long as we know only one culture, one set of standards, one way to live, we are trapped in the mould, because we can never choose an option of which we are unaware. Neither can we ever break the mould, for we cannot escape our facticity. We can,

however, exercise freedom within the bounds of that facticity. Unfortunately, Strether has for too long been unaware of the options open to him--including, apparently, the option to choose freely and alone. The "'tin mould'" metaphor, then, is not incompatible with an existential view of human freedom, any more than it is incompatible with Strether's exhortation to Little Bilham to "'live all you can.'"

Nor is Strether's insistence on the mere "illusion" of freedom inconsistent with an existential approach to living. I do not wish to suggest, of course, that existentialists think of freedom as illusory or false; on the contrary, the basis of the entire philosophy is that freedom is a necessity. However, since existence precedes essence, each human being must ultimately create for himself the values and, in fact, the realities by which he will live. We have already seen how, for Kierkegaard, the first ethical choice one must make is whether or not to choose "ethically"--that is, in full consciousness and with full commitment. It is through conscious choice that we form and understand the concept of freedom. Choice implies freedom, and freedom necessitates choice. Those who are unaware that they choose (like John Marcher, for example) deny the possibility of choice and of freedom. They wait for "fate" to choose for them. Just as our first choice is always whether or not to choose, our first free act is to believe we can act freely.

William James struggled often, in his writings, with the issue of free will versus determinism, and he came down

firmly on the side of free will. He points out that we never feel more alive than when we have brought to pass one out of a number of possibilities. However, he acknowledges that our sense of having willed a possibility into reality may be illusory, since we have no empirical means by which to test whether the course of events would have been different if we had willed otherwise. Theodore Flournoy summarizes James's conclusions this way:

> The proof of free-will will never be empirically given other than by this inner experience of choice, and since the appraisal by which we declare this experience true or false itself implies a choice, one finds oneself logically enclosed in a circle from which there is no exit unless by an appeal to an authority other than logic. Thus it has been said that it is by an act of liberty that we assert liberty. (113-114)

William James himself stresses the idea that choice, or at least the illusion of choice, is what provides the "palpitating excitement to our moral life and makes it tingle. . . with so strange and elaborate an excitement." He maintains that "this reality, this excitement, are what the determinists. . . suppress by. . . their dogma that all things were foredoomed and settled long ago." If the determinists are right, he concludes, "May you and I then have been foredoomed to the error of continuing to believe in liberty" ("The Dilemma of Determinism" 64). In his pragmatic insistence that we should be free to believe in freedom and in so doing to create freedom, William James is moving beyond the boundaries of strict pragmatism into the sphere of radical empiricism. With his contention that we

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create our own "moral realities" and that the basis for those realities is freedom, he comes very close to the fundamental tenets of existentialism. William James is not, of course, his brother Henry; but it is not unreasonable to suppose, on the basis of the text of The Ambassadors, that Henry shared William's confidence in the "illusion of freedom."

Perhaps even more bothersome to critics than the apparent contradictions within Strether's speech to Little Bilham is the apparent contradiction between his counsel to "'Live all you can'" and his ultimate "renunciation" of Maria Gostrey. Maria has been, in Europe, Strether's close friend and confidante. When, at the end of the novel, Maria indicates that she would like Strether to stay with her in Paris, Strether tells her he must return to Woollett. Maria does not at first understand why, since Strether has already assured her that he has effectively destroyed, through his handling of his "ambassadorship," his personal and professional relationship with Mrs. Newsome. Maria comes very close to pleading with Strether when she says, "'There's nothing, you know, I wouldn't do for you. . . . There's nothing . . . in all the world.'" Strether nevertheless replies, "'I know. I know. But all the same I must go. . . to be right'"--that is, "'not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself'" (344; bk. 12, ch. 5).

The puritanical rigor of this remark, coming as it does at the end of the novel, may seem to mark an end to

Strether's endorsement of moral independence and personal freedom. Percy Lubbock is one of the many critics who see Strether's final decision in this light:

> By degrees and degrees, [Strether] changes his opinion of the life of freedom. . . . [Chad] is on the verge of rejecting his freedom and going back to the world of the commonplace. . . . But in Strether's mind the revolution is complete; there is nothing left for him, no reward and no future. The world of the commonplace is no longer his world, and he is too late to seize the other; he is old, he has missed the opportunity of life.
> (158-59)

Similarly, F.O. Matthiessen concludes that Strether is entirely ineffectual: "The burden of The Ambassadors is that Strether has awakened to a wholly new sense of life. Yet he does nothing at all to to fulfill that sense" (Henry James: The Major Phase 39). In regard to Strether's renunciation of Maria's offer at the end of the novel, Robert E. Garis maintains,

> The sense is not of a rich summation but of the opposite, a pathetic reduction of painful complexities to a meager axiom which functions, not as an instrument of moral understanding, but as a talisman for the frightened and broken spirit. (314)

Even more virulent interpretations-- utterly deterministic in their Freudianism--suggest that Strether's "renunciation" of Maria Gostrey is the inevitable result of his pathetic and debilitating Oedipal complex (Deans, Wolf).

Not all critics, however, are so pessimistic about the end of the novel, and many come close to suggesting the possibility, in Strether's final decision, of existential authenticity. Quentin G. Kraft, for example, says Strether

is "intensely concerned with the act of living and . . . is aware that the possession of life depends on the exercise of inner choice" (376). Robert A. Durr insists that "[Strether's] journey has transported him into the obscure regions of his soul, and he has recognized and expanded--if he has not wholly transcended--his limits. And now within those limits he is free" (37).

I, too, believe that Strether, at the end of the novel, is free. Because of his opposition to Mrs. Newsome, he knows that he will lose her friendship, her hand in marriage, and any chance he ever had for financial success. His whole attitude toward the Chad issue has been a slow but conscious movement away from his inauthentic life in Woollett. Why, then, does he renounce Maria Gostrey?

Let us first lay to rest the assumption that Strether, in "renouncing" Maria, is denying himself something that he very much wants. It is true that he likes Maria, is grateful to Maria, is perhaps even very fond of Maria. However, we must keep in mind that what Maria is offering Strether is marriage, a commitment that ordinarily requires greater intensity of feeling than mere gratitude or comfortableness. Strether, in short, is not in love with her. If he has been romantically stirred by anyone in Paris, it has been by Chad's mistress, Mme. de Vionnet, not Maria Gostrey. Alwyn Berland agrees that Mme. de Vionnet represents Strether's "ideal" and that Maria simply does not "exert a strong appeal." Strether, Berland continues, "has a sacred moral identity which deprives him of second-best

rewards, of respectable compromises, of blinkered happiness.
The wholeness he has found in Europe does not include the
privilege of denying its moral imperatives" ("Americans and
Ambassadors" 80). To capitalize on the comfort Maria could
provide would be a no more authentic or moral way to live
than the way he has been living in recent years with Mrs.
Newsome in Woollett.

Nor can Strether in good conscience accept Mme. de
Vionnet's abject offer of herself when she candidly admits
that she's trying to "'keep hold'" of him. "'Is it,'" she
asks, "'impossible you should stay on--so that one mayn't
lose you?'" (320; bk. 12, ch. 2). Strether, infatuated as
he might be, understands that "what was at bottom the matter
with her . . . was simply Chad himself." He thinks,

> It was of Chad she was after all renewedly afraid;
> the strange strength of her passion was the very
> strength of her fear; she clung to him, Lambert
> Strether, as to a source of safety she had tested,
> and, generous graceful truthful as she might try
> to be, exquisite as she was, she dreaded the term
> of his being within reach. With this sharpest
> perception yet, it was like a chill in the air to
> him, it was almost appalling, that a creature so
> fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so
> exploited. (322; bk. 12, ch. 2)

It is precisely because he perceives her desperation so
clearly that Strether cannot stay with Mme. de Vionnet.
Understanding, as he does, her continuing passion for Chad,
Strether knows that remaining in Paris will undoubtedly
lead, if not to his exploitation of her, to her exploitation
of him. Sorry as he is for Mme de Vionnet, Strether must
also suspect that she would be capable, in her passion, of

intensifying her relationship with him in order to maintain some sort, any sort, of relation to Chad. All things considered, Strether's leaving Paris seems far more like a wise, compassionate, and self-respecting decision than like the solipsistic or "frigid" renunciation so many critics condemn.

Mrs. Newsome sent Strether to Paris on what Thomas J. Bontly has recognized as a "demeaning and demoralizing" errand (108). By being sensitive to the impressions he receives in Paris, Strether has been at last able to see that he can break free from the alleged "absolutes" that he has allowed to dictate his life. Strether goes home precisely because he now _can_ go home. He has broken the pattern of inauthentic behavior, and he can now be free anywhere he goes, including that most repressive of environments, Woollett, Massachusetts. He has not rejected the morality of Paris in favor of the principles of Woollett. On the contrary, he has learned that he is free-- and "condemned" to be free--to direct his own life according to the felt truth of his own integrity.

Chapter 4

Renunciation and Perversity

In trying to make sense of James's work, a number of critics have succumbed to the appeal of what might be called the "perversity theory" of renunciation. This theory, unofficial but persistent, holds that there is no rational motive for the startling and disappointing behaviors of some of James's most renunciatory heroes and heroines. Young and healthy, these protagonists cannot claim imminent death as their excuse for resignation and self-denial. Nor can they claim to have been rendered powerless by oppressive historical or cultural forces, for they invariably possess either large amounts of money or, at least, large amounts of beauty or wit or charm that win them moneyed friends and wonderful opportunties. Nor do they demonstrate deep commitment to any religious imperatives that might account for their predilection for martyrdom. Nevertheless, even in the absence of identifiable, rational motives, they seem willfully and relentlessly bent on sabotaging their own goals, desires, and futures. Three protagonists who have repeatedly come under attack for such stubborn and annoying perversities are Catherine Sloper of <u>Washington Square</u>, Fleda Vetch of <u>The Spoils of Poynton</u>, and Isabel Archer of <u>The Portrait of a Lady</u>.

In <u>Washington Square</u> (1880), Catherine Sloper's most widely deplored perversity is her unwarranted resignation to lifelong spinsterhood. Admittedly, her trusting heart is

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broken early in life by a clumsily unsuccessful adventurer, Morris Townsend; and her pain is exacerbated by her hypercritical and callous father, who has opposed the match from the beginning. However, although Catherine has been emotionally brutalized by both her suitor and her father and although we feel due sympathy for her, we romantics hope and expect that she will recover--that she will pick up the pieces of her broken heart and get on with her life. She does not. James shows us Catherine's emotional insulation through all the long years following her disastrous love affair. We see her remaining quietly defiant towards her father right up to the moment of his death. More significantly, we see that she rejects, or "renounces," several apparently sincere and appropriate suitors who appear some time after Morris's defection. She also rejects Morris when he turns up at her door, years after abandoning her, to ask for a second chance. Rather than marry anyone, she prefers to spend the rest of her life alone in a house much too big for her, with only her foolish and meddlesome aunt as a companion. Our final glimpse of Catherine occurs at the moment of her picking up her "morsel of fancy-work-- for life, as it were." The ending of the novel is not a happy one, and critics often blame Catherine herself, rather than her father or Morris, for the sense of waste that pervades her biography. One anonymous early reviewer, for example, identifies Catherine's problem as a kind of "obstinacy" and says that, although her father has "killed something in her life," it is she herself who turns "its

coffin into a kind of altar" (Gargano, _Early Novels_, 48).

Much more recently, Berthold has agreed that the novel

represents "less an expression of tragic personal loss than

of implacability in the case of Catherine" (128). For these

and other critics, Catherine's ultimate plight is due to her

own quietly spiteful wrongheadedness.

Fleda Vetch's renunciations strike some as even more

perverse than Catherine's, for Fleda, apparently, breaks her

own heart. She is in love with Owen Gereth, who, as he

slowly realizes, loves her, too. Though engaged to Mona

Brigstock, Owen wants very much to terminate his engagement

after falling in love with Fleda. In fact, he is sure that

Mona no longer loves him; he tells Fleda that Mona has come

to loathe him as a result of the long and nasty struggle

with Owen's mother over possession of the beautiful

furnishings at Poynton, the Gereth estate. Owen asks only

that Fleda promise to marry him. Thus a word from Fleda

would not only sever Owen's embittered engagement and ensure

her own happy union with him but also restore a degree of

dignity and satisfaction to her good friend and

benefactress, Mrs. Gereth, who has been so abruptly and

unfairly dispossessed. Nevertheless, Fleda will not promise

anything. She wants nothing to do with the breakup of

Mona's engagement; oddly, she does not want Owen to have

anything to do with it, either. She wants Mona to do the

breaking up entirely on her own: "'Everything,'" Fleda tells

Owen, "'must come from Mona'" (137; XVI). When Mona does

not, after all, break off with Owen, whom she victoriously

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marries in spite of all past recriminations and hostilities, Fleda is left alone with her pristine scruples--and virtually nothing else.

Though some critics view Fleda's renunciation of Owen as a highly moral act, many others agree with Yvor winters that her behavior represents an act of "moral hysteria" (319). As early as 1903, an anonymous reviewer acknowledged that Fleda's sense of honor might seem to many "an over-sensitive perversity" (Gargano, Early Novels, 30-32). Alwyn Berland, too, complains that Fleda's renunciation, "far from asserting the primacy of human values over 'things,' ends by bringing misery to every single major character in the novel. . . ." Berland emphasizes the perversity of Fleda's actions when she says, "We feel she has admitted the principle of love mainly for the sake of renouncing it" (Culture and Conduct 56). Even Millicent Bell, who likes Fleda, says, "Fleda's sacrifice must seem perverse, in the end, bringing as it does no happiness to herself, and James's preference for a renunciatory form may have seemed, even to himself, perverse also" (222).

Even more often than Catherine Sloper or Fleda Vetch, Isabel Archer of The Portrait of a Lady has been attacked for her "perverse" choices. The reason Isabel's renunciations are so painful to witness is that she, perhaps more than any other Jamesian character, begins with so many advantages. Even before she inherits a fortune from her uncle, Mr. Touchett, she is appealing in every way: young, healthy, beautiful, intelligent, imaginative, lively, and

idealistic. Everyone (with the notable exception of her
brother-in-law Mr. Ludlow, who thinks her somehow too
"foreign") finds her thoroughly charming. She is so
charming, in fact, that she is forced to reject, in a period
of just a few weeks, the marriage proposals of two highly
respectable and sincerely devoted gentlemen, Caspar
Goodwood, an American businessman, and Lord Warburton, a
British statesman. So accustomed does she become to having
men fall easily in love with her that she also prepares
herself to reject any similar proposal from her cousin and
good friend, Ralph Touchett, should he become so "tiresome"
as to declare himself to her. Finally, however, this
charming girl accepts the marriage proposal of a fourth
admirer, who is, unfortunately, the least genuinely devoted
of the four. Against the advice of her family and virtually
all of her friends, Isabel marries Gilbert Osmond, for whom
Isabel's chief charm lies in the seventy thousand pounds she
has recently inherited. Although (or because) Isabel
herself discloses many different reasons for her decision,
critics have wondered publicly, ever since the novel
appeared in 1881, why anyone as intelligent as Isabel would
have made such a patently misguided choice--would have, in
Isabel's own words, "thrown away her life" (381; ch. 42).

However, Isabel's choice of suitors is not her only, or
most damning, "perversity." Soon after the first year of
her marriage, Isabel understands that her husband has come
to "hate" her, principally for "having a mind of her own at
all" (380; ch. 42). She admits to herself that she and

Osmond are "strangely married" and that hers is "a horrible life" (381; ch. 42). Nevertheless, before the novel comes to a close, Isabel will again reject the covert overtures of Lord Warburton as well as the much more direct entreaties of Caspar Goodwood, both of whom wish to love and protect her. Although Isabel knows she has rendered the rift between herself and Osmond complete by traveling, against his orders, to see the dying Ralph in England, she nevertheless chooses, at the end of the novel, to return to Osmond in Rome. Isabel's renunciation of love, according to many critics, is her crowning perversity. Although David J. Gordon finds the "renunciation theme at the end of the novel only "slightly perverse" (271), Arnold Kettle complains that Isabel "deliberately reject[s] 'life' (as offered by Caspar Goodwood) in favour of death, as represented by the situation in Rome" (30). William Shuey is equally disappointed in Isabel:

> What are we to make of this high renunciation, this submission? It is not as though Isabel were a passive, weak woman, friendless and alone. . . She is renouncing the world and choosing suffering from a position of strength. Isabel's position is. . . purely and perversely renunciatory. (146)

Critics often try to explain the perversities of James's renunciatory characters in the only way "irrational" behavior is popularly explained—that is, in terms of some serious psychological disorder. For example, Alfred Habegger says of Isabel, "Her negative choices are complex, confused, unwise, and, to some degree, sick." For Habegger, the specific "sickness" in James's renunciatory characters

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is "autism," or "autistic withdrawal from the world" (30).

However, most critics who find James's protagonists mentally impaired identify the neurosis as psycho-sexual. For example, Maxwell Geismar says the true subject of _Washington Square_ is not the romance between Catherine and Morris but "complex incestuous oedipal family relationships" as dramatized by Catherine and her father (39). Lauren Berlant contends that Catherine's immersion in sewing--in her "morsel of fancy work"--at the end of the novel is a form of auto-eroticism (457). Carren Kaston suggests masochistic tendencies when she says Catherine, like Fleda Vetch, "seems to feel a suspect fondness for her pain" (38). Charles Thomas Samuels concurs that Fleda's problem is sexual when he says, "Insofar as Fleda is able to discipline her desire, we can grant her high marks for deportment, but there are hints throughout _Spoils_ that Fleda's desire is deficient if not perverse, and that her failure is an inverted erotic fulfillment" (81). In other words, according to Samuels, Fleda's problem is "sexual frigidity" (83). David J. Gordon suggests that both Catherine's and Isabel's renunciations also result from sexual fear (271); and Charles Child Walcutt states plainly that Isabel's "most important" motivational characteristic is her sexual frigidity (197). In this way, the perversity theory blends easily and often into a "perversion theory" of renunciation.

Other critics have concluded that the apparent "perversities" of James's characters are due principally to the author's technical incompetence. Critics frequently

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explain the renunciations of Catherine, Fleda, and Isabel as
James's failure to characterize them adequately or sensibly.
For example, Mina Pendo says Washington Square is "a novel
that seems, finally, to have something missing. Catherine
is never a challenging woman. She is patient and wealthy
and we are pleased to see her manage her spinsterhood with
dignity, but this is not enough in a heroine" (251). Even
the long-time Jacobite R.P. Blackmur impugns James's
handling of characterization when he calls Washington Square
a "light piece" because "Catherine's story is not there"
("Henry James" 109). Rebecca West, we recall, objects to
The Portrait of a Lady on the grounds that "the conduct
invented for Isabel is. . . inconsistent and. . . suggestive
of the nincompoop" (69). Similarly, of Fleda Vetch,
Patrick F. Quinn says, "There is a sharp, baffling
disparity between her characterization as it exists in
the scenes and incidents of the novel, and her
characterization as it existed in the mind of the novelist"
(564); and Edmond Volpe agrees that the "characterization of
Fleda is a failure of art" (607).

Thus the perversity theory of renunciation often
involves a critical impatience with what is perceived as
inconsistent or inadequate characterization. We can neither
condone nor understand a character's behavior, critics
complain, if that character contradicts herself in word or
deed. Nor can we tolerate a character's failure to
recognize and to communicate clear reasons for any given
decision. Logically inexplicable behavior can be understood

only as willful perversity, unconscious perversion, or failure of art. These common criticisms, however, grow out of a particular set of assumptions about the world—assumptions that Henry James, from his existential perspective, does not share.

The first assumption James challenges is the idea that human beings are, or can be expected to be, or should be depicted in literature as being consistently rational and rationally consistent. If his characters seem to lack the motivational logic and internal coherence of other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century protagonists, it is because most pre-Modernist literature reflects the traditional philosophical assumption that human behavior is rationally comprehensible and predictable. This assumption dates back at least to the ancient Greeks, for whom all of Being, including the human being, is rationally intelligible. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle writes, "[Reason] is the true self of every man, since it is the supreme and better part. It will be strange, then, if he should choose not his own life, but some other's" (qtd. in Barrett 89). As Barrett explains, even the Christianity of the Middle Ages upheld rationality as the natural center of human personality, insisting only that faith be equally acknowledged as the supernatural center; and with the Enlightenment, philosophers once again located the supreme essence of the human self in reason (89).

To a great degree, existentialism developed as a reaction against the idea that everything, including human

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behavior, is causally determined, logical, and predictable. Warnock says, "The myth which Kierkegaard aims to destroy is the scientific myth that everything is causally determined and that therefore in principle a complete and objectively true account of behavior of everything could be provided" (8). Kierkegaard's concern was that reason threatened to destroy faith, but the non-religious existentialists who came later were equally disturbed by the assumption that human beings were thoroughly or essentially rational. One obvious reason for their objection is that any philosophy positing rationality as the essence of human Being simultaneously declares that all human beings indeed share an "essence," a proposition from which existentialism recoils. Secondly, an essential rationality suggests not only that human beings have the ability to comprehend the universe around them but also that human beings themselves can be, in every instance, rationally, scientifically explained. Such a philosophy is, at bottom, deterministic and therefore denies the necessary human freedom to choose and to act that forms the basis of existential philosophy. Olson explains,

> Behavioral scientists operate on the assumption that human behavior is predictable, that men will behave in the future much as they have behaved in the past. But, say the existentialists, if man is free, then human behavior is not predictable; for to say that man is free is just another way of saying that men always can and frequently do act in such a way as to render many important facets of their behavior unpredictable. (23)

Most nineteenth-century writers (think of Dickens or

Charlotte Bronte) create protagonists based not on a theory of human irrationality and inconsistency but on the premise of the stable ego. That is, human character, in any given individual, is assumed to be, and is depicted as being, logical, unified, and coherent. Characters in Victorian fiction do, of course, often experience serious internal conflicts, but Victorian novelists tend to polarize positive and negative attributes, creating characters who inspire either sympathy and support or antagonism and reprobation. Any given character is predominantly good or predominantly malignant. W.J. Harvey is careful to point out that this does not mean Victorian novelists deny "the facts of change and development." However, in Victorian novels, according to Harvey,

> Change is still reconciled to the idea of a stable ego; one's identity lies precisely in the unique pattern of past changes which constitutes one's individuality. And this pattern also involves the future to the extent that it allows for some possibilities of development and excludes others . . . . (120)

The concept of character, and of characterization, changes radically with the fiction of the early twentieth century. Many studies have been written either defending or attacking the Modernist tendency to "devalue" or subordinate character in literature.[1] Experimental novelists such as Proust, Woolf, Joyce, and Lawrence seem more concerned with form, technique, and theme than with character per se. Using, among other techniques, interior monologue, they depict characters as complex and fragmented rather than as

simple and coherent. If, as a result of new techniques, we become more intimate with the workings of a character's consciousness, that character becomes, nevertheless, in spite of our intimacy, more, not less, ambiguous. In modern novels, there are no longer, in Higbie's words, "simple villains or fools" (179), any more than there are completely virtuous or completely wise or completely heroic protagonists. In 1914, D.H. Lawrence explained in a letter to Edward Garnett that he wished to depart from the idea of "the old stable ego" as portrayed in traditional novels; and although the basis for his departure seems more Freudian than existential, his complaint echoes the existential impatience with an "essential" concept of character. W.J. Harvey draws the connection between existential thought and the Modernist innovations in characterization:

> Sartre, like Lawrence, wishes to demolish the notion of the "old stable Ego", the Cartesian "ghost in the machine." We exist from moment to moment, looking forward into the future; there is no such thing as a continuing ego which unifies the flux of our concrete experience; there is no underlying essence which determines our nature. For this is to confuse _pour-soi_ [Being-for-Itself, or the human existent] with _en-soi_ [Being-in Itself, or inanimate objects] and to think of consciousness as a thing. If we try to think of ourselves as things, then we are guilty of _mauvaise foi_ [Bad Faith]. It is true that our past becomes a thing, but we are not our past. (154)

This reaction against the concept of the stable ego predates Lawrence, Sartre, and the twentieth century. Nietzsche's theory that absolute truth and knowledge are

always falsifications is predicated on his conviction that the "ego", or the knowing subject, is a process, not a thing (Blackham 24). Often Dostoevsky, too, born in 1821, attacks in his fictions the Enlightenment notion of the consistent, rational human character. Barrett explains that Dostoevsky became convinced of the irrationality of human Being during his imprisonment in Siberia, where his close, daily contact with criminals "yield[ed] knowledge of man that tradition had not yet come upon. No classicist or rationalist, armed with the Aristotelian definition of man as the rational animal, could. . . have retained his ancient convictions" (136). The radical conclusion Dostoevsky draws from his experience is that the criminal's mind is not significantly different from other human minds. What Dostoevsky learned was that "these criminals were not 'types,' but thoroughly individual beings" who blended childlike innocence with capricious brutality. Barrett says, "What Dostoevsky saw in the criminals he lived with is what he came finally to see at the center of man's nature: contradiction, ambivalence, irrationality. . ." (136).

In spite of the philosophical revisions taking place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Harvey reminds us, the "commonsensical, unanguished, philosophically unsophisticated notion of the self" evident in most Victorian fiction has persisted to the present day. The only sustained, "formidably organized attack" against the assumption of the stable ego, Harvey says, has come from existential philosophy; for the most part the Modernist

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attack against such assumptions has been "oblique, intermittent and unformulated," revealing itself only in various techniques of the most innovative modern writers (121). Henry James, I suggest, is indeed one of those innovative modern writers, necessarily combining his fundamentally existentialist outlook with new techniques in characterization.

Over the years, several studies have focussed, with varying emphases and conclusions, on the ways in which James both operated within and moved away from Victorian literary conventions. Although everyone agrees that James is a transitional figure between the Victorian and the Modernist, there is much disagreement as to whether James is more like the Victorian novelist or more like the Modern. In regard to character, Baruch Hochman maintains that James is still working in the Victorian tradition. "Character in James," he says, "remains that familiar entity which has engaged moralists and ethical theorists at least since Aristotle" (132). James shares, according to Hochman, the nineteenth-century interest in the "crystallization of identity" and the conception of "character" as something that is "stamped, as by a seal, on a man's nature" (133). Arnold Kettle, at the opposite extreme, maintains that James ("bourgeois" though he may be) most conspicuously differs from the Victorian novelist in that "Henry James's predominant interest is. . .by no means in character" (19). James thus comes much closer to modern novelists, who " rarely seem to value character as an end in itself. . . but

who become, rather, more concerned with "thematic and formal concerns" (Higbie 164). Both of these views seem to be overstated. I would agree with Hochman that James is, certainly, very much interested in character; and I would be the first to admit that even the most "perverse" of James's protagonists bear little resemblance to the tortured souls of Dostoevsky's fiction. However, the persistent critical outcry against the perversities and ambiguities of James's characters surely undermines Hochman's assertion that James subscribes to the "essentialist" view of human personality still dominant in the "real" world and in mainstream literature.

Kettle has remarked that although Henry James cannot be called a revolutionary, he nevertheless contributes in subtle ways to the Modernist literature of "disintegration" (10). One way James does so is to challenge the idea of character as monolith. No one, James demonstrates, is thoroughly good or thoroughly bad. We may like to think of Dr. Sloper as the villain who obstructs Catherine's hopes for marriage and happiness with the man she loves, but we cannot disregard the fact that Sloper is absolutely correct in his assessment of Townsend as a heartless opportunist bent on exploiting Catherine for her fortune. And as insensitively as Sloper may treat Catherine, he nevertheless acts in Catherine's best interests, as he sees them. Similarly, Mona Brigstock may behave like a willful brat in her dealings with the Gereths, but James keeps suggesting, through Fleda and Owen, that Mona has a sunny, sensitive,

loving side to her personality as well. Even Gilbert

Osmond, the cunning manipulator who treats Isabel (and,

indeed, all women) so badly, is depicted, early in the

novel, as a man of intelligence, sensitivity and charm--

enough charm, indeed, for Isabel, with all of her

intelligence and self-esteem, to have fallen in love with

him in the first place. Isabel herself, certainly, is an

amalgam of positive and negative qualities, an amalgam that

has undoubtedly contributed to the many critical allegations

of her inconsistency. Harvey highlights the ambiguities and

contradictions in Isabel's character this way:

> On the one hand, according to the narrator, Isabel
> shows "clear perception. . .high spirit. . .
> comprehensiveness of observation. . .
> independence. . .love of knowledge . . . strong
> imagination. . .immense curiosity about life. . .a
> strong will and high temper. . .a natural taste
> . . . nobleness of imagination". But on the other
> hand she is "theoretic. . .innocent. . .liable to
> the sin of self-esteem"; she has an "unquenchable
> desire to please" and "the faculty of seeing
> without judging"; her imagination is "ridiculously
> active" while "the unpleasant had been ever too
> absent from her knowledge."   (79)

To convince ourselves that James's inconsistencies in

characterization are deliberate rather than accidental, we

need only notice how often James himself pointedly

emphasizes their confusions and self-contradictions. In

Washington Square, because it contains one of the least

conscious of his heroines, James primarily emphasizes

Catherine's vagueness and inarticulateness regarding her own

feelings. For example, on the evening of their first

meeting, Morris asks Catherine if the dancing makes her

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dizzy. In recording Catherine's reply, James writes,

"'Yes,' she said; she hardly knew why, for dancing had never
made her dizzy" (15; ch.4). A bit later, on the same
evening, Dr. Sloper, commenting ironically on his daughter's
dress, tells Catherine she looks as if she had eighty
thousand a year. James is careful to point out the
confusion latent in Catherine's answer when he writes,
"'Well, so long as I haven't,' said Catherine illogically"
(18; ch. 4). These odd responses may seem to reflect
nothing more than Catherine's social ineptness, but in later
passages James emphasizes that Catherine's confusions run
much deeper. For example, a few weeks after Catherine and
Morris have had time to admit to each other their mutual
attraction, the narrator tells us that "if [Catherine] had
been told she was in love, she would have been a good deal
surprised. . ." (36; ch. 8). Shortly thereafter, James
similarly emphasizes an apparent inconsistency in his own
characterization of Catherine when he writes that Morris and
Catherine's "intimacy was now considerable, and it may
appear that for a shrinking and retiring person our heroine
had been liberal of her favours" (46; ch. 10). The effect
of these and similar comments is to underscore not only the
idea that Catherine does not know herself very well but also
the fact that her behavior is not entirely consistent with
what we might expect of her.

In Fleda Vetch, James creates a heroine with a much
higher level of self-awareness than Catherine Sloper's.
Nevertheless, in _Spoils_, too, James repeatedly calls

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attention to inconsistencies and confusions in Fleda's
character and/or behavior. Patrick Quinn has pointed out
that "Fleda, . . .for all the acuteness and lucidity that
James thought he gave her, . . . understands neither the
basis of Owen's need of her nor, in reverse, why she needs
to possess and master him" (571). In fact, Quinn says, "All
along, and with virtually every technique available to him,
James has been dramatizing the insufficiency of her
awareness" (575). The one glaring "inconsistency" that has
sparked much critical head-shaking is her desperate
eagerness, towards the end of the novel, to find Owen and
drag him off to the Registrar for a civil marriage ceremony
before Mona can. Certainly Fleda's willingness to abandon
her former, rigidly scrupulous, hands-off policy regarding
Owen's relationship with Mona seems to represent a complete
reversal in ethics as well as in strategy. However, I feel,
a much more significant indication of inconsistency is
Fleda's chronic anguished awareness, repeatedly revealed by
the narrator throughout the novel, of her "false position"
in regard to both Owen and his mother, Mrs. Gereth. For
example, early in the novel, Fleda feels that Mrs. Gereth's
attempt to "fob her off" on Owen has "made her position [at
Poynton] false and odious" (43; IV). Both to keep from
being manipulated by Mrs. Gereth and to demonstrate her
loyalty to her (as well as to protect her own
sensitivities), Fleda soon begins to pretend that she hates
Owen. By this time, however, the narrator has made clear
Fleda's real feelings for the new master of Poynton: she is

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"in love with Owen" (46; IV). The narrator further emphasizes the uncomfortable inconsistencies and ambivalences in Fleda when he explains,

> From the moment she suspected [Owen] might be thinking how Mona would judge his chattering so to an underhand "companion," who was all but paid in shillings, this young lady's repressed emotion began to require still more repression. She grew impatient of her posture at Poynton, privately pronouncing it false and horrid. (58; VI)

Again, after Mrs. Gereth moves all the furnishings from Poynton to Ricks, Fleda feels that "her position had become, in a few hours, intolerably false" (70; VII). Although Fleda is inclined to blame others for creating or construing her "false position," her sense of falseness actually results from the discrepancies between what she feels and what she says, what she intends to do and what she actually accomplishes, what she hopes to be and what she is (or looks like to others). Furthermore, the narrator never lets us forget that these inconsistencies are ironically compounded by Fleda's avowed and genuine desire to be, in her dealings with Owen, Mrs. Gereth, and Mona, always straightforward, honorable, and true.

Nowhere does James more relentlessly emphasize the confusions and inconsistencies of his heroine than in The Portrait of a Lady. Often he has Isabel herself comment on the murkiness of her motives and feelings. For example, when Mr. Touchett asks whether she did not find Lord Warburton's marriage proposal sufficiently attractive, Isabel replies, "'I suppose it was that. . . . But I don't

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know why'" (97; ch. 13). Later, when she discusses with Caspar Goodwood her intention to marry Osmond, she admits, "'No one can be more surprised than myself at my present situation" (290; ch. 32). Again, when Ralph tries to warn her against Osmond, Isabel says, "'I can't explain to you what I feel, what I believe, and I wouldn't if I could'" (304; ch. 34). Even at the end of the novel, when Henrietta Stackpole says to Isabel, " 'I don't see why you promised little Miss Osmond to go back,'" Isabel reveals her confusion about her own motives and logic. She says, "'I'm not sure I myself see now. . . . But I did then'" (498; ch. 53).

When Isabel herself fails to comment on the vagueness of her motives or the peculiarities of her choices, James often assigns the task to the anonymous third-person narrator, who takes a consistently ironic view of Isabel's inconsistencies. For example, the narrator says of her rejection of Warburton's proposal, "She liked him too much to marry him, that was the truth; something asured her there was a fallacy somewhere in the glowing logic of the proposition--as he saw it--even though she mightn't put her very finest finger-point upon it" (95; ch. 12). Later in the same passage, the narrator is even more frank about Isabel's vagueness and apparent self-contradictions. When Mr. Touchett concedes that Isabel might, indeed, very well find someone she likes better than Warburton, Isabel surprisingly replies, "' I don't care if I don't meet anyone else. I like Lord Warburton quite well enough.'"

Immediately the narrator says of Isabel, "She fell into that appearance of a sudden change of point of view with which she sometimes startled and even displeased her interlocutors" (97; ch. 13). Similarly, after Isabel, in London, smilingly tells the rejected and broken-hearted Caspar Goodwood that he ought to marry, the narrator remarks, "It is not on record that her motive for discharging such a shaft had been of the clearest" (136; ch. 16). Again and again the narrator reminds us, in one way or another, that Isabel is "inconsequent" (141; ch.16).

The frequent critical allegation, then, that Catherine, Fleda, and Isabel are inadequately or inconsistently drawn is neither insightful nor meaningful, since James himself has obviously taken considerable trouble to emphasize their confusions and inconsistencies. On the other hand, the same adamant critical objection to the inconsistencies of these heroines does, indeed, attest that Henry James was, in his characterization, deviating from traditional novelistic methods and popular expectations. Such deviation should not be surprising, however, in a writer whose epistemology, as Paul B. Armstrong convincingly argues, has affinities not only with the pluralistic radical empiricism of William James but also with the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Although James, as a transitional figure between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, begins with the assumption that reality is "there" somewhere to be discovered or to be artistically rendered, his fictions nevertheless "challenge

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the epistemological assumptions of mimesis by questioning the determinacy and independence of reality." Reality, for James, is pluralistic, dependent for its meaning on "differing interpretations that may or may not overlap" (Armstrong 207-09). Thus if, in James's epistemology, reality cannot be absolutely, objectively known, how much less accessible to knowledge must be the intangible qualities of "character" and motive.

James most explicitly expresses this conviction in The Portrait of a Lady, where he is careful to emphasize that the characters are fundamentally opaque to each other. Very early in Portrait the narrator prepares us for this important idea when he mentions that Mrs Touchett had "an extreme respect for her own motives. She was usually prepared to explain these--when the explanation was asked as a favour; and in such a case they proved totally different from those that had been attributed to her" (16; ch. 3). Later, when Isabel tells Osmond, after he has declared his love for her, "'I don't at all know you,'" the narrator immediately reminds us that Isabel had said the same thing almost a year earlier to Lord Warburton (272; ch. 29). Madame Merle freely admits that she finds Osmond "'unfathomable'" (236; ch. 25), just as Osmond earlier admitted to Madame Merle that he "[did not] understand her ambitions" (212; ch 22). Isabel herself seems "inscrutable" to Rosier (330; ch. 37). Caspar, too, finds Isabel "perfectly inscrutable," in spite of all of his efforts to understand her, causing him to nearly wail, "'I can't

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understand, I can't penetrate you'" (449-50; ch. 48).

Again, when Pansy is about to enter the convent, the

narrator tells us that "Isabel could say nothing more; she

understood nothing; she only felt how little she yet knew

her husband" (467; ch. 50). Hidden or unclear or mistaken

motives form the heart of this novel; for the pain and

sadness and waste of Isabel's marriage might have been

avoided only if Isabel and Osmond had been able to read each

other more clearly; or if Isabel had been able to penetrate

the mysteries of Madame Merle; or if Isabel had been more

clearly consistent in her own attitudes, behaviors, and

motives.

Well aware that anyone who functions in the absence of

clear, consistent, rational motives appears, to others, to

be obstinately contrary or corrupt, James himself often uses

the word "perverse" to describe his own characters. For

James, however, "perverse" carries a slightly different

meaning--somehow simultaneously both wider and narrower--

from the usual.

Although the word "perverse" appears only a few times

in Washington Square, its specific use helps to clarify

James's concept of perversity. Each time, the word appears

as part of Aunt Penniman's judgments of others. In the first

instance, the narrator tells us, "Mrs. Penniman was silent,"

dumbfounded, after "Morris had told her that her niece

preferred, unromantically, an interview in a chintz covered

parlor to a sentimental tryst beside a fountain sheeted with

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dead leaves. . . ." Aunt Penniman was, in fact, "lost in the wonderment, the oddity--almost the perversity--of the choice" (45; ch. 9). Later, the meddlesome lady thinks Morris is "certainly perverse" when he seems to scorn her crude speculation, meant to be conciliatory, that he might better fulfill his brilliant destiny by marrying someone other than Catherine (132; ch. 28). Finally, when Catherine seems not to understand that separation from Morris might be for the best, Aunt Penniman thinks her niece is "really too perverse." Aunt Penniman concedes that "a certain amount of perversity was to be allowed in a young lady whose lover had thrown her over," but she objects to "such an amount as would prove inconvenient to his apologists" (144; ch. 30). In both cases, Aunt Penniman applies the word "perverse" to people who rudely (in her eyes) fail to live up to the attitudes or dialogues she has rigidly scripted for them. James's ironic treatment of Aunt Penniman here, as elsewhere in the novel, suggests that the pejorative label "perverse" reflects more negatively on the person doing the labeling than on the person so labelled.

More significantly, the word "perverse" in Washington Square helps to define Jamesian perversity as any deviation from the expectations of another, no matter how foolish or rigid or solipsistic those expectations might be. Although all of the major characters seem to assume that they can identify the motives, and thereby predict the behavior, of other characters, their expectations are continually confounded. Catherine certainly misreads Morris's motives

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for making love to her; and Aunt Penniman repeatedly, wrongly, and with comic effect projects her own romantic yearnings onto the motives and goals of both Morris and Catherine. Dr. Sloper, the man of science, is more calculating and circumspect in his observations and hypotheses about human behavior, but he prides himself on his ability, ultimately, to read character correctly: "He had passed his life in estimating people (it was part of the medical trade), and in nineteen cases out of twenty he was right" (59; ch. 13). Despite his accurate judgment of Morris, however, the doctor makes error after error in his predictions about his own daughter.

In *The Spoils of Poynton*, James often applies the word "perverse" more pointedly to the concept of renunciation. When Fleda refuses to tell (or to allow Mrs. Gereth to tell) Owen that she is in love with him, Mrs. Gereth says, "'Then you're perverse, you're wicked'" (99; XI). Owen, too, thinks Fleda "painfully perverse" for championing Mona's behavior at Waterbath; and when Fleda supports Mona's opinion that the relationship between Owen and Fleda is "unnatural," the narrator tells us that Fleda's "perversity was distinctly too much for [Owen]" (132; XVI). Later, when Fleda reiterates that she will have nothing to do with Owen until Mona freely gives him up, Mrs. Gereth becomes utterly exasperated with Fleda's "'systematic. . .idiotic perversity'" (153; XVIII). In reply to Fleda's accusation that she "'simplif[ies] too much,'" Mrs. Gereth says,

"I do simplify, doubtless, if to simplify is to

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> fail to comprehend the inanity of a passion that
> bewilders a young blockhead with bugaboo
> barriers, with hideous and monstrous sacrifices.
> I can only repeat that you're beyond me. Your
> perversity's a thing to howl over."
>
> (157; XVIII)

In this novel, too, then, the label "perverse" is applied by characters who have not anticipated and do not understand the behavior or motivation of another.

It is no coincidence, any more than it is a failure of art, that James applies the label "perverse" most lavishly to Isabel Archer, the heroine critics most often attack for her inconsistencies and perversities. The narrator tells us, for example, that Mrs. Touchett feels that marriage between Isabel and Osmond would "have an air of almost morbid perversity" (239; ch. 26); and when Ralph sees Isabel for the first time after her marriage, he wonders "what perversity had bitten her" (346; ch. 39). When Isabel first meets Osmond in Florence, she is aware of her own "perverse unwillingness to glitter by arrangement" (216; ch. 23). Later, the narrator comments that Isabel thinks "with perverse admiration of what Caspar Goodwood had done for her" (295; ch. 33); and Caspar Goodwood thinks there is "something perverse" in the "inveteracy" with which Isabel avoids him" (448; ch. 48). Continually, James stresses the "perversity" of Isabel's affections, as the following early, lighthearted exchange between Ralph and Isabel demonstrates:

> "I infer also that you like my mother."
> "I like your mother very much, because--
> because--" And Isabel found herself attempting to
> assign a reason for her affection for Mrs.
> Touchett.

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>   "Ah, we never know why!" said her companion,
> laughing.
>   "I always know why," the girl answered. "It's
> because she doesn't expect one to like her. She
> doesn't care whether one does or not."
>   "So you adore her--out of perversity?"
>   (39; ch. 5)

As often as James emphasizes Isabel's perversities, we
should note that other characters in the novel are also
described in terms of their own perversities. Osmond, his
sister Countess Gemini, and even Ralph are repeatedly
accused, by various other characters, of being perverse.
Sometimes these accusations are couched in words of real
anger or pain, but just as often (as in the example above)
they are expressed playfully or fondly. James frequently
uses the word, especially in Portrait, loosely and
lightheartedly, suggesting again that,for him, "perversity"
sometimes implies nothing more than a behavior that does not
conform to expectations and theories. Critics, however,
rarely use the word lightheartedly. When they accuse
James's renunciatory characters of perversity, they do so
irritably, scornfully, or sadly, as if the renunciations
were personal affronts. And they may well be, if they
undermine our assumption of the stable, knowable,
predictable ego. Even more personally and intolerably
insulting, however, is that James's renunciatory characters
simply fail to do what we want them to; and in this regard,
too, James is working both within and beyond traditional
novelistic conventions.

       Although Robert Higbie's study of character and

structure in the English novel extends only through Dickens, some of the basic principles of his analysis serve to show why so many of James's renunciatory characters strike us as perverse--in a way that Dickens's submissive protagonists, for example, do not. Higbie begins by establishing that humans always structure experience--whether real-life experience or fictional experience--in terms of Self and Other. The reader responds to the protagonist of a novel as if that character were "Self" or "I" or subject (as opposed to "Other" or object). This "subject," therefore, "exists primarily as a means of making us desire: we want him to fulfill desires that the narrative arouses in us. . ." (17). In other words, we respond to the protagonist's desires as if they were our own; and if the protagonist is frustrated in those desires, we participate in that frustration. Higbie explains that much of the intensity of nineteenth-century novels, and of characterization, comes from the tension between a character's desires and that same character's acknowledged need for control over those desires, since ungoverned desire causes guilt and anxiety. In drama and other early forms of literature, control came primarily from external social or religious authority, but as these external controls continued to disintegrate in the nineteenth century, characters began to exert internalized controls. Thus, Higbie says, it is not unusual for characters in nineteenth-century fiction to "oppose their basic function [i.e., to fulfill their own and the reader's desire] by contradicting themselves. . . or by failing to

function as we desire them to" (81). The benefit of depicting self-conflicted characters, according to Higbie, is the intensification of the reader's response to the fiction. Ultimately, however, protagonists of most nineteenth-century fiction find a way to reconcile desire with control--chiefly through sublimation or "compromise formations"-- in a way that is fulfilling to themselves and to readers. That is, the conscious, rational protagonist does not completely reject destructive, irrational impulses but instead tries to "find a way of expressing them which is acceptable to the conscience" (53). Controlled desire and at least partial fulfillment, not repression, is the ultimate goal and usual outcome.

Interestingly, Higbie's chapter on Dickens focusses not on Dickens's conscious, rational, sublimating protagonists but on the "unresolved" (or "flat") and generally comic secondary characters. These secondary characters (such as Mr. Toots in Dombey and Son and Pegotty in David Copperfield) differ from protagonists in that they are less conscious, less rational, and less able to resolve the tension between desire and control. For this reason, they "often seem unable to obtain the fulfillment we want them to obtain and unable to express feelings Dickens makes us infer they have" (129). Higbie says of this kind of character,

> It is as if he is trying to function as a subject,
> serving desire, but there is a negative force in
> him preventing him from doing so, preventing his
> desire from becoming controlled enough so that he
> can allow it direct expression. The character
> seems to fear his own desires; because he
> evidently cannot control them, they remain too

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> rebellious to express directly and must be
> repressed.   (123)

We can tolerate this kind of irrational, unfulfilling
behavior in minor characters, Higbie explains, precisely
because they are not "subject-characters" (the protagonists
with whom we associate ourselves). We find them amusing,
not disappointing or perverse.

In Henry James, however, this dichotomy between the
conscious, "resolved," fulfilled and fulfilling protagonist
and the unconscious, "unresolved," unfulfilled and
frustrating secondary character breaks down. In James's
works it is the highly conscious protagonist, the character
the reader understands as "I," who seems unable to resolve
the tension between desire and control. To extrapolate from
Higbie's Freudian analysis of human behavior, the
renunciatory Jamesian protagonist fears desire. Instead of
sublimating or compromising, he or she represses desire,
rejecting it outright and thus irrationally denying his or
her own, as well as the reader's, satisfaction. This
interpretation would probably satisfy many of the critics
who have complained about James's perverse renunciatory
characters, since much of that criticism has been based on
Freudian principles. If James, however, as I propose,
understands human behavior and values existentially,
Freudian theory is inadequate to explain Jamesian
renunciation.

Existentialism, we recall, posits the recognition of
freedom, not desire, as the fundamental cause of human

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anxiety. Freedom, of course, may imply desire, just as ungoverned desire implies individual freedom, but there is an important difference between the Freudian and existential resolutions to what may look like the same human dilemma. According to Freudian theory, human beings feel the need to apply internalized controls, in the form of the ego and superego, to govern their own guilt- and anxiety-producing desires. They may, as Higbie points out, sublimate those desires, or engage in some sort of compromise formation, or entirely repress those desires. In any case, however, the wish to have desire controlled, through either external or internalized authority, is as much a part of the human psyche as desire itself. For existentialists, on the other hand, nothing is so fundamental to human existence as freedom itself. It is not so much that we desire freedom as that we cannot escape it, except through self-delusional methods. What Freudians call repression, Sartre would call lying to oneself. We lie to ourselves whenever we behave in a manner that denies our "original project of being," or spontaneous choice of self. Has, then, Henry James created "repressed" and "renunciatory" characters who lie to themselves, denying their true desires and goals? On the contrary, I believe James's most renunciatory characters are striving for existential authenticity and selfhood, and if we find them "perverse" and irrational, we are simply and petulantly reacting to their refusal to do what we want them to do.

What we typically want any character to do is what we

would like to do ourselves, given the fictional context; and in most cases we base our desires on cultural expectations, conventions, and values that existentialists simply don't share—namely, romantic love and, ultimately, happiness. These are some of the values espoused by mainstream literature, since they are also the values upheld by mainstream Western culture. They are, therefore, also the values held by the secondary characters in James's work, such as Aunt Penniman, Mrs. Gereth, and even Henrietta Stackpole, who urge the protagonists to seek happiness through romantic love. Like representatives of the culture in which James's heroines find themselves, we, too, want Catherine to marry someone who will help her fulfill her feminine, wifely, motherly potential. We want Isabel to divorce for much the same reason; and like Mrs. Gereth, we want Fleda to have done with the "bugaboo barriers" that keep her from promising to marry the man she loves. What are these three heroines doing when they seem to renounce love, when they seem "perversely" to renounce what look like their only chances for happiness?

Before we can attempt to answer that question, we have to look at happiness as a philosophic ideal. When we complain about the perversity of James's renunciatory characters, we reveal our underlying assumption that happiness is the goal they have chosen, or should have chosen, for themselves. Existentialism, however, refuses to posit happiness as the supreme good or even as a goal worthy of pursuit. In fact, as Robert G. Olson explains, one of the

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chief distinguishing characteristics of existentialism is
that it does not consider happiness one of the goals of the
authentic human being. Existentialists deplore both the
ordinary man's ideas about happiness, which are rooted in
materialism, and the traditional philosopher's, for the
traditional philosopher sees himself in the "ethereal never-
never land of philosophic fictions" (14). Both the ordinary
human being and traditional philosophers are open to charges
of "inhumanity," Olson says, because, to the existentialist,
the "underlying motive in both cases is the same: the desire
for some state of happiness or well-being which is not only
impossible of achievement but which if achieved would reduce
us to the status of unconscious brutes" (15). Thus, although
human beings do seek happiness, the human condition itself
precludes the possibility of actually attaining happiness.
Olson explains,

> The existentialists . . . mock the notion of a
> complete and fully satisfying life. The life of
> every man, whether he explicitly recognizes it or
> not, is marked by irreparable losses. Man cannot
> help aspiring toward the goods of this world, nor
> can he help aspiring toward the serene detachment
> from the things of this world which the
> traditional philosopher sought; but it is not
> within his power to achieve either of these
> ambitions, or having achieved them to find therein
> the satisfaction he had anticipated. Frustration,
> insecurity, and painful striving are the
> inescapable lot of human kind, and the only life
> worth living is one in which this fact is squarely
> faced; for, if the existentialists were right, a
> life of frustration, insecurity, and painful
> striving itself generates values, and the values
> so generated are the only ones actually realizable
> and genuinely worthy of human pursuit. (14)

Happiness is, I believe, one of the important subjects

of The Portrait of a Lady, for among Isabel's many
inconsistencies is her self-contradictory attitude toward
happiness and suffering. Early in the novel, when James
treats his heroine most ironically, Isabel seems to desire
happiness above all things. As she tells Ralph, she's not
afraid of suffering, but "'it's not absolutely necessary to
suffer; we're not made for that.'" In fact, she says, "'The
great point is to be as happy as possible. . . . That's
what I came to Europe for--to be as happy as possible'" (39-
40; ch. 5). A short time later, she again indicates, this
time to Mr. Touchett, that what she seeks is pleasantness.
She's not sure the people of England will satisfy her, she
says, for although she has "'no doubt they're good,'" she is
more interested in whether they are also "'pleasant'" and
"'agreeable'" (46-47; ch. 6). At this point, even if she's
speaking thoughtlessly, she clearly seems to value
happiness over goodness; nevertheless, such a "theory"
forces her to wonder, "What should one do with the misery of
the world in the scheme of the agreeable for oneself?" (44;
ch. 6). Suddenly, however, in spite of her earlier
statements that suffering is not absolutely necessary,
Isabel tells Lord Warburton she can't marry him because she
"'can't escape unhappiness'" (113; ch. 14). She does not
change her mind about Warburton's offer even though a short
time later she reflects on all the kinds of happiness she
has rejected in rejecting his proposal: "peace," "kindness,"
"honor," "possessions," and "a deep security" (115; ch. 14).
Thus in the space of only a few weeks she seems to shift

from wanting happiness above all to deliberately choosing unhappiness for herself. Even during the period of her engagement to Osmond, a period presumably intensely happy, she thinks about the "tragic part of happiness," the isolation that romantic love imposes on the lovers (307; ch. 35). After her marriage, of course, the subject of her happiness or unhappiness becomes paramount to other characters as well as to herself, and she and Pansy agree late in the novel that happiness does not matter (490; ch. 52). Yet on her journey to England, she thinks,

> It couldn't be she was to live only to suffer; she
> was still young, after all, and a great many
> things might happen to her yet. To live only to
> suffer--only to feel the injury of life repeated
> and enlarged--it seemed to her she was too
> valuable, too capable for that. (495; ch. 53)

Yet, although Caspar's final entreaty to Isabel takes the form of a discourse against the senseless barbarity of needless suffering (520; ch. 55), Isabel chooses to return to Osmond and, presumably, to unhappiness.

Thus happiness, by the end of the novel, is apparently no longer Isabel's goal or highest value; for although she might go on contradicting herself verbally regarding her attitudes toward happiness, her actions, rather than her theories, reveal her choices and her choice for herself. Man is only what he does, existentialists remind us, and Isabel, at the end of the novel, chooses to reject the possibility of happiness in favor of some other goal, or "project," for herself. The question we are left to ask, then, is what value, or what benefit, supersedes happiness.

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In Notes from Underground, Dostoevsky suggests the

existential answer to this question:

> The fact is, gentlemen, it seems that something
> that is dearer to almost every man than his
> greatest advantages must really exist or (not to
> be illogical) there is one most advantageous
> advantage . . . which is more important and more
> advantageous than all other advantages. . . .
> This advantage is remarkable from the very fact
> that it breaks down all our classifications, and
> continually shatters all the systems evolved by
> lovers of mankind for the happiness of mankind
> . . . . One's own free unfettered fancy worked up
> at times to frenzy--why that is that very "most
> advantageous advantage" which we have overlooked,
> which comes under no classification and through
> which all systems and theories are continually
> being sent to the devil . . . .What man needs is
> simply independent choice, whatever that
> independence may cost and wherever it
> may lead. . . . (20-23)

This excerpt represents a declaration of human independence

not only from all systems and all classifications but also

from the generally assumed, rational motivation of

"advantage" or happiness. And while Isabel--or Catherine or

Fleda--may not seem quite to embody "free unfettered fancy

worked up. . . to a frenzy," she nevertheless insists,

through virtually every action, on the freedom to choose

freely, unfettered by foolish allegiance to consistency or

fallacious notions about human happiness.

So ingrained in Western culture is the concept of

rational, logical motivation, with happiness as the

reasonable and universal goal, that to jettison the idea is

perhaps one of the most difficult steps in accepting

existentialism as a valid, viable philosophy.

Existentialists, on the other hand, contend that the

persistent belief in the stability and logic of human

character is delusional and pernicious:

> We perpetuate this delusion to protect ourselves
> from the dread which arises as we confront our own
> spontaneity and freedom. [Consciousness] must
> think of itself as being determined by character
> or personality. In order to escape from the dread
> of falling into this limitless freedom, man adopts
> roles and slips into personalities.
>
> (Grossman 222)

Yet the lack of clear, consistent, logical motivation does

not mean James's characters are ill-conceived or capricious.

I am not suggesting that James completely rejects the

notions of personality and psychological motivation. What

I am suggesting is that James's concept of human character,

of human choice, and of human "perversity" becomes more

meaningful in the context of existential freedom. In

rejecting love and happiness, in seeming deliberately to

court and win only their own disappointment and pain,

James's "perverse" heroines are actually choosing

existential values over conventional ones.

Because Isabel is so consciously concerned with the

issue of her own freedom, and because James himself writes

in the Preface of his conception of Isabel as a "certain

young woman affronting her destiny," few critics analyze The

Portrait of a Lady without addressing the theme of free will

versus determinism. Many see her decision to return to

Osmond in Rome as mere submission to the oppression of

Osmond's stronger will, the convention of marriage, or

Isabel's own repressions. Armstrong's phenomenological

approach to the novel, however, is basically an existential

interpretation, in which he demonstrates that Isabel learns, through error and pain, to exercise her freedom within the bounds of her facticity. According to Armstrong, Isabel's decision to marry Osmond is made in Sartrean "bad faith," because "a basic self-deception undermines her project" (112). That is, "Isabel fools herself when she thinks she is consenting to necessity in marrying Osmond; she is, in fact, attempting to defy limitation in the guise of accepting it" (112). Armstrong also appropriately recognizes Isabel's money as a factor in her decision to marry Osmond. She wants to use her inheritance in some practical way to help another human being, and, as Armstrong asks, "What could be more fulfilling than to fuse together freedom and care in such a noble and ennobling project?" (113). However, the weakness of Isabel's theory, Amrstrong maintains, is that she takes so much pride in the act of "binding her will by devoting herself to Osmond" that she is in fact really denying "any sense that she is actually going to be limited" (113). Armstrong's central point is that in marrying Osmond, Isabel is trying to defy, or deny, limitation. While such denial is, indeed, a form of existential bad faith, I would argue that in marrying Osmond, Isabel commits bad faith in a different form: she is attempting to deny not limitation but her own terrifying existential freedom and the responsibility that freedom entails.

The unexpected inheritance from Mr. Touchett is actually the crisis that awakens Isabel to her own freedom and

responsibility. Money alone, of course, does not make a human being free, for human beings are born into freedom. However, the unexpected fortune is what transforms Isabel's previous naive yearnings for, and simplistic conception of, freedom into a frightening reality. With the inheritance, Isabel realizes that she has indeed become dizzyingly free to do nearly anything she might wish; and Mrs. Touchett's counsel is perhaps as much an agent of this realization as the money itself. Mrs. Touchett tells her,

> "Now, of course, you're completely your own mistress and are as free as the bird on the bough. I don't mean you were not so before, but you're at present on a different footing. . . . You can do a great many things if you're rich which you would be severely criticized for if you were poor. You can go and come, you can travel alone, you can have your own establishment. . . .Of course you can do as you please; I only want you to understand how much you're at liberty."
> (191; ch 21)

When, shortly thereafter, Ralph advises Isabel to stop "tormenting" herself over the sense of responsibility the inheritance brings, Isabel tries to agree with him:

> "You could say nothing more true. I'm absorbed in myself. . . . Why indeed should we perpetually be thinking whether things are good for us, as if we were patients lying in a hospital? Why should I be so afraid of not doing right? As if it mattered to the world whether I am doing right or wrong!" (194; ch 21)

Nevertheless, she cannot rid herself of the terrible feeling of responsibility brought on by the money. The narrator tells us that "her voice tremble[s] a little" as she continues:

> "Yes, I'm afraid; I can't tell you. A large fortune means freedom, and I'm afraid of that.

> It's such a fine thing, and one should make use of
> it. If one shouldn't one would be ashamed. And
> one must keep thinking; it's a constant effort.
> I'm not sure it's not a greater happiness to be
> powerless." (194; ch 21)

As the months go on, however, Isabel seems to adjust to her

new power and freedom. The narrator says her "courage

reach[es] its height" right before she and Madame Merle

travel together to the Mideast. Isabel feels a "thrill," at

last, to realize that the "world lay before her--[that] she

could do whatever she chose" (281-82; ch. 31). And what she

chooses to do is marry Osmond.

Nevertheless, much later, during her introspective

meditation in Chapter 42, Isabel admits to herself that in

marrying Osmond she was trying to abdicate both the freedom

and the responsibility that accompanied the inheritance.

She recognizes that "but for the money,. . .she would never

have done it." She furthermore now admits to herself,

> At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on
> her mind, which was filled with the desire to
> transfer the weight of it to some other
> conscience, to some more prepared receptacle.
> What would lighten her own conscience more
> effectually than to make it over to the man with
> the best taste in the world? Unless she should
> have given it to a hospital there would have been
> nothing better she could do with it. (375)

These passages, taken together, chart the course of

Isabel's existential encounter with freedom and

responsibility. Initially, upon recognizing the freedom

conferred by her inheritance, she wishes to act responsibly.

However, her very desire to behave responsibly in freedom

creates, as well it might, existential dread. Her dread in

the face of this freedom causes her to try to abdicate both

freedom and responsibility, and she marries Osmond on the

"factitious theory" (376; ch 42) that he could assume these

burdens for her. While power--particularly the power of

money--might be transferred in this manner, freedom cannot

be. To choose to give up one's freedom of choice is itself

a free choice, albeit one made in bad faith, and the

responsibility that accompanies all freedom adheres to this

inauthentic choice also. In choosing to give herself in

marriage to Osmond, Isabel is simultaneously and ironically

creating herself, for a human being is only what he or she

does. When Isabel chooses to marry Osmond, she is, like

Marcher, choosing not to choose, choosing not to exercise

liberty and assume responsibility. Yet even that choice is

a choice that contributes to the creation of the chooser's

self. As the years pass, however, Isabel realizes her

error, and she confronts her own cowardice and self-

deception. Only then does she ultimately reassume

responsibility for her behavior, both past and present.

In spite of the existential insistence that choice

cannot be reduced to psychological or sociological motives,

existential freedom is always serious and responsible, not

capricious. The authentic human being makes every decision

deliberately and alone, without easy recourse to the

dictates of law or habit or conventional standards. Thus he

or she alone is responsible for every choice and for every

act. Those readers who condemn Isabel, at the end of The

Portrait of a Lady, for passively submitting to the dead

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forms and crushing oppression of the institution of marriage or to the pressure of mere convention and "respectability" fail to consider the intensely conscious decision-making process through which she has suffered. Isabel knows very well what options are open to her; her friends have persistently seen to that. Henrietta, Ralph, and Caspar all assure Isabel that she will find continued support and love and respect if she leaves Osmond. In addition, Isabel has seen other women--Mrs. Touchett and Madame Merle, as well as Henrietta--who have made lives for themselves independently from marriage and men. A woman less fiercely independent and deeply responsible than Isabel might well indeed have succumbed to the sustained importunities of her intimate friends, who ultimately, in unison, become yet another seductive voice of yet another "majority," even as they advocate separation or divorce or adultery.[2] Yet Isabel does not listen to them. Nor does she yield to the mere empty forms of marriage or conventional respectability. She heeds, instead, the dictates of her own conscience, and, like existentialists from Kierkegaard to Camus, she chooses duty over happiness.

There are many references in The Portrait of a Lady to duty, vows, contracts, obligations, and promises; and although James sometimes uses the words loosely or casually, he very often uses them, in regard to Isabel, with prophetic seriousness. For example, early in the novel, Isabel and Ralph discuss duty in regard to Henrietta. Ralph jokingly

complains that Henrietta has just told him it is his duty to marry, and Isabel "gravely" replies, "'She has a great sense of duty. . . . She has indeed, and it's the motive of everything she says. That's what I like her for'" (78; ch. 10). Shortly before her engagement to Osmond, Isabel tells Madame Merle of her intention to visit Pansy, as she has promised Osmond. When Madame Merle "in mild mockery" tells Isabel she seems to think very much about promises, Isabel agrees: " 'I think a great deal of my promises'" (275; ch. 30). After her engagement, when she must once again reject poor Caspar, Isabel is impatient, to the point of flippancy, with his entreaties; her only real concern, as far as conscience is concerned, is that she has "broke[n] no faith and falsified no contract" with him (286; ch. 30). Similarly, the marriage contract too, for all its legality, is for Isabel a personal contract with another human being. In trying to decide whether or not to defy Osmond by visiting Ralph in England, Isabel thinks, "[M]arriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar" (476; ch. 51). Later she reflects that, although Osmond "was not one of the best of husbands," that "didn't alter the case"; for "certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it" (512; ch. 55). There are many such references to Isabel's genuine concern with fidelity and duty, and we should not be surprised when Isabel, at the end of the novel, decides to return to Rome. She feels,

because of her personal and authentic choice of duty as a value, that she must return to Osmond, with whom she has exchanged those "tremendous vows," and to Pansy, toward whom she also feels an obligation that amounts to "an article of religion" (357; ch. 40).

Because authentic choice itself, as opposed to the content of that choice, is the primary existentialist value, it really does not matter whether we agree that Isabel has made the "right" decision or not. It doesn't matter whether Isabel will ever find happiness in Rome; and it doesn't matter whether Osmond and Pansy "deserve" Isabel's fidelity. It is equally irrelevant, probably, that existentialist philosophers place great value on fidelity and duty as part of a human being's responsibility to others.fn   What matters is that Isabel's conception of duty is subjective and intense. She does not conceptualize "duty" as something imposed on her from any outside source. She does not, for example, feel she has an obligation to Caspar merely because he insists that she does. Nor does she accept the idea, pressed on her by Osmond, that it is her wifely duty to "cultivate the advantage" of Warburton's interest in Pansy (372; ch. 42). Isabel's "renunciation" of happiness and love is made not in passive submission but in liberty and self-knowledge. No longer satisfied to delude herself regarding the conventions of happiness and romantic love, she freely decides, against the protests of her friends, to choose responsibility, fidelity, and duty. The fundamental human value is freedom, and "to be free," Blackham tells us,

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"does not mean practicability of purpose; it means
determining what one wants, not getting what one wants, but
determining what one wants in the large sense of choosing
how one shall take one's life and what ends one shall
pursue" (132). The point is that Isabel, alone and in
anguish, has authentically chosen her own values and has, in
so doing, become herself.

It may seem strange to talk about becoming one's
"self,"since existentialism rejects the notion of essential
"character" or stable ego. Yet there is no contradiction in
the idea of authentically becoming oneself if we understand
"self" to mean one's individuality--that is, solitariness
and uniqueness. One who makes no attempt to think about his
behavior, who thoughtlessly does as everyone else does or
urges him to do, lives an inauthentic existence because he
fails to see, recognize, or achieve his "self." He does not
know what he himself genuinely wants, likes, hopes for, or
values, because all of his choices are dictated by some
external authority or meaningless generalization. Only the
authentic human being knows who or what he is, for he
consciously and deliberately chooses, and therefore "finds"
or "becomes," his self with each decision. According to
Karl Jaspers, "In my will I create myself,. . .not all at
once but in the continuity of a lifetime" (94). It is, in
fact, the act of will inherent in each authentic choice that
seems to unify a given consciousness into a coherent entity.
Macquarrie explains: "To gather up the whole self into a
concentrated act of will is really and authentically to

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become oneself and to be rescued from the scattering and dissolution of the self in trivial concerns of the crowd" (170).

While few critics have explicitly judged Catherine Sloper and Fleda Vetch as existential heroines, many have obliquely, and perhaps unknowingly, suggested as much in their final evaluations. Again and again critics express admiration, sometimes even in the midst of otherwise scathing commentary, for these heroines' great sense of self. For example, although Granville H. Jones calls Fleda "frantic" and "fanatical," he nevertheless admits that she "still retains her self-respect" (136). Jones explains that her "extremity" results from her "dedication to the idea of herself as a responsible moral being. . . " (127). Oscar Cargill also recognizes that "although Fleda loses to her sensuous rival, she loses on the only ground she could take to retain the last shred of integrity" (230).

Catherine, too, receives high praise for her existential sense of self or, in Gordon Pirie's word, her "self-possession." Pirie maintains that Catherine herself does not recognize self-possession as an ideal but that "when the classic solutions of romance. . .are denied her, this is what she falls back on, and the reader can see that her whole life has been a training in this unromantic virtue" (47). James W. Gargano's praise of Catherine is also consistent with existential values. Catherine, he says, is an "early portrait. . . of the Jamesian protagonist transformed, to her own surprise, by the discovery of

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selfhood and an inner life" ("Washington Square" 355).

Elsewhere he says,

> By the depth of her feelings and
> comprehensiveness of her imagination, Catherine
> has re-created herself into a being that neither
> Townsend nor Mrs. Penniman, the eternal fools of
> the earth, (nor, for that matter, the "shrewd"
> and uncomprehending Dr. Sloper) could
> understand. When she says goodbye to Townsend,
> she may seem to be entering a tomb but in
> reality, she is "free" in the same way that
> Isabel Archer is when she returns to the prospect
> of a long stretch of life with the sterile
> Osmond. Her change, as she herself recognizes,
> has taken place in the innermost part of her
> being. . . . (362)

Catherine Sloper, Fleda Vetch, and Iabel Archer,
James's "renunciatory" heroines, seem perverse to us because
they operate outside some of the most basic assumptions of
their era and ours. They make their choices, their so-
called renunciations, with little or no regard for
established norms of reasonable behavior or morality. This
is not to say, certainly, that they are oblivious to other
human beings or to social situations. Indeed, only in
social relationships can values and standards of conduct be
created; and certainly Fleda and Isabel, if not Catherine,
are always supremely conscious of what others might be
thinking or feeling. Yet these heroines insist always on
not merely adopting, but actually creating, in solitude and
anguish, their own standards and values. Such insistence is
the mark of existential authenticity. Such insistence is
the only way to become authentically oneself.

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Chapter 5

Renunciation and the Generous Spirit

Although some critics clearly recognize the importance to James of fidelity to one's authentic self, too many others have perpetuated the misconception of a Jamesian ideal of pure selflessness. Sometimes these readers praise James for creating heroes and heroines whose moral stature seems proportionate to the relative magnitude of their generous self-denials; and often they attribute these perceived acts of sacrificial self-effacement to the tenets of Christianity, which, they insist, James must have assimilated as a result of his "Puritan" New England upbringing. Just as often, however, critics condemn James for promoting an unrealistic or unwholesome ideal of self-abnegation.[1] As different as these two critical evaluations are, what they share is the misconception, facile and complacent, that James consistently devalued the "self." Such an interpretation is incompatible with both the complexity of the Jamesian moral universe and the existential tenor of his thinking; and nowhere does this misconception more dismally distort our understanding of James's work than in the body of criticism regarding The Wings of the Dove.

The most extreme proponent of a religious interpretation of the novel is Quentin Anderson, who suggests, first in an essay entitled "Henry James and the

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New Jerusalem" and later, again, in The American Henry James, that The Wings of the Dove be read as a Christian allegory, with Milly Theale representing the selfless love of Jesus Christ. Actually--recognizing, no doubt, the basic implausibility of such an interpretation--Anderson announces early that to read the novel as allegory would be to simplify James too much. Nevertheless, Anderson then goes on to discuss the work as allegory, as a system of one-to-one correspondences. Milly represents life, Lord Mark represents death, and Merton Densher represents mankind ("New Jerusalem" 549); among the secondary characters, Lionel Croy is the devil, Kate Croy stands for selfhood, and Mrs. Condrip is the "literal church" (American Henry James 241). Anderson further describes the novel as "an account of the descent of the redeemer into hell, her struggle with the demons over man's soul, and her ultimate triumph" (548). Considering the assumptions on which his interpretation is based, Anderson argues logically and thoroughly. However, his chief assumption--namely, that the novelist's work should be read in light of his father's theology--is preposterously misleading.

The basis of Henry James, Sr.'s philosophy, Anderson explains, is that the greatest sin is the love of one's self. According to the elder James, who bases his theology on that of the Swedish mystic Swedenborg, the only reason the self exists is to make us aware of our alienation from God. Our task as moral human beings is to overcome our otherness to God by overcoming our sense of self. Jesus

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Christ is the model we must imitate, for, as Anderson explains, "Christ attests the divine life in us by renouncing the life of selfhood as factitious, frustrating and vile" (523). Milly Theale, according to Anderson, demonstrates this same "capacity for sacrificial love," an annoyingly vague abstraction that will be repeated--and refuted--by generations of the novelist's critics.

I am not denying that the element of "sacrifice" is inherent in James's plan for his novel. His notebook entry for November 3, 1894, emphasizes the sacrificial proclivities of both the dying girl he envisioned as his heroine and the man she loves. In regard to the man, James writes, "I see him as having somehow to risk something, to lose something, to sacrifice something in order to do it without reward, for the poor girl, even if he loved her, has no life to give him in return" (Mathiessen and Murdock 169-70). The man's genuine commitment to a second woman, combined with his attitude toward the dying girl, suggests itself to James as "a complication culminating in some sacrifice for him, or some great loss, or disaster" (170). The dying girl herself must be equally, or even more, sacrificial. In his notebook entry for November 7, 1894, James says,

> Moreover if she's as much in love with the young
> man as I conceive her, she would leave him the
> money without any question of marriage. I seem
> to get hold of the tail of a pretty idea in making
> that happiness, that life, that snatched
> experience the girl longs for, BE, in fact, some
> rapturous act of that sort--some act of
> generosity, of passionate beneficence, of pure

sacrifice, to the man she loves.   (171-72)

The completed novel, published in 1902, deviates little from James's original notebook sketches. Milly Theale is the young, beautiful, fabulously wealthy, and mortally ill heroine, who falls in love with Merton Densher. She does not know that Densher is secretly engaged to Kate Croy, who also becomes Milly's intimate friend. Kate and Merton cannot yet marry, for neither has enough money; and they cannot acknowledge their engagement because of the opposition to the alliance by Kate's benefactress, Aunt Maud. Knowing that Milly is doomed to die soon, Kate, over time and very carefully, tries to persuade Densher to marry Milly for her money, so that after Milly's death Merton, the heir to Milly's fortune, will have sufficient means to marry the woman he really loves, Kate. When Milly is informed of the scheme by Lord Mark, the rejected and bruised suitor of both women, Milly "turns her face to the wall" and dies, apparently now having nothing more for which to live. One of her final acts, however, after revealing to Densher that she knows about his and Kate's betrayal of her, is to bequeath him all of her money. Her generosity and forgiveness so affect Densher that he subsequently tells Kate he will marry her only if she gives up the money. If Kate insists upon having the money, he will make the fortune over to her, but in that case he will not marry her. She can have either Densher or the money, but not both. Kate presumably "renounces" Densher, just as he has, in effect, just expressed his willingness to renounce both Kate and the

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money. Thus the element of highminded sacrificial generosity James emphasizes in his preliminary sketches remains an integral part of the finished work.

Nevertheless, the precise nature of Milly's "sacrifice" is difficult to define. Her financial generosity to Densher implies, to Anderson and other like-minded critics, a forgiveness that is Christlike in its magnitude. Milly has, presumably, sacrificed her "self" for others. Although Dorothea Krook denies that her own interpretation of the novel is grounded on any religious theory, her essay essentially agrees with Anderson's theological evaluation. She sees the novel as dramatizing

> a clash between the powers of light and darkness--
> between the power of the world, figured in
> Lancaster Gate, to undermine and destroy the noble
> and the good, and the power of the good, figured
> in the person of Milly Theale, to abase the proud
> by answering it with forgiveness, loving-kindness
> and sacrificial death. (220).

Krook reinforces the religious bias of her interpretation by using words like "diabolical" to describe Kate and "miracle" to describe Milly. And although Krook qualifies the most obviously theological portions of her interpretion with the parenthetical phrase "(as the religious would say)," she ultimately explains Milly's effect on Densher as "the characteristic effect of the irruption of the divine order into the natural" (229).

Even critics who allow for the possibility of a less-than-Christlike motive on Milly's part sometimes insist on interpreting her last bequest as a "divine irruption."

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Frederick C. Crews, for example, while acknowledging that
the association between Milly and Christ "falls short of
complete allegorical pattern," nevertheless immediately
offers a thoroughly Christian interpretation of Milly's
bequest to Densher--an interpretation all the more
remarkable for its being based on the idea, proposed by
Spender and others, that Milly's motive is not generosity
and loving-kindness but jealousy or revenge. Crews says,

> But in one sense this is consistent with the
> religious theme. She saves Densher from this
> world, not within it, and thus her destruction of
> his worldly comfort may be seen as the practical
> form of her love. This is a Christian idea: to
> be thrown off the wheel of Fortune, however
> painfully, is to receive the merciful action of
> divine Providence. God's love is manifested not
> only in creation of the good but in destruction
> of the corrupt as well. (76-77)

Many other critics have also seen God's beneficence embodied
in Milly and have therefore interpreted the entire novel on
the basis of Christian doctrine. No one, however, is so
insistent about the Christian framework of the novel as
Anderson, who explicitly states that Henry James the
novelist is "the poet of his father's theodicy" ("New
Jerusalem 565).

If The Wings of the Dove seems, unfortunately, to offer
itself to some readers as a religious tract, one reason
surely lies in the number of religious allusions and images
in the novel. The title is generally (and reasonably)
conceded to be a direct allusion to Psalm 55:

> My heart is pained within me,
> And the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
> Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me,

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And horror has overwhelmed me.
                              And I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
                              For then I would fly away and be at rest."

While some critics explain the allusion merely in terms of

Milly's need for escape from pain and suffering, most

superimpose on this allusion the traditional idea of the

dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Because the dove is

also conventionally associated with peace and love,

attributes of Christ, mortal pain and suffering become

identified with Christ's pain and suffering. In addition,

several characters also refer to Milly as an angel, so the

image of her forgiving, protecting, encompassing "wings"

seems to fuse the dove image, or Christ image, with the

angel's, adding to Milly's aura of supernatural goodness.

This fusing of associated meanings is, indeed, how symbols

work in literature. Nevertheless, James, I have to insist,

is not working within such a tightly structured system of

Christian beliefs and values. To see his novel as strict

Christian allegory or fable is to neglect a host of other

allusions, images, and alternate interpretations.

     In his study of figurative language in James's

fictions, Robert L. Gale has demonstrated that James,

throughout his career, freely borrows religious images for

their metaphoric value. James does not, however, confine

his borrowing to Christian or Biblical images; he draws just

as freely from Greco-Roman mythology and Oriental religions.

Gale provides many dozens of examples from many dozens of

James's works to demonstrate this fact, and a fair number of

those examples come from The Wings of the Dove. As an

example of Eastern religious imagery, Gale points out that Densher, pronounces Aunt Maud to be "'on the scale altogether of the car of Juggernaut'" [71; IV] (151). Gale also quotes the description of Milly (at the end of chapter 21) as a pagan (and not at all ascetic) priestess. He also mentions, of course, Susan Stringham's image of Milly, amidst the inmates of Lancaster Gate, as "a Christian maiden, in the arena, mildly, caressingly martyred," not by "lions and tigers" but by "domestic animals let loose as for the joke" (247; XIX). Interestingly, Gale comments simultaneously on both the irony and the validity inherent in this image: "Lions and tigers, vicious though they may be, assure a better martyrdom than would domestic animals, in the center of which is poor Milly, the dove, the princess of peace, the crucified victim and victor. It is certainly no accident at all that Merton Densher makes a kind of Christmas resolution to honor Milly's faith" (154). What Gale merely suggests here is what he makes explicit elsewhere in his essay: James uses religious images (non-Christian as well as Christian) for their "dramatic impact." He uses them metaphorically, to deepen and condense his meaning; but his meaning is, as often as not, ironic. For example, James's Greco-Roman allusions, Gale says, are likely to suggest that "most human beings have more honor than divinities" (152). His "oracles and priestesses" images, while numerous, are "rarely elaborated" (152). Similarly, he says, "Nearly all of the Bible images are simple; most are undeveloped exaggerations; and many seem

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deliberately rather trivial. . . " (155). Regarding
Catholicism, Gale says, "Almost always the saint images are
inappropriate and merely graphic, and sometimes also
ironic"; person-to-person comparisons with Church
functionaries and communicants are "brief and rather
insignificant" (157-59). Protestant figures of speech, too,
are "rarely anything but frivolous" (162). Gale concludes
that James reveals a "sensitive awareness of spiritual
matters but no belief in any creed" (165). For this reason,
Gale comments, "James's imagery offers no support whatever
to the main thesis of Quentin Anderson['s] The American
Henry James" (155).

It is true that in its endorsement of personal
sacrifice, The Wings of the Dove seems to conform to
conventional nineteenth-century moral ideals, at least as
reflected in literature. In real life, the nineteenth
century was a period of industrial expansion and bourgeois
materialism, both of which tended to foster personal vanity
and greed as well as a cultural embracing of naturalist and
positivist theories. In reaction against this trend toward
selfishness, many Victorian writers held renunciation of
material gain and personal desire as the highest ethical
ideal. Indeed, Anthony Chanell Hilfer, in his study of
characterization in American fiction, points out that for
novelists like George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and William
Dean Howells, "self" is nearly always synonymous with
"selfishness." Victorian literary renunciation therefore
represents an individual's spiritual growth--a movement away

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from the personal and cultural threat of overweening self towards social responsibility and love of others. George Eliots's Gwendolyn Harleth, of _Daniel Deronda,_ is an obvious example. Milly Theale, it is true, does not demonstrate such movement, but that is only perhaps because she ends as she has begun--as the "Dove" of loving-kindness. At the end, she who has suffered so unjustly at the hands of her friends is less concerned with her own injured ego than with the love she still bears for Merton and, possibly, for Kate, too. It is in Merton Densher that we see the movement from selfishness to selflessness, for Merton, who until Milly's death seeks affably but doggedly to fulfill his own emotional desires, is finally so moved by Milly's generosity and by his own conscience that he cannot continue his now all-but-successful plan for self-gratification. Yet even if we accept that _The Wings of the Dove_ follows the conventions of Victorian morality to this extent, there is no need--and in fact no reason--to attribute that code of morality either to Christian doctrine or to Victorian religious humanism.

The relationship between Victorian renunciation and religious doctrine is more complex than it may at first seem. While Anderson associates self-denial with the intense religious convictions of Swedenborg and Henry James, Sr., most Victorian scholars attribute the self-abnegating proclivities of nineteenth-century protagonists to the failure, rather than to the intensity, of orthodox religious creed. By the nineteenth century, the discoveries in science that had begun in the Renaissance had all but

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completely eroded humankind's faith in God's divine plan for a human-centered, harmonious universe. For the average person, God was, if not "dead," at least remote and largely inaccessible. In the absence of absolute truth, morality had to be forged on the basis of personal relationships. That is, in the absence of God, as Hilfer says, "It appears that we must all love one another or die" (13). In this respect, Victorian literary renunciation can be seen as a reflection of Victorian humanism.

At the same time, however, religious intensity and motive are not absent from Victorian literature, for many Victorian novelists were searching for ways to modify old religions or to invent new ones, in order to feel again a closeness to God, to find some transcendent source of unity and meaning. U.C. Knoepflmacher writes, "In the 1860's, but above all in the 1870's and 1880's, there was a proliferation of imaginative efforts to reconcile the new [scientific] findings with the moral verities of the old religion" (5). Knoepflmacher points to the example of Mrs. Humphrey Ward's "search for a new blinding faith," most notoriously evident in her novel Robert Elsmere (1888), in which a clergyman struggles with his own unbelief. "The popularity of Robert Elsmere", according to Knoepflmacher, is "mainly the expression of the devout idea that the essence of Christianity will somehow survive its doctrine" (9-10). Mrs. Ward's book was not an anomaly. Knoepflmacher asserts that Mrs. Ward's "attempt to recast religion" had become a "time-honored practice" by 1888; and in his list of

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writers who preceded Mrs. Ward in the genre, he includes
Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, Samuel
Butler, Walter Pater, and George Eliot (10-11). Similarly,
J. Hillis Miller asserts that Carlyle was the most
influential writer of the period among the many writers who
were also searching for a secular religion (Carlyle's
"natural supernaturalism"). Miller says, "Carlyle's life
and writings are a paradigmatic model in nineteenth-century
English literature of the attempt to maintain the basic
structure of the Christian faith without its essential
dogmatic elements. . ." (282).

Barry V. Qualls is even more insistent about the
prevalence and significance of traditional Christian belief
in Victorian literature:

> [B]y adopting the types, analogues, and
> allegorical suggestion of the popular religious
> tradition, Carlyle and the novelists cast
> themselves firmly in that tradition of writing
> represented by Bunyan. Their plots are essentially
> his plot, even as the complications and
> variations are Victorian expressions of an age's
> uncertainties about the very figures it insists
> upon.   (13)

Qualls uses the term "biblical romance"--"that verbal
pattern established by the Bible, used by Quarles and
Bunyan, [and] reformulated by the Romantics"--to describe
Victorian fiction of the period 1837 to 1880. He contends
further that "the defining characteristic" of Victorian
fiction is "its quest to be at once secular scripture and
sacred scripture" (14). Victorian fiction is therefore
highly emblematic, according to Qualls, and "continually

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searche[s] for the spiritual meaning behind the world of things." Though Quall's description might be applicable to Nathaniel Hawthorne, it is not applicable to Henry James. Henry James is not, even in _The Wings of the Dove_, participating in the Victorian quest for or representation of God in emblems, religious allegory, or "natural supernaturalism." If we ever hope to arrive at a satisfying interpretation of the renunciations in _The Wings of the Dove_, we must try to see James not in the tradition of Victorian religious humanism, with its emphasis as much on traditional religion as on secular humanism, but in the light of existential philosophy.

The difference between the religious humanism reflected in much Victorian literature and the existential imagination reflected in the works of Henry James lies precisely in the difference between, on the one hand, trying to create new religious or quasi-religious systems to replace no-longer viable traditional religious authority and, on the other hand, struggling to create entirely human values and meanings in the accepted absence of external moral and ontological authority. These existential human values and meanings, moreover, must be determined not by mass social "movements" but, always and only, by the consciousness, or conscience, of each solitary individual. Thus, if existentialism shares with Victorian religious humanism an awareness that God is absent or inaccessible, that awareness does not, in James, take the form of nostalgia for the securities and consolations of Christianity or any other

transcendent, external authority. It takes, instead, the form of commitment to the terrible freedom, responsibility, and isolation of the individual existent.

The Wings of the Dove, certainly, is permeated with images of isolation, and these images are compounded by the irony that such isolation can occur in a network of social relationships. The book opens with a poignant exposition of Kate Croy's aloneness. She is waiting in the shabby dwelling on Chirk Street to offer herself, to offer the rest of her life, to a disreputable father, who, she immediately discovers, is as genuinely indifferent to "the bond of blood" as he is to Kate as a person. His only interest in what Kate does with her life is how she might best, financially, be of use to him. Kate's sister, Mrs. Condrip, is just as eager as their father to use Kate for her own economic gain, even if such use precludes her and Kate's continued association. Kate therefore feels both "free" and yet ironically coerced, by the financial need, or greed, of her father and sister, to accept the patronage of her rich Aunt Maud, though she knows Aunt Maud's interest in her is also chiefly proprietory. Maud Lowder is interested in Kate for Kate's value to her as a social asset. Thus, in spite of what Kate calls the "'piety'" of her "'family feeling'" (57; III), she has to admit, "'We're a failure as a family!'" (52; III).

Like Kate, Merton is introduced to us as a solitary figure: he habitually loiters alone in Kensington Gardens, waiting for Kate to appear. In so doing, the narrator

emphasizes, he conspicuously sets himself apart from other "men of business," who, in the middle of the afternoon, are at work and therefore "hidden from the public eye" (40; III). At his most public, then, Merton is most alone. Kate and Merton love each other, surely; yet the entire novel emphasizes the chasms--physical, social, and psycholgical-- that separate them. Merton is furthermore ironically alone in his effort to be united with Kate, who, in her yearning for money and social position, effectively keeps Merton at a frustrating and humiliating distance. Even when they can be said to be most nearly "together," as in their walks in Kensington Gardens, their alliance effectively isolates them from the rest of humanity, from whom they sit "as much. . . apart as possible," forming "their small floating island" (42, 53; III). Near the end of the novel, with Merton restlessly wandering the streets of Venice and Kate far away in London, even the island temporarily formed by their affection seems to have been sundered. Ultimately, their scheme for the gentle yet cold-blooded exploitation of Milly, designed to insure their own romantic union, results in hopeless alienation even from each other.

Milly Theale, of course, is the most solitary of all. The reader's initial impressions of Milly are filtered through the consciousnesses of other characters, who are struck, upon meeting Milly, by her isolated condition. For example, Susan Stringham's first impression of Milly serves as well for the reader's first impression, and what Susan chiefly recalls, aside from Milly's fabulous wealth, are

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Milly's "black. . . robes of mourning" and "isolation,"
incurred as a result of a breathtaking "series of
brereavements" (80-81; V). Susan knows that Milly is very
much alone in the world, having suffered the "loss of
parents, brothers, sisters, almost every human appendage"
(81; V). Later Susan remembers that the reason she was so
soon able to regard Milly with "sympathy and wonder" was
precisely Milly's "isolated, unmothered, unguarded"
condition (103; VI). Kate's early, almost envious,
evaluation of Milly as wonderfully liberated by wealth also
implies the solitariness of Milly's situation: "She had to
ask nobody for anything, to refer nothing to anyone" (128;
VIII). Later, Milly's doctor, Sir Luke Strett, is equally
startled by Milly's aloneness in the world. He asks her,
"'Do you mean. . .that you've no relations at all?--not a
parent, not a sister, not even a cousin or an aunt?'"
Milly's desire not to be "dreary" may account for the
flippant tone of her response, but the content of her reply
is chilling enough: "'Nobody whatever. . . I'm a survivor--a
survivor of a general wreck'" (173; XII).

Milly's isolation is deepened by her illness and her
consciousness of impending death. Although she asks Kate to
accompany her--to "break the ice"--on her first visit to Dr.
Strett, she insists on making every subsequent visit alone.
When Dr. Strett seems to want to remind Milly that she
really does have at least two devoted friends, Kate and
Susan, who know about her illness and can be trusted not to
gossip about it, Milly understands that Dr. Strett wishes

thus to "warm the air for her" with this notion of her connectedness with others. However, the narrator tells us, "The air, for Milly Theale, was, from the very nature of the case, destined not to rid itself of a considerable chill" (171; XII). The "nature of the case" is in fact the terminal nature of her disease, and the "chill" derives from the fact that regardless of how many devoted friends one might have, one must always die alone. For this reason, Milly tries to explain to the doctor that all of her friends together "'wouldn't make. . .the difference.'" She says, "'I mean when one is--really alone.'" To do her friends justice, she admits the depth of their kindness to her, but she insists, "'Only one's situation is what it is. It's me it concerns. The rest is delightful and useless. Nobody can really help. That's why I'm by myself today.'" She insists furthermore that, considering her already bereaved and family-less state, her death won't make any real difference to anyone (172; XII). After leaving Dr. Strett's office, she goes back into the great square alone, where she realizes that "now she knew why she had wanted to come by herself. No one in the world could have sufficiently entered into her state; no tie would have been close enough to enable a companion to walk beside her without some disparity" (177; XIII). What Milly has realized is the recurring idea expressed by all existentialist thinkers: one's own personal death is the ultimate evidence of any individual's real and terrible isolation.

Existentialist ideas about death differ in one

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important respect from the ideas of "ordinary" (i.e., existentially inauthentic) people and traditional philosophers. Like the average person, who does not like morbid thoughts about death to interfere with his or her everyday activities, the non-existential philosopher believes the grim inevitability of death should be ignored as much as possible. The Stoics, from whom traditional philosophies inherit most attitudes toward death, maintain that death is nothing to us—that death is not a legitimate concern of living people. Traditional Christian philosophers also devalue death as a concept, except, as Olson explains, in so far as it "draws our attention to God and reminds us of our dependence upon his grace or renews our determination to win his favor through obedient service." Only existentialists insist that human beings "ought deliberately to cultivate an intense and persistent surface consciousness of death," for only in this way is human experience "heightened and rendered most acute." Thus only the consciousness of death can imbue life with the quality most valued by all existentialists—intensity (Olson 193-196).

From an existentialist perspective, then, Milly's knowledge of her impending death, even as it isolates her from others, frees her to live intensely and authentically. It's true that she will not let others speak of her illness, but her reason is not that she wishes to deny the reality of her death. Rather, she wants to go on living—living fully, intensely, and without self-pity—even in the face of her own death; and it is precisely her heightened consciousness

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of death that allows her to experience a heightened sense of life and of self. That James understood the existential implications of Milly's condition is clear from his presentation of the ideas shared by Milly and Dr. Strett regarding her illness and its treatment.

Dr. Strett tells Milly that the way to live with death is simply to "live." She's to do as she likes, abstain from worry, and be active (176-78; XII and XIII). Milly's reaction to this "small prescription" is at first one of ambivalence; she feels Dr. Strett's advice has made a "mixture of her consciousness--a strange mixture that tasted at one and the same time of what she had lost and what had been given her" (178; XII). She realizes that what she has lost is the "beauty of the bloom. . .from the small old sense of safety"; what she has gained, however, is "the beauty of the idea of a great adventure, a big dim experiment or struggle in which she might, more responsibly than ever before, take a hand. . ." (178; XIII). She is so full of this new sense of adventure--the adventure of living--that she feels, on leaving Dr. Strett's office, like "a soldier on a march." She walks long and far, and she reflects that

> there were moments at corners, where she stopped
> and chose her direction, in which she quite lived
> up to [Dr. Strett's] injunction to rejoice that
> she was active. It was like a new pleasure to
> have so new a reason; she would affirm, without
> delay, her option, her volition. . . .
> (178; XIII)

Milly, looking death squarely in the face, becomes "enviably

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strong. . . the more easily perhaps that the hours were so
narrowly limited" (187; XIV). Out of the isolation imposed
by her consciousness of impending death, Milly experiences a
new sense of strength, freedom, responsibility, and will.
By existential standards, her condition is exactly the
condition of the authentically aware human being.

Milly's reaction to her illness also awakens her to the
existential and paradoxical relationship between self and
others. In one sense, Milly's illness and heightened
consciousness of both life and death mark her as "strange,"
as set apart from other human beings. At the same time,
however, her new awareness gives her a sense of connection
with others. As she walks through Regent's Park, following
her visit to Dr. Strett, she feels a wondrous affinity with
the other people there. She thinks,

> [H]ere were wanderers, anxious and tired like
> herself; here doubtless were hundreds of others
> just in the same box. Their box, their great
> common anxiety, what was it, in this grim
> life? They could live if they would; that
> is, like herself, they had been told so; she saw
> them all about her, on seats, digesting the
> information, feeling it altered, assimilated,
> recognising it again as something, in a slightly
> different shape, familiar enough, the blessed old
> truth that they would live if they could. All she
> thus shared with them made her wish to sit in
> their company. . . . (179; XIII)

What she suddenly feels herself to share with the rest of
humankind is their mutual concern with life, with death,
with being. If her new, intense awareness of the reality of
her own death isolates her from others, she yet recognizes
that the reality of death per se is what unites her with the

rest of humanity.

For all its emphasis on the isolation of the individual self, existentialism is deeply concerned with the moral relations, with existentially authentic relationships, between people. Different existentialists argue in different ways for the communal quality of human being; yet all agree that "community belongs to the essential or primordial constitution of the existent" (Macquarrie 77). Always, the individual understands himself and lives only in some relation to others. To some degree, in fact, the individual's idea of his own "essence" or "character" (false as the concept of any such quality may be) is determined by the Other; for, according to Sartre, only when an individual becomes conscious of "the gaze of the Other" does he understand that, in the eyes of the Other, he is an object that has specific, stable properties, just as a stone or a table has. This does not mean, however, that an individual should passively accept and perpetuate the "character" or role assigned to him by other people. To do so, unthinkingly, would be to accept the Other's evaluation of him as a thing, as "being-in-itself" instead of as "being-for-itself," and to do that would be to live inauthentically. Just as the individual must recognize and then transcend his past, he must also both recognize and transcend what the Other has made of him. As Sartre explains, "The important thing is not what one makes of us but what we ourselves make of what one makes of us" (Being and Nothingness (qtd. in Olson 177). Much of the conflict

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in <u>The Wings of the Dove</u> involves these paradoxes regarding
self and other.

We can see James's concern with this issue, first, in
the extent to which the characters in the novel try to "fix"
or "place" or label each other. For example, early in the
novel Kate and Merton confer over the most fitting label for
Aunt Maud, who strikes them variously as a vulture, an
eagle, and a lioness (59, 61; III, IV). More significantly,
the reader's impressions of Milly, for most of the novel,
are determined by the way in which the other characters
classify her. Susan Stringham persists in seeing, and in
dealing with, Milly as a fairy-tale princess or as the
heroine of a romantic novel. Densher, in love with Kate,
likes to denigrate Milly by thinking of her, for most of the
novel, as merely a "little American girl."   Kate's labeling
Milly as a "dove" may be the most pernicious act of "fixing"
Milly (since that is the fixed image by which most critics
like to explain her); but Lord Mark's identification of
Milly with the Bronzino portrait most clearly shows how
eager he is to "place" her as an inanimate--i.e., dead--
object. In addition, everyone identifies Milly in terms of
her wealth. Even her good friend Susan thinks,

> [T]he girl couldn't get away from her wealth
> . . . . She couldn't dress it away, nor walk it
> away, nor read it away, nor think it away; she
> could neither smile it away in any dreamy absence
> nor blow it away in any softened sigh. She
> couldn't have lost it if she had tried--that
> was what it was to be really rich. It had to be
> <u>the</u> thing you were. (92; V)

Before we feel too sorry for Milly, however, we should

note that she is just as likely to try to "fix" others. For example, when she first meets Lord Mark at a dinner party, she "wittily" yet "impatiently" tries not only to classify him but also to get him to see himself the way she does. She tells him, "'You're blase, but you're not enlightened. Your're familiar with everything, but conscious, really, of nothing. What I mean is that you've no imagination'" (119; VII). This pronouncement seems premature as well as startling, coming, as it does, from the "dove." Lord Mark's amused response, "'Oh, I've heard that. . . before,'" might seem to add validity to Milly's evaluation of him, but it might just as likely serve to highlight her remark as a bit of cliched labeling. Milly similarly and effectively "fixes" Kate. The narrator says,

> Kate Croy really presented herself to Milly. . .as
> the wondrous London girl in person, by what she
> had conceived, from far back, of the London girl;
> conceived from the tales of travellers and the
> anecdotes of New York, from old porings over Punch
> and a liberal acquaintance with the fiction of the
> day. . . .   She placed this striking young person
> from the first in a story, saw her, by a necessity
> of the imagination, for a heroine, felt it the
> only character in which she wouldn't be wasted
> . . . .   (126; VIII)

Later, after Milly learns that Kate and Densher know each other, she has a more difficult time comfortably "placing" Kate, not because she has yet learned that labels are false and demeaning but because she now feels compelled to try to see Kate not only from her own objectifying point of view but also, simultaneously, from Densher's. She more than once finds herself "seeing Kate, quite fixing her in the

light of the knowledge that it was a face on which Mr. Densher's eyes had more or less familiarly rested. . . " (138; IX). Milly realizes, at least, that the two images of Kate--her own and Densher's--would not be likely to match; for at one point she is startled, wholly as a result of her own abruptly changing consciousness, to see Kate suddenly, like an optical illusion, seem to change into "her other identity, the identity she would have for Mr. Densher" (167; XII).

The kind of identifying, classifying, and labeling going on in the novel is, in one sense, inevitable, since, according to existentialists, every individual must, by the very constructs of human consciousness, see other people as Others, as beings separate from "self," separate from the perceiving subject. Yet, existentialists insist, authentic being-with-others demands that the individual refrain from dealing with other people as if they were, indeed, mere objects or instruments for the perceiving subject's use. Heidegger discusses these differing relationships in terms of what he calls (or what has been translated to English as) "concern" and "solicitude." Concern is the relation between the self and the everyday world of objects, which we manipulate like instruments to help us reach our own goals. Solicitude, on the other hand, is the relation between one existing self and another. In this relation, the Other is recognized as a free agent in the world, just like myself. Heidegger's terms correspond roughly to Martin Buber's perhaps more famous "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. In

the I-Thou relation, the Other, as Macquarrie explains, "is not just externally 'there' for us; nor is he an end to some satisfaction beyond himself" (80). The I-Thou relationship implies an openness to and respect for another person's autonomy. These distinctions, however, are ideals. In real life, existentialists agree, solicitude, or the I-Thou relationship, too often degenerates into mere "concern," or the I-It relationship.

It is this degeneration that is dramatized in The Wings of the Dove. Nearly everyone in the novel is using someone else for his or her own purposes. We have already seen how Lionel Croy, Marian Condrip, and Aunt Maud want to use Kate for their various ends. Similarly, Kate and Densher together conspire to use Aunt Maud to see "'what can be got out of her'" (59; III). Kate demonstrates that she fully understands the principle of instrumentality on which her society is based when she tries, for Milly, to clarify Lord Mark's involvement in the Lancaster Gate social world:

> And he wasn't meanwhile himself indifferent--
> indifferent to himself--for he was working
> Lancaster Gate for all it was worth; just as it
> was, no doubt, working him, and just as the
> working and the worked were in London, as one
> might explain, the parties to every relation.
> (131; VIII)

Later Kate also tells Milly, with lighthearted cynicism, that Mrs. Lowder "'has. . . plenty of use for you!'" (201; XV). With her matter-of-fact acceptance of the degenerate "I-It" relationships between people, it is no wonder that Kate feels herself justified in her own thorough use of

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Milly Theale.

The characters in <u>The Wings of the Dove</u> also demonstrate another, related form of bad faith in the way they often contribute to their own instrumentality. That is, even after recognizing that they have been packaged and labeled for use by others, they often acquiesce in their reduction to mere objects. For example, Densher is aware throughout the novel of Kate's "management" of him, and he cringes to acknowledge his "so extremely manipulated state" (339; XXVI). Nevertheless, he does nothing, until the end of the novel, to assert his autonomy (except, of course, once, when he turns turns the tables on Kate, coercing her into having sexual intercourse with him (XXVIII). Densher is aware, too, that Kate, for all her manipulation of him, conspires with Aunt Maud in Kate's own exploitation. Densher, the narrator tells us, recognizes that Kate "was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the 'value' Mrs. Lowder had attached to her." Densher therefore thinks of Kate as a "distinguished actress," and he reflects that, just as an actress "was to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt's roof, to represent" (241; XIX). By conforming to the role imposed upon her by another, Kate has fallen entirely into bad faith.

On several occasions, Milly reveals that she similarly consents to her own objectification. For example, when Kate

agrees with Susan Stringham that Milly is indeed a "princess," Milly soon finds herself beginning "to borrow from the handsome girl a sort of view of her state"--that is, to accept her role as princess (128; VIII). Milly's contribution to her own reification is even more evident in her response to Kate's labeling her a dove. Milly is happily concerned with "the measure of success she could have as a dove. . . ." She seriously decides, therefore, that she "should have to be clear," in the future, "as to how a dove would act" so that she can act accordingly (203; XV). It is perhaps part of her conception of "dove-ness" that allows her to accept so readily the way in which Lancaster Gate makes use of her. In her discussion with Kate of the ways in which London society uses people, Milly "profess[es] herself delighted to know that something was to be done with her" (132; VIII). She also, at first, apparently delights in the way Kate manipulates her in regard to Densher; for in the National Gallery, when she first encounters Kate and Merton together, Milly reflects that she "on the spot . . . knew herself handled and again, as she had been the night before, dealt with. . . ." She does not, however, object to this manipulation, and in fact seems convinced that she is being dealt with "for her [own] greater pleasure" (210; XVI).

Thus the world of Lancaster Gate is rife with the various kinds of distorted relationships that mark existentially inauthentic being-with-others. It is perhaps for this reason, as much as for the other, more explicitly

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expressed reasons, that Milly leaves England after learning that she soon will die unless she can bring herself, instead, to live. I'm not suggesting that Milly has yet become consciously disillusioned with the kinds of relationships she sees around her. However, she has by this point learned that the only relevant issue in the face of death is how to live as fully and intensely as possible, and this means recognizing one's own fredom and responsibility. With this new understanding, whether she realizes what she is doing or not, she effectively withdraws from the I-It relationships of the social world. With her newly heightened sense of life and death, she now finds intensity and fullness not in superficial and predatory social relationships but in the solitude of her Venetian palace. Yet she is not withdrawing from life itself. Although she tells Merton that she finds it "best to remain within" her palace, the narrator makes clear that it is in solitude that she feels most intensely alive:

> She wouldn't let him [Densher] call it keeping
> quiet, for she insisted that her palace. . . had
> set up round her a whirlwind of suggestion that
> never dropped for an hour. It wasn't, therefore,
> within such walls, confinement, it was the
> freedom of all the centuries. . . .   (338; XXVI)

By the time Milly moves to Venice, she has come to terms with the reality of her own death, and she has resolved to live the rest of her life as intensely, as autonomously, and therefore as authentically as possible. Her final acts--her "turning her face to the wall" and her generosity to Merton --must therefore also be explained in terms of her

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existential attitudes.

There can be no denying that Milly's disillusionment is complete when Lord Mark exposes her betrayal by Merton and Kate, and we can imagine the depth of her despair. However, we can do no more than imagine, for James does not let us see Milly after Lord Mark's final visit to her. It is therefore difficult to judge with any certitude the extent to which her death is truly, as Susan Stringham reports, a "turning her face to the wall." Is Milly's death tantamount to suicide? Or does her body, ravaged by disease, finally just fail her after the shock and pain of her discovery? Since we cannot know what Milly thinks or how or why she actually dies, we can only consider both possiblilities.

The novel provides, I believe, ample evidence against the idea that Milly deliberately chooses death over life. Early in the novel, when Milly and Susan are in Switzerland, Susan becomes alarmed at Milly's unusual and unexplained absence from the inn at Brunig. She is particularly concerned because Milly has seemed "unpacified" and "restless" lately (88; V). Susan therefore goes in search of Milly, and she finds her perched alone on the "vertiginous" ledge of a precipice. Susan is immediately fearful for Milly's life, not only because a single false move might plunge her accidentally to her death but also because she fears a "leap," the result perhaps of a "caprice with a horrible hidden obsession" on Milly's part (94; V). Almost immediately, however, Susan concludes that whatever Milly might be meditating there on that precipice, she "[is]

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not meditating a jump." On the contrary, she seems to be "looking down on the kingdoms of the earth"; and Susan thinks that "though indeed that of itself might go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them." She wonders, in fact, "Was she choosing among them, or did she want them all?" (94; V). Susan withdraws silently from the scene, and when she thinks of the incident again later, she is more convinced than ever of Milly's strong ties with life:

> The future was not to exist for her princess in the form of any sharp or simple release from the human predicament. It wouldn't be for [Milly] a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life. . . . If the young friend still continued absent it wouldn't be because—whatever the opportunity—she had cut short the thread. She wouldn't have committed suicide. (95; V)

Admittedly, Mrs. Stringham is often given to romantic exaggeration, and even in this passage the narrator treats her with mildly ironic condescension. Nevertheless, Susan Stringham is not always wrong or foolish (consider, for example, the wisdom she shows in her asessment of Lord Marks's eleventh-hour visit to Milly), and the bulk of the novel certainly attests to Milly's eagerness to live life intensely—to "take full in the face" whatever life might hold for her.

Still, the passage concerning Milly's Alpine meditation is ambiguous at best, introducing, as it does, the idea of the possibility of suicide. And there is neither more nor less reason to trust Susan Stringham's interpretation of

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this scene than to trust her judgment, at the end of the novel, that Milly has deliberately turned her face to the wall. Many critics, in any case, read Milly's death as renunciatory; and some of them, moreover, find Milly's "renunciation of life" at the end of the novel to be merely morbid, passive, pointlessly negating. For example, Frederick C. Crews finds Milly's death "the measure of her failure," for "turning one's face to the wall somehow lacks heroic flavor. . . ." Her end, he says, is "too sudden and automatic to be taken as a conscious moral decision" (75). Samuels, too, complains that The Wings of the Dove, like so many of James's other works, centers on "a life denial that is neither satiric nor tragic but morbidly sentimental" (75). The problem I see with such interpretations is, again, the ambiguity of the word "renunciation."

If Milly's death is truly a "renunciation" of life-- that is, if she wills herself to die--we can only conclude that her act is, indeed, volitional and deliberate. Few existentialists endorse suicide per se as a wholesome general practice, for few, if any, existentialists are nihilists. All existentialists, however, address the issue of death and suicide to one degree or another. Camus, indeed, has said that suicide is the one truly serious philosophical problem. For Marcel, too, the "first question is whether I shall live or not," and his answer is that "it is a question for me alone and it would be absurd to look for an objective answer" (Olson ?). The point is that suicide is by definition willful and, as such, represents

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the free act of an autonomous individual. Milly's act of "renunciation," then, cannot be passive. Nor can it be purely negating. Macquarrie explains that, for Sartre, freedom is "in its very essence negative," for "the essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken away from a man is to say No." Negativity is therefore always also creative (241). When we say No to something, we say Yes to something else. If Milly is really saying No to life, she is also simultaneously affirming some other value or goal. She may be merely saying Yes to relief from physical pain or fatigue or heartbreak; but even when death is chosen as an escape, suicide, as Sartre argues, is a means to an end, movement toward some "project" of one's own. On the other hand, her negation may be a form of protest. She may, as some critics have proposed, want above all to punish Merton and Kate for their betrayal. Again, however, her "turning her face to the wall" represents a means toward the achievement of that goal. If her act is, indeed, a form of protest, we might do well to remember that Camus, who may come closest of all existentialists to nihilism, nevertheless contends that "rebellion in man is his refusal to be treated as an object" (qtd. in Macquarrie 163). Thus, even if Milly wills her own death, there is every reason to believe that her choice is existentially valid.

Whatever form her death actually takes, Milly makes at least one other deliberate choice before she dies, and that is to bequeath her fortune to Densher. This act, too, can

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and should be interpreted in light of her own and James's
existential attitudes. It is helpful here to look again at
two possible kinds of "I-Thou" relationships, one authentic
and one inauthentic. An additional inauthentic way of
relating to another person is to "leap in" for the other.
Heidegger explains:

> This kind of solicitude takes over for the other
> that with which he is to concern himself. The
> other is thus thrown out of his position; he steps
> back, so that afterwards, when the matter has been
> attended to, he can either take it over as
> something finished and at his disposal, or
> disburden himself of it completely.
> (qtd. in Macquarrie 82)

This "dominating mode of solicitude" is characteristic of
Kate's treatment of Densher, as well as of Densher's
reaction to her treatment of him, for nearly the entire
novel. Again and again, Densher "steps back," allowing Kate
to proceed with her scheme to exploit Milly while he waits
to see the outcome, even though her scheme intimately
involves him at all points.

It is this kind of behavior on Densher's part that
prompts many critics to see him as hypocritical and passive.
Geismar, for example, suggests that Merton is really "a weak
and petty 'criminal' of the heart--the leisure-class
equivalent of a Clyde Griffiths--whose whole moral fibre
collapses at the evidence of his double-dealing being known"
(239). I do not see Densher's own final "renunciation,"
however, in this way. By the end of the novel, Densher
overcomes his passivity. By insisting that Kate choose
between him and the money, he is himself taking, for the

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first time, a stand on the issue of Milly Theale, her money, her life, and her death. Robert Caserio agrees that though his final act makes no one happy, Merton's "braced sacrificial deed" is a "sort of risk of moral creativity" and one that matches the magnitude of Milly Theale's own moral spontaneity. Indeed, Densher's renunciation of the money and/or Kate provides, according to Caserio, "the only hope for a decent form of human interrelation" (206-208).

Densher's change—his act of "renunciation" and his new moral courage—derives directly from Milly's own "decent form of human interrelation," represented by her bequest to him. In leaving him her money, Milly treats Densher with a more authentic form of solicitude than Kate, for all her passion, ever manages. This form of solicitude does not "leap in" for the other but "leaps ahead," not in order to take away the other's autonomy but, in Heidegger's words, "to give it back to him authentically as such for the first time" (qtd. in Macquarrie 82). In this kind of solicitude, Macquarrie explains, one "helps to open up for the other his own possibilities of being" (82).

The money itself is not therefore Milly's primary gift to Merton. The money merely helps Merton open up his own "possibilities of being." Through Milly's forgiveness and generosity, Merton is awakened from his inauthentic unawareness and passivity. Just as Milly stops letting herself be used by Merton and Kate after she learns of their deceit, so does Merton stop letting himself be manipulated by Kate. So, also, does he consciously refuse to participate

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any longer in their exploitation of Milly. Milly's gift awakens Merton to the necessity of moral decision--it awakens, in short, his conscience.

Not all existentialists agree on the definition or existential validity of "conscience," but Densher's awakening assuredly fits Heidegger's application of the term. According to Heidegger, conscience summons the individual's self from "its lostness in the 'they.'" Macquarrie explains that the individual can hear the call of conscience only after he stops listening to the voice of the crowd, or to external circumstances, or to any authority external to himself. Conscience is "the call of the authentic self, struggling to be born," and it is "addressed to the inauthentic . . . self, the self that is dominated by the 'they' and entangled in concerns that have come to determine it rather than to be determned by it" (166).

The Wings of the Dove, like virtually all of James's work, is fraught with ambiguity and mystery. Because we do not see Milly during her final days, we cannot be sure what she would like Merton to do with the money she leaves him. More importantly, when Milly decides to leave her money to Merton, she knows she cannot be sure what he will do with it after her death. In bequeathing him the money, to do with as he chooses, she recognizes Merton's own individuality, his own freedom, and his own responsibility. In this way, she meets the existential standard for authentic I-Thou relations, for "the way to genuinely human being lies through being open, through being able to expend oneself,

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and to do this generously or even extravagantly" (Macquarrie 83). Similarly, at the end of the novel, Merton generously and authentically gives to Kate the same gift Milly has given to him--the freedom and the responsibility to choose.

Many of the existential values dramatized in The Wings of the Dove are clearly compatible with those of Christianity, and it is undoubtedly for this reason that so many critics have read the novel in the light of Christian doctrine. Yet, in spite of the Christian imagery and allusions, James makes no appeal in this work to any moral authority exterior to the human being. Human conscience is the arbiter of decent behavior, and faith is pledged not to some transcendent God but, always, to another human being. An existential interpretation of The Wings of the Dove goes further than any religious approach to accommodate the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in the work--paradoxes involving life and death, self and others, withdrawal and generosity.

Conclusion

All fictional characters, like all real-life human beings, make choices. James's characters stand out as peculiarly "renunciatory" because the choices they make seem, often, like pure negations. They say No to romance, No to marriage, No to financial security, No to happiness. Because these are the values generally venerated in Western culture, many critics, particularly in the last fifty years, have labeled James's renunciatory characters (as well as James himself) as solipsistic, dysfunctional, or perverse. At the very least, they find in James an unwholesome predilection for sentimentalized martyrdom. James's fictions are therefore often deemed flawed—either misconceived or poorly executed. Even readers who find much to applaud in James sometimes feel compelled to acknowledge, downplay, and ultimately apologize for these "faults." On the other hand, those critics who wholeheartedly approve of and purport to understand Jamesian renunciation almost consistently interpret James's works in terms of either orthodox Christian doctrine or nineteenth-century religious humanism, neither of which is appropriate, given the facts of James's biography and the evidence of his fictions. In view of the extent to which James has come to be defined by his "renunciations" and the amount of contention and confusion still surrounding this issue, a different approach to understanding his renunciatory characters seems necessary; and in view of the degree to which his life and

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work attest to his existential vision, an existential approach seems not only a reasonable but an obvious possibility.

James's world is indeed an existential world. Even those works that might be said to contain supernatural elements, such as "The Jolly Corner" and "The Turn of the Screw," are devoid of supernatural authority. That is, even in the face of the irrational, in the face of terror and anguish, James's characters have no recourse to other-worldly mediation. Indeed, they seek no such mediation or solace. They do not call upon God for help. They do not read messages from God writ large across the sky. They do not make their difficult moral decisions on the basis of rewards or punishments awaiting them in Heaven or Hell. They rely always and only upon themselves--upon their individual consciences, which rarely reflect the mores of society at large. James's characters do not appropriate ready-made rules or values. Every situation and every human relation are unique, requiring unique and personal judgments.

This is not to say, however, that James fails to affirm any abiding, underlying human values. James's values are precisely those shared by existentialist philosophers since Kierkegaard. Each of James's works affirms the value of human freedom and demonstrates the moral imperative for each individual, in the context of his or her facticity, to choose freely. Each work illustrates the existential paradox that free choice inevitably and dreadfully results in some form of personal limitation. The interplay between freedom

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and finitude is one of James's constant existential concerns.

Implied in such concern, and illustrated in all of his works, is the idea that human beings, with each deliberate, anguished decision, create themselves anew. Here James departs from the relatively simplistic concept of the "stable ego" that dominated literature, as well as conventional, everyday thinking, for centuries. James holds the existential conviction that we are what we do. We are only what we choose to be, and although each choice defines and limits us, we are free to revise our choices and ourselves at any point. In addition, James's frequent emphasis on his characters' inconsistencies and "perversities" undermines the common, ages-old assumption that human character is founded on a solid basis of rationality. Here again he echoes one of the primary beliefs of existential philosophy, which developed, we remember, in reaction against both the essentialist and rationalist tenets of traditional philosophies.

Nevertheless, to discard the concept of fixed character is not to discard the concept of self. Nothing is more important to existentialists, or to James, than the unique, individual human being. One's "true" self is exactly what an existentially authentic person must strive to realize. Neither happiness nor security nor comfort is as important as behaving in accord with one's own felt uniqueness. It is for this reason that each person must look into himself, instead of to external authorities in any form, for moral

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guidance. It is also for this reason that James should be understood as different from other nineteenth-century novelists, many of whom seem to value selflessness as a moral ideal. James's renunciatory characters are not selfless. Indeed, every choice they make, every renunciation, is either an attempt to establish the self in authentic moral integrity or, as in the case of John Marcher, a doomed attempt to escape, in bad faith, from the necessity to choose and to define the self. Since every conscious choice, then, is a serious act committed in solitude and anguish, James's characters, renunciatory as they may seem, are never passive. For James, as for existentialist philosophers, every choice made deliberately and alone is a moral act.

Thus what has come to be called "renunciation" in James would be better understood as existential choice. Too many readers have focused on the "no" inherent in James's famous renunciations. They have not always adequately paid attention to the inevitable "yes" that is also always implied. Because of the polarity between freedom and finitude involved in every choice, every rejection of one value or goal is necessarily a personal endorsement of other, alternative values or goals. Every act of renunciation is simultaneously an act of autonomous creation--the creation of self.

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Chapter 2

1. In _The Province of Piety_ (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), Michael Colacurcio summarizes the long critical debate over Hawthorne's attitude regarding Puritanism. Colacurcio points out that the two basic opposing viewpoints were first voiced by Herman Melville, who argued that Hawthorne's "power of blackness" derived from his sincere allegiance to his Puritan heritage; and by Henry James, who refused to acknowledge the plausibility of such a suggestion. According to Colacurcio, the Jamesians ultimately lost the debate. Colacurcio himself sides with Melville. Indeed, the thesis of Colacurcio's book is that "Hawthorne's sense of depravity--his power of blackness --is rightly apprehended only as a consciously historic re-cognition of the Puritan 'Way' in which America had begun" (14).

2. Giordano Bruno, for example, was burned at the stake in 1600 for endorsing and elaborating the heliocentric theory of Copernicus; and in 1663 Galileo was placed under long-term house arrest for the same reason, even after publicly recanting.

3. See Henry McDonald's "Henry James as Nietzschean: The Dark of the Aesthetic" (_Partisan Review_ 56 (1989): 391-405) and Stephen Donadio's _Nietzsche, Henry James and the Artistic Will_ (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) for specific similarities between the novelist and

the philosopher he most probably never read.

Chapter 4

1. For summary and discussion of the modern critical
   tendency to subordinate character in fiction, see W. J.
   Harvey's Appendix II ("The Attack on Character") in
   Character and the Novel and Robert Higbie's Epilogue
   ("The Decline of Character Intensity") in Character and
   Structure in the English Novel.

2. A notebook entry for November 3, 1894, supports the idea
   that James intended Isabel's friends to speak for the
   "majority" or the "they" when they urge her to leave
   Osmond. As he tries to settle on an outline of the plot
   for The Wings of the Dove, he remarks on the
   "practically universal acceptance of divorce"
   (Matthiessen and Murdock, 170).

Chapter 5

1. Predictably, many critics see even Milly's open-handed
   giving as symbolic of sexual repression. For example,
   in her study of money and morality in James's works,
   Alice Morgan concludes that, for James, extreme
   generosity is always linked to sexual renunciation.
   "Money," she says, "or some physical treasure is used as
   a symbol of the passion to be renounced." Morgan
   explains Milly's renunciation as her "determination to
   love Densher and her necessary failure to do so except
   in the guise of giving him money" (92). Unlike Morgan,
   who manages to remain neutral in her discussion of

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Dove, Maxwell Geismar can hardly control his contempt

for the novel's (and the novelist's) repressive sexual

attitudes. In The Wings of the Dove, Geismar complains,

James inextricably links generosity with sexual

renunciation and frustration and then exalts frustration

above all other human conditions and values. Geismar

specifically deplores the "Jamesian concept of

'primary experience,' the deep connection

between love and the will to live which is based on the

renunciation of any physical or passional love

. . ."(224). Having "refined away the sexual elements

of his narrative," Geismar says, James then grounds his

story firmly on "the solid base of cash (221). Thus,

for Geismar, financial generosity is indeed

renunciation--the unwholesome renunciation of sexual

love.

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(The above editions of The Ambassadors, "The Beast in the
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Spoils of Poynton, and The Wings of the Dove are reprinted
from the 1908 New York edition of James's work. James did
not include Washington Square in the New York edition.)

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