

## Vindication against Misreading:

### *The Golden Bowl, The American Scene, and the New York Edition*

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In the letter he wrote to Scribner's in 1905 proposing that he "furnish" each volume of his forthcoming deluxe edition with a preface, Henry James portrayed his novels and stories as disenfranchised beings patiently awaiting a "chance" for their cause to be righted. James would be their advocate and the prefaces the texts with which he would demonstrate his novels' worth (367). In this paper I will argue that the writing of *The Golden Bowl* and *The American Scene* were essential precedents and complements to this project of self-vindication. Reading *The Golden Bowl* through its preface shows that beneath the narratives of familial and marital relations in the novel run stories of a writer's contention with a misapprehending audience--the same struggles out of which James spun creative autobiography and a theory of fiction in the prefaces to the New York Edition. Through his indirect critique of his readership in *The Golden Bowl* and the fierce challenges he delivered to his compatriots in *The American Scene* James laid essential groundwork for the lessons in reading and creative production he would later offer in the New York Edition.

Paul Armstrong has argued that James's prefaces require the same "doubled reading" his novels require, that while the reader is absorbing James's account of his writing experience and his theory of writing, the reader is also responding to James as a centering consciousness whose "interpretive attitudes . . . are as much on display and as much an object for the reader's scrutiny as the impressions of a Lambert Strether or a Maggie Verver" (128). As comparable centering consciousnesses, James the preface-writer and his heroine Maggie Verver make common assertions. Both figures demonstrate the power of the creative deed. Paralleling James's affirmations about "doing" in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* is Maggie's discovery in the novel of her own brilliant capacity for action. After the assignation of the Prince with Charlotte in Gloucester, Maggie begins "to doubt of her wonderful little judgement of her wonderful little world" (307). She begins to "put" things both to herself and the people around her. She contrives

gestures to effect a change in her "practically unattackable" situation. The terms James uses to describe Maggie's campaign to rebalance familial and marital relations are the same terms he uses in his notebooks and prefaces when he celebrates the capacity to let oneself go with writing: "Ah, just to let oneself go--at least," he writes in his notebook in 1895, "to surrender one's self to what through all the long years one has (quite heroically, I think) hoped for and waited for--the mere potential, and relative, increase of quantity in the material act--act of application and production" (114). Likewise, in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, James celebrates the tendency of the writer's canvas "to lead on and on" (1041). In her lively interrogations about the Matcham houseparty and the Gloucester sightseeing Maggie lets herself go in a similar way:

Maggie went, she went--she felt herself going; she reminded herself of an actress who had been studying a part and rehearsing it, but who suddenly, on the stage, before the footlights, had begun to improvise, to speak lines not in the text. . . . Preparation and practice had come but a short way; her part opened out and she invented from moment to moment what to say and to do. She had but one rule of art--to keep within bounds and not lose her head; certainly she might see for a week how far that would take her.  
(348)

In this passage Maggie becomes James, inventing her role as she goes, while also inventing the rules for invention. Her creative exhilaration builds during the dinner party with the Matcham group: "Oh she was going, she was going--she could feel it afresh; it was a good deal as if she had sneezed ten times or had suddenly burst into comic song. . . . [S]he was dancing up and down, beneath her propriety, with the thought that she had at least begun something" (360-61). What Maggie has begun is the piecing together of a narrative by which she will win authority within her world. Her actions involve the same activities associated with writing that James describes in the prefaces. She observes, she notes, she wonders, she walks the London streets. The authority she reaches for is the same kind that James is seeking to achieve through his fiction. But her audience--her intimates--are not attending her; they misread her, they ignore her, just as, in James's view, his reading audience was not giving his works their "chance." If Maggie is a surrogate for James as writer in *The Golden Bowl*, Charlotte is the inattentive and uninspired reader by whom James feels neglected. The pain for Charlotte in the later chapters of the novel is palpable. She appears to be a victim of Maggie's emergence in the novel and of James's assertions in the preface of the "superior order" of the literary. Her return to America with her husband will be an exile. As

Charlotte leads her guests through the galleries at Fawns, lecturing them in a quavering voice that sounds "like the shriek of a soul in pain," she seems to be paying too great a price for her inappropriate marriage and her affair (526). But she has committed an error that to James is unforgivable. She has underestimated Maggie's abilities; she has misread her. Inured to Maggie's intuitive and creative energy, Charlotte assumes that Maggie will always live narrowly, through her father. And fearful that any change in the family situation will foreclose her relations with the Prince, Charlotte advises the Prince that they must "learn to take" the Ververs "as they are" (255). As Maggie observes to Fanny Assingham, "They thought of everything but that I might think" (555).

The Prince is a better reader than Charlotte. At first he seems to share Charlotte's limited perspective, but as Maggie begins to transform herself and their circle he notices her gestures, he watches and considers. By the time Adam and Charlotte are ready to leave for America the Prince is caught up with Maggie. He sees the powers that Charlotte has missed. "She ought to have *known* you," he tells Maggie. "That's what's present to me. She ought to have understood you better. . . . She not only doesn't understand you more than I, she understands you ever so much less. . . . She's stupid" (565). The Prince is a potentially appreciative and sensitive reader. It is he, not Charlotte, who notices the flaw in the golden bowl on the first expedition to Bloomsbury. And he interrogates Maggie after she reveals that she knows about his affair with Charlotte. He continues to observe and ponder after Maggie instructs him, "I've told you all I intended--find out the rest--!" (GB 464). Prince Amerigo is the reader whom James will hope to influence through his prefaces. He allows Maggie to guide him toward reading creatively. In Charlotte and the Prince James expresses ambivalences about his readership that he will not be able to put forth directly in the prefaces.

Through Charlotte's misapprehension and betrayal of Maggie James can demonstrate the pain and frustration of being neglected and misunderstood--and he can arrange a dramatic vindication. Instead of confronting Charlotte about her affair with the Prince, Maggie offers her a lesson in reading. When she spies Charlotte retreating to the garden with the wrong volume of a book she has loaned her, she goes after

her: "I saw you come out," she says, "saw you from my window and couldn't bear to think you should find yourself here without the beginning of your book. *This* is the beginning; you've got the wrong volume and I've brought you out the right" (540). In the conversation that follows, Charlotte defends her erroneous reading of Maggie and of Maggie's book with a stern accusation that Maggie has worked against her through her continued possession of her father. Maggie pretends to agree, yet silently claims to herself that "[y]es, she had done all." Maggie has shown her most resistant reader where and how to begin in a world that she herself has transformed.

Through Charlotte's underestimation of Maggie in *The Golden Bowl* James vents his anger toward the audience that has heretofore denied his works their "chance." His condemnation of Charlotte's misreading links *The Golden Bowl* to the prefaces. The novel becomes a prefatory act to the assembling of the New York Edition. It is a demonstration of feelings about the experience of authorship that James may have felt would be inappropriately placed in a preface. Having represented the bitter side of his authorial experience obliquely in *The Golden Bowl*, James could then proceed, in the prefaces, to a formal and public discussion of his writing that might win his works greater recognition from American and English readers. Just as readers could view Maggie's labors of invention through her narrating consciousness in *The Golden Bowl*, they would view James's writing process through his accounts of "the story of one's story" in the prefaces. And just as Maggie Verver's ultimate task in the novel is to guide Charlotte to the starting point of the book she has given her, James would take as his ultimate task, through the prefaces, to show his audience where to begin their reading of his works. To read properly is to sift down through the stages of the making of the work. Reading begins, not with the novel itself, but with the moment when a thought or a piece of conversation touched James's imagination like "the prick of some sharp point" and infused "the virus of suggestions" for the story (*Prefaces* 1138). In retrieving this moment James uncovers "scenes of labour" that he incorporates into the prefaces along with responses to the experience of rereading his works. By tracking his creative method, demonstrating it dramatically through scenes where we can watch him thinking and writing, James makes the work of writing visible to his audience. He claims for writing values commonly associated with other kinds of work. He shows the ardors of writing and the

protracted commitment that a single project requires. The composition of a novel becomes in the prefaces a formal process of inquiry and invention through which James can demonstrate to his readers the high achievement involved in creative labor. Analyzing the central problem of a novel through his dramatization of the germ allows James also to show how much ingenuity and courage have gone into solving that problem.

Through the loosely structured narrative of his writing experience in the prefaces James makes himself, as hero, an exemplum of faith. Whatever history he presents in his prefaces is personal. The faith he professes is a faith in the process of the individual artist, without reference to deity, community, or nation. And although he brutally interrogates that self in the privacy of his notebooks, he celebrates it unqualifiedly in the prefaces. The self as writer is reliable and productive; he discovers opportunities and makes the most of them. His constant ingenuity and productivity invest him with authority. James offers these abilities in exchange for the license to perform as a critic in his prefaces, that is, to direct his audience in their interpretations, to assess publicly his own works, and to place a supreme value on the novel as "the most prodigious of literary forms" (*Prefaces* 1321).

Like the writing of *The Golden Bowl*, James's travels in America and his writing of *The American Scene* were prefatory acts to the assembling of the New York Edition. And like *The Golden Bowl*, *The American Scene* fulfills a complementary purpose, as a repository for a writer's alienation from his native land and implicitly from his reading audience. Just as American readers are not giving James's novels a chance, America itself--its society, its landscape--does not give the writer a chance. But while James's alienation is expressed obliquely in *The Golden Bowl*, it is the central theme of *The American Scene*.

The American scene is far less reliable than the European. While James can rest assured that the Piazza Santa Maria Novella and other European sites crucial to his adult life will remain intact, he cannot expect such permanence from any location of his American past. His birthplace has been overshadowed by "a high, square, impersonal structure," and there remains no surface on which he can project the commemorative tablet that he carries in his mind. In Cape Cod, at the Jersey shore, wherever the

inquisitive James sees "the social mystery" eluding him, he must resort to the question of whether there is anything to see. "And that was doubtless, for the story-seeker, absolutely the little story," he concludes after a trip to Cape Cod. "[T]he constituted blankness was the whole business" (365). Where does the story-seeker discover a germ, then? And even if presented with the germ for a story or novel, how does he develop it, given the scanty resources, the lack of evidence of private life? America offers the artist little to work with. The romance that James had felt calling to him from his homeland continuously eludes him. He is left alone with his own story, already partially erased.

James issues an especially sharp critique of America as he surveys the clusters of new luxury houses at the Jersey shore, "planted each on its little square of brightly green carpet," affording little privacy to their wealthy owners:

The highest luxury of all, the supremely expensive thing, is constituted privacy--and yet it was the supremely expensive thing that the good people had supposed themselves to be getting: all of which, I repeat, enriched the case, for the restless analyst, with an illustrative importance. For what did it offer but the sharp interest of the match everywhere and everlastingly played between the short-cut and the long road? --an interest never so sharp as since the short-cut has been able to find itself so endlessly backed by money. (365)

Through its devotion to materialism, James asserts, America has opted for the short-cut, facilitated by money, as opposed to the long road, on which sensibility and aesthetics can be given play. He finishes with a question that serves as a frame to his commentary on American life and culture: "Never would be such a chance to see how the short-cut works, and if there be really any substitute for roundabout experience, for troublesome history, for the long, immitigable process of time" (366). If money represents the short-cut in this argument, then art stands for the long road. The prefaces that James was beginning to compose as he wrote *The American Scene* would demonstrate how one is to move along the long road. The scenes of composition in the prefaces comprise a loosely structured narrative of inspiration, speculation, and dedicated labor that render writing a visible and heroically productive activity. This narrative constitutes a model that James poses as a complement to his unflattering critique of his homeland in *The American Scene*. It chronicles the "roundabout experience" and the crucial role of the "long, immitigable process of time" in creative endeavors.

"See what I am making of all of this," the rumbling Pullman seems to say to James as the southern landscape speeds by. "I see what you are *not* making," he replies, "oh, what you are ever so vividly not; and how can I help it if I am subject to that lucidity?" (734-35) In the simultaneous enterprises of *The American Scene* and the New York Edition James set up a "match" between the short-cut and the long road, with his readers as spectators.

America is unfinished; in fact it is barely started. In contrast, James's own productivity, as dramatized through the figure of Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* and foregrounded in the prefaces to the New York Edition, is immense. It implicitly makes James the victor in the match between the short-cut and the long road. After rebuking America, in both *The Golden Bowl* and *The American Scene*, for its arrears, James poses through the New York Edition--his work of self-vindication--an exemplum of the done, a model of the long road completed.

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