

“Alberti’s Geometrics to Piranesi’s Choreographics: James’s Emotive Structures of Balance and Abyss”

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This paper (a snippet of a work in extended progress) is about projecting perspectives -- that technique whereby we grasp a sense of deep space once two-dimensional surfaces create an illusion of figures placed along a three-dimensional plane. From the ancients onwards, the history of the plastic arts shares in the history of geometry. In turn, as Leon Batista Alberti declared in his seminal treatise “On Painting” of 1435, they feed into the history of literary narratives. Note: if this were a footnoted essay, it would be studded with references to scholarly studies in applied physics and implied metaphysics, but since I’ve no “space” to itemize these sources, I signal my debts by “finger-quotes.”

I shall focus primarily on staircases, those material structures of ascent and descent, whose geometrics afford triumphal movements upwards or threaten the dangers of “coming down.” I shall show a cluster of slides (mostly drawn from the early to late Italian Renaissance) and cite passages from The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl, only too aware of what I must leave out regarding centuries of theoretical speculation and experimental practices that directed the changing history of spatial perspective. First, I put forth a series of “givens” that influenced the manner by which Italian artisans created brilliant illusions of balance and stability, which nonetheless teeter at the vertiginous edges of the frames that contain their narratives. This done, I want to show that James also experimented with the ways all representations of equilibrium are, like Paradise, forever created, lost, and (only on occasion) regained.

(1) In the Wings and the Bowl, James interwove “effable” scenes (visible on the page through his detailed descriptions) with intimations of the “ineffable” (that which lies hidden in the consciousness creating the tale) -- “ineffable” in the way that James, happy agnostic that he was, inserts a powerful sense of “the transcendent” that lies beyond controlling framing devices. If both painters and writers must deal with the fact that one cannot “make lines going beyond [the picture’s edges] without encountering the

frame,” consider Charlotte Stant’s situation about which Adam Verver observes, “You must have had things to be beyond them. It’s a kind of law of perspective.”

(2) Although the ancient Greeks commanded the sophisticated geometrics needed to represent naturalistic illusions of three-dimensional space, there was a long hiatus before Euclidean solids and Arabic mathematics were picked up again in 14th-century Italy; but not through lack of awareness of earlier geometrics. Rather, they were discarded in the name of fostering sacred truths through the use of hieratic symbols placed along a flattened plane. Note that in [**Jacobello de Fiore’s “Coronation of the Virgin”](#) the figures of Christ and the Virgin are large, whereas the others gathered in adoration, stacked as though on tiers of a wedding cake, are small - thus making clear their lesser ranking on the divine scale. But the time came when science acquired authority over theology, and terms such as “central projection,” “vanishing point,” and “linear perspective” took command, surrounding creatures of the quotidian with “naturalistic” space.

(3) An important and ever-lasting debate was set in motion, which pits “imagination” against “observation.” Cennino Cennini’s “Book of Painting” of 1400 insisted that the artist intends to “discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadows of natural objects,” but in 1435, Alberti’s “On Painting” attested “the painter has nothing to do with the things that are not visible.” Of course, students of optical geometry realized “the perception of representational paintings” is a “very different process from the perception of actual scenes in depth.” Subjects, sacred or secular, are “to be regarded as an arrangement of symbols for reality,” not as final testimony for the truth of the Absolute.

(4) Perspectival art rose out of applied geometry, not theoretical geometrics. Via brilliant innovations in surveying and measuring, Brunelleschi strove to erect a dome for Florence’s Baptistery that would not topple. Similarly, Maggie Verver would “pile up blocks, skillfully and dizzily,” in her hope that the elements of her marital situation would rise “so high that the structure would have to be noticed and admired,” even as she faced the fact that “When the blocks tumbled down they but acted after the nature of blocks.”

(5) Alberti's "how-to" manual gave detailed instructions for visualizing chequerboard floors since pavimento-perspectives assured a painting's stability. [**Gentile Bellini's "Procession in Piazza San Marco"](#) serenely depicts Venice's dignitaries in that public space James described as a "gallery paved with squares of red marble," "the whole place, in its huge elegance, the grace of its conception and the beauty of its detail" rendering it "the drawing-room of Europe." Yet the "naturalness" of this supremely quotidian scene becomes eerily "super-natural" once we glimpse God gazing down from His ineffable realm in [**Bonifazio de' Pitati's "God Above the Piazza San Marco"](#) or when ghostly figures sweep through the piazza in [**"The Stealing of Saint Mark's Corpse." Tintoretto's](#) bravura rendition of Venice's most precious legend.

(6) Although vanishing-point perspective continued to hold sway, the 1600s introduced new attitudes toward spatial depth. A new shallowness pressed figures against the front of the picture plane, in peril of falling over the edge. [**Rosso Fiorentino's "Moses Defends the Daughters of Jethro."](#) questions whether anyone could defend anything within spaces so distorted. Mannerism, the label attached to these radical experiments, is sometimes praised as bella maniera, but is often damned as decadence. Take this scholar's description of the Manneristic mode and match it to views some hold toward James's late novels: "greater emphasis was placed on the ideal beauty in the mind of the artist than on the reproduction of beauties discovered in nature and the ever more frenzied pursuit of aesthetic effects put a premium on originality and imagination which often passed over into exaggeration, morbidity, and the bizarre. Surprise, novelty, recondite allusions, and in general a priority for invention characterized an art which appealed to a public of connoisseurs and a narrow intellectual elite." Once "the classical balance of the Renaissance and the sense of harmony between nature and reason" disintegrated and "splendid lessons brilliantly learnt were applied in the service of ever more phrenetic idiosyncrasy," naturalistic forms were translated into fantasy, set within unreal spaces lacking firm perspective structures.

(7) As Western science and aesthetics "advanced" beyond the 17th-century, earlier principles became "forgotten lore" -- such as the belief that earthly spatial structures must try to emulate the "architecture" of

the cosmos wherein both earth and planets are “embedded in translucent spheres” of crystal -- “shapes that were invisible and unpalatable, but nonetheless real.” Recall this bit of “forgotten lore” as we come to consider the significance to the “human geometrics” in [The Golden Bowl](#) of crystalline shapes, whether whole or shattered.

(8) Over the centuries, interest continued in regard to the relation of viewer to picture plane. Alberti’s treatise urged artists to focus on a fixed distance by creating the illusion of a window through which those who stand before a painting look out upon the narrative scene. Now listen to what James says about the House of Fiction: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million -- a number of possible windows, not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will . . . They are but windows at the best, more holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.”

(9) Lastly, a bit of grounding for the geometrics of staircases, the physical and emotive structures I feature from now on. Mannerism in the 1600s was rich with images of twisted stairways mounting up and tumbling down, as in [**Vasari’s “Vulcan’s Forge.”](#) The 1700s yielded both [**Canaletto’s “Perspective”](#) (a charming vista of graceful Venetian steps) and [Piranesi’s “Carceri”](#) (an ominous scene of stairs buried within Rome’s ruins). Take the Canaletto to represent the position attained by Adam Verver: “The tall sharp spiral round which he had begun to wind his ascent at the age of twenty, and the apex of which was a platform looking down . . . on the kingdoms of the earth and with standing-room for but half a dozen others.” Take the Vasari and Piranesi to represent Prince Amerigo’s description of “the moral sense” inflicted upon Old Romans: “it’s no more like yours [an American’s] than the tortuous stone staircase -- half ruined into the bargain . . . is like the ‘lightning elevator’ in one of Mr. Verver’s fifteen-storey buildings. Your moral sense works by steam -- it sends you up like a rocket. Ours is slow and steep and

unlighted, with so many of the steps missing that -- well, that it's as short in almost any case to turn round and come down again."

Piranesi's "tortuous stone staircases" are founded on studies in the spiral, the helix, and rotational symmetry. Fascinating, yes, but guaranteed to unsettle one's balance. Is not gentle ascent of [**the stairway to the Palazzo Leporelli](#) preferable, with the splendid glimpse it give of ineffable realms above? But what if Densher is left looking up at Eugenio, blocked from "the massive ascent . . . to Milly's [piano nobile](#)"? And what if Milly loses the will to descend into a world marked by discord and abysses? Truly, there is awe, not awfulness, in perspectival projections that image the Virgin as child mounting stairways in glory -- as in these two [**"Presentations at the Temple"](#) by Titian and [Tintoretto](#) -- as a preview of her later ascension into the crystalline empyrean where, as in [**Botticelli's "Coronation: of the Virgin,"](#) she reigns as Queen of Heaven under the dove-like wings of the Holy Spirit. But what of Milly Theale once she reaches the top of the Leporelli staircase? "She had a vision of clinging to it . . . She was in it, as in the ark of her deluge . . . She would never, never leave it . . . The romance for her . . . would be to sit there for ever, through all her time, as in a fortress, and the idea became an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine dustless air . . . 'Ah not to go down -- never, never to go down . . .'" There comes the evening when Milly does "go down" to take command over "the Veronese picture" -- [**"Dinner at the House of Levi"](#) -- where her guests float together "like fishes in a crystal pool." When this brilliant interlude is over, she returns to the heights, but does Milly's ascent promise a healing grace of the kind Giovanni Manuseti depicts in [**"The Miraculous Healing of the Daughter of Ser Nicolo Bevegnudo of San Polo."?](#)

Once, Milly sought risks. "Don't tell me," she says to Susan Stringham, "there are not abysses. I want abysses." Once, Milly perched on the edge of an Alpine precipice that "appeared to fall precipitously and to become . . . a view of great extent and beauty, but thrown forward and vertiginous." Once, Milly had no wish for "any sharp or single release from the human predicament." Rather, she looked "down on the kingdoms of the earth," either to choose among them or to take them all. So where [does](#) James's narrative

finally place Milly in terms of the life's spatial possibilities? Does she remain fixed to the wall at Matcham, held in check by the frontal framing device of [**Bronzino's "Lucrezia Panciatichi,"](#) a memorial to what was once life but is now "Dead, dead, dead!"? Is she trapped in a one-dimensional [**"Maze,"](#) unable to escape the bafflements of life's "labyrinth" in which Susan says we are all enclosed -- forever denied the beatific vistas offered by the vanishing-point perspective laid out upon serene patterns of [pavimento](#)? Or is she placed betwixt and between death and life? "Since I've lived all these years," she tells Susan, "as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive . . . So, you see. . . you'll never really know where I am. Except indeed when I'm gone, and then you'll only know where I'm not."

As for [The Golden Bowl](#), what spatial relations enclose its main characters? What "hidden geometries" sustain or unsettle "the very form of the equilibrium they were, in different ways, equally trying to save"? Let us look first at Charlotte, then Maggie.

Here at the situations they face. [Charlotte viewed by Amerigo at Fanny's](#): "a charming young woman with a life of her own. She would take it high -- up, up, up, ever so high. Well then he would do the same; no height would be too great for them, not even the dizziest conceivable to a young person so subtle." Not for Charlotte Amerigo's fears over "cracks" in supposedly perfect crystalline objects. "I risk cracks."

[Charlotte standing halfway up the "monumental" staircase](#)" at the "great official party" --as in [**Veronese's "Esther Led Before Assueros"](#) -- where she is about to choreograph her ascents and descents under "the quiet eyes of Colonel Assingham , who had his elbows on the broad balustrade of the great gallery overhanging the staircase."

[Charlotte and the Prince paired like dancers](#) "midst the double stream of the coming and the going" of the ordered revelers. It has been said in regard to George Balanchine that "The technique of the classical ballet is based on geometry." Dancers on stage enact a "pattern of suggestion, [that] like the secret geometry of nature, is there for the looking, hidden in plain sight." But this is precisely what horrifies Fanny: the public exposure of the occult nature of two marriages through the choreographed movements of

unholy partners. However splendidly they present themselves, they reject “the beautiful symmetry” for which Fanny longs, of the kind on view in [**Vivarini’s Madonna and Child](#) where figures stand fixed within the tightly controlled space conventionalized by the painterly trope of the “sacred conversazione.”

Maggie performing her own hidden choreography: the struggle to save “equilibrium, the precious condition” despite “rearrangements,” the “fresh distribution of different weights.”

Maggie after witnessing the shattering of the imperfect crystal of the golden bowl:: posed at the window of the house of her own fiction, whose perspective reflects “as great a difference of view as the shift of an inch in a telescope.” Maggie at Fawns: forced to choose which painterly representation to offer the others seated quietly at bridge: Is it to be [**Botticelli’s “Calumny,”](#) that features an attractive but cunning beauty attended by Treachery, Deceit, and Envy, while Repentance and Truth hang back -- an allegory of emotional discord framed by the perfect harmony of classic arches? Or will it be [**Giotto’s “Judas’s Kiss”](#) that records Christ’s calm acceptance of his betrayer’s embrace -- a sacred moment pictorialized against the same background of “high spears against the sky” by which James depicts Maggie’s temptation to express “the rights of resentment, the rages of jealousy, the protests of passion.”

Maggie’s “vertiginous moments” on the terrace when she must decide whether to reveal all or to conceal everything: “Spacious and splendid, like a stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene she might people . . . either with serenities and dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins, things as ugly as those formless fragments of the golden bowl she was trying to hard to pick up.” As we know, Maggie goes for the Giotto, not the Botticelli, once “her cheek received the prodigious kiss” from Charlotte in “the high publicity” performed before the gathered spectators, each of whom possesses his or her own perspective on what is placed on display.

Near the end of the narrative, Fanny observes that Maggie thinks “so abysmally and yet so quietly. But that’s what will have saved you.” Which, then, of all the painterly spaces seen today best images the late-James world wherein characters rise or descend “quietly,” “abysmally”? I myself place the Prince within

Piranesi's Carceri, doomed to dimness to grope his way up and down, limited to saying "I see only you." I might also locate Milly within the darkness of Piranesi's spatial limbo, unable to sustain her presence on the splendid staircases of Titian, Veronese, or Tintoretto, although I cannot be certain this is the destiny for a woman who claims we will never know just "where" she is. As for Maggie, I have more confidence in the psychological structure she inhabits within the narrative space granted by James. Oddly enough (which is the point), her perspective seems very like that projected by [**M. C. Escher's lithograph, "Relativity."](#)

Avid students of the beauties of distortion as they were, 17th-century scientists and artists acknowledged that nothing in the universe is totally symmetrical, since the eye beholds forms "stretched, squeezed, swollen, and pinched" -- the fact which Piranesi made much of." Yet it was proposed that if "Any compound form may seem 'broken' when in the middle of being one shape it stops that and starts being another shape," this sort of "'breakage' can be repaired if the whole scenario -- starting, stopping, and then starting something else -- . . . is mended, or amended into a large piece of perfect symmetry." If Piranesi's "broken symmetries" resist repair, Escher's 20th-century geometrics do not.

In the following passage. I quote from one of Escher's best analysts in order to draw together the geometrics that ruled Escher's lithographs and James's novels. Escher, like James, knew the sense of unity is "due solely to the artist's ingenuity," even as it must rely on only "one facet of a much greater space comprising different angles of view and continuing into infinity." Like James, he acknowledged the world's plurality, but did not take panic, since this fact "signifies neither absurdity nor chaos but a challenge to look for new logical relationships between phenomena." Artist and author alike agreed there are "two different kinds of reality" -- the one we observe and the one we imagine -- and both seized opportunities to contain within a single pictorial space "conjunctions of [these] disparate spatial perceptions." Most importantly, Escher's "Relativity," like James's The Golden Bowl, pursues the "grafting of a narrative onto an abstract structure itself never visible" that "goes on unseen as part of the creative process." In lithograph and novel. we see figures "walking on the same stairs in the same direction

but one ascending and the other descending” made possible by the clever trick whereby “the composition as a whole is constructed using traditional perspective and the relativization of this perspective occurs only within it.”

I conclude with Escher speaking for himself. “If we create a universe, let it not be abstract or vague but rather let it concretely represent recognizable things.” We may not aspire to the infinity, the wholeness, imaged by the Italian masters; “nevertheless” we receive “a fragment” of that infinitesimal whole -- figures, although confronted by seemingly “broken symmetries,” that “continue without interruption to interlock.”

By such means, The Golden Bowl holds shattered pieces of impure crystal within both realms of reality -- that of the effable and ineffable. Its meanings extend far beyond the final page, leaving behind the same emotional impact as does a Bellini painting whose vanishing points disappear with such grace into infinity. Speaking for all creators, James said that if “the root of the matter” lies within your vision, you “are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal.”