Dramas of Decision: Ethics and Secrecy in Henry James, Jacques Derrida and Gillian Rose

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The work presented in the thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed:  


To my father (1930–2001)
Abstract

Ethics is more than difficult; it is an anxious opening onto the realm of judgement and perception. It has to confront desires appearing as principles, be exposed to the unintended consequences of action, and come to terms with the stark and often irreversible brevity of decision-making. No wonder, then, that ethics can dissimulate itself into morality; that it needs the security of ideals and confident codes for behaviour. Ethics, however, cannot be conflated with morality; it hesitates to lay down laws and frustrates expedient answers. It questions more than it affirms. It is a drama of discrimination. True ethics is a disenchanted ethics.

This dissertation argues that such a disenchanted ethics—one that embraces rather than rejects hesitancy, difficulty and indecision—can be found, partially exposed, partially buried, in the late novels of Henry James. Though there is no ethics per se in these novels—in the sense of a conscious project of formulating a system—an ethics developed through obliquity and equivocation is nonetheless inextricable from the reticence of James’s late style, the complexity of his social scenes, and above all, from the themes of friendship, love, secrecy, mourning and decision-making that recur again and again in his broken and disillusioned worlds.

An anxious ethics is not new and is not confined to literature (though this may be its genuine home). Thus the thesis also explores other authors who negotiate—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—similar anxieties: Jacques Derrida, Gillian Rose and, to a lesser extent, Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot and Søren Kierkegaard.

Secrecy is a constant motif in the dissertation and is used to couple James’s oblique approach to the above themes, especially decision-making, to the thought of Derrida and Rose. In the first chapter, secrecy is related to friendship, in the second, mourning. In the penultimate, it is considered essential to decision-making and, in the last, it is associated with love. In James's late novels, the anxious suspensions between intention and effect, speech and silence, innocence and experience, not only preserves the secrecy of the secret—it also inspires other ways of thinking and being. Every chapter deals with the difficulty of decisions as they inflect and inform the themes of love, friendship, mourning and secrecy.
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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Joseph Benedict Gibson, whose gentleness, kindness, loyalty and love were unwavering.

Writing a thesis becomes less about thought and more about friendship. If one had to choose the one friend, the one companion to preserve beyond the present, who or what would you choose? This is not about choosing the work, as a thesis above people, rather it is about choosing the friend (or friends) that help in the preservation of one's relationship to the work. For these are the friends who give one faith when it all seems hopeless.
Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with the relation between ethics and literature, and specifically with the relation of ethics to secrecy in Henry James's late novels—*The Awkward Age, The Wings of The Dove, The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. So first of all, it is a thesis that is on literature. In part, I am concerned with the issue of secrecy on a narrative level, that is, how secrets appear, disappear, are cloaked and exposed in James's fictions. But more importantly, I am interested in how the secret is represented and embedded in James's writing style: how it is inextricable from a mode of representation that equivocates between the given and the withheld, the visible and the invisible, between what is explicit and what is implicit. The thesis is concerned with how James's novels are delicately yet relentlessly sustained by a writing and thinking process which suppresses, diffuses, substitutes yet also preserves the secret. Whether or not "the secret" exists or doesn't exist is not the issue: the biggest secret of all could be that there isn't one.² Through James, I relate the theme of secrecy to ethics, justice, love, the gift, decision-making and friendship by reading his late works, infamous for their opacity: their very difficulty brings these ethico-philosophical questions into the open. I also read alongside James's novels, Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship, The Gift of Death* and a number of

²In Frank Kermode's introduction to *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), he summarises Tzvetan Todorov: "Todorov declares the secret to be the existence of the secret," (26). Maurice Blanchot makes a similar comment in *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), when he suggests that the secret conceals its very lack of secrecy, "its secret being that it has no secret," (19). Indeed this question of the secret's facticity is a part of the risk in believing in the secret; in a certain sense this is much like Derrida's gift, "if there is any," (7) in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The gift, like the secret, operates as a groundless ground in that it gives rise to an exchange economy by being outside it, just as the secret upholds the narrative process by also being partially outside its operations. The fact of either the secret's or the gift's actual or real existence is irrelevant to the affect and or effect each has on the structure of our thought and in terms of James's fiction, its function within a narrative framework.
other texts from his immense oeuvre. I also sometimes criticise Derrida through Gillian Rose's works, *The Broken Middle, Mourning Becomes the Law* and *Judaism and Modernity*.

Superficially it may appear that Rose—and by extension my own work—offers a moral solution to Derrida's aporetics. I don't think this is the case. Rose's concept of the broken middle will be related to the secret in James. By the broken middle Rose means how the seemingly irresolvable tensions between the singular, the particular and the universal, are worked through (but not fixed, synthesised or mended) by that which arises out of their discord, for example, novels, governmental institutions, charity organisations, discussion groups and so forth. (I do not, however, actually go through all of these possible mediations or responses since this thesis is concerned with reading literary and philosophical objects.) The secret, as a damaged vestige of James's fallen, broken worlds, is not only evidential of his society's limitations and failures, it is also a sign of resistance. I argue that what could arise through opposition, a manifestation or a response that is both a product of and a resistance to injustice, to the elided other or to the distraught, fragmented self or subject, is a space of negotiation; one that could address, not perpetuate, irreconcilable relationships and differences. Rose argues that postmodernism has chosen a defeatist path by sustaining and basking in the untenability of oppositions. For example, I think Maurice Blanchot perpetuates paradox without hope since he forsakes the possibility of working through problems via a middle ground and too easily equates it with sentimentality and humanism. This is a "despairing rationalism without reason" as Rose says.\(^2\) I also think, ironically enough, that this kind of response is more sentimental and middle-of-the-road than Rose's approach because by default it glorifies irreconcilable oppositions. In *The Space of Literature*, for example, Blanchot presents mourning as not only endless but also meaningless, making the "event" of death all the more heroic for its transcendent anonymity Blanchot assumes the

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role of an ascetic knight of resignation who prays for the "pure abandon" of an anonymous death:

Grant me the death which is not mine, the death of no one, the dying which truly evolves from death... which is not an event— an event proper to me, which would happen to me alone— but the unreality and the absence where nothing happens, where neither love nor meaning nor distress accompanies me, but the pure abandon of all that.³

How can dying "truly" evolve from death in order to become "the unreality and the absence where nothing happens"? The singularity of death is replaced by the anonymity of death since it is neither yours nor mine but "the pure abandon of all that." Blanchot deploys a similar negative poetic in such works as Friendship and The Writing of the Disaster. His extreme statements on a friendship where there is no sharing, proximity or responsibility offer a form of resistance that is not versatile but futile in their pattern of negation: "a friendship unshared, without reciprocity... This is passivity’s response to the un-presence of the unknown."⁴ Blanchot may try to dislocate the centrality of the subject by using such abstract configurations as "passivity’s response" but the subject is not eradicated only negatively reinscribed. Friendship too is denied in order to be obliquely affirmed as an alliance forged on the basis of a "common strangeness" where what "separates becomes relation."⁵ Blanchot's series of paradoxes—"to the proximity of the most distant, to the pressure of the most weightless, to the contact of what does not reach us"⁶—involves a kind of relation that is pure and ideal in its unbridled anonymity. The very possibility of disrupting Blanchot’s logic is foreclosed by his procedure of employing "contraries whose

⁶Ibid.
dialectical relation he must constantly deny." His reactive poetic refuses to be fragile in its denial of everything. Blanchot is "detached from everything, including detachment" and such "passivity beyond passivity" is not difficult, but too easy. His writings glory in the untenability of opposition. By default, his approach not only perpetuates the very thing he seeks to disrupt—the implied or explicit elisions and injustices of ontology—it is perhaps even worse in that accountability is elided by the reversal that one is the most responsible when one is irresponsible. As Blanchot writes: "responsibility is itself disastrous" and "the temptation to appeal to ethics, with its conciliating function (justice and responsibility)" offers a compromising option that does nothing to "lighten the Other's burden." The brokenness of the middle is walled up by Blanchot's "holy" system of thought.

This thesis, however, is not a tirade against Blanchot. He serves instead as an example of the thinking against which I situate my work and from which I would like to depart. To give a more important example of my argument and line of thinking, through James I specifically criticise both Derrida and Kierkegaard on their reading of the Abraham story. This occurs in Chapter Three where I address the relationship between ethics and decision-making through reading The Ambassadors. That novel, in James's own words, is "a drama of discrimination." In other words, both on the level of style and through the consciousness of his main character, the novel enacts a process of protracted and suspended sacrifice or decision-making. I argue that it is this kind of equivocation, this drawing out of the many instants of the decision which leaves open the introduction of ethics. In my criticism of both Derrida and Kierkegaard, I argue that in the Abraham story there was no decision

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7 Rose, Mourning, 111.
8 Blanchot, Writing, 12.
9 Rose, Mourning, 37.
10 Blanchot, Writing, 27.
in the first place because as a servant of God Abraham didn’t have either a self or a consciousness to begin with in order to make a decision. (Adorno makes a similar claim in Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic\(^\text{13}\)). In this story, Abraham is not a subject in order to have his subjectivity superseded, removed or tested by either the decision or by God. There is no mediation between him and God—his faith makes this impossible. Derrida’s argument, therefore, that the story is exemplary of a situation where the decision is higher or outside the subject, is compromised. The aporetic or untenable opposition between the human and the divine forecloses the moment of decision: there is no decision. I think that Derrida is too rash in his reading of this biblical and didactic tale because in the end there is also no sacrifice. The resolution is important in this context because it is crucial to a “dialectic of faith” that Kierkegaard calls “the most refined and most remarkable of all dialectics”\(^\text{14}\) because it is resolved by divine intervention. There is no divine intervention in James’s novels since they are dramas of equivocation both on a narrative and stylistic level. This is where the idea of the “middle” comes into my thesis.

Justice and ethics begin from the middle. James is a writer of the middle—which is also to say that his works are neither radical nor insipid, neither realist nor modernist. They do not occupy these easy categories, but rest in a liminal zone, a place which can be criticised for being indecisive because it is suspended with and between the either/or boundary. This middle does not divide, it is a divide. It is a place which separates and binds opposites. The middle is equivocal and patient. It is a meeting ground, a place for respite and, above all, for thinking.

The possibilities for ethics and justice exist within and between a beginning and an end that is neither self-fulfilling nor self-defeating. Yet such a no-place is neither mediocre nor weak: it is


acutely and poignantly here and now. Derrida's emphasis on the here and now of justice is neither a concession to his critics nor to traditional philosophy: it is a rigorous statement about the vitality and importance of the present.\textsuperscript{15} This means that ethics in deconstructive terms is always inscribed (in a context, a situation, a history, of course, but also in Derrida's sense of generalised writing), and that to recognise ethics as always inscribed is the first ethical move. The first ethical move of deconstruction is neither bound to an original event nor is it trapped within a determinate telos. Rather, it is a movement that has to be both fragile and uncertain in its rigorous procedure of thinking difficulty, otherwise it would operate as an alternative to classical ontology. In this thesis I interpret the "here and now" as a middle position which does not diffuse or avoid the difficult decision. On the contrary, it is a crucial point of departure through which a problem, a decision, a dilemma or a secret can be approached. The middle is here and now and it is also a "place" that is both fragile and uncertain since its borders are yet to be drawn or decided upon. This middle is not a "ground" or a "place" in itself, for this would immediately foreclose its investigative potential. Rose writes that "wisdom works with equivocation,"\textsuperscript{16} which means that the protracted vacillations of the present have the capacity to turn the uncertain decision or beginning into a movement that is both thoughtful and judicious.

Rose's broken middle is the "Janus-face"\textsuperscript{17} of Derrida's notion of the aporia in that both articulate, however differently, a diremptive relationship between oppositions—between the universal and particular,\textsuperscript{18} the individual and the community, the


\textsuperscript{16}Rose, \textit{Mourning}, 9.

\textsuperscript{17}Rose often uses the expression "Janus-face" to indicate an interrelationship between contrary positions. As she writes: "The aporia or gap is the Janus-face of the universal. Together, universal and aporia are irruption and witness to the brokenness in the middle. This ethical witness, universal and aporetic, can only act with some dynamic and corrigible metaphysics of universal and singular, or archetype and type, or concept and intuition." \textit{Mourning}, 10.

\textsuperscript{18}For Rose, the particular is the singular, see \textit{judaism}, 37-51.
law and justice and even faith and falsehood. Rose's frequent use of the term "diremption" is not only about the break dividing and sustaining opposition, it incorporates the possibility of their rigorously mediated relation. The injustices that arise through and because of discord could be inspected by the introduction of a middle ground. Derrida's aporia and Rose's diremption (or broken middle) are about the paradoxically porous nonpassages which both inaugurate and wall up decisions, beginnings, institutions and, perhaps, even novels. Justice and ethics, philosophy and literature, arise through the diremptions which occur within and between the law and the individual, the universal and particular, or even between intention and effect—because what these gaps leave open is the introduction of another possibility.

Resistance operates as a key element because its obstinacy and obstruction has the effect of delaying, extending and re-negotiating untenable ratios of power. In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida does not try to "eliminate" or "mend" an androcentric, classical model of friendship because this would only reinstate the originality of a patriarchal prototype or reconstitute another equally exclusionary model in its place. Instead, the spirit of his meditation on friendship trembles upon the limits of the fraternal bond which tries to push the untenability of its closed system towards a future time which is also paradoxically here and now. In *Judaism and Modernity* Rose writes: "because... institutions are systematically flawed—does not mean that they should be eliminated or mended," but what it does mean is that they can be re-negotiated, battled-over, rethought and preserved. It is the fight which constitutes a deconstructive reading strategy that seeks to address the injustices and elisions of traditional ontology. Yet in order to operate as an effective means of protest, resistance must also be enduring. Endurance is integral to making, breaking and to promising a future for other existences and relationships. Survival for Derrida institutes, constitutes, diffuses and preserves the interior and exterior, the inheritance and

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20 Rose, *Judaism*, 49.
disappearance of friendship, because it says "yes" first and foremost to existence. This theme of survival will be linked to the secret in James.

Derrida and Rose articulate in disparate ways an intermediary agent, an independent yet participating witness that inspects the edifice of ontology. This witness or third party—a child, a reader, a secret, a gift, a trace or even as the unthought—operates as either or both a limit or hinge point that can instigate moments of ontology's temporary disruption. Because of what takes place during and between instances of injustice, suffering and intolerance, the possibility, desire and promise for an ethical and just relation are brought into existence. Endurance, desire and anxiety operate as intermediary, resisting and negotiating forces that are integral not only to the introduction of the ethical, but moreover, to its resilience. Derrida writes:

between a concept and an event, the law of an aporia, an undecidability, a double bind occurs in interposition, and must in truth impose itself to be endured there. This is the moment when the disjunction between thinking and knowing becomes crucial.

James's later novels dramatise the "disjunction between thinking and knowing." His later writings explicitly and dramatically enact the discontinuities between thinking and acting, intention and effect, seeing and knowing, reading and understanding. In his novels, anxiety is a key element or an effect/affect sustaining these oppositions. It is through and because of the suspension of passion, desire and knowledge that a middle position is invoked. Rose asks: "But where is this middle?... without anxiety, how could we recognize the equivocal middle?" It is the element of anxiety which suspends both our comprehension and sense of unease in "The Turn of the Screw." Yet even this notoriously ambiguous ghost story is not strictly about whether or not the ghosts are real: it is about love and

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the uncertainty of knowing not only the object of one’s affection, but if such a strength of feeling can be identified as love:

‘I see. She was in love.’
He laughed for the first time. ‘You are acute. Yes, she was in love. That is she had been. That came out—she couldn’t tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw it; but neither of us spoke of it…’
‘Who was it she was in love with?’
‘The story will tell,’ I took upon myself to reply. …
‘The story won’t tell,’ said Douglas; ‘not in any literal vulgar way.’

The first unidentified narrative voice and outside witness to this infamous story is pulled up by its second narrator and character, Douglas, who, after this exchange delivers us the Governess’s account of her experiences at Bly house. It is her diary narrative which constitutes the greater part of the fiction. Once Douglas begins his recitation, the governess’s story becomes the focal point of our attention. The dominance and myopia of her perspective effectively sidelines the series of narrators and mediations that frame, interrupt and complement her account. During her story, the question of love recedes into the background. Yet love does not completely disappear from the scene for it remains as a ghostly trace of her anxiety and of our experience and memory of the fiction. In “The Turn of the Screw” the embeddedness of James’s narrative via the series of named and unnamed narrators, characters and written documents implicates diverse and numerous intermediary agents who not only carry the story but who moreover filter our experience of the novel (as Douglas corrects the first narrator’s show of presumption, “‘The story won’t tell… not in any literal vulgar way.’”) James’s world is imaginary, implicit, virtual and uncertain, ultimately because it is highly mediated. Secrets multiply, thrive and endure under such conditions. His works are detailed and intricate and yet for all their finery the dominant element maintaining his houses of fiction is the

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abysses of intention and meaning. Regardless or perhaps even because of one’s critical and interpretive exertions, James’s abyss remains unfathomable, which is also to say that his secrets are preserved. Yet it is through the opposition and the uncanny complicity between the descriptive detail and the vagaries of meaning within his works that we are able to forge a diremptive relationship to his writings. The equivocal middle is implicated through the coexistence and resilience of contrary elements. Simon Critchley’s argument for The Ethics of Deconstruction, although explicitly concerned with Derridean deconstruction, could be applied to the equivocal yet highly calculated nature of James’s prose style:

*deconstruction is a ‘philosophy’ of hesitation, although it must be understood that such hesitation is not arbitrary, contingent, or indeterminate, but rather, a rigorous, strictly determinate hesitation: the ‘experience’ of undecidability.*

James’s later novels enact the “‘experience’ of undecidability” not only because of their oblique perspectives but also because his conversations are regulated and organised through a reluctant and recoiling temporality. The decision to be bound to such a vertiginous process is comparable to “the ‘experience’ of undecidability.” To be proximate to this kind of writing, regardless of its complications and refractions, is a difficult decision because of the shifting and unstable nature of one’s position in relation to the work. Not only difficult, it is risky because it then requires constant sacrifice.

To regard the other, in the everyday sense of looking or caring for someone else, or more abstractly as an element of care given (or taken) to the reading of an object, is not just about the affirmation and preservation of a separate existence—it is about being proximate

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yet careful enough to resist the temptation either to subsume or appropriate such difference. The ethical is brought into operation once there is this element of regard, and this is indicated through the spacing of one’s relationship to others. In my understanding of regard, disregard is not far away. Disregard is not only about the withdrawal of one’s care, it could also manifest as a form of “over care” in the over-reading of an object. Yet by criticising such conscientiousness, what is implied is that a form of equilibrium can be reached between a reader and a text or between a self and an other. A novel, however, is both a determinate and indeterminate object since it is open enough to invite speculation, yet also closed enough to anticipate, resist and foreclose anything other than what is written. There is a battle between proximity and distance—a contest which is also about freedom and determinism. This continuing struggle, a problem which has haunted many a reader and writer, has also troubled the conceptual history of both friendship and love (not to mention the everyday negotiation of their difference). In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida addresses the paradoxes and nonpassages that contribute to the construction, the association and the separation of friendship from love. The question of scale (distance versus proximity) indicates the inadequacy and limitation of judgements and decisions that follow a compare and contrast criterion. Yet regardless, and paradoxically because of this limit, the decision to remain close which still maintains the other’s difference, although not ethical in itself, could lead to an ethical relation. The ethical comes into operation through the experience of being proximate because this experience leaves open an element of risk. In some cases, it is far more risky to be close than to be distant because distance does not ask for the same degree of responsibility. Risks are taken every day, at every moment and in every second. But it is not the risk alone which is important (even if, as the cliché goes, one’s life could be at stake)—it is whether or not one knows and, what is more, whether one could ever possibly know the extent of the risk. This, according to Derrida, is the structural aporia which lies at the heart of the decision. Ideally decisions are also judgements made by a subject after every possible consideration, after everything that can be
accounted for has been accounted for. But not everything can in fact be accounted for because no matter how much one may want to determine an outcome, a writing or a thesis, in the end the consequences of a decision or of an action reside with the other, whether this “other” is a reader or the indefinite future. It is faith which enables one to take risks because it gives us the armour to survive and to accept the consequences of a decision.

If anyone on the verge of action should judge himself according to the outcome, he would never begin. Even though the result may gladden the whole world, that cannot help the hero; for he knows the result only when the whole thing is over, and that is not how he becomes a hero, but by virtue of the fact that he began.

In contrast to Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith” in Fear and Trembling, James’s male protagonists are antiheroic because they interminably delay the moment of action. They are prevented from making dramatic or heroic choices because faith is missing in their society. Yet it is not simply the case that the Jamesian antihero is precluded from taking action because of a personal character fault that could be explained by or extended to a milieu built upon mistrust: such indecision goes further than the level of James’s social scenes and characterisations. James’s mode of address is equivocal. It is suspended by “the intermediate term” which, according to Kierkegaard, is a middle ground missing from Abraham’s story. Although Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling and Derrida’s response to the “dialectical lyric” in The Gift of Death argue that the absence of the intermediate term is what brings into being and exacerbates the “paradox of faith,” throughout this thesis I will argue the opposite. It is precisely because of the disappearance of a middle ground that the

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26 In the Politics Derrida assigns the idea of the sensible decision with Aristotelian thought: “A decision worthy—that is, a critical and reflective decision—could not possibly be rapid or easy, as Aristotle then notes, and this remark must receive all the weight of its import,” (15).
27 Kierkegaard, Fear, 92.
28 Ibid., 107.
29 Ibid., 99.
paradox of faith and the moment of decision are resolved. There is no moment of resolution in James's novels. There is no sense of closure or point of certainty from which either a character or a reader can retroactively navigate in order to reenact the moment of decision.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling* focuses upon the interrelationship between secrecy and inheritance. It also focuses on the aporetic logic through which writing develops, since the institution of literature (and its texts) survive through the double movement of story-telling (recollection) and of story suppression or displacement (forgetting). Yet by favouring the implicit over the explicit, the secret over the manifest, the hidden over the visible, the result of Isaac's restitution (an outcome which makes Abraham's silence and secrecy both signify and significant) is marginalised. Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling* may be motivated by a desire to think the profundity, incalculability, universality, particularity or peculiarity of literature's transmissible and untransmittable secrets, but the specificity of the object in question, the Abraham story, does not do justice to this ambition. It also does not provide an example where the determinism, voluntarism or subjectivity of the decision is dislocated. I have chosen to focus upon this story intermittently, and closely in one chapter, not just because of Derrida's interest in discussing the ethical implications of Abraham's risk, but also because Kierkegaard could be regarded as a virtual literary and historical contemporary of James. His persistent and gradual retelling and embellishments of the story are similar to James's own circuitous yet elaborately subtle process of story-telling. Yet what is important about the resolution and didacticism of the Abraham story is that:

The ruse of this 'dialectical lyric' is not, as *de silentio* rightly protests, to write the System, but to stage a reenactment of its first, focal, fatal, and fateful wisdom:

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that life must be risked in order to be gained; that only by discovering the limit of life—death—is ’life’ itself discovered, and recalcitrant otherness opens its potentialities and possibilities.31

The “potentialities and possibilities” opened up by the rediscovery of “’life’ itself” could also involve the reintroduction of other less recalcitrant things such as love and friendship. Without friendship and love, the desire for justice would dissipate, for these things keep vital our relationship to the world. Ethics arrives within and through our relationships to others—to language, thought and experience. It exists in loving the other and in being her/his friend, and as Derrida reminds us, when there is also no love and friendship, only enmity. The limits of faith, love and friendship do not erase these things but do justice to their possibility and their resilience in the face of discord.

The following chapters are all bound by a logic of the secret. James’s writings represent and enact what could be termed both an ethics and a literature of secrecy. The first chapter, “Secrecy and Friendship,” offers a reading of James’s The Awkward Age in relation to Derrida’s Politics of Friendship and Rose’s Love’s Work. The theme of friendship is central to the chapter because The Awkward Age is a work constructed through and around its perpetual disappointment. I have chosen to read this novel first partly because it is future-oriented. Derrida’s concept of the “democracy to come” will be implicated within the discussion of the friendships in the fiction. Like this yet to be realised ancient and modern political ideal, they too exist as flawed relationships that nevertheless still retain the promise of a better future. That The Awkward Age is concerned with the unnatural suspension of Nanda Brookenham’s coming of age not only brings to the fore the present disappointment of her social retardation, it leaves open the possibility of her future acceptance into the social world. Her suspended condition promises advancement because it is unjustly inhibited and yet this remains a possibility until the end of the

31Rose, Broken Middle, 15-16.
fiction. The awkwardness of Nanda’s extended time of adolescence is offset by the depraved conversations of her mother’s social circle. The novel was written at the turn of the century which further indicates the anxiety of an age on the brink of change.

The second chapter reapproaches the concerns of its predecessor via the questions of mourning and responsibility. *The Wings of the Dove*, arriving after *The Awkward Age* in 1902, will operate as a foundation for rethinking the themes already proposed. The novel begins, to use a phrase of Kierkegaard’s, with a “veritable clearance sale” of bodies. Death and mourning uphold this fiction and this is why the chapter will discuss the role of memory, guilt and survival. Whilst *The Awkward Age* could be described as a future-oriented fiction, *The Wings of the Dove* is informed and dominated by a past built upon regret and tragedy. The determinism of the past is indicated very early on through the introduction of one of its central female characters, a young woman doomed to die. Unlike Nanda, Milly Theale’s potential is not indefinitely suspended by a manipulating mother, but cut short by death. The tragedy of her early death is undercut and diffused by the machinations and schemes of the mourners and seducers who fill her society. Derrida’s *Gift of Death* will feature in this chapter in conjunction with his *Politics* since these works address the question of friendship through the work of mourning. The chapter will associate the work of mourning with a process of seduction. Milly is not mourned in this fiction, she is seduced, yet her seduction is perhaps less subtle than our own experience of the novel.

The third chapter offers a reading of *The Ambassadors* via Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* and Derrida’s *Gift of Death*. The novel follows *The Wings of the Dove* and it is a work steeped even more deeply within the past. The novel is centred on Lambert Strether, a man of fifty-five who finds himself contemplating and

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32In his preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses this surprisingly modern phrase to refer to the de-valuation of ideas in his society: “Not just in commerce but in the world of ideas too our age is putting on a veritable clearance sale. Everything can be had so dirt cheap that one begins to wonder whether in the end anyone will want to make a bid,” (41).
mourning his life once he becomes immersed in, and enchanted by, the capital of the nineteenth century, the "vast bright Babylon" that is Paris. Yet *The Ambassadors* is not simply a novel about a middle-aged man reflecting on a life bereft of experience, for such a life comes to the fore: it appears before him for the first time in Paris. It is through and because of the difference of Paris, a city that cannot even be compared to his bigoted and bland home-town of Woollett, Massachusetts, that Strether is in a position to discriminate. The oppression of his past existence makes his awakening possible, however belated. Paris illuminates and makes resplendent his imagination because it is antithetical to everything that he has known. His perceptions glow through the iridescent lights of the Parisian scene. This city becomes, for the greater part of the fiction, Strether's lover and friend. His aesthetic and intellectual journey throughout the novel ignites a train of thought that supposes "innumerable and wonderful things" about the world and its variegated characters. Strether's process of discrimination becomes an equivocal movement that tries to apprehend the vast spectrum of his experiences abroad. The indecisiveness, beauty and fragility of his discriminations will take centre stage.

The fourth and final chapter will deal with James's last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*. Love will close this thesis because it is one of the most guarded secrets of all in James's fictions. *The Golden Bowl* is about conspicuous consumption. In the age of money, love and friendship appear as anachronistic treasures of a past, romantic and redundant world. The bowl itself, a flawed object, symbolises a purchased and damaged form of love. Yet regardless of its decomposition and obstruction love survives as a fragment, which is indicative of its efficacy and resilience. There are three cities named in this work: Rome, London and "American City." The first city is remembered for its past greatness. It is the home-town of one of the novel's principal male characters, Prince Amerigo. It is through Amerigo's consciousness that Rome appears as an

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33 James, *The Ambassadors*, 63.
34 Ibid., 396.
irretrievable vestige of an old world that cannot be faithfully translated into London society. Instead, it is assimilated, appropriated and purchased. Rome exists in both Amerigo’s and the novel’s past and imagination. The second city, London, provides us with the central location through which the three sets of relationships—the Prince and Charlotte’s, Maggie and her father’s and the ficelles Fanny Assingham and her husband the Colonel—gradually unfold. The third city, American City is identified in the opening pages of the fiction as a final resting place: it is both a tomb and a home. This third and last city is projected into the novel’s imagined future. Charlotte’s punishment for loving her best friend’s spouse, also son-in-law of her father, is to live, in American City by the novel’s conclusion with her passionless tycoon husband. *The Golden Bowl* may be a work about lost, broken and purchased love yet this theme of debasement is disciplined by the formality of the novel’s triune structure. The three aforementioned relationships are framed by the three cities, and these places are emblematic of the golden bowl’s three broken fragments which lead to another work, another piece of artifice that arrives in the form of an unidentified three-volumed text introduced in the last book. These three fragments, cities, marriages and volumes offer three possibilities, three choices and three worlds. Yet it is the last world, American City, that not only provides a solution to the infidelity but inaugurates a new problem: the third option is a place of retribution. The injustice of Charlotte’s bondage and transportation to the new frontier is paralleled by the last scene, which depicts a smothering embrace between her ex-lover and ex-best friend. The proximity and myopia of Maggie and Amerigo’s embrace closes this fiction. Their recovered marriage becomes a domestic new frontier, one that is forged through silence, manipulation, conspiracy and miraculously, love:

> He tried, too clearly, to please her—to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her

35In his preface to *The Ambassadors* James uses the French expression “ficelle” to describe his technique of using some characters as surrogate readers, see pages xliii-xliv. The role of the *ficelle* will be intermittently discussed throughout the chapters.
face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: "See"? I see nothing but you.' And the truth of it had with this force after a moment so strangely lighted his eyes that as for pity and dread of them she buried her own in his breast.\(^{36}\)

In James's writings, friendship and its higher form, love, exist as traces of something "sentient and throbbing"\(^ {37}\) beneath the many veils of his social scenes and through the ornament of his prose style. Love and friendship not only exist and subsist through and because of these obstructions and filters: their concealment not only contributes and attests to their value, it actively constructs them as rarities. In James's novels, these bonds may be represented as dead, absent and disappointed, yet such impediments leave open not only the promise of their future recuperation, but of their absolute beginning:

Such is the secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion, the "highest passion" as Kierkegaard will say: it is a passion that, sworn to secrecy, cannot be transmitted from generation to generation. In this sense it has no history. This untransmissibility of the highest passion, the normal condition of a faith bound to secrecy, nevertheless dictates the following: we must always start over...The epilogue of Fear and Trembling repeats, in sentence after sentence, that this highest passion that is faith must be started over by each generation. Each generation must begin again to involve itself in it without counting on the generation before. It thus describes the nonhistory of absolute beginnings which are repeated, and the very historicity that presupposes a tradition to be reinvented each step of the way, in this incessant repetition of the absolute beginning.\(^ {38}\)


Literature survives because of "the highest passion... of a faith bound to secrecy." James also writes of literature as a passionate endeavour: "literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life." Extraordinary moments of passion, honour and courage appear, reappear and disappear through and because of the ordinary, the everyday. As "The Figure in the Carpet's" disappointed narrator laments: "All my life I had taken refuge in my eyes, which the procession of events appeared to have committed itself to keep astare." James's watchful character can neither change nor disrupt the cavalcade of his life's events for he is but a helpless witness to their passage. The relentless and reiterative procession of both commonplace and rare moments, within the immense spectrum of our experiences, cannot (of course) be faithfully translated, transmitted or encompassed within or between each work or literary culture because the survival of an individual or a collective memory is, paradoxically, only made possible by forgetfulness. As J. Hillis Miller writes:

We cannot remember and be responsible even if we would, since these acts, or rather this single act in one, memory as owning up, depends so it seems, on the persistence of records, traces. Writing, considered as an act, has the inestimable advantage that the traces of it remain... James' prefaces as a whole are the secondary traces and memorials, traces over the original traces, of such an act of re-reading.

Miller's *Ethics of Reading*—a text that not only addresses the responsibility of reading but also its janus-face, writing—is particularly interested in the ethical implications of James's preface writings. James's extensive, meticulous and perhaps even obsessive procedure of writing prefaces (the prefaces to the New York Edition were written years, even decades after the publication of his novels)

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39 James, "The Figure in the Carpet," 380.
40 Ibid., 388.
bears witness to and enact a process of forgetting. What is opened up by this work of memory, which also translates as a work of forgetting, is “a regular mise en abîme of seeing.” Although the repetitive and vigilant activity of re-reading and re-writing may not only promise but provide “visions, deep visions” of “depths within depths,” such a pleasurable experience is nevertheless bound by the law of the written and of its incessant repetition. Faith, memory and forgetting are crucial to the “incessant repetition of the absolute beginning” since they give us the courage to start over. The origin is diffused, remade and preserved by this work of forgetting.

Narrative beginnings originate but are neither original nor strictly derivative because they arise through and because of a dual desire to recover and to better the past. The desire to start over again is driven by the anxiety for an absolute beginning, which is also about the desire to reach an absolute end. These two absolutes or origins are both “untransmissible” and unattainable because they arise through and are constitutive of an enduring yet indeterminate middle ground. It is through and between each generation, not before or after, that a lifetime is conceived, exhausted and repeated. Rose imagines such a beginning to be an anxious inauguration because it suffers from the entropy of “failing toward form.” This failing toward form is about the agony of a “dual-directional” writing (or authorship) that equivocates “from the absolute to the ethical to the aesthetic.” The agonistic struggle between the ethical and the aesthetic, between silence and speech or between illegitimacy and authority, is neither resolved nor indefinitely perpetuated by the production of a work—a literary object or, generally, a life or a history—yet these oppositions can be mediated and negotiated through these things. In The Broken Middle, Rose’s notion of the anxiety of the beginning is not only related to Kierkegaard’s and Kafka’s unconventional authorships and lives (neither married, just like James), but also with the teleological suspension of the ethical in

42Ibid., 109.
43Ibid.
44Rose, Broken Middle, 15, 53.
45Ibid., 53.
the Abraham story. Yet according to Rose, Kierkegaard’s suspension is not just ethical, it is erotic.*6 The allure of an erotic suspension preserves the secrecy of the secret. James’s works indefinitely suspend the erotic but this is not because there are no bedroom scenes, it is because his secrets are preserved. Both the erotic and the ethical operate as virtual or even spectral agents that haunt and frame the edges of his fictions.

What unites the four novels I have chosen from James’s immense oeuvre is expenditure—the losses are excessive and the gains are incalculable. There is no explicit or immediate return in reading his works but there are many reserves, caveats and secrets which exceed calculation. This thesis cannot gather up all of these reserves, just as James’s novels, and later, his preface writings, could not recover and display the entirety of the human scene: “As for the origin of one’s wind-blown germs themselves, who shall I say... where they come from? We have to go too far back, too far behind, to say.”*7 Yet it is in and through the preserved secrecy of a past “too far behind” to recollect that we are at liberty to begin again and to embroider anew.

*6Ibid., 16.
Chapter One: Secrecy and Friendship in The Awkward Age

Literature concerning the secret is almost always organized around scenes and intrigues that deal with figures of death. (Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death)

(Vanderbank) '... it strikes you that, right and left, probably, we keep giving each other away. Well, I dare say we do.'...

'Ah, but what becomes of friendship?' Mr Longdon earnestly and pleadingly asked...

The young man met his eyes only the more sociably 'Friendship?'

'Friendship.' Mr Longdon maintained the full value of the word. (Henry James, The Awkward Age)

In the novels of Henry James, the question “can friendship exist when there is secrecy?” is constantly posed. This chapter proposes to think the relationship between secrecy and friendship in The Awkward Age (1899). In that novel, the secret not only operates as a social weapon of exclusion but as a form of reserve which allows characters to protect themselves, defend other’s interests without them knowing and, indeed, to negotiate the complex social contracts which perpetually threaten to ensare them. But the secret is more than a narrative ploy: it is inextricable from James’s literary technique. Like the secret, his style too operates on the level of suggestion and insinuation. Furthermore, in much the same way that James’s novels do not develop character and narrative, so too is the secret protected from a form of exposure. The secret does not exist in order to be subjugated to a process of revelation or unveiling. The reserve, which is maintained by the interminable concealment of the
secret(s), is also about keeping the faith—it is about allowing the hidden to retain its hiddenness. It refuses to impose upon the hidden a violence which would effectively force it above ground, making it vulnerable to scrutiny and in effect, annulling its secrecy. There is an ethics in this resistance. In a strange sense it is about being the secret’s friend. There is an abstraction or perhaps even an illogic in this thought because the secret is neither a subject nor object yet a thing which attaches itself to these things and, as such, it is capable of being either well treated or maltreated. In terms of James’s fiction, it is not simply a question of whether or not friendship can or cannot exist if there is also secrecy, but rather whether literature can exist without secrecy.

The first three sections of the chapter explore the relationship between friendship and secrecy in both literature and philosophy through the writings of Jacques Derrida and Gillian Rose, providing a theoretical framework for my later reading of The Awkward Age. Sections four to nine of the chapter describe the various forms and permutations of the secret in James’s fictions. In these sections, the relationship between friendship and secrecy will be extended to include a discussion on the work of mourning. In The Awkward Age, the secrecy and power of Nanda Brookenham’s mourning will be read as a form of disruption which promises not only to reassess the failure of friendship within her community, but also to re-evaluate limits of the classical, fraternal bond.

I: Literature and Secrecy

In James’s writings, the significance of the secret has nothing to do with what it is or with what it conceals but with what it promises. The secret operates as a form of desire which refuses to become exhausted. James’s novels maintain the depth, resonance and the tone of the secret’s silence. The secret is bound up with the movement of story-telling—it is an aporia which is intrinsic to the narrative process itself. The secret accompanies the story-teller
because it indicates the unknowable, the impossible limit of one's thought. It is a form of reserve which cannot be pillaged precisely because it is secret. The aporia as the secret and the secret as an aporia is an indication of writing's and thinking's limit. As a boundary, it forces one to think and to write for the first time. In much the same way as making a new friend, or keeping an old friend, one must be prepared to think properly of the other, which could also mean that one must think for the first time, every time.

In "The Art of Fiction" James quite pointedly refers to the secrecy involved in the literary process: "[The novelist's] manner is his secret... He cannot disclose it as a general thing if he would; he would be at a loss to teach it to others." ¹ A writer may follow all of the laws of fiction (harmony, continuity, verisimilitude, etc.) but this does not make him ("her" is excluded from James's criticism) a good writer. For James, the creation of a "good" literary work (as represented by the novel form) is an activity which remains secret to both the writer and to the reader of fiction. Yet surprisingly this mystery does not impair its production. In fact it does more to succour its artistic advancement. James has a tendency to give the literary process a divine character: its genius is treated as something which is secretly, even divinely, passed on to the chosen writer. This does not do justice to the vigilance involved in being a writer—it does not acknowledge the time given over to the production of a work.

This idea of vigilance and commitment in the making of a work can be thought in relation to the time involved in making and sustaining a friendship. Like writing, such a process also demands that one make a commitment, and such responsibility needs to be maintained and developed over a period of time. As Jacques Derrida writes: "Engagement in friendship takes time, it gives time, for it carries beyond the present moment and keeps memory as much it anticipates. It gives and takes time, for it survives the living present." ²

²Derrida, Politics, 14-15.
In *The Space of Literature* Maurice Blanchot makes an association between the creation of the work and the sacred. He writes:

It is as if a secret law required of the work that it always be concealed in what it shows and thus that it only show what must remain concealed, and that finally it show what must stay hidden by concealing it. Why is art so intimately allied with the sacred? It is because in the relation between art and the sacred, between that which shows itself and that which does not—in the movement whereby disclosure and dissimulation change places without cease, appealing and reaching to each other where, nevertheless, they are realized only as the approach of the unreachable—the work finds the profound reserve which it needs. It is hidden and preserved by the presence of the god, manifest and apparent through the obscurity of the divine, and again kept safe in reserve by this obscurity and this distance which constitutes its space and to which it gives rise as though thus come to light. It is this remove that permits the work to address the world and at the same time to reserve comment, to the ever reserved beginning of every story.

Blanchot writes of the complicity between concealment and revelation—one cannot exist without the other: “It is as if a secret law required of the work that it will always be concealed in what it shows and thus that it only show what must remain concealed... ” But what this lengthy passage has the most to say about is the work’s impossibility. Its reserve is so profound that it exists in a realm beyond the human, beyond all things which pertain to the human. As such, it cannot operate in the same orbit as friendship, ethics, responsibility or even secrecy. The biblical, repetitive and prophetic rhythm of the passage is reverent in its reticence. Blanchot’s enigmatic words not only preserve the mystery of the work, they are imitative of its secrecy. The work’s divinity is associated with a process of endless creativity. Blanchot’s work is damned to never reach a point of temporary peace or closure but undergoes a ceaseless

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process of making, unmaking and of remaking itself. The work becomes a death that never dies or a life that never lives because it is not finite but infinite. Blanchot's series of reversals are prohibitive in their circular pattern of negation and affirmation for the work "shows... what must remain concealed" and when it is finally permitted to "address the world," this is the moment when comment is reserved. The sanctity of the work is maintained and reconstituted through an intractable set of relationships mobilised to guard its divinity Blanchot's negative poetic is repeated in other of his writings, especially those in which the question of friendship is foremost. This issue will be dealt with later.

Gillian Rose, in her poignant autobiography, *Love's Work*, offers a personal insight into the production of the work. Although Rose's conception of the work could be thought to cover the fields of literature, philosophy, autobiography and so on, it is more than anything (irrespective of genre) about a lifetime endeavour. In this sense, the work is about a type of loving. The personal and the political intertwine in Rose's notion of the work as a third element which sustains and tempers a love relation:

The woman is not the mother, the man is not the son... the relationship has a third partner: the work. The work equalises the emotions, and enables the two submerged to surface in series of unpredictable configurations. Work is the constant carnival; words, the rhythm and pace of two, who mine undeveloped seams of the earth and share the treasure.

In *Politics of Friendship* the relationship between lover and beloved is also conceived as an alliance that has the potential to produce something other, or more than the initial coupling:

Being loved—what does that mean?... If we trusted the categories of subject and object here, we would say in this logic that friendship (philia) is first accessible on the side of

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4 The hyperbole of Blanchot's eulogy on friendship in *L'Amitie* and *The Writing of the Disaster* is ostensibly criticised by Derrida in his *Politics of Friendship*.

its subject, who thinks and lives it, not on the side of its object, who can be loved or lovable... One cannot love without living and knowing that one loves... This incommensurability between the lover and the beloved will now exceed all measurement and all moderation—that is, it will exceed the very principle of calculation. It will perhaps introduce a virtual disorder in the organization of the Aristotelian discourse.6

The incommensurability between lover and beloved may not overturn "Aristotelian discourse" but the excesses produced through a disproportionate kind of loving could temporarily diffuse (or confuse) a hierarchical structure. The dissymmetry between the lover and the "be-loved" has the potential to become a generous and powerful irregularity. The limit-points which define, align, separate and disintegrate relationships both hold and withhold the promise of inaugurating or welcoming other existences within the torn fabric of their institutions. A child or a work may operate as emblematic or memorial products of a loving friendship but they are also independent entities or witnesses that offer a third dimension to a dual relationship. The profits or excesses produced through the activity or passivity of loving have the potential to relax or loosen the strict bi-polarities of unjust relationships.

Both love and friendship—love in friendship and friendship in love—take their creative form in the work. The work is a product of their sharing. It operates as a third dimension to the lover/beloved relation and as such mediates between the two other parties. In this sense, the work is also a friend. It is the important spacing which separates and makes possible the two other identities. It is a product and a sharing of their travail. The work is both a form of artistic creation and is a witness to love. It is the one who survives.

This element of survival is integral to this question of friendship and literature. Survival is about the work of mourning—it is a protraction of memory—a process which preserves and carries the memory of a friend from the past, to the present and projected into the future. The work is also enduring: its

6Derrida, Politics, 9-10.
survival bears witness to a life, a thought, a friendship, even a love: “If I am to stay alive, I am bound to continue to get love wrong, all the time, but not to cease wooing, for that is my life affair, love’s work.”

II: Reason and Friendship

Friendship, like Rose’s conception of the work, is the product of a loving travail. Its development and sustentation require that one be open and responsive to the other. This opening up to the other, however, also asks for a certain reserve. There is no such thing as absolute exposure—something which Jean-Luc Nancy, Blanchot and above all Levinas are sometimes inclined to think. In spite of the fact that these thinkers write against a tradition which affirms such things as immediate or spontaneous communication, unified subjectivity, absolute presence, their obverse strategy of favouring the other (nonpresence, indirect communication, the fragmented subject and so forth) presents a flip side of ontology whereby its orthodoxy is not disrupted but reaffirmed. By favouring the marginal side of the binary, the central concepts of traditional ontology are not diffused but replaced by even more transcendental ideas. As Blanchot writes:

May ‘68... breached the admitted and expected social norms, explosive communication could affirm itself (affirm itself beyond the usual forms of affirmation) as the opening that gave permission to everyone, without distinction of class, age, sex or culture, to mix... intelligence expressed itself less than a nearly pure

7Rose, Love’s Work, 99.
8In “Speaking Without Being Able To,” in The Birth To Presence, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), Jean-Luc Nancy affirms the immediacy of speech: “Speaking comes by surprise. Or by chance, as a chance. Therefore the “best model’ of speaking is the conversation, the loose conversation, where nobody knows what he or she will say before he or she has said it...” (315). In The Unavowable Community, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1993), Blanchot also asserts the spontaneity of unmediated communication: “Everybody had something to say... ‘Spontaneous’ communication, in the sense that it seemed to hold back nothing, was nothing else than communication communicating with its transparent, immediate self...” (30).
effervescence... a sort of communism declared itself...
No serious attempts at reforms, but an innocent presence... An innocent presence, a ‘common presence’... The event? And had it taken place?

For Blanchot, the student revolutions of May ‘68 were so explosive that distinction, difference and identity fell away to produce “an innocent presence” that could refuse nothing, only admit everything—even memory loss (“had it taken place?”). Yet Blanchot’s glorious community is also wise enough to “instantly” understand itself as a “utopia... without future, therefore without present: in suspension as if to open time to a beyond of its usual determinations.” Blanchot may try to diffuse his idealised version of the events by suggesting that the uprising produced only a moment of “nearly pure effervescence” but the qualifications are not enough to dilute his reverie. In The Inoperative Community, Jean-Luc Nancy exercises similar hyperbolic skills:

In place of such a communion, there is communication... it appears, presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus exists as communication... Communication consists...of finitude... Finitude compars, that is to say it is exposed: such is the essence of community.

Against a totalitarian regime whose members are bound to a common goal, law, religion, or political ideal, Nancy’s inoperative community cannot be contained, determined or dominated by an over-riding belief system or principle. The dream of breaking through the bonds or boundaries of one’s blood-ties, histories, sex, class and culture is again invoked except that it is not attached to the events of May ‘68 but to the “event” of communication itself. Yet unlike Blanchot’s innocent assembly, Nancy’s community “without

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9Blanchot, Unavowable Community, 29-31.
10Ibid., 31.
a bond *and* without communion”¹² is a group defined in and through their shared differences. Although the communicative event is again represented as an ecstatic instance of exposure, contrary to Blanchot’s account, it is not treated as a transcendent moment of unmediated communication but as an experience enacted within and between a definitive and finite horizon: “Finitude compears, that is to say it is exposed: such is the essence of community.”¹³ “Compearance” is about the being-with or the being-together of existences that appear both as single and plural in their shared yet distinct identities. Unlike Blanchot’s utopian or dystopian “‘common presence,’” Nancy’s community is not an undifferentiated mass of beings but a gathering brought together in and through their shared differences and limitations. But where can a community whose members preserve each other’s identity and differences gather? What sort of institution could house, represent, support or mediate such a distinct mass of existences whose members are detached in their shared experience of being-in-common? Nancy does not provide us with the means through which his community could be translated into the everyday. Moreover, does a community have to become inoperative or explosive in order to withstand the pressure or gravity of totalitarianism? Surely there are other intermediary institutions or agencies that could relieve the subjugated, distraught, divided or dislocated subject. The gulf between a dictatorship or totality versus an interminably yet-to-be complete community or fragment body politic is a relationship that cannot be worked through because each position is as tyrannical and extreme as the other in their shared inability to advocate between authority and illegitimacy, captivity and boundless freedom.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., 29.
¹³Ibid.
¹⁴Nancy’s argument is pitted against a supposedly “Hegelian attempt to bring about totality” and against other dangerously “totalising” movements as “humanism or communism” (2). He argues that these theoretical and political institutions reduce both the individual and the community into self-reflective and reconstructive agents of one another’s goals, desires, images, realities and ends.

In his project to rethink community, Nancy chooses to use the word “singularity” over the individual because the former does not retain traces of a Romantic, Roussean or Hegelian consciousness. His uncommon community of
Absolute rule or no rule, government or no government, a bounded community or a boundless community are choices which are not negotiable in their extreme opposition and paradoxical indistinction. But rather than reconstitute a dual logic, one that opposes a totalitarian regime to an inoperative community, what could be reconsidered are the points of interference or break down which obstruct the law from delivering justice or which disable an institution from respecting and maintaining the individuality (or singularity) of its members. Rose argues that ethics and justice do not exist beyond the parameters of already existing institutions, governments, laws and individuals but are firmly entrenched, if not deeply concealed, within the fabric of their organisations and histories. Unlike Blanchot she refuses to consecrate the other identified as an “innocent presence” because such an alternative does not translate, in Blanchot’s own words, into a serious attempt at reform.\(^\text{15}\) Instead she is interested in recovering “the interference of meaning or mediation”\(^\text{16}\) within the crumbling edifice of the law and its faulty reason. Her writings seek to investigate the “breaks between universal, particular and singular, in individuals and in institutions”\(^\text{17}\) so that the gulf between oppositions could be worked through not eradicated, perpetuated or avoided. Rose’s broken middle is the result of a traumatic schism between individuals and institutions, justice and the law, ethics and metaphysics. It appears as a third dimension born out of their violent separation and, as a witness or trace of their estrangement, it has the capacity to advocate singularities, atoms and particles is also not just denotative of human life but also of finite existences in general. Furthermore, such existences are not defined or driven by a common desire or telos.

Self-realization or union is rethought and replaced by division and fragmentation. Nancy’s community is dynamic in its irresolution. Subjects and objects, individuals and works, selves and others are interminably alienated from one another and yet each are bound by their common experience of isolation.

The word totalitarianism is substituted with “immanence” since the latter encompasses “both democracies and their fragile parapets”\(^\text{3}\), and generally covers the will to make of the individual and of his community a visible and palpable work that reflects the history, identity, struggle and imagination of either or both party.

\(^\text{15}\)Blanchot, *Unavowable Community*, 30-31.
\(^\text{17}\)Rose, *Broken Middle*, xii.
their divorce. (In the case of James, as I will argue later, the intermediary agent is associated with the survival of the secret.)

In *Judaism and Modernity*, Rose argues that "postmodernism" has chosen to sacrifice reason in the name of a new ethics whose logic is to negate intermediary institutions that could give relief to such problems as oppression, isolation, injustice and inequality. Her argument against this new ethics is framed by the question of friendship:

Suppose a friend whom you trust more than any other, who taught you the meaning of friendship, lets you down suddenly, and then, persistently, ceases to fulfil the expectations which, over the years, you have come to take for granted, and which, without your being aware of it, act as a touchstone for all your other friendships. Would you give up all your friends? Would you change your expectations of all your friends? Would you simply avoid that particular friend... the first three responses (giving up all friends, giving up the normal expectations of friendship, or giving up the particular friend) seem to be in the wrong order: the last resort coming first... Now, if you substitute 'reason' for 'friendship', then you will see that the last resort has become the first response and remedy.19

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18In *Judaism and Modernity* Rose traces a pattern of thinking within the history of philosophy that has been instrumental in the development of recent theoretical movements she generally identifies as postmodern. Rose writes that the gradual abandonment of Athens, associated with the "demise of Marxism" and the fall of reason, was...

... originally prepared by Nietzsche and Heidegger, has been led over succeeding decades by thinkers across the spectrum of philosophy. From Buber and Rosenzweig to Weil, Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, Levinas and Derrida, all are Jews with a deeply problematic relation to Judaism and to philosophy, which is more or less thematized in their thought. It will be argued in this book that their different ways of severing existential eros from philosophical logos amounts to a trauma within reason itself. (1)

Rose argues that these thinkers have prepared the ground for the development of a new ethics where "'difference' has become the hallmark of theoretical anti-reason." (5).

19Ibid., 2-3.
Rose writes that philosophy's gradual abandonment of reason "misrepresents the alterity of reason; it misrepresents the meaning of reason; and it misrepresents the use being made of reason." The denunciation of reason as an imperialistic idol, ideal or totality whose reign once silenced strangers or beings exterior to its dominion (eg., "woman, the body (its materiality, its sexuality), dialogue, love... whatever is named as dangerous to reason") is done at the cost of friendship because it impoverishes both citizen and alien, friend and enemy, centre and margin. She argues that the apparent remedy of substituting citizen for alien, reason for unreason, sameness for difference, self for other, man for woman, perpetuates a logic of estrangement: it does nothing to disrupt a process that feeds upon a pattern of indictment and suspicion. Both citizen and alien, friend and foe, man and woman are cast out of Athens—an emblem of law and order, reason and the good—in the name of a new Jerusalem, a visionary city that promises autonomy and justice through the Other, the singular, the different and the disenfranchised. She argues that the decision to desert reason in the hope of resurrecting a new ethical order has had the obverse effect of inaugurating a series of mistakes whose emendation is made near impossible because of the persistent re-animation of an antagonistic logic.

Yet within the philosophical fraternity there are signs of discontent. Interestingly enough, such dissatisfaction is made vocal when the question of friendship itself—the fraternal bond which has enjoyed much laudation and esteem throughout the history of philosophy and literature—is chosen as a renewed subject of interest.

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20Ibid., 3.
21In Friendship Blanchot writes: "Reason is totality itself at work... it is achieved not through the effect of some quiet goodwill but through antagonism, struggle, and violence," (107).
22Rose, Judaism, 3.
III: The Fraternal Bond

Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* is very much a work concerned with rethinking the classically fraternal meaning of friendship, and in the process, Blanchot is not only included as one of the fraternizers (something from which Derrida is not exempt) but also, in places, questioned for his unreason. As Derrida writes:

> The moment when [Blanchot’s] hyperbole seems to engage with the greatest risk... is when the ‘without sharing’ and the ‘without reciprocity’ come to sign friendship... Without sharing and without reciprocity, could one still speak of equality and fraternity?... How could such a ‘response’ ever translate into ethical or political responsibility, the one in which, in the philosophical and Christian West, has always been associated with friendship?23

Derrida’s criticism of Blanchot is rhetorical; it does not outweigh the overriding admiration he has for his work and as such the bond between them, as philosophical comrades, is only strengthened by his ostensible objections. The profound aporias in Blanchot’s logic are eventually read by Derrida (after airing his initial concerns) as radical interventions into the canonical representation of friendship. The impossible friendship of Blanchot’s articulation is finally praised for its intractability—for the very transcendence of its unreason. Derrida’s approbation of Blanchot is related to his own project to rethink friendship (and indeed the ethics of decision-making) outside a voluntaristic, subjectivistic and deterministic framework. Derrida may argue that his notion of the “democracy to come” does not structurally follow a biblical form of messianism but is it strong enough to diffuse the historical and religious significance bestowed upon this Judaeo-Christian model? His contradictory democracy which is yet to arrive, yet whose arrival is already marked by the “now” is intimately linked to “the other’s decision in me.”24 Derrida’s democracy to come, “the other’s decision in me” and the

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24 Ibid., 68-69.
future nonfraternal time of friendship are all pushed into an
indefinite, unknowable beyond, one which trembles upon the
"perhaps." This "perhaps" is about the unconditionality of a
subject’s relation to the other and this "other" can be thought of as a
form of alterity within the subject or in a nonsubjective sense, as a
future time which operates outside a human understanding of
temporality. Is this where the inhuman resides, or, in Derrida’s
terminology, where the spectral comes into play? Or is this where the
elided feminine resides?

Simon Critchley’s Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity is critical of
Derrida’s “undoubted homology” in Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas in
that his lack of criticism perpetuates Levinas’s “profoundly
androcentric conception of friendship.” Critchley pulls him up for
reinscribing woman’s exteriority:

Friendship between women is only admitted on analogy
with fraternity. To that extent, I even have difficulty
with Derrida’s thought experiment (for it is nothing
more than that) in Adieu, where he suggests reading
Levinas on the question of the dwelling and the
feminine, as a kind of ‘manifeste feministe.’

Woman’s exteriority is essential to sustaining the fraternity because
she operates as an originary absent counter-point to its operations. In
other words, she is positioned as an “essentially pre-ethical, opening
of the ethical basis of community.” As a nonfoundational ground
to the fraternity she is obliquely sanctioned and yet her untraceable
originality also maintains her exile from his community. The fact
that a friendship between a man and woman, and moreover,
between a woman and woman is thought in relation to the classical
bond reinforces and reenacts her exclusion from the fraternity. But
how does one begin to think of another model, of another friendship

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25 Ibid., 70.
26 Simon Critchley, Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
or even to imagine a different relationship without some recourse to the previous regime? History may impose an immediate limit and determinism upon the process of thinking a sororal alternative or disruption, but it is also integral to the possibility of beginning an investigation. A beginning must be made somewhere regardless of the fact that the procedure may have to begin by being derivative. Yet it is not necessarily Derrida's recourse to analogy that is disturbing but his eventual approbation of Blanchot's supposedly radical position on friendship:

And yet, to the proximity of the most distant, to the pressure of the most weightless, to the contact of what does not reach us—it is in friendship that I can respond, a friendship unshared, without reciprocity, friendship for that which has passed leaving no trace. This is passivity's response to the un-presence of the unknown.29

Derrida's first reply to Blanchot's sequence of declensions seems disapproving:

How could such a 'response' ever translate into ethical or political responsibility... If this language seems 'impossible' or untenable with regard to the common sense of friendship, where it has commanded all the canonical discourses we have mentioned thus far, it is also because it is written in terms of a writing of the disaster.30

Blanchot's apparently extreme statement is quickly recuperated—it is welcomed back into the fold because it speaks of "the disaster at the heart of friendship, the disaster of friendship or disaster qua friendship."31 The disaster is another name for the limits, the blind spots or the sins which form, inaugurate and renew this bond. The logic of Derrida's argument is faultless except that Blanchot's statements are neither radical nor transgressive but conservative in

29Blanchot, Writing, 27.
30Derrida, Politics, 296.
31Ibid.
their unacknowledged perpetuation of a dual logic. Blanchot's series of negations—"a friendship unshared, without reciprocity, friendship of that which has passed leaving no trace"—may present a relationship that is "bondless" (or even boundless) yet his disclaimers only negatively reinscribe the bond of friendship. In other words, friendship is unfettered because it is restrained, unlimited because it is limited, distant because it is proximate and ungenerous because it is generous. Blanchot's paradoxes are not difficult but direct in their pattern of assertion by default. The equivocal middle is walled up by a reactive poetic that asserts friendship's failure in order to negatively affirm its strength. What is elided by his procedure of employing "contraries... he must constantly deny" is mediation. There is no conceptual or personal reserve left over in his reduced relation for re-drawing and rethinking the boundaries of his relationless relation. Blanchot's logic is neither porous nor fragile in its rigid pattern of assertion by default in order to instigate a process of reassessment. Rather than trust one friend, the friend in the self, in the subject, the law, in reason, in the man or in the woman, Blanchot chooses to trust no-one: "In this sense, the real sin against friendship is a breach of trust." This issue of trust and its consequent breach is nevertheless integral to beginning a process of reconciliation—of rethinking those lost or as yet untheorised friendships. For it is at this point of failure, whereby the disaster has almost succeeded in rupturing one's ability to trust, that the promise of trusting again is made possible—but on a different level. This does not mean, however, that such a breach negatively or automatically attests to a relationship's value, strength or recuperation. Rather, it is to say that breakdown has the effect of suspending an oppositional economy making way for a third possibility.

The later novels of Henry James begin their stories after this breach in trust. The struggle with disappointment is what fuels his characters' desires, intrigues and, moreover, friendships. The disaster

32 Rose, Mourning, 111.
33 Critchley, Ethics — Politics — Subjectivity, 256.
has already made its mark upon the verbal landscape of his drawing
rooms and as such the conversations, the actions, inactions and
thoughts of his protagonists operate both for and against its future
reparation. What makes this double movement of recuperation and
disintegration possible is the existence, or rather, the resilience of the
secret throughout his novels. This introduces again, the question of
survival. Survival is essential to friendship and it is also inseparable
from mourning. Derrida and Blanchot remind us of the terrible fact
of forgetting. The very possibility of memory is that it cannot
recuperate everything, it either edits or embellishes upon the past.
Yet it is precisely in these areas of loss or excess that the quality of a
friendship is allowed to appear. To use Blanchot’s terminology, this
“profound reserve” of memory is a non-place which remains
concealed and it is through the resilience of such concealment that
the gift of friendship and even love is interminably renewed. The
secret, this reserve of memory, endures throughout all
circumstances, all relationships and narratives. The later novels of
Henry James bear witness to its resilience.

In James’s works, the secret may initially operate as a device of
omission, but this is supplanted by the sheer number of secrets. Some
may appear incalculable: some may even elude its author. These are
the secrets which present the reader with a profound reserve, with a
fund of possibility which pays homage to its generosity. These secrets
are not divine by nature since they are very much a part of the
human scene, of the drama of conversation which unfolds and
refolds in every line.

IV: The Sacrifice of Friendship

*The Awkward Age* is a study in secrecy.\(^34\) It is also a novel which
dramatises the secret’s repeated betrayal. There is no friendship in

\(^{34}\)Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966). All references
to this edition will appear parenthetically throughout the body of the chapter.
The Awkward Age. In the words of Vanderbank: "we keep giving each other away." In such a situation, friendship cannot exist. The adhesion of Mrs Brookenham's social group is dependent upon the repeated sacrifice of the other. There is an explicit voyeurism in this desire to offer the other up to the derision of the group. In this novel, friendship operates as an aporia; it is brought forth by its sheer absence. In this sense, The Awkward Age is also a study in what becomes of friendship after it is lost. Yet what is so paradoxical about this procedure of betraying confidences, leaving the other open to ridicule, and making the individual vulnerable to the judgement of their community, is that a person cannot be completely disarmed. The conversations which take place in this novel may be the vehicle through which a character's secrets are brought to the surface, but the language itself and the shared social discourse of the community cannot eradicate the fact of its mediation. Mediation is a form of reserve which punctuates and spaces our relation to the other and to our self. This "reserve" is always in operation, even during those scenes where the moment of sacrifice appears in its most abject form. One scene indicative of such resilience is when Mrs Brookenham attempts to sacrifice her only daughter, Nanda, in the company of her two would-be suitors, Vanderbank and Mitchy:

The subject of this eulogy had meanwhile returned to her sofa, where she received the homage of her new visitor. 'It's not I who am magnificent, a bit—it's dear Mr Longdon. I've just had from Van the most wonderful piece of news about him—his announcement of his wish to make it worth somebody's while to marry my child.' ...

Mitchy had seated himself, but Vanderbank remained erect and became perhaps even slightly stiff... 'Even if it is decidedly fine'—he addressed his hostess straight—'I can't make out, however, quite why you're doing this. I mean immediately making it known.'

'Ah, but what do we keep from Mitchy?' Mrs Brook asked. 'What can you keep? It comes to the same thing,' Mitchy said. 'Besides, here we are together, share and share alike—one beautiful intelligence. Mr Longdon's "somebody" is of course Van. Don't try to treat me as an outsider.'

Vanderbank looked a little foolishly, though it was but
the shade of a shade, from one of them to the other. 'I think
I've been rather an ass!' (219)

By making Vanderbank's secret immediately known, Mrs Brook
betrays her daughter, her friend and her mother's lover, Mr
Longdon. It is publicly made known in this scene that Mr Longdon
has not only nominated but also financially backed Vanderbank to
become Nanda Brookenham's future husband. Mr Longdon's
considered and discreet proposition to Vanderbank (made in an
earlier scene in the late hours of his country retreat) was an offer
made in confidence. In this previous scene between the men at
Mertle, Vanderbank protests against even the mere mention of a
specific sum of money and as such he appears to respond to Mr
Longdon's proposal by being equally discreet and respectful in
manner. Previous discretion, however, is broken by Vanderbank
when he makes their private conversation known to Nanda's
mother. In making the decision to tell Mrs Brook, Vanderbank
betrays Longdon, Nanda and himself. His betrayal is instantly
exacerbated by the inclusion of Mr Mitchy into the now rapidly
fading secret. By sharing Vanderbank's secret with Mitchy, Mrs Brook
is also guilty of multiple acts of betrayal. The secret shared is no
longer the property of anyone. What was once Longdon's secret
underwriting of a marriage for Nanda (formed under the influence
of the Duchess, a woman who certainly is not innocent of
manipulating people for her own selfish ends) became a shared secret
once he presented his idea to Vanderbank. This confidence was then
further dispersed by the later inclusion of Mrs Brook and Mitchy.
This sharing out of a confidence brings to the fore the predatory
nature of James's social scene. Exposure also has the effect of
compelling these social predators to acknowledge their own
disloyalty and dissimulation.

The secret operates as an element which simultaneously binds
and unbinds James's social fabric. Sharing the secret is at once
inclusive and yet exclusionary. This double function introduces the
coeexistence of disparities within the apparently seamless landscape of
the social. In *The Golden Bowl* (as we shall see in the final chapter),

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the bowl operates as both a central and recurrent object in which all of the secrets which once contained were later dispersed. This bowl serves to expose the secret love affair between Charlotte and Amerigo. It therefore offers both the gift of knowledge and the proof of betrayal. It is also an object which gives Maggie the opportunity to exact her own form of justice. In this circumstance, as an imperfect embodiment of a secret, the bowl is essential to Maggie's private campaign to preserve her marriage. Interestingly though, her process of reparation only takes place once the bowl is ritualistically shattered. It breaks into three parts—a fragmented trinity which becomes symbolic of the three broken relationships and, indeed, of the three cities named in the book. In *The Awkward Age*, what is inadvertently demonstrated by the sharing out of Longdon's secret is the failure of total revelation: an individual's motives, desires and loyalties can never be completely laid bare. Such a secret's divulgence can only represent a partial view of the situation—it does not fully reveal Longdon's motivation in making such a proposal: one can only infer that he did it for Nanda's future happiness and also because he was once and is still in love with her deceased grandmother. These motivations, however, remain private. The third-person narration never once intrudes into Longdon's consciousness. Although Nanda is central to his plan, her possible knowledge and consequent attitude toward Longdon's bribe is another silence which is never revealed. Vanderbank's betrayal therefore remains but a superficial revelation. Moreover, it has the opposite effect of protecting other, deeper secrets—ones which are perhaps closer to the human heart. The exposure of this particular secret also provides Vanderbank with the opportunity to make an important social criticism of his "friends" and as such, the efficacy of the secret as a spectral agent remains intact. Vanderbank's ensuing speech is narrated in such a way that the scene in Mrs Brookenham's sitting room is directed like a subtle stage play, one whose main concern is with the domestic minutiae of the upper middle class:

Vanderbank, cultivating his detachment, made at first no more reply... The only token he immediately gave was to
get up and approach Mitchy... As if then for a better proof of gaiety he presently seized him by the shoulders and, still without speaking, pushed him backward into the chair he himself had just quitted. Mrs Brook’s eyes, from the sofa, while this went on, attached themselves to her visitors. It took Vanderbank, as he moved about and his companions waited, a minute longer to produce what he had in mind. ‘What is splendid, as we call it, is this extraordinary freedom and good-humour of our intercourse and the fact that we do care—so independently of our personal interests, with so little vulgarity—to get at the idea of things’... ‘What’s really “superior” in [Mrs Brook] is that, though I suddenly show her an interference with a favourite plan, her personal resentment is nothing... she offers me the truth, as she sees it, about myself, and with no nasty elation if it does chance to be the truth that suits her best. It was a charming, charming stroke.’ (222)

Vanderbank’s sardonic speech is clearly critical of Mrs Brookenham’s behaviour. It is also generally scathing of the “extraordinary freedom and good-humour” of their society. Mrs Brookenham’s apparently unselfish ability to show Vanderbank the truth about himself refers to an earlier comment where she predicts his inability to follow through on Longdon’s proposal. Mrs Brook knows and makes it publicly known that Vanderbank is incapable of such a commitment. At the dénouement of the novel, he proves the verity of her prophecy. The reason or reasons Vanderbank reneges on the plan remain unknown. Again one is left to infer that the thought of Mrs Brookenham as a mother-in-law was perhaps too overwhelming—or maybe he didn’t care enough for Nanda. But the opposite also could have been the case: perhaps he cared too much to make her his wife. Or is this just an example of a weak Jamesian antihero? These possibilities are left as possibilities. Whilst these secrets remain safe, the imagination is encouraged to do its rounds. But what is particularly unethical about Vanderbank’s behaviour is the implication of his marriage renunciation—he does not even care to tell Longdon of his decision which is made through his silence. His inaction, his indecision, is similar to Merton Densher’s in The Wings of the Dove as we shall see in the next chapter. Moreover,
Vanderbank's prolonged silence on this issue invokes one of the most enduring secrets in James's fiction: the question of marriage. For the moment, however, this particular secret will remain concealed. Following Jamesian protocol, it will for the time being exist in the background in order to support those other, perhaps less daunting concealments.

V: The Operation of the Secret

In James's novels there is never just one secret, there are many. One secret, perhaps the main secret, is always foregrounded or upheld by another and sometimes even by a series of other concealments. The secret undergoes a series of displacements or substitutions. Its efficacy is often replaced by other equally potent mysteries. The secret does not offer one obstacle but many, and these preclusions contribute to the general feeling of claustrophobia and irresolution permeating James's later works.

The interminable deferral of the secret's revelation is repeatedly played out, albeit with variation, in many of his fictions. For instance, in *The Ambassadors*, the primary secret in this novel has to do with the nature of Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet's 'attachment,' which Strether is originally sent out from America to investigate. This first mystery, however, is quickly substituted by a series of other secrets, one of which has to do with the Newsome manufacturing empire—what exactly do they manufacture? Other concealments involve the nature of Miss Gostrey's interest in Strether, Chad's true intentions to Madame de Vionnet and the elusive Mrs Newsome, a character who is absent throughout this novel yet whose nonpresence remains central to the suspension of the tension. *The Golden Bowl* is also built upon a

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35It is implied that the company manufactures toilets but this is never clearly explained by Strether or by any of the Newsome clan. The exact nature of the article or articles made by their industry is therefore still open for speculation. In this way, the narrative installs a secret at the heart of the Newsome's wealth and social position. Furthermore, Strether's resistance to satisfy Miss Gostrey's curiosity concerning mysterious article indicates his reverence and fear of Mrs Newsome.
series of secrets. The two main concealments are to do with the secret love affair between Amerigo and Charlotte, and then in the second book, when the scenario reverses after Maggie Verver acquires a discreet knowledge of their liaison, the question of her reaction. These secrets are supported by the mystery of the bowl itself, whose possible or actual crack is emblematic of broken vows and love attachments. The bowl makes its first appearance in this novel as an object of exchange: it is first discovered in an antique store and as a commercial article, the secret of its origin, of its past, has already been and will always be displaced by the history of its circulation.

The logic of one secret begetting another is repeated in *The Wings of the Dove*. This novel begins with two central secrets, the first involving a secret engagement between Merton Densher and Kate Croy, the second to do with the unknown nature of Milly Theale's illness. Whilst the former secret is made visible to the reader, the latter is never made known—the reader is left to infer that Milly died from consumption. These two secrets are substituted by others: the contents of a letter Milly wrote to Densher just before her death, the question of Densher's possible love for Milly after her death and Milly's moment of death, a scene concealed by the novel. Like *The Wings of the Dove*, "*The Aspern Papers*" is a tale whose series of events has the effect of rendering the missive mute. The narrative of "*The Aspern Papers*" is both foregrounded and sustained by the mystery concerning the secret letters of a famous poet, Jeffrey Aspern. The relationships within this short story are bound by the question of whether or not these papers actually exist and if so, how the protagonist will procure them from the poet's surviving, elderly yet extraordinarily shrewd lover. The name of the protagonist-narrator is a detail never revealed. This is not uncommon when James uses the first-person narration. In his preface to *The Ambassadors* James's motive in withholding the proper name could be ascertained from the comment that the first-person narration has the potential to unleash "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation."36

The withdrawal of the name in "*The Aspern Papers*" contributes to

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36James, preface to *The Ambassadors*, xlii.
the general sense of anxiety pervading the fiction.

Throughout "The Aspern Papers," the actual location of the love letters is uncertain. Their alleged hiding place (somewhere in Lady Juliana's bedroom) is fiercely guarded by the poet's surviving lover. The secret papers are central to the formation and characterisation of the novel's three relationships and, moreover, like most secrets, they are also the source of the dramatic tension. By the dénouement of the tale, the existence of these papers is confirmed through their sacrificial destruction by fire. Their existence is corroborated by their subsequent destruction. This is typical of James's oeuvre. The central secrets in James's works (which take the form of letters, books or ornaments) are rarely divulged, if ever. The event of the secret's material destruction does not signify its loss since the efficacy of a secret is associated with its prolonged invisibility which does not erase its power, but keeps its silence. The secret is therefore able to remain faithful to its mystery even in its destruction. This is where the question of the ethical enters into James's fictions. The preservation of the secret is about keeping the faith, it is about letting the other, the secret, remain a secret.

VI: Distance and Promixity

The preservation of the secret shares a strong affinity with the work involved in maintaining a friendship. In a similar fashion to the secret, a friendship also asks that one remain faithful and vigilant. This also requires that the friend, whether platonic or sexual, resist the temptation to take possession of the other, as beloved or friend. In order to sustain a friendship or a love relation, both parties need to be able to coexist independently of each other and of their bond. The history of classical thought on friendship (its representative thinkers are Aristotle, Cicero, Francis Bacon and Montaigne37) has

37Derrida's Politics deals with the work of all of these writers, except Francis Bacon, who should not be left out of this group since he also offers yet another patriarchal interpretation of the fraternal bond. See Bacon's essay "Of Friendship"
always privileged the friendship bond over a love relation. Friendship is valued more than love because it is equated with distance, freedom, equality and independence whereas the latter is associated with proximity, dependence and restriction. The privileging of friendship over love can be summarised as the affirmation of distance over proximity. The love relation is denigrated by classical philosophy because of the emotional proximity that comes with the sexual act. The borders which define friendship cannot be sustained in a love relation and that is why the latter is given a lower rating as it apparently does not allow for the free and equal co-existence of two agents. There is an obvious sexism operating in this classical model of friendship. By privileging friendship over love, what is elided is the singularity of each bond. It is also insensitive to the idea that friendship and love (philia and eros) sometimes cannot be easily differentiated since they are often intertwined. Furthermore, such a model also presumes that all love relations are heterosexual and all friendships are homosocial. Even if all love relations are heterosexual, what is also not properly considered within this narrow definition is the important issue of gender. This issue of gender difference, however, is only ever taken into account when it is about the woman’s supposed incapacity for friendship because of her sexual disposition. She is indicted for her sexuality which is made synonymous with her supposed emotional and intellectual inferiority. As Derrida reminds us of Nietzsche’s misogyny: “She is at once tyrant and slave, and that is why she (still) remains incapable of friendship, she knows only love.” Even if she “knows only love” and even if the love relation is too proximate, why does it have to mean the end of freedom and equality? Is not love, like Derrida’s notion of justice, a concept which cannot be made subject to a deconstruction because it is the very reason or ground for making a deconstruction? It provides us with a reason to achieve such things as equality and freedom.

Succumbing to proximity does not have to mean the end of

in The Essays or Councils Civill of Francis Bacon Lord Verulam (London: J. M Dent & Sons, 1918), 80-86.
38Derrida, Politics, 282.
friendship because there will always be distance, which also means that all relationships, however close, will always be mediated. This mediation may take the form of the community at large, the form of language, the difference in gender, culture, class or even intellect. In James’s novels, as I have argued, this form of mediation also comes in the form of a secret. Derrida writes of the time of friendship as such a form of mediation. The importance of time to a friendship is also testimony of the duration and history of a bond. Time gives to friendship the space of difference. It allows for the process of differentiation to take place between friends. The invisibility, duration and constancy of time is essential to any relationship because it allows for concurrent proximity and distance.

Existing either dependently or independently, closely or remotely, inseparably or inseparably from the other is also important to the work of mourning. Derrida refers to two kinds of mourning: the assimilation or incorporation of the other into one’s bereavement, and the failure to appropriate this other into one’s identity. Derrida describes the first kind as essentially narcissistic because it does not remember the other as an other since he or she is incorporated into the identity of the one who mourns. The proximity of this experience is very similar to the classical interpretation of the love relation since it too encroaches upon the identity of the other. Both experiences, a narcissistic work of mourning and a passionate

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39 Throughout the Politics of Friendship, Derrida makes constant reference to the work of mourning in relationship to friendship. What I am describing in the body of this chapter, though, comes directly from his “Work In Progress” lecture, delivered at the Seymour Theatre Centre, Sydney, Friday 13th August, 1999.

40 James’s procedure of rewriting his novels through the form of the preface is indicative of a refusal to bury the dead. The perpetual resurrection of the work, like the body of Lazarus, denies the body of the work its final resting place. James’s decision to revisit his novels could be associated with a narcissistic work of mourning since it is about his resistance to allow the other, as the novel, to exist independently from his authorship. And yet James’s meticulous re-examination of his works is also indicative of the depth of his engagement with his novels and with the experience of writing in general.

Although James’s prefaces offer a guideline to reading his novels, they cannot (of course) prevent or stifle the production of other kinds of reading practises or responses. In fact they perhaps do more to foster different kinds of reading strategies or interpretations because his prefaces are at once theoretical, autobiographical and anecdotal.
love relation, are classically thought to eradicate the space of difference (or distance) because of the overriding desire for possession. The second form of mourning offers, according to the model described by Derrida, a more remote experience of the other in that the object (or subject) in question is allowed to remain foreign to the mourner. This presents a paradox because in order to succeed in the work of mourning one must also fail. This is an impossible mourning. Derrida argues that ethics arises through an impossible or failed mourning because its point of break down paradoxically provides the conditions through which mourning and memory are made possible. But how can distancing oneself from the other become ethical or instigate ethics? Is this about the power of a higher demand or efficacy of a nonfoundational force that is greater than the subject and a subject’s relation to the other? Does this mean that responsibility in mourning is neither properly “yours” nor “mine” but exists anterior to these possessive pronouns? Such an outside (or inside) interruption could bring to an oppositional economy a third dimension. The appearance of a third partner could instigate a discursive relation between each work of mourning which could effect a renegotiation of their boundaries.

In The Wings of the Dove, Merton Densher’s guilt over his treatment of Milly Theale during her life time prohibits him from mourning her as a separate person. His work of mourning has much in common with the first form of grief in that he laments his own agency in both her death and life. His mourning, generated by guilt, is self-centred. By contrast, Lambert Strether’s work of mourning shares an affinity with the second form. Yet it is not identical to it since his past life (which by analogy takes the place of a deceased other) is neither completely dislocated from nor assimilated into his present situation. Strether’s mourning, however, is perhaps even more engaged than this second possibility in that it does not try to alienate the other (the past) in order to be faithful. His work of mourning becomes a process of discrimination that is a highly responsive and reflective movement that vacillates between the past and the present. Memory is used as a means through which the mistakes of the past can be worked through in order to provide for a
better future. This form of mourning entails the assumption of responsibility. His past experiences are able to coexist with his present situation. The past is neither denied its history nor is the present denied its process of remembrance.

In *Mourning Becomes the Law* Rose makes an analogy between a grief which refuses consolation, and postmodernism: "Post-modernism in its renunciation of reason, power, and truth identifies itself as a process of endless mourning, lamenting the loss of securities which, on its own argument, were none such."41 The nihilism of an endless mourning is, according to Rose, the result of a "severance of ethics from metaphysics."42 She points out that "the search for a new ethics,"43 an activity organised around the repeated denunciation of metaphysics, has begun a cycle of grief that is unequivocal in its rigid pattern of indictment. She writes: "Ethics and metaphysics are torn halves of an integral freedom to which they have never added up"—which also means that their dissymmetry is not prohibitive but accessible to a process of re-evaluation. Rose argues that through the "creative involvement"44 of a reassessment, the possibility for redrawing and shifting the boundaries between oppositions could be achievable. The shared integral freedom within and between each position—ethics and metaphysics, the particular and universal, self and other, love and friendship—provides a starting point from which to begin a process of reassessment. The broken middle arises through the points of intersection, interruption and break down which sustain and diffuse each position. The boundaries between love and friendship are flexible not only because their differences are difficult to gauge but also because each bond is driven by an integral freedom that is crucial to their survival as living bonds of a past, present and future.

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41 Rose, *Mourning*, 11. As already mentioned Rose's understanding of postmodernism is associated with a particular philosophical tradition, as she writes: "From Marx to Heidegger (and before and beyond), it has become *de rigueur* to charge your predecessor with adherence to 'metaphysics', and to claim your 'new method' to be exclusively and exhaustively, the overcoming of the tradition," (1).
42 Ibid., 2.
43 Ibid., 10.
44 Ibid., 12.
In *The Awkward Age*, the survival of many secrets has the dual effect of dissolving and renewing many of the novel’s central relationships. The endurance of the secret not only mediates the social sphere, it also contributes to a general sense of unease underpinning the fiction. Anxiety operates as a key element which keeps the relationships within Mrs Brook’s social circle both vital and edgy. Yet the silences, omissions and doubts which both punctuate and mediate Mrs Brook’s society not only reveal the shortcomings and limits of the group, they also have the capacity to inaugurate other possibilities and trusts. As we will see later in the chapter, the breakdown of trust, confidence and care in the mother-daughter relationship, albeit disappointing, eventually leads to a shift in the balance of power. Nanda may initially operate as a foil to her mother’s social prominence and yet the protraction of her uncertain position within the community provides her with the opportunity and leverage to forge a social identity that is independent of her mother’s.

**VII: The Derivative Bond**

*The Awkward Age*’s Vanderbank refuses to enter into a work of mourning. His rejection of memory could be criticised as unfriendly because of its apparent disregard and insouciance. Yet such neglect could also stem from a desire to preserve, through his silence, the secrecy of his past or absent friendships. For example, Vanderbank claims to Nanda to remember none of his friends:

‘You’ve already stayed here then?’...

45 Mrs Brook also seems to suffer from the same kind of amnesia as Vanderbank. In a conversation with the Duchess, she admits that she cannot remember how their mutual friend Mr Mitchy came to be a part of their group: “Mrs Brookenham meeting her friend’s eyes, looked for an instant as if trying to remember. ‘I give it up. I muddle beginnings.’” The Duchess replies in a more positive fashion to this memory lapse: “‘That doesn’t matter, if you only make them,’” (63). Mrs Brook seems uncertain about the importance of making a beginning, which is indicative of her general scepticism. By refusing to affirm the significance of beginnings she is one of those characters who work against recuperation.
'I've stayed here—yes, but not with Mitchy; with some people or other—who the deuce can they have been?—who had the place for a few months a year ago or two ago.'

'Don't you even remember?'

Vanderbank wondered and laughed. 'It will come to me. But it's a charming sign of London relations, isn't it?—that one can come down to people this way, and be awfully well "done for" and all that, and then go away and lose the whole thing, quite forget to whom one has been beholden. It's a queer life.' (158-159)

Later in this conversation, Vanderbank's possible unconcern is suggested further when he does not recall the name of a friend who was once thoughtful enough to make him a gift of a cigarette case:

She continued to handle the cigarette-case, without, however, having profited by its contents... She rubbed her cheek an instant with the polished silver, again, the next moment, turning over the case. 'This is the kind of one I should like.'

Her companion glanced down at it. 'Why, it holds twenty.'

'Well, I want one that holds twenty.'

Vanderbank only threw out his smoke. 'I want so to give you something,' he said at last, 'that in my relief at lighting on an object that will do, I will, if you don't look out, give you either that or a pipe.'

'Do you mean this particular one?'

'I've had it for years—but even that if you like it.'

She kept it—continued to finger it. 'And by whom was it given you?'

At this he turned to her smiling. 'You think I've forgotten that too?'

'Certainly you must have forgotten, to be willing to give it away again.'

'But how do you know it was a present?'

'Such things always are—people don't buy them for themselves.'

She had now relinquished the object, laying it upon the bench, and Vanderbank took it up. 'Its origin is lost in the night of time—it has no history except that I've used it... ' (160-161)
Like the golden bowl, the origin of the cigarette case has disappeared, except that it has not been erased by the history of its commercial transactions, but by its owner’s professed amnesia. Vanderbank is either hesitant to give away the name of the absent friend or lover because he wants to protect his or her identity, or he has actually forgotten the name of the donor. He even goes so far as to suggest that the case was not a gift in the first place in order to altogether circumvent Nanda’s inquiry. Yet these uncertainties are indicative of the text’s innumerable aporias, ones which arise and disappear in every conversation. Regardless and paradoxically because of these possibilities, Vanderbank breaks the law of friendship to his present interlocutor by refusing to divulge the name of the absent friend and in so doing protects the bond of friendship. In this instance, the secret appears in both a generous and ungenerous capacity. It is used both as a form of exclusion and of preservation. Vanderbank’s omission is concurrently thoughtless and thoughtful. It is this structural aporia that is not only constitutive of friendship but also of the secret.

Friendship requires the conscious act of decision-making. In order to be a friend, one must make a decision and in order to remain friends, one must continue making this decision throughout the duration of the friendship. This element of decision-making is related to the temporal commitment in making and sustaining a friendship since it “implies decision and reflection: that which always takes time.” Yet Vanderbank is evasive in his decisions. Mrs Brook takes an active role in making one particularly important decision for him by deciding that he will renege on Longdon’s offer of marriage. By not contradicting her judgement, Vanderbank breaks Nanda’s heart and in the process ruptures Mr Longdon’s trust. The odd thing is that despite his heartless neglect, Nanda still appears to admire him at the end of the novel. Perhaps her enduring affection is paradoxically to do with what he could not give her: love. Vanderbank’s withdrawal of this gift is perhaps instrumental in eliciting her capacity to love.

Nanda’s consistent maltreatment by her mother and by her

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46Derrida, Politics, 15.
social milieu renders her powerless. Her awkward position as an eligible yet unmarried woman is exacerbated by Vanderbank's silent renunciation of marriage. By not marrying Nanda, he refuses her the social currency and the limited power of being his wife. Nanda could have at least had some social and cultural leverage, however regulated, through the mediation of her husband. It must be recognised, however, that Mrs Brook's power as the other who makes Vanderbank's decision for him is but a superficial and limited authority. Like a matron's limited power, her efficacy is also mediated through Vanderbank's social and sexual dominance. Despite the fact that for most of The Awkward Age Mrs Brook operates as the novel's social centre, this power is contingent upon the continuing patronage she receives from her male admirers. The irony is that although her circle constantly sacrifices its members and those on its periphery, it is Mrs Brook, the orchestrator of most of these character assassinations, who, by the novel's conclusion, becomes its ultimate sacrifice. She uncannily predicts her own sacrifice to Vanderbank, the friend she loves the most: "'It will be him you'll help. If you're to make sacrifices to keep on good terms with him, the first sacrifice will be of me'" (145). The "'him'" that Vanderbank is "'to keep on good terms with'" is Mr Longdon. Yet even his eventual sacrifice of Mrs Brook does not preserve the other friendship: no such exchange takes place, for Longdon too is sacrificed by Vanderbank's silence, which is indicative of the latter's general unconcern. By the novel's conclusion, it is Nanda, the one most elided by her mother and Vanderbank, who tries to plead her case to the latter in order to save her from the worst punishment of all: social exile.

Vanderbank's indiscretion and insouciance is irresponsible on both counts. First of all, by sharing Longdon's secret he not only betrays this friendship, he also transfers (and translates) his duty of care into the social, public sphere. The responsibility and singularity of his friendships to both Mr Longdon and to Nanda are thereby given to Mrs Brook. Such a response is not only negligent but totally authoritarian. He succeeds in avoiding not only the decision, but moreover the accountability that comes with it. Mrs Brook, the one
who loves him the most, is sacrificed by his carelessness.

The Awkward Age's Little Aggie (Nanda's friend and contemporary) is another character where the responsibility of the decision is redirected onto other members of the community. But unlike Vanderbank, who is a male subject and citizen, she has neither the freedom nor the power to choose not to choose. Like Nanda, for the most part of the novel Aggie is another young unmarried woman who is manipulated by Mrs Brook's social circle. But unlike Nanda, Aggie represents a perfect social type; she is fashioned for marriage, "deliberately prepared for consumption" (181). Aggie is a prototype of innocence. Both as a social specimen and as a marriageable young woman, she is banned from making any decisions, especially those which involve friendship. As Lord Petherton explains her situation:

'We don't allow her very many friends; we look out too well for ourselves... We mount guard awfully, you know... We sift and we sort, we pick the candidates over, and I should like to hear any one say that in this case at least I don't keep a watch on my taste. Oh, we close in!' (184)

Although the women in James's fictions operate as significant social forces, their importance is undercut by the fact that they occupy this position because they are external to the male community. It is through and because of Aggie's and Nanda's exclusion that the world of the conversation and its fraternal infrastructure is maintained. This is the essential paradox or aporia that lies at the heart of friendship and of its social composition and enactments. Where is the solution to this double-bind? Such an aporia may not be amended or solved because it is structurally unsolvable yet this should not prevent its impassable borders from being reopened and, perhaps as a result of this, redrawn:

In one case, the nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open... In another case, the nonpassage, the impasse or aporia, stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a
border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable and indeterminate.47

The aporia is not only impassable and impossible—it is also aporetically porous—that is, possible. The possibility for a non-analogous sororal friendship introduces “a border to cross,” but one whose gateway is yet to be located. Perhaps it is a secret. Or maybe it will be through the agency of a secret that she will come to claim more of an equitable position in his world.

At the completion of the novel, Vanderbank has broken just about every law of friendship: trust, honesty, faith, secrecy, consistency, responsibility and remembrance. His crimes are so numerous that the seemingly trite charge of having too many friends could also be assigned to him without incurring much more damage.48 Like Merton Densher of The Wings of the Dove (as we

48 In *Politics*, Derrida makes constant mention of the number of friends one should have. This is not only in reference to Aristotle’s thought but is also concerned with the ethical dilemma attached to this question of amount. The number of friends one chooses is linked to the time involved in making and preserving a friendship. How much time should one set aside for each friend? Moreover, if one is in a situation of having too many friends then is the amount of time required to know each friend limited? This could also lead to a situation where one or a few friends out of the many are elided by this decision to have more rather than a few.

These may be thought to be technical, detailed or even perhaps trivial questions but they do matter in the everyday experience of relationships. Derrida associates this question of number with the political dimension of friendship. He writes that if “The name ‘democracy’... allies itself or competes with that of aristocracy, it is because of number, of the reference to the required approbation of the greatest number” (101). By contrast, democracy is aligned with many friends, and aristocracy by contrast is associated with the least number of friends. The greatest number or the smallest number cannot of course guarantee the quality or sincerity of a friendship but it can determine, to some extent, the priorities and the concerns of a relationship. It also of course has a bearing on the ethical concerns of a political institution—is it better to have the rule by many or the few? See Chapter 1: “Oligarchies: Naming, Enumerating, Counting,” (1-25).

In James’s short story, “The Altar of the Dead” in *The Altar of the Dead, The Beast in the Jungle, The Birthplace and Other Tales* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), his main character, George Stransom keeps a vigilant count upon his friends except that his conscientious enumeration is reserved only for his deceased friends: “He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead: it had come to him early in life that there was something one had to do for them” (4). The relationship between friendship, counting, death and debt is dealt with here in Stransom and his love interest, a woman who also mourns at the altar of the dead.

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shall see in the next chapter) by the end of the novel Vanderbank is terribly guilty, to the point where he cannot even face up to Mr Longdon and can barely hold a conversation with Nanda. Vanderbank has by this time also tried to avoid all contact with Mrs Brook. But what is perhaps the most damaging aspect of all, notwithstanding these negligences, is his distance. This “reserve” is not just about the distance he keeps with all of his social relationships, but has more to do with the distance he imposes upon the familial bond.

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida writes of the significance of the familial relationship in relation to friendship:

> The family is friendship; Aristotle says so explicitly... Familial or *syngenic* friendship in effect comprises several species, several forms or figures (*eide*). The excursus found in the *Eudemian Ethics* contains only two of them: friendship between brothers and between father and son. Neither woman, daughter nor sister is named at this point. Although they are not excluded, they appear at least derivative or exterior to this syngenealogical cell... ⁴⁹

If the family is friendship then Vanderbank has even gone so far as to threaten the sanctity of this institution. The relationship he damages the most is the derivative bond: the friendship between mother and daughter. He is the main reason Nanda and her mother have such a strained relationship, as he is the cause of their sexual rivalry. Even the supplementary status of the feminine bond cannot make it invulnerable to the alienating effects of jealousy. Mrs Brook’s relationship to Nanda shows how the marginal position of the feminine can be easily eroded by a masculine presence. Nanda may be called the “modern daughter” (133) by her mother and by those members of her community throughout this novel, but her apparent modernity is a code for the absence of maternal support. Nanda may be touted as an independent daughter but it is not by her own

Unlike Stransom, her work of mourning is reserved for only one deceased friend, which does not indicate her poverty in friendship in as much as it indicates the extent of her debt to this one friend: “Her debt... was much greater than his” (24).

choosing. In fact she has no familial support at all, regardless of her mother’s dereliction of duty. Mr Brookenham operates as the absent paternal presence throughout this novel. He is rendered both ineffectual and irrelevant by the dominance of his wife as a social force and by the novel itself. Nanda’s father is not important on a narrative level and neither is his existence critical to the familial or social context, except in circumstances where his social and paternal ineptitude is used as a form of comic relief. His limited characterisation is comical in itself because of the social and cultural leverage conferred by his status as head of the family. Because of his minimal textual treatment, he is, in a sense, beheaded by James. Yet despite his emasculation by both text and wife, he is not divested of all power since his impotence has the obverse effect of contributing to the pain of Nanda’s adolescence and to the increasing sexual frustration of his wife. Mrs Brook does indeed desire Vanderbank, immensely.

The convenience of Mrs Brook’s “friendship” for her daughter is highly unethical. The extent of her carelessness as a mother, as a

50 Mr Brookenham’s comic ability is foregrounded in the last dinner party scene at the home of Tishy Grendon. His insensitivity to his wife’s emotional manipulation of the group (especially Mr Longdon) has the effect of diffusing the cruelty of her implications (275-310).

51 Mrs Brook’s sexual interest in Vanderbank is suggested throughout. It is not only implied through their private conversations, but also through the perceptions of the other characters, Nanda in particular. It is made patently clear in the last social scene, with the entire circle present, that the Duchess wants to point out to Longdon Mrs Brook’s lust: “Well, she, poor dear, can’t help it. She wants him herself... ‘And he doesn’t—not a bit—want her!’” (291).

52 The inequitable “friendship” between mother and daughter is suggested in the following passage:

That they were so good friends as if Nanda had not been her daughter was a truth that no passage between them might fail in one way or another to illustrate. Nanda had gathered up, for that matter, early in life, a flower of wisdom. (232)

Mrs Brook’s resistance to fulfil her motherly role by admitting neither her age nor her daughter’s (thereby publicly recognising her seniority) indicates her sexual and social anxiety. Although this anxiety is understandable because of the limited and conditional power a woman has within patriarchy, such a desire to maintain her status through her sexual appeal is cruelly played out at another woman’s, her daughter’s, expense. Mr Longdon recognises the gross inequalities of their
woman and as a friend is made painfully obvious in the last, scene of sacrifice amongst the group set at the "home" of Tishy Grendon. Mrs Brook tactlessly demands in front of her circle that Mr Longdon terminate his relation with her daughter by returning her promptly to the nonexistent support of the family unit:

Mrs Brook turned again to Mr Longdon. 'I haven't explained to you what I meant just now. We want Nanda.'
Mr Longdon stared. 'At home again?'
'In her little old nook. You must give her back.'
'Do you mean altogether?'
'Ah, that will be for you, in a manner to arrange. But you've had her practically these five months, and, with no desire to be unreasonable, we yet have our natural feelings.' (298-299)

The irony in Mrs Brook's reasoning is that there is nothing "natural" about her feelings for her daughter since their bond has been irreparably damaged by Vanderbank's mediation. Vanderbank operates as an interval which separates (not binds) the mother and daughter relation. His presence ensures and continues their "friendship" and his paternal concern for Nanda becomes her only hope, even though his relationship to Nanda certainly cannot be thought as the more equal friendship.

It is interesting to note that in this scene it is through the agency of a book (whose title remains concealed) that the infidelity and sexual promiscuity of little Aggie is surprisingly brought to our attention. James's language is particularly insinuating; it teeters on the perverse:

'Oh yes—she's playing with him.'...
'Hide and seek? Why, isn't it innocent, Mitch! Mrs Brook exclaimed.
Mitchy, speaking for the first time, faced her with extravagant gloom. 'Do you really think so?'. ...
'And don't you suppose he has found it yet?' Mrs Brook pursued...
'You see she's sitting on it—.... So that unless he pulls her off—'. ...
'Ah, I hope he won't pull her off!' Mrs Brook wonderfully murmured... 'But what in the world,' she pursued, 'is the book selected for such a position? I hope it's not a very big one.' (303-304)

The owner of this mysterious book is another detail that is temporarily concealed in this exchange but it soon comes out that Vanderbank is its original owner. He lent the book to Mrs Brook, who left it lying around the house long enough for Nanda to take it up and lend it to her recently married friend Aggie. The circulation of this object is meaningful since it is through its agency that the novel's sexual relationships are discovered.
antithetical relationship.

In *The Awkward Age* the elision of the feminine is exemplified further by Nanda and "little" Aggie's exclusion from the "free talk" of Mrs Brook's society. In Mrs Brookenham's society, the excessive freedom of their talk, which is predominantly made up of sexual innuendo, is strategically deployed as a form of prohibition. Nanda and Aggie are deliberately excluded from the innuendo because, ironically, they are the centre of the attraction. Their virginal status gives Mrs Brook's society the needed motivation to construct even more outlandish metaphors and euphemisms in the pursuit of offering up to the group the spectacle of their ignorance.\(^{54}\) The apparent humour of their conversation is produced through their insincere and ostensible attempts to conceal the lewdness of their reference. In Mrs Brook's circle, distance is sacrificed for proximity. But as James's fiction also shows, even this form of proximity is distant because it has the effect of alienating most, if not all, of Mrs Brook's "friends" by the novel's conclusion.

In *The Awkward Age* the family is not synonymous with friendship but is a microcosm of the immense failure of friendship. The family fails to provide the individual not only with a support base but also with one of the most basic of needs: protection. Even if a family cannot give its members the good-will of friendship it can at the very least provide a refuge. Mrs Brook's home is such a failure that it cannot even operate as a dysfunctional retreat or shelter. The privacy of the home is turned inside out—it is, in other words, a social centre. The publicity of the Brookenham family disallows them the intimacy desired in a family. Nanda's older brother Harold cannot rely on his family for financial support and so spends all his time acquiring funds from his mother's social circle. He not only fraternizes in order to borrow money he cannot repay but is also reliant on the hospitality of others for the basic requirement of

\[^{54}\text{In keeping with the aporetic nature of this text, it is never made clear how much Nanda and Aggie actually know on the subject of sex, or of other secrets. One of those already mentioned has to do with whether or not Nanda knows of Mr Longdon's business proposition to Vanderbank. Whilst it is implied that Nanda knows or guesses a great deal about the liaisons within her mother's social group and of Longdon's secret, the extent of her knowledge is never made explicit.}\]
shelter. Mr Longdon becomes a very important player in this Brookenham game of transferring its familial duty of care onto those other members of its community. Denied by her own family, Nanda can find friendship and shelter only with others. This is provided in the personages of Mr Longdon and to some extent Mitchy, who are very much outsiders to the “syngenealogical cell” yet whose concern for her welfare takes the place of the family. By the end of the novel, Mr Longdon even offers to “remove her from the sphere of the play of mind” (preface, 11) which is the amorality of her mother’s household.

Although Mrs Brook may occupy the temporary position of being socially dominant, her domination is regulated and indeed mediated through a homosocial, which is also to say, androcentric economy. She is almost as powerless as her daughter except that she is married, older and more socially adept. These attributes, however, can be easily confiscated, as the novel’s dénouement proves. Mr Longdon operates as the novel’s moral centre and through his dislike of Mrs Brook the novel indicts her both for her rejection of the maternal role and for her overt sexuality. There is no justice in this indictment. Unfortunately, within the context of this novel and via the logic of patriarchy, there is reason. Nanda is her only ally since she does not want to see her mother sacrificed and it is through her friendship to her mother that the possibility for a feminine friendship—one which is forged through trust and equality, not suspicion and competition—could be attainable.

The kind of “hospitality” that Harold requires is not only related to having a roof over his head but also to pleasure of sharing a bed. The latter is acquired through his sexual exploits. By the later stages of the novel it is implied that he has become proficient in the arts of seduction. This is another example where the Brookenham home is clearly represented as an inappropriate environment for the guardianship of Nanda’s extended period of adolescence. The reason for her extended adolescence is bound up with her mother’s resistance to admit her age. Such an admittance would give away the secret of Mrs Brook’s age, something which she is at pains to conceal. It is suggested though that Nanda is eighteen which would place her over the transitional period of adolescence, yet this is not clearly verified by the text.
VIII: Marriage and Death

It is time for the secret of marriage to be addressed. Its reintroduction into this chapter is contextualised by other secrets, some which encrypt and thus maintain its efficacy. Deferring this question of marriage does not necessarily lead to its further concealment. Rather, it is integral to the process of revelation. This process is necessarily gradual since it cannot be made indissociable from the identity of the secret. Marriage in James's works is closely associated with death. Death and marriage—death in marriage or marriage in death—operate as the dominant leitmotif throughout James's fictions.56

"The Aspern Papers" and The Wings of the Dove in particular, reveal the complicity between marriage and death. Both dramatise the missive's sacrificial destruction by fire, which takes place only after a character's death and, moreover, whenever the question of marriage is foremost. In the death scene, which is never directly represented by the text, the secret operates as a memory trace of both its deceased heroines: Miss Bordereau (the "great" Juliana of "The Aspern Papers") and Milly Theale. The destruction of letters in these fictions contributes to the mystery surrounding the deaths of its heroines. These missives suffer from the same fate as their keepers. The protection of the secret through its consumption by fire has another function, and that is in the protection of another, bigger secret: the mystery of death itself. This close relation between secrecy and death is a connection which is developed further, albeit in a

56 In particular, James's short story "The Altar of the Dead" imagines the unity of lovers through the event of death. The male mourner in this story, George Stransom desires to be united with his fellow mourner through the event of his death. By the novel's conclusion he faints in the arms of this would-be lover before the altar of the dead. This echoes the conclusion to "The Turn of the Screw" in that the little boy Miles also faints or perhaps dies in the arms of the governess after she has performed his exorcism. Jack Clayton's brilliant cinematic adaptation of this tale (1961) brings to the fore the sexual dimension of this conclusion in that the governess (played by Deborah Kerr) actually kisses the young boy on the lips after he has passed out. This acknowledges the complicity between sex and death that is played out throughout James's writings.
more satirical fashion, in "The Figure in the Carpet." The narrative is also propelled by many secrets: as in "The Aspern Papers," the name of the narrator is also never divulged. The complicity between literature and secrecy is a dominant theme explored throughout. The narrator's story is paradoxically predicated upon a story he cannot tell. "The Figure in the Carpet" is a drama about its narrator's frustrated efforts to unravel one mystery, truth or central idea that would make sense of all the great literary achievements of his adored author, Hugh Vereker. Frank Kermode suggests in his introduction to this story that this tale is about James having a joke upon both the reader and critic of literature:

It would certainly not be incorrect to say that in one light 'The Figure in the Carpet' is an elaborate skit on ineffectual criticism, on the failure of professional commentators—'little writers'—to make out what one is trying to do. That was a situation with which James was all too familiar.57

James's "elaborate skit" is taken to extreme lengths as the actual or fictional secret underpinning Vereker's fictions outlasts most of the novel's characters, much to the increasing dismay and frustration of its earnest narrator. As in many of James's fictions this secret is protected by death. But what is so striking about this tale is the number of deaths it takes to preserve Vereker's secret. It seems that the difficult process of discovering the one concealed truth upholding the fabric of Vereker's (or James's) fictions can only lead to another, perhaps even more puzzling mystery: marriage.

Was the figure in the carpet traceable and describable only for husbands and wives—for lovers supremely united? It came back to me in a mystifying manner that in Kensington Square, when I mentioned that Corvick would have told the girl he loved, some word had dropped from Vereker that gave colour to this possibility. There might be a little in it, but there was enough to make me wonder if I should have to marry Mrs Corvick to get what I wanted.

57 Kermode, introduction to The Figure in the Carpet, 26.
Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge?58

The question is, can this narrator-character give up his precious claim to bachelorhood in return for Vereker’s secret? It appears, however, that marriage is too high a price for someone so well accustomed to the apparent pleasures of bachelor life. But perhaps the narrator has a legitimate fear of marriage since every other character who professes or indicates a knowledge of the secret has been “supremely united” by the marriage bed and subsequently died. A pattern appears to be emerging from Vereker’s textual carpet, and it suggests that his secret shares an affinity with both death and marriage. Just as the bachelor-protagonist of “The Aspern Papers” shrinks from the apparently terrifying prospect of marriage, so too does the bachelor-narrator of “The Figure on the Carpet.” Furthermore, as in “The Aspern Papers” where the price paid for this character’s preserved bachelorhood is the Aspern papers themselves, so too does the main character in “The Figure in the Carpet” choose single life over married life at the cost of discovering the secret. Many, in fact most, of James’s male protagonists prefer to remain ignorant of the secret if knowledge requires that they either propose or accept marriage. It is not surprising that most of his important male characters remain both single and ignorant.59

In “The Figure in the Carpet” the secret takes the form of an interpretive aporia in Vereker’s fictions and in “The Aspern Papers” it is used as a decoy which conceals deeper, more serious secrets, related not only to the question of marriage and death but moreover to what these decisions or outcomes conceal—the secret of sex. In these novels, as in most of James’s writings, the association between

58James, “The Figure in The Carpet,” 391.
59See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology Of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), for a feminist critique of the homosocial economy operating within James’s fictions and that of his literary predecessors. She makes particular reference to Thackeray’s and James’s glorification of the bachelor and the apparently care-free lifestyle such a condition entails. Marriage and by association the feminine are clearly denied through their affirmation of bachelorhood.
marriage and death cannot be thought without this third element. Sex is the hinge binding and dislocating these terms. While marriage religiously and socially sanctifies the act of coitus, death too is sexualised as a limit point or as an irrevocable change. But why are marriage and death so often used as code for sex? Is James implying that the married state is commensurable with being dead? That James never married suggests his personal reticence towards it. The threat of marriage seems to produce in James's bachelors a response which is almost hysterical. Is it simply because James himself is afraid of sex? Could it be as banal as that? Or is it about the responsibility and commitment that such a union demands which could in effect rupture his and his male protagonists relationship to art—to the literary form? This question will be dealt with later.

Like the narrators-protagonists in "The Figure in the Carpet" and "The Aspern Papers," Vanderbank of The Wings of the Dove and Strether of The Ambassadors manage to avoid the prospect of marriage. The death of a woman saves Densher from one marriage, and his subsequent guilt saves him from another. Strether, who is much older than the usual Jamesian male, enters The Ambassadors as a man who was once previously married but whose wife died in childbirth. In this novel, he is pursued by two women, Miss Gostrey and his fiancée, Mrs Newsome. Strether manages to avoid both. One could argue, however, that Miss Gostrey, whom James identifies in his preface as Strether's "ficelle," already performs a wifely support.

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60James's The Portrait of a Lady, offers a rare example where marriage stifles the potential of the central female character. Isabel Archer's marriage to the obvious cad, Gilbert Osmond, has the disastrous effect of clipping her wings. The promise that she showed to Ralph Touchett, a cousin who secured her a fortune in order to eradicate the economical imperative of marriage, is cut short by her decision to marry. In a different way, The Golden Bowl is another text which does not strictly follow Jamesian protocol. In this novel, marriage is not explicitly denigrated but is used as an institution through which some of the injustices and secrets within his social world are revealed and addressed.

61See James's preface to The Ambassadors, xxix-xlvi. James often deploys his female characters as ficelles; Waymarsh is the exception to this rule in The Ambassadors, but in What Maisie Knew (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), in particular, the main female character doubles up as the novel's ficelle. As James writes in his preface:
act. Strether is identified through Miss Gostrey’s difference. She operates as the other or as the narrative foil who has the effect of centralising his potentially featureless characterisation. What is also particularly interesting about Gostrey’s role as a *ficelle* (or supportive agency), as described by James, is how she acts as a friend not only to Strether but to the reader:

Strether’s friend Waymarsh is so keenly clutched at, on the threshold of the book... [and] no less a pounce is made on Maria Gostrey—without even the pretext, either, of *her* being, in essence, Strether’s friend. She is the reader’s friend much rather—in consequence of dispositions that make him so eminently require one; and she acts in that capacity, and really in that capacity alone, with exemplary devotion, from beginning to end of the book. She is an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity; she is in fine, to tear off her mask, the most unmitigated and abandoned of *ficelles*.62

Strether therefore does not have to marry Gostrey because she is already secured as his helpful agent and friend. James’s female characters may be deployed as narrative supports or facilitators but they are not rewarded for their trouble. In fact they are often sacrificed for their service. When sacrifice takes the form of death it serves to better or facilitate a narrative outcome. Furthermore, her death has the effect of nullifying masculine responsibility. As a *ficelle* she cannot be a friend in the proper sense of the word to her textual associates or even the reader because she is not treated as an equal, but as a slave. The *ficelles*, who are not heroines but understudies or foils, do not have to die because they are not significant enough to have their lives terminated, yet they do undergo a metaphorical

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I at once recognised, that my light vessel of consciousness, swaying in such a draught, couldn’t be with verisimilitude a rude little boy; since beyond the fact that little boys are never so ‘present’, the sensibility of the female young is indubitably, for early youth, the greater, and my plan would call, on part of my protagonist, for ‘no end’ of sensibility. (8)

See also his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* where James likens the character function of Henrietta Stackpole to that of Maria Gostrey since she too operates as “an aid to lucidity” as Isabel Archer’s *ficelle* (xv-xviii).

62 James, preface to *The Ambassadors*, xliii.
form of death. The *ficelle* disappears amongst the undulating folds of James’s text in order to preserve and uphold the identity of the work. She undergoes a process of omission because her narrative life is finite and contingent upon other, more privileged narrative concerns. There is an implicit perversity in her metaphorical death. In the case of those female characters who do undergo a literal death, there is an explicit perversity pervading their sacrifice. It appears that friendship between a man and a woman is admissible only when she dies. There is a certain necrophilic element in his love of the dead woman. She becomes so much more appealing, interesting and above all unattainable. James’s men value their women more in death, yet their valuation cannot be extricated from both the work of mourning and the identity of the mourner. Even in death, she is still a victim to his narcissism. Throughout James’s writings, both marriage and the feminine are denied in the pursuit of affirming art. This “affirmation” is about his male characters’s narcissistic relationship to thinking and generally to literature. Along with the institution of marriage, she is constructed as a threat to his world because of her unknown and dangerous sexuality, which promises to challenge the beauty and the pleasure of his relationship to art.

James’s male characters re-enact the same scenario in their

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63 In his private life James has been associated with the names of two women, Minny Temple and Constance Fenimore Woolson. The former died at the early age of 23, the latter committed suicide at the age of 54. Lyndall Gordon’s recent biography on James: *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (London: Vintage, 1999), argues that these two women were fuel for his narratives, especially those novels which concluded with the death of its heroine. Gordon suggests a strong connection between James’s personal obsession with death, in particular the women in his life who died, and his depiction of death in the novel. James comes across as a perverse identity whose fascination with death and the feminine became not only a dominant theme in his novels, but also in his life.

Continuing with the subject of James’s possibly perverse sexual preferences, during the last decade there have also been many interpretations, mainly speculative, which have tried to claim James as a gay author. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers one of the more intelligent accounts of this possibility but does not stray too far from his actual texts. Rather than be thought either as gay or straight, it is both safe and correct to say that his authorship perpetuates a homosocial economy like many of his predecessors. James’s obsession with sex and death in his novels could lead one to speculate upon his personal desires and this has to do with the question of necrophilia. The word necrophilia translates as a love of the dead. Many a Jamesian protagonist has survived his beloved only to belatedly display his love and devotion.
affirmation of art at the cost of the feminine. Love and friendship for a woman (which are conditional) characteristically arrive too late. The missed opportunity, marriage, a necessary narrative ploy, is missed because mourning and disappointment uphold James's later fictions. His works are driven by anxiety, tension and the uncertainty that comes with the deliberate exclusion of the other, of sex and moreover of the feminine. James's novels employ a negative aesthetic since it is through the unknown—the tension of not knowing the other's body, world and intentions—that the fine fabric of his world is delicately woven.

In James's novels, the secret offers a means through which the abysses of intention and meaning and between speech and silence can be negotiated. Its agency exposes their points of interconnection and disconnection. The secret works as a reminder to the friend of her/his responsibility to the other because it reveals the limit point of their interaction. It keeps the bond of love or friendship relational and dynamic. The secret in James's novels gives the time of friendship because it preserves the fact of difference—it allows for the existence of a mutual separateness. The secret is generous. But it is also imbricated with the fragile and vulnerable position of the feminine, for she along with the secret constantly suffers from his denial. In James's world, both the secret and the feminine are suppressed (death is the most extreme form of their concealment) by the closure of his decision to remain faithful to the work.

IX: Forgiveness

The anxiety of beginning, a marriage or a love commitment, is about opening one's self up to the other, to difference and to the unknown. The distance and difference between a man and a woman or between a woman and a woman is made commensurable by this exposure because their separateness becomes a shared experience. According to Rose, the sharing of a life, affectionately expressed through the sharing of a bed, is to experience the ethical, as she writes:

To spend the whole night with someone is agape: it is
ethical. For you must move with him and with yourself from the arms of the one twin to the abyss of the other. This shared journey, unsure yet close, honesty embracing dishonesty, changes the relationship. It may not be a marriage, but it will be sacramental even without benefit of sacraments. To navigate this together is to achieve the mundane: to be present to each other, both at the point of abyssal infinity, brings you into the shared cares of the world.\textsuperscript{64}

The ethical makes its appearance through one’s exposure to the other and such an opening up is about the concurrent dissolution and resolution of the categories of self and other in the affirmation of what they share: the work, the child, or the memory of their intimacy. It is about art falling apart at the seams of its perfection because it cannot recover everything. Rose’s description of the two lovers embracing conveys the excess and affective quality of a touch that skirts and challenges many borders separating visibility from invisibility, or the inside from the outside. The “shared journey” between her lovers does not lead to an unmediated relation because their embrace is “unsure yet close,” dishonest and honest, open and closed. Their “cares” are “shared” but not indistinguishable. What is affirmed in this passage is the power of the body as a site that is both intimate and public. It is a place that houses many possibilities and potentialities for its borders are at once fluid and tight, flexible and unyeilding. Rose’s notion of the ethical as a shared experience of the other’s finitude may be superficially absent in James’s social scenes, yet such intimacy appears obliquely in his works through an ornamental prose style that is at once porous and closed. His male characters may choose art over life and bachelorhood over marriage yet his undulating and relentless sentence constructions offer something else: they do not imitate his myopic relationship to the other and, for that matter, neither do all of his female protagonists.

Nanda’s show of passion by the end of \textit{The Awkward Age} brings to the fore the struggle for companionship. As both Mitchy and Mr Longdon praise the intensity of her feeling: “Any passion so

\footnote{Rose, \textit{Love’s Work}, 65.}
great, so complete,' Mitchy went on, 'is—satisfied or unsatisfied—a life'” (341). The secret of Nanda’s passion for Vanderbank is a positive element in this novel. Another affirming feature, but perhaps not quite as powerful as Nanda’s proud secret, is Mr Longdon’s resilient passion for her grandmother. Mr Longdon is introduced in this fiction as a disappointed lover and by the novel’s end Nanda too is disappointed by love. The dissatisfaction and disappointment of Mr Longdon’s failed love affair is, in part, why he desires to re-address the past by helping Nanda recuperate the loss of her present broken passion. It is through the repetition of the broken heart in this novel that the promise of an amendment is brought into being and, as a result, the affirmation of the feminine. Nanda is crucial to this work of reconciliation on both counts.

The work of mourning in James’s fictions is not hopeless as indicated by the dénouement of *The Awkward Age*, but it is androcentric. Only his male characters are afforded a legitimate and visible work of mourning. The mourning of the ancient Lady Juliana of “The Aspern Papers” is concealed and moreover associated with the greatness of the poetry of her deceased lover. Yet perhaps the poignancy of her sorrow is indirectly suggested through the novel’s silence. Mrs Brook’s mourning, in response to the fall of her social reign and loss of Vanderbank’s friendship, is also omitted. Yet such a concealment is again not only indicative of the novel’s many secrets, it also preserves the privacy and perhaps even the depth of her loss.

In *The Awkward Age*, Nanda’s characterisation is thematically important on many levels. The awkwardness of her uncategorised social position is representative of the general anxiety of an age on the brink of change. James wrote this novel at the close of the nineteenth century, a time which, not unlike the present, is characterised by its self-conscious relationship to time. In his preface to *The Awkward Age* James comments on the restlessness of his age: “We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an 'epoch of transition’” (12). Nanda’s uncanny resemblance to a woman of an earlier age underpins her awkward relationship to her contemporary world. She even goes so far as to describe her time as “an age without a name” (165). Nanda may live in the novel’s present, but her
presence is haunting. Her looks haunt Mr Longdon with the spectre of her deceased grandmother and disturbs her present community with its prospect of eternal girlhood. Furthermore, Nanda is unsettling because she indicates a knowledge and an experience that extends beyond her age and which recoils before her time. She is also mature enough in her thinking to say to Mitchy: "'Don't "adore" a girl, Mr Mitchy—just help her. That's more to the purpose'" (118). Nanda perhaps understands that love between a man and a woman does not necessarily guarantee her the freedom and the equality that she both needs and deserves. Certainly in James's world, and according to the classical interpretation of the love relation, it does not give a woman friendship. Mitchy's response to Nanda's wise words is incredulous: "'Help you?' he cried. 'You bring tears to my eyes!'" Nanda replies: "'Can't a girl have friends?... I never heard of anything so idiotic'" (ibid). Nanda is not just the modern daughter, but the modern woman in the best sense of the word.

The Awkward Age dramatises the immense failure of friendship. It must be recognised, however, that such failure is not irredeemable. Nanda's show of passion at the end of the novel and her show of concern for her mother's welfare offer positive and regenerative responses to the disaster of her life. The reader is left with the promise that friendship can and will be restored. Nanda's forgiveness of her mother offers a beginning to this work of reconciliation. She is the one who suffers the most from her mother's neglect and yet she understands perhaps more than anyone else why her mother has failed in her duty of care as a mother, as a friend and above all else, as a woman. Nanda has forgiven the impossible. In the Derridean sense, she has responded in a most ethical manner possible because she has forgiven the unforgivable.

Nanda begins to disturb her mother's circle, in particular, Mitchy, Vanderbank and her mother, by indicating an awareness of Mr Longdon's secret. She also suggests in the conversations throughout the second half of the book that she cannot be classified as the innocent virgin who is unaware of the sexual act. Whether or not Nanda actually has or has not had sex is perhaps irrelevant: she unsettles many of those within her mother's social circle. See pages 248, 258 and 273, where the question of how much Nanda knows is foremost.

In his "Work In Progress" lecture Derrida made the comment that "the decision to forgive the unforgivable is a gift."
She has pardoned the actions of one who has not only tried to undermine her sexuality, confidence and womanhood—everything which is particularly sacred to the vulnerable identity of an adolescent female—but who is also her mother. The title of this novel and James’s preface to The Awkward Age may suggest that it is novel about both the trembling identity of a burgeoning youth and the cultural and historical transition of an era on the cusp of change, but I would offer another possibility: it is also a novel about forgiveness. How and why Nanda came to forgive her mother remains a secret. The novel never makes this clear; her process of reasoning is preserved by this aporia. Yet perhaps it is not really a secret that Nanda was able to forgive, rather it is by means of the secret that she came to this decision. In Politics of Friendship Derrida writes: “friendship always begins by surviving.” Nanda is a survivor but she is not alone in her struggle since her endurance is preserved by another survivor, Mr Longdon. Although Nanda’s forgiveness is surprising, it is not redemptive. It neither recovers the damage of the past nor removes the suffering of the vanquished, but what it does leave open is the possibility for a better future. The novel concludes with the imminent departure of Mr Longdon and Nanda from the scene of her mother’s fallen, disappointed and unhappy household. They plan to leave the ruins of Mrs Brook’s society together. Their last conversation ends, with the novel, on a promise:

... his face changed as a light dawned. ‘That puts it then that you will come?’
‘I’ll come if you’ll take me as I am—’...
‘Come!’ he then firmly said—quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.
It literally made her smile...
‘Today?’ she more seriously asked.
He looked at his watch. ‘Tomorrow.’...
She faltered, but at last brought it out. ‘Yes. Do you see? There I am.
‘I see. There we are. Well,’ said Mr Longdon— ‘tomorrow.’
(378, 382-383)

67 Derrida, Politics, 291.
Chapter Two:
Mourning and Responsibility in
The Wings of the Dove

[Mitchy] 'Any passion so great, so complete...
is—satisfied or unsatisfied—a life.'
(Henry James, The Awkward Age)

[Kate] 'The great thing... is that she's satisfied.'...
'Satisfied to die in the flower of her youth?'
'Of having been loved... That is, of having,' she wound up, 'realized her passion... She won't have loved you for nothing.' It made him wince, but she insisted. 'And you won't have loved me.'
(Henry James, The Wings of the Dove)

Where does the emotion of loving spring from?... from the approach of death.
(Maurice Blanchot, The Unavowable Community)

I: The Question of a Fulfilled Life

At the conclusions of both The Awkward Age and The Wings of the Dove what is affirmed by characters who either miss out on realising their passions or who make the mistake of undervaluing their attachments, is love. As the first two citations suggest, for James's characters the quality of life is articulated in relation to love regardless of whether or not it is fulfilled, returned or gratified. Typical of James's later writings, these novels dramatise the failure of reciprocated love—it remains a thing which eludes possession. Yet this does not eradicate love; in fact it is instrumental in bringing it
out in the open. Love, as a “missed rendezvous,”\(^1\) is brought into visibility as a form of excess. It appears as “aneconomic”: a principle, fragment, trace, emotion or memory that is not strictly ever present. In *The Wings of the Dove* Milly Theale may have realised and satisfied her passion because she loved Merton Densher but her feeling remains as an excess of passion because her love could not be returned. Kate Croy tries to vindicate herself and Densher of any wrongdoing in their seduction of this dying young woman by arguing that they gave her the opportunity to realise “her passion”: that is, they provided her with the gift of love. How is it possible to give the gift of love when it is a thing which defies possession? Is not love, like death, so singular that it cannot be replicated, owned, shared, given, known or absorbed? Love and death are experiences that are particular to the singularity of an individual: they provide the spacing which separates and binds our relationships with others and with the world in general. How, then, is it possible to give the gift of another’s love?

What is so particular about *The Wings of the Dove* is that it is a novel which dramatises the offering of many things—objects and emotions—that are not in the possession of the particular character to give. Yet such gifts are offered all the same: Milly’s love is one of those gifts. Kate presents Densher with the gift of Milly’s love—“‘She won’t have loved you for nothing’”—whilst accepting the return of his affection: “‘And you won’t have loved me.’”\(^2\) With the exception of Milly Theale, everyone else in this novel has a motive for caring. As the superficially charming, mercenary yet frank Lord Mark warns her quite early on of their London circle: “no one among them did anything for nothing” (108). To love without the expectation of a return is to take a risk. But to love for no return is nonsensical because one’s response and responsibility to the other remains unsatisfied, and yet this, according to Derrida, is originary responsibility since it operates outside an exchange economy.\(^3\)

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\(^1\)Nancy, “Shattered Love,” in *The Inoperative Community*, 91.

\(^2\)Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, 410. All further references to this novel will appear parenthetically in the main body of the chapter.

\(^3\)Derrida, *The Gift*, 1-34.
What these opening citations appear to affirm is the idea of loving without being loved. A question of responsibility is implicated within these statements not only because the activity of loving involves consciousness, intellect and judgement but also because such words arise in response to the work of mourning. In saying this, what must also be taken into account in reading a James novel is the unstable and ironic nature of utterance. Although these statements appear to affirm the experience of loving, what they also conceal in making this point are the depraved circumstances and intentions which uphold such a position. In the world of James, a character’s spoken thoughts and intentions never just (if at all) refer to the object at hand. The relationship between speaker and object is refracted by the uneven densities between intention and effect. A character’s sense of responsibility therefore cannot be attached just to what is said but to what is insinuated or even concealed by speech. The performative dimension of James’s utterances further implicates the irresponsibility of disowning one’s words and intentions as it also incorporates the untruth of one’s statements. Yet it is between the surfaces and the depths, the genuine and the disingenuous that an adequation can be made between the spoken and the unspoken and between responsibility and irresponsibility. In James’s later writings, the protracted disjunctions between speech and silence, intention and effect, innocence and experience evoke an equivocal threshold that oscillates between these positions. Such a space of liminality could be associated with the inside-outside position of a reader, and yet her or his outside position is circumvented by the fact that James’s novels are highly determined objects. The intervening or convening reader is therefore not a free agent but a determined subject who is governed by the written. Furthermore, James’s novels already incorporate “ideal” and sometimes even misleading readers: the ficelles, Maria Gostrey, Fanny Assingham, Henrietta Stackpole) and even the author himself, who, through his preface writings offers both helpful and on some occasions misleading advice on the construction of his works. Other “readers,” or, rather, reading

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4James’s preface to The Golden Bowl is an instance where his statement about the
positions appear less conspicuously through the tone, syntax, point of view, moments of ellipsis and instances of refraction which both haunt and construct his fictions. Yet this is not to argue that the relationship between the said and the unsaid can be reconciled by either a reader or by an intermediary device; rather it is to say that ambiguity, opposition and uncertainty co-exist in James's novels without a resultant synthesis. And it is perhaps through and because of these intermediary devices or agents that their irreconcilability, as well as their efficacy, is sustained.

This chapter will address the relationship between mourning and responsibility as it is dramatised in *The Wings of the Dove*. The thought of Derrida will provide most of the theoretical content but what will become apparent through reading Derrida via James is that the work of mourning, as one's responsibility to the other, also involves a seduction. The chapter will gradually build toward a work of mourning that is commensurable with seduction. But before this will be addressed in the final section, we shall first have to work through questions of mourning, responsibility, guilt, the decision, the gift, love and friendship. The process through which I will move toward this thought will be gradual and incremental, like the novel itself.

From the very beginning of *The Wings of the Dove*, mourning has already been exhausted. Mourning backgrounds the novel and it underpins the characterisations of its two female protagonists. The first chapter begins with the sorry history of Kate's family:

Her father's life, her sister's, her own, that of her two lost brothers—the whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid, voluminous phrase, say even point of view is misleading. His claim that the novel's perspective is mainly directed through the consciousness of the Prince in the first volume and then through the Princess in the second volume is not strictly the case. The novel's point of view is directed through many other characters and agencies. During numerous conversations in the novel (especially the exchanges which take place between the ficelles, Fanny Assingham and the Colonel) there are instances of perspective change and refraction where the direction of the emphasis is relocated to an object surrounding their conversation or to a character who is not present on the scene.
a musical, that dropped first into words, into notes, without sense, and then, hanging unfinished, into no words, no notes at all... She had gone to Mrs Lowder on her mother’s death... There had been nothing else to do—not a penny in the house, nothing but unpaid bills that had gathered thick while its mistress lay mortally ill. (6, 20)

Whilst Kate is introduced as a penniless survivor forced to leave the wreck of her family home, Milly’s entrance is accompanied by a catalogue of riches. Unlike Kate’s, her name is not attached to a bankrupt household, but to a city whose wealth and power is synonymous with capitalism:

It was New York mourning, it was New York hair, it was New York history, confused as yet, but multitudinous, of the loss of parents, brothers, sisters, almost every human appendage, all on a scale and sweep that had required the greater stage... She was alone, she was stricken, she was rich, and, in particular, she was strange... (72)

The extravagance of Milly’s grief is balanced by the enormity of her inheritance. She enters James’s fiction as a social anomaly. Her uncommon demeanour captures the imagination of Susan Stringham, another woman introduced in relationship to mourning. Susan’s series of bereavements include a husband and a mother. James writes: “She too had her discipline, but it had not made her striking” (72). With these words, James makes an association between mourning and castigation.

II: Mourning and Responsibility

In The Gift of Death Derrida questions Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s conceptions of responsibility as a form of originary guilt. The Christian model of original sin is linked to the belief that one enters

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the world mortal and indebted to God for the gift of life. To be guilty is to be mortal—it is to feel the limits of one's life, experiences and memories. It is also to recognize what cannot be recuperated or repaired without acceptance. This perpetuates a movement of desire toward the other in the pursuit of forgiveness. Guilt, as originary responsibility, attempts to recover the debt of one's mortality (or even to cover the fact of one's mortality) by seeking absolution through the other, and yet such a process is doomed to remain dissatisfied because it is predicated upon a cycle of grief. Such dissatisfaction may take the form of an inconsolable work of mourning because it cannot succeed in either understanding or conquering death. In the words of Heidegger: "death reveals itself as the possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational." Levinas may argue the opposite, that death is always the other's death, that one can never know what it is to die except as an experience in alterity. Yet Rose shows how both agree on death's impossibility:

For if the nothingness of death is presented in Heidegger as 'the possibility of impossibility', and in Levinas as 'the impossibility of possibility', and in Blanchot as two deaths, one possible the other impossible, then all three accounts attribute a pseudo-Kantian hermeneutic circle to the nothingness of death: where nothing as possible or as impossible becomes the condition of all possible experience... What is important is what these two accounts have in common. In both cases, ethical actuality is established by what is possible or impossible. Both accounts strive to present the fate of finitude.

Derrida's reading of Heidegger's theorisation of death as the impossible gift which cannot be offered, taken or transferred incorporates both Heideggerian nonrelationality and Levinasian alterity. The issue of guilt, as an originary form of responsibility

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restages this question of death's singularity in terms of the work of mourning. If death can neither be given nor taken, then how does one partake in a work of mourning without taking some degree of responsibility for an experience that one cannot possibly know in order to share? This is to experience the impossible.

... no one can either give me death or take it from me... Even if one gives me death to the extent that it means killing me, that death will still have been mine as long as it is irreducibly mine... dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised or transmitted. And just as it can't be given to me, so it can't be taken away from me.8

If responsibility is originary guilt or sin then one's response to the other is motivated by the desire for absolution in order to close this debt. Such responsibility is, at the very beginning, limited because it seeks to end responsibility. It wants to be absolved from its duty of care by the other's forgiveness. Responsibility loses its singularity, its secrecy and its aneconomy once it allows itself to be translated into the general. To seek the other's recognition, whatever this may be, is to relinquish one's responsibility to that other since it is the other (and no longer the self) who is called upon to act and to react. The uniqueness of one's duty is sacrificed by the decision to share one's responsibility.

Derrida represents the Abraham story as an exemplary case where his duty to God is preserved because it is kept from being translated into the general. In other words, it remains a secret:

He keeps quiet in order to avoid the moral temptation which, under the pretext of calling him to responsibility, to self-justification, would make him lose his ultimate responsibility along with his singularity, make him lose his unjustifiable, secret, and absolute responsibility before God. This is ethics as "irresponsibilization," as an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility.9

8Derrida, The Gift, 44.
9Ibid., 61.
If friendship is preserved by secrecy, as we saw in the previous chapter, then so too are responsibility and the decision. Love may be integral to a friendship but it can be differentiated from it because it requires an even more profound form of preservation. One may declare that one loves but such a declaration is more risky than a declaration of friendship because it also says that one cannot necessarily take responsibility for a depth of feeling one may not be able to know, fathom or control. Is love then an irresponsible friendship? And if so, is it therefore by default the more responsible relation because it accepts even more sharply and painfully the uncertainty of one's position? That the uniqueness of a friendship or of a love relation (and decision) may be maintained through its concealment further suggests that such experiences and relationships can never be completely present to the self, or known. One's responsibility to the other in love or friendship is preserved by secrecy because it survives as a trace, as a form of reserve or as a forgotten memory which cannot be completely recollected or made present. It survives.

In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida reminds us that one cannot survive without also entering into a work of mourning. Survival is complicit with mourning: "For one does not survive without mourning." The question is, though, for whom does one survive?

This is an abyssal calculation: do you desire to survive for yourself or for the person whom you are mourning, from the moment the two of you are as one?\[11\]

Does survival need a reason? Derrida thinks this question in relation to the gift. By offering a reason for one's life, and for the other's death, what is involved is the provision of a name. But the giving of a reason or a name is according to Derrida a narcissistic offering, because the other is drawn within a reflective and vertiginous relation to the self.\[12\] Yet the giving of a reason for one's survival,

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11Ibid., 186.
12Ibid., 187
regardless of its possible vanity or self-justificatory ineptitude, is nevertheless still a way of responding to the pain of the other’s death and of one’s survival. It may be misguided and selfish but it is a response to grief.

Derrida’s notion of friendship as the “grieved act of loving”\(^\text{13}\) is about the survival of the past in the present as it also incorporates and anticipates the future. The work of mourning is a process of recollection which takes possession of the past, however temporarily and imperfectly, in order to preserve the life, the friendship or the love of the deceased. Such a process does not have to be guilty, because one cannot take responsibility for the other’s death any more than their life. Life and death are as singular as the individual who lives and dies. Heidegger’s notion of the irreplaceability of a death which “can only be mine alone”\(^\text{14}\) indicates the intractibility of such a position. Logically it may be impossible to take responsibility for the other’s death but this does not erase one’s sense of responsibility—in fact it exacerbates it. Responsibility is intimately linked to impossibility: one feels responsible precisely because it is impossible to take the place of the one who dies. If it were possible, then the irreducibility of death (and of life) would cease to be significant. Although it may be irrational to take responsibility for the death of an other, such irrationality is not without its sense of justice.

In The Wings of The Dove, Merton Densher’s mourning is his response to and responsibility for the death of Milly Theale. Because he could not love her when she was alive, it is also synonymous with being guilty. As a consequence of this inability, and in response to her death, he chooses to love her memory. By the novel’s conclusion, Kate demands to know the nature of his homage to Milly:

‘Your word of honour that you’re not in love with her memory.’
‘Oh—her memory!’
‘Ah’—she made a high gesture—‘don’t speak of it as if

\(^\text{13}\)Ibid., 14.
\(^\text{14}\)Derrida, The Gift, 45.
you couldn't be. I could, in your place...Her memory's your love. You want no other.' (456)

Again, as in the citation which began this chapter, Kate assumes the authority to interpret Densher's feelings for Milly. Take Kate at her word: if Densher is in love with Milly's memory, does that make it a responsible work of mourning? That is, does it do justice to the life that once was? Responsibility does not have to be aligned or made synonymous with guilt, since it is also about justice. Yet this is not to imply that justice must result in the cancellation of one's debt or responsibility to the other. Rather, justice could be about the quality of one's responsibility to the other. In this sense, justice could involve the preservation of the good in one's memories and relationships, regardless of whether or not this leads to the closure of a debt. Is not mourning a way for the living to enact or exact a form of justice? Densher's gift to Milly, however belated, is to preserve the gift of her love by choosing to protect the dignity of her last moments on earth. In his last meeting with her before her death, he promises to deny his engagement to Kate (that is, if Milly asks, which she doesn't) and to follow through by retracting his promise to Kate: "I wouldn't have made my denial, in such conditions, only to take it back afterwards."... 'Oh, you would have broken with me to make your denial a truth?'" (404). The text does not include the scene of his last meeting with her in Venice; this subsequent conversation with Kate in London is all that remains of this moment. The novel itself preserves the secrecy of Milly's death by keeping its point of view distant from her gradual deterioration. Once she chooses to turn "her face to the wall" (401) after hearing the cruel news of Densher's secret engagement to Kate, then her withdrawal from life is mimicked (and perhaps even respected) by this fiction which conceals her process of decay. Unlike the proud gaze of the Bronzino portrait, which she is reputed to resemble, Milly chooses to turn her face away from the deceptions and cares of society in order to embrace the singularity of her death. It may be literally impossible to die of a broken heart, but is it possible to live with a broken heart? What died before the event of her death was desire.
In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Rose reminds us of the phonetic possibilities of the word mourning and how it also contains a beginning (morning). Although mourning may deal with the remains of a life or of a day, without a beginning there would be no remains, there would be no life to mourn. Death as an absolute end and life as an absolute beginning are "events" which may not be transferable or giveable, yet this should not prevent them from being honoured. Memory offers them this honour, however imperfect or self-serving one's recollection of the past (and of the other) may be. One's sense of responsibility to the other and oneself is crucial to this process. Without these things there would be no justice, and without justice there is no love. It may be impossible to die in the place of the other, but it is possible to mourn the death of an other. If guilt is nominated as originary responsibility without the hope of respite then where is the justice in this process? Justice does not have to replace guilt; it can exist alongside it. Densher may undergo a work of mourning that is predominantly guilty, yet this does not eradicate the idea of its justice. Densher could not become Milly's lover during her lifetime, but he can and does become her friend after death. As Derrida writes: "to love friendship, it is not enough to know how to bear the other in mourning; one must love the future." If impossibility leads to possibility, then there is justice and hope. Densher's work of mourning does leave open the possibility of a morning which tries to do justice to the sins of the past by preserving the desire to begin again, this time properly. His last marriage proposal to Kate, on the final pages of the novel, indicates the desire for such a beginning:

He heard her out in the stillness, watching her face, but not moving. Then he only said: 'I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour.'
'As we were?'
'As we were.'
But she turned to the door, and her headshake was

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now the end. 'We shall never be again as we were!' (456-457)

This last scene between Kate and Densher sadly echoes an earlier, happier moment in their relationship, a time before the arrival of Milly Theale and the promise of her money. The lamentatory tone of the "were" contrasts with the immediacy of the present tense in "are":

Suddenly she said to him with extraordinary beauty: 'I engage myself to you for ever:"
The beauty was in everything, and he could have separated nothing—couldn't have thought of her face as distinct from the whole joy...'And I pledge you—I call God to witness!—every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life.'...
They had exchanged vows and tokens, sealed their rich compact...to belong tremendously, to each other. ...
Densher gazed a little at all this clearness... 'Yes; no doubt, in our particular situation, time's everything. And then there's the joy of it.'
She hesitated. 'Of our secret?'
'Not so much perhaps of our secret in itself... Our being as we are.' (66-67)

Densher and Kate can never again be as they were once the unconditionality of their earlier pledge "to belong tremendously, to each other" is allowed to be conditioned by the plan to possess Milly's fortune. By the novel's dénouement, Kate is left to choose between love or money, marriage or wealth: Densher refuses to offer her two gifts. It is implied that the second gift, the money, is tainted by the memory of Milly's love, disappointment and eventual death. Densher's love for Kate becomes conditional with the arrival of this second gift. This is his homage to Milly. Yet it seems that Kate won't marry Densher without Milly's inheritance and he won't marry her with it: such is the incommensurability of their love relation which closes this text. As lovers, Kate's and Densher's growing dissonance is the result of their differing responses and senses of responsibility toward Milly's life and death. For whilst Kate was content to accept
her gift of love and money on Densher's behalf, Densher can only accept one thing: her friendship. Kate and Densher may survive as Milly's mourners, but by the end of the novel their survival as lovers remains uncertain.

III: The Gift of Love

To love before being loved is to take responsibility for that love, because it is first and foremost an act or a decision which affirms the other regardless of a return of affection. Such a response may arise from debt, although that would presuppose a condition of sin, guilt or lack. Derrida tries to rethink a tradition which aligns responsibility with guilt by arguing instead that to respond to and indeed to take responsibility for the other is, before everything else, a moment of risk. It says "yes" to the other before calculating the extent of that risk. Guilt is foreign to this model because it operates on the principle of calculation even though one's sense of guilt could be incalculable. Debt (if there is one) may arrive after the moment or the "event" of this decision to love. For Derrida, responsibility incorporates the possibility of withdrawing one's concern and care for the other. In order to think through responsibility, one must also entertain irresponsibility. The decision to love without the expectation of a return is irresponsible in that it chooses to be vulnerable. Yet such vulnerability is also completely responsible because it also accepts and acknowledges the precariousness of one's position, of one's place in relation to the other.

In the spirit of a gift that cannot be returned (or even given) Milly's love for Densher is aneconomic. But is not love, by its very nature, already aneconomic, in that it is disruptive and thereby paradoxically integral to the idea of economic calculation? The aporia of love is essential to dialectical thinking because it offers a form of reserve that cannot be subsumed within this system, thereby inaugurating a process of return: "Nothing leads us more surely back to ourselves (to the Occident, to philosophy, to the dialectic, to
literature) than love."\textsuperscript{17} Love may offer a reason to return, whether this is to recount a moment of decision, to return to an estranged beloved, or to re-read an impenetrable novel, but it can guarantee an outcome of neither reconciliation nor understanding because its existence and efficacy is predicated upon its continued exteriority from these processes. In order to survive, love must remain aporetic, or aneconomic, or both.

In \textit{The Wings of the Dove}, Densher's want of love for Milly is covered by the generosity of her passion: she loved enough for both of them. She even goes so far as to reward his deficit by bequeathing him, after her death, a "stupendous" (455) amount of money. He cannot accept her bequest because he is already indebted by her love. His debt to her excess of passion cannot be repaid and as such, his work of mourning in response to her death is driven by the desire to amend this deficiency. Kate's triumphant words which head this chapter are discordant with his guilt. Densher is so consumed by remorse that he cannot even bring himself to learn the extent of Milly's generosity. The amount of money left him remains a secret. So do Milly's reasons. With its seal intact, the letter which may have promised an explanation is thrown into the fire by Kate. By the novel's conclusion, Densher is left to wonder if this missive of Milly's may have contained a strange twist:

\begin{quote}
Then he took to himself at such hours... that he should never, never know what had been in Milly's letter... The part missed forever was the turn she would have given her act. That turn had possibilities that, somehow, by wondering about them, his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined. It had made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes—his pledge given not to save it—into the fathomless sea, or rather even it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint, far wail. This was the sound that he cherished, when alone, in the stillness of his rooms. (450-451)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17}Nancy, "Shattered Love," 92.
That Densher cannot accept her bequest intensifies its efficacy. Her offering remains a gift because it retains its secrecy: "The gift is the secret itself, if the secret itself can be told. Secrecy is the last word of the gift which is the last word of the secret." Yet Milly’s gift is further complicated by the burning of her “last word;” the letter preceeding, announcing and perhaps even explaining her offering, is suppressed by Kate’s action. Milly’s words are taken from her and reclaimed by her friend, her competitor, seducer and betrayer. But is this the most suitable and responsible action on Kate’s behalf, in that it keeps the secret of Milly’s gift? In this particular case I think that it is no longer a question of preservation but of appropriation. Love is offered to Milly as a possible remedy for her illness:

‘The point is will it cure?’
‘Precisely. Is it absolutely a remedy—the specific?’
‘Well, I should think we might know?’ Mrs Stringham delicately declared...
‘Have you never, dearest, been in love?’ Susan Shepherd inquired. (269)

It is not Densher, the object of her affection, who offers her this gift of love, but the “circle of petticoats” (332) who gather around him. The “circle of petticoats,” made up of Susan Stringham, Maud Lowder and Kate Croy, mediate Densher’s relationship to Milly. They even go so far as to promise Densher (well before Milly indicates any romantic interest) the gift of her love, and with it, the promise of her fortune. Is it possible to give the gift of an other? If it is impossible to die in the other’s place, then it must also be impossible to love in the other’s place. More to the point, is it ethical to promise a gift that is another’s—to claim another’s gift as one’s own? The ethical

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19It is not only Kate, aunt Maud and Susan Stringham who try to control the attachment, but also Milly’s doctor, Sir Luke Strett. The circle of petticoats is thereby occasionally interrupted by the presence of the distinguished doctor. Lord Mark also tries to be an important influence in Milly’s life. He makes her an offer of marriage but it is implied that his proposal is motivated not by feelings of love but by mercenary reasons. Milly promptly declines his offer in favour of Merton Densher. Densher, however, never does make her an offer of marriage to replace Lord Mark’s indiscretion.
dimension of this problem remains embedded within the dense folds of Milly's metaphorical wings, as Kate so eloquently explains:

'I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well, she stretched out her wings, and it was to that they reached. They cover us.'
'They cover us,' Densher said.
'That's what I give you,' Kate gravely wound up.
'That's what I've done for you.' (456)

Milly's wings are her fortune: their expanse covers both Kate and Densher after her death. Kate accepts and delivers to Densher not only the gift of Milly's love, but also her fortune. Ethics may be at the forefront of her presumption of authority, but so is friendship. Kate claims to have been Milly's friend, and yet she offers her a false gift. That she is capable of giving her friend a counterfeit gift, an act which constitutes a betrayal, is nevertheless in keeping with the nature of her Aunt's social friendships. Kate explains to Densher the exploitative and Machiavellian reality of her Aunt's circle: "'Yes,' said Kate—'that's the way people are. What they think of their enemies, goodness knows, is bad enough; but I'm still struck with what they think of their friends'" (234). It is not what Kate thinks of Milly that is so astounding—since she professes quite openly and with admiration that she is a dove (184)—but what she is able to do to someone she claims as a friend. Kate may believe that she gave Milly one of the greatest gifts possible, the chance to love, but the fact of its untruth and Densher's forced interest poisons her offering.

Milly's love-sickness for Densher cannot of course cure her illness. At least until the moment she is undeceived it can only make her want to live all the more. Being in love "may temporarily stave off the inevitability of death, but its palliative qualities are cut short by Lord Mark's revelation of Densher's secret engagement to Kate. Her death is hastened by this disappointment. Love may not transcend death but it can make one's death "not nothing": "This death is not nothing. I may die before my time... My time and yours..."
Placeable and unplaceable time."^20 Milly does not die for nothing. And in this sense, Kate is perhaps justified in believing very early on that she will provide Milly with a kind of gift whose significance and resonance cannot be predicted:

>'You may ask,' Kate said, 'what in the world I have to give; and that indeed is just what I'm trying to learn. There must be something, for her to think she can get it out of me. She will get it—trust her; and then I shall see what it is; which I beg you to believe I should never have found out for myself.' (119)

Kate may believe that her gift to Milly was to give her a brief moment of happiness by offering her the services of her lover, but what this offering could not account for was the gift of Densher's responsibility in failing to love her.

Densher leaves Venice greatly affected by his experience with the dying Milly, partly because before giving herself up to death, she absolves him of any wrongdoing:

The essence was that something had happened to him too sacred to describe. He had been, to his recovered sense, forgiven, dedicated, blessed; but this he couldn't coherently express. (416)

Although the novel indicates Milly's absolution, it does not guarantee Densher's own sense of peace. In fact the debt of her love and death remains an open account. The novel's conclusion does nothing to close this debt.

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^20Rose, Mourning, 146.
IV: The Arrival of the Ethical

'Will you take me just as I am?
   She turned a little pale for the tone of truth in it...
'Ah, do let me try myself! I assure you I see my way—so
don't spoil it: wait for me and give me time. Dear man,'
Kate said, 'only believe in me, and it will be beautiful.' ...
He laid strong hands upon her to say, almost in anger,
'Do you love me, love me, love me?' (207)

Densher’s plea for Kate to love him without reserve (that is without
her aunt’s approval and without waiting for the possibility of gaining
Milly’s inheritance) cannot be met because her love is conditioned by
other motives. (This scene also pre-empts the ending of this work,
where he will ask Kate only to take him conditionally.) Instead of
meeting his offering, she asks that he give her other things, time and
faith. Her refusal to take the risk in accepting his offer is supplanted
by a higher demand, to ‘‘try for everything’’:

   'I shan’t sacrifice you; don’t cry out till you’re hurt. I
shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that’s just my
situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything.’
(51)

By sacrificing no-one and no thing, Kate in fact gives up everything:
this is her sacrifice. It may not be as immense as Milly’s sacrifice, but
it is certainly not without pain. Although her desire to retain
everything may inspire condemnation because of its superficial
greed, such a judgement would ignore that she is held responsible for
not only her own life but for the lives of others, a needy older sister
with two fatherless children, and also a dishonoured father. Kate
wants to try for everything because she has everyone else to consider.
"‘One lives for others. You do that. If I were living for myself I
shouldn’t at all mind him’’" (274 ) says Aunt Maud, whose implied
sexual interest in Densher makes her relationship to Kate even more
perverse. It may be impossible to die in the place of the other (the
other’s death is irreplaceable) but it is possible to live for others and
to make others live according to one's own will. The promise of Aunt Maud's will has the effect of directing the behaviour and desires of those whose lives depend most upon the promise of her eventual generosity:

It was clear... that Mrs Lowder was keeping her wealth as for purposes, imaginations, ambitions, that would figure as large, as honourably unselfish, on the day they should take effect. She would impose her will, but her will would be only that a person or two shouldn't lose a benefit by not submitting if they could be made to submit. To Milly, as so much younger, such far views couldn't be imputed... Even the richest woman, at her age, lacked motive, and Milly's motive doubtless had plenty of time to arrive. (130)

Milly's motive arrives three hundred pages later. She dies leaving Densher with a large portion of her estate. Her money remains as a trace of her love for him and as a haunting memory of his own deficiency in not returning her affection. Kate may appear to be the most selfish character in this novel, not only for her mercenary interest in Milly's fortune but also for her continued resistance to Densher's numerous offers of marriage; but if it were merely a question of her accepting his love, then the novel would have concluded well before Milly Theale was introduced. Milly provides Kate with an ethical dilemma. Her money promises to deliver Kate from an intractible position of responsibility. Densher is of course aware of Kate's personal difficulties, and this is why his participation (however reluctant) in her plan to seduce Milly also cannot easily be denounced: how could he "give away the woman one loved, but to back her up in her mistakes... that was perhaps chief among the inevitabilities of the abjection of love" (245).

It is precisely one's willingness to "give away" the person one loves which, according to Derrida, is the most responsible decision one can make, because it chooses to do the impossible. His reading of the Abraham story provides us with an example where the paradox of faith brings together the opposition between responsibility and irresponsibility. By choosing to be responsible to God, Abraham
makes a choice riddled with contradiction, not only because in doing so he must break the fifth commandment, "thou shalt not kill," but also because it is insouciant in that it results in the withdrawal of his responsibility as a father. The decision to confiscate Isaac's life entails the assumption of a divine authority. But is not such an assumption arrogant? The crucial factor making Abraham's decision responsible is that it remain a sacrifice. According to Kierkegaard, in order to make his terrible act a sacrifice, he must love his son all the more in the instant of death:

The moment he is ready to sacrifice Isaac... he must love his son with all his soul. When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he sacrifice him; for it is indeed this love of Isaac that in its paradoxical opposition to his love of God makes his act a sacrifice.21

If Abraham did not love Isaac at this moment then his act would be a murder: "in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact."22 Abraham's responsibility is inextricable from his sacrifice. According to Derrida, if it were easy for him to kill his son then there would be no decision, no sacrifice and no responsibility. But what of Isaac? Does his love for his father (and God) remain intact after realising his father's terrible intention? Isaac's response is silenced by this story. Abraham is praised by both Derrida and Kierkegaard (despite and paradoxically because they cannot understand him) because he chooses to do the impossible:

But when I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of the monstrous paradox... I am constantly repulsed, and my thought, for all its passion, is unable to enter into it... Abraham I cannot understand; in a way all I can learn from him is to be amazed.23

21 Kierkegaard, Fear, 101.
22 Derrida, The Gift, 66.
23 Kierkegaard, Fear, 62, 66.
Ethics, according to Derrida, arrives at the instant of giving death because this is where the intractibility of Abraham’s decision is dramatically enacted. But does the impossibility (or inhumanity) of Abraham’s decision lead to the arrival of an ethical ground in the sense that it also leaves open the possibility of a retraction? No. It is God and not the father of this story who is at liberty to retract from his original commandment to sacrifice. It is only God, who is all power and all mercy, who is able to ask for the impossible and then to replace this with the possible in the intervention of his mercy. Abraham’s limited choice to kill or to not kill is unequivocal and unnegotiable in its strict bipolarity. Where is the justice in this choice? Derrida argues that the ethical isn’t just about having free choice, it is also about the impossible choice. Yet Abraham’s decision is foreclosed by a faith that cannot be mediated. Kierkegaard writes that Abraham’s faith excludes the possibility of a negotiating ground because “this paradox does not allow for mediation; for it rests precisely on the single individual’s being only the single individual.”

In order to remain faithful to God, Abraham cannot become his friend but must accept servitude. His singularity and agency is subsumed within the unmatched singularity and authority of God. Rose writes that “friendship is relational, not differential, because it is always pervaded with meanings neither party intends, but which are recoverable by reflection when challenged.” The relationship between God and Abraham is differential in that it is indicative of the incommensurable gap between the universal and the particular, the divine and the human. There can be no meeting ground in this divide because the meeting ground is precisely the divide. While Abraham chooses to do the unthinkable—put to death the son he loves—Densher chooses to do the thinkable—refuse to “give away the woman one loved.” Although, in The Gift of Death, Derrida argues that the ethical arises through the impossible decision and impossible mourning, I do not think that ethics and justice can be

24 Ibid., 98.
25 Rose, Judaism, 4.
derived from (or arrive through) such absolutes. Abraham’s paradox of faith is resolved by divine intervention. In a James novel, there of course is no divine, universal or absolute power underpinning his fictions. His novels dramatise the absence of certainty in a world that is governed instead by the vicissitudes of human frailty. There is no outside force righting the wrongs of his fictions and that is why his works are dramas of equivocation. The difficulty of Abraham’s decision is undercut because it is taken from him by the divine and also because the story is built upon the restitution of order. Derrida’s emphasis on Abraham’s irresolution marginalises the over-riding resolution that concludes with the recovery of Isaac. (The next chapter discusses in more detail Kierkegaard’s and Derrida’s readings of this biblical tale through a reading of The Ambassadors.)

Yet the structural aporias which constitute the decision can be sustained in The Wings of the Dove. Densher cannot be absolute in his decision to seduce Milly because his friendship disallows him from being resolute. He is left with the difficult choice of sacrificing either a friendship or a love relation. He chooses, with much hesitation and irresolution, to sacrifice the friendship. Hesitation provides Densher with an ethical ground (however temporary and flawed such a ground may be), because it involves the decision to remain indefinitely proximate rather than resolutely distant from the situation. It is far more difficult and risky to remain close at hand where one feels the other’s finitude. Densher’s equivocation is also a response to the limits of his own mortality. His difficult position is demonstrated by his persistent reluctance to follow through with Kate’s plan of seduction.

The ethical arrives when the impossibility of Densher’s position is extended to include the possibility of a retraction. While the absolutism of Abraham’s faith disallows him the opportunity (and the freedom) to retract from his decision, the irresolution of Densher’s position gives him the freedom to negotiate. Now this may involve an involuntary or forced form of freedom which effectively re-positions the subject as a victim to the determinations of context. But is a decision or a subject ever free of determining factors? For most of the novel, Densher’s procrastination is a
response to the over-riding factors and concerns of his milieu. Only once Kate and Aunt Maud leave Venice for London, a departure which disperses the phalanx of petticoats, is he given the opportunity to forge a less mediated relation to Milly and, as a result, make a decision. His freedom arrives when he promises himself that he will reverse his decision if called upon to answer for his secret engagement. Although Milly does not ask this of him, his promise to end the deception remains intact. His refusal to marry Kate with Milly's money is exemplary of his new-found freedom to negotiate. In the end he decides to be true to his love without the conditionality of Milly's money, and as a consequence of this decision he also remains faithful to the memory of his deceased friend. The subjectivity, determinism and sacrifice of Densher's decision may render it a Pyrrhic victory on all counts but it at least preserves his integrity:

'We've played our dreadful game, and we've lost. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our feeling for ourselves and for each other, not to wait another day. Our marriage will—fundamentally somehow, don't you see?—right everything that's wrong, and I can't express to you my impatience...'

She looked at him without flinching—... 'My dear man, what has happened to you?'

'Well, that I can bear it no longer. That's simply what has happened. Something has snapped, has broken in me, and here I am. It's as I am that you must have me.' (419)

The marriage between Densher and Kate does not "'right everything that's wrong,'" it does not take place and the novel's conclusion does nothing to provide us with a substitute restoration. Instead we are left with the regrets of a character who has finally chosen, however forced, guilty and belated, to be faithful to his conscience.

Densher's irresolution in response to his terrible dilemma is balanced by the resolution of his passion for Kate, as he pleads for her commitment: "'What I wish is to be loved. How can I feel that I am?'... 'Good God, if you'd only take me!'" (325). Kate may have a
"talent for life" (449) but it is Milly, a young woman who "would live if one could" (166) who offers Densher the gift of unconditional love. Milly can be absolute in her love because she is going to die very soon, whereas Kate’s talent for life prohibits her from living by absolutes. Milly’s responsibilities and love attachments can be refined to, and defined as, an "I-you" relation because her death is not just inevitable, it is impending. Kate on the other hand is prevented from simplifying her responsibilities and her love attachment because her time in the world is indefinite, and as a consequence she is not free to ignore her other responsibilities. Furthermore, unlike the independently wealthy Milly, Kate is financially dependent on her aunt and therefore has not the freedom to love unconditionally, without guilt or debt. By refusing to give Densher her unconditional love, Kate is responsible. It is perhaps easy to give the other unconditional love when one is faced with the awful situation of accepting an early death, because in such extraordinary circumstances, the extraordinary is possible. But what of those less grandiose decisions and sacrifices made by those who have to negotiate their life for a long time to come? It is the banality of Densher’s decision, a sacrifice which is not extraordinary, which takes up the responsibility and the debt of the other’s death. However rich she was when she died, Milly’s debt is immense.

V: Impossibility and Possibility

‘I’d die for you,’ said Susan Shepherd after a moment. ‘“Thanks awfully”! then stay here for me.’ (132)

Susie positively wanted to suffer for her... (277)

Susan Stringham’s26 impossible offer does not lead to her protecting

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26 The novel uses the names Stringham and Shepherd interchangeably (Stringham is her married name, Shepherd her maiden name) as well as alternating between Susan or Susie. The variations on her name may indicate an inconsistency in her character or could also indicate differing degrees of formality. Very early on in this fiction the
Milly from mercenary servants and would-be lovers during her last months in Venice:

—Susie who would have drowned her very self for her; gave her up to a mercenary monster through whom she thus purchased respites. Strange were the turns of life and the moods of weakness; strange the flickers of fancy and the cheats of hope; yet lawful, all the same—weren’t they?—(288)

By offering to do the "radically impossible" Susie effectively cancels herself out from doing what is possible: "I can give the other everything except immortality, except this dying for her to the extent of dying in place of her and so freeing her from her own death." The point is, though, that Susie does not offer to give Milly anything other than immortality. The excess of her gift has the effect of excusing her from fulfilling other, more practical duties in her care of Milly. Why does the possible, the finite or the everyday have to be expended, cast off or ignored in the pursuit of offering the miraculous? James is affectionate, yet by no means ironic and critical in his depiction of Susie. The magnitude of her statement, "'I'd die for you," is undercut by the frivolity of the tone. If it were possible for Susie to die in order to save Milly then it is unlikely that such an offer would have been made in the first place.

Derrida argues that "the impossible" is not the opposite of the possible, in that as a gift it must "keep a relation of foreignness" to a binary logic. Its exteriority from this process is paradoxically (and miraculously) the reason it both interrupts and, as a result of its interruption, maintains a binary structure. Yet Susie's impossible gift neither inaugurates an oppositional economy nor interrupts it

use of her maiden name, Shepherd, also indicates her protective relationship to Milly since she is represented, though not without irony, as a shepherdess (77). The emphasis on Stringham in the latter half of the novel may suggest that not unlike the other characters in this work, she is also interested in stringing Milly along for her money even though she also appears to sincerely care for Milly right up until her death.

27 Derrida, The Gift, 43.
28 Ibid.
29 Derrida, Given Time, 7.
because the possible is precluded from her offering. The incommensurability between the impossible and the possible forecloses the introduction of the ethical since it obstructs Susie from giving the possible. Although Derrida argues that "the impossible" precisely cannot be reconciled with its opposite because it cannot be opposed, related or identified with anything other than itself (it is aporetic), he does suggest that through and because of such alterity, it is instrumental in bringing into existence a dialectical process. What I am suggesting here is that its otherness (or its non-passage) does not necessarily initiate or lead to such an opening.

The impossible is introduced again when Milly announces to Kate (after viewing the Bronzino portrait) that she wants to "die without its being noticed" (149). Although Kate is correct to assume that Milly "won't die, she won't live, by inches. She won't smell, as it were, of drugs. She won't taste, as it were, of medicine. No one will know" (230), what cannot be covered up by such precautionary measures is the fact of her wealth. It is impossible for Milly's death to be neglected because everything about her, especially in the face of her impending death, is indicative of her immense fortune:

... it was in the fine folds of the helplessly expensive little black frock that she drew over the grass as she now strolled vaguely off; it was in the curious and splendid coils of hair, 'done' with no eye whatever to the mode du jour... it lurked between the leaves of the uncut but antiquated Tauchnitz volume of which, before going out, she had mechanically possessed herself. 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 the thing you were. (82)

Her imminent death does nothing to conceal the existence of her wealth; in fact, it is instrumental in making it even more visible. Milly may want to die privately, without ceremony and without publicity, but this is impossible because her existence (and notoriety) is bound up with her money. As Aunt Maud laments the tragedy-of
her loss by associating it with her money:

What most deeply stirred her was the way the poor girl must have wanted to live.

‘Ah, yes indeed—she did, she did: why in pity shouldn’t she, with everything to fill her world? The mere money of her, the darling, if it isn’t too disgusting at such a time to mention that—!’ (415)

The last quarter of the novel is directed toward the moment when we are notified of her death. The narrative is telescoped to this end. The pace of James’s style slows down as we are drawn into the concentrated rhythm of its waiting game. In this last book (book ten), both Densher and the novel move in unison as they withdraw from Venice in order to wait in London for the news of her decease. During these last chapters, the point of view is Densher’s: the concern is with his response and sense of anxiety leading up to the news of her death. James’s decision to take the focus away from the place of death and to redirect it through Densher’s point of view effectively mediates and aligns our experience of Milly’s death with Densher’s own. This filtering and aligning also produces anxiety. Along with Densher (and to a lesser degree with Aunt Maud and Kate), the reader is a helpless witness to her death:

Suspense was the ugliest ache to him, and he would have nothing to do with it; the last thing he wished was to be unconscious of her—what he wished to ignore was her own consciousness, tortured, for all he knew, crucified by its pain... The days, whether lapsing or lingering, were a stiff reality; the suppression of anxiety was a thin idea; the taste of life itself was the taste of suspense. That he was waiting was in short at the bottom of everything. (414)

No one knows exactly when Milly will die for death has its own time. The time of Milly’s death is integral to the question of her impending inheritance. The relationship between death and debt is crucial to this question of how much will be left behind and to whom. The singularity of one’s death is translated into the general,
however imperfectly or unfaithfully, by the survival of an estate. Inheritance maintains the continuity of one's life and death even if wills are open to contestation, are sometimes out of date, incomplete or even subject to suppression, as is the case in The Wings of the Dove.

VI: The Work of Seduction

For the greater part of this novel, Milly appears to choose seduction over mourning because, unlike the latter, the former affirms her sexuality. But seduction is easily subject to denunciation because it involves manipulation, deception, sex and as a consequence of these things, power. And yet the asymmetrical ratio of power between seducer and seduced perhaps offers a more commensurable opposition than the gap between the living and the dying. Despite the fact that Milly's willingness to become seduced is made possible by the element of deception, it should not be forgotten that she is no stranger to the art of deception herself. As Kate yet again offers to Densher an explanation of her feeling:

'She never wanted the truth'—Kate had a high headshake. 'She wanted you. She would have taken from you what you could give her, and been glad of it even if she had known it false. You might have lied to her from pity, and she would have seen you and felt you lie, and yet—since it was all for tenderness—she would have thanked you and blessed you and clung to you but the more. For that was your strength, my dear man—that she loves you with passion.' (405)

30The decision to seduce Milly rather than to mourn her is a choice that is made not only by Kate Croy but by nearly every other character in this fiction, even by Milly herself. It is almost the unanimous, popular choice, with the exception of Densher's opposition. However, one should not necessarily draw the conclusion that his resistance is bound up with a sense of moral responsibility. It could have more to do with his lack of experience with death. Unlike Kate and Milly, he is not associated with death or with a work of mourning that both anticipates, and ensues from, its event. He appears a stranger to grief. This is his innocence and perhaps even his charm.
Whether or not Milly actually "'never wanted the truth'" only Densher remains uncertain. What is certain, though, is that Kate is interested in alleviating both her guilt and Densher's and, as a consequence of this, their responsibility in their treatment of Milly.

_The Wings of the Dove_ is yet another late James fiction where reality is fashioned and filtered through the art of conversation. Characters cannot be disengaged from their utterances and as such the truth of a situation, of an emotion and of a relationship lies in an equivocal realm, one which moves discreetly between speakers and their situations. This is why, like the other later works in this thesis, _The Wings of the Dove_ requires a kind of attention which is not simply attentive to what is said, but to what is implied, concealed or even denied by speech. Although the conversations between Kate and Densher dominate the fiction, when Milly does speak, her conversation reveals her propensity for self-deception. She persistently conceals the seriousness of her ill health:

'Why I shouldn't have a grand long life?' Milly had taken it straight up as if to understand it and for the moment to consider it... 'He tells me to _live_.' —and she oddly limited the word.

It left Susie at sea. 'Then what do you want more?'

'My dear,' the girl presently said, 'I don't "want", as I assure you, anything. Still,' she added, 'I am living. Oh yes, I'm living.' (264)

The community of mourners, friends and seducers who enter Milly's life stay in her life on the condition that they never mention the fact of her ill health. Seduction and the element of deception which accompanies (or even makes possible) "its success are not irreconcilable with mourning. That death is final, certain, absolute and inevitable does not exclude deception, seduction and manipulation. The truth of death does not guarantee the veracity of a work of mourning—it can offer a ground for its deception. The inevitability and sacrifice of Milly's death is balanced by the materiality of her desire for Densher. Seduction does not offer a better option than mourning, but what it does do is enable the materiality of Milly's life to appear before us more sharply: it does
justice to her humanity. Her mortality is brought before us all the more explicitly when her earlier tendency to conceal her illness is later overtaken by a greater desire: to live for the man she loves. Seduction awakens her desire to live and to be loved by Densher, which is indicated when her sense of propriety is supplanted by her passion for life. Lord Mark's offer of marriage pushes her beyond the parameters of good manners: "'Should you positively like to live here?' 'I think I should like,' said poor Milly after an instant, 'to die here'" (295).

The interrelationship between seduction and mourning allows Milly to become responsible for both her love and her death. It is also the means through which a useful friendship is forged between two women. In Politics of Friendship, Derrida writes:

"for Aristotle... friendship... between man and woman... belongs neither to properly familial or syngenic friendship nor to friendship in the highest sense, primary or virtuous... This friendship is based on the calculation of the useful, a friendship of partnership... hence one of a political kind... Community between man and woman relates to useful goods; it is a community of services, and hence political.\(^{31}\)

Although the question of a useful and political friendship is explicitly thought in terms of married life, the calculation involved in Kate's friendship to Milly is an instance where the useful is uppermost in the development of their relation: "she would have something to supply, Kate something to take" (179). While Kate's relation to Milly can be justified and simplified by the motive to obtain her fortune, Milly's interest in Kate cannot be subject to such an obvious form of calculation:

She pulled herself up... just the odd result of the thought was to intensify for the girl that side of her friend which she had doubtless already been more prepared than she quite knew to think of as the 'other', the not wholly calculable... She should never know how

\(^{31}\)Derrida, Politics, 201.
Kate truly felt about anything... (125-126)

The friendship between Milly and Kate is symmetrical in the sense that the latter is the knower, the former the innocent. It is because of this division that their friendship is commensurable for at least two reasons: it is economic in that it follows the lines of a supply and demand model (Milly has money and Kate desires her money), and it is forged and maintained through the absence of a desirable object, Merton Densher:

Milly found 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 and which, by the same token, had looked, rather more beautifully than less, into his own. (125)

The man who mediates their relationship does not necessarily divide and conquer their friendship. Rather, he is integral to the preservation of their relation. However, the friendship between Kate and Milly is not only defined through Densher’s separate relation to each of them, it is defined through their separate relation to him. Moreover, the silence surrounding their relation—the silence of Kate’s secret engagement to the man Milly loves, the silence of Milly’s ill health and the general omission of information between these two women is what offers a ground, however mendacious or unstable, for their friendship. Milly may not be able to fathom Kate, since she “expressed to Susan Shepherd more than once that Kate had some secret, some smothered trouble, besides all the rest of her history” (114), yet this does not prevent her from being her friend. But what is perhaps more interesting than Kate’s apparent opacity is Milly’s. She may be touted as the dove of the novel by Kate—who by contrast is likened to a predator, a “creature who paced like a panther” (183-184)—it is the innocent, and not the predator, who is the most difficult to fathom. Milly’s desires and intentions are assigned to her by Kate, who is therefore ultimately the object of our scrutiny. Milly may appear as a foil to Kate’s guile but her apparent naivety is just that. She offers a contrast to Kate’s relative.
transparency. Densher may liken Kate to a library of uncut volumes, but it is Milly, a young heiress who could own libraries stacked high with uncut volumes, who appears as the most enigmatic heroine of all. Her characterisation cannot be extricated from James’s point of view and moreover the perspective is mainly filtered through Kate and Densher’s conversations. Milly remains incalculable to the end. Her death does nothing to enlighten, but is instrumental in maintaining her mystery. We are rarely given access to her state of mind, for "she herself was so 'other', so taken up with the unspoken" (126).

In The Wings of the Dove, friendship and love are enacted at their limit. That is, they appear in their most broken, poisonous and malicious form because they are implicated within a process of seduction. Kate’s decision to seduce Milly is complicit with her decision to befriend her. In Politics of Friendship, the recurrent phrase, “O my friends there is no friend” 32 is indicative of the aporia at the heart of such a relationship. Derrida points out that this phrase is “quoted from memory” 33 by Montaigne, who recalls the words from Aristotle. The double bind of this utterance is complicated further by its recitation. The work of mourning is integral to both friendship’s possibility and impossibility, its failure and success. In the case of the friendship between the two women, a relation which disrupts the fraternal heritage of this bond, the interdictions which haunt, dismantle and make possible their friendship are also the means through which the novel’s dramatic tension is sustained. The explicit economy of Kate’s and Milly’s friendship is upheld by the aneconomy of the silences and the secrets which concurrently bind and divide their relation, and furthermore, our relation to the text. Throughout this novel, a more pervasive form of seduction takes place through and because of many omissions. Derrida’s statement that “friendship does not keep silence, it is preserved by silence” 34 can be extended to include the production of literature. Yet a crucial factor in one’s relation (or friendship) with the novel is not only the

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32Ibid., 26.
33Ibid., 27.
34Ibid., 53.
preservation of its many silences, but their allure. Seduction does not just operate on a narrative level but on a formalistic level as well. In order to read this novel, patience, persistence, concentration and proximity are required. Such characteristics are not only assignable to a work of mourning but also to that of a seduction. Responsibility is integral to both processes, in that they both involve the decision to remain indefinitely close to the work (or the other) at hand. Both seduction and mourning require a kind of attention that is not only thoughtful but is above all made possible through a work of memory. Although by the dénouement, Densher's mourning tries to overturn his work of seduction, the allure of the fiction cannot be superceded. In order to be successfully seduced by this novel, one must first decide to remain persistently and indefinitely proximate to its intricate (and seemingly infinite) formulations and turns of phrase. It requires both discipline and generosity to give one's self up to this kind of writing. Perhaps it is the willingness to be open to this kind of seduction which constitutes the most responsible work of mourning, since it chooses to be vulnerable and potentially erroneous in its vulnerability.
Chapter Three:
Difficulty and Decision-Making in
The Ambassadors

‘Will you give yourself up?’
Poor Strether heaved his sigh. ‘If I only could! But that’s the deuce of it—that I never can. No—I can’t.’ She wasn’t, however, discouraged, ‘But you want to at least?’
‘Oh unspeakably!’
(Henry James, The Ambassadors)

Strether has... his moment of hesitation. This moment of hesitation is what we get—what I give... He can’t accept or assent. He won’t. He doesn’t. (Henry James, “Project of Novel [The Ambassadors]” in The Complete Notebooks of Henry James)

Abraham... must act... he must know at the decisive moment what he is about to do... if he doesn’t know that... he is far from being Abraham, he is less significant than a tragic hero, he is in fact an irresolute man who can resolve to do neither one thing nor the other... such a Haesitator [waverer] is simply a parody of the knight of faith. (Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling)

I: The Expense of Faith

In Fear and Trembling Søren Kierkegaard makes the ontological distinction between faith and knowledge: “faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.” The supposed virtue of surrendering to the instant of decision is lauded by Judaeo-Christian ideology in that it is about choosing the spirit over the corporeal, the invisible over the visible. Faith is about making a leap because it asks that one forget the middle term, which is the process or means

1Kierkegaard, Fear, 82.
through which one comes to a point of decision-making. It brings to
the instant both a context and a history. The lightning flash of the
instant is not a random, ahistorical, or spontaneous ‘event,’ but a
moment which is made possible by a past, a history and a context.
The instant of decision is the culmination of a thinking process
which has undergone a transformative movement, however swift or
plodding, from one kind of cognition to another. The instant does
not signify a rupture between thought and action but is a transitory
space which reveals how the two categories overlap and inform one
another. To think is to act. Action is traced by cognition and it is a
movement which is foreshadowed by memory. And yet the
opposition between thinking and acting, between the mind and the
body, continues to dominate our thinking. The middle term may be
forgotten in the instant of decision but it is not eradicated since it
offers the important spacing between faith and knowledge.

The leap of faith is not a moment of transcendence but an
instant of forgetfulness. And yet such a process of forgetting is
paradoxically made possible only through remembrance: one must
remember in order to forget and vice-versa. In the story of Abraham,
the father’s willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, culminates a
double movement of memoration and forgetfulness. In Fear and
Trembling and The Gift of Death, Kierkegaard and Derrida argue that
Abraham is delivered as the father of faith because the full weight of
his conflicting responsibilities to God and to Isaac are felt in the
instant of “giving death to his own.”2 The opposition between
Abraham’s duty to and love of Isaac and his duty to and love of God
is at once inflamed and resolved in the instant of decision. But
within this same instant, Abraham has also resigned himself to the
will of God. His intention to sacrifice is an expression of his “infinite
resignation”3 from all that he knows and loves in the finite world.
In this story, faith has produced a massive movement of
expenditure: everything other than the will of God has been
renounced.

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2Derrida, The Gift, 95.
3Kierkegaard, Fear, 72.
The knight of faith must not hesitate. He accepts his responsibility by heading off towards the absolute request of the other, beyond knowledge. He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge... It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret.4

If the instant of decision "structurally breaches knowledge" then it operates as a form of expenditure. But why must knowledge be the thing expended, cast off, or sacrificed? Is it possible to make a decision without having to give up the very thing which constitutes the basis of decision-making?

Lambert Strether of The Ambassadors does not sacrifice his intellectual disposition in order to make a decision because it is precisely through this resource that his process of discrimination becomes meaningful, and in the end, ethical. His sustained engagement with the world prolongs the decision. He is, in the words of Kierkegaard, a "Haesitator." This chapter will deal with the relationship between ethics and decision-making. My reading of The Ambassadors will consider the ethics of the protracted sacrifice. In The Ambassadors, the decision does not follow a logic of abandonment. Strether's movement of discrimination does not seek to deny or sacrifice all that he knows and loves in order to make a decision. The opposition between the individual and society, between a subject and object, or between the particular and the universal cannot be maintained in a world where the distinctions between perceptions and memories, substances and images, words and actions have collapsed. It is impossible to be a knight of faith or even a tragic hero under such conditions. The instant of decision is not a moment of interior, singular or secret madness because it is traversed, inflected and disseminated by the exteriority of another madness: the world of the social.

4Derrida, The Gift, 77
Strether’s judgements are forged through his relationship to the world, to language and to his social community. The solipsism of the decision is diffused through its social articulation and enactment. In The Ambassadors, the decision becomes a gradual process that works discreetly, silently, even invisibly through its many protracted sentences and complicated clauses. The decision is neither eventful nor extraordinary but is transformed into an incremental, cumulative process that arises through the novel’s innumerable qualifications and careful judgements. Strether is the assemblage of many decisions, some revealing, others misleading; combined, they challenge the reader’s ability to discriminate between his perception of the world and the narrative point of view.

II: Sacrifice Interrupted

In The Gift of Death, Derrida writes of the structural importance of the instant in decision-making:

how can the concept of decision be dissociated from this figure of the instant? From the stigma of its punctuality?... At the instant of every decision and through the relation to every other (one) as every (bit) other, every one else asks us at every moment to behave like knights of faith.\(^5\)

In his reading of the Abraham story, the instant of decision is consecrated as a moment of ecstatic or miraculous alterity. Derrida argues that Abraham’s intention to sacrifice Isaac is made commensurable with the act of sacrifice through the “no-time-lapse” of the instant:

This is the moment when Abraham gives the sign of absolute sacrifice... this is the instant in which the sacrifice is as it were consummated, for only an instant, a no-time-lapse, separates this from the raised arm of the murderer himself... In this instant,

\(^5\)Ibid., 77-79.
Therefore, in the imminence that doesn’t even separate the decision from the act, God returns his son to him and decides by sovereign decision.⁶

Yet the difference between Abraham’s intention to sacrifice Isaac and the act of sacrifice is vast enough to save him. Derrida writes that Abraham’s incommensurable faith is not only proved in the instant, it is endured and that such a moment “cannot be grasped in time and through mediation.”⁷ If the instant of decision over-steps cognition and reason, consciousness and comprehension, then it is perhaps miraculous that such a moment is remembered at all let alone proffered as the climax of the story. Within the “no-time-lapse” of the instant, Isaac is at once sentenced to death and restored to the world of the living. By raising his hand against his son, Abraham proves his unparalleled faith and loyalty to the divine. He is also instantly rewarded for his reverence. Derrida’s emphasis on the paradox or collision of Abraham’s two duties “in the instant itself” underplays the significance of the “sovereign decision”⁸ in resolving the paradox. God’s intercession not only preserves Isaac’s finitude, it also resolves the conflict between Abraham’s love of Isaac and love of God, between his duty to human ethics and to divine will. In this story, God has the power to grant or refuse life, give time or confiscate it. Without the intervention of the divine, the story of Abraham would not be remembered as a tale of faith, but as a tragic story of senseless murder. Abraham would not inspire poetic rumination or philosophical discussion but would emerge as either a cold blooded murderer or as a gullible or stupid patriarch. The result of the story enables both Kierkegaard and Derrida to praise him as a knight of faith who acts without reserve, resistance, hesitation or expectation of reward.

Kierkegaard’s characterisation of Abraham, however, differs slightly from Derrida’s in that he equivocates between the image of an ascetic knight of faith and that of a gambler who believes “on the

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⁶Ibid., 95-96.
⁷Ibid., 65.
⁸Ibid., 96.
strength of the absurd" that God will retract his commandment to kill. In Kierkegaard, Abraham’s decision may exceed “human calculation” but it is not exempt from calculation because it is precisely on the strength of an absurd or ridiculous form of calculation that he receives Isaac back. Kierkegaard points out that through risking the known in pursuit of the unknown, Abraham not only gains Isaac, but also God’s gratitude and history’s veneration as the father of faith. By contrast, Derrida’s reading of the story has a tendency to hallow Abraham as a knight of faith whose absolute duty to God goes “beyond both debt and duty.” Derrida’s main concern is with thinking the incalculability of Abraham’s faith and decision. He is not interested in the miracle of Isaac’s restored finitude (a retraction which inspires Kierkegaard’s imagination) but with how God’s intervention returns the incalculability of Abraham’s faith into the realm of calculation. Derrida’s theoretical emphasis is placed upon the reanimation of a gift economy. That is, God’s revokement doesn’t save Isaac in so much as it restores the imbalance of Abraham’s absolute duty into economic calculation. The obvious point elided by this approach is that there is no sacrifice. Derrida does what Gillian Rose criticises Adorno for in The Broken Middle: “he utterly misses the point that nothing is sacrificed; and that no sacrifice ever occurs in Fear and Trembling.” Both Kierkegaard’s and Derrida’s embellishments of the story take up the responsibility of Abraham’s decision by speculating upon possible pain and torment leading up to the sacrifice. Their fear and trembling cannot be derived from the act of sacrifice (because there isn’t one) but in the thought of sacrifice. Kierkegaard’s and Derrida’s readings translate the particularity, rarity and secrecy of Abraham’s faith into the discursive, general realm of philosophy and literature. Their meditations have the effect of transforming the instant of Abraham’s decision into a movement that is ponderous. Their

9Kierkegaard, Fear, 65.
10Ibid.
11Ibid., 56.
12Derrida, The Gift, 63.
13Rose, Broken Middle, 14.
“voluble” accounts fill the silence and the secrecy of a sparse Biblical tale that is unceremonious in its narration of a father’s willingness to kill his son because God demanded this of him. Abraham’s paradox of faith provides a conceptual limit through which both writers develop their discussion. Their extensive meditations seek to think “precisely” and paradoxically “where thinking leaves off.”

In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard reminds us on a number of occasions that Abraham’s conflict of love and duty was a trial and a temptation. But at what cost? The story elides Sarah’s love for and duty to her son and God. In The Gift of Death, Derrida wonders if the privilege given to the God-father-son relationship involves the sacrifice of woman from “the system of... sacrificial responsibility.” This possibility, however, is left “in suspense.” Perhaps this story is not so much about the impossibility of deciding the undecidable as it is about the sacrifice of the maternal figure in preserving Abraham’s unmediated relationship to God. Furthermore, what happens to Isaac’s love and trust in his father and faith in God once he is aware of Abraham’s terrible intention? Abraham may have passed the test of faith given by a jealous God “who demands absolute love,” but what about the effects of his decision upon those excluded from the dilemma? Is not Abraham selfish in his assumption of sole responsibility for the life of Isaac? Derrida’s focus on the structural aporia of Abraham’s decision—there is no way in which he can obey God without violating his paternal duty of care—obliquely sanctions Abraham’s assumption of authority. Whether or not the decision is beyond Abraham or within his grasp, possible or impossible, the dilemma still revolves around the conflict of his paternal responsibility to and love of Isaac and his filial responsibility to and love of God.

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14Ibid., Rose makes a similar statement: “Abraham is ‘incommensurable’, which is why de silentio is so voluble,” (16).
16Kierkegaard, Fear, 82.
17Ibid.
18Kierkegaard, Fear, 101.
III: The Impossible Decision

The argument in both *Fear and Trembling* and *The Gift of Death* is hinged upon the opposition, conflict and miraculous transfiguration of two irreconcilable spheres: the general or "universal" sphere of "human life and ethics" versus "the sphere of the 'exception'... the transcendent commandment of faith." The paradox of faith is about the conflict, collision and eventual supremacy of the individual sphere of exception over and above the universal sphere of human life. Abraham's faith is the exception; it is an inferiority that cannot be made commensurable with an exteriority. Kierkegaard writes that the paradox of faith is "the most refined and most remarkable of all dialectics" because it dramatises the miraculous usurpation of one position, the particular, over the general sphere of ethics and language. The instant of decision operates as a mythical battle ground in which the single individual becomes, through the exception of faith, higher than the universal. On the strength of an absurd form of calculation, Abraham's incommensurable inferiority surpasses the exterior, universal world of language, ethics, justice and the law. The incommensurability of Abraham's faith exceeds the world of categories. It operates outside the realm of understanding and reason. Yet it is precisely and paradoxically through the incommensurability of his faith that Abraham is justified before the general sphere of language, reason, justice and ethics:

Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior... the single individual who, having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now by means of the universal becomes the individual who, as the particular, stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal.

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21 Ibid., 84-85.
The singularity and supremacy of Abraham's decision is reliant upon its insurmountable interiority, secrecy and unintelligibility. Abraham's concealment separates him from both the common man and the tragic hero. The knight of faith exists above a mortal world of vicissitudes and frailties, of conversations and feelings. Abraham cannot be mediated because he "stands in absolute relation to the absolute." Abraham's incommensurable interiority is commensurable with the divine in that neither can be mediated nor understood. For Kierkegaard, "the ethical... is the universal" which means that ethics is not only enacted within the general, social sphere of human relationships, law and language, it is synonymous with this realm. Both Abraham and God stand outside the universal which is also to say that both exceed the ethical domain of human law and language. Abraham "cannot speak" which means that he cannot be translated or contained by the universal: ethics cannot touch him. Kierkegaard and Derrida revere him for his unintelligibility because of the added suffering of deciding alone: "The tragic hero knows nothing of the terrible responsibility of solitude... he has the comfort of being able to weep and wail... sobbing and crying give relief, while groans that cannot be uttered are torture." The question is though, if Abraham is inexplicable or unintelligible, then how is it possible to know if his silence conceals a deeper nature? If it is conceivable that his silence conceals a tortured soul, then it is also conceivable that his silence conceals nothing of the sort. Part of the mystery and paradox of Abraham's faith is bound up with his inexplicability and yet Kierkegaard and Derrida seek to decipher a character who thwarts understanding. Their accounts advocate Abraham's position—by looking favourably upon his silence. Abraham is in part vindicated on the strength of his resignation from the court of human law and ethics. He is justified because of his refusal for justification: "His justification is, once again, the paradox; for if he is the paradox it is not by virtue of

22Ibid., 85.
23Ibid., 83.
24Ibid., 138.
being anything universal, but of the particular."\(^{25}\) Abraham's withdrawal from the world is read as a sign of his self-sacrifice and courage. Conversely, his silence could be evidential of a stubborn or even arrogant nature that is audacious enough to over-step the counsel of not only his family but also the everyday processes of human law, justice and ethics. But in order to preserve the ethics of Abraham's intended sacrifice, Kierkegaard and Derrida uphold the belief in his internal struggle prior to and in the moment of raising his hand against his son.

Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's "temptation is the ethical itself which would keep him from doing God's will."\(^{26}\) And Abraham's duty "is precisely the expression of God's will."\(^{27}\) He acts "For the sake of God's sake, and what is exactly the same, for his own... The unity here is quite properly expressed... "\(^{28}\) Therefore, what room would there be left, within such of an absolute relationship with God, to allow for the painful vacillations of conscience and decision-making? Kierkegaard writes that Abraham's responsibility is God's responsibility and his authority is God's authority. His will and God's will are indistinguishable. Abraham is a cypher.

Theodor Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard is not interested in the scandal of Isaac's threatened death but in the disgrace of Abraham's renunciation of "consciousness and intellect."\(^{29}\):

Kierkegaard's absolute self is mere spirit. The individual is not the sensuously developed person, and no property is accorded him beyond the bare

\(^{25}\)Ibid., 90.
\(^{26}\)Ibid., 88.
\(^{27}\)Ibid.
\(^{28}\)Ibid.
\(^{29}\)In *The Broken Middle*, Rose writes "Adorno picks out a different scandal" for it is "not Isaac but consciousness and intellect" that are "sacrificed in a 'mythical' reconciliation—the logical outcome of voracious idealism which assimilates actuality to its own notion and simultaneously annihilates itself in the idea of paradoxical sacrifice. This is the paradox behind paradox: consciousness so over-extended, so all-consuming of 'nature', that it cancels its other, and in so doing destroys itself; for consciousness which has no other is consciousness of nothing or not consciousness," (13).
necessities. Inwardness does not consist in its fullness but is ruled over by an ascetic spiritualism.\textsuperscript{30}

As an abstract figure of "mere spirit" Abraham's decision is rendered null and void because he had neither a subjectivity nor a consciousness in the first place in order to have it removed, tested or superceded. Abraham's singularity or particularity is over-ruled by an "ascetic spiritualism" that cannot be challenged or mediated. His movement of infinite resignation is an austere and puritanical process that not only forsakes the known in the pursuit of the unknown, but is also an act of self-effacement. As a knight of faith, Abraham has renounced all claim to worldly goods. God is not only the keeper of his life but also the lives of those besides him. It is only through the grace of God that he lives and that Isaac is restored to the world of the living. He is dispossessed of everything, including his right to decide. Abraham is overwhelmed and obliterated by an incommensurable faith that cannot be mediated and by a God who cannot be understood.

Derrida writes: "A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process."\textsuperscript{31} God, as the incalculable, determines the absurd calculation of Abraham's decision. In the story of Abraham, the "free decision" is foreclosed by a God-centred world. The singularity of Abraham's decision is over-shadowed and underpinned by the certainty of a theistic universe that asserts God as the origin and reason for existence. Abraham's decision is impossible, not because it is structurally aporetic, but because it is ultimately not his to make. As the supreme being, God upholds Abraham's paradox of faith.

Adorno argues that Kierkegaard places Abraham at the centre of a systematic struggle between opposing and attracting spheres—the universal and the particular—only to make Abraham subordinate to the miracle of their transfiguration. He is used as a straw figure whose particular life is superceded by a dialectic that

\textsuperscript{30}Adorno, \textit{Kierkegaard}, 51.

operates regardless of "the specific content of the individual's experience of faith." Abraham does not occupy the side of the particular as a sentient or mortal being but as an empty signifier or vessel through which the lofty orbit of the spheres are enabled to collide and transform:

The self-motivated totality of the spheres changes one sphere into another. It is not the subject and its concrete particular life that mediate between them; the subject is, rather the stage on which spheres disappear and others are revealed. Thus in its origin, as in its full developed form, Kierkegaard's dialectic transcends the person for whom it was planned, while the objectivity of the mythical, ambiguous spheres, the autonomous self's claim to dominion disavows itself.

Adorno further argues that Kierkegaard's dialectical lyric is neither completed nor resolved by the transformation of the spheres because there is no translation "of the aesthetic into the ethical, and of the ethical into the religious," only the substitution of one position, the particular, for the other, the universal. The ethical is teleologically suspended through the unceasing motion of opposing and attracting spheres. The finite and chaotic world of individual passions and of singular desires is at once transposed and displaced by the perpetual orbit of a celestial dialectic that cannot be translated or grounded by the "concrete particular life... for whom it was planned."

Decisions are not made in a world of pure spirit or within the realm of dispassionate spheres but are forged in a fallen, finite and contaminated world of broken beliefs and disappointed passions. In The Ambassadors, the decision is not an instance of unmatched singularity or of incommensurable interiority but is a process traversed and enacted within the general sphere of language, society

32Adorno, Kierkegaard, 97
33Ibid.
34Ibid.
35Ibid.
and conversation. The decision cannot exceed debt or duty, human law or divine will but is a movement indebted to these abstract ideals and everyday processes.

In *The Ambassadors*, Strether is neither determined nor supported by the certitude of a God-centred universe and neither is he absorbed within nor expelled by an unworldly struggle of spheres or of irreconcilable categories. Strether’s process of decision-making, a movement which is at once visible and invisible, specific and vague, reasonable and unreasonable, is entwined within the difficult and uncertain movements of his conversations and turns of phrase. Strether’s character and decisions are indistinguishable: they are wedded to his sense of being in the world. In this novel, the difficulty of the decision is not predicated upon its impossibility or its insurmountable piety, but upon the very banal possibility of misreading the world and its diverse array of characters.

**IV: Judgement and Perception**

In the world of late James, judgement is never pure but contaminated. Decisions are delayed because they are filtered:

> Strether had meanwhile on his own cabled; he had but delayed... His message to Mrs Newsome, in answer to her own, had consisted of the words: ‘Judge best to take another month...’ He had added that he was writing, but he was of course always writing...36

The decision to love, to be one’s friend or to change one’s life arises from a contaminated innocence (*The Awkward Age*) a ruptured trust (*The Golden Bowl*) and a broken knowledge (*The Ambassadors*). The interconnectedness between the past and the present, between the individual and society and between judgement and perception is dramatically enacted in *The Ambassadors*. Strether’s discriminations

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36James, *The Ambassadors*, 236-237 All further page references to this novel will parenthetically appear in the main body of the chapter.
lie in his perceptions and they are innumerable. The intertwining and layering of vision between our image of Strether and Maria Gostrey's, between the narrative voice and Strether's consciousness, indicates the embeddedness of perception and the difficulty of making judgements because of this. Strether's process of decision-making is a discreet, subtle and difficult movement that seeks to navigate its way through a world where categories have melted and merged and where vision is at once single and plural:

He had allowed for depths, but these were greater; and it was as if, oppressively—indeed absurdly—he was responsible for what they had now thrown up to the surface. It was—through something ancient and cold in it—what he would have called the real thing. (297)

Strether is a parody of the knight of faith because he values the aesthetic over the ascetic, sensation over detachment, bewilderment over decisiveness and pleasure over sufferance. He refuses to foreclose his relationship to the aesthetic environs of late nineteenth century Paris because he is not an ascetic man of faith but a man of immeasurable imagination. He allows himself to be seduced by the splendours of Paris, a city whose history, art and culture operate in sharp contradistruction to the morally stilted world of his American hometown of Woollett, Massachusetts. Strether is "very much in Paris" (preface, xxxviii) and as a result of his emotional proximity he fails as Mrs Newsome's ambassador. He is not an independent, unflinching, or insensible witness to the scene but a man overtaken, traversed and affected by what he sees. Strether's sensory perceptions merge with the luminous city of his contemplation. He is both seer and seen, conductor of vision and object of vision and as a result of his enmeshment, the point of separation between subject and object or between the individual and the world is not sustainable. As Strether exclaims to Miss Gostrey, the ficelle of the fiction: "I can't

separate—it's all one; and that's perhaps why, as I say, I don't understand'’ (372).

The novel begins with a mission. Strether is sent out from America to bring Chad Newsome home, son and heir to Mrs Newsome's family business, a corporation that has the potential to become an industrial empire. But once abroad, his purpose is almost immediately superceded by a greater demand, and that is to experience the adventure and uncertainty of travel. Strether's poetic vacillations try to do justice to the profundity of his European experience. His relationship with the world is not directed through a principle of calculation and yet he is neither a knight of faith nor a tragic hero but a man who loves to think. And when he does fall in love it is not for a person but for a place. He becomes enamoured of a city whose spectacle and glamour both intoxicate and inspire. Strether's sense of duty to protestant Woollett and moreover to the virgin queen, Mrs Newsome is supplanted by a greater sense of duty: to renew a friendship with a city of his past. Strether's thinking makes it impossible for him to make "an infinite movement of resignation" away from the world of sense and sensation because such an act would impose a violent limit upon all that he admires and desires. As one of James's most intellectual and imaginative characters, Strether finds that his revisitation of Paris promises to inaugurate another story, one which will narrate the process of his own unravelling.

What is awakened by his experience of Europe is his propensity for "intense reflexion" (preface, xxxviii). His poetic

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38Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors," in An Explication in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Ambassadors: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Albert E. Stone (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), writes: "Strether's sense of his role... in which his solemn obligations as an implicated friend are counterbalanced by his equally ceremonious sense that due decorums must also be attended to when he comes face to face with another friend of long ago—no less a person than Europe," (85).

39In the early pages of the fiction Strether is struck by the low cut dress of his new friend Maria Gostrey and likens her to Mary Stuart whereas Mrs Newsome is associated with the modest and rigid attire of Queen Elizabeth. His recourse to historical allusions in understanding the two dominant women in his life indicates his sexual naivety and fear of the authoritative woman (35).

40Kierkegaard, Fear, 143.
sensibilities are given full range as he immerses himself within the bright lights, smells, theatres, museums, sidewalks and cafes of Paris. Chad Newsome’s dazzling world of would-be artists, poets, writers and dilettantes provides his aesthetic sensibilities with a spectacle he cannot fathom. The sophistication of Chad’s society makes it difficult for Strether to discern virtue from vice, probity from roguery, integrity from infamy and truth from fiction. Yet such oppositions, which remain unchallenged in Woollett and its sister city Milrose, cannot be sustained in Paris. Differences become similarities as they twinkle, tremble and melt together (63) under the golden canopy of the capital of the nineteenth century. One’s sense of authority, purpose and motive cannot but mingle and fuse with the vaporous substances, diverse particles and gleaming sights which crowd Strether’s vision:

His greatest uneasiness seemed to peep at him out of the imminent impression that almost any acceptance of Paris might give one’s authority away. It hung before him this morning, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. (63)

Strether’s consciousness cannot be disciplined or punctuated by the instant, as he reveals to Miss Gostrey of his wandering state of mind:

‘I’m always considering something else; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror. I’m considering at present for instance something else than you.’ (13)

Strether’s admission of distraction exemplifies his porous disposition. His open character allows him to forge an intense and vital relationship to the world. Strether’s “obsession” with “the other thing” brings to the fore the complex nature of memory and perception. His train of thought is not singular but inflected with a variety of overlapping sensations and images that frame and uphold
his conversations and perceptions. The image of Miss Gostrey's velvet neck band, for example, inspires Strether's imagination:

What was it but an uncontrolled perception that his friend's velvet band somehow added, in her appearance, to the value of every other item—frivolous, no doubt, idiotic, and above all unexpected—of liking it: he had in addition taken it as a starting-point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights. (34)

Strether's sense of things exterior to the present does not foreclose his relationship to his interlocutors, on the contrary, it provides him with connections and associations that further enrich his conversations and experiences. His concentration on "the other thing" during his conversation with Gostrey leads their discussion to an understanding: both come to recognise each other's propensity for deep reflection, as she later remarks: "For what do you take people, that they're able to say words about anything, able remorselessly to analyse? There are not many like you and me" (30). Strether's dialogues with Gostrey serve a dual purpose: they aid the work's lucidity and reveal his character. Strether's thought processes and judgements are made visible to the reader through the mode of the conversation. Strether's discriminations cannot be detached from his conversations and as such the realm of the social operates as a ground for decision-making. His gradual process of reasoning unmakes the decisiveness of the decision. The singularity of the decision, as a leap of faith which defines an individual's individuality, is undone by its social articulation.

In his preface James criticises "the little old tradition... of the human comedy... that people's moral scheme does break down in Paris" (xxxvii). The influence of Paris is far from damaging to Strether's "moral scheme" as his lateral flights of fancy only make him all the more receptive and sensitive to the world of the social and to its variegated characters. His sense of goodwill, humanity and justice is enhanced by his decision to undergo an aesthetic odyssey. Strether's movement of intellection becomes the "stuff" of drama.
because it cuts "thick... into his intellectual, into his moral substance" (preface, xxxvii). His belief in Chad’s "virtuous attachment" (129) is indicative of his preserved innocence. Experience does not replace Strether’s innocence. He remains bewildered and surprised regardless of his urban ramblings and spontaneous outings. Strether’s infatuation with Chad’s lover, Mme de Vionnet, and his prolonged exposure to their social group provide him with experiences and conversations that counteract all that he has known and understood: "Strether had never in his life heard so many opinions on so many subjects. There were opinions at Woollett, but only on three or four" (123). His exposure to the new enables him to re-appraise the familiar. The dour world of Woollett is rendered strange and distant when compared to a city where small pleasures, refinements and delicacies are derived everyday. The world re-appears to Strether as a hospitable place that houses much beauty and possibility. His Parisian adventure makes him believe in "life" once more as it triggers memories shelved long ago and provides him with a reservoir of new experiences:

Buried for long years in dark corners... germs had sprouted again under forty-eight hours of Paris. The process of yesterday had really been the process of feeling the general stirred life of connexions long since individually dropped. (60)

At the beginning of the novel, Strether is described as a man "burdened" with a "double consciousness":

He was burdened, poor Strether—it had better be confessed at the outset—with the oddity of a double

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41 Book twelve depicts the famous boating scene where Strether accidentally disrupts Chad’s and Mme de Vionnet’s secret rendezvous. Their chance meeting is instrumental in revealing their "eminent 'lie'" (403) about the professed virtue of their attachment. Strether later explains their deceit to Miss Gostrey as "a technical lie" (419). Although Strether is surprised, a little envious and morally shaken by the discovery of their sexual liaison he is nevertheless staunch in his support of their almost virtuous attachment. His chance knowledge of their sexual relationship may go deep with him but it doesn’t lead to his loss of innocence. Strether is still naive, uncertain and sexually reticent regardless of this belated knowledge.
Strether’s dual consciousness contributes to the drama of his discriminations for he is a man whose point of view is divided before meeting the object of the gaze. Martha Nussbaum suggests that Strether’s double consciousness is “closely linked... to his past.”42 Certainly, he begins his mission in good faith as one of Woollett’s most respectable dignitaries only to find such a posture absurd and anachronistic in a world so seemingly unburdened by sombre observances and strict views. Strether’s process of judgement is dramatic not only for the sheer passion with which he invests his perceptions but also for its variance with the strict views of Mrs Newsome and the narrow society of Woollett. By refusing to pass immediate judgement on Chad, he risks everything:

‘You’ve spoken to me of what—by your success—Mr Chad stands to gain. But you’ve not spoken to me of what you do.’...
‘Ah don’t talk about payment!’ he groaned.
Something in the tone of it pulled her up... she put it another way. ‘What-by failure-do you stand to lose?’
He still, however, wouldn’t have it. ‘Nothing!’...
She kept him a moment... ‘What do you stand to lose?’...
he could only this time meet it otherwise.
‘Everything.’ (52)

Chad and Mrs Newsome, Paris and Woollett, the old world and the new world, Strether’s past and present, all stand in opposition, yet their antithetical relationship is neither sacrificed nor foreclosed by Strether or the fiction, but prolonged. The protraction of their differences contributes to the refinement and sensitivity of Strether’s discriminations. His admiration of Chad and appreciation of Paris cannot be extricated from his memories of past privations and losses. His sense of wonder and longing for the good and the beautiful arises

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42Nussbaum, “Perceptive Equilibrium,” 70.
through the trauma of the past. The spectre of Strether as a "pale figure" of long ago standing near a "young wife he had early lost and the young son he had stupidly sacrificed" (59) provides a haunting image of a young man whose sense of the present is filtered and mediated through his remembrance of the past. Memory makes possible Strether's process of discrimination. If there are any sacrifices or dismissals in this fiction, they are made by Mrs Newsome. By the novel's conclusion she chooses to sacrifice Strether for the preservation of her unnegotiable authority and sense of moral rectitude. Although Mrs Newsome is absent throughout the novel, she nevertheless operates as a powerful narrative force. Her efficacy is bound up with her invisibility, as Strether explains to Miss Gostrey: "'she peeps out. She's behind the whole thing; but she's of a delicacy and discretion—!'" (45).

V: Freedom and Determinism

The abyssal world of late James offers intellectual and emotional landscapes that challenge one's ability to discriminate:

The fathomless medium held them—Chad's manner was the fathomless medium; and our friend felt as if they passed each other, in their deep immersion, with the round impersonal eye of a silent fish. (122)

The discreet and constantly shifting nature of utterance and the innumerable inflections of tone and emphasis offer a plethora of implicit and explicit meanings that challenge judgement: "our friend... felt again the brush of his sense of moving in a maze of mystic closed allusions. Yet he kept hold of his thread" (198). Strether chooses to be "nowhere" (77) by deciding to think his way through the complicated stratifications and concealments of Chad's world. Such a choice is not only difficult, it is risky. Failure is not only imminent, it is certain. Yet Nussbaum argues that "Hesitation and
bewilderment are part of his sense of life, and part of its accuracy."\(^{43}\) She writes that the difficult and patient process through which Strether comes to both apprehend and misapprehend Chad’s society allows James to make a case for

the moral significance of the novelist’s (and the reader’s) ‘sense of life,’ for the vigilant and responsive imagination that cares for everyone in the situation and refuses the injunction of Woollett to ‘simplify’ for the sake of purity and safety. The very sentences are Strether’s straining towards perceptual rightness in the midst of wonderful puzzling mysteries.\(^{44}\)

The responsibility of “straining toward perceptual rightness” is not only driven by the desire to make sense of the world, it is also propelled by the desire to make life better through one’s perceptual and intellectual efforts. Strether’s aesthetic judgements are inextricable from his belief in the good as his passionate desire for a rich and full life is indicated in his famous speech to the little Bilham:

‘Live all you can; its a mistake not to. 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?... 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... 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; I don’t quite know which... Don’t at any rate miss things out of stupidity.’ (153)

\(^{43}\)Ibid.

\(^{44}\)Ibid., 75.
James's novel is built upon this moment of Strether's belated coming of wisdom. Although the outburst is dramatic and uncharacteristically forthright it does not function as a narrative climax but as the central idea through which the fiction is delicately hung. In his preface, James describes Strether's epiphany as a "smothered" and "independent particle" (xxix) that lurks within a mass of other particles. His speech glimmers briefly in the foreground of the garden-party scene only to recede, once spoken, amongst all the other elements and conversations that make-up the social gathering. Although Strether is sensibly "affected" (158) by his words, the "little artist-man" (74) to whom his speech is addressed disappears "within the few moments" (158) of the outburst. The intensity of Strether's speech is diffused by its reception. Yet Strether's words are not only carousing, they also lament. He speaks of freedom as an illusion and of "one's consciousness" as a "helpless jelly... poured" into a "tin mould" (153). Strether's constant activity of letter-writing to Mrs Newsome not only staves off the moment of decision, it also buys him the illusion of freedom. By reporting back to Mrs Newsome every fine detail of his experiences and discriminations, Strether not only seeks to extend both his and Chad's stay, but also desires to obtain her endorsement. Strether is, for the most part of the novel, answerable to Mrs Newsome until he is removed as her ambassador and replaced by her daughter Sarah Pocock. The individual is not a free agent but a subject regulated by social decorum, personal relationships and cultural expectations. The urgency of Strether's words to little Bilham reveals his fervent desire to change the tin mould into which his consciousness has, for too many years, been so helplessly poured. Strether's epiphany is imbricated with his aesthetic awakening. Although James's man of imagination is still, at this stage in the fiction, influenced by the strict protestant values of Woollett and intimidated by the moral code of his absent fiancée, he is nevertheless free to reappraise the life he has led.

James's social spheres, however flawed or predatory, provide micro-worlds in which his characters are given the limited freedom to manoeuvre and to manipulate their positions. As we shall see in
the next chapter, Maggie Verver uses the glamour and spectacle of the social sphere to retrieve the affections of her husband, and as we saw in *The Awkward Age*, the inequitable relationship between Nanda Brookenham and her mother is reorganised through the mediation of the social domain. James's social worlds may be shaped and compromised by the rigid observances, values and rituals of the ruling class, but the intricate relationships, discreet liaisons and subtle exchanges within these environments also have the potential to re-model the contours and outlines of their composition. The tin moulds of culture, custom, language and society may determine the thoughts and actions, decisions and perceptions of James's characters but these enclosures are not beyond the reach of the individual because they too are of the mortal world. Unlike the God-dominated universe of the Abraham story, there is no invisible, ineffable or divine force underpinning James's world; his fictions are built upon the contingency of speech and the indeterminacy of action. There is a kind of minute democracy operating within and through the inflections of tone, vicissitudes of speech and vacillations of meaning that pervade James's novels. In *The Ambassadors*, the mode of the conversation not only prolongs or extends Strether's train of thought, it also has the capacity to interrupt and to inaugurate other ways of thinking and being. Strether's conversations with Chad, little Bilham, Mme de Vionnet and, above all, Miss Gostrey provide an arena in which he is able to reflect upon his past life and to build upon his present relationships; they also provide him with the opportunity to believe in the "illusion of freedom" (153).

Although Strether's gradual shift in consciousness is made possible through his social interactions and experiences, he is still allowed some secrets and depths. The extent of his feelings toward Mme de Vionnet is only intimated through his idealised vision of her countenance and through his indefatigable advocacy of her character. It is also never made clear what Strether will do with his life in Woollett after he has exhausted his travels in Europe. James leaves many details of Strether's emotional life and future choices unanswered, but, as his preface suggests, part of the "value" of
Strether's "intimate adventure" is tied in with an element of concealment:

The thing was to be so much this worthy's intimate adventure that even the projection of his consciousness upon it from beginning to end without intermission or deviation would probably still leave a part of its value for him, and *a fortiori* for ourselves, unexpressed. (preface, xxxix)

James's prose may represent the singularity of Strether's vision and judgement of the world but his style is also imitative of a consciousness (and of a world) that cannot be easily deciphered. This does not mean, however, that Strether and his milieu are indecipherable or beyond calculation, but what it does suggest is that they are vulnerable to miscalculation. As already suggested, Strether's reaction to Paris is in part a response to the collision and to the conflict between two worlds, Woollett and Paris, and the two value systems these cities represent, ascetic spiritualism and aesthetic materialism. Yet his movement of consciousness (or process of judgement) discards neither option nor city. Strether is still the man from Woollett regardless of his infatuation with Paris, Chad and Mme de Vionnet. The difficulty of his judgements is therefore not predicated upon sacrifice but preservation. And it is through Strether's desire to preserve "everything" (which is reminiscent of Kate Croy's wish to try for everything in *The Wing of the Dove*) that error is not only a possibility, it is a likelihood. It is this kind of risk which leaves open the possibility for ethics because it arises from the desire to overcome one's circumstances without, however, resulting in the renunciation of one's intellect or community.

The language of *The Ambassadors* enacts Strether's ambitious desire to fathom the vast spectrum of experience through the reticence of its sentence constructions and numerous qualifications. The care with which Strether thinks is imitated by the detail of James's writing:

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45See Ian Watt's analysis of "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*" for a detailed analysis of James's language.
Our friend’s final predicament was that he himself was sitting down, for the time, with them, and there was the supreme moment at which compared with his collapse, Waymarsh’s erectness affected him as really high. One thing was certain—he saw he must make up his mind. He must approach Chad, must wait for him, deal with him, master him, but he mustn’t dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they were... He must at any rate be clearer as to what—should he continue to do that for convenience—he was still condoning. (82)

The reluctant rhythm of the passage indicates Strether’s “more or less groping knowledge” (preface, xxxix) of the world. The passage writes of Strether’s desire to “make up his mind,” to “master” Chad and to “deal” with a difficult situation, yet it also speaks of his decision to “wait for him” and to see “things as they were.” Strether feels the dilemma of his position as the acting ambassador to his fiancée and as the future step-father to her son Chad. His difficult position is intensified when he finds that he cannot condemn, only admire. He discovers that Chad and his friends are not the disreputable or morally deficient group he once thought in Woollett but a highly civilised social circle whose knowledge and appreciation of fine things excites and inspires his imagination. Their “irregular life” (82) disarms rather than incites judgement. The “erectness” of his old friend Waymarsh reminds Strether of the stern logic of his fiancée Mrs Newsome and the protestant values of her Woollett principality. Unlike the unyielding Waymarsh, Strether’s demeanour is not erect but relaxed, for “he himself was sitting down” with Chad and his group. Strether desires to “be clearer as to what... he was still condoning,” which means that he decides to wait and to understand Chad and his world before passing judgement. He chooses to suspend his decision in favour of the procurement of further knowledge. As Strether explains to Gostrey:

‘Still, I want to see him a little further. He’s not in the least the case I supposed; he’s quite another case. And it’s as such that he interests me... I don’t want to give him up.’ (234)
By suspending both his and Chad’s "immediate rupture and immediate return" (104) to America, Strether does the unthinkable: he alters Mrs Newsome’s unchallengable system of judgement. Rather than avow or disavow from a distance, he chooses to re-evaluate the "queer misconceptions and confusions" of the Woollett system. His efforts stir up not only Mrs Newsome’s ire but also her daughter, Sarah Pocock’s. As Mrs Newsome’s succeeding emissary, Sarah accuses Strether of callous disregard: "‘You can sacrifice mothers and sisters... without a blush, and can make them cross the ocean on purpose... how you do it?’" (348). Strether’s rebuttal to her accusation is rendered both ineffectual and nonsensical before the Newsome court of no appeal: "‘I don’t think there’s anything I’ve done in any such calculated way... Everything has come as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else’" (348). Strether is condemned by the Newsome women because he had the audacity to think: "What exposed him was just his poor old trick of quiet inwardness, what exposed him was his thinking such offence” (349).

VI: Possible Decisions

Strether does not make a single decision in this novel, he makes many. He decides to love Europe and to extend his stay in Paris. He chooses to support Chad’s attachment to Mme de Vionnet and he also decides to not only accept Mrs Newsome’s desertion, he embraces it. These decisions are neither dramatic nor extraordinary but are developed gradually through the course of his conversations with Miss Gostrey. Furthermore, his decisions are forged in recognition of the past, as he explains to Gostrey: "‘I’m making up late for what I didn’t have early... They may say what they like—it’s my surrender, it’s my tribute, to youth’” (241). Strether’s decision to believe in the “virtuous attachment” (128) is motivated by his desire to salvage something good from life: "‘The point is that they’re mine. Yes, they’re my youth... —if they were to fail me’” (241). As it turns out, they do “fail” him because the attachment is not platonic but an intensely physical relationship. In book twelve, Strether’s painful
awakening to this truth brings to the fore the limitations of his judgement. Chad and Mme de Vionnet’s sexual relationship presents an affront to his perception because it indicates a secret, private realm that lives and thrives in concealment from his gaze. Strether’s judgement is incapable of comprehending the solitude and intensity of a sexual love relation. His accidental exposure to the “deep, deep truth” (396) of their intimacy ignites a moral response that reveals briefly the man from Woollett. His subsequent judgement of Mme de Vionnet is adjusted for he no longer sees a super-subtle creature of culture but “a maidservant crying for her young man” (409). She is re-drawn before his injured and envious gaze as a fallen idol whose passionate and moving appeal to keep “her young man” is read as an “incoherent” (409) act of weakness. Strether’s unrecognised jealousy of Chad is indicated in his final judgement of Mme de Vionnet:

This was not the discomposure of last night... the real coercion was to see a man ineffably adored. There it was again—it took women, it took women; if to deal with them was to walk on water, what wonder that the water rose? And it had never surely risen higher than round this woman. (408)

Nussbaum argues that “James’s novel itself complicates our admiration of Strether”⁴⁶ by showing us a man who is at once both expansive and limited in his discriminations. Strether may be a man of immense imagination but his imagination cannot recognise “the world from passion’s point of view.”⁴⁷ The revelation of the sexual relationship becomes another turn of the screw in Strether’s drama of discrimination. The shock of this truth leads to the recognition of another truth, his perceptual incompleteness. Strether may perceive all of the fine details and nuances which make-up Chad’s Paris yet his point of view is neither omnipotent nor faultless but intrinsically flawed:

⁴⁶Nussbaum, “Perceptive Equilibrium,” 78.
⁴⁷Ibid., 81.
It was the quantity of make-believe involved and so vividly exemplified that most disagreed with his spiritual stomach... It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll... He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things. (396)

The fervor of Strether’s discriminations is matched by the fallibility of his judgements. Yet Strether’s imagination, albeit shaken, remains undaunted by this shock revelation as his play of mind begins anew to suppose “innumerable and wonderful things” about the world and its unpredictable characters. The world continues to be interesting to Strether both because of its surprises and regardless of its disappointments.

The accuracy of Strether’s system of judgement is again put into doubt over his ideal perception of Chad. Although he is adamant in his refusal to give him up to Woollett and to his mother, according to his lover, Mme de Vionnet, Chad is always “‘giving himself up’” and will so until “‘the end’” (286-287). The dénouement of the novel verifies her words as Chad indicates a desire to give her up for the promised wealth in “the great new force” (431) of advertising. As he explains to Strether: “‘It’s an art like another, and infinite like all the arts... With the right man to work it c'est un monde’” (431). Such a sacrifice, however, is only tacit. The gap between Strether’s judgement of Chad and the novel’s point of view again indicates the former’s perceptual limitations. Strether, however, is not unconscious to his failings as he comes to question his own part in dressing up Chad as a man of high culture:

With this sharpest perception yet, it was like a chill in the air to him... she had made Chad what he was... She had made him better, she had made him best... it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was none the less only Chad. Strether had the sense
that he, a little, had made him too; his high appreciation had, as it were, consecrated her work. The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order... (408)

The incompleteness of Strether's vision reveals the deep humanity at the heart of the decision. (It also provides the novel with dramatic tension.) Although Strether's discriminations are incomplete, their epistemological and empirical limits are nevertheless integral to the introduction of the ethical. As Nussbaum writes:

For Strether's vision of particularity involves a willingness to be incomplete, to be surprised by the new, to see that and how our "actual adventure" transcends our "personal experience." And so by being able to grant the incompleteness of the past experience, which he calls "this last queet quantity", Strether allows himself to emerge as a person [for] whom "nothing will ever come to the same thing as anything else."48

The "willingness to be incomplete, to be surprised" is a difficult decision because it chooses to read the world from a position of uncertainty rather than certainty. The fragility of one's position makes the process of decision-making difficult because it is not an expression of one's self-determination or unmatched singularity but an entangled movement forged through one's flawed and uncertain relationship to the world. The arrival of the ethical is complicit with the conceptual, contextual and perceptual limits which both preserve and frustrate the decision, for such obstructions also have the potential to give way to seemingly limitless possibilities.

By placing his faith in the physical, sensual and social world of conversation, literature, art and society, Strether's sense of vision is at once extensive and incomplete. It is extensive because it seeks to forge lateral connections between disparate objects, yet limited because not all things can be connected or understood. But in spite of his perceptual limitations and failures, Strether does indeed possess,

48Ibid., 71.
in the words of Miss Gosfrey, "'treasures of imagination'" (377). Such an imagination is indicated through his sense of the vast back-log of history underpinning his sense impressions. In his first meeting with Chad, Strether sees not only a man who is marked out by women but also a "man to whom things had happened" (106). His first and only meeting with the great sculptor Gloriani also reveals an individual whose "charming smile" reflects a "terrible life behind it!" (138). Strether's immense imagination is again disclosed during his first private meeting with Mme de Vionnet at her home. James's prose enters his consciousness to reveal a play of mind that sees not a room full of antiques or treasures but a history of battle and war living beneath the surface of her collection:

some of the glass cases contained swords and epaulettes of ancient colonels and generals; medals and orders once pinned over hearts that had long since ceased to beat; snuff-boxes bestowed on ministers and envoys; copies of works presented, with inscriptions, by authors now classic. (173)

Mme de Vionnet's personal museum of artifacts is brought to life by an imagination that sees the fragility, brevity and the corporality of lives who once wore and used the objects frozen behind the glass. For Strether, the past peeps out "in gleams" and "in glances" (106) through the "loose folds" (324) of the present. His decision to judge Chad as a "social animal" (201) who lives, acts and thinks in relationship to others is further evidence of his generous sense of vision. By choosing to see the world as a vast and complex series of relationships and connections, Strether finds that "'everything'" comes "'as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else'" (348). Life cannot be grasped as a whole, only partially glimpsed as a series of fragments, memories and moments. Yet it is within the details of these glimpses, that life springs the surprise that "there was something in the great world covertly tigerish, which came to him across the lawn and in the charming air, as a waft from the jungle" (154). Yet for Strether, life would be but a poor show without its covert tigers, as he explains to Miss Gostrey:
'It's a plot,' he declared—'there's more in it than meets the eye.' He gave rein to his fancy. 'It's a plant!... What I mean is that with such elements one can't count. I've but my poor individual, my modest human means... All one's energy goes to facing it, to tracking it. One wants, confound it, don't you see?... one wants to enjoy anything so rare. Call it then life... call it poor dear old life simply that springs the surprise. Nothing alters the fact that the surprise is paralysing, or at any rate engrossing—all, practically, hang it, that one sees, that one can see.' (118-119)

Strether's final judgement in the fiction is passed on Mrs Newsome, a woman whom he has, for the greater part of the novel, both feared and revered. She is criticised for her inability to "admit surprises":

'那就是 just her difficulty—that she doesn't admit surprises. It's a fact that, I think describes and represents her; and it falls in with what I tell you—that she's all... fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there's no room left; no margin, as it were for any alteration. She's filled as full, packed as tight, and she'll hold... (376)

Mrs Newsome's invulnerable, unchallengeable and seamless worldview not only stifles the surprises in life, it also absorbs the adventure, uncertainty and pleasure of its vicissitudes. By the novel's conclusion, Strether no longer upholds Mrs Newsome as a noble subject but as a woman incapable of living. As he explains to Miss Gostrey, she is all "fine cold thought" (376) and the only way to "morally and intellectually... get rid of her" is to "bayonet" the "whole moral and intellectual... block" (376).

Cynical Jim Pocock, a man both married and resigned to the Newsome system of judgement, offers Strether an insider's perspective:

'Oh don't you know her well enough,' Pocock asked, 'to have noticed that she never gives herself
away, any more than her mother ever does? They ain't fierce, either of 'em; they let you come quite close. They wear their fur smooth side out—the warm side in. Do you know what they are? They're about as fierce as they can live.'

'Yes'—and Strether's concurrence had a positive precipitation; 'they're about as intense as they can live.'

'They don't lash about and shake in their cage,' said Jim, who seemed pleased with his analogy; 'and it's at feeding-time that they're quietist. But they always get there.'

'They do indeed—they always get there!' Strether replied with a laugh that justified his confession of nervousness. (265)

Strether is disturbed by Jim's words as he comes to realise how "quiet" Mrs Newsome "had been" for "she had fed, and Sarah had fed with her, out of the big bowl of his recent free communications" (265-266). Mrs Newsome greets Strether's numerous missives and generous descriptions with an icy silence that floats across the transatlantic post like a "waft from the jungle" (154). Strether unintentionally floods the narrow stream of Mr Newsome's "whole moral and intellectual... block" (376) by re-evaluating his life and decisions. He offends Mrs Newsome's predetermined moral scheme of judgement by allowing himself to be open to the surprises, pleasures and disappointments of life. He cannot act as her knight of faith because he cannot disregard the fact of his community or humanity. Unlike Chad, whom Strether perceives to be a man marked out by women, he is a man who chooses to be marked out by the surprises of the world and by its many disappointments. He departs the fiction as a man whose experiences and judgements mean that he will never be quite the same again.
VII: Mourning and Decision-Making

Throughout this novel, Strether is haunted by the memory of lost relationships and opportunities, yet his process of mourning does not operate to the other's detriment: no such expenditure takes place. Because of his past experiences, Strether is painfully, even poignantly aware of the significance of every moment, conversation and relationship. His process of memory is transformed into a deeply reflective and thoughtful movement of consciousness which never loses sight of the other. In his preface, James describes *The Ambassadors* as "a drama of discrimination" (xxxvii). Yet I would suggest that it is a drama of equivocation. The thickness of experience, of seeing and living, is dramatically enacted through Strether's desire to hold onto everything. His drama is one of protraction, extension and resistance.

In much the same way as a work of mourning, retarding the moment of decision requires much concentration. Such equivocation cannot simply be scorned as indecisive since it shows a certain vigilance in its desire to think through a dilemma. It is not rash, but thoughtful, not bold but discreet. Ethics traverses and indeed floods the question of whether or not to act through faith or through knowledge. Strether acts by the knowledge of his own mistakes and through the faith of his convictions. His decision-making does not culminate into a moment of miraculous or ecstatic alterity but is a process traced by the memories of his past experiences and entwined within the context of his community. Unlike Kierkegaard's or Derrida's Abraham, James's character refuses to decide in total isolation from everything and everyone. Although Strether may hear "the faint receding whistle" of his life "miles down the line" (153), what remains of his world, he refuses to give up. The idea of the virtuous attachment, regardless of its truth or fiction, gave him the opportunity to begin his own work of amendment and reconciliation. Strether's work of mourning is concerned with returning the deceased, the lost and the forsaken elements of his life back into the hallowed walls of the city because what he was concerned with, above all, was in exacting justice—as
Strether says in his own words to an enamoured Miss Gosfrey, he did it all "to be right" (438). The ethical, however, is not synonymous with Strether’s sense of moral rectitude, just as it cannot be equated with Mrs Newsome’s; rather, it is complicit with the difficult, fragile and uncertain process through which he apprehends the world and reassesses his place within its mortal ramparts.

Much like the dénouement of *The Awkward Age*, *The Ambassadors* also concludes with the impending departure of its main character from the battle field of the novel’s location. Strether decides to leave Paris, in spite Miss Gosfrey’s protestations, in order to embark on another journey that promises to challenge in a different way his powers of perception and diplomacy. His decision to return to the new world may signify a retreat to his old life and habits, but this possibility seems either too remote or too cruel to consider. His final conversation with Miss Gosfrey concludes on a note that is both affectionate and erotically charged:

‘There’s nothing, you know, I wouldn’t do for you.’
‘Oh yes—I know.’
‘There’s nothing,’ she repeated, ‘in all the world.’
‘I know. I know. But all the same I must go.’ He had got it at last. ‘To be right.’
‘To be right?... It isn’t so much your being “right”—it’s your horrible sharp eye for what makes you so.’
‘Oh but you’re as bad yourself. You can’t resist me when I point that out.’
She sighed it at last all comically, all tragically, away. ‘I can’t indeed resist you.’
‘Then there we are!’ said Strether. (438)

As we shall soon see in *The Golden Bowl*, America again appears as the final destination or vanishing point through which James’s characters either choose to relocate or are forcibly expedited. Strether’s departure, however, like his fate throughout the novel, is not sealed but held in suspense.
... one must start with the friend-who-loves, not with the friend-who-is-loved, if one is to think friendship. This is an irreversible order. One can be loved while remaining ignorant of that very thing—that one is loved—and in this respect remain as though confined to secrecy. (Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*)

Undoubtedly, the secret always has to do with love, and sexuality.
(Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*)

*The Golden Bowl*, James's last completed work of fiction, is a novel which both encapsulates and reiterates many of the themes which have dominated his *oeuvre*. This last chapter will operate on one level as a writing of repetition. By following the generic pattern of an end-work, I will reinstate, both directly and indirectly, many of the themes which have come to shape this work: ethics, friendship, secrecy, decision-making and the work of mourning. What has also been threading throughout this thesis, alongside these themes, is the idea of rupture. Without the fact of interruption, thinking would never begin. Without rupture there would be no work of mourning; there would not only be no moment of the decision but no decision; there would be no friendship, ethics or secrecy. There would be no writing. The event of rupture, whether this comes in the form of an epiphany, a climax, a revolution, a trauma, a marriage, a betrayal, a death or a decision, is essential to the structure of narrative. Rupture can be associated with the Freudian idea of an originary trauma, but in James's articulation, it has more to do with the notion of an
"obscure hurt." In James’s works, the eventfulness of a trauma is turned into a meditative process. Its grandeur and immediacy is stilled by the patient and thoughtful movement of his style. James’s hurts are obscure because they are, above all, writerly. But this does not eradicate the wound itself, it only further augments its being and adds to its resonance. The ornamental quality of James’s style has the obverse effect of bringing out into the open the scars inflicted by unhappy or false loves, of failed friendships or the death of loved ones. What James’s difficult style produces is a sense of disquiet in its double movement of revealing and obscuring these hurts.

This chapter will specifically address the question of love in The Golden Bowl since it appears in this work as a form of rupture. This is not to say that love is either eventful or climactic; on the contrary, it is introduced incrementally, if not secretly, into this work. Love is represented as neither a grand nor transcendent emotion nor as a weak or uncontrollable irruption of feeling; rather, it is indicative of a certain form of reserve which cannot be made subject to these conventional narrative patterns. In James, love is synonymous with secrecy for it too gathers momentum through the

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1 Leon Edel, The Untried Years, 1843-1870 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 175-176. The phrase “obscure hurt” has become notorious amongst James’s critics for many reasons, especially in regard to speculation concerning his possible impotence or homosexuality. The fact that James never married certainly adds fuel to these speculations but it does not legitimate them. Edel’s biographical work does document an actual hurt, a back injury James sustained (at the early age of eighteen) after fighting a fire. According to David McWhirter in Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), this early “hurt” has been drawn out by James for reasons which indicate its possible falsity:

James clearly wanted the hurt to endure because it provided him with a cornerstone for the myth he would spend much of his life constructing—the myth that he was a powerless victim of a predetermined fate—and relieved him of responsibility for the life-choices he had made and was still engaged in making. (166-167)

These “choices,” according to McWhirter, corresponded with James’s decision to live a quiet “introverted” life, one which definitely did not include a subscription to the Civil War effort. It also provided a good excuse to curtail any romantic attachments he (or others) might entertain. McWhirter names Minny Temple as one possible love interest who was abandoned by James because of the excuse of the obscure hurt (167).
Dramatic tension is produced through a continuing resistance to declare love. In a James novel, one cannot simply love but must struggle with the fact that one loves or, in most cases, cannot love. Love is brought into visibility as a form of labour. In *The Golden Bowl*, it is Maggie Verver’s stubborn resistance to give up her husband which becomes her labour of love. Through her, James’s novel not only explores the social dimension of love (which is never simply the property of an individual) but moreover demonstrates how the public sphere is integral to love’s possibility and survival. In order for Maggie Verver’s love to supersede her rival Charlotte Stant, she must interrupt the social space which, up until the second volume, has furthered Charlotte’s advantage. Maggie’s love takes the form of a public performance. This does not mean that her feelings are declared openly; on the contrary, it means that she must further regulate her emotions in order establish a dominant position within the social sphere. James’s novels are above all constructed of and through conversation: in order for Maggie’s love to triumph over Charlotte Stant’s, she must

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2Nanda Brookenham’s love for Vanderbank is concealed throughout *The Awkward Age*. The strength of her feeling is indirectly conveyed through her sustained resistance to giving herself away. Ralph Touchett’s love for Isabel Archer is a secret which does much to sustain the narrative tension throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*. In “The Beast in the Jungle” May Bartram’s unrequited love for John Marcher is yet another instance where the secret of her passion is concealed right up until her death. The resistance to speak openly of love contributes to the all-pervasive sense of frustration, anxiety and failure in James’s works.

3Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1996). Irigaray writes that Hegel is “the only Western philosopher to have approached the question of love as labour” (19). This idea of love as labour is associated with the social and religious emphasis placed upon the role of reproduction. According to Irigaray, the pleasure of sex and indeed the possibilities of feminine desire are limited by the belief that for a woman, love is a form of labour. For a woman, love is an obligation and not a right.

In *The Golden Bowl* Amerigo and Maggie’s child, affectionately named “the Principino” (150) is not treated as a product or as a trace of their love relation but as a sign of Maggie’s love for her father, Adam Verver. The sexual bond between Maggie and Amerigo is shown as the peripheral attachment, one which is used to complement the central relationship between father and daughter. Interestingly though, the existence of the child is quite unimportant on a narrative level, except that it attests to the fact that Maggie and Amerigo do have a sexual relationship. This is quite important to know in a Henry James novel since sex is off stage.
win the battle of conversation. This means that the subject of love and her knowledge of her friend’s betrayal must never be spoken of. What remains protected throughout the course of their “high fight” is the question of Maggie’s knowledge.

A question of knowledge, of how much is known and by whom, is thematically integral to *The Golden Bowl*: “Knowledge, knowledge, was a fascination as well as a fear.” Knowledge is thought of as both a quantity and a possession. The association between knowledge and economics is significant because on one level *The Golden Bowl* is a documentation of the ceaseless procurement and valuation of rare possessions. The epistemological question “what is it?” is altered to “how much is it?” A question of price supercedes the basic question of being, or rather, the importance of monetary value has become synonymous with the being and the identity of an object.

The affirmation of love in the novel marks a departure from the usual Jamesian scenario of frustrated, unrequited or even unrealised passion. David McWhirter writes that *The Golden Bowl*’s “unprecedented representation of enacted love... seems disjoined

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4Susan Winnett, *Terrible Sociality: The Text of Manners in Laclos, Goethe and James* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Winnett’s text specifically deals with the power of social discourse in *The Golden Bowl*. Maggie Verver’s social battle against Charlotte is cited as an exemplary case where the world of appearances is used to change the nature of one’s private relations: “whoever controls the surface controls the depths” (216). Winnett writes of a lawlessness at the heart of James’s social scene: “what is most truly terrible about the novel’s sociability... is its total arbitrariness, its availability for whatever use to whomever has the wit, the contempt for worldliness for its own sake, and the financial backing to play its games with impunity” (27).

5On this question of the unsaid, Tony Tanner in *The American Mystery* writes: “Sexual desire is the ‘obscure’ thing, behind all the other things—above everything else it is the ‘dominant unspeakable’ in the Jamesian world” (130). This is true, but what it does not considered in his reading is that sexual desire is not simply a thing which lies behind the social discourse, but is imbricated within its speech patterns and silences. The politeness of James’s conversation may, on one level, operate to obscure the existence of sexual desire, but on another more powerful level the social sphere is used to intensify and uphold the very force of one’s desire.

6James, *The Golden Bowl*, 422. All further page references to this novel will appear parenthetically throughout the main body of the chapter.

7In *The Broken Middle*, Rose writes: “For Aristotle, ‘the greatest of aporias’ is to know the individuality of individuals” (165). For James, one of the greatest aporias is simply to know.
from James’ oeuvre as a whole.” Rather than decide whether or not love is either affirmed or denied, fulfilled or repressed (in order to finally resurrect James as a closet optimist or to reinforce the idea of his characteristic disenchantment), what I hope to do is trace the conditions through which love is able to appear in this work. Love in James is conditional—which is also to say that it cannot be extricated or extracted from its immediate context. Love cannot transcend the social scene: it is imbricated within the intricate folds of the novel’s many conversations. One could argue that love is conversational, or rather, that it provides an invisible ground through which the art of the conversation is brought into being. Indeed, the question of Maggie Verver’s love underpins nearly every conversation throughout the second volume of the novel. Her love, once described by herself as “unutterable” (506) provides a reason for utterance.

In a similar fashion to the operation of the secret throughout James’s works, love appears indirectly in this work. It is complicit with mediation in that it too operates as an invisible ground through which relationships, conversations and situations are developed, ruptured and even terminated. It functions in much the same way as a memory trace in the sense that it also remains throughout all circumstances (despite the fact that it is circumstantial and made possible by circumstance.) Love, if it is strong and true, must also be resilient. Moreover, the resilience and duration of such love is bound up with a work of mourning, as Derrida writes:

The anguished apprehension of mourning (without which the act of friendship would not spring forth in its very energy) insinuates itself a priori and anticipates itself; it haunts and plunges the friend, before mourning, into mourning...it is the grieved act of loving.

As a process of memory, love is awakened by the experience of loss. Yet such awareness is not just the affirmation of the other’s existence

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8McWhirter, Desire and Love in Henry James, 143.
9Derrida, Politics, 14.
or finitude, but has to do with one's own fragile grasp on the world. A work of mourning (any work of mourning) does not have to take place after the loss or death of a beloved or a friend; it is not so temporally rigid. What is apprehended first of all through the “grieved act of loving” is the mortality of the friend who loves. Mourning is also an affirmation of the mortality of that love. Friendship and love cannot transcend the world of time and memory: they are developed and sustained through and because of time; it is their possibility and sustenance.

In order to first think love, one must begin with the subject who loves. Love is thought as a condition (or as a state of being) through which a subject is situated in relationship to the object of his or her love. This subject who loves (or who is even perhaps incapable of love, as is often the case in James's fictions) is nevertheless also the one who experiences grief, pain, and indeed exhilaration because of such love. Love is therefore recognised through a series of other emotions, feelings which try to evoke its essence but must fail since the experience and the power of love is bound up with its continued concealment. *The Golden Bowl* does not provide us with any new knowledge on this question of love but what it does do is show that despite this, and moreover, because of this aporia, it is a ground for action. This is where the novel departs radically from James's previous works. Love does not prevent or frustrate action but is a force propelling decisions and conversations. It is in the name of love that Maggie Verver chooses to win back her husband. It is because of love that ruptured trust is recovered. In this novel, love arises through and because of the desire to begin again: it is bound up with a process of repetition.

In many ways *The Golden Bowl* is a novel about the difficulty of beginning. Its own many starts resemble what Gillian Rose identifies as anxious inaugurations into the difficult terrains of philosophy and of dialectics in general.\(^\text{10}\) The anxiety of beginning involves the anxiety of thinking and of thinking as a form of anxiety. Love enters this equation on both sides—as a form of thinking and

\(^{10}\text{Rose, Broken Middle, 85-112.}\)
anxiety. To be in love is to feel the anxiety of one’s own finitude: it is to know the parameters, the limits of one’s existence. The impasses which love and thinking come to represent paradoxically stem “from the fact that there is no limit.”¹¹ In order to think, and moreover, in order to think about love, what is demanded is “a boundless generosity”¹² in that the subject has been exhausted. What is therefore risked by the decision to return to the subject of love is the success of thinking differently.

This chapter will argue a number of things about this difficult question of love. First of all it will generally trace the thinking of love as it has been dealt with in philosophy and literature. Derrida’s Politics of Friendship will again figure quite strongly in this endeavour because it provides us with a thoughtful meditation not only on the question of friendship, but also on love:

In all good sense, what you hear above all is loving; you must hear loving; you cannot fail to hear it in total confidence when the word friendship resounds: friendship consists in loving, does it not; it is a way of loving, of course.¹³

Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “Shattered Love” will also be dealt with because it not only explicitly addresses the thinking of love in philosophy, but also more generally, the thinking of love in the Christian West. Although Nancy’s essay traces (albeit briefly and schematically) the representation of love in philosophy, his piece is more concerned with re-approaching this question deconstructively because, above all, love comes to signify that which paradoxically cannot be represented. In his essay, Nancy nominates love as an undeconstructible ground upholding thought but is also careful to point out that such a “ground” is not substantial in itself because love, in itself, is no thing. Love may form “the limit of thinking”¹⁴ but cannot be limited because it is neither a subject nor an object but

¹¹Derrida, Aporias, 20.
¹³Derrida, Politics, 8.
something which remains foreign to these categories. As a figure of alterity love operates as a spectral agent which both interrupts and also makes possible a dialectical structure. In other words, it is aporetic:

Love is thus not here, and it is not elsewhere. One can neither attain it nor free oneself from it, and this is at bottom exactly what it is: the excess or the lack of this completion, which is represented as the truth of love. In other words, and as it has been extensively said, extensively represented, and extensively theorized for some two centuries: the impossible.15

Nancy’s idea of love as “the impossible” echoes Derrida’s formulation in *Given Time* of the gift’s aneconomy—for it too is a figure of the impossible.16 Both love and the gift, as aporetic concepts, are crucial to beginning because structurally they represent impasses that cannot be overcome, thereby inciting a logic of repetition. Repetition and alterity intertwine in their performance of the forbidden passage.17

In *The Golden Bowl* love is bound up with iteration because it too indicates a point of limit that cannot be passed (or surpassed), and as a result of this nonpassage what is introduced upon the scene is the need to begin again. This chapter will show that love in *The Golden Bowl* has much in common with both Derrida’s and Nancy’s notions of the aporia (since it too functions as “the impossible” which paradoxically makes possible the relationships in the novel) without, however, being identical. And this is because love in *The Golden Bowl* is not just about the unutterable; it also serves a formalistic (if not pragmatic) function. Love’s oblique presence is crucial to sustaining and suspending its narrative framework. The

15Ibid., 93.
17Critchley’s *Ethics of Deconstruction*, argues that these two concepts, alterity and repetition, sum up the logic of Derridean deconstruction: “... it is the belonging together or interlacing of these two movements, or paths, of reading—repetition and alterity—that best describes the double gesture of deconstructive reading: the figure of the chiasmus,” (28).
**Golden Bowl**'s many beginnings, repetitions and mistakes revolve around the question of love. The making of a beginning is central to the forging of the two marriages and to the rekindling of a passionate love relation. The decision to begin anew or to renew old relationships is, however, a choice which arises out of exhaustion. There is nothing romantic about the love attachments in this work: they are either expedient or perverse. Yet such negativity does not eradicate either the promise of or the desire for a more positive or resolute form of love to develop. In fact, it is dialectically instrumental in leaving open the possibility of a better beginning. Like *The Golden Bowl*, this chapter will undergo many starts in the hope that the time of love and the time for thinking about love will always return upon itself as an unfinished project.

### I: The Thinking of Love in Philosophy and Literature

Nancy's provocative "Shattered Love," begins with the difficulty of thinking love:

> The thinking of love, so ancient, so abundant and diverse in its forms and in its modulations, asks for an extreme reticence... It is a question of modesty, perhaps, but it is also a question of exhaustion: has not everything been said on the subject of love? Every excess and every exactitude? Has not the impossibility of speaking about love been as violently recognised as has been the experience of love itself as the true source of the possibility of speaking in general? We know the words of love to be inexhaustible, but as to speaking about love, could we perhaps be exhausted?\(^\text{18}\)

According to Nancy, it is precisely because the subject of love has been exhausted that it is (paradoxically) necessary to turn once again to this conundrum: if it is to resonate at all, then what is demanded is this element of risk. Derrida's aphoristic comment that thinking starts when thinking is impossible provides us with a paradox in

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\(^{18}\)Nancy, "Shattered Love," 82.
which to approach the perverse, yet strangely persuasive logic of this
task. Indeed throughout the essay, Nancy’s alignment of love with
thinking—"Thinking is love. But philosophy has never explicitly
attested this"—performs its own theoretical risk-taking since it asks
that one begin to think love in terms other than the classical and
romantic traditions which have associated it with the loss of
reason.

In The Symposium, Phaedrus reminds us that the God of love
(Aphrodite) was created second to chaos: "Hesiod tells us that Chaos
first came into existence... after Chaos... Earth and Love, came into
being." The succession of love after chaos (perhaps) provides us
with a reason love has been associated with disorder. In the
seventeenth century, the pithy yet highly androcentric discourse of
Francis Bacon further testifies to love’s supposed unreason: "it is
impossible to love and to be wise." The clichéd phrase, "love is
blind" owes its inheritance to this kind of thinking. The reverie,
creativity and emotion which love apparently inspires are
traditionally thought to operate at the cost of reason, calculation and
thinking in general. Part of love’s opposition to reason is bound up
with gender difference. The supposed irrationality of woman is
consistent with the idea that the emotion of love can cloud a man’s
judgement. Nancy manages to overlook the obvious sexism and
misogyny running throughout the history of classical thinking.

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19Derrida, "Work in Progress."
21Nancy cites Pascal’s Discourse on the Passions of Love (he does not offer any
further reference) on the separation between love and reason: "They have
inappropriately removed the name of reason from love, and they have opposed them
without a sound foundation, since love and reason is but the same thing" (90). Pascal
may be right that such an opposition is unfounded, but his conflation of love and
reason is equally unfounded.
22Plato, The Symposium, [178b—179c], trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth:
Penguin, 1988), 42. Blanchot’s Unavowable Community , also cites Phaedrus on this
point: (For the Greeks, according to Phaedrus, Love is nearly as ancient as Chaos)
(40).
23Bacon, "Essay X.—of Love" in The Essays or Councils Civill of Francis Bacon Lord
Verulam, 29. The italics are taken from the original text.
24Nancy’s essay ignores the important question of gender for the love in both
literature and philosophy. His decision to address the question of love as a “missed
rendezvous” (91), has the effect of disengaging it from a body (or a place) and as a
Love's gendered associations are neutralised (or rather neutered) by the idea that it is something which "is always missed by philosophy." The thinking of love—that is, a kind of thinking which does not try to master or limit it—may have eluded what Nancy identifies as traditional philosophy, but it is the question of the feminine which seems to have eluded, and been elided by both Nancy and the metaphysical tradition he invokes. By contrast, however, Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* reminds us of the feminisation, which is also to say, the demonisation of love in philosophy:

Love is below friendship because it is an above/below relation, one of inferiority and superiority, slavery and tyranny. It is implied, then, that friendship is freedom plus equality... 'In woman, a slave and a tyrant have all too long been concealed. For that reason, woman is not yet capable of friendship: she knows only love.' Feminine love causes only 'injustice' and 'blindness'...

Derrida's reference to Nietzsche's subordination of love in this passage generally sums up the marginalisation of the feminine in philosophy. Here Nietzsche identifies both love and woman through their opposition to such things as equality, egality, freedom and friendship—ideals which apparently can only exist within the result, the feminine inflections resonant throughout the history of love's many constructions are avoided. Nancy's essay may remind us that love has been traditionally (and narratively) thought in terms of serving as either an access or an end, but does not take into account the symbolic importance of the feminine body in thinking of love in these spatial terms.

According to psychoanalysis, the maternal body provides a self with its original home. The feminine body operates as either or both an access point or as an end, as a place of eventual return. The relationship between love and the feminine also underpins the classical narrative model of heterosexual desire. In traditional narratives, tension and drama are derived through a protracted struggle to take possession of the feminine. Even if certain narratives deal with a homosocial and/or homosexual love economy, the narrative model still repeats a heterosexual scenario whereby the lover, as the active agent, attempts to draw the beloved or other into the same orbit as himself or herself. Love stories are generated by the desire toward an eventual communion between two agencies. This desire for union is, according to the wise Diotima from Plato's *Symposium*, about the base drive toward reproduction.

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fraternity. Woman is thought to be so bereft of power and of subjectivity that she can know only desire, dependence, jealousy and possessiveness—characteristics which denote both her sexual and intellectual inferiority. Love and the feminine are therefore not only identified through their inferior relationship to man, but also in terms of their opposition to thinking. Friendship, unlike love, is apparently more conducive to reason because it allows for enough distance to bring about a free and equal exchange of ideas, while love is too proximate, asymmetrical and emotional to enable such lucidity. What is involved is mediation or its lack: the love relationship is unequal and unreasonable because it is unmediated, whereas friendship is mediated and therefore equal and reasonable. Furthermore, the lover is always in the subject position and the beloved in the object position: he is the actor and she the receiver. In friendship, power is based upon equality (and what is implied by this is sameness) in that the two positions involved are occupied by subjects and are of equal value. Reason and thinking are associated with the male subject: this is his right, his power and it is ultimately a mark of his difference to and superiority over nature. It is atypical to associate thinking and reasoning with an object. Like a slave, love and the feminine serve the independent will of the master. Love must be mastered in order to keep its slave-like emotions, its very unreason in check. What further separates love from friendship is knowledge: “One can be loved while remaining ignorant of that very thing—that one is loved—and in this respect remain as though confined to secrecy.”27 In a friendship relation there is no uncertainty or anxiety in the act of loving the other because the nature of that love is “at its very birth, declared.”28 Secrecy is integral to, if not constitutive of a love relation since it operates in dissymmetry and inequality.

Ancient and modern narratives converge in their deployment of love as a central dramatic device in that its “inscrutable mystery”29

27 Ibid., 9.
28 Ibid.
29 I borrow this phrase from Blanchot’s Unavowable Community, where he refers to Marguerite Duras’s love story, The Malady of Death (40).
provides a narrative with a mystical foundation in which to resurrect a story. Love's abstraction operates as an untraceable (perhaps even divine) origin through which a narrative can begin and conclude. Of course love always complicates its very instrumentality since it is also something which remains other to our dramas, our representations, and even to our thinking in general. But what distinguishes modern representations of love from its ancient forms is the increasing importance given to its economic function.

In James's later works the economics of eros are temporarily suspended between “conviction and action” (453), for love is something which is neither affirmed nor denied but made subject to an interminable process of suppression. Tony Tanner associates the oblique representation of love in James with the “long-circuiting desire”30 in Kierkegaard’s The Seducer’s Diary, in that both draw out the moment of consummation. Tanner argues that resistance is as crucial a factor in maintaining the interest of Kierkegaard’s seducer as it is to sustaining the sexual tension in a James novel. Although Tanner makes an interesting connection between the teasing strategies of Kierkegaard’s seducer and that of James’s own circuitous method of story-telling, he does not take into account that in a James novel resistance is not generated through the promise of or desire for an eventual surrender but, on the contrary, through the hope that such a moment will never take place. Kierkegaard’s seducer (albeit perverse and sadistic) is thus more conventional than the Jamesian anti-hero: the former’s mode of seduction is motivated by the desire for an eventual consummation, whereas the latter’s is motivated by the desire to keep his distance. Throughout James’s writings in general, love is not made subject to a dialectical logic but temporarily disengaged from it. I would suggest instead that The Seducer’s Diary has more in common with the chivalric romances of the medieval period and with eighteenth and nineteenth century romances than with James’s novels: these narratives also require that a lover undertake a circuitous and often painful obstacle course, in order to test not only the strength of feeling involved, but also to reward such

30Tanner, The American Mystery, 104-120.
tenacity with an equally fervent return of affection. The hero’s (or heroine’s) difficult journey is, however, not simply a test or a trial: it is about the very possibility of producing and sustaining a narrative in the first place. In the romance genre, both the idea and the ideal of love are maintained through a lover’s (or narrator’s) repeated affirmation of distance over proximity, obliqueness over directness and absence over presence. Romantic love is identified through its opposition to the banal. Although James’s narratives are far from banal, they are certainly not romantic. And this is not only because love is a thing which is perpetually frustrated or disavowed, but has to do with the nature of his mode of address. Regardless of the subject-matter, what attests to James’s modernism (or perhaps even postmodernism) is his avoidance of conceptualising either the role or the passage of love in his novels. And yet there is also something obliquely romantic about the protection or concealment of love throughout his novels. It is, in a word, sacred. One of the first love scenes between Charlotte and the Prince is named by both as a sacred encounter. James’s prose becomes repetitive, even incantatory in its description of their passionate embrace:

They were silent at first, only facing and faced, only grasping and grasped, only meeting and met. ‘It’s sacred,’ he said at last.

‘It’s sacred,’ she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge. (259)

31I deliberately refer to love as a “passage” for two reasons: one of those is that love is a process of feeling (it must be developed over a period of time), and the other is that it is more formally a rite of passage. James’s novels repeatedly dramatise the rite of passage between innocence and experience, between ignorance and knowledge. The development of a love attachment is crucial to these movements. The Golden Bowl is certainly no exception to this: once Maggie is aware of her husband’s infidelity, her knowledge provides her with the opportunity to make a decision to fight for her love.
This love is sacred because it is a secret. Yet once it becomes known to Maggie, the sacredness of their pledge and of their relationship in general undergoes a gradual process of dissolution. The romance and moreover the efficacy of their relationship is predicated upon its secrecy. The Prince's desire for Charlotte is illicit, exciting and passionate because it is hidden, but once Maggie makes it known to him that she knows of their intimate relationship, what is then ruptured is not the marriage but the secret.

Although love is not directly represented, I do not want to imply that it is something which exists beyond or outside language, since that would not only romanticise this concept but would transform any further thinking on love into an exercise of edification. The potential danger of making love synonymous with the aporia is that it could be collapsed into other concepts as the sublime,\(^3\) with an interminably escaping other, or with negative theology in general. The enigmatic character of love does not have to cancel out its mortality since it is very much of the world, of language and of sense (sensibility) in general. In fact, love's worldliness contributes further to its paradox. Love is difficult to think precisely because it is so proximate to ourselves, to the other and to our experience of the world.

James's mode of representation follows a negative logic: truth is affirmed through incessant denial and love is avowed through its betrayal. This is \textit{The Golden Bowl} — moreover, it sums up the logic of his later works. The resilience of the secret is crucial to sustaining ambiguity: it operates as a form of mediation. James's conversations are upheld by the mediation of the secret. The conversations which take place throughout \textit{The Golden Bowl} are built upon the constant reiteration of the lie. Without the production of the lie, there would be nothing to say, nothing to protect. The production of the lie is, however, more than anything a sign of resistance. Desire is awakened through resistance: "They had silences... that were almost

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\(^3\)In "Shattered Love" Nancy makes a connection between love and the sublime: "Love, certainly, has the most intimate relations with the sublime and with an extreme mode of presentation..." (97).
crudities of resistance—silences that persisted” (367). If love cannot exist without desire, desire can exist without love. Love is driven by the desire to make a proper beginning which promises a future: “For to love in friendship, it is not enough to know how to bear the other in mourning; one must love the future.” Desire without love is doomed because its narrative framework is predicated upon both the false start and the unhappy ending. Desire enacts an interminable beginning without end, without a middle and more to the point, without a proper beginning: “Desire is unhappiness without end... It is infelicitous love...” The passionate love affair in *The Golden Bowl* is sacrificed for the marriage. And yet it is the desire and the suffering of the vanquished in this novel which invite our sympathy. (Could it be because Charlotte Stan’s love for the Prince is so aberrant, risky and less calculating than Maggie’s that it appears as the more heroic?) The power of Maggie’s love comes at the cost of another woman’s desire. Without the protracted suffering of the other woman her love would fail to resonate and it would cease to be valuable. More than any other novel by James, *The Golden Bowl* is a study in the economic structure of love, which is appropriate to a novel that records the constant purchase of precious objects. To say that love in this novel is economic is also to suggest that it is sacrificial. In order to avow love within the context of a marriage, what must be renounced is an illicit love affair. Yet because of such expenditure, love’s avowal comes out as neither redemptive nor transcendent but as a triumph tainted by sacrifice. The novel leaves us with the traces of the other’s pain as it concludes with the smothering enclosure of a marital embrace.

33It is difficult to separate love from desire. Their difference is dependent upon the intention and the outcome of each passion. Love is treated as the higher or more noble passion because it is generally associated with the commitment to marry. By contrast, desire is the more base emotion because it feeds off its own energy without converting its drives into something that is public and resolute, i.e., a marriage.


35Ibid.

36Maggie’s father, Adam Verver is a collector of rare articles and throughout the course of the novel many of the scenes either frame him within settings that reflect his material wealth or show him in the process of buying objects for his personal museum.
Although *The Golden Bowl* deviates from the rest of James’s *oeuvre* because of its unprecedented avowal of love, what makes it all the more exceptional is its affirmation of love over desire. Most of James’s novels dramatise the unfulfillment of desire. In general, they are driven by the dissatisfaction, disappointment and uncertainty produced by the indefinite extension of “desire remaining desire.”

In *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie’s decision to love and not to renounce her husband, albeit a declaration which is more public and open than the affair she seeks to disrupt, is an oath that is still protected by the secret. Love may be affirmed over desire but it is nevertheless an avowal obscured by the resistance to identify the loved object:

‘No; I’m not terrible, and you don’t think me so. I do strike you as surprising, no doubt—but surprisingly mild.
Because—don’t you see?—I am mild. I can bear anything.’

‘Oh “bear!”’ Mrs Assingham fluted.

‘For love,’ said the Princess.

Fanny hesitated. ‘Of your father?’

‘For love,’ Maggie repeated.

It kept her friend watching. ‘Of your husband?’

‘For love,’ Maggie said again. (404-405)

The deferral of the proper name in this passage maintains the force of Maggie’s decision to love. The power of her love is bound up with its secrecy, with the resistance to name, to make visible and thereby to share what must remain a secret if it is to endure. If there

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38 Philip Sicker’s *Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) argues that Maggie’s reticence to impose a proper name to her love suggests a certain philanthropy: “By refusing to devote herself exclusively to one person, Maggie transforms love from a personal sentiment into a kind of religion. Rather than diminishing one another, her two loves grow more intense,” (164-165). Maggie’s resistance to name her love is not significant of a generosity of feeling, but of a crisis of feeling. In the “For love” episode with Fanny Assingham, Maggie speaks of a certain “mildness” where she could “bear anything” because the foundations of her love have been irrevocably shaken by her husband’s and best friend’s betrayal. It is not a sign of her generosity but of her extreme uncertainty.
is to be any romance in this fiction, it appears in a negative form through the agency of the secret. Both the secret and love operate as spectral forces that cannot be sent, given or exchanged. The secret, if it is to remain one, cannot be given or exchanged: it must be withheld. So too then must love remain suspended if it is to become a work of love. Maggie’s labour of love operates as a sustained and concentrated form of resistance. Her love is not passionate, it is not romantic and it is not selfless: it is so intense that it is unutterable.

‘My idea is this, that when you only love a little you’re naturally not jealous—or are only jealous also a little, so that it doesn’t matter. But when you love in a deeper and intenser way, then you are, in the same proportion, jealous; your jealousy has intensity and, no doubt, ferocity. When, however, you love in the most abysmal and unutterable way of all—why then you’re beyond everything, and nothing can pull you down.’

Mr Verver listened as if he had nothing, on these high lines, to oppose. ‘And that’s the way you love?’

For a minute she failed to speak, but at last she answered: ‘It wasn’t to talk about that. I do feel, however, beyond everything—and as a consequence of that, I daresay,’ she added with a turn to gaiety, ‘seem often not to know quite where I am.’ (506)

The immense self-control that Maggie exerts over herself in order to reclaim her world requires much thought and concentration:

She was keeping her head for a reason, for a cause; and the labour of this detachment, with the labour of her forcing the pitch of it down, held them together in the steel hoop of an intimacy compared with which artless passion would have been but a beating of the air. (423)

Her once complacent relationship with her husband, Prince Amerigo, becomes a site of contention, battle and anxiety. The intensity of Maggie’s consternation throughout the second half of the novel brings her character into visibility. Her movement of consciousness parallels the development of the novel. Maggie’s doubt is inextricable from her process of thought. Her reasoning is
inseparable from the sense of anxiety accompanying or motivating her suspicions. Her thinking is generated by anxiety and such anxiety becomes a transformative emotion: it comes to affirm both her married life and her ability to love. However, the apparent positivity of love's avowal in this work is not without its darkness: this is a novel by James after all. There is nothing heroic about Maggie's decision to love and this is partly to do with the value system she shares with her billionaire father: she too is driven by the desire for acquisition. Maggie's decision to love, and not to renounce her beloved (or her social community) is also an indication of her stubbornness. Her love for the Prince is both selfish and possessive. Furthermore, it is not simply a question of retrieving her husband's affection, since she never had it in the first place, as Fanny Assingham explains: "What I take her to be waking up to is the truth that, all the while, she really hasn't had him. Never" (310). Fanny Assingham operates as the important ficelle to both Maggie and the reader, since her role is crucial to developing an understanding of the novel. Her conversations with her husband, the Colonel, and with Maggie not only serve to illuminate, they are essential to the construction of the work as a whole.

The lovers and would-be lovers in James's fictions may circulate and gather around each other's many firesides, drawing rooms (and sometimes churches) without ever once uniting within the intimacy of the touch. The indefinite suspension of expressed emotion is imitated by a style that indirectly represents its subject-matter. James's world is filtered. Both the device of the point of view and the ornament of his diction mediate our relation to the text. As James writes of his method:

We may traverse acres of pretended exhibitory prose from which the touch that directly evokes and finely presents, the touch that operates for closeness and for charm, for conviction and illusion, for communication, in a word, is unsurpassably absent. (preface to The Golden Bowl, 35)

Although James nominates "communication" as a thing "unsurpassably absent," love could easily operate as its substitution.
Yet love is affirmed even when it is negated. Even when someone cannot love (as was the case with John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle”) he or she is still articulated in relation to love. This is the essential paradox of love or of any abstraction (or absolute concept) whose identity cannot successfully be made subject to a mode of inquiry.

The aporia of love, like those of friendship, justice and ethics, installs the subject in the world. The question is, though, can love be thought without the subject? The following lengthy passage from “Shattered Love” traces the thinking of love in philosophy and in so doing, reinforces the agency (or centrality) of the subject in sustaining its many theoretical formulations:

If it were necessary to take the risk of grasping... one might try this: love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching completion. The first meaning of this formula (and it deliberately has several meanings) would be that philosophy thinks love as an accomplishment, arriving at a final and definitive completion. The second meaning would be that philosophy thinks love as an access rather than an end... The third meaning would be that philosophy thinks the being in love as incomplete and led by love toward a completion. The fourth meaning, that this completion surpasses what it completes, and consequently fulfills it only by depriving it of itself (inasmuch as it reaches its end). The fifth meaning would be that philosophy thinks the suppression of the self in love, and the correlative suppression of the self of love, as its ultimate truth and as its ultimate effectivity: thus, love infinitely restitutes itself beyond itself (in the final analysis, death and transfiguration—... .) The sixth meaning would be that this “beyond the self” in which, in a very general manner, love has taken place is necessarily the place of the other, or of an alterity without which neither love nor completion would be possible. But the seventh meaning would nevertheless be that this “beyond” is the place of the same, where love fulfills itself, the place of the same in the other... 39

Nancy’s description of love’s many dialectical variations all revolve

around the subject. The seven meanings of love identified not only cover the thinking of love in philosophy but also provide a summary of its Christian foundation. (This is especially the case when love is imagined as a force which transports the self beyond the self. In other words, it is conceptualised as a divine vehicle through which a subject is enabled to transcend his/her worldly condition.) Following on from this passage, Nancy continues to demonstrate the repetitious pattern of love's binary constructions by drawing upon examples from of music, literature and psychology:

Of course, this kind of philosophical thinking is not confined only to philosophical discourse or to its theological avatar. It is easy to see it structures all occidental experience... from the Grand Rhetoricians to Baudelaire, from the troubadours, to Wagner or Strauss, from Saint John of the Cross... and moving through Racine or Kleist... Monteverdi or Freud. For all of them, love is double, conflictual, or ambivalent: necessary and impossible, sweet and bitter, free and chained, spiritual and sensual, enlivening and mortal, lucid and blind, altruistic and egoistic.40

Again, the resilient (yet unnamed) factor straddling all of these binary oppositions is the subject. In order for love to be both “sweet and bitter, free and chained” it must be attached to an agency. Nancy is aware of this agency since his essay is mainly concerned with disengaging the thinking of love from the orbit of the subject. The subject as a man, a being, an ego, a God or even a proper name, is reconfigured as a heart:

... this heart (if there is one) designates the place where the dialectical power is suspended (or perhaps shattered). The heart does not sublate contradictions, since in a general sense, it does not live under the regime of contradiction... The heart lives—that is to say, it beats—under the regime of exposition.41

For Nancy this “regime of exposition” is nondialectical since it does

40Ibid., 87.
41Ibid., 89.
not follow a rigid pattern of attraction and repulsion, or negation and affirmation, since it is existence as uncertain rhythm or as an indefinitely pulsating present. Although Nancy acknowledges the limits of his substitution of a subject with an organ—"The heart of the subject is again a subject"—the important factor shifting his logic is that a heart (and by analogy a subject) already enters the world as broken. As the words of a "celebrated" rabbi head the second section of his essay: "No heart is as whole as a broken heart." The subject as an incomplete being who is completed by love or as a completed being who is shattered by love, offer narrative scenarios that situate love and the subject within a teleological framework. Love is rethought as neither an access nor an end, but a process whose force cannot be mastered by classical thinking. It is divested of its locality. Love is not a place, it cannot be positioned either at the beginning or at the end of a narrative, of a life or even of a subjectivity, because it manifests itself through these things. Nancy writes that "love is always happening to us" since it collects its energy, its life-force through a subjectivity. This does not mean that it is regulated or directed by a subject. On the contrary, it is disengaged from a subjectivistic or a deterministic logic. But what begs the question of love's dislocation is why? Why is it important to shatter love's ontological connections? Is it because traditional ontology is thought to limit love and, by association, the freedom of a subject? But is not a limit crucial to the very possibility of thinking outside its horizon? I suspect though that neither love nor the subject are liberated by Nancy's attempt to disentangle them. By taking away the anchor which has grounded love, Nancy has (inadvertently) imposed an even more romantic blush on this question. Love, as a missed rendezvous between the subject and philosophy, between thinking and being or between the law and the city, is turned into

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42Ibid., 90.
43Ibid., 91. The citation is taken from Elie Wiesel's *The Fifth Son*.
44Nancy's "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community*, makes a connection between love and the city via the question of community: "Love does not complete community (neither against the City, nor outside of it, nor on its fringes)...
On the contrary, love, provided it is not itself conceived on the basis of the politico-subjective model of communion in one, exposes the unworking and therefore the
something even more transcendental because of its conceptual elusiveness. That love "itself" is missed by thinking implicates a certain nostalgia. Memory makes the missing of love possible, but Nancy has never attested to this. He may try to go against the romantic tradition of characterising love as a redemptive or recuperative agent which binds categories, bodies, ideas or communities, and argue instead that it shows up their points of rupture, limit and failure; but even so, if what is produced is a negative poetic, it is a poetic all the same. The metaphor of a shattered love, of a love that traverses and splinters all aspects of experience is indeed a divine force to reckon with or perhaps even to idolise. Nancy is certainly aware of his hyperbole:

*Love is the act of a transcendence (of a transport, of a transgression, of a transparency...). But this transcendence is not one that passes into—and through—an exteriority... in order to reflect itself in it... it does not pass through the outside, because it comes from it. (Transcendence is always thought as a self-surpassing; but here it is not at all a "surpassing," and even less "self-"; transcendence is the disimplication of the immanence that can come to it only from the outside.) Love does not stop, as long as it lasts, coming from the outside. It does not remain outside; it is this outside itself, the other, each time singular...*  

Nancy's nondialectical conception of love as an act of transcendence which enters the field of consciousness as an outside energy, neither appropriating nor subsuming other forces in its wake retains, nevertheless, a theological edge. Like the archangel Gabriel, love announces itself, it arrives from the outside, or better still, it is the incessant incompleteness of community. It exposes community at its limit* (38). Nancy's capitalisation of the word “City” implies the romantic idea of a citadel whose fortress is poetically linked to the fortress of a beloved's heart. The city is also a place of law and order which is placed in opposition to the tyranny of love, an emotional place which resides outside the city's walls. In Rose's *Mourning Becomes the Law*, her reading of the famous Poussin painting, 'Landscape with the Ashes of Phocian' rethinks the easy opposition between the love of Phocian's wife and that of the unjust city, (22-26).

*45Nancy, "Shattered Love," 97*
outside announcing itself to an inside. Nancy's metaphoric is indeed elaborate. Love does not transport the subject outside himself, it does not work from the inside out but from the outside in—such a reversal may destabilise the centrality of the subject, but not love. Yet Nancy is not satisfied with simply reversing the narrative direction of transcendence or even with decentralising or eradicating the agency of the subject, he also wants to make this exteriority, this love into something self-supporting: "it is this outside itself."

Nancy's project of rethinking the structural possibilities of love has much in common with Derrida's project of rethinking the moment of the decision. Both draw upon the idea of an extreme alterity that takes away the agency of the subject. A question of responsibility remains. By dislocating both love and the decision from the orbit of the subject, what is introduced is a new concern, and that has to do with the question of the ethical. Is it not ethical to be responsible for one's actions (or even inaction, as is generally the case in a James novel)? Yet the very difficulty of thinking love (and the decision) outside its ontological determinations is crucial to bringing into question the ethical dimension because accountability paradoxically arrives in response to the failure to do one's duty. Ethics does not operate through an "I must" imperative. It is not predicated upon a debt economy. A responsible decision does not seek to profit from its judgement. Ethics and responsibility arrive in and through a process of equivocation because they acknowledge first and foremost the singularity of a decision: they should not be

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46 The phallic implication of this model is something which could be considered via a reading of Luce Irigaray's "These Lips Which Speak Together" in This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). In "Shattered Love," Nancy's notion of an outside force that "does not stop, as long as it lasts" entering into an inside (vaginal) space, like "a blade thrust in me" certainly offers an explicit sexual dimension to love's "movement" of "transcendence," (97).

47 Critchley's The Ethics of Deconstruction argues that in Derridean deconstruction, "Ethics, properly speaking, is restricted to imperatives that are categorical; and for Derrida, the ethical moment is the interruption of the general context of conditional hypothetical imperatives by an unconditional categorical imperative. Ethics arises in and as the undecidable yet determinate articulation of these two orders" (40).
regimented by law, by a code or by a subject. Derrida reminds us that friendship does not arise through an "ought" relation and neither for that matter does love. Yet it is also the resilience of the "ought" factor which makes the decision to not be bound by its law responsible. This is both paradoxical and aporetic. But this is not to say that it is responsible to go against the law (since the "counter-rule is still a rule") or to follow the law. Rather, it is about responding to an other (perhaps a loved one or a friend) specifically as someone other. The decision is therefore a moment which should be neither predetermined nor erratic but guided by the principles of the situation at hand.

In The Gift of Death and Politics of Friendship, Derrida argues that the "unconscious" or "passive" decision "remains responsible" to itself since it operates as a response to the limits of knowledge. Structurally, the decision is not about knowing the right or correct path to choose. If that were the case then there would be no decision. Knowledge, if it does arrive, comes after the decision. The decision, first and foremost is about taking a risk since it chooses to be responsible for what it cannot know—and this is why the decision cannot be either "yours" or "mine," voluntary or involuntary, since the decision is to experience the infinitely unknowable within a finite horizon. Derrida argues that one has to experience the moment of the aporia in order to make a decision because it is a passage where there is no passage. The decision to follow a pathless path is to experience "the impossible" (not the impossible as the opposite of possible, but the impossible as that which cannot be absorbed within a binary logic.) The decision to forgive the impossible is a gift. The decision to love is also a gift: "One can love being loved, but loving will always be more, better and something other than being loved."51

In Given Time Derrida cites Lacan on the association between

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49 Ibid.
50 Derrida, Politics, 67-70.
51 Ibid., 11.
love and the gift: “love: It gives what it does not have."\[52\] This again re-structures the position of the subject in that what is involved is his/her dispossession (or in Nancy’s terminology “disimplication.”) Yet in this case, neither love nor the gift (love-as-gift or gift-as-love) are instrumental in returning the self to his/her proper place, home, nature and so on. No such restitution takes place because what this gift of nothing indicates is the absence of an original self before the offering. The gift forms the subject. Nancy’s reasoning is similar in that it is through rupture that a subject is formed: “it is the break itself that makes the heart. The heart is not an organ, and neither is it a faculty. It is: that I is broken and traversed by the other where its presence is most intimate and its life most open.”\[53\] Following the same logic, it is the decision which makes the subject, not a subject which makes a decision, because the decision (and this could include the experience of love) is higher and better than the subject; it is always something more. Although Nancy and Derrida seek to write against a tradition which places the subject at the centre or at the origin of action, feeling, thinking, decision-making, loving, their alternative is still subject-oriented except that their new “subject” is reconfigured as a force higher than the world of names and of pronouns. Language cannot touch or identify such force since it is as invisible, indeterminate and ineffable as the supreme being. Although I suspect it is both ethical and pragmatic to be humbled by feelings and choices whose power and resonance go beyond the parameters of one’s knowledge and experience, what happens though after the drama of choice has subsided? The instant of decision or of love provides romantic snap-shots of a moment that can only “keep a relation of foreignness”\[54\] to the everyday. It is what

\[52\]Derrida, \textit{Given Time}, 2. See also Jacques Lacan’s \textit{Ecrits: A Selection}, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routiedge, 1993). The original passage, “For love is giving what one does not have, it is certainly true that the subject can wait to be given it…” (255), specifically refers to the “primary transference” between a psychoanalyst and a patient. As Lacan writes: “it is certainly true that the subject can wait to be given it, since the psychoanalyst has nothing else to give him. But he does not give him this nothing, and just as well; and that is why he is paid for this nothing, preferably well paid” (255).


\[54\]Derrida, \textit{Given Time}, 7.
happens once the surprises of love and the decision have abated that presents a more difficult challenge because it involves the banal responsibility of living with one's choices and loved ones.

_The Golden Bowl_ begins after the moment of decision. We enter James's world on the eve of a marriage between his two central characters, Maggie Verver and Prince Amerigo. The romance between the bride and groom, their meeting, courting, the proposal and acceptance, forms a series of events and circumstances that come before the opening lines of this novel. In fact many important decisions, as instrumental moments that shape the novel's finite world, take place off stage. What we are left with are the remains of choices, some onerous, others promising, that we, along with James's characters, are invited either to dismiss or preserve.

II: The Anxiety of Beginning

_The Golden Bowl_ could be described as a story about a naive, selfish American family made up of a father and daughter who decide to augment both their lives and fortunes by means of suitable marriages. What ensues though, is that their newly acquired spouses conduct a secret liaison which shows up the narcissism of the father-daughter relationship. The relationship between Maggie and Adam Verver is forged through a reiterative process of making rare acquisitions. Their most recent acquisitions, Charlotte and Amerigo, do nothing to interrupt their lives. In fact they only to bring them closer to the point where their intimacy becomes a form of social myopia. What eventually interrupts their selfish world, ironically enough, is another purchase. The object in question is not a precious article but a flawed golden bowl. In the first volume, James's technique of filtering the characterisations of Maggie and Adam through the perspectives of the Prince, Fanny Assingham and the third person narration contributes to a sense of restriction underpinning their relationship. Maggie and Adam's thoughtless relationship to one another subsists in a logic of repetition. Then at the close of this volume and throughout the second, the point of
view is gradually redirected through Maggie's consciousness. The perspective shifts in order to follow her gradual process of self-realisation. Once she begins to suspect an affair between Amerigo and Charlotte, the novel undergoes a radical shift in point of view as she manoeuvres her way back into her husband's life and imagination. This is the *The Golden Bowl* in a nutshell, but what this summary cannot account for is the secrets which uphold the story.

Omission is central to James's method of story-telling. The provision of a gap (or gaps) allows other ideas, situations, conversations, events and characters to come into being. As Tzvetan Todorov lucidly explains:

> the secret of the Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and superpowerful force which sets the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion. This motion is double and, in appearance, a contradictory one (which allows James to keep beginning it over and over).^{55}

Todorov's parenthetical remark is particularly interesting because it associates secrecy with repetition. And what it implies, though it does not elaborate on it, is the element of anxiety which must accompany the decision to begin anew. Beginnings are fuelled by anxiety because they are first and foremost responses to the limit point of a relationship, of a situation, of a line of reasoning and even of a narrative framework. Repetition is an uneasy, anxious process in that it re-stages the limits of utterance, of knowledge, and generally of one's experience of the world. Repetition in *The Golden Bowl* is brought about through failure:

> Of what exactly the failure consisted he would still perhaps have felt it a little harsh to try to say; and if she had in fact, as by Charlotte's observation, "broken down," the details of the collapse would be comparatively unimportant. They came to the same thing, all such collapses—the failure of courage, the failure of friendship, or the failure just simply of tact; for

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didn’t any one of them by itself amount really to the failure of wit? (260)

In *The Golden Bowl* the desire for renewal is brought about through this collapse. What seems to embody all forms of break down is the “failure of wit.” Courage, friendship and indeed tact culminate in the failure of wit and all that it entails: intellect, humour, nous, thinking and reasoning. Indeed Maggie’s myopia throughout the first book is indicative of such a failure.

The event of a breakdown is crucial to the possibility of starting over again because beginnings operate as a response to the disaster: they are both recuperative (and in this sense synonymous with change) and repetitive (evincing the impossibility of change). Beginnings, moreover, are imbricated with the act of decision-making, and yet “a decision is, in the end, always secret.”56 The decision to begin and the beginning of a decision are bound up with secrecy because the secret provides the important space of reserve through which a story (any story) can be retold, reordered and repeated. Judgement and memory are crucial to this process of storytelling, or story beginning, and yet it is the element of secrecy (or perhaps even the secret as an unknown element) which perpetuates this reiterative cycle. Every beginning, however false, shaky or unsure is a decision: it is also made possible through the fact of memory. In this sense, beginnings are also works of mourning: they recollect the past (or the dead) in order to begin the process of revision. One’s relationship to the world is renewed again and again through the decision to start over—beginnings affirm life, memory and above all, love.

The narrative of *The Golden Bowl* is not based upon redemption nor on the recovery of a love betrayed, but of a love that is conceived on betrayal. How can betrayal constitute a basis for love? Such a basis is bound up with the idea of rupture. What is brought to the fore by the presence of rupture is the limit point of a relationship: it bears witness to its impossibility. Love makes its appearance in this

novel as a broken promise. The shifting nature of James's point of view also has the effect of breaking up the continuity of perspective, and in this sense, rupture is stylistically performed throughout this work.

James's novel traces the breakdown of many relationships. The fine fabric of his world is perpetually tested and perforated by acts of betrayal. The affair between the Prince and Charlotte may operate as the central deceit but its centrality gives rise to other concealments. Every relationship in *The Golden Bowl* is tenuous except the familial bond, and as a result of such fragility, what is reintroduced over and over again is the need to begin again. Maggie's re-organisation of her social position in the second volume is indicative of such a beginning. Yet her beginning is also fuelled by anxiety.

There were hours enough, lonely hours, in which she let dignity go; then there were others when, clinging with her winged concentration to some deep cell of her heart, she stored away her hived tenderness as if she had gathered it all from flowers... Something indubitably had come up for her that had never come up before; it represented a new complication and had begotten a new anxiety—... there were moments while she watched with her... to feel her own heart in her throat, was to be almost moved to saying to her: 'Hold on tight, my poor dear—without too much terror—and it will all come out somehow.' (519, 521)

Anxiety is a sensation which makes the gaps in experience resonate as gaps. It is anxiety which provides us with the visceral experience of the aporia. I choose anxiety over fear because anxiety has no object,

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57 The extent of Adam Verver's knowledge and possible manipulation in the background of this text is never made known. The reason Amerigo chooses to stay with his wife is also never revealed since the narrative doesn't enter his point of view in the second book. In the second half of the novel, the break-up scenes between Amerigo and Charlotte are also concealed.

58 In *Aporias*, Derrida asks: "Can one speak... of an experience of the aporia? An experience of the aporia as such? Or vice-versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?" (15). These questions are indeed difficult to answer. According to Derrida, an experience of the aporia or an aporetic moment is not eventful in the sense that it could be classified as a knowable moment. His last
whereas fear does have an object. Fear is dialectical: one must be fearful of something in order to establish an “I,” a subject who fears an object, something other to one’s self. By contrast, anxiety cannot name its object. What characterises the later fictions of James, including *The Golden Bowl*, is a vague, yet all consuming sense of apprehension. Things are sensed but never named, they become a product of the air, as Fanny Assingham explains to her husband: “I felt to-day, as I tell you, that there’s so much in the air;”/“Oh, in the air!—” the Colonel dryly breathed, /“Well, what’s in the air always has—hasn’t it?—to come down to earth”’ (p. 302). Throughout the novel, James draws upon the elements of air, water, earth and fire to disperse, consume and sometimes to crystallise (however temporarily) the uncertain relationships. The illicit passion between Charlotte and Amerigo is metaphorically represented as a “golden flame” (553), yet a flame whose heat can be easily weakened by a barometric change. Evil here and in “The Turn of the Screw” is suspected, but never exposed: this is to experience anxiety, to know but never to have either the facility or the opportunity to name one’s knowledge. As Fanny Assingham exclaims to Maggie, “‘There are many things... that we shall never know’” (445). To experience anxiety is to shudder with equivocation, it is to shake with the ambivalence of indecision. The pain produced by such indecision gives value to the aporetic structure of a double-bind because it is not just a recognition of the impossible, it is an experience of the impossible. As suggested in the previous chapter, this again brings to the fore the physicality and difficulty of thinking. In the later stages of the novel, Maggie Verver’s heart becomes not only an organ of anxiety but is also indicative of her thinking, and moreover, of her loving:

Maggie felt truly a rare contraction of the heart on making out the next instant where the new system would probably have to be... Maggie came on with her heart in her hands; she came on with the definite provision, throbbing like the tick of a watch, of a doom impossibly sharp and hard, but to

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question is pertinent to rethinking the relation between experience and the aporia in the sense that both are integral to the very possibility or existence of the other.
which, after looking at it with her eyes wide open, she had more or less bowed her head. (491-492)

III: False Starts

In the very first pages of the novel, the element of anxiety is immediately introduced through the consciousness of one of its main characters, Prince Amerigo. Amerigo's thoughts are made present to us even before we are given a physical description of him. He appears as a man divided by thoughts of his past and present. His arhythmic footsteps give a double beat to his split consciousness torn between two cities: Rome and London. As he walks the London streets he thinks of his past, of his old, romantic life as a Roman Prince. He is as an anachronism, a foreigner anxiously contemplating his present, contemporary setting, which promises to deliver him a new life as a married man living in a modern metropolis. In these first pages, he is a figure of equivocation. What will he choose, Rome or London, single life or married life, the ancient or the modern? To begin a novel with the eve of a marriage, especially if this novel happens to be a work by Henry James, is to begin with anxiety. *The Golden Bowl* begins as a work about the difficulty or the anxiety of beginning, but what is made explicit in these opening pages is the association of that anxiety with the movement of thought, with the process of decision-making. Amerigo's decision to marry the daughter of a wealthy American businessman provides us with the novel's first dubious start. Charlotte Stant is also introduced in these early pages. She is identified first as Maggie's childhood friend and second as Amerigo's secret love. The Prince's decision to meet Charlotte in secret before his wedding day casts further doubt upon his future life with Maggie.

The second book of the first volume of *The Golden Bowl* opens with the introduction of another important male character, Maggie's father Adam Verver. In a similar fashion to the first page of the novel, the first two words of the chapter are the name of the new character. This name is accompanied by another, the title of his
country estate, Fawns. In contrast to the Prince's introduction, a beginning which represents the dynamism and uncertainty of a young man negotiating the busy streets of London, Adam makes his first appearance as an isolated figure, as an older man framed within the impressive enclosure of his country estate. Maggie's father is depicted amongst his possessions, objects which denote his wealth and power. The pace of the writing imitates the easy gait and highly calculating movement of his thought processes. We know that he is alone—and that he has in fact deliberately crept away from his familial and social responsibilities in order to steal a quiet hour by himself:

We share this world, none the less, for the hour, with Mr Verver; the very fact of his striking, as he would have said, for solitude, the fact of his quiet flight, almost on tiptoe, through tortuous corridors, investing him with an interest that makes our attention—tender indeed almost to compassion—qualify his achieved isolation. (129)

This opening image of Adam's physical remove from society also indicates his psychological isolation: "His real friend, in all the business, was to have been his own mind, with which nobody had put him in relation" (145). Adam remains an unknown and unknowable figure throughout. He may be identified through his wealth, through his business acumen and through his patriarchal reign over two households (Portland Place and Eaton Square) but we learn nothing of his possible knowledge of the affair between Charlotte and Amerigo. This question of how much he knows, and possibly orchestrates as a result of his knowledge, provides the novel with one of the most enduring secrets of all. Along with one of the most proficient readers in this fiction, Fanny Assingham, we are left to speculate upon the extent of his knowledge. Interestingly

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59Gore Vidal writes in his introduction:

I barely noticed Adam Verver the first time I read the book. I saw him as an aged... typical tycoon... and thought no more. But now... I regard him with new interest—not to mention suspicion. What is he up to? He is plainly sly; and greedy; and although the simultaneous possession and ingestion of
enough, after learning of her husband's infidelity, Maggie's choice of punishment is to keep him guessing about Adam's knowledge as she throws out to Amerigo before leaving the room after a rare moment of confrontation, "'Find out for yourself!'" (465).

What we learn from this stolen hour with Mr Verver is that he is desperate to escape from the advances of a certain Mrs Rance, a divorcée from New Jersey. The question of anxiety is again introduced with the threat of another marriage. The scene is comical as we are invited to watch this wealthy and highly successful businessman undergo a moment of emotional near-collapse in the face of an imposing and determined woman. Adam's original composure within his comfortable retreat is quickly transformed into a battle-ground—into a site of panic at the growing realisation that subterfuge has failed:

His eyes, in any case, now saw Mrs Rance approach... Should she frankly denounce him for a sneak he would simply go to pieces... The deep danger, the only one that made him...

confectionary is a recurrent James theme, my God, how this father and daughter manage to both keep and devour the great world itself! (12)

The novel does indicate, however obscurely and indirectly, that the sly tycoon knows something. This is suggested very early, even before he makes a proposal of marriage to Charlotte:

There hovered about him at all events, while he walked, appearances already familiar, as well as two or three that were new, and not the least vivid of the former connected itself with that sense of being treated with consideration which had become for him, one of the minor, yet, so far as there were any such, quite one of the compensatory, incidents of being a father-in-law. It has struck him up to now that this particular balm was a mixture of which Amerigo, owing to some hereditary privilege, alone possessed the secret; so that he found himself wondering if it had come to Charlotte, who had unmistakably acquired it, through the young man's having amiably passed it on. (184)

Adam's wondering consciousness associates the names of Amerigo and Charlotte with a shared secret. He recognises a pattern in their response to him, one which indicates a certain complicity of treatment:

He might wonder what exactly it was that they so resembled each other in treating him like—from what noble propagated convention...but the difficulty was here of course that one could really never know—couldn't know without having been one's self a personage; whether a Pope, a King, a President, a General, or just a beautiful Author. (184-185)
positively turn cold, would have been the possibility of her
seeking him in marriage, of her bringing up between them
that terrible issue. (133-134)

Adam is marked out as the single man of the group at Fawns because
of his daughter's recent marriage. Despite the fact that, like Lambert
Strether of The Ambassadors, he enters this novel as a widower, the
excuse of mourning can no longer prevail in the face of the new
dissymmetry imposed by his daughter's betrothal. We also learn
during this "quiet hour" with Adam of his admiration for his
daughter: "She was her mother, oh yes—but her mother and
something more..." (145). The perverse nature of the father-daughter
relationship is indicated through their frequent and intimate series
of conversations throughout the novel. (In many ways Adam and
Maggie resemble a married couple more than any of the novel's
actual couples.) Their bond is emphasised further by Adam's decision
to rectify the imbalance of the situation by marrying his daughter's
best friend. Adam's proposal to Charlotte Stant is not only motivated
by the desire to please his daughter but also by a longing to be closer
to his child. As Maggie implants the idea of re-marriage in her
father's mind:

'Now that I'm married to some one else you're, as in
consequence married to nobody'...
'So you think.' her father presently said, 'that I had better
get married just in order to be as I was before?'...
Her companion turned it over. 'You don't go so far as to
wish me to take somebody I don't like?'
'Ah father,' she sighed, 'you know how far I go—how far I
could go. But I only wish that if you ever should like
anybody you may never doubt of my feeling how I've
brought you to it. You'll always know that it's my fault.'
'You mean... that it will be you who'll take the
consequences?...
'Well, that's handsome.' He emphasised his sense of it by
drawing her closer and holding her more tenderly. (162-163)

Even at this early stage, a sense of foreboding has entered the scene of
familial bliss with the question of re-marriage operating as the
central concern. Although Adam expresses the hope that he not make a mistake in choosing a new wife, as it turns out his circumspection is rendered ineffectual in the face of Charlotte and Amerigo’s occult conspiracy of silence. By proposing marriage to Amerigo’s previous lover, Adam unintentionally re-kindles their romance. The following passage, an excerpt which is typically Jamesian for its sheer lack of romance, depicts Adam’s process of decision-making:

It fell in so beautifully with what might be otherwise possible... The way in which it might be met was by putting his child at peace, and the way in which to put her at peace was to provide for his future—that is for hers—by marriage... He had seen that Charlotte could contribute... Oh if Charlotte didn't accept him the remedy of course would fail... To think of it merely for himself would have been... yes, impossible. But there was a grand difference in thinking of it for his child. (187)

James goes against the romantic (and erotic) tradition by depicting not a man caught in the throes of a passion on the eve of making a proposal of marriage but a man insensible to the object of his intended offering. Rather than represent the sexual and emotional yearnings of an older man for a younger woman, James prefers to depict a father’s love for his only daughter. Adam’s paternal concern seems particularly irregular when the other woman in question is considered to be so physically exquisite, charming and intelligent. Yet the possibility of incest remains an implied aberration throughout; it is protected by the high style of James’s prose. The forbidden is thereby suspended within the undulating folds of literary technique.

Adam chooses to make his proposal to Charlotte immediately after conducting a successful business transaction. In this scene of purchase, James’s prose again enters Adam’s consciousness to reveal a man whose business acumen extends to the purchase of a beautiful woman. James is lightly critical of Adam’s presumption of authority. He is depicted as a consummate egoist who anticipates, with a measure of delight, the outcome of his proposal. Adam likens himself to a captain of the high seas who anxiously waits to see if his
ships will burn in the water if the answer to his question is "no": "perhaps for the first time in his life... every inch of the rest of him being given to the foreknowledge that an hour or two later he should have 'spoken.' The burning of his ships therefore waited..." (191).

Love becomes a missed rendezvous in the scenes of proposal and acceptance between Adam and Charlotte, since the true objects of their affection, the very reasons motivating their decisions, are missed. Maggie and Amerigo are absent from these scenes of decision-making and yet they do manage to mediate and determine the course of events through the device of the missive. Adam marries Charlotte because of his love for Maggie and Charlotte marries Adam because of her love for Amerigo. Everything is askew and yet there is a perverse logic in the crisscrossing of their desires. Love becomes an oblique offering through the diagonal direction of its lines of desire.

Charlotte and Adam's wedding is a scene omitted from the text, just as Maggie and Amerigo's. Instead, the narrative immediately cuts forward to the third book, with Charlotte walking ceremoniously, in all her post-betrothal splendour, down a "monumental" staircase (213). James's prose converts into a stream-of-consciousness technique in order to imitate the fragmented rush of perceptions of its proud and beautiful heroine:

She was herself in truth crowned, and it all hung together, melted together, in light and colour and sound: the unsurpassed diamonds that her head so happily carried... The ordered revellers, rustling and shining, with sweep of train and glitter of star and clink of sword... the double stream of the coming and going, flowing together where she stood, passed her, brushed her, treated-her to much crude contemplation and now and then a spasm of speech, an offered hand... She hoped no one would stop... it was her idea to mark in a particular manner the importance of something that had just happened. She knew how she should mark it, and what she was doing there made already a beginning. (214)

This beginning that is already made not only refers to Charlotte's dramatic entrance into the public sphere, it also indicates the renewal
of her affair with the Prince. Amerigo’s interest in Charlotte is rekindled by her display of social prowess and glamour. Yet by the conclusion, Charlotte’s original radiance is dimmed by her lover’s abandonment. She becomes a living sacrifice in this work. She is the most rare acquisition in Adam Verver’s valuable estate—not only for her beauty, her social aptitude and elegance, but also because she is bought twice over: first as a wife, and second as a woman who has wronged his daughter. In the second volume, Charlotte is reclaimed as a broken being, as a woman whose debt to Adam and Maggie remains indefinitely outstanding. She is held captive by their decision to never once utter the nature of her wrong-doing. Her love for Amerigo is so exorbitant that it must be punished. The margin or the excess of her loss is a thing which remains incalculable. James is not a writer of tragedy because his world is already fallen, although Charlotte’s emotional captivity and eventual banishment to “American City,” with a dispassionate husband as her captor, is indeed an unjust punishment. The father and daughter team are certainly as monstrous, as Gore Vidal suggests, in their display of purchasing power.

In Henry James and the Art of Power, Mark Seltzer argues that “The Golden Bowl is a novel about power—conjugal, commercial, and imperial.” Seltzer suggests that it is not love but power which directs the action in this novel. Certainly, Maggie’s desire to retrieve the affections of her husband is bound up with the desire to regain power over her world, and indeed she uses her financial and social leverage to restore her marriage. Love and power are both abstractions which try to indicate a source, a reason or an origin for action. They are words which often intertwine: “the power of love,” “love as power” and “power in love.” Yet I have chosen to favour the word “love” over “power” to explain the action in this novel, despite the fact that they are imbricated in each other because in this particular fiction, James explores the possibility that love, especially when it is disappointed, has the effect of transporting us “beyond

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everything” (506). But what is perhaps even more efficacious than the abjection of love, is knowledge. Maggie’s decision to conceal her knowledge of the affair from the public domain and, more significantly from Charlotte, has the effect of advancing her social, moral and marital position. Furthermore, the omission of Adam’s knowledge throughout becomes another source of power. In James’s novels, knowledge is manipulated to such an extent that it bears little resemblance to the truth, and on those rare occasions when it does arrive, it is not redemptive but punitive. Love and knowledge collide with the re-appearance of the golden bowl.

IV: The Great Gold Cup

The golden bowl itself, an object which is difficult to possess (it is never given to anyone) is narratively and thematically crucial to this question of knowledge. The golden bowl is more than an object and more than a possession. Maggie identifies the bowl as her friend as she explains to her husband: “‘The strangeness,’ she lucidly said, ‘is in what my purchase was to represent to me after I had got it home; which value came,’ she explained, ‘from the wonder of my having found such a friend,’” (459-460). The golden bowl delivers Maggie evidence of a betrayal. Such evidence is rare in a James novel because the proof usually goes up in smoke, quite literally as we saw in *The Wings of the Dove* and in “The Aspern Papers.” The golden bowl, as a piece of evidence and as a friend, enables Maggie effectively and decisively to recover control over her world. She may not be a great personage like the “beautiful Author” (185) of this tale but her influence is atypical since she is one of those rare characters who acquires enough evidence to not only legitimise her suspicions, but also to act upon them. Moreover, the dominance of her perspective throughout the second book, imitates the conclusion she so much desires: total possession.

The golden cup operates as the hinge point through which at least two forms of love are negated and affirmed: the illicit and the sacred. It is the illicit, secret love relationship in this work which
provides us with one of the most intense, passionate and above all poignant attachments in all of James’s fictions. Much like the history of “the great gold cup” (292) Charlotte and Amerigo’s sexual history is also confined to secrecy. It is Maggie’s memory which is validated over Charlotte Stant’s. The affair between Amerigo and Charlotte cannot survive, it cannot have a future because its history can never be publicly claimed. The power of Maggie’s love resides in her moral and social right to openly love her husband—it is also bound up with her liberty to openly remember, honour and reclaim the history of her attachment. Her decision to love is made possible by the fact that she can publicly undertake a work of mourning. Recollecting the past is essential to a love relationship because what is made possible by such recognition is a future.

The golden bowl is an irregularity for many reasons. It is one object in this novel whose price cannot be easily fixed or agreed upon. It makes its first appearance in a Bloomsbury antique store before the adoring eyes of the shop keeper, Charlotte and a disinterested Amerigo. It is presented as a curiosity and it remains a curious item throughout the novel. Years later, Maggie by chance comes across the same “antiquario” (455) and buys the bowl only to find out later from the enthusiastic vendor that the price she paid was too much because it is flawed. The bowl’s flaw is a figure for Charlotte’s and Amerigo’s mistake in failing to purchase the item because what is left is a trace of their secret rendezvous:

’They were intimate, you see. Intimate,’ said the Princess...
‘There’s always the question of what one considers—!’
‘What one considers intimate?’ ... turning again to the new ornament of the chimney and wondering even while she took relief from it at this gap in her experience...
‘They went about together—they’re known to have done it. And I don’t mean before—I mean after.’ (435-436)

61The novel offers variations on the golden bowl theme by offering a variety of images that range from Arcadian-like references to the golden isles to foreboding images of cups and goblets of poison (77). James makes reference to the poisoned wine of the Borgias in connection with Charlotte’s ill-will toward the Ververs. Throughout the novel, the mercantile world of business constantly informs and infringes upon the ethical and emotional milieus of its three main couples.
Maggie may have paid too much money for her purchase but what she receives in return for her show of faith in this object is "real knowledge" (463). The scene of confrontation between Maggie and the Prince provides us with one of the most climactic moments in James's oeuvre, not only for its intensity, but for its innovation (450-465). For the first time in this novel, the face to face encounter is not mediated by the production of the lie, but by knowledge. It is this kind of innovation which leads to the question of love.

The bowl is crucial to bringing about the accidental appearance of love. Through its uncanny re-appearance, love arrives as an accident, even as a mistake, because it was never a part of the Verver's calculation. In the presence of the bowl, before its undeniable evidence, Maggie chooses to be faithful to the faithless. Her love appears to be miraculous. To begin again is also to trust: "At last it seems, the failure of the beginning reveals that we have already begun, already staked—a trust." What is "staked" in the risk of starting over is the success of the decision. What is also recollected in this decision to begin again is faith: "Once again the middle is in the beginning... and the beginning is in the middle: faith." The inauthentic golden bowl is used as the prime vehicle through which a process of amendment is made possible. On a narrative level, it is also crucial to re-connecting the fragments of this story, pieces which even predate the beginning. Charlotte and Amerigo's past love affair, a relationship that existed outside the frame of this fiction, resurfaces as a result of its appearance. The golden bowl may re-unite the missing fragments of this story and help in repairing its flawed relationships, but for all its trouble and significance, it ends up being broken itself. Fanny Assingham, in a rare moment of conviction, attempts to destroy the vessel by smashing it to the ground:

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62 Leading up to this scene of confrontation between Maggie and her husband, the text dramatises numerous conversations between Maggie and Fanny Assingham which deal obliquely with the question of infidelity. During these conversations, it is Fanny's role to deny all knowledge of the affair between Charlotte and the Prince. She must lie in order to protect Maggie's tactic of indirectly working her way back into her husband's emotional life.
63 Rose, Broken Middle, 42.
64 Ibid., 72.
Fanny Assingham... raised the cup in her two hands, raised it positively above her head... and then with due note taken from the margin of the polished floor... dashed it boldly to the ground... (447-448).

The scene is ritualistic, even religious as Fanny tries to eradicate the evidence of her flawed judgement in making both Maggie’s and Adam’s marriages. Yet the bowl is not completely destroyed by her gesture, only split into three fragments. Even in the event of the bowl’s material destruction it still continues to subsist as a powerful symbol in this novel. The three pieces lying on the floor may symbolise the love triangle between Maggie, her husband and Charlotte, and the now irrevocable disruption of their relations. But the triunity of its fragments also leaves open the possibility of renewal.

V: Epilogue

“Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?” (William Blake, The Book of Thel)

*The Golden Bowl* may comprise two volumes but embedded within this fiction is a book of three volumes. The number three again appears in relation to the tripartite division of an object except, in this case, they form the pieces of a mystery text. By the dénouement, Charlotte, in her pain and suffering as the now forsaken beloved, tries to flee from the claustrophobic environs of Adam’s grand house by seeking refuge in the garden. In her haste to escape, she mistakenly takes the second volume of the unidentified work. Maggie, always watching and noticing her error, follows her flight in order to replace the second volume with the first. Her gesture may be “thoughtful” but it is above all symbolic as she alerts Charlotte to the need of making a proper beginning. This is Maggie’s moment of triumph. But what of the third piece to the puzzle, the third fragment of the golden bowl and of the third city, American city, named throughout this novel? The novel begins with the Prince’s
memories of Rome, and the drama unfolds within the modernity of London, but what has always kept its place on the edges of the novel’s imagination is American City:

‘You regularly make me wish I had shipped back to American City. When you go on as you do—’ But he really had to hold himself to say it.

‘Well, when I go on—?’

‘Why you make me quite want to ship back myself. You make me quite feel as if American City could be the best place for us.’

It made her all too finely vibrate. ‘For “us”—?’

‘For me and Charlotte...’

Ah then it was that the cup of her conviction, full to the brim, overflowed at a touch! There was his idea... It was a blur of light in the midst of which she saw Charlotte like some object marked by contrast in blackness, saw her waver in the field of vision, saw her removed, transported, doomed. (512)

Adam transports Charlotte and the pride of his museum back to American City. The novel begins with the ignorance of the Ververs (which repeats James’s international theme about the innocence of Americans) but ends in the slavery of Europe. By the conclusion of The Golden Bowl, Amerigo and in particular Charlotte have become enslaved for their physical beauty, their European sophistication and, above all, for their commercial innocence. The Ververs may be able to buy half the beautiful world and indeed the company of their loved objects, but will they succeed in the purchase of love? Love cannot be put in a golden bowl, especially when the bowl is neither golden nor symmetrical. Perhaps it could be found broken, amongst the fragments of a damaged vessel. This is Jamesian love.

Although The Golden Bowl is a novel about the endless consumption of precious objects and people, stylistically it counteracts a process of easy absorption. The Golden Bowl is clearly a work which defies the logic of consumption. The difficulty of James’s late style incites a reading of repetition. The act of reading is transformed into an act of iteration. The deliberation of James’s style solicits a response that is not only prudent, but also diffident. The
endurance required to read *The Golden Bowl* may not convert into a work of love or become a variation on its insistence, but it does have the potential to transport us, however temporarily and unsteadily, "beyond everything" (506). James’s later works are above all novels of reticence. Such deliberation is more than thoughtful, it is generous. If, according to Nancy, both love and thinking are about "the weighing or testing of the limits"\(^6\) then *The Golden Bowl* is indeed a work of such hesitation.

Conclusion

“She ended up knowing so much that she could no longer interpret anything. There were no longer shadows to help her see more clearly, only glare.” You cannot go further in life than this sentence by James.1 (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia)

She knew at last so much, that she had quite lost her earlier sense of merely guessing. There were no shades of distinctness— it all bounced out. (Henry James, “In the Cage”)

The telegraphist of James’s short story “In the Cage” reaches a point of abstraction in her work where words appear as “mere numbers.”2 Language is transported and transfigured by the speed, rhythm and economy of the wire. Words are transformed into electrical signals; they are animated by the movement of the telegraph. From behind the “framed and wired confinement” (9) of the postal cage, James’s heroine spends her days exchanging words for money, or rather she makes words commensurable with an amount of money. She experiences the world as a series of faces and figures, names and dates, rendezvous points and sexual intrigues, all of which connect and disconnect through the agency of the wire. The post office operates as a centre of communication and of potential intrigue. James’s telegraphist is more than a mediator: she is a translator. Her memory for dates and names, faces and amounts, attitudes and

1Deleuze and Guattari’s translation of James is a transformation of the original. Their alteration is endnoted in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 535.

2James, “In the Cage” in In the Cage and Other Stories (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 17. Page numbers to this edition will appear parenthetically throughout the body of the text.
mannerisms indicates an exceptional intelligence that goes beyond the duties and expectations of her workplace. She is a thinker employed as a postal clerk. James's heroine enters the fiction as a dissatisfied clerk intent on leaving her position, only to change her mind for the sake of a charming customer. She falls in love with a man whose face and demeanour excite her fancy and awaken her desire. She persists in her work because she is in love and, moreover, because she believes that the man she loves is in great danger: "They were in danger, they were in danger, Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen: it beat every novel in the shop" (43).

Like the governess of *The Turn of the Screw*, James's young woman also perseveres in her work for the sake of the man she loves. James describes her persistence "as one of the finest, tenderest sacrifices a woman had ever made for love" (43). She, however, never once offers love as a reason for her continuing. Rather, she provides a far more perverse reason; she believes that Captain Everard is in danger and requires her assistance. As she passionately warns him of his peril— "'Your danger, your danger—!'" (62). Who or what threatens Captain Everard is never made known. What matters is that she believes that he is in danger.

As with *The Golden Bowl*, the theme of infidelity is again integral to the plot. Unlike *The Golden Bowl*, however, the covert liaison is not mediated through the perspectives of family and friends, but though the eyes of a public servant. James's telegraphist, however, is far from an indifferent bureaucrat: she is in love. Like the transformation of words into telegraphic signals, so too is love converted into something else, something dark and occult. The telegraphist's passion for the Captain inspires a kind of reverie that imagines unnameable "'horrors'" (61) and obscure dangers lurking beneath the surface of his missives. She is also convinced that he is aware of his peril: "'He's not only afraid of the lady— he's afraid of other things'" (69). These "other things" are never divulged. We are left to wonder if his danger was merely of the sexual kind. By the story's end, the anxiety concerning his obscure peril is overshadowed by the shock announcement of his impending marriage. The clerk is disconcerted to find out through the agency of a friend,
not through her own devices, that the Captain "must" (101) marry his mistress, a woman only recently widowed (the implication being that she is pregnant). This piece of information seals both their fates: she decides to leave her job and Captain Everard must marry his mistress. The Captain's fate, however, is not only clinched by this outcome, it is nailed down like a coffin ready for burial: "'So she just nailed him?'/ 'She just nailed him'" (101).

Deleuze and Guattari argue that the secret takes another turn in this story:

The nature of the secret has changed once again... previously it was either only a hidden matter given in the past... Or else the secret became the form of something whose matter was molecularized, imperceptible, unassignable: not a given of the past but the ungiveable "What happened?" But on this third line there is no longer even any form—nothing but a pure abstract line. It is because we no longer have anything to hide that we can no longer be apprehended. To become imperceptible oneself, to have dismantled love in order to become capable of loving.\(^3\)

According to this passage, the secret can no longer be thought in terms of an "obscure hurt,"\(^4\) a "smothered trouble,"\(^5\) or a "buried scent,"\(^6\) because it is divested of its secrecy. There is nothing withheld in order to be given and nothing given in order to be withheld. The invisible no longer upholds the visible: they are one and the same thing. What we are left with is a "pure abstract line," a mark of notation that reveals nothing and conceals nothing. Or conversely, which reveals everything and conceals everything. There is nothing left over: no spillage, no excess and no margin of loss or gain in which to begin another train of thought or line of reasoning. Where to now? Deleuze and Guattari suggest that "you cannot go further in life" once the shadows have been absorbed by the glare.

"In the Cage" could be proffered as a final variation on the

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\(^3\)Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 197.

\(^4\)Edel, *The Untried Years*, 175-176.


\(^6\)James, preface to *What Maisie Knew*, 6.
secret in James—final in the sense that it is either killed by
technology or over-exposed by the interpretive rigour of his
telegraphist—but such a conclusion is perhaps too easy to make or
perhaps even too dramatic to consider. Deleuze and Guattari’s “pure
abstract line” may indicate the entropic destiny of the secret, but such
a limit is reached, or at least intimated, in every one of the fictions
dealt with in the thesis. If the secret ends as “a pure abstract line,”
then conversely it could also begin as a figure of thought, or in
James’s terminology, as a germ of an idea through which his
narrative machinery is set into motion.\(^7\) I would suggest, however,
that the secret fulfils neither option nor outcome. It cannot be either
an access or an end because it cannot be extricated from a writing style
that is equivocal.

The destiny of the Jamesian secret is difficult to chart and its
history is impossible to recount because it is bound up with a mode
of story-telling (or reasoning) which represents the indeterminacy of
a world built upon the constant interplay of words and ideas, images
and sensations. The secret does not begin as a substantial force in
order to have its substantiality removed or abstracted. The secret is
neither of the order of the visible nor that of the invisible, but moves
in a half light between revelation and concealment, or between
speech and silence. Glare and shadow intertwine in a style that
strives to achieve a form of poetic and aesthetic completeness. Such a
method is not only difficult, it is abstract.

*The Awkward Age* may finish on the promise of tomorrow
but that conclusion is reached only once the efficacy of the secret has
been blanched out by Nanda’s insistence on knowing everything:

‘Hasn’t it come out all round now that I know everything?’

... ‘You know, you know!’ he then rang out.

‘Of course I know.’

‘You know, you know!’ Mitchy repeated.

‘Everything,’ she imperturbably went on, ‘but what you’re
talking about.’\(^8\)

\(^7\) Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 145.

\(^8\) James, *The Awkward Age*, 368-369.
The "everything" that Nanda claims to know includes everything but what Mitchy is "talking about." The confidence of her statement is immediately undercut by the possibility that she could also in fact know nothing. This kind of ambiguity may sustain the power of the secret, yet its potency is at the same time destabilised by the constantly shifting nature of James's utterances.

Although James's late fictions are obliquely assembled through conversation, dialogue is not only the means through which his characters are drawn and his stories are told: it is also the means through which lives are negotiated and decisions are made. The thresholds between speech and silence, love and friendship, mourning and responsibility recede, evaporate and re-surface under the pressure of a style that tries to collect every fine detail and particle of experience. But perhaps the most haunting aspects of all in James's novels are those rare scenes of break down, when previous control is overtaken by a moment of unanticipated emotion:

'It would be easier for me,' he went on heedless, 'if you didn't, my poor child, so wonderfully love him.'

'Ah, but I don't— please believe me when I assure you I don't!' she broke out. It burst from her, flaring up, in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still—in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only, after a moment, give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged...9

It is during such moments of unbridled passion, when speech fails and when conversations are abruptly suspended, that the limits of love and friendship are brought to the fore. In the above passage, the extraordinary control and composure of James's technique operate in sharp contradistinction to Nanda's moment of collapse. But James's writing does something more than simply contrast with its subject-matter: it has the effect of transforming the scene of Nanda's break down into a moment that is poignant and memorable. The sharp

9Ibid., 379.
rhythm of James's directives—"in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair"—not only describes the action, it elevates the scene of her fall into a moment that is dignified. The poignancy of her suffering is interlaced with her desire to resist, however unsuccessfully, the depth of her feeling. Nanda's resistance to avowing her love for Vanderbank is not only a sign of her pride and obstinacy, it also evokes a certain fragility dwelling beneath the surface and spectacle of the public sphere. In *The Ordeal of Consciousness*, Dorothea Krook writes of James's insistence on the beauty of this kind of struggle: "For there is a beauty... in reticence, composure and civility inflexibly maintained, with every appearance of naturalness and ease, when the heart is being torn to pieces by anguish, terror and humiliation."10

The reticence of James's late style is not only evidence of his skill and literary mastery, it is also redolent of a certain kind of fragility dwelling beneath the folds and circumlocutions of his technique. Although Nanda Brookenham and Charlotte Stant may represent a frailty that threatens to buckle or break under the pressure of the social sphere, their suffering would mean nothing without the complicity of James's style. The many protracted clauses and sentences which pervade his later works elicit an equivocal realm that stubbornly resists the petrified and insensible landscapes of his drawing rooms. James's writings may not succeed in breaking the social, financial and moral bonds which hold so many of his characters to ransom, but his circumlocutions have the potential to extend, or at least loosen the fine threads of their attachments. The patience and beauty of his style provides a kind of subterfuge that has the capacity to usher in other possibilities and situations. The ethical is complicit with the hesitation and equivocation of a style that is at once elastic and unyielding, stubborn and generous.

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