

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Teaching Time: Temporal Imagination and the Late Novels of Henry James

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A few years ago I learned this fact about reading: when we encounter an individual word in a sentence, we activate all possible meanings and associations of that word at once, keeping open the whole range of semantic possibilities that word might suggest, until the syntax of the sentence narrows the field of meaning. I picture this process unfolding in time as a kind of wave: each word flaring out into its range of possible senses before gradually settling down again, each little explosion of possibility immediately followed by another, remaining active for overlapping intervals in an ongoing rhythmic unfolding.

In the small town in western Maine where I live, August is exceptionally pleasant. The bugs are gone, and there are lakes and rivers and ponds to swim in five minutes away in any direction. Kids run around outside until nine at night; the ice-cream stand is open till ten. The college students who stay in town get seasonal work, and in general there is a feeling of plenty, of fullness and possibility. By the end of the fall semester, Maine winter has set in. Sometime in November the churches start opening during weekday hours for older people who can't afford to heat their homes all day and night. The university's classrooms and hallways are muddy from boot traffic. The students start to run out of money, and some of them stop showing up. They can't afford to fix their car, or their boss won't give them the hours off, or they can't pay their tuition. By December it's dark by four o'clock.

Putting *The Golden Bowl* on the syllabus for my senior seminar on literature and philosophy this fall was in every way an August decision. Later on, I would remember loosely calculating the hours it would take my students to read one hundred pages of James's prose, and while I held in my head the word *difficult* while making

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this calculation, I did not hold in my head an actual late-Jamesian sentence. So when the semester began in September, and I started actually reading *The Golden Bowl* with my students, it was with a somewhat wintery intimation of the probable failure of this experiment.

The book opens with a description of the Prince—a *prince*, for Christ's sake—the last descendant of noble and scandal-ridden Italian aristocrats whose numbers include a former pope, who spent down the family fortune building the now-crumbling palace that the Prince has inherited. The Prince's prospects have recently improved dramatically by virtue of his engagement to Maggie Verver, daughter of the American tycoon and art collector Adam Verver. In the book's opening sequence, the Prince is wandering London, recalling a conversation with Maggie. The text moves between the simple past and past perfect, the Prince wandering and remembering and sometimes failing to remember. He remembers Maggie asking where he would be without his ancestors:

He recalled what, to this, he had gravely returned. "I might have been in a somewhat better pecuniary situation." But his actual situation . . . positively so little mattered to them that, having by that time lived deep into the sense of his advantage, he had kept no impression of the girl's rejoinder. It had but sweetened the waters in which he now floated, tinted them as by the action of some essence, poured from a gold-topped phial, for making one's bath aromatic. No one before him, never—not even the infamous Pope—had so sat up to his neck in such a bath. It showed, for that matter, how little one of his race could escape, after all, from history. What was it but history, and of THEIR kind very much, to have the assurance of the enjoyment of more money than the palace-builder himself could have dreamed of? This was the element that bore him up and into which Maggie scattered, on occasion, her exquisite colouring drops. They were of the colour—of what on earth? of what but the extraordinary American good faith? They were of the colour of her innocence, and yet at the same time of her imagination, with which their relation, his and these people's, was all suffused. What he had further said on the occasion of which we thus represent him as catching the

echoes from his own thoughts while he loitered—what he had further said came back to him, for it had been the voice itself of his luck, the soothing sound that was always with him. "You Americans are almost incredibly romantic." (32)

Is the *now* in "it had but sweetened the waters in which he now floated" the Prince's present, wandering in London, in contrast with the *then* of the remembered conversation? Or is it the more general *now* of his vastly improved "pecuniary situation," contrasted with the relative poverty of his life before meeting Maggie? And what are we to make of that authorial intervention "on the occasion of which we thus represent him," the way James's *we* intrudes to remind us that what we are reading is *not* a half-remembered exchange but the *representation* of a half-remembered exchange, an echo of an echo, a ghost of a ghost? "Catching the echoes from his own thoughts while he loitered" captures the mood of leisure that permeates the late James: people are always just floating around, wandering, loitering, thinking over what they've just said, or what's just been said to them, and at the same time the prose itself, with its own floating, meandering, loitering quality, piling up phrase after phrase, modification after modification, seems to imagine, even to demand, a reader with limitless time. What had I been thinking, I wondered, asking my time-strapped, cash-strapped students to try to become this kind of reader, for the sake of reading about a literal prince soaking in a warm bath of money?

Of course, part of what I had been thinking about was precisely the ways in which my students are disallowed the kind of empty time and mental space, the kind of decadence of receptivity, that the sentences in James's late novels require; the ways in which phenomena like poverty and debt and social media conspire with their puritan cultural inheritance—this is New England, after all—to keep them moving relentlessly forward. Most of my students have been encouraged or grudgingly allowed to attend college on the explicit condition that they will more or less immediately monetize their degrees and repay the exorbitant cost of their

time there, a condition that, for most of them, is never far from mind. Debt is a particularly effective enforcer of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity,” or “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3). Following Heather Love and others, Freeman argues that such temporal ordering is closely related to compulsory heterosexuality, and she observes that “late nineteenth-century perverts, melancholically attached to obsolete fetishes they ought to have outgrown, or repeating unproductive bodily behaviors over and over, also used pastness to resist the commodity-time of speedy manufacture and planned obsolescence” (9). Whether or not Henry James technically qualifies as a late-nineteenth-century pervert in Freeman’s formulation, there is certainly something queer about this willful resistance to linear progress in his late prose, a kind of syntactic equivalent to Lambert Strether’s stalling for time in the Paris of *The Ambassadors*, his putting off of Woollett’s chrononormative demands in order to bask a little longer in the reflected glow of Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

I was thinking, too, of my own belated queerness in relation to time, the way grief thickens the present, overlays the past right onto it, so that you find yourself living always in reference to another time. My personal timing has been complicated in the last few years by two deaths, one of them a suicide, which, far from final, go on and on, making a kind of counterpoint out of what was once a single and forward-moving melody. This, it turns out, is one of the consolations of grief, this thicker time, this late recognition that the past is always *right here*, inside the present, though the machinery of chrononormativity urges you toward forgetting. I had found it such a relief to step out of the relentless present and into the echoey room of this thicker time, and it struck me that his materializations of this kind of time, his way of forcing us to occupy it, is one of the things I love most about the late James. Here, for example, is his description of Strether’s first day with Maria Gostrey in Chester:

She had, during the morning—spent in a way that he was to remember later on as the very climax of his

foretaste [of Europe], as warm with presentiments, with what he would have called collapses—had all sorts of things out with Strether; and among them the fact that though there was never a moment of her life when she wasn’t “due” somewhere, there was yet scarce a perfidy to others of which she wasn’t capable for his sake. (*Ambassadors* 45)

“[H]e was to remember later on” is an example of what Dorritt Cohn calls “analeptic prolepsis,” a flash-forward to future remembering (3); it occurs throughout James’s late novels but with particular frequency during Maggie’s initial discovery of her husband’s affair in *The Golden Bowl*. In the passage from *The Ambassadors*, the temporal layering is doubled, or maybe tripled, for what Strether *will remember* in the future is the temporally hyperspecific *climax* of his *foretaste* of Europe. The phrase “climax of his foretaste” is comically suggestive of Strether’s simultaneous fastidiousness and aestheticism; remembering his collected impressions of Europe, he categorizes and then subcategorizes them by stage. What James gives us in this little aside is a kind of ghost narrative of Strether’s future, shadowing the main plot. I think of this technique as operating similarly to James’s free use of subjunctive structures and formulations throughout the late works, my favorite of which is what Adré Marshall identifies as “hypothetical discourse” (qtd. in Cohn 3). In the following passage from *The Golden Bowl*, for example, Maggie realizes that her plan for her father and her husband to take a trip together has been thwarted by her stepmother. The actual calculations here are nearly impossible to follow, but note how much of what is most real and pressing to Maggie in this passage exists in the realm of the subjunctive:

It was exactly as if [Charlotte] had known that her stepdaughter would be afraid to be summoned to say, under the least approach to cross-examination, why any change was desirable; and it was, for our young woman herself, still more prodigiously, as if her father had been capable of calculations to match, of judging it important he shouldn’t be brought to demand of her what was the matter with her. Why otherwise, with such an opportunity,

hadn't he demanded it? Always from calculation—that was why, that was why. He was terrified of the retort he might have invoked: "What, my dear, if you come to that, is the matter with YOU?" (390)

Even the final, quoted line of dialogue here is imagined: a hypothetical response to an unasked question ("What is the matter with you?"). Like analeptic prolepsis, this extended materialization of the subjunctive can be seen as a sort of shading in of the negative space around what *is* said and done in *The Golden Bowl*, a fleshing out of the present into all of its imaginary possibles.

In her strange and brilliant essay "Subjunctive Time, Henry James's Possible Wars," Wai Chee Dimock notes that

[t]he subjunctive . . . is only loosely, or perhaps even nominally, bound by empirical reality. Its allegiance is to a ghostly region, a kind of syntactic underground, hovering just below the threshold of actualization, casting its shadow on the known world, turning sharp bright lines into a dense thicket, at once insubstantial and impenetrable, a vectorial field not yet hardened or pruned. A still-undecided past and a still-hypothetical future are housed by this syntactic form: counterfactual, not often accredited, but available all the same as virtual sites, thinkable versions of the world. The very presence of this grammatical mood suggests that pre-histories and post-histories are more varied, more fluid, and more open-ended than the eventual outcome would reveal. (243)

Dimock's formulation of the subjunctive as articulating "allegiance to a ghostly region" as well as her evocation of fluid and open-ended pre- and post-histories—alternate temporalities that resist, even as they accompany, the relentless unfolding of the actual—get close to what it is I think I'm doing when I coerce my students into making space in their crowded lives for the strange leisure of *The Golden Bowl*. I want them to learn about time: that is, to understand both its total and tragic irrecoverability and finitude and also its strange plasticity and malleability. It strikes me that what I want is in this way not so different from what

Strether wants in *The Ambassadors*, when he accosts Little Bilham at Gloriani's party with his late-middle-aged speech about the finitude of youth: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to" (176). There is of course something absurd about this scene: the kind of thing Strether wants to tell Little Bilham can't really be gotten secondhand; it has to be lived to be known or at least to be realized. I'm thinking here of Eve Sedgwick's wonderful articulation of the difference between recognition and realization in Buddhist pedagogy, and also of the numerous scenes of failed or absurd pedagogical ventures in that essay, particularly her failed attempts to get her cat to look at what she's pointing at rather than at her finger (168).

The quality of experience I want to communicate to my students is similarly unshareable, as grief is, finally: a force that rearranges the furniture of daily consciousness in different ways for each of us, even if we grieve the same person's loss. My friend's suicide, which sometimes seems to me like the ultimate act of resistance to chrononormativity, was a kind of dark curtain that for a time—six months? a year?—covered my life. When the curtain was pulled open again, time was changed. This has something to do with the fact that I had felt since we were both very young, sixteen or seventeen, that my friend *would* commit suicide, and that I *would* give the eulogy for him that I in fact gave, and it has something, also, to do with his refusal from as far back to obey the imperatives of chrononormativity: to wake up or pay his bills or show up on time or call you back or graduate or hold a job or marry or have children, even, finally, that most basic of imperatives, to *go on*—all of which I was and am myself utterly incapable of resisting. I don't know how to explain how these two facts—the nonbeing my friend chose and, in choosing it, wove into my life; and the fact that I anticipated this choice, that I had in some sense woven it in already—affected my experience of time. And I am even less capable of explaining what it is about this experience I want to communicate to my students through the strange vehicle of Henry James's prose. What do I want, really, to happen to them, and how could I ever know if it had?

In class, seated in a circle around the pushed-together tables, my students read passages from *The Golden Bowl* out loud. Taking turns, sentence by sentence, they work through the following description of Maggie's first consciousness of her husband's affair:

It fell, for retrospect, into a succession of moments that were *watchable* still; almost in the manner of the different things done during a scene on the stage, some scene so acted as to have left a great impression on the tenant of one of the stalls. Several of these moments stood out beyond the others, and those she could feel again most, count again like the firm pearls on a string, had belonged more particularly to the lapse of time before dinner—dinner which had been so late, quite at nine o'clock, that evening, thanks to the final lateness of Amerigo's own advent. These were parts of the experience—though in fact there had been a good many of them—between which her impression could continue sharply to discriminate. Before the subsequent passages, much later on, it was to be said, the flame of memory turned to an equalising glow, that of a lamp in some side-chapel in which incense was thick. The great moment, at any rate, for conscious repossession, was doubtless the first: the strange little timed silence which she had fully gauged, on the spot, as altogether beyond her own intention, but which—for just how long? should she ever really know for just how long?—she could do nothing to break. (332–33)

It is slow going, but the sentences read well. We feel, together, the waves of syntactic possibility lighting up, the phrases and their nuances multiplying, the languorous sentences unfolding and doubling back and unfolding farther. James gives us only the quality of Maggie's memories—their theatricality, their countable discreteness—and nearly nothing of their content, and we are lost before we realize it, the rhythm of James's sentences having guided us, step by clear, careful step, farther into the wilderness. Is the "before" in "before the subsequent passages" temporal or spatial? And "passages" of what? "Subsequent" to what? Time—around the table, in the book—takes on a kind of thick texture. Reading together, we find ourselves as though in the little side chapel, raising our lanterns, looking into

the thick smoke. We have lost completely what it was (a referent? a plot?) we wandered in looking for, but we've forgotten about all that anyway. It is a deep pleasure, somehow, to be slowly bewildered in this way; to introduce my students to this slow bewilderment. In some of their faces I see that it is a pleasure for them, too.

The dilemma I confront teaching the late James is an extreme instance of what I routinely experience as the impossibility of teaching, the "radical doubt that a basic realization can be communicated at all" that Sedgwick identifies in the Zen pedagogical tradition (172). As the demand to articulate realizable, readily transferable, and immediately monetizable "outcomes" becomes ever more vociferous, my own sense of this radical doubt keeps growing. It's not that I mind so much repeating the little lie that what I am doing is teaching things like "critical thinking" and "argumentative writing" and "historical context"—I mean, of course I am teaching those things, but it's equally obvious to me that that's not *really* what I'm doing, or wanting to do, and that those phrases are things we (or I, at any rate) say to administrators to keep the heat on, and that the students can repeat to their anxious relatives to justify their continuing to be humanities majors. I don't mind dissembling in this way, but it would be good, one feels, in such a situation, to have a clear picture of the better thing one was really doing.

But that clear picture is exactly what "aesthetic education," or Henry James's prose, for that matter, deprives one of. Fortunately, my own aesthetic education has prepared me to see such depravations as paradoxical signs of proximity to—well, something worth being proximate to. Later on, I would remember Ralph Waldo Emerson:

And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;—the

way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience.

I read this passage from “Self-Reliance” for the first time in Joan Richardson’s class in 2002, which begins to feel like a long time ago. As the years have passed it has become more and more central to my idea of what it is I am doing when I “teach literature,” precisely because of the way that it insists on my *not* knowing. Lately I have been thinking about why we sit in a circle, or around a table, in the literature classroom, about what it means that most of us, if we had our druthers, would organize ourselves and our students into this shape, as though our teaching were really some ritual. Across the circle I see the faces of people of another generation, with another generation’s sensibilities, of wholly different life experiences, people whose lives are nevertheless coming to include this present moment of looking across the same circle, and who later on may remember this scene, just as the circles in which I sat long ago, across from the faces of my teachers, have been overlaid onto the present circle

in the queer fullness of time. What is it after all we are gathered around? Isn’t it something more like time or life than it is like a book? What but the ghostly region of the mourned and the wished-for and the after all still, perhaps, possible?

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