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'Precious Objects': Strange 'Things' in James and Wharton

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‘PRECIOUS OBJECTS’: STRANGE ‘THINGS’ IN JAMES AND WHARTON

by

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ABSTRACT

In this work, I attempt to examine the importance of things, the strange agency of objects, which emerges in the literature of the late nineteenth century. To this end, I examine the economy of things in both Henry James and Edith Wharton. I attempt to connect this object agency with the emergent discourses and technologies of the time, and to link these both with media and queer theory.

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CHAPTER 1

THE FASHIONABLE EDITH WHARTON

The Golden Bowl is the ultimate expression of an objectification of thought and feeling which one can trace in James's work from the moment Isabel Archer "dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective."¹ These qualities, by the time of the major phase novels, are no longer only manifested just in moments of quiet contemplation but are in constant circulation; indeed, thoughts seem to be able to circulate between human minds and aesthetic objects. Examination of this strange narrative economy provides an opportunity to expand upon Bill Brown's excellent work on "things" in the novel in his book *A Sense of Things*. Brown examines the elevation of the thing, but stops short of a full reckoning with the consequences that stem from this elevation, from the flattening that occurs when objects and humans are positioned on the same plane and placed in analogical relation. Before engaging with James, however, it will be useful to examine Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Decoration of Houses*. I think these interventions will provide the further opportunity to integrate object, Marxist, queer, and media theories, an integration which will enable a more thorough understanding of just how 'very modern'--if not, indeed, postmodernist and posthumanist—these writers are.

In this first chapter, I will examine the way an economy of decoration trains *The*

¹ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Norton, 1995), 430.

House of Mirth's Lily Bart in how to function as an object and how this connects both to Wharton's own ideas of proper decoration and ornamentation. Following that, I will explore the peculiar form of technological subjectivity which emerges in James's *The Bostonians*, that is to say the way in which Olive Chancellor's exploitation of Verena Tarrant mirrors the structure of a cybernetic system. Finally, in my reading of *The Golden Bowl*, we will see how James begins to dissolve any subjective distinction between person and object. The titular bowl possesses, mediates, and transmits information and meaning in ways more profound than any of the novel's human characters. These second two examples of Jamesian psychological realism seem to be points on a trajectory of separation from Wharton's naturalistic realism. It seems that much of what we think of as high Modernism, and indeed queerness, exists in seminal form in these two works of James.

The word 'fashion' has taken on an air of superficiality, as if it had only to do with the output of Parisian couturiers, *Project Runway*, and Hollywood actors convinced that the world absolutely requires that their ideas about shoes and handbags be physically manifested. And, of course, fashion entails those things; it is also much more than that. To understand fashion is ultimately to understand the epistemological and ontological categories within the ecosystem of consumer objects circulating through society at a given moment. Bill Brown execrates the intrusion of this fashionableness into the academy in his essay on 'thing theory', writing: "the academic psyche has internalized the fashion system (a system meant to accelerate the obsolescence of things)."² But what, one might ask, is the alternative? A system in which certain things reign forever? Yes,

² Bill Brown. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 13.

fashion elevates specific things and theories to a preeminent status in any given moment, simultaneously derogating others. Yet the knowledge of their eventual deposition, while not diminishing the power they wield during their reign, provides a certain kind of freedom. This is not to say that fashion is an absolute good, just to note that acknowledging and accepting the cycles of fashion is not to endorse any particular moment; it is to recognize the inevitability of change.³ Certainly one might reasonably express outrage at the nature and pace of such shifts, but to decry the shifts themselves seems almost reactionary. The longing for permanence evident in Brown's essay is also disturbingly present in Donald Pizer's reading of Lily Bart's death in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*:

The "conditions of life" conspire to defeat the spiritual fulfillment which is human love. But love did exist and continues to exist despite this defeat. Lily and Selden's "brief moment of love" had earlier provided them with a "fleeting victory over themselves," keeping them from "atrophy and extinction," and now, in his realization of her love, has supplied him with a "faith" that has made him "penitent." Thus, in the "silence" of physical actuality there can nevertheless be transmitted the "word"--the clear expression of their love for each other--which was never spoken in life.⁴

One hesitates to be polemical, but this seems a horrifying reading of Wharton. Lily Bart's life--groomed, conditioned, and determined from the outset by family, friends, and society to be a lovely and useless object--is not redeemed, elevated, or made whole by Selden's belated and consequence-free admission of affection. She was indeed victim of certain fashions, terrible vicissitudes, but this strange longing for the eternal--as if that were a real or desirable category--short circuits an otherwise valuable analysis and

³ And the cycles of fashion experienced within academia are of course enormously different from those experienced by Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*; no one's life has ever been ruined by an oppressive New Historicist regime.

⁴ Donald Pizer, "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.2 (1995): 246.

debases her character. Even if there is a way out of Wharton's naturalist nightmare for Lily, a highly dubious proposition, that path does not pass through Selden's flaccid affections.

Wai Chee Dimock's analysis of the relationship between Selden and Lily proves far more helpful:

He will not propose to her until he knows that she will accept him; indeed, he will not love her until he knows that she will love him in return, until he can be "as sure of her surrender as of his own." Short of this assurance--and all through the book Selden is never completely sure--he will not part with his spiritual capital; he will not take "risks" with it. For Selden love is a form of exchange, and he will hear of nothing but profits.⁵

Selden's final moments with Lily's body only reinforce Dimock's analysis, as we witness him "rummaging through Lily's papers, fretting over the check made out to Trenor, feeling sorry for himself."⁶ Dimock's analysis that Wharton could not have composed "a stronger or more bitter commentary on the loneliness and futility of Lily's 'rebellion'" seems, compared to Pizer's, unassailable.⁷ Dimock's thesis can productively be pushed further by reading Selden's relation to Lily not just as a matter of the exchange of "spiritual capital," but as one wherein Lily becomes herself a total commodity. This is evident even in the earliest stages of their relationship. While walking down Madison Avenue together, we are given insight into Selden's thoughts:

Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to

⁵ Wai Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *PMLA* 100.5 (1985): 786.

⁶ Dimock, "Debasing Exchange," 789.

⁷ Dimock, "Debasing Exchange," 789.

produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?⁸

Selden, from the beginning, understands Lily as a product, something manufactured for use.⁹ Note the unconcern for "dull and ugly people" and this vocabulary of the ceramic which he uses to describe her (both of which will also be found in *The Golden Bowl*). It emphasizes, all at once, her decorative and fragile qualities. And yet, for Selden, there is something within this porcelain person which disturbs him, a mystery in the manner of her composition which he finds unsettling. He is unable to identify the exact nature of her finishing and how it was accomplished. There is some sort of paradox at the heart of her creation.

The unsettling thing is that Selden is not necessarily wrong about Lily's status as an object. Lily has been carefully crafted since her youth, her mother "consoled" by only one thing, "the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance."¹⁰ There is here, however, a tension between two kinds of thing-ness. Selden's Lily is a decorative bauble; Mrs. Bart's Lily is a carefully honed blade, sharpened for a singular purpose. The differential between these two different modes of objecthood will, in many ways, determine Lily's transit throughout the novel.

The word 'determine' is here used advisedly. Another aspect of the novel in

⁸ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 5.

⁹ But, of course, without an ability to use herself.

¹⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 34.

which Pizer's reading differs from Dimock's is the nature of the novels' determinism. Pizer tries, through the aforementioned appeal toward love, to find a way out of the horrifying gears of the novel's world; Dimock acknowledges a gesture towards hope in the person of Nettie but finds it halfhearted. I would argue that a thorough analysis of Wharton's work, not only *The House of Mirth* but also *The Decoration of Houses*, reveals a worldview so thoroughly deterministic that even a divan cannot escape the ineluctable forces of history. One of the most startling features of *The Decoration of Houses*, aside from its incredibly idiosyncratic usage of the word 'simple', is its focus on the processes of history. The introduction reads not so much like a guide for decoration as a *tour d'horizon* of Western civilization and political economy. For example, after making stops in the middle ages and Renaissance Italy, Wharton and Codman write:

As the result of this division of labor, house-decoration has ceased to be a branch of architecture. The upholsterer cannot be expected to have the preliminary training necessary for architectural work, and it is inevitable that in his hands form should be sacrificed to color and composition to detail. In his ignorance of the legitimate means of producing certain effects, he is driven to all manner of expedients, the result of which is a piling up of heterogeneous ornament, a multiplication of incongruous effects; and lacking, as he does, a definite first conception, his work becomes so involved that it seems impossible for him to make an end.¹¹

This seems enormously convincing as an explanation for the proliferation of "heterogeneous ornament," but it also evinces an incredibly deterministic historical mindset.¹² The logic at work here reminds one of no one so much as Marx; as a result of a specific historical economic event, the division of labor between architect and decorator,

¹¹ Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Scribner's, 1897), 20.

¹² This "heterogeneous ornament" is also, as I will discuss, one of the central features of *The Golden Bowl*.

a series of inevitable outcomes is traced. *The Decoration of Houses* reveals itself, in process and form, to be the *Grundrisse* of style manuals.

This decorative-historical materialism is reinforced again in the book's relentless binary between decoration and architecture, as when they write that "[r]ooms may be decorated in two ways: by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out."¹³ This binary is significant, as it reveals an ethical system that extends far beyond Wharton's views on home improvement. One can glimpse in these architectural precepts a connection with her ideas about fiction; indeed, as Liisa Stephenson writes, the "literary principles that Wharton advocates in *The Writing of Fiction* recall the architectural principles she set out in *The Decoration of Houses*. Her call for an 'economy of material' in the novel and short story . . . closely resembles the 'tact of omission' that she advocates in decorating houses."¹⁴ One can also see a similarity between her architectural and artistic views in her famous quotation in reference to *The House of Mirth* in *A Backward Glance*: "A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideas."¹⁵ Just as unnecessary ornamentation destroys the classical integrity of sound architecture, so too does excessive frivolity debase human

¹³ Wharton and Codman, *The Decoration of Houses*, 19.

¹⁴ Liisa Stephenson, "Decorating Fiction: Edith Wharton's Literary Architecture," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79.4 (2010): 1098. Stephenson also writes of Wharton's architectural view of James's major phase: "'James,' she writes, 'unconsciously subordinated all else to his ever-fresh complexities of design, so that his last books are magnificent projects for future masterpieces rather than living creations.'" This is a tantalizing commentary, but most it makes one desperately wish to hear Wharton's critique of the Ververs' decorative style.

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, (New York: Scribner's, 1964): 207.

beings. For example, Lily herself takes on the position of the classical forms in this passage: "Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part."¹⁶ It is also worth noting the use of the word 'organism' to describe a house, a gesture toward the organic which plays such a significant role in the naturalistic language of *The House of Mirth*. If the house is an organism, then it functions by certain identifiable systems. The question of whether these systems act in accordance with nature or in defiance of it is one to which I will return, but it is worth noting once again how much of a piece all Wharton's aesthetic theories are, how totalizing her vision is.

Wharton's views, in so far as they can be deduced from *The House of Mirth* and *The Decoration of Houses*, are very much in line--for the most part--with Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Certainly they share a similar view of the evolution of style:

The process of developing an aesthetic nausea takes more or less time; the length of time required in any given case being inversely as the degree of intrinsic odiousness of the style in question. This time relation between odiousness and instability in fashions affords ground for the inference that the more rapidly the

¹⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*. p. 135. It is helpful to contrast that depiction of Lily with the description of the high society hotel which Lily visits: "The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel—a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements, while the comforts of a civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert. Through this atmosphere of torrid splendour moved wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture, beings without definite pursuits or permanent relations, who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity from restaurant to concert-hall, from palm-garden to music-room, from "art exhibit" to dress-maker's opening. High-stepping horses or elaborately equipped motors waited to carry these ladies into vague metropolitan distances, whence they returned, still more wan from the weight of their sables, to be sucked back into the stifling inertia of the hotel routine. Somewhere behind them, in the background of their lives, there was doubtless a real past, peopled by real human activities: they themselves were probably the product of strong ambitions, persistent energies, diversified contacts with the wholesome roughness of life; yet they had no more real existence than the poet's shades in limbo" (273-74).

styles succeed and displace one another, the more offensive they are to sound taste. The presumption, therefore, is that the farther the community, especially the wealthy classes of the community, develop in wealth and mobility and in the range of their human contact, the more imperatively will the law of conspicuous waste assert itself in matters of dress, the more will the sense of beauty tend to fall into abeyance or be overborne by the canon of pecuniary reputability, the more rapidly will fashions shift and change, and the more grotesque and intolerable will be the varying styles that successively come into vogue.¹⁷

Though this argument might seem on the surface to be reactionary--a typical conservative paean to stability--it is in fact the kind of salutary criticism of change mentioned in this paper's opening paragraph. It does not decry change, it questions the engines and the pace of that change. The economy of the gilded age really did do something strange to consumption among the upper classes, and that had profound effects on the various systems of fashion circulating during the era. The cycle of "aesthetic nausea" Veblen diagnoses creates an alternate ecosystem, one which perverts the growth and development of those raised in it; indeed Lily Bart is such a specimen:

Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples?¹⁸

This is where the question of whether the "decorative mission" is natural or artificial reemerges. The idea that it is easier for the decorative, the beautiful, to flourish in the natural world than in the social world is a radical statement in contravention of the prevailing Darwinist thought of the day; here Wharton is claiming that society--especially high society--is red in tooth and claw rather than nature. In fact, the greatest point of

¹⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912) 178.

¹⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 301.

departure between Wharton and Veblen is located in their view of women's 'prowess', his term for a person's potential for and predilection toward a sort of primal viciousness. Veblen claims that "[i]n girls the transition to the predaceous stage is seldom accomplished with the same degree of completeness as in boys; and in a relatively large proportion of cases it is scarcely undergone at all."¹⁹ Wharton's response to this claim is Bertha Dorset who, though of course not physically violent, is of unmatched prowess and never left the predaceous stage.

Passages like the one describing Lily as an unmoored sea anemone are what make it very difficult to read the novel as anything but the harshest kind of deterministic naturalism. Lily is, according to Wharton, not just dispositionally but somehow biologically incapable of functioning outside the narrow range of high society in which she was raised. This predetermined inability adds some explanatory force to Lily's ever-deepening dependence on Chloral; the prescription opiate provides the only possible escape from a world which Lily is increasingly aware she is, not just ill-equipped, but unequipped to live in. "Unable to either consume or produce," writes Meredith Goldsmith, "Lily vacillates between stimulants and chloral, the novel's final addictive substance. Lily's developing chloral habit mirrors the rise of "morphinomania" in late-nineteenth-century culture, in which white middle-class women were designated the prototypical users of opiates like chloral and morphine."²⁰ Again, Lily is not *sui generis*, but indicative of broad, horrifying, and largely unaddressed (on the policy level) social

¹⁹ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 251.

²⁰ Meredith Goldsmith, "Cigarettes, Tea, Cards, and Chloral: Addictive Habits and Consumer Culture in *The House of Mirth*," *American Literary Realism* 43.3 (2011): 250.

ills. Her paranoid encounter with the pharmacist reveals, with remarkable economy, the horrors of this "morphinomania":

The clerk had read the prescription without comment; but in the act of handing out the bottle he paused.

"You don't want to increase the dose, you know," he remarked. Lily's heart contracted.

What did he mean by looking at her in that way?

"Of course not," she murmured, holding out her hand.

"That's all right: it's a queer-acting drug. A drop or two more, and off you go—the doctors don't know why."

The dread lest he should question her, or keep the bottle back, choked the murmur of acquiescence in her throat; and when at length she emerged safely from the shop she was almost dizzy with the intensity of her relief.²¹

The pharmacist is well aware that Lily is abusing the drug; no one looks so conspicuous as an addict attempting to look uninterested in her drug of choice. Yet he relies on this kind of custom, thus says nothing. What is more interesting in terms of this essay, though, is how the term 'bottle' is deployed, both in this passage and throughout the latter chapters of the novel. The fetishization of the container of the drug, the object form of the desired chemical, is a common trope within the language of addiction. What renders it especially sad and poignant in *The House of Mirth* is the sudden emergence of another kind of bottle in the midst of Lily's chloral-fueled descent into death: Nettie's baby bottle. The word repeats several times during their encounter, the last instance being the most important: "The baby had sunk back blissfully replete, and Mrs. Struther softly rose to lay the bottle aside," then, in a moment that seems one of the saddest in the novel, Nettie says, "I only wish I could help *you*—but I suppose there's nothing on earth I could

²¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 288.

do."²² The baby's healthily satiated state is one that Lily will never be able to attain again; even the small (and, as Dimock notes, dubious) hope which Nettie's child represents is closed off to Lily. To achieve any kind of comparable state she must nurse on her bottles of Chloral; she must suckle on the chemical death which her era's system of largely unregulated medicine made possible and, indeed, fashionable.²³ "Painkillers like morphine and choral were ideal modern commodities," Goldsmith writes, "cheap, disposable, and habit-forming. Physicians and pharmacists, working in tandem with the burgeoning culture of consumption, used these commodities to treat the symptoms of women's frustrations."²⁴ One can easily draw a connection between Wharton's attitude toward this terrifying pharmaceutical excess and her horror of excess home decoration and upholstery. Obviously the consequences of excessive home decor pale in comparison to the ruined lives which result from drug abuse (though perhaps more for us than for Wharton), yet I think Wharton would diagnose them as symptoms of the same disease, deviations from the classical injunction toward simplicity, straightforwardness, and order. It is another example of the dramatic consequences of a "frivolous society."

²² Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 315.

²³ Goldsmith opens her essay with a fascinating anecdote about Wharton being contacted by the makers of Orangeine, the patent cure offered to Lily by one of her coworkers by brand name: "The second letter corroborates Hale's anxieties. Charles Bartlett, president of the Orangeine Chemical Co., thanked Wharton for her reference to his 'pet prescription' and offered a complimentary year's subscription in the 'Orangeine Good Health and Good Spirits Club,' which would send her the medication at a discount in exchange for a testimonial. Bartlett included several pages of advertising with numerous statements from other members of the club and noted that 'a suggestive allusion' to the medication by 'a most prominent author, in the most prominent serial of a prominent monthly magazine, is a rare tribute to Orangeine, and of great value.' Bartlett and Hale agree that Wharton's novel advertised Bartlett's product, perhaps in spite of itself; in Bartlett's view, Wharton needed only lend her name to one of Orangeine's ads to formalize the arrangement" (Goldsmith, "Cigarettes," 242).

²⁴ Goldsmith, "Cigarettes, Tea, Cards, and Chloral," 254.

Bruno Latour, in *Reassembling the Social*, makes an interesting distinction (using examples that are particularly appropriate for a discussion of Wharton) between the roles of material things can play:

If, for instance, a social difference is 'expressed in' or 'projected upon' a detail of fashion, but that this detail--let's say a shine of silk instead of a nylon--is taken as an intermediary transporting faithfully some social meaning--'silk is for high-brow', 'nylon for low-brow'--then it is in vain that an appeal has been made to the detail of the fabric. It has been mobilized purely for illustrative purposes. Even without the chemical difference between silk and nylon, the social difference between high-brow and low-brow will have existed anyhow; it has simply been 'represented' or 'reflected' on a piece of cloth that has remained wholly indifferent to its composition. If, on the contrary, the chemical and manufacturing differences are treated as so many mediators, then it may happen that *without* the many indefinite material nuances between the feel, the touch, the color, the sparkling of silk and nylon, *this* social difference might not exist at all.²⁵

Are the material things in *The House of Mirth*, from cigarettes and small bottles up to libraries and enormous estates, mediators or intermediaries? How do they function? I would contend that in this novel their object status is determined by time, more specifically the time of life of the person encountering the object. That is, in the case of an adult arriviste, someone who grew up outside the sphere of the wealthy, objects serve an intermediary function; they transform nothing, merely transmit the information that the person possesses the money and the knowledge of fashion required to obtain such an item. No change in the social sphere occurs, the thing is just faithfully testifying to the wealth and sophistication of its owner. This, in *The House of Mirth*, is not just true for arrivistes, but any adult; once a personality has been formed objects merely intermediate. Objects, however, have an entirely different effect when it comes to children and teenagers. In the sort of young life led by Lily Bart, the "desultory yet agitated fashion

²⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 40.

life," the objects which surround a person most certainly do create social difference through acts of mediation. Things as simple as flowers are capable of determining personality--not merely affecting mood or disposition--in such an environment. Wharton writes of Lily that "[h]er whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in."²⁶ Having grown up in the atmosphere of luxury, it is now a condition of her survival. Lily's troubles arise in part because this atmosphere no longer satisfies her:

But the luxury of others was not what she wanted. A few years ago it had sufficed her: she had taken her daily meed of pleasure without caring who provided it. Now she was beginning to chafe at the obligations it imposed, to feel herself a mere pensioner on the splendour which had once seemed to belong to her. There were even moments when she was conscious of having to pay her way.²⁷

Like a hothouse flower or an animal raised in captivity, the world outside the confines of the privilege in which she spent her youth quite literally prove fatal to her. Her upbringing, the entire field of objects with which she was surrounded as a youth, served a very definite purpose: to create "her beauty, her power, and her general fitness to attract a brilliant destiny."²⁸ When she fails to attract that destiny, when she falls into disgrace, the entire telos of her existence collapses in on itself. She possesses nothing but social skills, sophistications, and refinements which are rendered utterly useless; as Latour writes: "Left to its own devices, a power relationship that mobilizes nothing but social skills would be limited to very short-lived, transient interactions."²⁹ Without a marriage or an inheritance, she has no means of acquiring the kinds of objects necessary for her to

²⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 26.

²⁷ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 26.

²⁸ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 87.

²⁹ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 66.

continue to exercise the kinds of social force she has been trained to deploy. Lily has mastered the social niceties necessary for a life she is no longer living and is fully unprepared for the viciousness of a world full of Bertha Dorsets and factory work. The object education of her youth did not prepare her to manipulate objects, only to charm and judge; no wonder, then, that when she is presented with the only physical implement which might help her, the letters between Bertha and Selden, she doesn't know how to use them. Somehow Bertha acquired a 'prowess' which Lilly utterly lacks.

Within the narrow field of her upbringing as a society girl, Lily might legitimately be considered skilled--after all, she had more than her share of suitors willing to marry her. It is outside of that sphere that her total unsuitability and oddity reveal themselves. Out in the world of unlovely things she immediately begins to disintegrate, unable to face the iniquities and inequities which her physical surroundings increasingly intermediate; their constant reminder of her status is too much for her. Even the relatively luxurious environs of her aunt's home prove almost too much for her luxury-perverted mind:

Lily had tried to mitigate this charmless background by a few frivolous touches, in the shape of a lace-decked toilet table and a little painted desk surmounted by photographs; but the futility of the attempt struck her as she looked about the room. What a contrast to the subtle elegance of the setting she had pictured for herself—an apartment which should surpass the complicated luxury of her friends' surroundings by the whole extent of that artistic sensibility which made her feel herself their superior; in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure! Once more the haunting sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression, so that each piece of the offending furniture seemed to thrust forth its most aggressive angle.³⁰

This room, of course, is only the first station in the pageant of Lily's degradation; knowing what we know of her fate, her bristling at this room seems almost comical. Her

³⁰ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 110.

estimation of her taste and skill in clothing and decoration will be ironically put to the test when she works at the milliner's; she finds herself unable to perform the simplest acts required of her and disgusted with her fellow workers:

Lily slipped out last among the band of liberated work-women. She did not care to be mingled in their noisy dispersal: once in the street, she always felt an irresistible return to her old standpoint, an instinctive shrinking from all that was unpolished and promiscuous. In the days—how distant they now seemed!—when she had visited the Girls' Club with Gerty Farish, she had felt an enlightened interest in the working-classes; but that was because she looked down on them from above, from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence. Now that she was on a level with them, the point of view was less interesting.³¹

This is one of Lily's most unflattering moments, and a further indication of the truth of her absolute unsuitability for life outside the atmosphere of luxury. This opportunity for her to form a social sphere outside the realm of the fashionable set, a set which will no longer have anything to do with her, is utterly wasted because of snobbery and an unwillingness to recognize the realness and the permanence of her economic situation. Lily is still convinced of the delusion that one belongs, on some permanent ontological level, to the class into which one was born. And though, as Lily's own behavior testifies, this might be true of a person's mindset, Lily's permanent socio-economic decline also testifies to the tenuousness of a person's actual class status.

The kind of social novel exemplified by *The House of Mirth* has, according to Latour, a value totally exterior to its status as an aesthetic object:

Finally, when everything else has failed, the resource of fiction can bring--through the use of counterfactual history, thought experiments, and 'scientifiction'--the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense. Here again, sociologists have a lot to

³¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 286-87.

learn from artists.³²

Wharton would probably be pleased with the idea of her novel used as a "counterfactual history," convinced as she was of the scientific and social scientific basis for her fiction.

The House of Mirth even addresses the role of fiction, in a metafictional moment between Lily and Rosedale:

"I won't go into what's happened. I don't believe the stories about you—I don't *want* to believe them. But they're there, and my not believing them ain't going to alter the situation."

She flushed to her temples, but the extremity of her need checked the retort on her lip and she continued to face him composedly. "If they are not true," she said, "doesn't *that* alter the situation?"

He met this with a steady gaze of his small stock-taking eyes, which made her feel herself no more than some superfine human merchandise. "I believe it does in novels; but I'm certain it don't in real life. You know that as well as I do: if we're speaking the truth, let's speak the whole truth. Last year I was wild to marry you, and you wouldn't look at me: this year—well, you appear to be willing. Now, what has changed in the interval? Your situation, that's all. Then you thought you could do better; now——"³³

The House of Mirth is clearly meant as Wharton's corrective to this gap between consequences in reality and consequences in fiction. This is one of the reasons why critical attempts to rescue Lily from her abject fate by appeals toward love or by imagining elaborate alternate scenarios under which she might not have died drugged and alone seem so baffling. Clearly, Wharton did not write that book. To imagine that she did does a disservice to her unrelenting vision; it transforms her novel into one of the kind mentioned here by Rosedale, something she would clearly have been horrified by. It would have violated both her aesthetic sense and her ethical convictions.

³² Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 82.

³³ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 255-56.

As discussed earlier, this rigorous ethical backbone extends through, not just Wharton's fictional works, but into unexpected places such as *The Decoration of Houses*. This ethical connection exists in large part because of Wharton's conviction that environment does dictate circumstances, that the things that surround us have a profound effect not only on our attitude but also our behavior. Or, to again quote Latour:

It is always things--and I now mean this last word literally--which, in practice lend their 'steely' quality to the hapless 'society'. So, in effect, what sociologists mean by the 'power of society is not society itself--that would be magical indeed--but some sort of summary for all the entities already mobilized to render asymmetries longer lasting.³⁴

Wharton intuited that, in the absence of physical objects to act as nodes in the circuit of social power, no kind or amount of social force could sustain itself for long. Latour reveals his theory of objects to be, at a fundamental level, a revision of Foucault's notions of power, a revision which finds a sophisticated way to account for the action of nonhumans in its scheme. Crucially, however, objects, no matter how agentive, do not exist in their own circuit independent of the human:

Talking of 'material culture' would not help very much since objects, in this case, would simply be connected *to one another* so as to form an homogenous layer, a configuration which is even less likely than one which imagines humans linked to one another by nothing else than social ties. Objects are never assembled together to form some other realm anyhow, and even if it were the case they would be neither strong nor weak--simply 'reflecting' social values or being there as mere decorum.³⁵

This is why it is a good thing if "the academic psyche has internalized the fashion system." The fashion system, while frequently productive of all manner of horrifying, objectionable, idiotic, or useless things, must be understood because it is the only system

³⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 68.

³⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 84-85.

in a world without a distinction between the social and the material, in which nonhumans interact with humans to create a community.

The constant introduction of new forms of nonhuman actors in this era of rapid technological change means an ideological and social landscape that is in constant flux. It is easy to be horrified by the word ‘fashion’, especially in the context of *The House of Mirth* in which Wharton’s use of it as a collective noun indicates an unthinking crowd performing whatever movements, rituals, and denunciations its leaders, determined by money and heredity, dictate. The fashion I am discussing is of an altogether different kind; it is not a fashionable set ruled by some cabal of frigid WASPs, but an emergent phenomenon based on interaction between humans and nonhumans.

Lily’s heartbreaking declaration to Selden toward the end of the novel, just before she dies, provides an excellent opportunity to make a distinction between the different types of fashion under discussion:

I have tried hard—but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap—and you don't know what it's like in the rubbish heap!³⁶

The fashionable world in which Lily found herself trapped was one that only underwent change superficially. The system of fashion which emerges from a Latourian engagement with the nonhuman, in contrast, is in a constant state of potentially liberatory flux.

Uselessness, within this sort of fashion, could only be a temporary state. The rubbish heap is transformed into a repository of possibility.

³⁶ Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 308.

CHAPTER 2

THE HUMAN USE OF HUMAN BEINGS IN *THE BOSTONIANS*

The rubbish heap of history is exactly where I would begin to trace the role of objects in James, specifically the following scene in which Isabel communes with the ruins of Rome in *The Portrait of a Lady*:

Isabel took a drive alone that afternoon; she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places; where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered.³⁷

This passage immediately follows Isabel's devastating yet still inchoate realization of her true relationship to Madame Merle, the revelation that she had been masterfully deceived into her marriage to Osmond; her decision to take this solitary drive is the direct result of these discoveries. Isabel's wish "to be far away" from the society to which she has found herself lashed begins a complex process of separation, descent, contemplation, elevation, and integration which develops in just these few sentences.

The word "confidence" here strikes with a bitter resonance in the wake of Isabel's

³⁷ James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 430-31.

betrayal and disillusionment. “Old Rome,” whatever consolations and affinities it might hold for her within its “world of ruins,” can not sufficiently compensate her for the loss of confidence she has suffered because of the gothic machinations of Merle and Osmond. How strange and sad it seems that this formerly hopeful, untameable, and thoroughly, in the generic dispositional sense of James’s international novel, American woman must come to find her nearest likeness in the ancient and the “crumbled.” Of course, despite her “weariness,” (at this point so powerful as to be accounted a physical presence--it has to be “rested” upon “things”) she is not herself crumbled. This connection to the ruins, while a cold sort of comfort for the loss of her understanding of the world, is a comfort nonetheless. Whatever degradations these Roman stones may have suffered, they, after all, remain “upright.” It might be productive here to briefly note the connection this usage of the word “upright” has to the climax of James’s *The Bostonians*; there, in her final confrontation with Basil Ransom, Olive Chancellor has lost everything but “straighten[s] herself again, and she was upright in her desolation.”³⁸ Something about the figure of the defeated but unvanquished woman is of deep interest to James, the woman whose life is destroyed but who, through the workings of her consciousness, remains intact and acquires a terrifying dignity.

Of course, Olive Chancellor never has the sort of moment Isabel experiences in this passage, the opportunity to “drop her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places.” Again, as with her weariness, her sadness is separated from her person, granted a physicality, and placed within the space of old Rome. More specifically, her sadness is *dropped* within that space, just as Isabel “descended” from her carriage. This series of

³⁸ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Dial, 1945), 376.

separations and descents moves toward a moment of--an opportunity for--evaluation, when the “very modern quality” of her sadness “detach[es] itself and gr[ows] objective.” The isolation of the modern, idiosyncratic, and ephemeral within the physical context of ancient objects enables a form of scientific and dispassionate analysis; the Eternal City acts here as a psychological petri dish. Indeed, Isabel’s discoveries within this laboratory built of ruins are microscopic, or rather her discovery is the “smallness” of the subject of her study.

She places this smallness within “the large Roman record” and begins to ascend, mentally, from “the less to the greater.” Her contextualization of individual sadness within the scale of a deep “continuity of the human lot” is not only an intellectualized historicization of human suffering, but also a palliative which diminishes that suffering by placing it within a world-historical continuum. As she has become “acquainted” with Rome, so too does she become acquainted with the shared human destiny of failure and disappointment, arriving at a melancholy acceptance of the ways of the world. Rome--and, metonymically, the world--become for her “chiefly . . . the place[s] where people had suffered,” and this knowledge allows her to reintegrate into the social realm from which she willfully departed at the beginning of the passage. Secret sadnesses accumulate to constitute human society; suffering thus becomes the foundation of the real. These several sentences, then, comprise a remarkably concise microcosm of conventional Jamesian psychological realism, a sophisticated delineation of a character’s consciousness as that consciousness participates in the circuit and subterfuge of society.

As mentioned before, Olive Chancellor does not experience a similar contemplative moment in *The Bostonians*. Rather she relies on the human use of human

beings. The words “Henry James” and “cyborg” should almost certainly never appear in the same essay, much less the same sentence. Yet sometimes one must follow logic where it leads, and the cultural logic of *The Bostonians* emerges as unexpectedly cybernetic *avant la lettre*. James’s novel of nineteenth century social reform is, primarily through the figures of Verena Tarrant, Basil Ransom, and Olive Chancellor, teeming with an emergent technological discourse which was entangled with the figure of the female medium. The mystical character of this figure, exemplified in works such as Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, loses a great deal of its mystical character in *The Bostonians* while retaining its mysterious force—the presence of “some power outside.”³⁹ Though this relationship retains its essentially exploitative structure, *The Bostonians* also allows us to explore the fascinating and historically consequential nature of exploitation performed on behalf of the exploited.

“The puzzle of nineteenth-century spiritualism ... has been greatly illuminated by historians of technology,” writes John Guillory, “who have shown convincingly that such spiritualism is a show cast by communications technology itself, a nice joke of history underscored by the tenacity with which the spiritualists sought to use media technology to capture the voices and images of the dead.”⁴⁰ One can also argue that communications technology is, in several significant ways, a show cast by spiritualism, but the important point is that these two cultural forces were dialectically bound to one another. Furthermore, this connection between spiritualism and technology, between mediums and media, opens up unexpected channels to ideas of, as Jeffrey Sconce puts it,

³⁹ James, *The Bostonians*, 30.

⁴⁰ John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 348.

“discorporative electronic liberation”: “Long before our contemporary fascination with the beatific possibilities of cyberspace, feminine mediums led the Spiritualist movement as wholly realized cybernetic beings--electromagnetic devices bridging flesh and spirit, body and machine, material reality and electronic space.”⁴¹ The presence of Verena Tarrant (and the ethereal telepresence she enables) in the context of a historical analysis of the role of the female medium allows us to reconsider James’s novel of late nineteenth century social reform as one of media technology and potentially liberatory forms of subjectivity.⁴² Rather than a vision of incipient modernism “which cannot move past a formalism designed to rarefy and obscure the social and political significance of technology itself” because it only imagines technology as something that must be dealt with and adjusted to rather than something which arises from and enables human desires (personal and political), *The Bostonians* provides an opportunity to examine the “the felt intensities of modern communication.”⁴³

At this strange yet instructive nexus of the scientific and the pseudoscientific, one can begin to see the proto-cybernetic quality of the female medium. The three major components of the clairvoyant exhibition (the ethereal message, the domineering “exhibitor,” and the receptive female medium) are strikingly analogous to N. Katherine Hayles’s elucidation of the functioning of a cybernetic system: “three powerful actors-- information, control, and communication ... operating jointly to bring about an

⁴¹ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 27.

⁴² Forms which, it should be noted, possess an almost equal potential for oppression and annihilation.

⁴³ Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 20.

unprecedented synthesis of the organic and the mechanical.”⁴⁴ This similarity is significant because the emergence of the female medium is revealed as a catalyst for the conceptual disembodiment of thought, an event that telegraphy and eventually wireless communication would reinforce; it marks an epochal shift in the history of information. Again, Hayles illuminates the radically modern consequences of such a development:

When information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy, for the materiality in which the thinking mind is instantiated appears incidental to its essential nature. Moreover, the idea of the feedback loop implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only within the subject but also between the subject and the environment.⁴⁵

Identifying this historical link is vital to our understanding of the significance of nineteenth century American cultural structures, ideologies, and practices to the development of seemingly disconnected technological developments.⁴⁶ It also aids in the explanation of the gendered nature of Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg, for we can see in the figure of the medium the genesis of Haraway’s sketch of the condition of the cyborg: “Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic.”⁴⁷ The protocols and phenomena of the spiritualist spectacle thus reveal themselves as generative of--and in conversation with--a startlingly wide range of technological discourse. The figure of the female medium

⁴⁴ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8.

⁴⁵ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2.

⁴⁶ This connection is reinforced in the above even terminologically, as “feedback loops” themselves emerged conceptually from nineteenth-century industrial technology.

⁴⁷ Craig Hanks, ed., *Technology and Values* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 239.

becomes a specter incongruously haunting the history of materialist, postmodern concepts. Now that the dangerous word *postmodern* has been deployed, a retreat to the nineteenth century is in order.

‘Overdetermined’ is probably too weak a word to describe the circumstances which resulted in women’s bodies becoming the site of this spectral media, but the belief at the time among spiritualists was that women were uniquely suited as receivers “because they were weak in the masculine attributes of will and intelligence, yet strong in the feminine qualities of passivity, chastity, and impressionability.” The basic structure of this feminine necro-technological spectacle precedes and prefigures that of telegraphy, marking the “transition from the notion communication premised on face-to-face exchange to one premised on distance.”⁴⁸

But what distance does the medium’s form of communication traverse? Does her invisible wire run heavenward or is she somehow discoursing with dark, chthonic forces? The implication that the medium might be somehow inhuman was inevitable; this potential inhumanity arose out of the (ironically) humanitarian reasons that women were considered ideal mediums from the beginning of the spiritualist movement. Sarah Stickney Ellis’s description of this tradition and the brief explication by Jill Galvan which follows it is enormously helpful in understanding the origins of this development:

She enters, with a perception as delicate as might be supposed to belong to administering angel, into the peculiar feelings and tones of character influencing those around her, applying the magical key of sympathy to all they suffer or enjoy, to all they fear or hope, until she becomes identified as it were with their very being, blends her own existence with theirs, and makes her society essential to their highest earthly enjoyment.

⁴⁸ Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” 348.

As Ellis conceives it, sympathy has a specific direction; it draws a woman outward, until her own self 'blends' with other selves.⁴⁹

This perceived selfless and integrating sympathy of women is precisely one of the “social, scientific, and spiritual logics” through which “women appeared to be 'naturally' suited for the mysteries of mediumship.”⁵⁰ That outwardly directed integration into the circuit of society, already enacting a loss of subjectivity in the Ellis formulation, takes on a more radical cast when coupled to the fantastic, unearthly spectacle of the female medium. After all, if a woman melts outward into the larger society with her everyday sympathy, with what strange societies does the spirit medium integrate? Ellis’s formulation can also be seen in James’s description of Miss Birdseye, whose participation in social reform is directly linked with the featureless formlessness of her physical body. It is as if her attempts to “blend her own existence” with that of society has resulted in a literal sort of effacement.

Why, then, does this social link form between social reformers like Miss Birdseye and the culture of the female medium? Mrs. Luna’s derogatory explanation seems to be that it is entirely natural for “witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals” to come together at their “weird meetings,” precisely because they are

⁴⁹ Jill Nicole Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010), 28-9.

⁵⁰ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 26. Here one should note the insight of Irving Howe that “[c]ulture, no less than politics, can harden into ideology” [Irving Howe. *Politics and the Novel*. (New York: Horizon, 1957), 154].

all just that: weird.⁵¹ Whatever truth might lie in that, it will be useful here to once again cite Sconce:

In these at times volatile struggles, the disembodying power of telegraphy and the liberating possibilities of electronic telepresence held a special attraction for women, many of whom would use the idea of the spiritual telegraph to imagine social and political possibilities beyond the immediate material restrictions placed on their bodies.⁵²

Though initially considered as the ideal potential mediums because their supposed “passivity, chastity, and impressionability,” this liberatory capacity of the medium arises from its capacity for disembodiment and, crucial to an examination of *The Bostonians*, its fundamentally sympathetic nature.⁵³ One of the most repeated phrases in the novel is “in sympathy,” almost always without any appended explanatory phrase. It is assumed that if one is “in sympathy,” one takes on the entirety of the reform agenda--think of Miss Birdseye’s membership in any and all reformatory leagues, founded for any and all purposes--so a medium’s essentially sympathetic function aligns her naturally with this sympathetically defined political structure. She is more “in sympathy” than anyone else.

Miss Birdseye and (initially) Verena represent these blending, integrating, and sympathetic female forms of political engagement and mediumship. These are not, however the only such forms in the novel. Mrs. Farrinder and Olive Chancellor (whatever her claims to the sympathetic orientation) are primarily motivated by antipathy. Mrs. Farrinder sums up this confrontational orientation concisely:

⁵¹ James, *The Bostonians*, 4.

⁵² Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 25.

⁵³ What is a medium, after all, but an individual both severely and cosmically sympathetic?

I am only myself, I only rise to the occasion, when I see prejudice, when I see bigotry, when I see injustice, when I see conservatism, massed before me like an army. Then I feel—I feel as I imagine Napoleon Bonaparte to have felt on the eve of one of his great victories. I must have unfriendly elements—I like to win them over.⁵⁴

This is the reason given for her reluctance to speak at that fateful meeting at Miss Birdseye's; it is not a sympathetic community she requires but a crackling dialectical atmosphere. For the most part, this desire arises from her basic pragmatism--she wants to win people over to her side. Olive's confrontational nature has an entirely different origin. Almost immediately after her first appearance in the novel, the reader is informed that Olive wants nothing so much as to die as a martyr for her cause, to have to opportunity to meet death in sanctified glory. Olive, then, is a warrior, even if of the most peculiar sort. Her inability to perform as such an entity contributes to an explanation of her total admiration of Verena's gift; Verena's disembodied rhetorical glory functions as an analog to Olive's dearly longed for death on the revolutionary battlefield.

How does that rhetorical glory function? Lisa Gitelman writes that "the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or 'blindness' to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, "the content," that they represent for users' edification or enjoyment."⁵⁵ This 'blindness' operates for the spectacle of the female medium, but it is complicated by the unique nature of the mediumistic 'technology.' That is to say, much of the spectacular quality of this form rests on witnessing the function of the human body as receiver, the effects that a supposedly otherworldly transmission has on a form not 'designed' for such a purpose.

⁵⁴ James, *The Bostonians*, 25.

⁵⁵ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006), 6.

Also, in the earlier, more mystical and mesmeric phases of Verena's career, Selah's laying on of hands prior to the speech in order to somehow tune her spiritual dials to the appropriate setting--"Doctor Tarrant looked at no one as he stroked and soothed his daughter"--actually calls attention to the mediatized procedures of the ritual, making the Tarrants' peculiar protocols into a significant part of the show.⁵⁶ Also, even after Olive compels Verena to learn her Goethe, it is never the startling 'content' of her oratory which spellbinds her audience. It consists largely of platitudes about sisterhood and exhortations to love one another, sentiments which to its audience would have been far from revelatory. The fascination arises from the style of delivery: "It was generally admitted that the style was peculiar, but Miss Tarrant's peculiarity was the explanation of her success."⁵⁷ Thus the strange particularities of the medium itself are the source of its captivating power.

The 'blindness' function in this spectacle lies in the obfuscatory purpose which this heightened attention to protocols and media (or, rather, medium) technologies serves. If one assumes that spirit mediums are not actually linked in to some kind necromantic network--and one probably should--then Selah's 'switching on' of his daughter can be read as a sort of legitimating theatrical protocol. It doesn't accomplish anything, at least not anything spectral, but it attempts to give the veneer of technological legitimacy to an otherwise hokum-fueled system. It functions as a sort of a reverse of the reveal of the Great and Powerful Oz as the man behind the curtain; see, Selah implies, I had to pull all these levers to make Verena work. To the skeptical, of course, such a move only

⁵⁶ James, *The Bostonians*, 32.

⁵⁷ James, *The Bostonians*, 35.

heightens the ridiculousness of the spectacle.⁵⁸ Mrs. Farrinder’s initial enthusiasm for Verena when they meet at Miss Birdseye’s is almost destroyed by these overt attempts at creating a faux-technological legitimacy; we can see the turn in her estimation when Verena pleads with her to perform the ‘starting up’ role that Selah will eventually play:

“If I could only hear you first—just to give me an atmosphere.”

“I’ve got no atmosphere; there’s very little of the Indian summer about me! I deal with facts—hard facts,” Mrs. Farrinder replied. “Have you ever heard me? If so, you know how crisp I am.”⁵⁹

This sort of reaction goes a long way in explaining why the stagey ‘switching on’ portions of the performance are dropped later in the novel, allowing the “strange spontaneity in [Verena’s] manner, and an air of artless enthusiasm, of personal purity” to function apart from any feints toward the technological.⁶⁰ “If she was theatrical,” after all, “she was naturally theatrical,” and here Gitelman’s concept of ‘blindness’ returns to its normal formulation.⁶¹

The loss of these theatrical fillips does not, however, alter the proto-cybernetic structure of Verena’s performance. The figure of the ‘exhibitor’ just becomes a part of the blinded, obscured function of the media. Rather than Selah’s creepily handsy display,

⁵⁸ The remaining explanations rest entirely within the vile person of Selah Tarrant. It is also worth noting Olive’s reaction to this kind of protocol after Matthias Pardon indicates to her the nature of its performance: “Olive Chancellor made no rejoinder save a low, impatient sigh...” (James, *The Bostonians*, 29).

⁵⁹ James, *The Bostonians*, 28-9.

⁶⁰ James, *The Bostonians*, 28-9.

⁶¹ James, *The Bostonians*, 28-9.

Olive assumes the role of exhibitor, substituting ‘on-stage’ mesmeric ritual with ‘off-stage’ intellectual and emotional domination. Verena is being exploited as a media technology as much by Olive as she ever was by Selah; the question becomes whether the more righteous nature of Olive’s goals for that exploitation ameliorate the violation of Hawthorne’s famous Unpardonable Sin--the domination of one will by another. In other words, it becomes a political question.⁶²

The continuing development and deployment of new communications mediums and technologies becomes essential to radical and revolutionary political projects at the turn of the century, a requirement to subvert and attack, to continue using Jamesian formulations, the “last complacency, the supreme imbecility, of petty, genteel conservatism.”⁶³ What makes Olive Chancellor a hero of this modern political project is her recognition of that fact; what makes her a villain is her attempt to co-opt another human being as a technological adjunct to her ideological crusade, no matter how righteous. However, this transmutation of humans into technologies, even beloved technologies, opens up interesting pathways toward revolutionary forms of subjectivity. The subjective problem of the cyborg, as articulated by Haraway, is essentially the same as the one presented to Olive and Verena:

To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet

⁶² Hawthorne is invoked here because of the many parallels between *The Bostonians* and *The Blithedale Romance*, so abundant that many critics have claimed that the former is an attempt to rewrite the latter.

⁶³ James, *The Bostonians*, 87.

to be other is to be multiple without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many.⁶⁴

The infinite complications of the structurally technological mediumistic system presents this conundrum to the characters of *The Bostonians*; they are not able, anymore than we, to resolve it.⁶⁵ There is so much evident potential for the unimaginable variety of transformations of the autonomous subject which the figure of the medium presents, and at least as many evident dangers.

Olive Chancellor is frequently cited as the most famous lesbian in nineteenth century American literature, yet one can possibly carve out another distinction for her. The structurally cybernetic system of the female medium's spectacle leads to the creation of literature's first aspirational cyborg.⁶⁶ Towards the end of the novel, Ransom asks Doctor Prance about Olive's condition:

“What do you think of Miss Chancellor--how does she strike you?”

Doctor Prance reflected a little, with an apparent consciousness that he meant more than he asked. “Well, she's losing flesh,” she presently replied.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Hanks, *Technology and Values*, 238-9.

⁶⁵ Sconce describes the similarity of the eras' problems: “I believe such an analysis of this founding spiritual technology will demonstrate that our own era's fascination with the discorporative and emancipating possibilities of the looming virtual age is in many ways simply an echo of this strange electronic logic, a collective fantasy of telepresence that allowed a nation to believe more than 150 years ago that a little girl could talk to the dead over an invisible wire” (Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 28).

⁶⁶ If we think of Haraway's distinction between cyborg and goddess, who, in all of American literature, would be faster to reject the role of goddess and assume the mantle of cyborg than Olive Chancellor? As long as she was allowed to retain a few righteous dualisms.

⁶⁷ James, *The Bostonians*, 223.

Though this obviously refers a loss in body mass, it implies a certain loss of humanity. The narrator informs us soon after this of the value which Olive places on the kind of gift Verena possesses:

Her talent, the talent which was to achieve such wonders, was nothing to her; it was too easy, she could leave it alone, as she might close her piano, for months; it was only to Olive that it was everything.⁶⁸

Olive yearns to possess the type of voice Verena possesses, a voice connected to an (imagined) spectral information network, not to be its controlling exhibitor. A voice that can function, in her role as ideological warrior, as a weapon. During her final confrontation with Ransom, there is also a fascinating textual ambiguity which moves Olive further from the human:

Dry, desperate, rigid, she yet wavered and seemed uncertain; her pale, glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death. Ransom had a vision, even at that crowded moment, that if she could have met it there and then, bristling with steel or lurid with fire, she would have rushed on it without a tremor, like the heroine that she was.⁶⁹

It is unclear who in this battle, death or Olive, is “bristling with steel or lurid with fire.” Of course by this point it is also quite unclear, should Olive somehow find herself rushing any particular manifestation of the Grim Reaper, that death would stand a chance. He (and, for the purposes of this particular scenario the gender assumption is the only one

⁶⁸ James, *The Bostonians*, 227.

⁶⁹ James, *The Bostonians*, 248.

possible) is, at this moment in the novel, no more human than she is. Rather, she is not the kind of human for which the nineteenth century had any kind of category.

Verena, abducted from her position of communication in this feminist proto-cybernetic system, finds herself in the velvet-gloved grip of Ransom (himself depicted as inhuman, though the associated imagery is tattered, bejeweled, and vampiric). Just as the public broadcast of her voice was the primary goal of Olive's possession of her, so privatizing it becomes the primary goal of Ransom's. "Keep your soothing words for me," he tells her, with an almost cartoonish villainy, "you will have need of them all, in our coming time."⁷⁰ The idea that she would become a speaker of national or international renown disgusts him on some primal level. Already a member of a beaten and justifiably humiliated class, the post-Civil War white aristocracy, he cannot abide the image of these northern women assaulting his compensatorily conservative and intellectually pretentious *weltanschauung* (the German seems multivalently appropriate).⁷¹ Particularly not if the object of his cathection, Verena, is going to lead them into battle, to "take the field in the manner of Mrs. Farrinder, for a winter campaign, carrying with her a tremendous big gun."⁷² While the moral character of Olive's exploitation of Verena's gift is vastly complicated, Ransom's exploitation is not. It is not

⁷⁰ James, *The Bostonians*, 247.

⁷¹ It is Ransom that the uglier qualities of James's own species of genteel conservatism are allowed their hideous bloom, a conservatism described by Irving Howe: "... James was a conservative, though less in formal opinion than as a tangle of what might be called cultural emotions:--a hushed reverence for the great things of the past which had been wrenched from the endless blood and failure of history; a feeling that history being what it was these great things were probably inseparable from the blood and the failure; a distaste for the vulgarity of public life, which had been one reason for quitting America, where life was strenuously public; and a deep distrust, indeed a professional refusal, of abstract ideas" [Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon, 1957), 139].

⁷² James, *The Bostonians*, 217.

that he wishes to ‘turn her off,’ but rather that he wants to use Verena’s talents for the sole purpose of his own entertainment, advancement, and comfort. Olive’s scheme, as problematic as it is, at least planned to use Verena’s vocal peculiarities to turn her into a hero at the vanguard of profound social change. Ransom plans to turn her into a gramophone. Verena, completely devoid of agency and without any real conviction, is neither allowed nor considers the self-ending solution of Hyacinth Robinson, another James character torn between two political worlds. The subjectivity annihilating potential of her position as medium is revealed in her complete inability to decide how or whether to be.

Though it is nominally a novel about nineteenth century American reform movements, the political value of *The Bostonians* is located in its examination of political actors, not political organizations and ideologies. James, of course, was not an explicitly ideological writer, and as such “James showed himself to be brilliantly gifted at entering the behavior of political people, but he had no larger view of politics as a collective mode of action.”⁷³ It is the effect that these radical, reformational, and reactionary milieus and orientations have on the subjectivities of his characters that makes the novel politically potent. Olive Chancellor, for all her absolute correctness, does contain within her character a powerful examination and critique of a leftist inclination toward control; Basil Ransom’s character contains a critique of a reactionary inclination toward control. The divergences and points of contact between these two species of control in the battle over the blank technological subject that is Verena Tarrant, a kind of comparison that could

⁷³ Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, 150.

only emerge in its full force and complexity in a narrative format, give the novel much of its intellectual heft.

In their contest for domination of Verena, Olive's publicly-directed, philanthropic exploitation and Basil's isolating, solipsistic exploitation interact in ways that reveal the peculiar values and cruelties of each orientation. *The Bostonians* dramatizes, in largely otherwise inarticulate ways, aspects of political life which would be impossible in an epic, schematic attempt at an ideological *tour d'horizon*. The final scene, when Basil physically wrenches Verena from Olive, is more than just (fantastic) melodrama. It is an elegantly coordinated narrative interaction between, not just ideologies, but individuals as produced by specific kinds of American ideologies in the clash over control of the emergent technological, performative self.⁷⁴ This mysterious, compelling, yet ideologically barren subject, Verena Tarrant, is representative of a new structurally technological and subjectivity refracting species of individual. This female medium--in all her disembodied and disembodiment communication, exploited and exploiting spectacle--is the, well, medium through which James is able to depict a prescient and continually relevant story of political actors in an age of increasingly media structured change.

⁷⁴ Richard Salmon elegantly defines Verena's performativity: "The lack of authentic interiority in James's characterization of Verena Tarrant also signals this shift in the cultural construction of the self. Verena's identity is, to the same degree, no longer authorized by an immanent cogito; instead as [Richardson] Evans observes, the nature of the self is tied to its enunciation or performance. In *The Bostonians*, James traces the emergence of this modern performative self and explores its complex relationship to rival forms of public representation" [Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 44-5].

CHAPTER 3

THE GOLDEN BOWL AND THE RISE OF THE OBJECT

Unlike these two earlier James novels which are thoroughly engaged with the larger social world, *The Golden Bowl* exists in a strange vacuum. Isabel Archer, for example, reascends to the realm of the social after her descent into the strange, thought-objectifying space of the ruins. We see a character who, though by herself, is in the world. Who is, further, using the ruins of the world to better understand her own mind and then recirculating that knowledge back into a more profound understanding of the world. The only use the *The Golden Bowl*'s Maggie and Adam Verver have for history is to the extent that it creates objects for their delectation. The world external to the queer little circuit at the center of *The Golden Bowl* is largely only seen--seen in a specific way, here described by Maggie:

"You Americans are almost incredibly romantic."

"Of course we are. That's just what makes everything so nice for us."

"Everything?" He had wondered.

"Well, everything that's nice at all. The world, the beautiful, world—or everything in it that is beautiful. I mean we see so much."⁷⁵

Romantic is defined here as seeing only the beautiful, only concerning oneself with the things that catch one's fancy--a kind of ocular aesthetic solipsism. The 'world' and the beautiful are conveniently rendered coterminous and everything else is consigned to the oblivion of the unlovely.

⁷⁵ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 32.

The narrative of *The Golden Bowl* emerges from Maggie and Adam Verver's meticulous creation, via curation, of heterotopian spaces; it is the story of their attempt to escape and obscure the social (i.e., the unlovely). Further, these spaces, through their very otherness, enable their constituent *objet d'arts* to take on strange and agentive powers, entirely mediating and determining the lives of their collectors. This creates a strange mutation of the heterotopian form, one in which, to use Foucault's vocabulary, the Persian rug ceases to represent the garden and goes about obscuring, hollowing out, eliminating, and replacing it. In other words, the golden bowl transforms from an object which represents something about the world to an object which is fundamentally and structurally constitutive of it. From these materials of porcelain, crystal and ormolu, the Ververs construct a floating world, a Sèvres ship from which they perform their bijou buccaneering:

We've been like a pair of pirates—positively stage pirates, the sort who wink at each other and say 'Ha-ha!' when they come to where their treasure is buried. Ours is buried pretty well everywhere—except what we like to see, what we travel with and have about us. These, the smaller pieces, are the things we take out and arrange as we can, to make the hotels we stay at and the houses we hire a little less ugly. Of course it's a danger, and we have to keep watch. But father loves a fine piece, loves, as he says, the good of it, and it's for the company of some of his things that he's willing to run his risks.⁷⁶

These “pieces” are removed by the camp-piratical Ververs from their contexts, de-commodified, and placed into relation with one another; the Ververs world is consequently de-historicized. The objects no longer function as conventional commodities, nor even as *morceaus de musée*, but become thoughtful (in the most literal sense of that word), communicating objects. These serve both to structure the interior and

⁷⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 34.

exterior worlds of the characters and to thoroughly remove those characters from society and history, creating, in Foucault's words "another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged" as the space outside it is "messy, ill constructed, and jumbled."

However, the Ververs attempt to entirely abjure the outside world in favor of--by means of, in fact--their own artfully arranged "real space" renders their heterotopian space into a species of utopia, a utopia structured by the form and relation of objects.

People also become treasures within the Verver's world-within-a-world but only to the extent that they can manage to resemble things. When explaining the Prince's value to her father, Maggie says, "You're a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. You're not perhaps absolutely unique, but you're so curious and eminent that there are very few others like you . . . You're what they call a *morceau de musee*."⁷⁷ Thus these wealthy expatriate aesthetes have performed a curious and consequential flattening between thing and person, laying a foundation for the participation of the remaining actor of significance in the novel: namely the golden bowl itself.

The bowl arrives in the narrative after the setting has been established as a London which exists almost exclusively as a stage for *The Golden Bowl*'s actors; a London which is an--if not unpleasant--unbeautiful room to be obscured by whatever objects the Ververs might have at their disposal. This placement of the story within what is essentially a void renders it almost equal parts enchanted and horrifying, both lovely and dreadful. This a quality which is only heightened by the magic force the bowl exudes; in many ways it functions like the cursed object at the heart of some tale from the

⁷⁷ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 33.

Brothers Grimm. In fact, the entire scene in which Charlotte and the Prince first encounter the object unfolds like something from a fairy tale or a gothic novel. When the antiquario removes the bowl from its box, he remains silent and allows it "to produce its certain effect."⁷⁸ There is something about "the charm of its shape" as well as "the tone of its surface" which creates this effect; its power over Charlotte seems to emerge out of some condition of its physicality, yet that power takes on a mystical cast.⁷⁹ Something within the form of the object itself, independent of knowledge of its provenance, lends it a fascinating and yet foreboding quality. "You couldn't scrape it off--it has been too well put on; put on I don't know when and I don't know how," the antiquario says of the golden layer surrounding the crystal--if it is crystal, something which remains an open question--adding that it was achieved by "some beautiful old process," a "lost art" from a "lost time."⁸⁰ It is a thing, finally, which functions "on lines and by laws of its own." What kinds of lines, then, and what kind of laws?

It seems almost redundant to quote Bruno Latour's maxim to "look for nonhumans when the emergence of a social feature is inexplicable" when speaking of *The Golden Bowl*.⁸¹ James's characters find themselves constantly lagging behind the knowledge bound up in objects. Though Maggie eventually discovers the secret shared by Charlotte and the Prince, her awareness comes far after the bowl's, and the bowl is the source of her epiphany. The inanimate functions in much the same way that Latour

⁷⁸ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 107.

⁷⁹ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 107.

⁸⁰ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 108.

⁸¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 56.

describes the function of Robert Boyle's air pump: "[I]nert bodies, incapable of will and bias but capable of showing, signing, writing, and scribbling on laboratory instruments before trustworthy witnesses. These nonhumans, lacking souls but endowed with meaning, are even more reliable than ordinary mortals, to whom will is attributed but who lack the capacity to indicate phenomena in a reliable way."⁸² In *The Golden Bowl*, though it is not performing a scientific function, it is worth noting that the bowl is an imperfect instrument, possessing some flaw which, while invisible, is known to at least some of the characters. The flaw, fatal to an air pump, seems to be the very thing which lends the bowl its mysterious allure:

'Does one make a present,' she asked, 'of an object that contains to one's knowledge a flaw?'

'Well, if one knows of it one has only to mention it. The good faith,' the man smiled, 'is always there.'

'And leave the person to whom one gives the thing, you mean, to discover it?'

'He wouldn't discover it--if you're speaking of a gentleman.'

'I'm not speaking of any one in particular,' Charlotte said.

'Well, whoever it might be. He might know--and he might try. But he wouldn't find.'⁸³

This flaw, this crystalline synapse, is, alongside the object's visible form, what creates its Ververian beauty and, consequently, its path to agency.

It is also granted, through this imperfection, its role as analogy and its place within the novel. As Katherine Hayles writes, in terms of cybernetics, "analogical relationships are the links that allow pattern to be preserved from one modality to

⁸² Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012) Kindle Edition.

⁸³ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 109.

another," becoming a "universal exchange system that allows data to move across boundaries" and "the lingua franca of a world (re)constructed through relation rather than grasped in essence."⁸⁴ The seemingly overdone metaphor of the hidden crack, representing the hidden crack in the relationships in the characters, becomes the medium through which the characters and the object come, not just into contact, but into conversation with one another. Through this system of analogy, the bowl transmits information; in so doing it emerges as a functionally technological object.

Furthermore, its role as a technological object is not merely intermediary but profoundly mediating. Latour defines the distinction in helpfully Jamesian terms, the aforementioned "a shine of silk instead of a nylon."⁸⁵ The specific qualities and inexplicable features of the bowl make it, within *The Golden Bowl's* narrative, a thoroughly mediating nonhuman. Without its unique qualities, Charlotte would never have been so taken by it, nor would Maggie have come to find herself struck by the same object. Of course the antiquario has a role to play here, but it only emphasizes the role of the inanimate in the unfolding of the plot. Yes, the antiquario is the one who returns to Maggie with the information that Charlotte and the Prince had been in his shop years ago, but, in carrying this information, which was contained by the bowl, he acts only as an intermediary. The bowl acts as the agent of change; the bowl refracts reality and allows, not only revelations of the truth but fantasies of the future, as in the following conversation between Maggie and Mrs. Assingham:

⁸⁴ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 98.

⁸⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 40.

"Well, what I want. I want a happiness without a hole in it big enough for you to poke in your finger."

"A brilliant, perfect surface—to begin with at least. I see."

"The golden bowl—as it WAS to have been." And Maggie dwelt musingly on this obscured figure. "The bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack."⁸⁶

Somewhat ironically, the very thing which allowed Maggie access to the knowledge of what, to her, constituted a betrayal--the crack in the bowl--is the very thing she wishes to seal up. What it seems Maggie wants, then, is not the truth, but a world in which things--her beloved beautiful things--can not speak back to her, can not reveal the things she does not wish to see. She desperately wants them to resume their proper role: silently obscuring the world.

Still, a bowl? What a thing to build an entire (very lengthy) novel around, to place the weight of six hundred pages on. The bowl, as James deploys it narratively, takes on a quality that is almost Dada, a provocation comparable to Duchamp's *Fountain*.⁸⁷ Yet there is an interesting tension between the bowl insofar as it exists as *The Golden Bowl*, if you will, and the bowl within the novel itself, as it is seen by the characters. *The Golden Bowl*, the obscurantist high art object, the most impossibly major work of the major phase, seems in tension with this merely decorative object. As discussed, the bowl certainly takes on powerful, mediatized qualities as it takes its place in the narrative, but its initial appeal to Maggie and Charlotte seems more as kitsch than any kind of artistic value. In fact, there is very little evidence that the Verver's collection consists of anything

⁸⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 383-4.

⁸⁷ Or perhaps to Damien Hirst's *The Golden Calf*--not technically Dada, of course, but a weird, entrepreneurial spawn thereof. The Ververs would love it.

other than kitsch, valuable as it might be--certainly their attitude towards it fits the definition of the word. An investigation of kitsch might provide some additional explanation for the bowl's strange power.

The word *kitsch*, in its modern usage as “cheap artistic stuff,” arose in Munich in the 1860s and 70s among the sorts of art dealers with whom the Ververs might have had dealings.⁸⁸ “Cheap artistic stuff” is not, in an art historical sense, just in reference to the sorts of sculptures that can be purchased at Interstate truck stops or the works of Thomas Kinkade; it includes anything that does not function artistically, anything that serves first as a comfort rather than a challenge. Though it still possesses a derogatory air, the word and what it represents have had their defenders, none more eloquent than Walter Benjamin, who wrote that kitsch is “the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things.”⁸⁹ Kitsch, in Benjamin's definition, is not a foolish appreciation for the cheap or the imitative, but a genuine communion with objects. The appeal of the bowl for Charlotte certainly seems to fit within this definition. At the end of her relationship with the Prince, she hopes to acquire the strange energy of the odd little goblet as compensation. Indeed, Charlotte's desire for the bowl and the comfort it might afford her is so great that she is willing to marry another man--any man, one infers--if it will enable the Prince to purchase it for her: “Well, I would marry, I think, to have something from

⁸⁸ Matei Calinescu, *Five Phases of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 234.

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2008), 238.

you in all freedom,” she declares.⁹⁰ The Ververs, on the other hand, certainly do acquire outlived things, but their purposes, once again, are not to take in energies, but rather to block out the insufficiently gorgeous. They only wall themselves from the world with all manner of objet d’art and tchotchkes, whereas Charlotte’s path has the potential to develop her into something new, as Benjamin again details:

The new man bears within himself the very quintessence of the old forms, and what evolves in the confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century--in the dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists--is a creature who deserves the name of ‘furnished man.’⁹¹

This is obviously a very different kind of ‘furnished man’ than Mr. Verver. She is a person who has taken the “quintessence” of forms into herself; a person who recognizes the truth of Marshall McLuhan’s statement that the “user is always the content of any medium” while simultaneously manifesting its inverse.⁹² Charlotte takes the broken part of the bowl into herself; Maggie, though intrigued by the glamour it surreptitiously lends when she is ignorant of it, wishes to make it whole and ‘perfect’ again. Both are drawn to kitsch but only one understands it in the Benjaminian sense: “And which side does a thing turn toward dreams? What point is its most decrepit? It is the side worn through by habit and garnished with cheap maxims. The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch.”⁹³ Maggie’s object dreams function quite differently, as one can see in her vision of the pagoda:

⁹⁰ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 113.

⁹¹ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 238.

⁹² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Corte Madera: Gingko, 2003), 548.

⁹³ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 236.

This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow: looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished.⁹⁴

Even in her reveries, Maggie brings along beautiful things with which to decorate. What is interesting here is not only her admiration of it, her walk around its perimeter, but the intimation that she wishes to enter it. This, for Maggie, would be the ultimate experience of a beautiful thing: to enter inside it, to have it become her world. But the pagoda, representing as it does the “arrangement . . . by which, so strikingly, she had been able to marry without breaking, as she liked to put it, with the past” does not seem to have a point of access for her.⁹⁵ Maggie has moved into “the darkening shadow of a false position,” and she realizes that a life within the porcelain pagoda is impossible.⁹⁶

What other consequence might a reading of the bowl as kitsch have? Henry James’s status as the master, whatever one might think of the appellation, rests on his reputation as a writer capable of plumbing the deepest and most minute caverns of a character’s mind; a novel centered around a weirdly transmitting, kitschy cup seems to be an oddity. And it is undoubtedly odd, but it is an oddity which can usefully be explored. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” addresses James in a way that might further our understanding of *The Golden Bowl*:

⁹⁴ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 327.

⁹⁵ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 328.

⁹⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 329.

Camp and tragedy are antitheses. There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist's involvement) and, often, pathos. The excruciating is also one of the tonalities of Camp; it is the quality of excruciation in much of Henry James . . . that is responsible for the large element of Camp in his writings. But there is never, never tragedy.⁹⁷

Sontag lists *The Europeans*, *The Awkward Age*, and *Wings of the Dove* as examples of Jamesian camp, but in many ways *The Golden Bowl* deserves a place on that list, and for reasons beyond 'excruciation'.

Consider the high, tragic seriousness with which the novel regards its central events: a husband does not cheat on his wife, the wife sends her husband out again and again with the woman he did not cheat with, he cheats, the wife is horrified when she finds out she was betrayed, a bowl of dubious value but amazing significance is broken, and then the marriage is stronger than ever. Now, that is obviously flippant and unfair to Maggie (but, really, how can that particular impulse be resisted?) but it is not inaccurate--*The Golden Bowl* is not the *Oresteia*. To invest almost six hundred pages into such a plot is almost the definition of camp, especially when you add to this consideration James's naiveté. That is, James's unawareness of the discrepancy between the "seriousness of the artist's involvement" and the seriousness of the subject matter, an unawareness that only adds to the grandeur of the novel's camp. Indeed, identifying the novel as camp is in no way meant to be derogatory; if anything it elevates the novel. The subject matter of the novel is not serious in some great, tragic sense, but James makes the reader occasionally forget this. The characters, quite realistically, do not feel that they are in an absurdly sophisticated, luxurious world free of serious consequence, and James renders his novel

⁹⁷ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966), 289.

in such a way as to respect their naiveté.⁹⁸ These few people and the things they've gathered around them do, after all, constitute their world, and the loss of it would certainly seem a tragedy to them. "[P]ure examples of camp are unintentional; they are dead serious."⁹⁹

The bowl itself only adds to the valences of camp the novel creates. As Sontag writes, "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." From the arcane processes that supposedly forged it to the communicative powers it somehow possesses, nothing in the novel is more unnatural than the bowl.

"Well, I daresay it was natural; but in point of fact I never was more wrong in my life. For, all the while, if you please, this was brewing."

Mrs. Assingham indulged, as nearly as possible to luxury, her vagueness. "'This'—?"

"*That!*" replied the Princess, whose eyes, her companion now saw, had turned to an object on the chimney-piece of the room, of which, among so many precious objects—the Ververs, wherever they might be, always revelled peculiarly in matchless old mantel ornaments—her visitor had not taken heed.

"Do you mean the gilt cup?"

"I mean the gilt cup."¹⁰⁰

Maggie speaks of the bowl as if it is an abomination; a beast that she was obliged to let into her home, a cleverly disguised interloper among her menagerie of beautiful things. It is the sort of thing she loves rendered monstrous. Also, taken out of its context, this scene's status as camp is even more self-evident. It would not be out of place in a Douglas Sirk melodrama, and the fact that, *in situ*, it works narratively is a testament to

⁹⁸ Of course Charlotte and the Prince are said to be poor, but it is not of the same kind of poverty that existed in London at the time, even in other James novels, for example *The Princess Casamassima*.

⁹⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 283.

¹⁰⁰ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 440.

James's commitment and further evidence of his aforementioned naiveté.¹⁰¹ All of these absurd but glorious melodramatics reach a climax at the almost unbelievable camp moment of the destruction of the bowl:

"Well then, if it's because of this—!" And Fanny Assingham, who had been casting about her and whose inspiration decidedly had come, raised the cup in her two hands, raised it positively above her head, and from under it, solemnly, smiled at the Princess as a signal of intention. So for an instant, full of her thought and of her act, she held the precious vessel, and then, with due note taken of the margin of the polished floor, bare, fine and hard in the embrasure of her window, she dashed it boldly to the ground, where she had the thrill of seeing it, with the violence of the crash, lie shattered. She had flushed with the force of her effort, as Maggie had flushed with wonder at the sight, and this high reflection in their faces was all that passed between them for a minute more. After which, "Whatever you meant by it—and I don't want to know NOW—has ceased to exist," Mrs. Assingham said.¹⁰²

Here we have the startling union of high camp and the explicit acknowledgment of the bowl's unsettling ontological state. The narrative has trapped Maggie with an object that does not behave as she expects objects to behave, and her revelation of this to Mrs. Assingham brought about her unhinged destruction of said object. Fascinatingly, Mrs. Assingham accedes to Maggie's intimation that the bowl is somehow or another possessed of some secret knowledge, knowledge that it is capable of transmitting, implying in her statement that it "has ceased to exist" that by destroying the thing she has destroyed the facts that it contained, somehow erasing them from history. Fanny's destruction of the bowl is taken as seriously as the destruction of the cross, a literal ex-cruciation, a departure from object based theology and a return an Edenic ignorance. The bowl, functioning as a camp-technological object "undermines the depth model of identity from inside" and instead of a "direct repudiation of depth, there is a performance

¹⁰¹ No disrespect meant to Sirk, of course.

¹⁰² James, *The Golden Bowl*, 454-55.

of it to excess.”¹⁰³

Moments like this last one make clear that to call *The Golden Bowl* camp is indeed not a derogation of its value; it is in fact a necessary step in understanding its achievement. John Carlos Rowe wrote the following of another technologically engaged James work, *In the Cage*:

Whether he knows how much he shares the anxiety of Lady Bradeen, Captain Everard, and the others once in charge of the symbolic discourse of culture is difficult to determine from the surface of a novella of such depths. Sounding those depths, we find James's own unconscious betrayed, not only regarding his ambivalence about his own sexual preference, but also regarding his status as the master, the figure who devoted his life to 'coded' texts, not so much to prevent detection as to encourage, even provoke, it. In that, there is a great difference, all the difference, I would say, to distinguish Henry James from less worthy authorities.¹⁰⁴

This is true enough of *In the Cage*, but it is fascinating how much more clearly these sorts of revelations ring out from *The Golden Bowl*, a novel obsessed with surfaces, a book not so much to be ‘sounded’ as to be examined. One might easily enough compare the decoding of the telegraph to the decoding of the bowl’s message, but what is most significant is that the workings of the bowl are obscured while the workings of the telegraph are on display. The impossible layer of gold which coats the crystal hides from sight the exact nature of the flaw within, but can not eliminate the characters’ suspicion of its existence--it in fact magnifies those suspicions. Knowledge of its peculiarities can only be learned by breaking the object. This, I think, is a far more Jamesian puzzle than one that can be solved with a handbook and too much free time, not to mention one far

¹⁰³ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 310-11.

¹⁰⁴ John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), 180.

more resonant with more modern forms of technological communication.

The very process of the composition of *The Golden Bowl* complicates and enhances our understanding of James's engagement with technology and once again entangles a technological relationship with a camp one. James composed all of his later work with the aid of an amanuensis, a typist who took down everything he said. This had profound implications stylistically, as one can easily see when comparing an earlier or middle period novel, such as *The American* or *The Tragic Muse*, to *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, or *The Golden Bowl*. James's late style, in its requirement of the reader's mind as the other medium for its function, might seem to accord some measure of autonomy to that mind. But the practical effect is the requirement of total giving over of one's mind. The reader becomes the object of the text in a form completely distinct from the common forms of narrative relationship; her mind functions in much the same way as the amanuensis--she is being dictated to. James's last typist, Theodora Bosanquet had much to say about the relationship between herself, James, and (that new technology) the typewriter:

[T]he "click" of the Remington acted as a "positive spur" to the author's speech. Words were "pulled out" from James in this manner, she says, "effectively and unceasingly." Bosanquet makes it clear that James had little control over this process. During dictation, the author found it impossible to keep any texts within the lengths specified by publishers. Only by reverting to handwriting could he find recourse to limiting his word count. This is because, as Bosanquet says, the "music of the Remington," and not James's preplanned intentions, actually guided his thought throughout the act of composition. Indeed, the sounds of the machine became such an integral part of James's writing that he could not do without them. When the Remington was temporarily replaced by a silent Oliver model, James found dictation impossible and had to suspend all work until the old clanker was returned from the repair shop.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Schilleman, "Typewriter Psyche: Henry James's Mechanical Mind," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.3 (2013): 14-15.

Thus, though not thought of as a writer interested in issues of technological progress in the same way that his friend H. G. Wells was, James was personally and professionally engaged with the implications of technological advancement in what was, for him, the most profound possible way. I say profound because his art was of the utmost importance to him, and his style was the foundation of his art; if the technology used for the composition of his work was affecting his style, he would surely have been as aware of it as his amanuensis.

This ‘écriture automatique’, to use Kittlerian terms, structurally resembles a cybernetic system. The three major components of James’s composition process (the author, the typist, and the typewriter) are strikingly analogous to Katherine Hayles’s description of the functioning of a cybernetic system, mentioned earlier: “three powerful actors--information, control, and communication . . . operating jointly to bring about an unprecedented synthesis of the organic and the mechanical.”¹⁰⁶

One can also connect the place of objects in *The Golden Bowl*’s system of composition with its status as a camp document. If the three-part system of author-amanuensis-typewriter structurally resembles the cybernetic, it also structurally resembles the production of a gossip column. That is, an older man of indeterminate sexuality describes to his typist the goings on of a wealthy and troubled family.¹⁰⁷ The novel also employs a floating, flaneur-like, third person perspective and, as has been mentioned, so many of the pivotal scenes in the novel are melodramatic in a way that is atypical for James, for example in his description of the illicit kiss between Charlotte and

¹⁰⁶ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. 8.

¹⁰⁷ The word ‘troubled’ here is used in a relative sense.

the Prince:

"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.¹⁰⁸

That is an explicitness bordering on the pornographic considering James's usual restraint in the description of the physical manifestations of affection. Why, then, define this as camp? It seems, though James is always reluctant to moralize or render judgment, that this novel is an example of Sontag's note #56:

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character" . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as "a camp," they're enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling.¹⁰⁹

The tender feeling connects to James's already noted naiveté--these characters think their problems are tragic, so James renders them that way.¹¹⁰

The Golden Bowl is a novel that defies simple historicizing--not least because, as I hope I've demonstrated, it makes every effort to separate itself from the world--forcing

¹⁰⁸ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 255.

¹⁰⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 293.

¹¹⁰ To stretch the idea of gossip even further, the bowl is novel's internal gossip--Mrs. Assingham tells tales, but mostly to her husband.

one to tease things out from its style and its strangenesses. Though James's writing in the major phase novels increasingly incorporates colloquialisms and informalities, the prose only becomes more difficult and obscure. This apparent paradox puts James and *The Golden Bowl* in the company of modernists such as Joyce, whose famously unreadable *Finnegans Wake* is composed of almost nothing but bathetic shifts between--and improbable unions of--the quotidian and the esoteric. *The Golden Bowl* does not, thankfully, achieve a level of inscrutability on par with that particular monster, but James gets too little credit for the startling modernity of this novel.

Departing radically from the conventionally realist notions of the depiction of consciousness, *The Golden Bowl* imbues the figures which supposedly represent that consciousness with their own sort of agency, adding another source of paranoia for the already paranoid characters. Going even further down this stylistic rabbit hole, the novel begins to reflexively question itself, as can be seen in its almost constant use of "as if," a phrase which, Kevin Ohi writes "suspends the diegetic 'reality' of narrated events."¹¹¹

Ohi also links the temporally created paranoia of the novel with the grammatical structures of zeugma and syllepsis. Zeugma, defined in the wonderfully Jamesian phrase "double governance," "provides a grammatical analogue of a more thoroughgoing mixing of literal and figurative registers in *The Golden Bowl*."¹¹² The mixing of these registers leads to further narrative strangeness; the figurative in the novel "spurns any subservient

¹¹¹ Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 46. Ohi doesn't discuss this, but the abundant presence of "as if" in *The Golden Bowl* seems to somewhat supplant (though by no means entirely) his use of the phrase "as it were," which appears so frequently in his earlier, more conventionally realist novels.

¹¹² Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 47.

role” and “becomes a visible element in depicted landscapes, and determines elements of character and plot.”¹¹³ This assertiveness on the part of the figurative not only materializes the metaphorical, but dematerializes the concrete and dehumanizes the human (e.g., Charlotte and Amerigo transformed into “human furniture”). Ohi also connects this sylleptical blurring of registers to adultery, referring to its instances in the novel as “narrativizations” of that very blurring. Finally, Ohi’s reading of the pagoda at the beginning of Book Second becomes positively surreal in its overlapping reflexivity; the passage becomes a metafictional *mise en abyme* in which Maggie might witness the site of her own creation as a character. Once again, he emphasizes the inextricable nature of the novel’s style from its plot. The audacity involved in its conception and composition--a very specific kind of audaciousness, yes, but audacious nonetheless--is startling.

In the introduction of a special ‘thing theory’ issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Bill Brown wrote the following:

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than

¹¹³ Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, 49.

a particular subject-object relation.¹¹⁴

The Golden Bowl deserves to be recognized as a novel which confronts these issues, especially since it came at them at a time when it was far harder to imagine agentic objects. In fact, it acts as a kind of bridge between two technological worlds. I have come to think of it as a kind of fairy tale of a new technological era, a *Beauty and the Beast* wherein the enchanted object contains, transmits, and transforms information instead of making dinner and setting a girl up with a deservedly cursed rich man.

Finally, what happens to queerness, supposing these posthumanist revolutions do away with the liberal humanist subject? These writers of the *fin de siècle* were already asking the question of what happens when objects determine consciousness, when humans become technologies, and when objects contain and transmit information. If they already undertook the representation of these objectified and technological forms of subjectivity, then perhaps posthumanism is merely an unrecognized form of queer theory. Queerness, after all, is not a matter of identity politics, easily done away with once as soon as the liberal humanist subject is. Secret transmissions, glorified objects, and strange states of subjectivity have long been queer concerns. As John Guillory writes in "Genesis of the Media Concept": "I argue that the concept of a medium of communication was absent but *wanted* for the several centuries prior to its appearance, a lacuna in the philosophical tradition that exerted a distinctive pressure, as if from the future."¹¹⁵ Perhaps the flourishing of queerness since the late nineteenth century is the result of similar, well, distinctive pressures from the future. To explicitly align queerness with the

¹¹⁴ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

¹¹⁵ Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," 321-62.

bowl and all its implications: “Of course it's exquisite. That's the danger.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 111.

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