THE TASTE OF HENRY JAMES

The recent publication of *The Painter's Eye — notes and essays on the pictorial art* by Henry James[1], making hitherto inaccessible material available, has drawn attention to this aspect of James' work. The reviews and essays which make up this selection were all written when James was young, but James the art critic can also be followed through his novels and through his tales (the latter conveniently collected by Matthiessen in *Stories of Artists and Writers*)[2].

Reading through the material so made available two things emerge: in the first place an indication of the best taste of the time, with generous diversions on behalf of his friends, and secondly an excess of caution, an exaggerated fear of putting a foot wrong, a continuous testing of the ice at the brink where others were happily skating. The present article is rather concerned with this second aspect, in an attempt to see some of the reasons and results of this caution. It is important to state at the outset that, however this may have weakened the final value of his critical work, felicitously phrased though it so often is, and diminished the value of his aesthetic judgements, except in so far as they reflect on his own work, this caution can only be held to have strengthened him as an artist. The fear of vulgarity, or error, in taste, led him to produce more and more perfect work up to the final achievement of *The Golden Bowl*.

A number of charming and revealing passages in his autobiography *A Small Boy and Others* (1915)[3] express the fear lest even in childhood he should have been guilty of a failure to distinguish the good from the bad, the genuine from the fake.

There is first his unwillingness to condemn his childish enjoyment of Dickens whose « taste is easily impugned ». James solves

[1] Selected and edited by JOHN L. SWEENEY (Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1956).
[2] Published by New Direction Books, New York, s.a.
[3] Republished together with *Notes of a Son and Brother* and *The Middle Years* in *Autobiography*, Criterion Books, New York, 1956.

this problem fairly easily by refusing to reread him. This was one way of squaring his aesthetic conscience.

When I take him up to-day and find myself holding off, I simply stop: not holding off, that is, but holding on, and from the very fear to do so; which sounds, I recognize, like perusal, like renewal, of the scantest. I don't renew, I wouldn't renew for the world; wouldn't, that is, with one's treasure so hoarded in the dusty chamber of youth, let in the intellectual air. Happy the house of life in which such chambers still hold out, even with the draught of the intellect whistling through the passages [4].

While he preserves Dickens in a sealed tomb, sure that he is in this way intact but that to open it would be to see him crumble into dust before his eyes, he lets in the intellectual air with a vengeance on an early preference for a wallpaper with dragons on it.

I saw them in particular paste long strips of yellowish grained paper upon walls, and I vividly remember thinking the grain and pattern (for there was a pattern from waist-high down, a complication of dragons and sphinxes and scrolls and other fine flourishes) a wonderful and sumptuous thing. I would give much, I protest, to recover its lost secret, to see what it really was — so interesting ever to retrace, and sometimes so difficult of belief, in a community of one's own knowing, is the general aesthetic adventure, are the dangers and delusions, the all but fatal accidents and mortal ailments, that Taste has smilingly survived and after which the fickle creature may still quite brazenly look one in the face [5].

Could it, he worries, really have been good? Or was it one of those *all but fatal accidents* that Taste — the capital indicates that he intended the *best* taste — was to survive.

A further passage from the same autobiography shows the taste of the young James running into a much greater danger than wall-paper. The Italian Primitives were nearly too much for it, just as they had been frankly too much for Hawthorne — the other great American novelist who set out on an aesthetic adventure with greater rashness and what seems at times to have been greater

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

courage than James. Hawthorne on the whole took things easier. In his Italian journal more than once we find a refusal to go too far out of his way for the Primitives, as for example in the May 28, 1858 entry for Assisi:

> My wife, U —, and Miss Shepherd now set out with a cicerone to visit the great Franciscan convent, in the church of which are preserved some miraculous specimens, in fresco and in oils, of early Italian art; but as I had no mind to suffer any further in this way, I stayed behind with J— and R—, who were equally weary of these things... [Later the same day] My wife and the rest of the party returned from the convent before noon, delighted with what they had seen, as I was delighted not to have seen it.

And he remained consistently impenitent, for on June 8 of the same year he wrote « there were some of those distressing frescoes by Giotto, Cimabue, or their compeers... my wife left me to go in quest of yet another chapel, where either Cimabue or Giotto, or both, have left some of their now ghastly decorations ». But Hawthorne was on the outside, and willing to accept this position although aware at times of the disadvantage to an artist. James, while extremely conscious of beginning, too, from the outside, was determined not to remain so.

In « The Madonna of the Future » James takes up the challenge voiced in Hawthorne's Preface to *The Marble Faun,* which suggests that America is barren soil for the artist, and replies:

> Nothing is so idle as to talk about our want of a nursing air, of a kindly soil, of opportunity, of inspiration, of the things that help. The only thing that helps is to do something fine. There's no law in our glorious Constitution against that. Invent, create, achieve [6].

Nevertheless the speaker of these fine phrases, the Moses who is to lead the Americans out of the house of bondage, is a singular failure in the tale. In his early novel, *Roderick Hudson,* James is even more sanguine:

[6] *Stories of Artists and Writers, op. cit.*, p. 21.

« Was this done in America? » he asked.

« In a square white wooden house in Northampton, Mass. » Roderick answered...

« If you could do so well as this there », said Singleton, blushing and smiling, « one might say that really you had only to lose in coming to Rome » [7].

And this time the prophecy is born out by the results.

In *The Marble Faun* Hawthorne had the same idea for Hilda, who in Italy ceased to be an original artist and became a copyist of pictures. Certainly Hawthorne made her into a truly exceptional copyist: « In some instances even (at least, so those believed who best appreciated Hilda's power and sensibility) she had been enabled to execute what the great master had conceived in his imagination, but had not so perfectly succeeded in putting upon canvas »; but in spite of this rare gift Hawthorne poses the question:

> We know not whether the result of her Italian studies, so far as it could be seen, will be accepted as a good or desirable one. Certain it is, that since her arrival in the pictorial land, Hilda seemed to have entirely lost the impulse of original design, which brought her thither [8].

Yet if Hilda's talent was destroyed by Italy, the art of Hawthorne's two Alices (painting in the case of Alice Vane in the tale « Edward Randolph's Portrait » [9], music, in that of Alice Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*) [10] decayed when they were respectively transplanted from « sunny Italy » or « abroad » to their native America.

The point is that neither James nor Hawthorne, as they shuttled their artists to and fro across the Atlantic, could ever quite make up their minds where they would thrive, and were never entirely satisfied with the results, afraid that if uprooted they would lose their native inspiration, or that they would never learn if they stayed at home. The idea of learning obsessed them both. James,

[7] *Roderick Hudson* (The Chiltern Library, London, 1947), pp. 90-91.
[8] Modern Library edit., New York, 1937, p. 622.
[9] *Twice Told Tales*, Riverside edit., Boston and New York, 1883, p. 294.
[10] Riverside edit., Boston and New York, 1883, p. 230.

putting the idea into the mouth of an American character in « The Madonna of the Future » had said: « An American to excel has just ten times as much to learn as a European » [11], while Hawthorne's journals of his travels in England, France and Italy show how hard and sincerely (in spite of his impatience with the Primitives) he tried to learn: *The Marble Faun* bears witness to the extent to which, after all, he succeeded.

The tales of a novelist, with their barer outlines and limitation of subsidiary themes, often go farther toward uncovering the writer's intentions than his novels. Just as Hawthorne's « Rappaccini's daughter », « The Artist and the Beautiful » and « The Birthmark » all handle the question of the ultimate aim of the artist, asking whether it is enough to try to achieve perfection, so James' early tale « The Madonna of the Future » uncovers one of his basic themes. For James there are no doubts, the artist has only one aim, perfection, and there is only one danger — failure. This failure can be the result of a lack of dedication, but James knew that he himself ran no risks here. And this early tale, like his great final novel *The Golden Bowl,* was concerned with his own problems as an artist. In « The Madonna of the Future » the Europe-America theme is only subsidiary to the problem he dealt with overtly in a number of his stories, that of over-dedication, over caution, to the negation of achievement. At the end of the tale the artist is found pointing to his empty canvas. His last words are « Well for me if I had been vulgar and clever and reckless, if I could have shut my eyes and taken my leap » [12].

While as an artist James learned to leap at a height that leaves the reader breathless (a favourite word of his own), as an art-critic, for fear of being thought vulgar, he could never take the risk and make the necessary leap. Much of his criticism consists of descriptions of the works he is discussing, and as such they make delightful reading, for James was a master of description, and could pause to fix the impression of a curtain (for he delighted in costume and

[11] *Op. cit.*, p. 21.
[12] *Stories of Artists and Writers, cit.*, p. 48.

drapery) with as much care as the painter himself had taken over it:

> The young lady, dressed in black satin, stands upright, with her right hand bent back, resting on her waist, while the other, with the arm somewhat extended, offers to view a single white flower. The dress, stretched at the hips over a sort of hoop, and ornamented in front, where it opens on a velvet petticoat with large satin bows, has an old-fashioned air, as if it had been worn by some demure princess who might have sat for Velasquez. The hair, of which the arrangement is odd and charming, is disposed in two or three large curls fastened at one side over the temple with a comb. Behind the figure is the vague faded sheen, exquisite in tone, of a silk curtain, light, undefined, and losing itself at the bottom. The face is young, candid and peculiar [13].

These descriptions, therefore, make portraits in themselves, but James might to all intents and purposes have been standing, pen and paper in hand, at the artist's easel, drawing from life, instead of in a gallery with a picture as his model.

His greatest asset as a critic was just this felicity of expression, which charms the reader into overlooking the fact that he has so little that is new to say. It is a great deal that from time to time he can find a new way of saying it — whether by catching one of the more obvious features of Rubens in «carnal cataracts» or summing up the National Portrait Gallery (1897) in passing:

> On the whole, however, nothing is more striking than the number of honourable persons who have been agreeably figured. If the biggest pictures are not the biggest people — for both the legal and regal professions enjoy, I think, an undue acreage — there are many mementoes that, as well as being precious on any terms, are both modest and charming [14].

His best and most revealing comments are those of the inspired amateur, and are frequently due to his view of all the arts as one and interchangeable. It has often been noticed how the vocabulary of his novels is enriched by terminology from painting and architecture, and by a similar transition he can describe a «Gentleman painted by Aadrian de Vries» as «a work of the most harmonious completeness

[13] «John Sargent», *The Painter's Eye*, *cit.*, p. 219.
[14] «The Grafton Galleries», *ibid.*, p. 260.

— the perfect prose of portraiture »[15]. But this is common enough, as is his introduction of musical imagery into a description of a painting by Théodore Rousseau:

It is not an American sunset, with its lucid and untempered splendour of orange and scarlet, but the sinking of a serious old-world day, which sings its death-song in a muffled key[16].

Often too he draws revealing comparisons between literary works and paintings. A small Daubigny reminds him « of one of George Sand's rural novels — *François le Champi* or the *Petite Fadette* »[17]. The pictures of Gérome « are for art very much what the novels of M. Gustave Flaubert are for literature, only decidedly inferior »[18]. Here with literature he was back on his own ground and immediately more daring, sure of himself, at times finding excellent examples. Writing on an exhibition of French pictures in Boston in 1872 he could say: « if we were to seek for a literary correlative for that sadly imperfect Delacroix near by, we should find it in some fragment of Shelley »[19].

Delacroix is one of the most interesting figures to appear in James' art criticism, just because for once James so clearly took the risk of admiring him. In an early essay « An English Critic of French Painting », 1868 (the earliest reproduced in Mr. Sweeney's selection), writing of Delacroix, James is still on the brink, taking his last precautions.

So many of his merits have the look of faults, and so many of his faults the look of merits, that one can hardly admire him without fearing that one's taste is getting vitiated, nor disapprove him without fearing that one's judgement is getting superficial or unjust[20].

One's taste and one's judgement: this is a key comment, especially in view of the date at which it was written, at the outset

[15] « The 1871 Purchase », *ibid.*, p. 56.
[16] « French Pictures in Boston », *ibid.*, p. 45.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[18] « An English Critic », *ibid.*, p. 42.
[19] « French Pictures in Boston », *ibid.*, p. 47.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

of his writings as an art critic, expressing the same feelings that he returned to forty-five years later in his autobiography, when recollecting his childhood impressions. This preoccupation, that is to say, ran through the whole of his work. This was James' approach to every picture — a concern primarily with himself and with his own reactions — would they be right?

In the character of Christopher Newman, in *The American*, James drew another American who came to Europe to learn, and who declares happily:

> « I've come to see Europe, to get the best out of it I can. I want to see all the great things and do what the best people do »[21].

Yet in spite of this laudable intention Mr. Newman is a failure. He begins badly, for on the first page of the novel he is found in the Louvre where « if the truth must be told, he had often admired the copy much more than the original ». He buys one of these copies on the spot, which is later delivered to him, and it is clear from James' satire at this point that there is no longer any hope for Mr. Newman. How could such a man deserve a beautiful French aristocrat as a wife?

> It had been endued with a layer of varnish an inch thick, and its frame, of an elaborate pattern, was a least a foot wide. It glittered and twinkled in the morning light and looked to Newman's eyes wonderfully splendid and precious. He thought of it as a very happy purchase and felt rich in his acquisition. He stood taking it in complacently... [22].

It is interesting to find Hawthorne in his Journals taking the same innocent pleasure in frames and in what he called « the sunshine of varnish »; and in his entry for June 1858 he wrote cheerfully of the paintings in the Pitti gallery:

[21] *The American* (The Chiltern Library, London, 1949), p. 40. I am grateful to Prof. Lombardo for drawing my attention to *The American* as a significant expression of James' taste.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

It gladdened my very heart to find they were not darkened out of my sight, nor apparently at all injured by time, but were very well kept and varnished, brilliantly framed, and, no doubt, restored by skilful touches if any of them needed it.

Mr. Newman of *The American* remained, like Hawthorne, an outsider. James condemns him above all with the word *complacently*. Here is a millionaire who might have become a great collector, such as James so greatly admired, and who instead ordered six or eight such copies « as large as the original ». Over and over again James returns to this lack of taste.

It is to be feared that his perception of the difference between the florid and the refined had not reached the stage of confidence, and that he might often have been seen — as we have already seen him — gazing with culpable serenity at inferior productions[23].

This, for James, was unpardonable and it is impossible to understand or enjoy the novel properly if we overlook this fact. Why otherwise should the novel not have a happy ending, why must the heroine be shut up in a convent and the hero leave Paris for ever, a sadder and wiser man? The sacrifice is not gratuitous but inevitable for James. Mr. Newman was not good enough for the heroine's family in that he was a « commercial man ». But James furnished him with a document which could have been used to force the family's hand. At the last moment the document, which could have ruined the family, proves insufficient — against all the probabilities — because James felt himself that the Mr. Newman he had created was unworthy. He had been given every opportunity to learn, but had learnt little. He did the Grand Tour, Belgium, Holland, the Rhineland, Switzerland and Northern Italy, while Paris became for a time his home. But his approach is wrong, he will not make the necessary effort:

He liked everything, he accepted everything, he found amusement in everything; he was not discriminating, his values were as vague and loose as if he had carried them in his trousers pockets[24].

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

James' feelings about the importance of taste are the reason for the «sad» ending. Such a hero has to leave Paris «to stay *away* for ever».

But to go back to James' boyhood. He saw his first collection of Italian Primitives in America, and was forced sadly to admit that he was bored, and worse, that he «never afterwards stood before a real primitive, a primitive of the primitives, without having first to shake off the grey mantle of that night»[25]. He describes them in words reminiscent of Hawthorne's own: «this collection of worm-eaten diptychs and triptychs, of angular saints and seraphs, of black Madonnas and obscure Bambinos». This was much more serious than a question of dragon-adorned wall-paper, it is a first and rare example of an open disagreement with the *best taste*. Once again his conscience must be squared — he cannot like Hawthorne simply accept his failure, there must be a more plausible explanation: «I like to think that the collection consisted without abatement of frauds and «fakes» and that if these had been honest things my perception wouldn't have so slumbered»[26]. Rather than admit to an error in his childish judgement, a lack of perception or a taste as yet unawakened, he questions the authenticity of a whole «shipment» of Primitives (possibly with justice). Here I think, just in this inability to make, or to risk making, an error in judgement, lies the explanation why James, who with his knowledge and extreme sensitivity would have seemed the ideal art critic, somehow falls short: an impression which the reader receives more fully on a wider reading, taking in the whole sweep of James' art criticism, than from any particular comment or passage. He was always cautious, cautious even to the extent of recognizing the dangers of over-caution, so that in *The American* he can write:

«Hang it, I don't care for inanimate canvas or for cold marble beauty; I prefer the real thing!». And Mr. Tristram tossed off this

[25] *A Small Boy and Others*, *cit.*, p. 153.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

happy formula with an assurance which the numerous class of persons suffering from an overdose of prescribed taste might have envied him [27].

Two distinctions must be drawn here. The cry in favour of life over art is uttered by Mr. Tristram, an unmitigated bounder as far as James was concerned. At the same time « prescribed taste » refers here rather to the number of stars in Baedeker than to what James elsewhere himself calls the best taste. There are many examples in James' novels of people suffering from « the prescribed taste » — the visitors to the Gallery in the scene in *The Golden Bowl* is a late example, while Hawthorne proved from his notebooks to be an almost chronic sufferer. Mr. Newman at work in the Louvre is another example.

He had looked out all the pictures to which an asterisk was affixed in those formidable pages of fine print in his Baedeker; his attention had been strained, his eyes dazzled; he sat down with an aesthetic headache [28].

Here, however, the criticism is rather directed to the size of the self-administered dose than to the prescription, for James himself was only too willing to be guided.

A further explanation why James did not strike out more as an art critic may perhaps be found in his status as an amateur. This being so he quite rightly took his stand on his own enjoyment of a work of art. In his review of Fromentin's *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois,* as Mr. Sweeney has pointed out, James took Fromentin to task for a certain over-technicality.

He enters too much, in our opinion, into the technical side, and he expects his readers to care much more than should be expected even of a very ardent art-lover for the mysteries of the process by which the picture was made. There is a certain sort of talk which should be confined to manuals and note-books and studio records [29].

[27] *The American, cit.*, p. 36.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 1.
[29] *The Painter's Eye, cit.*, p. 118.

Yet in the last analysis the critic must evaluate the work before him. In this evaluation the technical element plays an important part, and here the amateur must rely on the specialist, who may lead him so far from his original impressions as to annul them. The amateur critic, for all his boast of freedom, is very far from being free. While taking his stand on enjoyment James too often allowed himself to be talked off it, whether in favour of the Impressionists or of the Italian Primitives.

The fact that he spent so much of his life in galleries and studios, or that he had tried his own hand and watched William trying his at the visual arts, did little or nothing to help him. The more he looked, the more the possibilities and dangers of error «bristled». There is by contrast a surer tone in James' comments on drama and on writing, as though he could trust his own judgement more thoroughly — a ring of assurance that is frequently wanting in his art criticism.

Perhaps for this reason the collector and critic who never makes a mistake is such a familiar figure in his novels, from the early Rowland Mallet in *Roderick Hudson* to Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl*. The latter is especially interesting. He is, like Rowland Mallet, an American, and his taste throughout the novel is represented as infallible, but he is an example of the American who has learnt. Behind him is a dark past, before his visit to Europe after the death of his first wife, before his *sense was unsealed*. «He could wince, fairly» to remember the errors into which his taste had been led, looking back from his security of conviction and judgement — the security which we feel James so much envied:

> Adam Verver knew, by this time, knew thoroughly; no man in Europe or in America, he privately believed, was less capable in such estimates, of vulgar mistakes [30].

He had become the perfect connoisseur, thinking back with a shudder to the time when he had been nothing of the kind, «too decidedly, too dreadfully not». The satisfaction of Adam Verver

[30] *The Golden Bowl*, Grove Press, New York, 1952, Book I, p. 142.

lay, James says, in the thought of « the affinity of Genius or at least of Taste, with something in himself — with the dormant intelligence of which he had almost violently become aware »[31]. Here Taste (capital again) comes second only to Genius, showing how highly James prized the inability to make vulgar mistakes, which is the rather negative aspect of it which seems, whether in Adam Verver or in the other collectors of his novels, to have fascinated James most.

The affection and respect with which James treated this character can be seen by his attempt to justify him, just as he tried later to justify his own early lapses. Almost instinctively he provides a screen for him in the figure of his first wife. It was she who had led him astray, in her innocent ignorance, and only her timely death, the collector admits to himself, has saved him:

> Would she have led him altogether, attached as he was to her, into the wilderness of mere mistakes? Would she have prevented him from ever scaling his vertiginous Peak — or would she, otherwise, have been able to accompany him to that eminence, where he might have pointed out to her, as Cortez to *his* companions, the revelation vouchsafed? No companion of Cortez had presumably been a real lady: Mr. Verver allowed that historic fact to determine his inference[32].

While in his art criticism James may strike us as having little to say, on the larger aesthetic problems he had instead everything. And here he was sure of his ground — but as an artist and not as a critic. In *The Golden Bowl*, the work which by James' own standards comes nearest to the vertiginous peak of perfection, he was concerned with the predicament of the artist. This comes out in the central symbol, in the bowl itself, and as so often happens, the meaning that he gave to the bowl is revealed in a much earlier story, in a passage which, as far as I have been able to check, has gone unnoticed. In « The Author of Beltraffio » (1884) we meet the golden bowl in a far from happy metaphor. An author, speaking of the book he is working on, says:

[31] *Ibid.*, Book I, p. 143.
[32] *Ibid.*, Book I, pp. 144-145.

This new affair must be a golden vessel, filled with the purest distillation of the actual; and oh how it worries me, the shaping of the vase, the hammering of the metal! I have to hammer it so fine, so smooth; I don't do more than an inch or two a day. And all the while I have to be careful not to let a drop of the liquor escape! [33].

Here the artist is concerned with the shaping and hammering of the bowl, forming and making perfect his work by slow stages, and the precious content is the purest distillation of the actual. In 1888 in « The Lesson of the Master » James returns to the idea of gold as being the material of the artist. Again he is speaking of a writer:

I've touched a thousand things, but which of them have I turned into gold? The artist has to do only with that — he knows nothing of any baser metal [34].

In his early work James toyed with a number of symbols for art, taking over the rose of the Aesthetes for example in « The Next Time » (1895), to describe the writing of a book:

that fiery hearted rose as to which we watched in private the formation of petal after petal and flame after flame [35].

(Yeats' « Rosa Alchemica » dates from only a year or two later). James had a feel for the symbols in the air, but if the rose was the rose of the Rosecrucians, the Bowl was the San Graal, and was to develop for him until it could indeed hold *the purest distillation of the actual*.

This symbol, as he returned to it in *The Golden Bowl* had gained a further quality in its fragility — it must be both fragile and perfect — crystal covered with gold: « You couldn't scrape it off — it has been too well put on. I don't know when and I don't know how. But by some very fine old worker and by some very beautiful old process » [36]. And there is no room for imperfection,

[33] *Stories of Artists and Writers*, *cit.*, p. 75.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 254.
[36] *The Golden Bowl*, *cit.*, Book I, p. 118.

however slight, in a work of art. The bowl has a crack — it must therefore be broken.

The moral interpretation of the symbol has been noted at length by a number of critics, and worked out very thoroughly in a recent book by Mr. Bowden [37]. I wish here only to draw attention, in view of James' own respect for taste, to the significance which this crack in the golden bowl had for him. The infallible collector, Adam Verver, never himself saw the bowl, while the Prince (the European) saw the crack at a glance. It is the two women, first Charlotte and then the Princess, who in spite of all their taste and subtlety are unaware of the flaw. Both have actually to be told of it. It is difficult for the reader to imagine how important this mistake was in James' own eyes. Given the first description of the bowl « which rang with the finest, sweetest sound » their mistake seems pardonable enough. But for James such an error in judgement was unpardonable, just as a flaw in a work of art was unpardonable. He could accept nothing short of perfection, and perfection working with the most difficult material.

It is only with the breaking of the bowl, the realization of its imperfection, that the Princess can stand at the mantelshelf at the turning point of the book, with the pieces in her hand, holding them together, measuring the fact that though they still fit so perfectly there is nothing to hold them, and preparing for the final separation. James' four main characters, working out their perfectly balanced lives, are successful only in their recognition and acceptance of their failure to keep together. The perfection of the balance, the height at which the perfomance is being carried out, and the risks being taken, are shown most clearly in the subtlest of torture scenes, where Charlotte wills herself to go through her paces (one sees her as seeing herself condemned to an eternity of such performances in her husband's unique Boston collection) for a group of unworthy and unappreciative visitors:

« The largest of the three pieces has the rare peculiarity that the garlands, looped round it, which, as you see, are the finest possible

37 *The Themes of Henry James*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1956.

vieux Saxe, are not of the same origin or period, or even, wonderful as they are, of a taste quite so perfect. They have been put on at a later time, by a process of which there are very few examples, and none so important as this, which is really quite unique — so that, though the whole thing is a little *baroque*, its value as a specimen is, I believe, almost inestimable » [38].

This speech for thirty seconds sounds even to Maggie like the *shriek of a soul in pain*, which kept up a minute longer would break and collapse, so that even she, the torturer, in the moment of her triumph, almost cries out to her father « Can't she be stopped? Hasn't she done enough? ».

Is Charlotte then one of the Americans who has come to Europe and learnt? Before her marriage she was described as hanging over the golden bowl for a quarter of an hour, unable to discover its flaw. She is certainly described as going to school to Mr. Verver.

> One of the attentions she had from immediately after her marriage most freely paid him was that of her interest in his rarities, her appreciation of his taste, her native passion for beautiful objects and her grateful desire not to miss anything he could teach her about them [39].

Yet the whole point of her tortured speech in the gallery seems to lie in the fact that it is an excellent performance, she is wonderfully trained, but she is little more than a dancing bear on the Jamesian level. A few pages before, her relation to her husband, Adam Verver, is described in the following terms:

> and the likeness of their connection would not have been wrongly figured if he had been thought of as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck [40].

Charlotte in the gallery is presented as another triumph of the connoisseur, another piece ready to be packed back to America, a piece too fine to be valued by gaping visitors, recognizable only by

[38] *The Golden Bowl*, *cit.*, Book II, p. 300.
[39] *Ibid.*, Book II, p. 294.
[40] *Ibid.*, Book II, p. 295.

the initiated. Only James could have envisaged such a hell and such a fate as a fitting punishment for the young woman whose love had destroyed the perfect balance of the human relationships in his novel, who had destroyed at least temporarily what was to have been the perfect harmony, « The golden bowl — as it *was* to have been », and it was only his infallible collector, Adam Verver, who was fitted to say (in Maggie's translation of it): « Yes, you see — I lead her now by the neck, I lead her to her doom ».

While generally speaking the idea of making the turning point of a long novel the act of breaking the golden bowl seems subtle, the culmination of James' symbolism, yet this symbolic act becomes almost vugar in comparison with the arch-refinement of the later scene in Mr. Verver's gallery. James is working here on the highest possible plane, where only his taste and genius as an artist could guide him. All vulgar expression of feeling on the natural level had been dispensed with by Maggie in a wonderful passage after the breaking of the golden bowl:

> the rights of resentment, the rages of jealously, the protests of passion... figured nothing nearer to experience than a wild eastern caravan, looming into view with crude colours in the sun, fierce pipes in the air, high spears against the sky, all a thrill, a natural joy to mingle with, but turning off short before it reached her and plunging into other defiles [41].

With this triumphant farewell to all that was vulgar in passion James was no longer dealing with the actual, but with *the purest distillation of the actual,* and it is with this that at the end his own gold and crystal bowl is filled, a challenge to the connoisseur.

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[41] *Ibid.*, Book II, p. 243.