HENRY JAMES

THE GOLDEN BOWL

PENGUIN ENGLISH LIBRARY

THE GOLDEN BOWL

HENRY JAMES

Gore Vidal's most recent collection of essays, *The Second American Revolution* (published in England as *Pink Star and Yellow Triangle*), won the American Book Critics Circle Prize for criticism in 1983.

HENRY JAMES

THE GOLDEN BOWL

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
GORE VIDAL
AND NOTES BY PATRICIA CRICK

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street,
New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1904
Published in Penguin English Library 1985

Gore Vidal's Introduction appeared originally in the January 19, 1984, issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

Printed in the United States of America by
George Banta Company Inc., Harrisonburg, Virginia
Set in Times Roman

CONTENTS

Introduction 7
Note on the Text 18
Preface by Henry James 19

THE GOLDEN BOWL
Volume One: The Prince 39
Volume Two: The Princess 323

Notes 581

INTRODUCTION

1

In the spring of 1880 Mrs Henry Adams confided to her diary:

> It is high time Harry James was ordered home by his family. He is too good a fellow to be spoiled by injudicious old ladies in London – and in the long run they would like him all the better for knowing and living in his own country. He had better go to Cheyenne and run a hog ranch. The savage notices of his Hawthorne in American papers, all of which he brings me to read, are silly and overshoot the mark in their bitterness, but for all that he had better not hang around Europe much longer if he wants to make a lasting literary reputation.

That same year the egregious Bret Harte observed, sadly, that Henry James 'looks, acts, thinks like an Englishman and writes like an Englishman'.

But the thirty-seven-year-old James was undeterred by public or private charges of un-Americanism; he had every intention of living the rest of a long and productive life in England. Since he was, in the phrase of his older brother William, like all the Jameses a native only of the James family, the Wyoming pig farmer that might have been preferred rooting, as it were (Oh, as it were! – one of his favourite phrases: a challenge to the reader to say, As it were *not*?), for those truffles that are to be found not beneath ancient oak trees in an old country but in his own marvellous and original consciousness. James did nothing like an Englishman – or an American. He was a great fact in himself, a new world, a terra incognita that he would devote all his days to mapping for the rest of us. In 1880 James's American critics saw only the fussy bachelor expatriate, growing fat from too much dining out; none detected the sea-change that was being undergone by what had been, until then, an essentially realistic American novelist whose subject had been Americans in Europe, of

whom the most notorious was one Daisy Miller, eponymous heroine of his first celebrated novel (1878).

But by 1880, James was no longer able – or willing? – to render American characters with the same sureness of touch. For him, the novel must now be something other than the faithful detailing of familiar types engaged in mating rituals against carefully noted backgrounds. Let the Goncourts and the Zolas do that sort of thing. James would go further, much as Flaubert had tried to do; he would take the usual matter of realism and heighten it; and he would try to create something that no writer in English had ever thought it possible to do with a form as inherently loose and malleable as the novel: he would aim at perfection. While James's critics were complaining that he was no longer American and could never be English, James was writing *The Portrait of a Lady*, as nearly perfect a work as a novel can be. From 1881, James was the master of the novel in English in a way that no one had ever been before; or has ever been since. Even that Puritan divine, F. R. Leavis, thought *The Portrait* 'one of the great novels of the English language'.

Over the next twenty years, as James's novels got longer and longer, they became, simultaneously and oddly, more concentrated. There are fewer and fewer characters (usually Americans in a European setting but Americans at some psychic distance from the great republic) while the backgrounds are barely sketched in. What indeed *are* the spoils of the house Poynton? James never tells us what the 'old things' are that mother and son fight for to the death. Balzac would have given us a catalogue; and most novelists would have indicated something other than an impression of a vague interior perfection. As James more and more mastered his curious art, he relied more and more on the thing *not* said for his essential dramas; in the process, the books become somewhat closer to theatre than to the novel-tradition that had gone before him. Famously, James made a law of the single viewpoint; and then constantly broke it. In theory, the auctorial 'I' of the traditional novel was to be banished so that the story might unfold much like a play except that the interpretation of scenes (in other words, who is thinking what) would be confined to a single observer if not for an entire book, at least for

the scene at hand. Although James had sworn to uphold for ever his own Draconian law, on the first page of *The Ambassadors*, where we meet Strether, the principal consciousness of the story and the point of view from which events are to be seen and judged, there is a startling interference by the author, Mr James himself, who states, firmly: 'The principle I have just mentioned . . .' Fortunately, no more principles are mentioned by the atavistic 'I'.

There is the familiar joke about the three styles of Henry James: James the First, James the Second, and the Old Pretender. Yet there are indeed three reigns in the master's imagined kingdom. James I is the traditional nineteenth-century novelist, busy with the usual comings and goings of the ordinary fiction writer; James II is the disciplined precise realist whose apotheosis is *The Portrait of a Lady*. From 1890 to 1895 there is a break in the royal line: James turns to the theatre; and most beautifully fails. Next comes the restoration. James returns in triumph to the novel – still James II (for purposes of simile, Charles II as well); and then, at the end, the third James, the Old Pretender, the magician who, unlike Prospero, breaks not his staff but a golden bowl.

After 1895, there is a new heightening of effect in James's narratives; he has learned from the theatre to eliminate the non-essential but, paradoxically, the style becomes more complex. The Old Pretender's elaborateness is due, I should think, to the fact that he had now taken to dictating his novels to a series of typewriter operators. Since James's conversational style was endlessly complex, humorous, unexpected – euphemistic where most people are direct and suddenly precise where avoidance or ellipsis is usual – the last three novels that he produced (*The Ambassadors*, 1903; *The Wings of the Dove*, 1902; and *The Golden Bowl*, 1904) can be said to belong as much to the oral tradition of narrative as to the written.

James was fifty-seven when he started *The Ambassadors* and sixty-one when he completed *The Golden Bowl*. In those five years he experienced a late flowering without precedent among novelists. But then he was more than usually content in his private life. He had moved out of London; and he had established himself at the mayoral Lamb House in Rye. If there is an eternal law of

literature, a *pleasant* change of house for a writer will produce an efflorescence. Also, at sixty, James fell in love with a young man named Jocelyn Persse. A charming Anglo-Irish man-about-town, Persse was not at all literary; and somewhat bewildered that James should be in his thrall. But, for James, this attractive young extrovert must have been a great improvement over his predecessor in James's affection, Hendrik Andersen, the handsome sculptor of megalomaniac forms. Andersen had been trouble. Persse was good company: 'I rejoice greatly in your breezy, heathery, grousy – and housey, I suppose – adventures and envy you, as always, your exquisite possession of the Art of Life which beats any Art of mine hollow.' This 'love affair' (with the Master, quotes are always necessary because we lack what Edith Wharton would call the significant data) had a most rejuvenating effect on James; and the first rapturous days with Persse coincided with the period in which he was writing *The Golden Bowl.*

A decade earlier (November 28, 1892) Henry James sketched in his notebook the first design for *The Golden Bowl*:

> . . . a father and daughter – an only daughter. The daughter – American of course – is engaged to a young Englishman, and the father, a widower and still youngish, has sought in marriage at exactly the same time an American girl of very much the same age as his daughter. Say he has done it to console himself in his abandonment – to make up for the loss of the daughter, to whom he has been devoted. I see a little tale, *n'est-ce pas*? – in the idea that they all shall have married, as arranged, with this characteristic consequence – that the daughter fails to hold the affections of the young English husband, whose approximate mother-in-law the pretty young second wife of the father will now have become.

James then touches upon the commercial aspect of the two marriages: 'young Englishman' and 'American girl' have each been bought. They had also known each other before but could not marry because each lacked money. Now

> they spend as much of their time together as the others do, and for the very reason that the others spend it. The whole situation works in a kind of inevitable rotary way – in what would be called a vicious circle. The *subject* is really the pathetic simplicity and good faith of the father and daughter in their abandonment . . . he peculiarly paternal, she passionately filial.

On Saint Valentine's Day, 1895, James again adverts to the story, which now demands to be written, though he fears 'the adulterine element' might be too much for his friend William Dean Howells's *Harper*'s magazine. 'But may it not be simply a question of *handling* that?'

Seven years later, James was shown a present given the Lamb family by King George I: it is a golden bowl. The pieces have now begun to come together. James has just completed, in succession, *The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Comfortably settled in the garden room at Lamb House (later to be inhabited by E. F. Benson's dread Miss Mapp and then the indomitable Lucia; later still, to be blown up in the Second World War), James wrote, in slightly more than a year, what he himself described to his American publisher as 'distinctly the most done of my productions – the most composed and constructed and completed . . . I hold the thing the solidest, as yet, of all my fictions.' The 'as yet' is splendid from a sixty-one-year-old writer. Actually, *The Golden Bowl* was to be the last novel that he lived to complete; and it has about it a kind of spaciousness – and even joy – that the other novels do not possess. In fact, *pace* F. R. Leavis, I do not think James has in any way lost his sense of life or let slip 'his moral taste' (what a phrase!), rather . . .

But that is enough setting up. Read the book now; then, if so inclined, check your own impression of this work with someone who first read it when he was the age of the Prince, who replaced the 'young Englishman'; and has now reread it at an age greater than that of 'the widower' Adam Verver.

2

When I first read *The Golden Bowl*, I found Amerigo, the Prince, most sympathetic. I still do. I also found – and find – Charlotte the most sympathetic of the other characters; as a result, I don't think that her creator does her justice or, perhaps, he does her too much conventional justice, a black cloth on his head as he sentences her to a living death. But then James *appears* to accept entirely the code of the class into which he has placed both himself in life and the characters in his book. This means that the woman must

always be made to suffer for sexual transgression while the man suffers not at all or, in the case of the Prince, very little – although the renewed and intensified closeness to Maggie may well be a rarefied punishment that James only hints at when, for the last time, he shuts the door to the golden cage on Husband and Wife Victrix. For once, in James, the heiress has indisputably won; and the other woman, the enchantress, is routed.

I barely noticed Adam Verver the first time I read the book. I saw him as an aged (at forty-seven!) proto-J. Paul Getty, out 'to rifle the Golden Isles' in order to memorialize himself with a museum back home – typical tycoon behaviour, I thought; and thought no more. But now that he could be my younger brother (and Maggie an exemplary niece), I regard him with new interest – not to mention suspicion. What is he up to? He is plainly sly; and greedy; and although the simultaneous possession and ingestion of confectionery is a recurrent James theme, my God, how this father and daughter manage to both keep and devour the whole great world itself! They buy the handsome Prince, a great name, *palazzi*, the works. They buy the brilliant Charlotte. But they do not know that the two beauties so triumphantly acquired are actually a magnificent pair, destined to be broken up by Maggie when she discovers the truth, and, much as Fanny Assingham smashes the golden bowl into two parts – and pedestal, Maggie breaks the adulterine situation into three parts: Amerigo, Charlotte, and Adam. Then, adulterine world destroyed, Maggie sends Adam and Charlotte home to American City at the heart of the great republic.

Best of all, from Maggie's viewpoint, Charlotte does not know for certain even then that Maggie knows all – a real twist to the knife for in a James drama *not* to know is to be the sacrificial lamb. Once Mr and Mrs Adam Verver have gone for ever, the Prince belongs absolutely to Maggie. One may or may not like Maggie (I don't like what she does or, indeed, what she is) but the resources that she brings to bear, first *to know* and then *to act*, are formidable. Yet there is a mystery in my second experience of the novel which was not present thirty years ago. What, finally, does Adam Verver know? and what, finally, does he do? Certainly father and daughter are so perfectly attuned that neither has to *tell* the other anything at all about the unexpected pair that they have acquired

for their museum. But does Maggie lead him? Or does he manage her? Can it be that it is Adam who pulls all the strings? As befits the rich man who has produced a daughter and then bought her – and himself – a life that even he is obliged to admit is somewhat selfish in its perfection.

As one rereads James's lines in his notebook, the essentially rather banal short story that he had in mind has changed into a wonderfully luminous drama in which nothing is quite what it seems while James's pious allusion to the subject as 'really the pathetic simplicity and good faith of the father and daughter in their abandonment' is plain nonsense. James is now giving us monsters on a divine scale.

I think the clue to the book is the somewhat, at first glance, over-obvious symbol of the golden bowl. Whatever the king's christening gift was made of, James's golden bowl proves to be made not of gold but of gilded crystal, not at all the same thing; yet the bowl is massy and looks to be gold. The bowl is first seen in a Bloomsbury shop by Charlotte, who wants to buy a wedding present for her friend Maggie. Charlotte cannot afford anything expensive but then, as she remarks to her lover, Maggie's groom-to-be, '"She's so modest," she developed – "she doesn't miss things. I mean if you love her – or, rather, I should say, if she loves you. She lets it go."' The Prince is puzzled by this use of 'let', one of James's two most potent verbs (the other is 'know'): 'She lets what –?' Charlotte expatiates on Maggie's loving character. She wants nothing but to be kind to those she believes in: 'It's of herself that she asks efforts.'

At first the bowl enchants Charlotte. But the shop owner overdoes it when he says that he has been saving it for a special customer. Charlotte knows then that there must be a flaw; and says as much. The dealer rises to the challenge: 'But if it's something you can't find out, isn't it as good as if it were nothing?' Charlotte wonders how – or if – one can give a present that one knows to be flawed. The dealer suggests that the flaw be noted to the recipient, as a sign of good faith. In any case, the bowl is a piece of solid crystal and crystal, unlike glass, does not break; but it can shatter 'on lines and by laws of its own'. Charlotte decides that she cannot afford the bowl; she joins Amerigo, who has been

waiting for her in the street. He had seen the flaw at once. '*Per Dio*, I'm superstitious! A crack is a crack – and an omen's an omen.'

For the moment, that is the end of the bowl itself. But James has now made the golden bowl emblematic, to use a Dickens word, of the relations between the lovers and their legal mates. To all appearances, the world of the two couples is a flawless rare crystal, all of a piece, beautifully gilded with American money. Of the four, the Prince is the first to detect the flaw; and though he wanted no part of the actual bowl, he himself slips easily into that adulterine situation which is the flaw in their lives. Charlotte refused to buy the bowl because she could not, simply, pay the price; yet she accepts the adultery – and pays the ultimate price.

In due course, Maggie acquires the bowl as a present for her father. Although she does not detect the flaw, the dealer believes himself mysteriously honour-bound to come to her house and tell her that the flaw is there. During his confession, he notices photographs of the Prince and Charlotte; tells Maggie that they were in his shop together. Thus, she learns that they knew each other before her marriage and, as she tells Fanny, 'They went about together – they're known to have done it. And I don't mean only before – I mean after.'

As James's other triumph of knowledge gained through innocence was called *What Maisie Knew*, so this story might easily have been called *When Maggie Knew*. As the bowl is the symbol of the flawed marriages, so the line: 'knowledge, knowledge was a fascination as well as a fear', stands as a sort of motto to this variation on one of our race's earliest stories, Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit of knowledge which, once plucked, let the first human couple know both the joys of sex and the pain of its shadow, death. But if James was echoing in his last novel one of the first of all our stories, something is missing: the serpent-tempter. Is it Adam Verver? Or is he too passive to be so deliberate an agent? Actually, the shop owner is the agent of knowledge; but he is peripheral to the legend. Fanny Assingham has something slightly serpentine about her. Certainly, she is always in the know, but she is without malice. In fact, she prefers

people *not* to know; and so she makes the splendid gesture of smashing the bowl and, presumably, the knowledge that the bowl has brought Maggie. But it is too late for that. Maggie moves into action. She sets out to rid herself of Charlotte because 'I want a happiness without a hole in it . . . The golden bowl – as it *was* to have been.'

In the first of a series of splendid confrontations, Maggie tells the Prince that she knows. He, in turn, asks if Adam knows. 'Find out for yourself!' she answers. Maggie is now having, as James colloquially puts it, 'the time of her life – she knew it by the perpetual throb of this sense of possession, which was almost too violent either to recognize or to hide'. Again, 'possession'. When the suspicious Charlotte confronts her in the garden (of Eden?) at Fawns, Maggie lies superbly; and keeps her enemy in ignorance, a worse state – for her – than even the United States. Finally, Maggie's great scene with her father is significant for what is not said. No word is spoken by either against Charlotte; nor is there any hint that all is not well with Amerigo and Maggie. But James's images of Maggie and Adam together in the garden – again the garden at Fawns (from the Latin *fons*: spring or source?) – are those of a husband and wife at the end or the beginning of some momentous change in their estate. The images are deliberately and precisely marital: 'They were husband and wife – oh, so immensely! – as regards other persons.' The reference here is to house party guests but the implication is that 'other persons' include her husband and his wife. They speak of their social position and its ambiguities; of the changes that their marriages have made. She is a princess. He is the husband of a great lady of fashion. They speak of the beauty and selfishness of their old life.

Maggie remarks of her husband that 'I'm selfish, so to speak, *for* him.' Maggie's aria on the nature of jealousy (dependent in direct ratio on the degree of love expended) is somewhat mystifying because she may 'seem often not to know quite *where* I am'. But Adam appears to know exactly where he is: 'I guess I've never been jealous.' Maggie affirms that that is because he is 'beyond everything. Nothing can pull *you* down.' To which Adam responds, 'Well then, we make a pair. We're all right.' Maggie reflects on the notion of sacrifice in love. The ambiguities are thick

in the prose: Does she mean, at one point, the Prince or Charlotte or Adam himself? But when she says, 'I sacrifice you,' all the lines of the drama cross and, as they do, so great is the tension that James switches the point of view in mid-scene from daughter to father as James must, for an instant, glimpse Adam's response to this declaration: 'He had said to himself, "She'll break down and name Amerigo; she'll say it's to him she's sacrificing me; and it's by what that will give me – with so many other things too – that my suspicion will be clinched."' Actually, this is supposed to be Maggie's view of what her father senses, but James has simply abandoned her in mid-consciousness for the source of her power, the father-consort. How Adam now acts will determine her future. He does not let her down. In fact, he is 'practically *offering* himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice . . .' The deed is done. He will take Charlotte back to American City. He will leave the field to Maggie.

Adam has been sacrificed. But has he? This is the question that reverberates. Maggie finds herself adoring him for his stillness and his power; and for the fact 'that he was always, marvellously, young – which couldn't but crown, at this juncture, his whole appeal to her imagination'. She gives him the ultimate accolade: 'I believe in you more than anyone.' They are again as one, this superbly monstrous couple. 'His hands came out, and while her own took them he drew her to his breast and held her. He held her hard and kept her long, and she let herself go; but it was an embrace that august and almost stern, produced, for its intimacy, no revulsion and broke into no inconsequence of tears.'

Where Maggie leaves off and Adam begins is not answered. Certainly, incest – a true Jamesian 'horror' – hovers about the two of them, though in a work as delicately balanced as this the sweaty deed itself seems irrelevant and unlikely. It is enough that two splendid monsters have triumphed yet again over everyone else and, best of all, over mere human nature. But then Maggie contains, literally, the old Adam. He is progenitor; and the first cause; *fons*.

It is Adam who places Charlotte in her cage – a favourite Jamesian image; now James adds the image of a noose and silken cord by which Adam leads her wherever he chooses – in this case