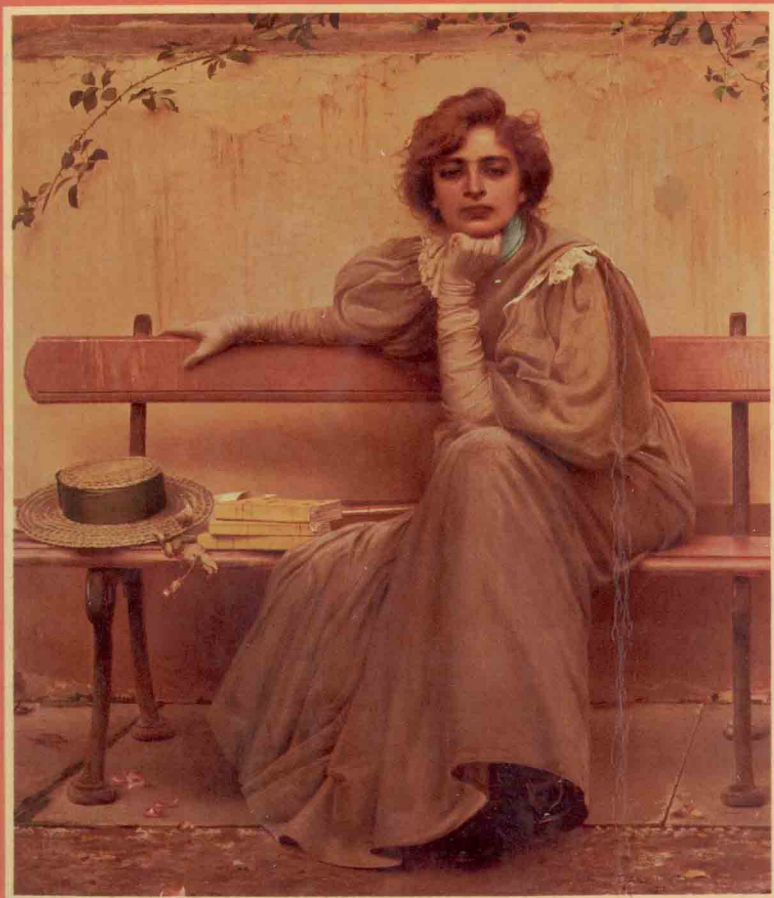


THE WORLDS CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES
THE
GOLDEN BOWL



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



HENRY JAMES

The Golden Bowl



EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

AND NOTES BY

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INTRODUCTION

HENRY JAMES wrote his last completed novel in 1904, but the idea for it had come to him many years previously, when he heard that a middle-aged American and his only daughter had simultaneously become engaged to be married. This suggested to James a curious situation wherein the father and child, devotedly attached, should remain so, 'with the husband of the one and the wife of the other entangled in a mutual passion, an intrigue'.

At the point when he made this résumé of the theme in his notebook James wanted to call it 'The Marriages', but he had already given that name to a short story of 1891. The novel that at length took shape became *The Golden Bowl*, a grander title for what was to be the finest achievement of its author's later style. The change in James's art—a change regretted by some admirers of his earlier manner—was one of method not of subject-matter, for James would always return to certain themes that worked well for him. It happens that *The Golden Bowl* and 'The Marriages' are both about treachery; but much more striking than this one point of resemblance are their divergences, which reveal the direction James's fiction had taken.

'The Marriages' concerns the efforts of an unappealing, interfering young girl to prevent her father's remarriage. Adela is unappealing because James sees to it by the relentless irony of his treatment that we should find her so. Quite patently he sets her up as a type of obsessive personality in order that he may bring her down; in this way he keeps the whole tale firmly within the bounds of social comedy, tying it up at the end with a neat novelettish twist. The reader who might risk discerning in Adela tragic depths of neurosis is instead cajoled into a sense of complicity with the author's method and narrative purpose.

With *The Golden Bowl* it is different. At the close of

James's late novels we are left with the impression that something is missing that was there in fiction before. We have lost an awareness of the narrator's moral vision, and we have lost the sense of a plot reassuringly dependent on characterisation. What, reading *The Golden Bowl*, we never lose sight of, its central point of reference, is the bowl itself, the crystal cup with a crack in it concealed under a layer of gilt put on 'by some very fine old worker and by some beautiful old process'. This artefact as mere object plays a crucial part in the plot, and it also has several symbolic connotations, among them the imperfect domestic arrangements outlined above. But the image of the golden bowl has a power and a resonance that extend far beyond these functional levels, and which may partly account for a tendency among critics to call the book itself 'magnificent but flawed'. Whatever we make of that view, to think of *The Golden Bowl* in terms of a falling-off from some ideal structure is to fail to appreciate its experimental nature.

If James's novel had been written by Jane Austen, the bowl might be said to define the crack, for her fiction provides an encompassing moral vision within which the nature and extent of any flaw is clearly discernible. But in the novel as James wrote it, as the crack opens up, we must grope outwards to see whether there is a framework—moral or epistemological—within which it can be contained. The author seems almost to have reversed the process we find in, say, *Sense and Sensibility*, where plot derives from a scheme of different character-types and their interaction. In *The Golden Bowl* certain characters seem to be trying to compose their own novel as they go along, according to their own conceptions of who they are and what is happening.

Deviating in this way from the realistic novel or novella of manners which James's public knew, and of which he himself had produced many examples, *The Golden Bowl* displeased some contemporary critics, who were disappointed by what they called its 'unreality'. For all that, its subject-matter is rooted in reality, a reality deriving, as in

many nineteenth-century novels, from the characters' pursuit of those attributes which make for a comfortable life in society. The first marriage in it takes place between Maggie, daughter of Adam Verver, an American millionaire and art-collector, and an Italian prince of noble family, now impoverished. It is a straight swap of cash for social position, though Maggie and Prince Amerigo are lucky enough to find each other personally attractive into the bargain. All this happens of course in England, where large numbers of the Americans that James observed wanted to be. Maggie is able to visit the British Museum, where she can mull over the well-documented annals of the princely house and feel that she has secured them 'even for her father'.

James, who had left his native America near the outset of his career, liked to use the theme of two cultures meeting. When on the first page of the novel we learn that the Prince looks at pretty women in the street, we seem to be entering familiar Jamesian territory, where American innocence will be confounded by European corruption. It is in fact the same territory, but the perspective is altered. Almost immediately it becomes apparent that what we have in the Prince is no conventional villain, not another Morris Townsend, the handsome fortune-hunter in *Washington Square*. In that novel James's use of irony makes it instantly clear what Morris is and where he is headed. In Book First of *The Golden Bowl*, called 'The Prince', a situation is presented mainly as it impinges on Amerigo's consciousness. We see what he sees, and that is not everything: he doesn't know the answers to questions we shall want answered. In the same way James had exploited, to create mystery, Adela's one-sided viewpoint in 'The Marriages', but there is no such immediate sense of collusion with an ironic authorial presence when he brings on his Prince.

At the start of the novel the engaged couple, Maggie and Amerigo, appear to be coming to terms in the frankest chattiest way with their faintly sordid bargain and the culture gap. The Prince cannot see, and the reader will only

see much later with hindsight, that what their conversation actually does is to prefigure what is going to happen, like the prologue of a play:

'I haven't the least idea . . . what you cost' . . . 'Wouldn't you find out if it were a question of parting with me? . . .' . . . 'Yes, if you mean that I'd pay rather than lose you.'

This strange opening dialogue leaves the Prince, like the reader, disconcerted. But there will be no leading this pedigree bull by the nose into a murky novelette. He is self-aware and on his guard, fully conscious that in relation to the Ververs and his marriage he doesn't know what he is or what he's going into. He wants to be a good husband, but he's not sure what that means among these foreigners in a foreign country where the moral map may not be the same as his. 'I can do pretty well anything I see. But I've got to see it first,' he tells his old friend Fanny Assingham, who introduced him to Maggie.

Seeing is important to the Prince. Does everyone in this situation see where everybody else is placed? The idea that one's relationship to the rest of society is clearly defined and clearly, if tacitly, understood, is something the Prince's homeland and history have bred in him. A *galantuomo* looks at marriage in a certain way and at pretty girls in another, and everybody knows the form and observes his place. Tacit understanding is not to be relied on in someone from another culture. The Prince wants Fanny to recognise that there's a risk for Maggie. Fanny's vague acknowledgment that the water is troubled ('Oh, you deep old Italians!') he welcomes as 'the responsible note'.

After her marriage, Maggie and her widower father—in James's initial conception, 'passionately filial' and 'peculiarly paternal'—remain in a cosy huddle together, Amerigo standing benignly somewhat apart. This awkward triangle is squared by the introduction of a beautiful young wife for Adam, who becomes, by default of the Ververs, Amerigo's escort to parties and country-house weekends.

'What in the world did you ever suppose was going to

happen? The man's in a position in which he has nothing in life to do': Fanny's husband, Bob, speaks at this point for the reader who knows a thing or two. But Amerigo does not act as he does just because he has time on his hands. He has been bred to react promptly to the pattern of a *situation nette*—and clearcut situations readily produce mirror-images of one another. 'Placed' as he is, that is, flung into the company of his stepmother-in-law, he sees but one obvious move for a *galantuomo*. And, having himself a lively conception of that role, it provokes him that others appear to have none. In some exasperation, the Prince is reduced to using his imagination mainly for wondering how 'these people among whom he was married . . . contrived so little to appeal to it'. Charlotte does appeal to it.

'She's extraordinarily alone' is what most strikes Fanny Assingham about Charlotte Stant when she turns up just before Maggie's wedding day. An old schoolfriend of the bride, Charlotte has looks and style, but no money or husband, and therefore no place in the ordered pattern of society. Amerigo is now securely established there. But security, seen from another angle, is also restriction. This idea is always present in *The Golden Bowl*, and quite insistently reinforced on the metaphorical level. Safety suggests enclosure which suggests escape.

Charlotte is also a figure from the Prince's past, from the black night of his annals: but she and Amerigo had woken up to a realistic appraisal of their mutual insolvency, and had parted. Now she comes back, not to prevent his marriage, but to fulfil some more enigmatic purpose.

It is the crashing unconventionality of Charlotte's declaration to him in the Park that weakens Amerigo's breastplate of virtue. The *déclassée* little telegraphist in James's novella 'In the Cage' makes a similar gambit, without the same success. A liberating gesture, as that fiction shows, doesn't amount to much if the young man won't go along with it. The telegraphist's Captain Everard isn't bright enough to see that something like a dare is involved, or imaginative enough to accept one. Amerigo is. Like the girl

on the flying trapeze Charlotte sweeps out of the dark into his new world, and he catches her.

They have, then, their wild swing in a sort of moral void and whether they ever look down into what Maggie might call an abyss is anybody's guess. But down on the ground of social intercourse, it is clear that what counts for Charlotte, as for Amerigo, is all-round horizontal visibility, or observing the forms of behaviour. She is even more adept than the Prince at the witty superficialities of drawing-room comedy: 'the great thing is, as they say, to "know" one's place,' she blandly tells Fanny, her stooge, letting Fanny infer the ominous pattern which Maggie's attachment to her father has placed the couples in now.

The pattern evolved to begin with precisely because the Ververs thought they could fit Charlotte's singularity into it. They see themselves as good plain folks who, Maggie feels, lack the fairy-tale charisma that should accompany their fabulous riches. She points out Charlotte to her father as an object of rare value and, with an alacrity that hints at another sort of moral void, the Ververs cash in on Charlotte's star qualities. On the avowed basis that Charlotte will make them 'grand', they add a fourth wheel to their coach. That their magically transformed pumpkin then drives into a sticky patch is something they will only gradually perceive.

The perception that Charlotte and Amerigo are doing something counts for more in *The Golden Bowl* than what they specifically do, at least in terms of what James called in another context 'mere zoological sociability'. A less original writer might have lingered over precisely those things that James leaves out, and the trappings of tawdry romance that remain, the literary clichés like a rose flung from a window, are there to be recognised by these intelligent lovers and parodied. Diverting the reader's attention from what they 'really' do, they connive with James: with characteristic obliquity he can refer to their 'identities of impulse' as if making case-notes on a rather dull disease, while keeping the erotic quality of the relationship very vividly there, but

displaced into metaphor and even comedy ('What in the world does he want to do to me?' inquires Charlotte, hustled away at the Foreign Office party to meet 'the greatest possible Personage').

A contemporary critic who felt that James had not fully realised the possibilities of the relationships between the characters also deplored James's refusal to speak as the omniscient narrator. But of course it was James's adoption of a partial view that enabled him easily to sidestep the spectacle of the Prince 'relating' to Charlotte. Mystery would then have fled with a shriek, to borrow the phrase James used of George Sand's self-exposure. What we see instead is the Prince feeling his way into a situation as an actor might work out his moves on the stage, taking note of the points of entrance and exit. The process of this mapping-out is slow and intricate, and conveyed in a labyrinthine prose; it is in marked contrast to the rather trite conception of a prince—someone to whom one unthinkingly pays tribute—that Maggie, Fanny and even Charlotte have of him. For them, the Prince's foreignness means exotic rarity, the attributes of the novelistic hero. But for us who see him in Book First through his own eyes, his foreignness is no more romantic than theirs would seem to any other displaced person.

That is why the Prince is so real, and nowhere more so than when he is building out of his cultural heritage, with its notions of clarity and smoothness and visibility, a concept of 'caring' for Maggie: a sort of goldfish bowl, she protected inside, which could enable him to maintain the comfortable status quo and at the same time to 'do something or other, before it was too late, for himself'. What he does is sketched in with dazzling rapidity, from Charlotte throwing off 'an image that flashed like a mirror played at the face of the sun' to her perusal of Bradshaw, working out the fastest move from Matcham to Gloucester. Though the affair leaves a bright streak through the novel, like a particle in a bubble-chamber it is no sooner there than it disappears. At the end of the book's first half, things to which it seemed

to be leading end too, as if James had suddenly decided to demonstrate the speed and flourish with which a true virtuoso can say it all.

James had realised that the 'adulterine element' in his story might jeopardise its publication in the family magazine for which he originally intended it. 'But may it not', he asked himself, 'be simply a question of *handling* that?' In the novel the topic of adultery as a social unmentionable is given to Fanny Assingham to handle, which she does with her husband as if playing pass-the-parcel, hating to let it go but only allowed to unwrap a little at a time.

The Assinghams' nocturnal confabulations irritate some critics, who appear to think that James only dragged the couple in to have them drop prurient hints about what he couldn't say openly. But this is to ignore their comic function, and their contribution to the background and movement of the narrative. In a typical exchange, they consider the implications of Adam Verver's being so much older than his wife:

' . . . In the first place [says Fanny] Mr Verver isn't aged.' . . .
'Then why the deuce does he . . . behave as if he were?'

She took a moment to meet it. 'How do you know how he behaves?'

'Well, my own love, we see how Charlotte does!'

Bob is not just puncturing the hollow portentousness of Fanny's 'How do you know . . .?' His use of the word 'does' casually implies that something *has* happened, in the midst of a conversation that Fanny is resolutely steering towards the conclusion that it has *not*. Such effects however are subtle, and it is true that the Assingham conversations appear designed to confuse any reader who simply wants to know what's going on. While not denying the charge, James might have countered that something is going on, only not what such a reader might suppose.

At the beginning of Chapter XXIII, as Bob sympatheti-

cally watches Fanny float on deep waters of thought, her voyage is not outward to something just below the horizon, but a deliberate paddle back to where she started from, the bank. The wave-like ebb and flow of the dialogue ('what makes them—' 'What makes them—?' 'Well, makes the Prince and Charlotte . . .') is just a way of lapping Fanny gently towards that bank. For she seeks not the truth, but safety; she is intent not on revealing her conclusions, but on evading them. The reason is that Fanny, who has always felt socially and intellectually inferior to her smart friends, now feels especially insecure; for the Verver ménage seems to be headed for catastrophe, and she thinks she caused it.

Fanny picks away at the scabrous situation, full of guilt, dread and fascination. Her inability to let well, or ill, alone, is in fact the one way in which Fanny *has* caused it. At the party where we first see Charlotte and Amerigo 'placed' side by side socially, Charlotte reflects that 'For herself indeed, particularly, it wasn't a question; but something in her bones told her that Fanny would treat it as one.' She does, and her absurd fussing about Charlotte appearing to be the Prince's appendage is what makes him defend Charlotte and take her part; the thought creeps into Fanny's head for the first time that the Prince might not be all that he is supposed to be, might not 'represent his price'. Whereupon her face, flying 'the black flag of general repudiation', prompts the Prince, in a teasing mood, to respond with wickedly suggestive verbal elaborations. Fanny finds 'his eloquence precious . . . she had even already the vision of how, in the snug laboratory of her afterthought, she should be able chemically to analyse it.'

Fanny chooses to believe, however, that she is to blame for the present situation because she organised the Prince's marriage to Maggie without telling her of his previous connection with Charlotte. Furthermore, although she was not the prime mover in bringing about Adam's marriage to Charlotte, we see her inventing a larger part in that business than we know she actually played ('I was really at the bottom of it . . . I planned for him, I goaded him on').

She cannot be allowed to control the drama to such an extent, for that would make the lovers mere puppets. But her colloquies with Bob brilliantly reveal how Fanny invests herself with guilt and responsibility for the whole affair, donning a hair-shirt that is as much an extravagant assertion of identity as her bizarre clothes. Her ambivalent attitude is evident in her notion that 'if she had stood in the position of a producing cause she should surely be less vague about what she had produced'; if the outcome is in doubt, maybe she is guilty of nothing, but on the other hand the idea that she caused it gives her the right to mull it over and over. That is how Fanny justifies to herself what might be called her voyeurism, but which is more a case of her trying to write her own novel in the margins of James's. Confronted with 'the play of her mind', Bob acts as editor to his wife, 'a large proportion of whose meanings he knew he could neglect'.

But Fanny's vivid imagination makes out of the commonplace of adultery a situation so fraught with evil and danger that, until she can find a solution that will save them, the Assinghams have to take refuge in a fiction: that 'Nothing—in spite of everything—*will* happen. Nothing *has* happened. Nothing *is* happening.' Meanwhile, James's exposition has brought the lovers to the point where they want to be silent and disappear. They know how unwilling Fanny will be to see them go. 'We're beyond her,' says Charlotte, indulgently enough, but later, more determined that Fanny shan't tell their story, 'She's helpless, she can't speak.' James and his co-writer are in an impasse: the novel has reached a point of stasis.

For starting it up again, James had his idea: to bring on Maggie, making her the focus of attention. It becomes apparent that Fanny's most important role in the novel is to prepare the stage for her. Thus her shaky drafts, the product of her obsession with saving the situation and her own skin, condense towards a formula that involves switching her allegiance from the lovers to Maggie. How much Charlotte might have wished to disappear from

Fanny's lurid novel, and how much she resents being kept in it, is evident at the beginning of Book Second when she stops asking Fanny to her dinner parties. But by then Fanny is exalted above such pettiness by her own sense of being involved in a great symbolic drama of salvation.

Henry James could of course have brought on Maggie without Fanny's help. At the start of Book Second, by an extraordinary *tour de force* which owes nothing to her, the lovers with their point of view are blotted out and our attention compelled to Maggie. But from the moment James lets Fanny adorn Book First with comments like '[Maggie] wasn't born to know evil' and 'She'll die first' (rather than botch the business of 'saving' everybody), our impression of Maggie is indelibly coloured: readers of *The Wings of the Dove*, at least, will envisage Fanny wheeling on-stage a fair, frail figure of saintly aspect and saintly purpose. Maggie however is more durable than Milly Theale, and is not extinguished by the knowledge of her wrong: as Fanny percipiently predicts, it makes her sit up and decide to live.

When she has the stage to herself, the exact nature of Maggie's role is less apparent than the speed with which she picks it up. She improvises 'lines not in the text' and says 'extraordinary things' to Fanny, finally coming out with the question Fanny has been dreading: it marks the end of Fanny's attempts to retard and conceal the truth, which at last, in the thirtieth chapter, she is made to name, though she quickly retreats into a denial of it. This is the best Fanny scene in the book: nowhere is she more cunning and resourceful, more extravagantly Fanny-ish, and yet more patently outclassed. For simply getting from A to B, from recognition of the problem to its solution, Maggie is clearly going to be a winner.

And indeed she makes it to the finishing tape, in what looks like a straight race between good and evil, as long as Fanny cheers on the sidelines and Maggie keeps to an undeviating moral line:

'Dearest Maggie . . . you *are* divine!'

'They pretended to love me,' the Princess went on. 'And they pretended to love *him*.'

'And pray what was there that I didn't pretend?' inquires Fanny. Still loath to relinquish a major part in the drama, she makes a final bid for one. Maggie has produced the golden bowl, emblematic of the flaw in her marriage and now literal evidence of the lovers' complicity. But the grand gesture Fanny makes at this point doesn't really derive from a finely thought-out connection between the bowl as a symbol and what Maggie is trying to tell her. Fanny simply cloaks an 'irresistible impulse', encouraged a little by Maggie's hint of excited suspense, in vatic utterance which is also utterly vapid: 'I don't believe in this, you know', and 'A crack? Then your whole idea has a crack.' This last remark Maggie, who is here concerned with being specific, tries to nail to the matter in hand, but she is quelled by more sounding phrases.

What we have in this scene is a drama which the visual symbol of the golden bowl—'inscrutable in its rather stupid elegance'—dominates from start to finish, but it is not symbolic drama, with all that term implies of high seriousness. James's linguistic effects are always finely calculated: if he had been attempting the sort of drama where the tone is uniform, values are fixed and grand gestures *de rigueur*, it is inconceivable that he would have let Fanny come on to fudge the climax with her ham acting and woolly remarks ('Whatever you meant by it . . . has ceased to exist'). When tempted to think of Fanny as John the Baptist, it is salutary to remember that there is something kitschy in her prophetic tone.

Yet Fanny, by making in theatrical terms an unforgettable impression, serves what was James's actual purpose. *The Golden Bowl* is not a tract but a drama, in which we must expect not to be told but to be shown. James had abandoned the method of the omniscient novelist who can demonstrate from a superior position the working-out of moral laws; in

his Preface to the novel he recalls with satisfaction his method of getting down 'into the arena' with

the persons engaged in the struggle that provides for the others in the circling tiers the entertainment of the great game.

When the consciousness that registers events is located not in the author but in a character, or shifts from one character to another, knowledge is necessarily partial. 'In the Cage' and *The Ambassadors* are earlier examples of James using a limited viewpoint to make a banal situation intriguing. In *The Golden Bowl* he was to exploit that limitation to the full, through some of the most complex narrative effects he ever created.

The elaborate verbal devices of *The Golden Bowl*—the sinuous sentences, the allusive dialogues, the truncated conjectures—create a forest of signposts which sometimes appear to point towards some ultimate discoverable truth. The characters grope their way through, acquiring as they go knowledge of various kinds, which cannot always be simply formulated. Maggie wants to know what is going on: one clue is when she senses something different in the Prince's embrace, and James must describe this almost indefinable impression. She wants to know right from wrong, but has got herself into an intricate moral bind, and a sentence like 'you couldn't be sure some of your compunctions and contortions wouldn't show for ridiculous' is the convoluted expression of it. Amerigo wants to know where he is placed, especially in relation to Adam. The passages in Book First where he tries to form a clearcut picture of where he really is are not easy to follow. What strain the reader may feel is the strain of keeping such characters within novelistic limits: backing away from every form of stereotype, they constantly threaten to burst the bounds of acceptable, readable fiction.

They have to be intelligent to cope with it all, and they are, which is what makes their struggle interesting. But Charlotte, it may be observed, is not associated with linguistic complexities: on the contrary, her terse

remarks ('I risk the cracks') are like hammer-blows striking the elaborate conceptual structures that the other characters have built.

Does this mean that Charlotte is less intelligent, and therefore less interesting? No, because Charlotte's role in the novel is not to find out, but to be the plastic material of other people's conjecture and fantasy. The Charlotte-as-beautiful-dummy school of thought does not take sufficiently into account Charlotte's appreciation of this, her self-awareness. She 'knows', for example, that she is 'inevitably to be sacrificed' to the 'humorous intercourse' of the Assinghams, almost as if she were in collusion with James. When Charlotte figures in Maggie's imagination as a tragic errant figure 'having gropingly to go on, always not knowing and not knowing', we must remember that, emotive as the picture is, it is only Maggie's interpretation of the evidence. While the Ververs and Amerigo get tied up in the complicated business of inventing fairy-tales, devising rationales and examining their consciences, Charlotte slips these knots: she remains free, remains 'great', not least because her consciousness is virtually inviolate.

It is sometimes suggested that the elaborate narrative devices which produce the effect of a labyrinthine quest make *The Golden Bowl* 'difficult', with the implication that James is obscuring some ultimate truth wilfully, or worse still unwittingly; but if the prose is difficult (which really means intricate and often ambiguous), that is because James means us to recognise that the truth is complex, and not something that can ever be seen at one glance.

Nor should it be supposed that picking one's way through the technical obscurities to the point where all is light for Maggie is an exercise that in itself reflects some idea of moral triumph implicit in the book. That would suggest that *The Golden Bowl* was appropriate for Sunday reading, when it is in fact as ill-suited to such encounters as Maggie's 'bad-faced stranger in a house of quiet'. And furthermore it is not constructed like a long dark tunnel with a glimmer of