

SELF-TOUCH IN HENRY JAMES'S MAJOR PHASE

by

James Martin

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL

May 2023

Copyright 2023 by James Martin

SELF-TOUCH IN HENRY JAMES'S MAJOR PHASE

by

James Martin

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Andrew Furman, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



Andrew Furman (Feb 22, 2023 13:23 EST)

Andrew Furman, Ph.D.
Dissertation Advisor

Marina P. Banchetti

Marina Paola Banchetti, Ph.D.



Shelby Johnson (Mar 1, 2023 12:53 CST)

Shelby Johnson, Ph.D.



Eric Berlatsky, Ph.D.
Director, Ph.D. in Comparative
Studies



Michael J. Horswell, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt
College of Arts and Letters



William D. Kalies, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, Graduate College

March 2, 2023

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is sincerely grateful to his dissertation advisor, Andy Furman, who welcomed an advisee who simply walked into his office after a previous advisor left the college. He is grateful as well to his exceptional committee members: Marina Banchetti for her intellectual inspiration and Shelby Johnson for her extensive and insightful feedback provided even as her own tenure clock was ticking. His gratitude extends to the entire Departments of English, of Philosophy, and of Languages, Linguistics, and Comparative Literature for the support and enlightenment they provided him during his study.

ABSTRACT

Author: James Martin
Title: Self-Touch in Henry James's Major Phase
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Andrew Furman
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Year: 2023

The three novels of Henry James's "major phase" have alienated many readers in James's own time and today. I draw on the philosophical school of phenomenology, in particular the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a recent extension by the philosopher Richard Kearney, to suggest that a lack of self-touch by characters in these novels has contributed in a significant but previously unnoticed way to many readers' sense that these novels feel frustratingly intangible. I make a comparison to the instances of self-touch in other Edwardian novels to underline the difference. I suggest that James is putting forward a model of "middle-distance intimacy" in which intimates orbit each other at a fixed distance, neither coming closer nor moving further away. This kind of intimacy, for James, privileges the eye that sees from across the room over the hand that touches from up close. While this model of intimacy perplexed many readers in James's time and later, it is a valuable exploration of a different yet—for some—no less satisfactory kind of emotional life.

SELF-TOUCH IN HENRY JAMES'S MAJOR PHASE

List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
Introduction: A Distaste for Late James	1
Chapter 1: Self-Touch in James's Novels.....	12
The Ambassadors.....	13
The Golden Bowl.....	23
The Wings of the Dove.....	29
Chapter 2: Critics' Views of James	37
Friends and contemporaries of James's.....	37
Gay critics	40
Belated critics.....	44
Chapter 3: High-Touch Contemporaries: Bennett, Forster, Wharton, Woolf.....	51
Arnold Bennett.....	54
E. M. Forster	66
A Room with a View	69
Where Angels Fear to Tread.....	72
Edith Wharton.....	77

The Custom of the Country.....	78
The House of Mirth.....	89
Virginia Woolf.....	96
Chapter 4: Low-Touch Contemporaries: Beerbohm, Wells	112
Max Beerbohm.....	112
H. G. Wells	116
Conclusion	122
Appendix: Henry James's novels	125
Early period: 1871-1881	126
Middle period: 1886-1890	126
Interregnum: 1890-1896	126
Late period: 1897-1904.....	126
Unfinished or otherwise dismissed: 1911-1917.....	127
Works Cited	128

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Novels for Comparison to Henry James’s Major-Phase Novels 7

Table 2. The Comparison Novels in Descending Order by Instances of Self-Touch per
Word 8

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Caricature of Harding Edward de Fonblanque Cox by Kite for <i>Vanity Fair</i> , 1909. From <i>Edwardian Fashion</i> by Daniel Milford-Cottam.....	94
Figure 2. "Lytton Strachey" by Max Beerbohm, c. 1925.	104
Fig. 3. <i>Zuleika Dobson</i> , Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1971.....	114

INTRODUCTION: A DISTASTE FOR LATE JAMES

Henry James wrote 19 novels over his career. His popularity peaked early, as Rebecca West recalled: “From 1875 to 1885 (to put it roughly) all England and America were . . . captivated by the clear beauty of Mr. James’s work” (qtd. in Anesko 223). But even during those ten years, his “super-subtlety” attracted some criticism (qtd. in Kaplan 200). His 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady* was described in an unsigned *New York Times* review as “spun out too much, and suffer[ing] the reader at times to exclaim at its dullness” (qtd. in Simon 15). That novel shows patterns that would deepen in his later work: he skips the climactic marriage between Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond, and he leaves Isabel’s final renunciation of love and return to the remote, cold Osmond unexplained (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*). The sentences with which he told his story were luxuriously ruminative, but sometimes frustratingly slow and other times so discreet that they were hard to understand. James’s sales and then his reputation declined as the world changed around him. After the traumatic failure of his play *Guy Domville* in London in 1895, James entered a late period in which his novels became even slower and harder to interpret definitively. His failure to get rich via the stage may have led him to spurn the market and double down on the features that had challenged his readers.

James’s new, slower style frustrated many. In a 1902 letter, Henry's brother William implored Henry to “write a new book . . . with great vigor and decisiveness in the action [and] no fencing in the dialogue” (qtd. in Kaplan 519–20). In 1904, James’s friend, the novelist Edith Wharton, wrote to another friend that James's “books of the last

ten years I cannot read, much as I delight in the man” (“To William Crary Brownell” 287). James's late period begins in 1897 with *The Spoils of Poynton*, but his difficulty climaxes with his three final novels, which make up what the critic F. O. Matthiessen called James's "major phase." These novels, all published in the first five years in the twentieth century, are *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*.¹

Matthiessen's phrase reflects a cycle in James's reputation. James's contemporaries found his late period unrewarding—James was too much himself, doubling down on his worst characteristics of delay, rumination, and inactivity. By the 1940s, the late period had come into fashion and was considered James's greatest. This may have had some connection to the professionalization of literary study and the taste in the American academy of the mid-20th century for difficult texts, epitomized by modernist and post-modernist authors like Joyce, Woolf, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon. Whatever the reason, Philip Fisher wrote in a 1992 retrospective that James's major-phase novel *The Ambassadors* was “One of the master texts of a whole generation of American study,” referring to a mid-century generation of academics (Fisher 235). But in the 21st century, the pendulum has swung back again. Critics once again prefer James's earlier novels. *The Portrait of a Lady* (the final book of his early period) is now James's most-assigned and most-admired novel (Gorra).

The major-phase novels are undoubtedly those in which James is the most himself. His personal interests are carried the furthest in them. Naively, we might imagine that if some of James's perspective is good, more of it would be better. So what

¹ For a more detailed overview of James's novels and their periods, see Appendix.

has made these late novels so unengaging to so many expert readers? Their stories sound appealingly juicy at first. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the journalist Merton Densher pretends to love the dying heiress Milly Theale in order to inherit her money. In *The Ambassadors*, the middle-aged American Lambert Strether discovers that his charge Chad Newsome is having an affair with an older married Parisian, Madame Marie de Vionnet. In *The Golden Bowl*, the nouveau riche American heiress Maggie Verver realizes that her husband Amerigo is having a secret affair with their mutual friend Charlotte Stant. So far, so typical—the stories might have come right from one of the melodramas that Peter Brooks argues James took inspiration from (Brooks).

Yet in two of the novels our suspicions are never verified. We never learn whether Densher truly does love Milly, nor when he first understands that he is enacting a scheme conceived by his fiancé, Kate Croy, to bring them enough of Milly's inheritance to marry on. We never know for certain whether Amerigo and Charlotte have an affair beyond a single kiss. In all three novels, what absorbs James is the wondering, the turning over of hints. For James, it seems that the process of consideration itself has a tactile quality something like the rubbing of a worry stone, obsessive yet pleasurable. Something draws James to dwell at incredible length on moments that many authors would move through quickly.

Each novel has a plot in which very little happens very slowly. The characters speculate about minimal events for dozens of pages. This can make these characters seem both dim and easily shocked: they take too long to figure out secrets they are too surprised by. James's fascination with social hints and epistemology more broadly has been widely remarked upon, as has an emotional quality variously labeled as decorum,

reserve, shyness, or fear. What has been less noticed is that as his characters stand back from the action, they not only choose thinking over acting, they choose looking over touching. Characters very rarely come close enough to other characters to touch them—they stand back, appreciating others as if they were the paintings that James loved so devotedly. Not only that, but characters very rarely touch themselves. Everyday instances of self-touch, things like shaving or sitting with one's hands on one's knees, are described less often by James than by many of his novelistic peers. After hundreds of pages of this absence, we almost begin to feel that James's characters cannot make physical contact with the world around them. They seem ghostly, as if their hands would pass through objects. This reinforces the sense that they cannot come to decisions or take action.

I want to argue that this paucity of self-touch is an important contributor to the frustration these novels have generated in many readers. The French and German philosophers known as the phenomenologists, near-contemporaries of James's, believed that the experience of self-touch in particular is what gives us our sense that we are part of the exterior world. When I touch one hand with my other hand, I feel this single act simultaneously in both hands. According to philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this simultaneous sensation is the foundation of my understanding that I am an object like other objects. When we read about a character touching their own body, this connects us to the character. When a character shaves, wrings his hands, or scratches his cheek, it makes the character feel more real to us. Each occurrence may be barely noticeable, but they gather cumulative power. When these small moments of self-touch are absent, we are more likely to feel that a character seems unreal, even if we do not realize why.

No earlier critic of James has examined self-touch specifically. But many of James's critics have observed that touch between characters—sexual touch above all—seem to be missing from late James, along with decisive action and strong emotion. In an unsigned 1905 review of *The Golden Bowl* for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the twenty-three-year-old Virginia Stephen (later Virginia Woolf) writes that the characters in the novel “remain but so many distinguished ghosts“ (qtd. in Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 263). In his 1915 book *Boon*, H. G. Wells has a character complain that James's characters “never make lusty love, never go to angry war, never shout at an election or perspire at poker” (Wells, *Boon* 106). In his 1927 *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster complains of *The Ambassadors'* characters that “their clothes will not take off” (Forster, *Aspects* 160).

In what follows, I will compare James's three major-phase novels to a group of eight novels by other Edwardian authors. I will count the instances of self-touch in each of the eleven novels; as predicted, I will find that James's novels rank low in self-touch when compared to his peers' novels. But I will also find that this single statistic is not enough to explain whether one of the novels feels “real” in the relevant sense. A novel like Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* has only a few vivid scenes that involve self-touch, but these are enough to make it feel like a high-touch novel. I will need to combine counting with detailed examination of individual instances of self-touch to arrive at an overall assessment of James in comparison to his peers.

For the comparison group, I sought out novels that share most of the following features with James's major-phase novels:

- Published between the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914.²
- Written by a British author. While James was born in America, he moved permanently to England in 1876 and eventually naturalized himself in 1915, so by the first decade of the twentieth century when he was publishing his major-phase novels, he was effectively British.
- Set in Britain.
- Involving characters who are rich or at least comfortable.

² Many historians consider this a coherent period, the “long Edwardian era,” although King Edward VII was succeeded by King George V in 1910, leading other historians to label 1910 the beginning of the Georgian era (Fry 29:00).

Table 1. Novels for Comparison to Henry James’s Major-Phase Novels

Title	Author	Date
<i>The House of Mirth</i>	Edith Wharton	1905
<i>Kipps</i>	H. G. Wells	1905
<i>Where Angels Fear to Tread</i>	E. M. Forster	1905
<i>The Old Wives’ Tale</i>	Arnold Bennett	1908
<i>A Room with a View</i>	E. M. Forster	1908
<i>Zuleika Dobson</i>	Max Beerbohm	1910
<i>The Custom of the Country</i>	Edith Wharton	1913
<i>The Voyage Out</i>	Virginia Woolf	1915

Several of the novels do not meet every criterion. For example, Edith Wharton was an American, but she crossed the Atlantic dozens of times, living the last several decades of her life in France (Lee, *Wharton*). She also wrote about the same social world as James and was a close friend of his, discussing him extensively in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (Wharton, *Glance*). All the novels I chose were at least preponderantly similar to James’s.

Below are the results of counting all the instances of self-touch across the eleven novels. I divided each result by the word count of the novel to produce a score for the frequency of self-touch. I multiplied that score by 10,000 to produce a more readable result, shown below as “instances/words.”

Table 2. The Comparison Novels in Descending Order by Instances of Self-Touch per Word

Novel	Author	Instances	Words	Instances / words
<i>Zuleika Dobson</i>	Beerbohm	30	82,357	3.643
<i>Kipps</i>	Wells	33	113,795	2.900
<i>The Voyage Out</i>	Woolf	35	139,731	2.505
<i>Where Angels Fear to Tread</i>	Forster	11	50,742	2.168
<i>The Custom of the Country</i>	Wharton	28	144,447	1.938
<i>A Room with a View</i>	Forster	9	68,470	1.314
<i>The House of Mirth</i>	Wharton	15	133,562	1.123
<i>The Ambassadors</i>	James	15	168,750	0.889
<i>The Old Wives' Tale</i>	Bennett	19	221,486	0.858
<i>The Golden Bowl</i>	James	10	211,964	0.472
<i>The Wings of the Dove</i>	James	8	191,891	0.417

My perception of a novel as “high-touch” or “low-touch” largely agreed with its score in the table above. Novels towards the bottom of the list usually felt more arid and less physical; I felt less present in them and had less of a sense of connection to their characters. But there were three surprising exceptions. Bennett scores low but feels high; Beerbohm scores the highest but feels low; and Wells scores second-highest but also feels low. Wells is particularly surprising: he criticized James as quoted above and was a figure of scandal for his own affairs and illegitimate children as well as for some of his writing championing a more open sexual life. He attracted particular criticism for his “new woman” novel *Ann Veronica* (1909), for which he based his main character on one

of his known lovers (Sherborne 203). It is surprising to me that the only slightly earlier *Kipps* feels so sexless and so touchless, despite being a love story, and I will need to account for this sensation.

Overall, the novels fell intuitively for me into two groups: high-touch and low-touch.

High-touch: Woolf, Wharton, Forster, Bennett

Low-touch: Wells, Beerbohm, James

In this dissertation I will first discuss James's major-phase novels and their sense of disembodiment. I will then consider the high-touch novels, their instances of self-touch, and what else might make them feel as high-touch as they do. I will follow that with a chapter on the low-touch novels and dwell particularly on the cases of Beerbohm and Wells to account for how my subjective sense of them differs from what my counting and Wells's own reputation led me to expect.

Let me conclude this introduction with a short reflection on the promise and the limits of my largely empirical approach to studying these novels. The empirical approach is in large part a statistical approach. A popular but nebulous term is the "digital humanities." While this can mean many things, one large sector is the use of computers to look for patterns in large volumes of text. This is sometimes called the "computational turn," by analogy with the famous "linguistic turn" in 20th-century analytic philosophy (Berry xi). This is truly a project of the "humanities" broadly conceived—it is not always situated in English or comparative literature departments. But within literary studies, the most influential promulgator of the methods has surely been Franco Moretti. In his 2007 book *Graphs, Maps, Trees* he coined the term "distant reading" (Moretti). The term itself,

I expect, had much to do with the interest in the method. It is pithy, clever, and oppositional, suggesting that the older method of close reading was dangerously near-sighted. Even before Moretti makes this explicit, the phrase “distant reading” itself suggests that we will not only supplement but challenge the results of close reading, built as it was on examining selected moments from an already-selected canon, a double filtering that many regard with suspicion.

The results so far have been interesting but not definitive. It is very hard to identify meaningful patterns in huge collections of texts. It is even harder to argue what these patterns mean to readers, then or now, or what kind of cultural work they do. For me, I think the greatest value of the method is to produce new ingredients for an old-fashioned mill. Personally, I have not found a substitute for the old-fashioned process of introspection and intuition that I hope will lead me to worthwhile reflections on literature, and I continue to judge the value of my results by the reactions of readers more experienced than myself—largely academics.

But I do think that this method has helped me to notice things I would not have otherwise, and perhaps that no one else has previously. I found that James’s characters often had characteristic small gestures, repeated hundreds of pages apart. This suggests that James had a persistent visual sense of each character—a character lived in his imagination partly in terms of how they moved or held themselves physically. I found that James had favorite gestures across his novels: for example, hands in pockets for men and hands clasped for women. This shows a sense of self-containment and withdrawal from action in James’s characters; while this is not a new observation about them, it supports an old observation in a new way. In a time of wide-open prospects for the digital

humanities, distant reading of the kind I engage in here can complement traditional close reading rather than supplanting it. Other digital humanists have made similar arguments; Martin Paul Eve devoted an entire book, 2019's *Close Reading With Computers*, to exploring David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (Eve). Rather than exploring thousands of texts with computational methods, we may learn just as much from exploring only a handful of them—each novel comprises many thousands of small moments, some of which we naturally overlook. Counting methods may help us to avoid “seeing the same thing over and over again,” as the digital humanist Andrew Piper suggests (Piper 72).

CHAPTER 1: SELF-TOUCH IN JAMES'S NOVELS

Henry James's late novels are in some ways ahead of their time. His focus on perception and interior experience, for example, anticipates modernist novels like *Jacob's Room* or *Ulysses*, both published in 1922, eighteen years after James's last major-phase novel. Some treat him as a transitional figure between realism and modernism, or even an early or proto-modernist: consider that a profile of him appears on the website of the Yale Modernism Lab (Domestico). Yet in terms of portraying bodily experience, James was notably behind many of his peers in Edwardian Britain, to say nothing of French novelists like Émile Zola. Zola's explicitness in his 1885 *Germinal*, with its scenes of coal miners in rural France having semi-public sex in fields, remained unimaginable in Britain until long after the Edwardian era (Zola).

David Thorburn, a scholar of the modernist novel, observes that an important aspect of modernist literature is its increased focus on the body: "The representation of sexuality and the representation of our lives in our bodies was one of the central projects of modernism and is one of the central reasons to value modernist literature especially" (Thorburn). This is an area in which the reticent James is more like his Victorian ancestors than his modernist descendants. Looking at self-touch in particular, we will find that James's characters tend to be further away from other characters when they engage in it; James's self-touch has a particularly self-contained quality, and often seems to serve a self-soothing function for the characters. We see this clearly in the novel of James's often considered to be his most emotionally autobiographical: *The Ambassadors*.

The Ambassadors

The Ambassadors opens with the American journal editor Lambert Strether having recently landed at Liverpool on a ship from America. A few miles inland, Strether hosts his censorious American friend Waymarsh in his hotel room. A hearty, masculine, simple American, Waymarsh is ill at ease with European culture. He is unhappy to be headed for libertine Paris. In Strether's room, Waymarsh hopes to tire himself out as the unfamiliar environment has given him trouble sleeping. As Waymarsh sits in conversation with Strether, we read that "With his long legs extended and his large back much bent, [Waymarsh] nursed alternately, for an almost incredible time, his elbows and his beard" (James, *Ambassadors* 29). The moment is not given much focus; we only think in passing that Waymarsh seems stiffer than Strether, more rigidly upright and American, taxed rather than excited to be abroad.

A few pages later, during the same conversation, this gesture is doubled down upon: "Waymarsh seemed to sit stiffer and to hold his elbows tighter" (James, *Ambassadors* 60). Given James's hesitance to describe a character's interior state, it is not too much to read this reiterated gesture as revealing strong anxiety—not just the discomfort of an insomniac, but the near coming-apart of a man to whom the world no longer makes sense. Worldviews clash in this novel, and the free and easy European world is a threat to Waymarsh. Even his name suggests this: in James's original plan for the novel, the character was named "Waymark," showing an unshakable sense of moral direction, whereas "Waymarsh" suggests that he feels the danger of getting lost in the European swamp (James, "Project of Novel by Henry James" 380).

In holding himself, Waymarsh engages in an almost childlike self-soothing. A circuit that would traditionally be between two people—a mother comforting a child, paradigmatically—shrinks to a single person serving as both comforter and comforted. Henry James himself is read by his biographer Fred Kaplan as a son who withdrew in the face of an overbearing father and never reemerged (Kaplan). We may see a ghost of this here. James's self-touch often implies, however lightly, the absence of an expected second party. This same implication is not there in scenes of self-touch from the comparison novels, like Mr. Povey's feeling for his tooth in *The Old Wives' Tale* or St. John Hirst cutting his toenails in *The Voyage Out*. In those novels, characters feel more fully embodied and more present in the world.

Especially because James is so hesitant to tell us directly how a character feels, repeated gestures by characters seem to convey something important about their personalities. Coming so far apart and in such an arid environment, these gestures in James start to seem like the proverbial palm trees that indicate an oasis in the desert. A casual reader will be most affected by the sparsity and shallowness of them, but a reader who focuses on them may worry at them as if they could reveal water in the desert.

There are two other notable repetitions of self-touch in this novel, and they tell us more about a kind of femininity which James admires. The second scene with a repeated gesture comes when Strether is left alone with Madame de Vionnet in her apartment. Vionnet is Chad Newsome's older, married lover; in some way, Strether falls in love with her as well as with the love story between her and Chad. Madame de V.'s repeated gesture is to clasp her hands in her lap. This is a gesture which makes a point of self-

containment and inactivity; James seems to find it typically and admirably feminine, and gives it to many of his sophisticated female characters.

Strether scrutinizes the apartment, which comprises “the first floor of an old house to which our visitors had had access from an old clean court” (James, *Ambassadors* 212). It is by looking intently at the architecture and the furnishings that Strether tries to come to an understanding of “the ancient Paris that he was always looking for” (James, *Ambassadors* 212). Visual scrutiny is how Strether tries to grasp Parisian culture—the phrase “looking for” is well chosen. Madame de Vionnet is similarly an object of contemplation. We sometimes feel that James wishes that all human interaction could be transacted through silent gazes. We read that Madame de Vionnet “leaned back in [her chair] with her hands clasped in her lap and no movement, in all her person, but the fine prompt play of her deep young face” (James, *Ambassadors* 215). Madame de Vionnet works a silent magic on Strether by merely turning her hand. Strether marvels that “he had done nothing; but by a turn of the hand she had somehow made their encounter a relation. And the relation profited . . . by the very air in which they sat . . . by the first empire and the relics in the stiff cabinets, by matters as far off as those and by others as near as the unbroken clasp of her hands in her lap and the look her expression had of being most natural when her eyes were most fixed” (James, *Ambassadors* 216). We are approaching a paradox: Madame de Vionnet increases her intimacy with Strether by doing nothing whatsoever, staying nearly as still as a statue. This is not quite a contradiction, since Madame de Vionnet’s inactivity distinguishes itself from a typical, chattier host would act, so she stands out by comparison. But in James, the more silent a visage, the more it seems to call out for interpretation and the viewer’s involvement. Yes,

James wants us to consider in passing that Strether is a romantic dupe, fooled by a very minimal application of guile. But James's primary point is to dwell on what we all can learn from reading people's faces and gestures as if they were paintings.

The third repeated gesture comes when Strether is surprised to find himself alone with Mamie Pocock. The Pockocks have recently arrived in Paris to bring Chad home. Strether comes to their rooms to speak with Sarah. He finds to his surprise that he is left alone in their space; he assumes "a mistake on the part of the servant who had introduced him and retired" (James, *Ambassadors* 349). He gets to look at their space and divine what he can from its contents, as James's characters often do. But it turns out the servant has not made the mistake of showing Strether into an empty room; Strether realizes that a woman is standing on the balcony but has not noticed him. (Presumably the servant announced Strether, but the woman on the balcony did not hear. Because servants in James are treated more as furnishings than as people, we sometimes realize they must have spoken without their speech rising to the level of narration.) Strether realizes the woman on the balcony is Mamie Pocock. This gives him a chance to scrutinize her while she does not know she is being observed. This is as close to inside information as Strether will ever get in *The Ambassadors*—it is the closest we will get to an information dump of the kind an omniscient narrator might give us.

In this sense Strether's eavesdropping on Mamie Pocock is useful, and so we can see why James lingers on it. James also stretches out this pause because he wants us to speculate alongside Strether and agree that it is valuable; James is quite serious that silent observation is one of the best ways to learn the truth. But there is also something erotically charged about the lingering. Henry Wonham writes that James seeks to "enter a

zone of feeling and experience that exists between moments," where James finds "something more exciting . . . than actual physical intimacy" (Wonham 91). Wonham is writing about *The Golden Bowl*, but his comment applies to this pause between plot moments as well. There is an unaccounted surplus in this moment, a sense that James leans into it. There is a sexual charge that comes both from the delay that Wonham points out and the sense of voyeurism that Jonathan Freedman remarks on (Freedman). Eventually, Strether makes noise to get Mamie to notice him. He pretends to be coming in for the first time: "he went out to her with a step . . . as if he had just come into the room" (James, *Ambassadors* 353). This is an implicit admission that he has done something to be ashamed of.

Strether has previously made fun of Mamie as stuffy and old before her time. Yet he now somehow decides that Mamie is on his side; he decides they both want Chad to embrace love and life in Paris. Mamie, he now concludes, is "in *his* interest and not in Sarah's; and some sign of that was precisely what he had been feeling in her, these last days, as imminent" (James, *Ambassadors* 354). The sign, presumably, is Mamie's lack of reaction. Chad was intended by Mrs. Newsome to wed Mamie, but Mamie does not seem upset by Chad's absence. Strether deduces from Mamie's lack of reaction that Mamie understands Chad has found someone else and approves of it. Mamie supposedly communicates this by doing and saying nothing; by staying behind in the apartment; by using polite formulas that are so impenetrably correct that they are nearly empty, nearly equivalent to silence. Does Mamie in fact have any idea what is going on? We do not know. It is her inactivity that Strether finds so activating, just as he did with Madame de Vionnet.

Like Madame de Vionnet, Mamie's characteristic gesture is to clasp her hands. On page 354, she holds "neatly together in front of her a pair of strikingly polished hands" (James, *Ambassadors* 354). Three pages later, she sits "rubbing her polished hands" (James, *Ambassadors* 357). The clasping of the hands in the lap is a feminine gesture of passivity for James. The polish suggests that Mamie is inhabiting the rules of her home culture, while supposedly also subverting them.

Strether's assumption here is this: "Especially sharp in Strether meanwhile was the conviction that his companion really knew, as we have hinted, where she had come out" (James, *Ambassadors* 357). Mamie is not with Chad—that is who most of all has left her alone in the rented rooms this day. Yet she gives no sign of upset or jealousy. She does not ask about Chad. But Strether is assuming a lot here—assuming that Mamie understands the rules, understands she is being jilted, and is tolerating it. At this point, Strether believes that it is Mademoiselle Jeanne de Vionnet, the daughter, who is in love with Chad. He believes that he and Mamie quietly acknowledge this between themselves. But Strether has little to support this. Still, even if Strether is far from the mark here, his misunderstanding is not important to what James most wishes to express.

The Ambassadors is a puzzle for readers to work endlessly, never arriving at a solution. Though some readers resist the idea, it seems to me we are not intended to solve the puzzle. We might invoke Keats's idea of negative capability, his belief that it is a great virtue in literature to be "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact" (qtd. in Ou 1). James seems to embody a version of this ideal: as Keats believes great writers do, James "resist[s] the instinctive clinging to certitude, resolution and closure" (Ou 2). On the scholar Li Ou's view however, Keats's

negative capability involves “abandon[ing] the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge” and being open to “disturbing or even agonizing” perceptions (Ou 2). James’s version of negative capability, by contrast, is enclosed and emotionally contained. His myopic focus gives the impression of zooming closer and closer into a small space, and this feeling is very different from Keats’s.

For me, what James is trying to express most of all is a kind of emotional connection to others that stays at the perfect distance. Like satellites, James’s characters orbit one another at a distance that preserves equilibrium, neither breaking away nor crashing together. This is a life of the permanent middle distance. Characters like Strether are not exactly alone; rather, they prefer to stay at a distance from their intimates. This distant intimacy is not fake; it is simply different from what most people seek. Although James would not have heard of this idea, the idea of visual “grip” in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provides a powerful and revealing metaphor to illuminate the unusual kind of good life that James is striving to portray.

We should begin with Merleau-Ponty’s idea that our senses have a natural “grip” on the world, an intuitive understanding of the best way to take hold of the things we perceive. The American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (1929-2017) explains Merleau-Ponty’s idea: “We are always moving to get an optimal grip . . . [Merleau-Ponty] talks about how in a museum, your body is just led by a picture to move to the optimal distance to see the maximum richness . . . you are led by the object, calling on your body” (*Conversations with History: Hubert Dreyfus* 34:29). This view of grip is echoed by a phenomenologist of a younger generation, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, who gives this analogy in a 2016 talk: she says that according to Merleau-Ponty, we draw on our natural

sense of grip when “doing something like focusing a microscope.” Someone “might teach you *how* to focus the microscope but they cannot teach you *when* it’s in focus” (*Science in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology* 18:28).

Merleau-Ponty is discussing how perception works, but the 21st-century scholar Sara Ahmed extends his argument into the affective realm in her book *Queer Phenomenology*. The key idea Ahmed takes from phenomenology is that we do not simply reside in a pre-existing world, but we co-constitute that world. For Ahmed, it is each person's "orientation" that determines how they are motivated to constitute the world. We might think of our orientation as a feature that endows certain things in our environment with a gravitational pull on us. The analogy is with sexual orientation, although Ahmed is speaking more generally. We pick out, see, and turn towards those things that are attractive to us. Next we are drawn toward them: we desire to approach, even if this approach may not be realized. We perceive something because we are pulled towards it. We see the things we want to touch. Ahmed writes that “emotions are directed to what we come into contact with: they move us ‘toward’ and ‘away’ from objects” (Ahmed 2). That is to say that “bodies are moved by the orientations they have,” and “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others” (Ahmed 3).

Ahmed describes herself as seeking to marry queer studies with phenomenology. Her goal seems to be to make sexuality a constitutive force of the universe at a more basic level than is often recognized—parts of experience that might seem pre- or non-sexual in fact rely on sexuality. Thus it is appropriate to queer everything. In this picture of the world, the appropriate point of "grip" on everything is right up next to it. It is

always our underlying desire to get close enough to touch something. *The Voyage Out* gives a good example of this when it describes Rachel's love for Terence: "When [Rachel] thought of their relationship she saw rather than reasoned, representing her view of what Terence felt by a picture of him drawn across the room to stand by her side. This passage across the room amounted to a physical sensation, but what it meant she did not know" (Woolf, *The Voyage Out* 216). Love in Woolf's novel is mysterious, but we do know it is attraction in the literal sense, just as Ahmed suggests.

Many have assumed this will be true of all desiring gazes: because Lambert Strether looks at Madame de Vionnet with desire, for example, he must be in love with her and wish to touch her. F. O. Matthiessen subscribes to this when he argues that "what pervades the final passages is Strether's unacknowledged love for Madame de Vionnet" (Matthiessen 39). In psychoanalytic language few would use so definitively today, Thomas R. Deans concurs with Matthiessen that Strether has failed to get what he really wants, or at least should want. Deans judges Strether as deviant or deficient when he writes that "Sexuality for Strether is displaced from genital primacy to an oral scopophilic impulse to introject, and to possess, the erotic scene in precise detail" (Deans 233). In different language than Ahmed's, Deans is expressing a similar idea: to be attracted yet not wish to approach is a paradox, a problem, a sign that something is wrong.

But I propose that Strether had exactly what he wanted with gazing and speculation alone. Pleasurable distance is what James's major-phase characters, particularly Lambert Strether, often want. Many readers react to Strether with puzzlement, and when we are confused, it is easier to assimilate someone else to

ourselves—to assume that Strether wants what we want, but fails through fear or some other shortcoming to get it. But I think we misread Strether if we do so.

James's distinctive universe, with its magnified place for vision and its diminished place for touch, offers a consistent fictional world whose rules are illuminated by the vocabulary of phenomenology. While James leaves many readers with a sense of ghostly dissatisfaction, his alertness to nuance and his rigor in exploring extremes of consciousness have much to teach us if we attend closely and read James on his own terms. One way we may read his hard-to-characterize sexual or romantic energy, which it might be too simple to call either repressed or asexual, is in terms of a desired "grip," a desired distance. Contrary to what Ahmed seems to imagine, the kind of desire that James expresses wants to approach only close enough for an ideal view—James seeks to find an appropriate distance and stay there.

The connection of this appropriate distance to the paucity of self-touch is not immediately obvious, but we can draw a line from one to the other. James's characters touch their bodies rarely, and we get few narrations of feelings that arise within their bodies. This leaves the reader of the novels as well with a diminished readerly sense of embodiment. On the other hand, James spends an enormous amount of time describing sights and scrutinizing them for their meaning. This leaves readers with an expanded sense of vision, a sight characterized for James by what it does *not* lead to—it does not lead to touch. The reader has the sense of the world that James is presenting as normal and even normative. Other people are best not when approached closely but when held at the distance that allows a stream of pleasurable perceptions to flow from them—when treated as if they were paintings.

James is creating a fictional world in which his own experience is not deviant but central. And this gives his major-phase novels, for all their exasperating opacity, a communicative purpose. He is trying to show us through immersion what his world is like, and even to suggest that his way of living is a good way, a way that more should adopt. There is no doubt that James was sometimes lonely and said as much in his letters; he did not always feel satisfied with his isolated way of life. But to me, the major-phase novels are an attempt to explore, both for himself and for his readers, the idea of a different kind of good life, a life based not on total isolation, but on a middle distance from others.

The Golden Bowl

The Golden Bowl is the longest and slowest of James's major-phase novels. It is the novel in which the least happens—it narrates a struggle between two women over a man, but the struggle is conducted through forceful inaction and loud silence. In the end Maggie Verver seems to win back her husband Amerigo and exile her rival Charlotte Stant to America, but little about what happens and less about how we should assess it is clear. We can sympathize with the student of Henry Wonham's who lamented, "I've read over 800 pages in which absolutely nothing takes place!" (Wonham 90). Virginia Woolf might have been thinking of this novel when she wrote that in James's work she could not "find anything but faintly tinged rose water" (Woolf and Strachey 70).

The novel focuses on its four central characters—Maggie, Charlotte, Amerigo, and Adam—but this quartet is always observed by a couple of older friends, Bob and Fanny Assingham. In his major-phase novels, James often avoided having his narratorial voice do the speculating, putting it into the mouths of characters instead. The

Assinghams—like Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*—exemplify this.

The Assinghams are often read as frivolous, shallow gossips, taking their surname at face value. But my favorite reading of *The Golden Bowl* comes from Ashley Barnes, who suggests that the Assinghams are the most important characters in the novel: they are James's model of ideal intimacy, an intimacy that remains at the middle distance (Barnes). While Lambert Strether is only temporarily able to maintain this ideal distance with Madame de Vionnet or Maria Gostrey, the Assinghams have a lasting relationship in which they stay at a middle distance from one another. What holds them in this balance is looking at other characters as if they were works of art. Barnes argues persuasively that the Assinghams are a model of the Jamesian good life.

The instances of self-touch in this novel fit well with characters who stay at a middle distance. As in *The Ambassadors*, they suggest self-containment and self-consolation. In the first instance of self-touch in *The Golden Bowl*, Bob Assingham mulls over the world with Fanny and as he does so he sits “with an ankle resting on the other knee,” meditatively watching his own “extremely slender foot which he kept jerking in its neat integument of fine-spun black silk” (James, *Bowl* 91). Bob is neither taking action nor moving mentally to a new attitude or a conclusion—rather, he is mulling. When Bob later feels reproved by Fanny, we see that he “jerk[s] up his chin, testing the growth of his beard with the back of his hand” (James, *Bowl* 327). Here we see a reaction that we may either read as mild surprise or as utter shock—we cannot be sure whether we should take the jerking of the chin as genuine pain or as comical inflation by James's narrative voice, inflation that in turn could imply either affection for Bob or reproach.

(Determining James's tone towards what he describes often gets harder the more closely you look.) But if we see at least some real hurt in Bob's response, then we read his touching his beard as consoling himself, self-soothing like Waymarsh did in Strether's hotel room.

Two more examples come from a very minor character, a priest named Father Mitchell. Maggie watches him after dinner as we see him “[sit] back with fat folded hands and [twiddle] his thumbs on his stomach” (James, *Bowl* 584). The Father’s action is even more straightforwardly inaction—the twiddling represents stasis and replaces the expected speech. Maggie thinks the priest may finally speak to her and give her advice, but the speech doesn’t come: “nothing came but the renewed twiddle of thumbs over the satisfied stomach” (James, *Bowl* 584).

Self-containment runs throughout the novel. In *The Golden Bowl*, it comes with small, directionless movements, rather than with statue-like immobility as in *The Ambassadors*. Maggie watches her husband Amerigo as he stands “with his hands in his pockets,” looking at the shattered golden bowl on their mantelpiece (James, *Bowl* 500). “Hands in pockets” is one of the most common gestures for a male character across all of the major-phase novels. (Women, having no pockets, clasp their hands instead.) A few pages later, we read that Amerigo has remained self-contained and “kept his hands in his pockets” (James, *Bowl* 505). By this point we have cited six of the ten instances of self-touch in the entire novel.

But *The Golden Bowl* is also exceptional among the three novels for two striking and unusual instances of self-touch. The first involves Charlotte and Amerigo. It comes about 40% of the way through the novel, when we see the couple kiss. The heat of this

moment has no parallel in James's major-phase novels, and it may have none in his entire body of work: "Then of a sudden . . . 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" (James, *Bowl* 285). In this remarkable passage, James describes a dissolution of boundaries, and this is startling in a writer for whom boundaries—of propriety, of the body, and of private consciousness—are so rarely penetrated. The two pairs of lips are described as a kind of common possession—not "each one's lips sought the other's," but "*their* lips sought *their* lips" (emphasis added). I think it is fair to take this literally: a being with two pairs of lips is kissing itself, making this an instance of self-touch. This passage is also an exception to James's rule that we must deduce the interior state of a character from exterior signs. Here, James describes an interaction between "pressure," a physical event, and "response," a state of desire. He does not leave it to us to cross the boundary between exterior and interior—he crosses it for us.

This kiss is sometimes cited as a corrective to the notion that James was afraid of sex or lacking in sexual feeling. For me, though the kiss is striking, it does not obviate the aridity of the novel as a whole. But it does ask us to account for it—where did this unusual moment come from in the work of an author who is so reticent? Some have suggested that James's own feelings towards sex became less guarded as he aged. They cite the homoerotic letters to younger male friends he began to write in the late 1880s (Gunter and Jobe). Another moment often cited is that James, who once disliked Walt Whitman, is reported by Edith Wharton to have read Whitman's famously homoerotic

poetry aloud at her home in the Berkshires with great appreciation (Wharton, *Glance* 186). Some biographers see this as a sign of James's growing comfort with homosexuality, just as they see his dislike of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s as a sign of his earlier discomfort with it (others ascribe this dislike to envy of Wilde's success as a playwright). Yet we can only surmise. Every statement about James's emotional life can be doubted. In the case of his letters, his effusive expression is excessive in a way that may actually serve as an ironic deflation. And since James burned so many of his letters, whatever we think we see is assembled from only a few fragments of the record. All we can say for sure is that the kiss between Charlotte and Amerigo is surprising. For me, it seems hardly to fit in the novel.

The other surprising instance of self-touch comes when Adam Verver is waiting for Charlotte Stant to agree to marry him. Adam has met Charlotte in the courtyard of their Paris hotel in order to head out to lunch—for propriety, they are staying in separate rooms as they are not yet married (James, *Bowl* 192). Charlotte has set down a feather boa and looks for it as they get ready to walk out. Adam finds it: “He saw her boa on the arm of the chair from which she had moved to meet him, and , after he had fetched it, raising it to make its charming softness brush his face—for it was a wondrous product of Paris, purchased under his direct auspices the day before—he held it there a minute before giving it up” (James, *Bowl* 199). The energy here is of attraction not yet consummated, with an eroticized sense of delay. Adam has purchased this item for Charlotte, a purchase far more flirtatious than, say, a raincoat would be. Adam's hand and his face feel the boa simultaneously, and the movement of the hand is mirrored in the movement felt across the face, engaging in a self-touch through an intervening object.

The texture of feathers and the touching of the face both have an eroticism to them, far more than rubbing the fabric of a new raincoat between one's hands would have. Ruth Bernard Yeazell notes for modern readers that a feather-boa is a "snake-shaped wrap of feathers, worn about the neck" (James, *Bowl* 606). The neck is also often an eroticized area of the body, and if we wish to push for symbolism, we can observe that a boa evokes the Biblical serpent that tempted Eve.

There is also a kind of delayed touch between people. On the next page, we read of Charlotte that "She had taken her boa and thrown it over her shoulders, and her eyes, while she still delayed, had turned from him, engaged by another interest" (James, *Bowl* 200). Adam's lips do not touch Charlotte's neck directly, but they nearly do, through the intermediary of the boa. Yet at the same time, Charlotte is looking away, a demure pose (James, *Bowl* 200). There is again the pull between approach and resistance. This takes one more turn when we realize that what Charlotte is looking at is the approach of a courier with a telegram from Amerigo, a telegram which will apparently approve of Charlotte's marriage to Adam; this represents another approach between Charlotte and Adam. Yet then again, if Charlotte is looking to Amerigo in the form of his telegram, this is in another way a withdrawal from Adam. We see Charlotte captured in a frozen moment, turning away in a freeze-frame that can be infinitely scrutinized.

If the moment with Charlotte and Amerigo is sexual, the moment with Charlotte and Adam is at least sensual. Yet there are vanishingly few moments of this kind in this novel about a topic that would seem to lend itself naturally to sexuality, namely the war between a wife and a mistress over control of a man. A most sexual topic finds barely any sexual expression.

The Wings of the Dove

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy wishes to marry the reporter Merton Densher, but is blocked because he does not have enough money to make the marriage respectable. Kate happens to meet and befriend Milly Theale, an orphaned millionaire who is suffering from a never-specified fatal illness. Kate plans for Densher to get Milly to fall in love with him so that after Milly dies, Densher will be left with enough of Milly's fortune to marry Kate. As Densher gets to know Milly, he never reveals that he and Kate are secretly engaged.

What each character understands about the scheme and when is uncertain. When does each character understand that Milly will die? When does each understand that Kate and Densher could benefit? James's ability to hold the questions open while narrating these same scheming characters' thoughts and actions is remarkable. We are not even sure when Milly herself realizes she will die or when Kate conceives her plan.

Closely connected with this is the question of how much love each character feels towards the others. Does Kate want to help Milly, to exploit her, or both? Does Densher intend to help Milly, to harm her, or neither? One common reading of *Wings* argues that Densher really does fall in love with Milly. If so, the novel has a kind of anti-climax at the end of Book 8 and the beginning of Book 9, when Densher first leaves Kate alone as a paradoxical way of expressing his love for her, then seems to do the same for Milly.

Throughout James's novels, at least as far back as *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881, James likes to skip over climactic moments: he will approach them, skip them, and then spend all his energy on their recollection. In *Wings*, Densher insists that if he is to fully continue with the plan against Milly, Kate must reassure him by coming to his hotel room

and sleeping with him. Book 8, Chapter 3 ends with Kate agreeing, “I will come” (James, *Wings* 314)³.

James skips entirely over the meeting that ensues. We pick up in Book 9, Chapter 1 with Densher staying alone in the “plain and small rooms where Kate had spent her last night in Venice with him,” Kate having since returned to London (Foote 187). Densher will not allow anyone else in these rooms; they seem to serve as a kind of real-life memory palace for him: “he couldn’t for his life, he felt, have opened his door to a third person” (James, *Wings* 316). What would it mean to open such a door? It might simply mean having a male friend over for conversation, but especially if we take the rooms as a metonym for intimacy, it might indicate a romantic connection with Milly or even a sexual connection with some other companion. Since James is so delicate, a term like “opening the door” can cover a vast range of behavior. He excels at opening broad umbrellas in his texts through weaving in and out of metaphoric language—it is often hard to tell exactly what he is talking about.

But importantly, it is in being without Kate and reflecting back on her that he feels “his renewed engagement to fidelity” (James, *Wings* 316). James writes that “The actual grand queerness was that to be faithful to Kate he had positively to take his eyes,

³ In many of his novels, James prefers complexity even in his table of contents. *Wings* was originally published in two physical volumes comprising ten “books.” Each book contains between two and seven short chapters. So a typical page header in the Norton edition of *Wings* reads “Volume I, Book Fifth, IV.”

Other novels, like *The Portrait of a Lady*, simply have chapters numbered sequentially straight through the volume(s): Chapters I through LV.

his arms, his lips straight off her—he had to let her alone” (James, *Wings* 316). James skips the sex scene between Densher and Kate not only because he was likely incapable of writing it, but because it is not the moment he is most interested in. It is the reflection that matters.

Kate having left Venice, Densher remains, visiting Milly each day. Densher enters a kind of frozen stasis; he finds that the best way to "pursue" Milly at Kate's behest is to do nothing. This satisfies multiple goals: Densher is afraid that if he speaks too indelicately about Milly's health, Milly will get upset and perhaps decline. He does not know how to explain why he is staying in Venice—in particular, whether or not he is staying for Milly because of a romantic interest in her. And he still does not want to lie explicitly to Milly, seeming to feel that his lies of omission are forgivable as long as he does not lie by commission. Densher apparently believes that not upsetting Milly about her health and/or not pressing the question of whether he is in love with her are kindnesses to Milly.

In the passage below, nothing is happening. But at the same time, it is a detailed explication of all the aspects of the ideal relationship that I have been arguing James believes in.

Destruction was represented for [Densher] by the idea of his really bringing to a point, on Milly's side, anything whatever . . . he was to do nothing . . . He was only not to budge without the girl's [Milly's] leave—not, oddly enough at the last, to move without it, whether further or nearer, any more than without Kate's. It was to this his wisdom reduced itself—to the need again simply to be kind. That was the same as being still—as studying to create the minimum of vibration. He

felt himself . . . shut up to a room on the wall of which something precious was too precariously hung. A false step would bring it down, and it must hang as long as possible . . . He should be able to be still enough through everything. (James, *Wings* Bk. 9 Ch. 2)

Densher wants to stay at a middle distance from Milly, moving neither "further or nearer." Milly is explicitly compared to something "precious" hung "precariously" on a wall—surely a painting. The comparison to a painting is explicit, and Densher can best respect the painting by staying still.

At this moment, Densher engages in the specific self-touch that has most characterized him throughout the novel. Densher is portrayed as an intelligent idler, dreamily vague. This is dramatized by his "head" which is "apt . . . to throw itself suddenly back and, supported behind by his uplifted arms and interlocked hands, place him for unconscionable periods in communion with the ceiling, the tree-tops, the sky" (*Wings* 46–47). James's sense of humor tends to droll overstatement—calling Densher's dreaminess "unconscionable" is a typical example. Densher repeats this gesture on page 55, as he reflects on not making enough money to marry Kate: "The innumerable ways of making money were, no doubt, at all events, what [Densher's] imagination often was busy with after he had tilted his chair and thrown back his head with his hands now clasped behind it. What would most have prolonged that attitude, moreover, was the reflection that the ways were ways only for others" (James, *Wings* 55).

At the anti-climax at the beginning of Book 9 Chapter 2, Densher repeats this gesture once more: "he leaned back on his velvet bench with his head against a florid mirror and his eyes not looking further than the fumes of his tobacco" (James, *Wings*

323). Here Densher is not only turning his eyes from the world around him but looking no more than a few inches upward, making this instance even more self-absorbed—literally more short-sighted—than the earlier ones. At this moment, Densher is most himself: expressing his love for one and likely two women by doing nothing, by staying the sort of ecstatic, sexually-charged paralysis that James finds so exciting.

This climactic paralysis is shortly resolved when Densher makes a typical visit Milly's rented palace, the Palazzo Leporelli, only to find himself unexpectedly turned away. It turns out that the villain of the novel, Lord Mark, has told Milly that Densher is engaged to Kate. This makes Milly "turn her face to the wall," give up on life, and begin her final decline. Indeed, turning her face to the wall is Milly's characteristic gesture. It seems to express a withdrawal from the world, a sense of helplessness both with her illness and with the way the world (in particular Merton Densher and Kate Croy) has treated her. This is not an instance of self-touch, however. Only once does Milly touch herself that we see. When Lord Mark comes to see her in Venice, he realizes for the first time that she may be ill enough that her life is in danger. He asks her, "Do you mean . . . that you're really not well?" (James, *Wings* 269). In response to this, Milly "closed her eyes to what she saw and unresistingly dropped her face into her arms . . . She had fallen to her knees on the cushion of the window-place, and she leaned there, in a long silence, with her forehead down" (James, *Wings* 269). She reflects that this non-response is too heavy and significant not to betray to Lord Mark that she is indeed ill. The transaction of important information through inaction is again characteristic of James. Dropping one's face into one's hands or arms is a typical Jamesian gesture, practiced usually but not exclusively by women.

Kate Croy also has only one instance of self-touch in the novel, but it is an interesting one. It comes only a page into the actual text of the novel, on page 22 of the Norton Critical Edition (just after James's introduction). In the first scene of the novel, we see Kate waiting to meet her father, who has brought dishonor on his family for a never-specified sin.⁴ She examines herself in a mantelpiece mirror as she wonders why the universe would make her family so eminent only to make it so disreputable shortly after. She then reflects that if she is able to look presentable, this is some escape from the stain: "Wasn't it in fact the partial escape from this 'worst' in which she was steeped to be able to make herself out again as agreeable to see?" (James, *Wings* 22). We can take this several ways: A simple, pragmatic, "Well, at least I look okay, whatever else has gone wrong." A moment of vertiginous uncertainty about inner reality, as we might imagine an alcoholic in denial having: "Can I *really* be an alcoholic if I am able to look so bright and presentable at this 8 am meeting?" A sense that reputation is about how people perceive and react to you, and so Kate still has value if wealthy men think she does. But there is also a deeper question, one that obsesses James throughout all three of his major phase novels: What is the relation between appearance and reality? What conclusions do we come to if we pursue the counterintuitive idea that outer appearance is more true than inner reality, or is even the only truth? What we look like *is*, in the final analysis, all that we are.

⁴ In the 1997 film, Lionel Croy is a drug addict, but in the novel the source of his shame is never clear (*The Wings of the Dove*).

Once we have spent enough time in James's universe, this last question will come naturally to our minds when we see Kate examining herself in the mirror. "She stared into the tarnished glass too hard indeed to be staring at her beauty alone. She readjusted the poise of her black closely-feathered hat; retouched, beneath it, the thick fall of her dusky hair; kept her eyes aslant no less on her beautiful averted than on her beautiful presented oval" (James, *Wings* 22). The "oval" is Kate's face. Naming it this way draws out its geometric character rather than the fact that it is a human feature belonging to the body of the person gazing at it. It makes Kate's face the object of her own aesthetic gaze, as if she were an art history student examining a painting. When she looks sideways at her face while turning it away from the mirror, she is trying to see how she would look to a third party. This is something many of us may have done as we regard ourselves in a mirror, but it is unusual to spend an equal amount of time trying to get an awkward side view as we do getting a straight-on view that strains the eyes less. If we take James at his word that Kate gives equal time to trying to side-eye herself, then we see that something is compelling her to try to understand how she looks to others—how she looks not only straight on, in a view that she herself can also see in a mirror, but how she looks to others in ways that are inaccessible to her. This is really a philosophical question, and an unanswerable one: how do I appear to others? Kate's self-scrutiny here is less about vanity than about her chances in the world—is she really ruined if she doesn't *look* ruined? How exactly *does* she look?

These three central characters account for all but two of the instances of self-touch in the novel. The other two are unremarkable: Lionel Croy, Kate's father, is seen "standing before her with his hands behind him" and much later Lord Mark settles his

“nippers on his nose and [goes] back to [a] view” (James, *Wings* 26, 272). (“Nippers” is a slang term James uses frequently for pince-nez; I assume the origin is that pince-nez nip one’s nose.) These are both standard Jamesian gestures of inactive contemplation, but neither bear much weight in the text.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICS' VIEWS OF JAMES

I have argued that James's three major-phase novels have less self-touch than many comparable novels. I have also described the particularities of self-touch in the novels, where we see self-touch expressing containment and withdrawal, as with male characters' hands in their pockets or Madame de Vionnet's clasped hands. It further suggests self-soothing, as with Waymarsh's hands on his knees or Densher's hands behind his head. But what evidence do I have that these features of James's novels had an effect on his readers?

Is the lack of self-touch in James's major-phase novels something that would actually affect the experience of readers who are not tallying up self-touch in a notebook? I believe so, and I take many of James's critics to be reaching for terms to reflect some of this influence. Some critics talk about ghosts or shades. Some talk about sexlessness. Some talk about novels without color or flavor or novels from which much of life has been subtracted. I think these critics are describing a common sensation, generated at least in part by the minimal and idiosyncratic self-touch in the novels.

Friends and contemporaries of James's

It is most striking to notice frustration with James's work among his friends, who we would expect to be well-disposed. The first friend for whom many critics will reach is the American novelist Edith Wharton. Wharton was a long-time admirer of James's. About twenty years younger than him, Wharton had long hoped to meet the older James,

and he finally sent his first letter to her in 1900. They met in person in 1903 and were friends until his death in 1916.

Wharton devotes Chapter 8 of her 1934 memoir *A Backward Glance* to Henry James and the visits he paid her at The Mount, her mansion in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, during the first decade of the twentieth century (Wharton, *Glance* 176). Wharton describes James as thrilled by her love of motoring with a chauffeur in an open-air car (she tore around Massachusetts and around Europe at speeds breathtaking for the time); as insecure about his corpulence and miserable in American heat; as an incredible conversationalist, story-teller, and reader of poetry, particularly of Whitman; and as thin-skinned about his work.

Discussing his work, she makes a complaint echoed by E. M. Forster: each complains that James sacrifices full humanity to Aristotelian unity. Wharton writes, “his stage was cleared like that of the *Théâtre Français* in the good old days when no chair or table was introduced that was not *relevant to the action* (a good rule for the stage, but an unnecessary embarrassment to fiction)” (*Glance* 191). She describes a kind of inhumanity through subtraction in James’s late novels. “I one day said to [James] ‘What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in “The Golden Bowl” in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?’” (*Glance* 191). Wharton talks most about the parsimony of plot and of characters in *The Golden Bowl*, pointing out that the characters seem to do nothing but to reflect on the others in their small group of six (the Ververs, Amerigo, Charlotte, and the Assinghams). But in Wharton’s mention of “the void” and her italicized claim that

Bowl's characters are not human, I see a suggestion that James's characters have no bodily life. Following Merleau-Ponty, I want to suggest that the narration of self-touch helps readers to identify with characters and feel the characters to be embodied like they themselves (the readers) are, and so the lack of self-touch in James's novels may be one unrealized source of Wharton's sense that James's characters are disembodied.

One of the first books on James was published in 1916 by Rebecca West, a writer best-remembered today for her 1941 book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. Like her lover H. G. Wells, West "admired James but found his later writings exasperating, noting that the Jamesian sentence had become 'a delicate creature swathed in relative clauses as an invalid in shawls'" (Sherborne 223). In language similar to Wharton's, West concludes in her book that the characters in *The Golden Bowl* "are not even human" because they do nothing but ruminate on their relationships with each other (West 28). West roots James's own abstention from life in his 1861 back injury, believed to have kept him out of the American Civil War. It was after this injury, West argues, that James "worked out a scheme of existence . . . in which the one who stood aside and felt rather than acted acquired thereby a mystic value, a spiritual supremacy" (5).⁵ West goes beyond simply saying that James's characters are bystanders who think too much; calling them inhuman suggests that she believes an essential part of life is missing from James's late novels.

⁵ Calling this a back injury is taking a side in a debate—James was never explicit about the location of the injury he referred to as an "obscure hurt." James's first birth-to-death biographer, Leon Edel, believed on minimal evidence that James suffered a genital injury which accounted for his lifelong bachelorhood. James's later biographers Fred Kaplan and Sheldon Novick were unpersuaded.

H. G. Wells was another largely admiring younger contemporary of James's; his parody of James in the 1915 book *Boon* brought their friendship to an end, as Michael Sherborne describes in his biography of Wells (Sherborne 228–32). Wells gives a famous image for James overusing his powers on trivialities: he compares James “to a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea” (Sherborne 229).

Gay critics

Many both now and in his own day believed James was gay. This makes the question of his evaluation by gay critics particularly interesting. The most prominent of these gay critics was the novelist E. M. Forster, born about 40 years after James. Forster's splendid personal reflection on the novel, *Aspects of the Novel*, is best-remembered today for introducing the distinction between “round” and “flat” characters, but it features an extended discussion of James and what Forster saw as his shortcomings. This discussion comes in Chapter 8, “Pattern and Rhythm,” which focuses on *The Ambassadors*. Forster argues that James sacrifices too much of his characters' humanity to his desire to write perfectly patterned novels: “So enormous is the sacrifice that many readers cannot get interested in James” (Forster, *Aspects* 159). Forster does not define “pattern” (he gives examples instead), but it seems to mean a kind of Aristotelian unity applied to theme instead of plot: “Everything is planned, everything fits; none of the minor characters are just decorative . . . they elaborate on the main theme” (*Aspects* 153).²

Already we see an elaboration on Rebecca West's assertion about *The Golden Bowl*: James achieves his aesthetic goal through sacrifice and subtraction. As Forster says, “most of human life has to disappear before [James] can do us a novel” (*Aspects* 160). But Forster speaks at greater length about the characters themselves and how much

they are missing: “the characters . . . are constructed on very stingy lines. They are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality . . . Their clothes will not take off, the diseases that ravage them are anonymous . . . Even their sensations are limited. They can land in Europe and look at works of art and at each other, but that is all. Maimed creatures can alone breathe in Henry James’s pages” (*Aspects* 160–61).

If we are willing to stretch our meaning of “touch” into metaphorical territory, we see an explicit trade-off between touch and vision: “[Strether] is the observer who tries to influence [‘touch’] the action, and who through his failure to do so gains extra opportunities for observation. And . . . Strether is capable of observing—through lenses procured from a rather too first-class oculist” (Forster, *Aspects* 154).

Forster is the writer who tracks my thesis most closely of all. He observes that James’s characters see too much and do too little. He notes that their other senses are reduced and that we cannot imagine them naked. Though it was quite rare in the Edwardian era to describe characters unclothed in any British novel, Forster is not alone in his sense that James’s characters are even *less* unclothed somehow. How they can score “less than zero” on this meter is a puzzle, but the sense is not unique to Forster; Stephen Spender will echo it in the 1930s.

Forster had met Henry James in January of 1908, when James was 66 and Forster was 27 (Moffat 94). Forster was deeply disappointed by James and “the fawning and the hush” James cultivated around himself (Moffat 96). He read much of James’s dwelling on aesthetic details as avoidance—to Forster, James was “merely declining to think about homosex, and the knowledge that he is declining throws him into the necessary fluster” (qtd. in Moffat 96).

For each gay critic like Percy Lubbock or F. O. Matthiessen who considers James a master, there is one like Andre Gide who describes James's characters as clockwork automata and opines that James's fiction is "without color, without flavor" (qtd. in Simon 42). But the second really noteworthy criticism of James by a gay critic that focuses on James's sexlessness comes from Stephen Spender. Spender (1909-1995) was a poet and autobiographer who came to prominence in the 1930s along with the other "Oxford Poets," of whom W. H. Auden is the best remembered.

In his 1935 book of literary criticism, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs*, Spender argues that in James's early works, James finds sex either puzzling, "the merest formality," or repugnant: "the very idea of making love has been put into inverted commas, as though it were somehow ridiculous and vulgar" (Spender 32-33). Spender too may suspect James of repressed homosexuality. Spender notes for example that in both *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The American* (1877), there is a relationship between two men that is far "more convincing and more passionate" than the comparable relationship in the same novel between a man and a woman (Spender 38).

Like Forster, Spender also imagines clothes that cannot be taken off. Again, this is interesting because no novel from James's contemporaries would have described nakedness, let alone sex. Perhaps the paucity of self-touch accounts for their sensation, which is a tricky one to justify: how can we account for our modal sense of what characters in a text *would* do, outside of the text? What in the text licenses us to extend their behavior beyond the text? Without answering this unanswerable question, we can observe that Forster and Spender shared the same conviction.

Novels in other European traditions expose nudity much earlier. There are examples in other novels of characters who are partially unclothed—examples that pre-date or post-date James. In the 1605 first volume of what most consider the first modern novel, Don Quixote gets out of bed partially undressed to attack a wine skin in his sleep, taking it for the head of a giant: “He was in his shirt, which wasn’t long enough in front to cover his thighs, and was some six inches shorter behind. His legs were long and scrawny, hairy and none too clean” (Cervantes, chap.36). This is the kind of ribald comedy we see in much medieval literature, the implied exposed buttocks in particular. Of course, many argue that British culture became more sexually conservative in the 19th century than it was before, but even in that century we can see a clear difference between nations. In Balzac’s 1835 novel *Father Goriot*, for example, the villain Vautrin displays his chest hair: “he unbuttoned his waistcoat and exposed his chest, covered, like a bear’s back, with a shaggy fell” (Balzac). This wouldn’t happen in a British novel of the time, but persists in the French tradition. In Emile Zola's 1885 *Germinal*, a novel about the desperate poverty of coal miners in rural France, it takes us only 16 pages to come upon a coal miner waking up with his genitals exposed: "His nightshirt had ridden up round his stomach and he pulled it down, not for decency's sake but because he was cold" (Zola 16). Throughout *Germinal*, Zola imagines miners having sex publicly, lying down in fields of tall grass with their legs sticking up.

The British novel takes much longer to get anywhere close to this point. In her 1915 *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf shows St. John Hirst partially unclothed: “When naked of all but his shirt, and bent over the basin, Mr. Hirst . . . impressed one . . . with the pathos of his young yet ugly body, for he stooped, and he was so thin that there were

dark lines between the different bones of his neck and shoulders” (Woolf, *The Voyage Out* 98). By the time of *Ulysses* in 1922, there is a long scene of Leopold Bloom reading in an outhouse, relaxed with and even pleased by the smell of his own feces: “He read on, seated calm above his own rising smell” (Joyce 152). James stands out not only from novels in other language or from other time periods, but even from near-contemporaries in his hesitancy to show any part of the body unclothed (as Woolf will do only a few years later) or to refer to the interior of the body (as Bennett does with the episode of Samuel Povey’s tooth in *The Old Wives’ Tale*).

To continue into contemporary writing, the gay author Colm Tóibín’s 2004 novel *The Master* imagines James sympathetically as a repressed gay man (Tóibín). A review of the novel by the gay critic Adam Mars-Jones is warm towards the novel but cool towards James, observing of James’s opaque sentences that “We shall not read their like again, with any luck” (Mars-Jones). Impressed by Tóibín’s handling of James’s sexuality, Mars-Jones observes that here Tóibín has outdone James himself, as “James naked was some thing [*sic*] that even James seems to have had difficulty imagining” (Mars-Jones).

Belated critics

If gay critics are those who on the whole are most critical of the disembodied sensation arising from James’s major-phase novels, a group that we might call belated critics are the least so. I use this term to refer to critics who are writing in the wake of a hundred years of James scholarship; critics in this position typically make complexly qualified statements, navigating between the various positions staked out by their predecessors. They typically correct what they consider to be earlier misunderstandings of James.

I will consider two of these belated critics. Thomas Otten argues that touch is not really missing from James; I will suggest that he focuses one novel from James's late period and makes it over-representative, when in fact that the absence of touch holds for all three of James's major-phase novels, a much larger portion of his late output. Ashley Barnes argues that the absence of touch and the body in James suggests not a failure of relationship, but a new vision of relationship: her terms involve putting surface over depth, and she connects that to putting Catholic culture over Protestant culture. My terms involve distance and "grip," and I do not take a religious line, but Barnes has influenced my argument heavily.

Otten's 2006 book is well-aware that it enters a long tradition of James scholarship. He wants to nuance prior ideas about James. In a style with a taste for paradox, he observes that he wants to "get at some meanings in Henry James that criticism's obsession with vision has made hard to see" (Otten 39). In particular, he argues that criticism drawing on Thorsten Veblen's theory of commodity culture treats commodities as "primarily visual," and as a result such criticism has "abstracting effects" that are untrue to James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, which focuses on "the point of contact between the human hand and the objects that lie immediately adjacent to it" (Otten 39–40). Otten is thinking of earlier Veblen-inspired criticism of James like that by Jean-Christophe Agnew (Agnew).

Otten's argument in brief is that Anglo-American culture in the era of *Poynton* (the 1890s and 1900s) made a strong connection between tasteful interior design and the touch of the hand. Tasteful objects reflected individuals' preferences and their "personal touch," so to speak, and should ideally not be machine-made. In turn, objects offer us

certain opportunities for touch and so "figure forth an ideal body" (Otten 50). It is easy to see how objects elicit certain behavior from us: we do not grip the dainty handle of a coffee cup in the same way we grip the weighty handle of a beer stein. Otten argues that objects were believed to go even further in shaping or producing proper bodies. He further argues that a genteel kind of wear was another mark of taste—"As the individually owned object is handled, its edges wear down; the boundary between the body and its property dissolves" (Otten 51).

The larger function of this discourse is to reify class. Tasteful people own tasteful objects; tasteful objects make tasteful people. These objects cannot simply be purchased with money, just as "a social-climber cannot acquire the correct . . . tone because he cannot unlearn . . . his early training," as Otten quotes William James from a discussion of the persistence of habit in *The Principles of Psychology* (qtd. in Otten 52). "Because it is such a thoroughly bodily matter" in the 1890s-1900s discourse of interior design and of physiology, "class is incontestable" (Otten 53).

Otten's argument is elegant and broadly informed; he draws in not only various interior decorating texts (including Edith Wharton's first published book, *The Decoration of Houses*), but Francis Galton's pioneering 1892 work *Finger Prints*⁶. Yet Otten's argument does not destabilize mine that late James as a whole still prefers vision to touch. In the major-phase novels, vision remains primary, and this is a much larger body of work than *Poynton*, a novel that is also far less read.

⁶ This was Galton's spelling of the then-unknown term which he did much to promote.

Additionally, while Otten makes an argument that the line between the hand and the coffee cup is dissolved in the discourse he examines, if we step back to a more conventional view that distinguishes bodies and inanimate objects, we can observe that the touch in *Poynton* is not human touch: it is people touching objects, not touching themselves or one another. In examining *Poynton*, I found only ten instances of self-touch, for example (James, *Poynton*). The characteristic gesture of self-touch in *Poynton* belongs to the tasteful yet avaricious Mrs. Gereth, who is in danger of being deprived of her lifetime of carefully acquired antiquities. The gesture is a bit on the nose: Mrs. Gereth three times rubs her hands together with eager appetite (James, *Poynton* 81, 173, 177). Supporting my earlier claim that James often imagines characteristic gestures for his characters, Mrs. Gereth twice is described as rubbing her hands “slowly.” While Mrs. Gereth here expresses her greed or eagerness to repossess her “spoils,” the gesture shows her keeping to herself. Other instances of self-touch fit into James’s general pattern: an instance of a man with his hands in his pockets, an instance of a woman covering her face with her hands (James, *Poynton* 92, 213).

Otten shares with Ashley C. Barnes a basic tactic: reading literature alongside an extra-literary discourse for the illumination it offers. For Otten it is interior design. For Barnes, it is “theological history” (Barnes 3). Her splendid book *Love and Depth in the American Novel* argues that late 19th-century American fiction promotes an ideal of love that is shallow rather than deep. She argues that “characters like [Harriet Beecher] Stowe’s Eva and Tom or James’s Fanny and Bob Assingham do not gaze into each other’s souls or plumb each other’s depths. The world does not disappear when they are together. Instead they interpret the world of discourse—the Bible [for Eva and Tom], the ongoing

story of their friends' affairs [for Fanny and Bob]—they inhabit together" (5–6). The love couples like these find is "genuine and enduring, but not deeply revelatory."

For Barnes, the root of the ideal of love as merging with your lover is "Protestant Bible reading" as opposed to "Catholic mass-going"—a Protestant assertion of solitary depth-diving as real love of God and hence real love of one's human partner. The ideal of communal love is a counter-reaction from within American Protestantism, a swing back towards the lost idea in "a Protestant co-opting of Catholic practices that is aimed at deflecting the depth drive" (5).

There are two very powerful ideas I hope to take up from Barnes. The first is that a "shallow" love may be real, enduring, and genuine. Especially in earlier James criticism, there is a persistent idea that James's characters have failed to achieve intimacy, just as James himself did in his life. Barnes gives a theoretical backing for looking at James's couple relationships as successful on their own terms—even perhaps as superior to "deeper" relationships, which in James's works are often doomed.

The second is that Barnes puts sexuality to the back. She grants that eros is implicated; "James imagine[s] a love both less erotic and more persistent: the seemingly endless desire of friendship and shared curiosity," and so part of communal love is perhaps a lower erotic temperature (2). But her study is really about love and not about sex. We can imagine Fanny and Bob with a rollicking sex life or with none at all; this is not the essence of what makes their love communal rather than revelatory.

This bears on an important idea. In one traditional view, a good romantic relationship must involve a flourishing sexual life to be truly satisfying: a flourishing relationship implies, requires, and perhaps depends essentially on flourishing sexuality.

After all, this view holds, romantic relationships are largely just the social costume that sexual relationships wear. This view is implicit in much psychoanalytic thought.

But Barnes does not put sexuality at the core of her discussion. One way of considering James is that his idea middle-distance love is fundamentally asexual, since characters do not come close enough to touch. But we can also consider middle-distance love without thinking it entails any particular sexuality. One powerful idea from the pioneering queer theorist Gayle Rubin, put forward in her essay "Thinking Sex," is that one of the sexual "ideologies [that] operate together to constrain us" is "the excessive importance placed on sexual behaviour (compared to other behaviours like our eating habits, for example)" (qtd. in Barker and Scheele 48). We might simply chose to place less importance on the sexual aspect of love in James. In fact, we may choose to look at James's ideal middle-distance relationship in one of three ways:

- Fundamentally about sexuality: an asexuality he desired or a homosexuality he feared or covertly embraced
- About an intimacy that entails a particular sexuality but is not primarily about it
- About an intimacy that does not imply or depend on any specific sexuality

One reason James's ideal did not fit smoothly with the world around him is that he wanted a sexuality that his world did not have a place for. Fred Kaplan's biography describes James visiting America and meeting with his old family friend Charles Eliot Norton, the Harvard art historian: "Norton could not imagine that James had no regrets about being childless," and found James "a most pathetic figure in his solitude" (qtd. in Kaplan 498). But it is important to be agnostic on this issue. By bringing to bear a rich

discourse that stands aside from queer theory or other discussion of sexuality, Barnes offers a useful alternative frame for the Jamesian ideal of intimacy.

CHAPTER 3: HIGH-TOUCH CONTEMPORARIES: BENNETT, FORSTER,
WHARTON, WOOLF

Why is the representation of touch important to consider? Part of the repressiveness of Victorian and Edwardian culture was that its imaginative literature was touch-poor. It seems likely this made Britons' real lives more touch-poor as well. This would be sub-optimal, since for most people (perhaps excepting some neurodivergent people), touch is nourishing and beneficial; a study has shown, for example, that "Basic human touch . . . leads premature babies to gain weight" (Kearney 103).

In a recent book, the philosopher Richard Kearney argues that we are undergoing a crisis of touch in contemporary Anglo-American culture. Kearney makes the important point that it is not only under-representation of touch that can damage our relationship with this important sense: over-representation can damage it as well. Kearney calls out today's enormous online pornography industry and the coincident epidemic of loneliness; super-abundant sexual media seems to be standing in for real sexual life for many today. Kearney writes, "The more virtually connected we are, the more solitary we become. We 'see' brave new worlds but 'feel' less and less in touch with them. Optical omnipresence trumps tactile contact. Cyber connection and human isolation can go hand in glove" (Kearney 4–5).

But in Henry James's novels we may find a cautionary qualification of Kearney's message. In some cases, James prompts us to ask, can it be genuinely nourishing to connect only through the eye, without connecting through the skin?

It is worth digressing into Kearney's argument to show how we may repurpose part of it in support of James. Kearney argues that touch is the most important sense because it is the most mutual. He cites Husserl on the importance of self-touch and double sensation: only touch is perfectly reversible—when we touch our fingertips together, both digits are equally subject and object (Kearney 46). He then extends this (somewhat shakily) to argue that touch between people is also the most mutual sensory interaction. Bad touch is that which tries to ignore this mutuality, riding roughshod over the other without taking them in; good touch is that which incorporates the feedback, selfhood, and otherness of the other; that which accepts being an object of another's touch just as much as the agent of touch. So mutuality depends on permeability, on risk. There is thus an ethical meaning to touch. Touch is the sense that most requires us and most allows us to be open to others, to be vulnerable, to truly connect.

Kearney then makes an etymological argument. He suggests that without realizing it, we have adopted touch as our baseline for a good sensory relationship, and so we describe the praiseworthy use of our other senses in terms of how touch-like they are. We call good use of the other senses "tactful." The tactful use of sight he calls "insight," which he defines as "something experienced by anyone who gazes deeply into nature and feels embraced by its gaze" (Kearney 25). When we do this, we have "the experience of seeing and being seen at the same time: a tactile double sensation . . . This deeply synesthetic way of seeing beneath mono-optic perception signals an amplification of all the senses at once . . . In short, in spite of the ubiquity of 'spectacle' in our digital age, there exist other ways of seeing. And such tactful insight is by no means confined to exceptional visions . . . but is available in the most simple perception of things" (Kearney

26). In Kearney's idea, touch gives us the example for the best way to use all our senses. Touch is both the origin of and the best location for ideal sensory experience.

But if sight can provide a truly tactile experience, then could not it in fact stand in for touch, at least sometimes or for some people? If there were no visual alternative to spectacle, then touch would be irreplaceable, but there is. Indeed, James seems to find both ecstasy and intimacy in the visual, in particular in the sight of a graceful, exquisite woman across a room, engaged in conversation but coming no closer.

We may sometimes imagine James as a personality with a deficit, only able to tolerate the less-nourishing but less-overwhelming experience of sight instead of touch. At other times we may imagine him as Barnes does, as someone wise enough to understand that plunging into intimacy is ultimately destabilizing and unsustainable. At still others, we may imagine him as someone trying to express an unusual, perhaps even neurodivergent personality, a personality that does not share most people's hope that insightful vision will ultimately cash out in touch.

But while this is essential to us to remember as we reserve judgment on James, we should still examine what many other novelists of the 1900s and 1910s were bringing into literature. The presence of touch and the body were to be important to modernism, as David Thorburn observed above. The pre-modernist school of naturalism also increased its representation of touch and the body: "Zola and later naturalistic writers, such as the Americans Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, try to present their subjects with scientific objectivity and with elaborate documentation, sometimes including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature" (Abrams and Harpham, "Realism and Naturalism")

335). As the 20th century began, there was an ongoing process of bringing touch more into Anglo-American literature, a process that would continue later in the century.

Arnold Bennett is interesting as our first high-touch contemporary to consider. While he hardly describes sex or emotionally warm touch, he does show his characters living in their bodies with a kind of resigned acceptance that James would never depict. Bennett's characters are embodied and embedded in the world. Bennett achieves this with a few powerful instances of self-touch and description of embodiment in general, showing that it is not simply a count of instances that makes the difference, but the quality of those instances, as my discussion of his novel *The Old Wives Tale* will show.

Arnold Bennett

Arnold Bennett was one of the most successful novelists of Edwardian England. In 1917, Bennett was “an immensely successful professional novelist; his name sold newspapers [and] people recognized him in the street” (Trotter, *The English Novel* 133). Several things contributed to the quick decline of his reputation. He wrote too much, resulting in work of uneven quality, and appearing uncouth to the rising modernists who preferred long meditations over their work before publication. He openly hoped to make money from his writing where the modernists sought to be avant-garde. And most damningly, he was attacked by Virginia Woolf in her 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” written in response to his critical review of her first properly modernist novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922). Even critics with no allegiance to modernism felt that Bennett's work fell off significantly after World War I, to such an extent that Walter Allen wrote that “It is scarcely possible not to see him as a war casualty” (Howarth 4). Today Bennett is rarely taught or read.

But at least since Margaret Drabble's influential 1974 biography of Bennett, English professors have periodically rediscovered and championed him (Drabble). There is a consensus that his best works are the novels he wrote set in the pottery-making district he grew up in in central England, a district referred to in his work as The Five Towns, though in reality it comprised six towns that fused into the single municipality of Stoke-on-Trent in 1910. Most agree the greatest of these novels is *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), the story of two opposite sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines (Bennett). Constance is as constant and conservative as her name leads one to expect, but Sophia, while "wild" and daring—she runs away with a salesman to Paris—only survives, never gaining much wisdom.

The scholar David Trotter argues that, uniquely among Edwardian novelists, Bennett writes novels in which the heroes neither fall nor rise. The fall was associated with naturalism, with Emile Zola and a quasi-Darwinian, deterministic pessimism. The rise was associated with Victorian novels in which characters arrive at wisdom or spiritual regeneration. Both plots rely on self-revelation, a kind of epiphany in advance of Joyce's use of the term: through a clarifying struggle, characters are revealed to the reader and to themselves. But "Most unusually for a novelist, Bennett was interested in the way people remain in ignorance of themselves, and in the way such ignorance creates an identify" (Trotter, "Avoidance" 717). Bennett's characters do not come to understand themselves, and as a result they do not change, exactly. Rather they settle more fully into themselves. Bennett's term for this was "declension": "Declension involves a gradual loss of energy, will, presence significance. But there is a gain . . . of definiteness . . . In the end, in Bennett's novels, loss and gain are hard to distinguish, as they are in many

people's lives" (Trotter, "Avoidance" 719). Trotter associates Bennett's characters and their lack of self-knowledge with the ideas of Freud: "Bennett's [narratives] resemble Freud's" (Trotter, "Avoidance" 723). Without saying so explicitly, Trotter is praising Bennett: while Virginia Woolf saw Bennet as retrograde, Trotter associates Bennett with Freud, one of the most cutting-edge intellectuals of the Edwardian era. Further, Bennett's novels, unique in their half-sad, half-satisfied examples of lives in declension, are similar to "many people's lives," and this means presumably that naturalistic novels of a fall or Victorian novels of a rise are less so. Trotter thus implies that Bennett has pulled off a mimetic triumph that further elevates him: Bennett has represented a truth about human lives as they are really lived, a truth that other novelists have overlooked.

Trotter's book on the Edwardian novel in its historical context is an exceptional work. Though muddled by its reliance on the theoretical terminology of its time, Trotter's book makes many powerful and stimulating observations, drawing on truly exhaustive reading. Trotter observes that "towards the end of the [nineteenth] century . . . description in general became more minute" in novels (Trotter, *The English Novel* 201). This meant that characters' physical features, including sexually arousing ones, were increasingly described. In addition, Trotter argues that the way physical features are described changes: they are increasingly described not as indexes of character—the way an early Victorian like Dickens or a late Victorian like Bram Stoker had done—but as features of the body and targets for sexual arousal. He gives the example of reactions to scars in particular: "If Victorian scars express moral identity, Edwardian scars provoke desire" (Trotter, *The English Novel* 202).

The Old Wives' Tale is not a particularly sexual or scandalous book, but it does follow the trend Trotter describes of increased representation of the body. In contrast to James's late novels, we see the inside of the body represented. There are five representations of lips from the inside, for example, on pages 10, 88, 238, 381, and 493. Four of these involve a character expressing a worried frustration, as in the first example: "Sophia, short of adequate words flushed and bit her lip" (Bennett 10). The fifth is a gesture people still commonly use when they want to focus: "She bent low to the task . . . putting the tip of her tongue between her lips, and expending all the energy of her soul and body in an intense effort to do what she was doing" (Bennett 88).

Many of the instances of self-touch are conventional gestures that indicate an emotion or interior state. Biting of the lip is common. Also common are gestures with the hands: rubbing hands to warm up (105, 413), clasping hands in happiness (11), folding hands in contentment (545).

The two most interesting instances I will take in reverse order. One is a little-commented-upon moment when Constance first starts to realize that her husband Samuel Povey has caught the illness that will lead to his death.

A little uncomfortable suspicion shot up in [Constance]: Surely there's nothing the *matter* with him?

Something — impossible to say what — caused her to bend still lower, and put her ear to his chest. She heard within that mysterious box a rapid succession of thin, dry, crackling sounds: sounds such as she would have produced by rubbing her hair between her fingers close to her ear. The crepitation ceased, then recommenced, and she perceived that it coincided with the intake of his breath.

He coughed; the sounds were intensified; a spasm of pain ran over his face; and he put his damp hand to his side. "Pain in my side!" he whispered with difficulty. (251)

The sounds Constance is hearing are called "crackles" by doctors ("Crackles"). Bennett may have consulted medical literature in his description, since Wikipedia gives the same comparison he does for diagnosis of "fine crackles": "This sound can be simulated by rolling a strand of hair between one's fingers near the ears" ("Crackles"). Bennett is also accurate in saying that the sound comes more often and more noticeably on the inhale than on the exhale.

Constance has no medical understanding of Povey's symptoms. His body is an enigma she approaches with fear and perplexity, though we have no doubt that he has caught his illness from emotional exhaustion—his illness is symbolic.

An even more interesting example is Povey's tooth. Povey begins as an apprentice in Constance and Sophia's parents' dry goods shop. "Dry goods" was an old-fashioned name for "the class of merchandise comprising textile fabrics and related things . . . (as opposed to groceries)" ("Dry Goods, n."). At this time, rather than buying all one's clothes ready-made, it was more common to buy fabric and have clothes made by a tailor or make them oneself. There is a comical example of this on page 171 where a well-off collier (a coalminer) asks to buy some of the shop's very best cloth to have a coat made up for a dog. Mr. Povey, now the proprietor, refuses: "Cloth at 12s. a yard on a dog's back indeed!" he responds, incensed. "I will thank you to get out of my shop!" (171). A dry goods store carried fabric of many kinds, as well as some small items that were premade; Constance and Sophia's mother Mrs. Baines indicates that the shop carries

“underwear, gloves, silks, and so on” (39). The Baineses’ store also contains a millinery, an arm that makes and sells women’s hats.

One way to read the episode of the tooth is as a judgement in miniature on Sophia's character. Olga Broomfield argues that a characteristic excellence of *The Old Wives' Tale* is that its opening scenes forecast the entire novel in miniature—everything will be important later. Nothing "just happens" in the way it sometimes does in long, early novels where characters may just hit the road and have a series of unconnected encounters⁷. In line with this view, we may see the tooth as both Sophia’s first rebellion and an encapsulation of her story as a rebel. Reading the novel for the first time, we expect Sophia to rebel. She does rebel. She is deeply disappointed. She learns to survive on her own. But in Trotter's reading, her values do not change or expand—instead, she imposes her home on Paris.

If we side with Trotter's reading against Prose's, we can look to the episode of the tooth as prognostication. Sophia takes things in her hands—showing an impish disregard for inherited rules, but making a not unserious attempt to solve a problem. She is in her way a radical, going to the root of the issue by going to the root of the tooth. But her attempt achieves nothing.

She does not get in trouble. Prose observes that Constance will marry Samuel Povey, who "as far as we know, never learns that he was the subject of his sister-in-law's

⁷ In English, we sometimes use the term "picaresque" for these episodic novels, though the term is properly reserved for novels that are not only episodic but focus on the adventures of a *picaro*, an "insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alteration of character through a long succession of adventures" (Abrams and Harpham, "Novel" 253).

experiment in dentistry" (Prose xiii). Even if he does eventually learn the story from Constance, it happens off-stage; Sophia's experiment does not have echoes within the text beyond the reckoning between the two sisters. Sophia's disruptiveness does not alter the plot any more than Constance's compliance does.

Prose sees Bennett's novel as "the sort of literary love affair the occasionally transpires between a writer and a character in a novel . . . here, between Arnold Bennett and Sophia Baines" (Prose xvi). In Paris, having broken with her family and then breaking with her selfish and ill-chosen husband, Prose sees her as "perpetually learning" such that the novel becomes an "astonishing bildungsroman" that describes her ultimate "psychological and spiritual triumph" (Prose xvi, xviii).

Trotter's view is nearly opposite. Sophia "frees herself from Gerald . . . by reverting to the Baines values of enterprise, thrift, [and] self-denial" (Trotter, *The English Novel* 21). Rather than surviving by moving forward, she survives by moving backward. To Trotter, Sophia persists in radical Paris by ignoring it. Bennett "writ[es] his declension plot *over* the degeneration plot of Zola's *Nana*"—Sophia lives in the same convulsed Paris that Zola's novel described, but runs her Pension Frensham largely unaffected by the convulsion (Trotter, *The English Novel* 139). We do not feel that she is stupid or unaware, but rather that the events are unimportant to her. Bennett, to Trotter, cares above all about a "poetic of unawareness," about characters who do *not* come to understand themselves in a profound way. These characters do not fail to understand themselves as much as they succeed in realizing there is no self-understanding to be had. Accepting this is wisdom. In this light, I will revise my earlier statement that Sophia gains no wisdom: realizing there is nothing to do but to inhabit the conventions and the personality we find

ourselves with is all the wisdom we can achieve. In simply persisting and remaining herself, Sophia does all we can hope to do.

Critics have often puzzled over "Sophia Baines's experiences of the Siege of Paris," the 1870-71 climax of the Franco-Prussian war (Edwards 592). Trotter offers the neatest explanation of why Bennett sets Sophia's life in a convulsing city and then does not engage with that city. Ryan John Edwards makes an unpersuasive argument that the solution to this puzzle is that Bennett "foregrounds Sophia's remarkably unremarkable activities during a period in international conflict" in order to dissolve our overconfident distinction between the historically significant and the quotidian, "implicat[ing] a critical reassessment of the interplay of history and the everyday" (Edwards 592). But I am inclined to agree with Trotter and with Charlotte Jones, who notes that the real revelation about the two sisters is how similar they are: "the passionate, impetuous Sophia has lived almost exactly the same life as Constance, who married the draper's assistant, had a son and stayed in the house she was born in all her life. For Sophia, living through the siege of Paris and the Commune 'meant chiefly that prices went down'. There is some irony in that observation, but it is not harsh or bitter. That, says Bennett, is what it is to be human" (Jones).

Indeed, we might make an argument that of the two sisters, it is Constance who Bennett prefers. Each sister is named after a virtue. Constance is undeniably constant. The irony is that she is timid and conventional, and her faithfulness is sometimes offered to those who do not deserve it, chiefly her son Cyril, a spoiled glutton who becomes a self-satisfied dandy who leaves her for art school in London. Constance's book of the

novel ends with the picture of Cyril's disordered bedroom, all that he has left behind for his mother.

So we might expect the next book, named for Sophia, to show Sophia living a freer and better life, a life we should aspire to. But in fact, what Sophia learns is to turn back to the English wisdom of her mother, rather than adopting the ideals of Paris where she comes to live. The word "wisdom" is used only twice in direct connection with Sophia: on page 69, her mother yields to "Sophia's complete inability to hear reason and wisdom" (Bennett 69).

Later, after she is abandoned by her husband, Sophia is saved from starving on the Paris street by two courtesans. She is at first grateful to them, but finds their French effusiveness, childishness, and dependance on men revolting. She comes to believe that "she, Sophia, knew all that was to be known about human nature. She had not merely youth, beauty, and virtue, but knowledge – knowledge enough to reconcile her to her own misery" (Bennett 378). In this passage Bennett lets us know how heated Sophia is and leaves us suspicious of her insights, but this is still somewhat a genuine realization: Sophia is turning away from dependance and connection, twice shy after having been once bitten. This is in a way wise (the husband who abandoned her, Gerald Scales, was an exploitative liar she should not have trusted), but it also represents rejection of French openness for English stoicism and self-reliance. Sophia's wisdom consists in returning to the ideals she was brought up with. Eventually Sophia becomes partners with Madame Foucault in running her boarding house before taking it over entirely. Rather than Sophia adapting to Paris, she adapts Paris to herself. "Sophia was happier than she had been for

years. She had a purpose in existence; she had a fluid soul [Madame Foucault] to mold to her will according to her wisdom" (Bennett 404).

Sophia learns to become more like Constance. Dependability and unswerving direction are what enable her to thrive in Paris, just as her mother's conventional and unreasoned maxims allowed Sophia to insist that Gerald Scales marry her before seducing her. This is not to say that Bennett holds up Constance as a hero—he shows us her shortcomings. He himself lived a much larger life than the one he was born to, and while he surely felt that the appropriate horizons for men and women were different, he does not feel that all was simply for the best in the best of all possible small towns.

When he brings Sophia and Constance back together in the fourth book of the novel, we see that in fact his deepest conviction seems to be that there is not much to be known or to be done. Whether we live a sweeping and outwardly radical life like Sophia or a small and conventional life like Constance, we end up at much the same place. Life is a mystery to be observed and adjusted to more than to be penetrated. Yet the unthinking and rigid conventions of Bursley are mostly a force for good in both sisters' lives. We might ask where this value comes from given that this wisdom is held by rote and not by reflection—Bennett himself may resist foreign ideas, but he resists them only after first engaging with them. Bennett is far more of a philosopher than Mrs. Baines ever is.

So Bennett seems to have two conclusions, perhaps contradictory: first, "a smaller, more conventional life is wiser—get married." Second, "it doesn't matter what you do. Life sorts out the same no matter what." *Conservative* seems too narrow a word for someone with the philosophical awareness, psychological insight, and rueful humor

of Bennett. Yet no character in *The Old Wives' Tale* finds their way to a fundamentally different life—the novel does not end in change but in return and rest. World-historical change does happen—not only in Paris, but finally in Bursley as well, as the Five Towns federate into one in the closing pages of the novel, over Constance's passionate but ineffective objection. Yet the novel's characters' neither change the world nor are changed by it. Life is a mystery that we simply continue on in, and our wisdom consists in realizing that is all there is to do.

The novel's final paragraph is moving, unexpected, and yet fitting. Sophia has a small dog named Fossette; the dog is elderly and is left behind when both sisters have passed. After a 611-page novel (in its 1911 edition) that has ranged from Bursley to London to Paris and through the lives of three generations, we end with the dog. We are reminded that "the infirm Fossette" is the "sole relic of the connection between the Baines family and Paris," inviting us to see this moment—unseen by any human character in the novel—as containing a summary of the impact of France as a whole and of the novel's whole central story of Sophia's custom-breaking (Bennett 611). Fossette "was conscious of neglect, due to events which passed her comprehension. And she did not like it. She was hurt, and her appetite was hurt. However, after a few minutes, she began to reconsider the matter. She glanced at the soup-plate, and, on the chance that it might after all contain something worth inspection, she awkwardly balanced herself on her old legs and went to it again" (Bennett 611–12). What makes this passage so touching and beautiful is that Fossette stands in for all of us. In one sense, Bennett condescends to her—she does not understand the death of Constance just as so many Bursley residents do not understand their world or the rules they live by. Her emotions are wounded in a

childish way. She is motivated by self-interested appetite. For all this, we may look down on her. She also has not changed at all—though her legs are now old, she repeats the same behavior she has evinced all her life. The extent of her realization is to return to the same habit she has always had—to get over it, to Keep Calm and Carry On. Yet Bennett's ultimate claim is not just that this very English value system is better than the French. Rather, his claim is that this is all there is to do in life. We may feel slightly mocking or sad towards the old French dog. But she has done all there is to do in life, just as we must do.

One way of evaluating life is to look at the outcome, the decisions made. In this sense, nothing has changed. Another way to look at life is the wisdom or the emotional sense with which we regard our lives. In this sense, Bennett has brought us to a bemused, somewhat rueful understanding that for all the limitations we may see—social and personal—this life is all there is. Fossette is all of us, and to look down on her is to look down on ourselves. There is in the end nothing to do but to keep going, and it seems that the choices we make really make very little difference to the path we must continue to walk along, one old leg at a time.

We can draw a comparison with James here. Bennett's sisters persist—they stay themselves, and continue to live. Though Bennett's book is reserved about sex and does not detail a great deal of touch, some of the comedy and some of the characters' humanity comes from living inside their bodies. From Povey's trouble with his tooth to Constance's difficulty in getting out of her house, "partially incapacitated by her sciatica," to vote unsuccessfully against the federation of the five towns at the end of the

novel, characters persist in their bodies with a kind of mild ruefulness (Bennett 603). They do not change much.

In James by contrast, characters often do change. A number of his novels end with a central character making a grand if puzzling resignation, stepping further back from the world. Isabel Archer does this at the end of *Portrait*, giving up her suitor Caspar Goodwood only a page after sharing a kiss “like white lightning” with him, returning instead to her marriage with the remote Gilbert Osmond in an ending that has perplexed and provoked readers ever since 1881. Lambert Strether does it at the end of *The Ambassadors*, refusing to marry his friend Maria Gostrey and returning to a likely emotional exile in the United States. While James’s characters do not step further back from their bodies, they never step further into them, maintaining the distance they have held from corporeal reality all along.

E. M. Forster

This sense of incorporeality frustrated a younger novelist who initially admired James: E. M. Forster (1879-1970). Forster published five novels in his lifetime.⁸ All are about the call to connect deeply with other people: his famous motto is “only connect” (Forster, *Howards End*). What stands in the way of connection is the gulf opened by Edwardian British respectability; other cultures—Italy and India—give Forster examples of more genuine ways of life. Today, Forster’s novels live on in beloved film adaptations, especially the 1985 Merchant-Ivory production of *A Room With A View* (*A Room*). Five

⁸ His sixth novel, *Maurice*, was openly homosexual. Forster wrote it in 1913-14 but withheld it until it was published posthumously in 1971.

films were released between 1984 and 1992, and they helped to form ideas of romance for many of my contemporaries.⁹

But there is an irony here: Forster himself "would not allow any of his novels to be made into films" during his lifetime, as he felt they would be co-opted by Hollywood and the American cultural machine (*Journey* 4:52). And now the films are remembered by many as models of thrilling and sincere heterosexual romance, befitting a writer whose "favorite novelist was Jane Austen" (*Journey* 26:37). But Forster was a homosexual who endured "decades of hiding his homosexuality" (Moffat 20). In his early years, Forster doubted whether he could ever live a sexually or emotionally fulfilled life. This was not a permanent feeling for Forster—within about 15 years of his graduation from Cambridge, he found "a whole set of gay men" and a social world to fit into (*Journey* 14:45). He eventually lost his virginity in Alexandria, Egypt, at the age of 37, volunteering as a Red Cross medic during the First World War. He spent his old age in a supportive three-person relationship with a bisexual man and his wife, as Wendy Moffat revealed in her 2010 biography. But at the time when he published his first novels, he was skeptical about a happy ending for himself of the kind he gives Lucy Honeychurch and George Emerson in *A Room with a View*.

The literary critic Santanu Das observes that after publishing *A Passage to India* in 1924, Forster came to feel that "he could not write what he wanted to write anymore within the structure of the standard heterosexual novel, the novel that ends with marriage

⁹ The films are *A Passage to India* (1984); *A Room with a View* (1985); *Maurice* (1987); *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1991); and *Howards End* (1992).

or a birth, and as a result he reject[ed] the novel form" (*Journey* 36:14). After this Forster wrote essays and talks for the public—in later life, he became best-known as a BBC broadcaster and a defender of liberal values. For fiction, he wrote only short stories which he did not publish. His remarkable story "The Other Boat," which appeared only after his death, details a homosexual encounter and a murder with a frankness his novels never approached (Forster, "The Other Boat").

Even within Forster's early novels there are coded yet definite homosexual allusions—to the poetry of A. E. Housman in *A Room with a View*, for example (Herz 149). "How does the shadow of a homosexual romance" in *Room*, Judith Scherer Herz asks, "shape our reading of the heterosexual marriage plot?" (Herz 142). More pointedly, to what extent should we feel that these early heterosexual love stories are undermined?

Though this may be a minority view, I find Forster's heterosexual love stories rich, fully inhabited, and sympathetic. He is particularly good at writing about women. Lucy Honeychurch in *Room* and the Schlegel sisters in *Howards End* give a feeling of depth and mysterious truth. Forster's cardinal virtue is compassion, even for those he dislikes and protests against, and this compassion illuminates all his characters. In a diary, Forster wrote, "I can understand the drought of others, though they will not understand my abstinence" (Moffat 79). That is, Forster can understand others' struggle to connect even if they cannot understand his. The marriage-plot novel was not able to contain all of the story that Forster wanted to tell; in particular, his homosexuality and his curiosity about sadomasochism pull at the fabric of his early novels, stretching them somewhat out of shape. But Forster seems to love all his characters, even those who come the closest to being villains. In *Room*, Cecil Vyse "has a human complexity even if

he is chiefly the object of the narrator's satire" (Herz 144). In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, we identify with Mrs. Herriton as she rages at the disruption of her tidy life by her daughter-in-law's improper engagement: "It upset her more than anything, and again and again she struck the banisters with vexation" (Forster, *Angels* 16). In the literary climate of 1905, this phrase is both shocking and moving—it feels starting to see a proper matron explode with anger, and we feel Mrs. Herriton's anguish and sense of powerlessness. Forster can always momentarily become the character he is writing about, even a character like Mrs. Herriton who represents what he is protesting. No character escapes his empathy. There is a frustration in Forster's early novels that his country does not offer him the same compassion he offers it, but this does not eliminate the sincerity of his work.

We may draw a contrast with Virginia Woolf, whose attitude toward the previous generation is less understanding than Forster's. In Woolf, there is often scorn for her antecedents. In her essays especially (far more than in her novels), Woolf can be snobbish, but she is a snob who hates most of all the previous generation of snob, those "eminent Victorians" that her close friend Lytton Strachey mocked in his famous book of that name, a book remembered as "an oedipal massacre of discredited father figures" (McCrum). Forster's remarkable balance of compassion and criticism is one of the most striking and admirable features of his work as a novelist.

A Room with a View

A Room with a View is the story of the growth of Lucy Honeychurch. Though she is a traditional and stiff Englishwoman, we know from her eloquent piano playing—a mode of self-expression she shares with Woolf's Rachel Vinrace—that she has it in her to

be genuine, human, and emotional; even her name suggests the sweetness she may grow into. Lucy's growth comes in accepting that she loves the "wrong" man, the young George Emerson, a shocking dissenter from Edwardian proprieties. To find her way to George, Lucy must repudiate the repressed Cecil Vyse, who is far more than a villain or a foil but nonetheless fills the romantic-comedy role of the wrong man.

We never know quite why Lucy loves George. He is handsome (this is clear from the bathing scene at Sacred Lake in Chapter 12) and she seems to admire his freedom, but she is more drawn to what he is not—conventional—than to what he is. We never get a clear sense of what it is about George's personality that draws Lucy; Herz observes that George is the character "most looked *at*" but he "remains only lightly looked *into*" (Herz 143). In this way Forster's novel falls short of *Middlemarch*, where we see just what it is that Fred Vincy loves about Mary Garth—that she will make him his best self. This is perhaps an unconvincing part of Forster's novel—is it the old myth of "love at first sight"? On the other hand, perhaps we resonate deeply with people subconsciously—we may know we fit well with a partner years before we know why.

There are two interesting scenes of self-touch in *Room*. First, Lucy wakes up in the Vyse household from a nightmare. This is a subconscious sense that her life with Cecil—whom she has temporarily accepted—is ill-fitting, not what she truly wants. She is shown touching her cheek, twice: "sitting upright with her hand on her cheek. . . still covering one cheek with her hand" (Forster, *Room* 130). She is looking to her body for knowledge here, in a way: feeling herself to try to understand how she feels. The other interesting instance comes from Cecil. Twice he covers his eyes: "Cecil laid his hand

over his eyes . . . moaned Cecil, again laying his hand over his eyes” (Forster, *Room* 148).

Each of these gestures is mentioned twice, suggesting they are an important part of Forster’s imagination of these scenes. The effect on a reader in each case is to quietly make us identify with the character. We not only see Lucy sitting up from a nightmare; when we read of her touching her cheek, we momentarily imagine ourselves doing the same thing, and join empathically in her position. Similarly with Cecil: Cecil represents the wrong values, and he is not only superior but sometimes cruel and constantly what we would today call mansplain-y. But we also feel for him as someone trapped in his own character, knowing no better; this is made explicit when he reacts to Lucy’s breaking off of their engagement not with rage or entitlement but with a sense of self-recognition and of the abyss opening beneath him. In this scene on page 148, we feel not only Cecil’s disdain; the covering of his eyes makes us feel his real personal discomfort and disease. As with Lucy, we momentarily take Cecil’s position, imagining ourselves with our own eyes covered.

Criticism of *Room* has recently focused on whether Forster is truly telling the story he appears to be telling. How sincerely is he invested in the story of Lucy’s growing up into self-understanding and choosing the right marriage? “Does one read [*Room*] as one would a Jane Austen novel with the heroine Lucy Honeychurch, like [Austen heroines] Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet, coming to learn who she is and what she wants through false starts and confusions . . . finally rewarded by the right husband (not her mistaken first choice) at the end?” (Herz 138).

I would argue that Forster's novel is not exhausted by its conventional love story, but it does inhabit that story sincerely. We stand with his characters and look out from inside them, feeling with them and for them. Lucy's growth as a person does not make her into an ideal, fully-realized person of the kind Forster can barely imagine, but her growth is a precondition for that full realization.

Self-touch plays a role in my assessment. I believe that it takes us into the selves of the characters and lets us look through their eyes as few other things do. This makes us side with the characters and believe in their stories. It helps us to read these early novels as mostly what they purport to be, perhaps even more so that the self-critical Forster realized.

Where Angels Fear to Tread

Forster's first novel tells the story of Philip Herriton. Herriton is sent from England to Italy to rescue his sister-in-law Lilia from an impulsive marriage to Gino, a poor and conventionally macho Italian. When Lilia dies in childbirth, Herriton is sent back to retrieve the child, but the child dies in an accident. Herriton returns to England with Caroline Abbott, a family friend who has helped persuade him to see Gino and Italy more positively. About to confess his love to Caroline on their train ride back, Philip decides instead to remain alone forever when Caroline confesses that she is in love with Gino.

Lionel Trilling was the first to note that *Angels*, published in 1905, was similar to James's *The Ambassadors*, published two years earlier. Like Lambert Strether, Philip travels to another country to try to put an end to a love affair his home culture censures, only to learn that it is his home culture that is in the wrong. Like Strether, Philip turns his

back on love at the end of the novel and resigns himself to a life alone. Sam Alexander of the Yale Modernism Lab argues that "the real tragedy of Philip's life" is not that Caroline has fallen in love with someone else, but that Philip cannot master his "inability to commit himself" (Alexander). There is an "undeniable homoeroticism in Philip's relationship to Gino," and while I would not read Philip as a closeted homosexual, his story of withdrawal does seem like one that would resonate with a homosexual author like Forster who, at this early stage of his life, could see no way to an expression of love for himself (Alexander).

Like *The Ambassadors*, *Angels* ends in renunciation and a melodramatic exaggeration of its own tragedy. It is certainly Forster's most Jamesian novel. Yet from its first pages, we are already in a different world of touch than Henry James ever inhabited. Mrs. Herriton expresses her anger at the shame Lilia will bring to the Herritons this way: "again and again she struck the banisters with vexation" (Forster, *Angels* 16). This kind of physical expression of anger would never appear in James's novels of 1900-1910. Characters have bodies in a way they do not in James. At one moment, Philip Herriton "stumble[s] away to wash his hands," a kind of bodily maintenance never acknowledged in James (Forster, *Angels* 24). No character would make their toilet in this way in James; skin is never explicitly evoked, so dirt has nothing to soil. Things may appear shabby or worn, but this is an optical and never a tactile characteristic. In the scene where Philip first meets Lila's intended, Gino, we see dirt very often: Gino's hands are "not particularly clean, and did not get cleaner by fidgeting amongst the shining slabs of [his] hair" (Forster, *Angels* 24). Gino hides behind a "dirty" curtain and "his starched cuffs were not clean either" (Forster, *Angels* 24). Compared to the suppression of the

body in James, this scene feels indecent: when we imagine dirt, particularly on people's skin, we imagine how we feel when we ourselves are dirty. Implicitly, the body is called into our minds.

What is dirty at this point will later become what is earthy, what is natural: the presence of the uncouth body which shocks Philip will later be celebrated. The dirt only appears in this scene, as we look through Philip's shocked eyes.

Indeed, self-touch in this novel goes along with the theme of lack of restraint. The next instance is Gino laughing at Philip because it turns out that he and Lilia are already married, not merely engaged, so Philip has arrived too late. Gino explodes into laughter: he "gasped and exploded and crammed his hands into his mouth and spat them out in another explosion" (Forster, *Angels* 31). He is childlike and unable to contain himself. During this exchange in Philip's room, Gino also shakes Philip "by the shoulders" and gives "him an aimless push, which toppled him onto the bed" (Forster, *Angels* 31). Gino seems to feel an enthusiasm too big for his body. Like a child, he simply does not know what to do with himself. There is also an undertone of boyish roughhousing or wrestling, with its own undertone of sexuality. For such a mild-mannered and kind man, Forster has a surprising lifelong interest in sexual sadism; we may speculate that this began in a childhood where wrestling was the only sanctioned physical contact between boys, giving a sexual charge to play or even bullying. Forster himself recorded that he felt sexual excitement writing the later scene where Gino twists Philip's broken arm in anger, and a clear strain of sadomasochism appears in his posthumous story "The Other Boat" (Forster, "The Other Boat"). But the feeling of Gino's roughhousing with Philip is not that something implausible happens, explicable only as a cover for something else.

Rather, we feel something real and human if mysterious is being transacted. In the Edwardian context, Forster's novel brings a blast of emotional openness that surprises and thrills.

Philip also demonstrates that self-touch coincides with emotional climaxes. At the end of *Angels*, the carriage with Philip and Harriet in it is overturned. Philip is "a good deal hurt," breaking his arm (Forster, *Angels* 129). He sits and "rock[s] himself to and fro, holding his arm" (Forster, *Angels* 129). As he attempts to get his bearing, he "trie[s] to light a match, holding the box in his teeth and striking at it with the uninjured hand" (Forster, *Angels* 130). At this moment of crisis and emotion, Philip is living in his body, trying to deal with it very concretely. Never in James would we see a character struggling to navigate a physical action like this.

Where *Room* is the happiest of Forster's early novels, *Angels* is more muted. Characters experience real joy and real insight during the novel, but it ends with an unhappy triangle. Caroline Abbott is unhappily in love with Gino, who is unavailable because he has remarried. Philip Herriton is unhappily in love with Caroline, resigned to being the lifelong friend who will help her to forget Gino. Gino himself is unchanged. Not quite a villain at first, he is not quite a hero at last; he is simply the opposite of everything English, with both good and bad consequences. Caroline and Philip end trapped in their English propriety; Gino has no self-inflicted wounds, but he is a victim of circumstance, having lost his son, his greatest joy. The tragedy seems very large—too large for the novel. Sam Alexander is right to observe that the novel "climaxes in a 'song of madness and death' but at points crosses into the territory of farce" (Alexander). At this early point in his career, Forster oscillates between English reserve and Italian expression

but cannot yet imagine a marriage of the two; the only English-Italian marriage ends in death. Yet already we see the important place for touch and the body which will continue throughout Forster's work; it is in part through self-touch and touching others that Gino expresses himself and inhabits his life, and a more touch-rich environment is a substantial part of what Forster models for his fellow reserved English readers.

Edith Wharton

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) grew up in New York City, reaching adulthood as the tide of Gilded Age *nouveaux riches* swept over the stuffier aristocrats of "old New York" (Wharton, "Old New York"). She began adult life as the unhappy, intellectually lonely wife of a Boston aristocrat, Teddy Wharton, living in several homes on the East Coast of the United States. As she neared her 40s, she began to break away. She published her first book in collaboration with the architect Ogden Codman, a manual on interior design called *The Decoration of Houses*. She followed this with a first novel in 1902 and became a famous best-seller with her second novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). She divorced and spent the balance of her life in Paris and the French countryside.

Wharton was an admirer and later a friend of Henry James's, and for some time she was seen as a lesser acolyte of his, but there is a more sociological, ethnographic strain in her writing: she understood much more about the push and pull of the markets that actually generated wealth, and was more direct and insightful about the economic and sexual power plays that circulated in her world. James seems to have been permanently sheltered in a way that Wharton was not; Wharton's work often laid bare the savage politics cloaked by gentility, leading one critic to label her work "drawing-room naturalism" (Emmert).

Another long-term development in Wharton's writing was an increasing acceptance of her own sexuality. Her marriage to Teddy was a cold and sexually unsatisfying one; her loneliness with Teddy likely found expression in her 1911 novella "Ethan Frome" (Wharton, "Ethan Frome"). Her writing acquires more sexual warmth in her 1917 novella "Summer," which she called the "hot Ethan" (Wharton, "Summer").

This trend reached its apex in the unpublished fragment "Beatrice Palmato." This fragment was discovered by Cynthia Griffin Wolff "in Wharton's papers at Yale, in time for [R. W. B.] Lewis to include it as an appendix to his biography [of Wharton] in 1975" (Lee, *Wharton* 795). This fragment is a straightforward piece of erotica, "an experiment in taboo-breaking, an exercise in writing sexual fantasy" (Lee, *Wharton* 799).

Along with its greater expression of sexuality, Wharton's work gives a fuller description of touch in general and self-touch in particular than James ever did. In Wharton's novels, we see far more of the body made real through self-touch. The most impressive and characteristic examples come in her 1913 novel often regarded as one of her masterpieces, *The Custom of the Country*.

The Custom of the Country

The Custom of the Country is the story of the continual rise of Undine Spragg, a midwestern American *nouveau riche* who conquers first New York and then France, leaving ex-husbands in her wake. Sarah Emsley, editor of the Broadview edition of the novel, writes that reviewers "were alternately fascinated and repelled by" Undine and Wharton's "depiction of American society as greedy and immoral" (Wharton, *Custom* 422). Undine continues to receive varying assessments from critics; Emsley writes that "the question about Undine has been, is she monstrous or not monstrous? If she is not monstrously immoral, to what extent does she simply treat her husbands the way women of her class were treated by men?" (Wharton, *Custom* 28).

Critics who see the positive side of Undine may focus on her self-assertion, particularly when it comes to her sexuality and her sense of her own body. Undine is spoiled and manipulative, but she is also an unabashed advocate for herself just as Edith

Wharton became. Wharton's own life was a story of increasing self-assurance and self-assertion, and so there must be some piece of Undine that she admires. While Wharton was not a doctrinaire feminist, she broke with New York convention in moving from her frigid marriage through a sexually fulfilling affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton to a divorce from Teddy Wharton in 1913. This awakening coincided with her awakening sense of vocation as a writer, which brought her both fame and her own income. We must see some parallel between Wharton's self-assertion and Undine's. Wharton's biographer Hermione Lee gives an astute assessment: Wharton looked down on Undine because Wharton "believed in an old-fashioned idea of society as an entity with distinction and some moral function and was appalled by its decomposition" in the hands of characters like Undine. Yet this partial view of Wharton "does not allow for the relish, energy and appetite with which [Wharton] plunges into the invention of Undine . . . and it does not do justice to Wharton's passion for the idea of getting what you want" (Lee, *Wharton* 611).

Of the 28 instances of self-touch in the novel, ten involve Undine. Of those, fully half depict her putting on or taking off clothing or accoutrements (Wharton, *Custom* 56, 90, 91, 104, 116). This goes to show Undine's concern with appearance: she is vain, yet also shrewd about how much of her value on the marriage market comes from how she looks. One of the most interesting passages is Undine's very first instance of self-touch, which reveals a good deal about her character:

This time her fears were superfluous: there were to be no more mistakes and no more follies now! She was going to know the right people at last—she was going to get what she wanted!

As she stood there, smiling at her happy image, she heard her father's voice in the room beyond, and instantly began to tear off her dress, strip the long gloves from her arms and unpin the rose in her hair. Tossing the fallen finery aside, she slipped on a dressing-gown and opened the door into the drawing-room.

(Wharton, *Custom* 56)

We see here Undine's childish impatience: she is eager to implore her father for a new dress in which to attend a dinner she has been invited to by Laura Fairford, sister of her future husband Ralph Marvell. But the verbs here are striking. She "tears" off her dress with a force that approaches violence. Although she puts on a dressing-gown at once, the removal of clothing—let alone its tearing off—is something we could never imagine in Henry James. In an era when erotic energy was often so deeply buried, it is startling to see a woman so eager to be unclothed. This resonance is amplified by the verb "strip" in the next sentence. Undine seems, on the one hand, angry at the gifts her father has given her because they are no longer the *right* gifts: she wants new and different clothing, and her old clothing is only an impediment. Her ingratitude is highlighted here. She "toss[es] the fallen finery" aside just as she will later toss aside Ralph, her finely aristocratic and ineffectual husband. She is even impatient with herself. It is the essence of Undine that she is never satisfied, and we see in the final paragraph of the novel that she never will be: "She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (Wharton, *Custom*

409).¹⁰ What is desirable to Undine is defined by her not having it: it is endlessly deferred. At the root of her over-esteem of herself is an under-esteem of herself: she will never be enough, never find a point of satisfied equilibrium. There is a whisper of violence against herself as well as against her father in her discarding of her clothes.

But there is also an implied eagerness to be naked. Undine seems to have some sexual hunger, or at least hunger for what sex may be able to get her. Wharton will express sexuality further in “Summer” and in “Beatrice Palmato”; we see this beginning with Undine, though it is always money and status Undine cares most about. We may also observe that Undine also wants to be entirely unrestrained in her movement, whether her movement through society or the movement of her body.

Men are largely stymied by Undine. Two of the male characters express this with similar gestures. Undine’s father Abner Spragg seems aware that his daughter oversteps and manipulates him but is largely powerless to resist. When he is worried, stalled, or frustrated—nearly always by her—he expresses this by worrying at his facial hair. He does this first as he listens to Undine complain that Ralph Marvell, now her fiancé, is not as wealthy as she had thought: “Mr. Spragg heard [Undine] out in silence, pulling at his beard with one sallow wrinkled hand” (Wharton, *Custom* 115). Later he makes a similar gesture when Undine implores him for money: “Presently he raised a hand to stroke the limp beard in which [his] moustache was merged” (Wharton, *Custom* 186). Much later in the novel, Undine tries to force Ralph, now her ex-husband, into giving her money by

¹⁰ Undine cannot marry an ambassador because she is divorced, an insurmountable bar to such a marriage at the time.

demanding custody of their son, whom Ralph loves and Undine is indifferent to. Ralph goes to Mr. Spragg to ask what is happening, and Mr. Spragg again expresses his frustration with Undine quietly: “Mr. Spragg drew his beard through his hand. ‘The ladies are apt to be a trifle hasty’” (Wharton, *Custom* 312).

Ralph Marvell uses the same gesture to show the same weak will: “Small, well-knit, fair, he sat stroking his slight blond moustache” (Wharton, *Custom* 59). The gesture at first seems simply ruminative, but in retrospect we realize Ralph is another man who has been run over by Undine. Ralph is a lawyer and aspiring writer, likely to be thoughtful and perceptive, but in his small outline and his slight moustache we see early intimations of weakness. The impression is reinforced on page 81: “The hand with which he stroked his small moustache was finely-finished too, but sinewy and not effeminate” (Wharton, *Custom* 81). In this passage we are looking through Undine’s eyes via free indirect discourse; Undine is making excuses for Ralph, finding that he is masculine enough for her to be attracted to him—she is rationalizing away her own initial impression that he *is* effeminate: “She had always associated finish and refinement entirely with her own sex, but she began to think they might be even more agreeable in a man” (Wharton, *Custom* 81). We regularly see Undine rationalize in favor of others when she desires them for advancement, and then rationalize against them once she has gotten what she wanted. However we may disapprove of the implied ideal of traditional masculinity here, we can recognize that Wharton is giving us early signs that Undine will be able to dominate Ralph.

And indeed, the climax of Wharton’s novel is Ralph Marvell’s defeated suicide. After Ralph and Undine have separated, Undine extorts Ralph over custody of their son

Paul. Though Undine is indifferent to Paul, she realizes that Paul will pay money to keep him. Ralph goes to Elmer Moffatt, a crass speculator from Undine's hometown, for an inside tip on a Wall Street deal to make the necessary money quickly. When the deal fails, Ralph suffers two coincident shocks which drive him over the edge.

Moffatt's deal falls through, and Ralph has to consider both that he will not be able to pay for his son and that he will not be able to repay his emergency loan from his friend Clare van Degen. He lashes out in anger at Moffatt, and Moffatt is angered in turn and throws in Ralph's face what readers may have already guessed: Moffatt was secretly married to Undine himself back in her hometown before her parents forced a divorce.

Ralph goes into a kind of shock. Leaving Moffatt's office, he "found himself outside on the landing," not recalling getting there. He becomes unable to face his emotional storm, and as his emotions become too powerful to perceive, he begins to perceive the physical details around him with heightened vividness: "The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions, his sensitiveness to the heat, the noise, the smells of the disheveled midsummer city" (Wharton, *Custom* 331). This moment, with the grime of the city, may remind us more of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* than of our stereotype of Wharton's portraits of the Gilded Age, and Wharton might be pleased by this association; Hermione Lee notes that Wharton admired *Sister Carrie* (Lee, *Wharton* 594). In an odd way, Ralph becomes both super-present in his body and absent from it. In normal experience, when our focus is on our social life or on our daily decisions, we are semi-aware of our bodies—we receive sensations but largely sublimate them, incorporating them without paying full attention to them. Ralph is deeply upset and overwhelmed, but he also does not know how to move forward: he cannot imagine a next

step. Everything seems impossible, and so in a sense there is no future. In another sense, part of him is striving to look away from the awful knowledge he has come to: that he will lose Paul and that Undine was a manipulator from the beginning. As he looks away from the future he cannot imagine a path into and away from the realizations that have welled up inside him, he is left with bodily sensations, and they become magnified.

We see Ralph's mind sticking like a record: "The money—how on earth was he to pay it back? How could he have wasted his time in thinking of anything else while that central difficulty existed? . . . He had forgotten what he wanted the money for. He made a great effort to regain hold of the idea, but all the whirring, shuttling, flying had abruptly ceased in his brain, and he sat with his eyes shut, staring straight into darkness" (Wharton, *Custom* 333). We see here what is important to Paul: he will have to violate his honor and his obligation to another friend, Clare van Degen, who has loaned him money. He forgets for the moment that he will not be able to ransom Paul. I would argue, however, that rather than meaning that he cares more about his obligation to Clare, this means he cares more about his obligation to Paul—so much so that it is unthinkable to him.

These, I believe, are the two ultimate causes of Ralph's suicide: his anguish at the collapse of his social world, and his anguish at the loss of his son.

First, he is anguished about the collapse of all the values and social codes he believed in, represented by Undine's way of life triumphing over his own. In particular, he is anguished about being cuckolded, as he imagines it—he becomes disgusted by the physical presence of Moffatt's body in his office, and then remembers Undine's physical presence as well. He thinks that perhaps Undine did not tell him that she had slept with

Moffatt because she simply did not remember it, so unimportant was it to her. In Ralph's code, having a man to dine who had formerly dated your wife without knowing about it was equivalent to being actively cheated on—the degree of disgrace was the same. So the disgust is not only social; it is in particular sexual. What is the “last flash of irony” Ralph perceives? I think it is that even though Undine has shown his values to be utterly bankrupt and ineffectual, he cannot stop living by them—his final thought, nearly by rote, is that he is doing his duty in a gentlemanly way, taking care of his wife. He cannot stop thinking this way though Undine has shown she does not deserve it and, more awfully, Undine has shown him that his entire way of life is coming to an end in society at large.

Secondly, Ralph is anguished about the loss of his son. Ralph truly loves his son, and the harshest and most unambiguous and tear-jerking criticisms of Undine come at her utter indifference to motherhood. Wharton had a difficult relationship with her own mother, "the disapproving Lucretia Jones" (Lee, *Wharton* 218). Wharton herself never had children, but throughout *Custom* we see criticism of bad parents (Mr. Spragg who is never quite able to rise beyond sourly pulling his moustache to contain Undine; Undine who is only annoyed by her son) and praise of those who love children (Ralph most of all—Undine criticizes him, but not as a father; and even Elmer Moffatt, who as a later stepfather to Paul is jocularly friendly and attentive, if not exactly loving). Wharton does like melodramatic flourishes and she knows that an unhappy child has been a great way to move readers at least since Dickens, but we also see a personal thread of concern about parenting through the novel.

Whatever the ultimate causes, there is also a proximate cause of Ralph's suicide: it is the return of a servant that gets him to pull the trigger. Why does Wharton include

this seeming tangent? One could imagine the novel written differently, where Ralph simply goes to his room alone, is overwhelmed by his awful thoughts, and commits suicide. I think it is because it is a proxy case of Ralph's failure to referee, guide or contain the women in his life. At this moment, he cannot stand the thought of having to settle a small domestic battle between two female servants, just as he was often unable to contain or direct Undine. He fails one final time in a masculine duty that Wharton, for all her self-sufficiency, seems to have expected of capable fathers and husbands.

Ralph's moment of simultaneous self-presence and self-alienation, of suicidal despair, is expressed largely through language of self-touch. This is a significant way that Wharton describes how Ralph has been knocked out of the normal flow of experience during this moment of crisis. Ralph "dropped his head on his hands to shut" out his visceral sense of Undine's body ("her freshness, her fragrance . . . filled the room with a mocking glory") (Wharton, *Custom* 332). As he sits, his ideas "became as unreal and meaningless as the red specks dancing behind the lids against which he had pressed his fists clenched" (Wharton, *Custom* 332). Ralph's body is present to him here: he notices the specks behind his eyes and feels his body as something separate from himself, almost an adversary. I think of people who, in great distress, hit their own heads.

The servant approaches and Ralph feels unable to take another instant of interaction with her. Wharton partly may be showing an old-fashioned loyalty to plot here: rather than the event from Moffatt's office gaining in force in his mind, she wants Ralph's immediate situation to give the final push that precipitates his action. In this moment Ralph is overwhelmed and ashamed by his inability to be a proper aristocrat and a proper boss—he does not have the strength to referee the servants' dispute, as he did

not have the strength to referee Undine. As Ralph “distinctly hear[s] the old servant’s steps on the stairs,” he commits to shoot himself with his revolver (Wharton, *Custom* 334). We read that “he passed his left hand over the side of his head, and down the curve of the skull behind the ear” (Wharton, *Custom* 334). This is language James would never use. Even in specifying which hand Ralph uses, Wharton has already left James’s more abstracted universe of discourse. We are invited to imagine Ralph holding the pistol in his right hand (he is right-handed, presumably) while laying down a guide-track with his left. It is hard to imagine James ever contemplating the actual act of suicide from this close up—if he did, he would never have deemed it suitable to write down for public consumption. But most interesting is the word “skull.” It goes the furthest to show Ralph’s body as something alienated, something that he at once both is and is not—the skull is not a part of our bodies that we involve in social life or that we typically mention in describing how someone looks. The skull is hidden from ordinary discourse except in specialized contexts like medicine or anthropology, and when it is exposed or called to attention, something has gone wrong—we are looking at a skeleton, or contemplating our mortality, or struggling with a headache. In this moment, Ralph is treating his body as something other than himself. In a sense, this is the phenomenologists’ self-touch gone wrong: Ralph touches his body and feels the sensation in both parts of his body, yet he doesn’t have the sense, “That’s me.” Instead, he seems to think implicitly, “That’s it.” This is a bad state to be in. We see this also when Ralph is on the subway, when Ralph notices the awful sounds and smells of the city and (presumably) of the onrushing modern life that will destroy his set of values: “combined with the acuter perception of

these offenses was a complete indifference to them, as though he were some vivisected animal deprived of the power of discrimination” (Wharton, *Custom* 331).

One key strand of Ralph’s crisis is how he relates to his body: it becomes at once more present and more absent to him than usual. With uncanny intuition, Wharton narrates how it feels to go through this kind of emotional crisis and corroborates what I have been arguing, that one’s experience of one’s self is expressed in part through one’s relationship with one’s body. Though she lived before the era of yoga or mindfulness meditation or much explicit focus on bodily sensation as a part of self-knowledge (at least in what gets written about publicly—we must always remember that novels are different from private diaries which are different from private thoughts), the bodily nature of Ralph’s crisis feels very modern, gripping, and in my mind very true to life.

It is an interesting question whether some experiences may have more of a literary existence than a real existence—whether tropes for characters’ experiences can somehow self-generate in our imaginations and rise and fall in literature without a corresponding existence in our real lives. But there do seem to be real experiences like Ralph’s—the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* has an entry for “peritraumatic dissociation,” a particular experience “that occurs at or around the time of a traumatic event”: “Affected individuals may feel as if they are watching the trauma occur to someone else, as if in a movie, or they may feel ‘spaced out’ and disoriented after the trauma” (“Peritraumatic Dissociation”).

The larger question I am asking is, what contributed to making novels like Wharton’s feel more alive to readers than novels like James’s? One large factor is surely the plots: suspenseful, scandalous, and gripping. In James’s major-phase novels, very

little happens, while *House of Mirth* was a scandalous best-seller. But I believe there is also a notable difference in the way characters appear physically. She uses the self-touch of Abner Spragg and Ralph Marvell—the pulling of their moustaches—to suggest a similar and damaging hesitation. And most of all, she uses a vivid description of Ralph’s alienation from his own body, narrated in part through increased instances of self-touch, to make his suicide feel both affecting and inevitable.

The House of Mirth

The House of Mirth is the story of the decline of Lily Bart. Wharton once wrote that she felt the only way to give a heart to her satire of the shallow, mercenary rich of New York was to show how their inflexibility ground down a character who would have been capable of more: “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys” (qtd. in Beer and Nolan 15). Lily is torn between marrying for prosperity and marrying for preference (it is too much to say “for love”), and she ends up with neither. She must go to work at a milliner’s shop, which fills her with a shame that neither she nor Wharton seems able to overcome or imagine their way through. Readers have found the conclusion of *Mirth* its least convincing section, and in a rare instance of Wharton’s imaginative limits, I found myself wishing that Lily would simply reconcile herself to a lower-middle-class life; the millinery job she finds so shameful would be an accomplishment for a character in a Dreiser novel. However, Lily is unable to adapt and dies of an overdose of chloral hydrate, taken as a sleep aid; this incident balances on the edge between accident and suicide. Lily wants oblivion so badly that she is willing to risk death: “She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so . . . But after all that was but

one chance in a hundred" (Wharton, *Mirth* 362). She dies the very night before the suitor who has resisted her, Lawrence Selden, comes at last to propose marriage.

Lily's indecision and self-sabotage can be frustrating. Her inability to overcome her shame at falling out of high society is hard to understand, as much as we all fear ostracism and the unknown. It is possible from the 21st century to imagine Lily living a life as a milliner, independent of the demands of high society, if she could only have allowed it to herself. But her nascent intelligence, perception, and desire to be true to herself are moving, and the vise that society closes on her is infuriating.

The governing power of Lily's world is a market based on earning power for men and sexual allure for women. The critic Wai-Chee Dimock gives a beautiful reading of the novel showing how its social rules can be rewritten by its past winners at will, ensuring that they will always continue to win (Dimock). Wharton's novel is more focused on the body and on sexual commerce than anything Henry James wrote. While neither sex nor nudity is directly depicted in the novel, Gus Trenor clearly expects sex from Lily in exchange for his financial help, and says as much. The most publicly sexual scene in the novel involves a *tableau vivant*, a staging of a living painting. In the 19th century, *tableaux* were "frequent as a form of elegant private entertainment (in a drawing room, for instance)" (Cuddon et al. 707). Their popularity came in part because they were sanctioned ways to show off unmarried daughters' sexual attractiveness: "Frances Trollope (mother of the novelist Anthony) in *The Mother's Manual* (1842) actually recommends the *tableau vivant* as an acceptable way of luring suitors to marriageable daughters" (Cuddon et al. 707). Lily chooses to appear in a painting by Joshua Reynolds that shows its central figure "draped in flimsy material" so that she can display herself to

maximum effect (qtd. in Wharton, *Mirth* 171). Lily's provocative costume is a mixture of self-assertion and self-abasement. Lily only does what everyone does but more overtly, yet she is crucified for it with utter hypocrisy. One wealthy male observer remarks that it is a "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up" (Wharton, *Mirth* 172). We may follow Dimock in suggesting that the winners in the market may reveal its true character whenever they wish, but the losers must always maintain the façade. Is Lily exaggerating her sexuality at this moment in a last attempt to play the marriage market, or in order to throw that market's true character back in its face? Does she expect to provoke acceptance or rejection? The answer seems to be both.

In a novel that turns on the interchange of money and sex, it is unsurprising that touch and self-touch are well-represented. We can make several observations about self-touch in *House of Mirth*.

Twice, Lily brushes or adjusts her hair in a mirror. She is the only character we see do this, and it serves each time to illustrate her concern for self-presentation and her anxiety about her fading beauty. The first time is in her room at Bellomont during the Trenors' first party: "As she sat before the mirror brushing her hair . . . she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of her cheek" (Wharton, *Mirth* 62). The second time is as she leaves Gerty Farish's after spending the night with her, trying to put a brave face on life: "She was before the mirror again, adjusting her hair with a light hand, drawing down her veil, and giving a dexterous touch to her face" (Wharton, *Mirth* 306).

Next, we can note Wharton uses a gesture also used often by James: a character will hide their face in their hands when in anguish. This is generally to conceal tears or

the possibility of them. Lily's father Hudson Bart does this in the flashback when he realizes he is destitute: "her father was sitting with both elbows on the table . . . his head bowed on his hands" (Wharton, *Mirth* 67). Lily does it when Selden half-jokingly explains that he does not have enough money to marry her: "she dropped her face on her hands and he saw that for a moment she wept" (Wharton, *Mirth* 108). She does it again when she faces the humiliation of declining Simon Rosedale's marriage proposal in writing: "she laid the pen down, and sat with her elbows on the table and her face hidden in her hands" (Wharton, *Mirth* 217). Finally, Selden does it when he is in Lily's living space reflecting on Lily's suicide: "Selden . . . sank into the chair beside the desk. He leaned his elbows on it, and hid his face in his hands" (Wharton, *Mirth* 368).

Do gestures like this wax and wane in popularity? In the decade of 1900-1910, the gesture seems to be in the air, appearing across different authors' works. I suspect that soon after this period, this gesture was not represented nearly as much in fiction. I wonder whether this mirrored real life—did the gesture similarly lose popularity in reality? I imagine the waning of the gesture came about because crying openly became less shocking or shameful. It is notable that in *House of Mirth*, Lily does this once even when she is alone; the gesture of concealment has been internalized, even though no one else is there to see her cry.

The third observation is that Wharton also uses the gesture of hands in pockets, though with a different intent than James, who uses it to indicate cool patrician withdrawal. This too seems to be a gesture that had a broader cultural resonance that both James and Wharton were drawing on. The gesture seems to have been current in the cultural code of the era.

For Wharton, it is Simon Rosedale who puts his hands in his pockets, showing that he does not know the social rules around him. When he comes to propose marriage to Lily, he sits "tenaciously planted beside the tea-table, his hands in his pockets, his legs a little too freely extended" (Wharton, *Mirth* 213). He is an intruder; he is Jewish and he is new money, and he does not know the rules of Lily's world. To a modern eye, the rules of Lily's world are themselves arbitrary constructions, meant only to reify wealth; Lily and Wharton herself can seem foolish not to understand this. But Lily's sense of threat is very real. When Rosedale speaks to Lily again a year later, he violates the rules in the same way, although now he is self-satisfied and triumphant: "He stood before her, his hands in his pockets, his chest sturdily expanded under its vivid waistcoat" (Wharton, *Mirth* 295). We can notice as well that Wharton individualizes each of these gestures to Rosedale and to the occasion. Rosedale is "tenaciously" planted and the detail of his freely extended legs is vivid; it gives such a sense of his bull-in-a-China-shop presence. Similarly, his "sturdily expanded" chest, puffed up in satisfaction, gives a sense of his body and his personality to match his "vivid" (if not quite garish) waistcoat.

In his book *Edwardian Fashion*, Daniel Milford-Cottam reprints a 1909 illustration of a man wearing a vivid tie and comments that "Although increasing numbers of men risked introducing colour and pattern into their wardrobes, this startling bright green and red tie . . . was perhaps too showy to have met with widespread approval" (Milford-Cottam 42). This pop of color would surely have been outdone by a vivid waistcoat like Rosedale's—Milford-Cottam writes, for example, that "only the most dandified young men followed the example of [the British author] Saki's rather effete but exquisitely elegant hero, Reginald, with his penchant for apricot ties with lilac

waistcoats” (Milford-Cottam 42). Most important of all, Rosedale as a man on the rise is violating a cardinal rule seen in Edwardian Britain and presumably in New York: middle-class and rising men should display “due deference to the idea that innovation in dress was an aristocratic privilege” (Milford-Cottam 42). In Britain, innovation often flowed down from the very top; the fashion for leaving one’s bottom waistcoat button unbuttoned came down from Edward VII, one of Britain’s more rotund kings (Milford-Cottam 39).

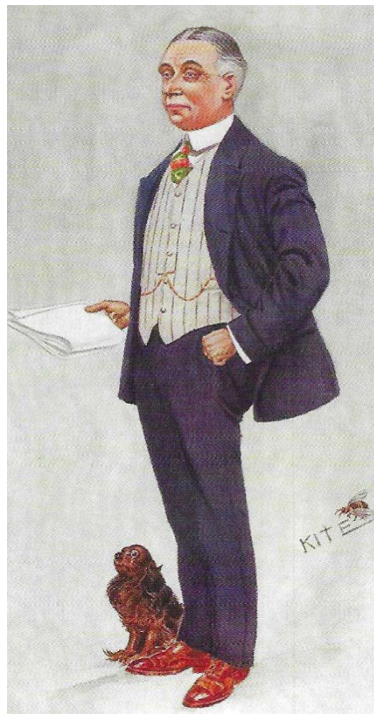


Figure 1. Caricature of Harding Edward de Fonblanque Cox by Kite for *Vanity Fair*, 1909. From *Edwardian Fashion* by Daniel Milford-Cottam.

For James, gestures are more often stereotyped, cut out with a cookie-cutter. They less often have vividly descriptive terms that indicate a particular character’s body or attitude, like Wharton’s “tenacious” or “sturdy.” Rosedale is described consistently through the novel; he is stocky, blunt, unrefined, with his body reflecting his manner and his lack of etiquette. When he buys Lily a meal later, we see that even in compassion, he

has only the blunt and crass body that he has—he literally cannot help himself from being unrefined. “He sat silent, his thick hands clasped on the table, his little puzzled eyes exploring the recesses of the deserted restaurant” (Wharton, *Mirth* 332).

As Rosedale comes to truly see Lily’s suffering, he feels a real concern for her, reflected in his sitting silently. Yet his hands are still thick, unable to move delicately, and his eyes are still small, struggling to see the social codes at work. It is not too much to say that this is a much-softened version of the old libel that Jews had horns; Rosedale’s body reflects his crassness and makes it inherent, inescapable. Yet Wharton does show Rosedale as one of the few characters capable of compassion—I cannot be the only reader who ended up liking Rosedale more than any other suitor of Lily’s in the novel. Rosedale is also important for measuring Lily’s progress—the character who was once far below her is now far above her. Rosedale thus matters to the machinery of the plot as a benchmark that makes Lily’s fall concrete, so this also justifies the descriptive energy that Wharton focuses on him.

Wharton gives her characters bodies that are noticeably and consistently individual. There is no equivalent to Rosedale’s bodily uniqueness in any of the characters from James’s major-phase novels. We always imagine looking at James’s characters from outside, but with Wharton’s characters, we start to imagine our own legs spread wide as we sit at a table or our own hands tracing the backs of our skulls. Like the sciatica of Bennett’s Constance Povey or the frustrated banner-pounding of Forster’s Mrs. Herriton, Wharton’s moments of embodiment draw us into her work while James leaves us standing back.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf is today considered one of the greatest of all English novelists. The Woolf most readers think of—the revolutionary modernist who embraced stream-of-consciousness—made her debut in 1922 with *Jacob's Room*. But before 1922, Woolf had already published two novels: *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919). These novels are much closer to 19th-century realism and are much less read today.

The year 1922 was a kind of *annus mirabilis* for modernism. Modernism is often divided into "early" and "high" phases, and 1922 is the traditional start of high modernism: “most agree that what is called high modernism, marked by an unexampled scope and rapidity of change, came after the First World War. The year 1922 alone was signalized by the appearance of such monuments of modernist innovation as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*” (Abrams and Harpham, “Modernism and Postmodernism”).

But *The Voyage Out* is already an extraordinary novel that strives to make palpable the deep mysteries we all find in the world, in other people, and even in ourselves. Leaving aside the astonishing work of Joseph Conrad, even Woolf's first novel is strikingly different from its contemporaries. In her introduction to the Modern Library edition of the novel, Elisa Gabbert writes, “If *The Voyage Out* is less experimental in form than the later novels for which Woolf is best known, its characters are all the more moving for the ways they try to break convention from within the conventions of Edwardian fiction—reminiscent of Forster” (Gabbert x). But it is not only the characters who strain against these bounds; in moments like the narration of Rachel's illness, the

form of *The Voyage Out* strains against its limits as well. Only in retrospect does the novel seem traditional.

The Voyage Out centers on Rachel Vinrace, a woman with potential she struggles to realize in Edwardian Britain. As with Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room with a View*, Rachel's artistic talent and her emotional depth are emblemized by her love of playing the piano. Like Woolf, Rachel has only been tutored at home, never sent out of the house to school. Rachel goes on a transatlantic "voyage out" to the fictional city of Santa Marina, in a fictional colony in South America (Woolf, *Voyage* 82). She stays with a friendly couple, the Ambroses, under the motherly guidance of Helen Ambrose. Rachel and Helen fall with a group of well-to-do British guests at a nearby hotel, becoming particularly close to Terence Hewet (who will be Rachel's love interest) and his friend St. John Hirst. As we have seen, hotels themselves had a sense of suspension of normal rules and even of erotic possibility under the cover of semi-anonymity in the discourse of the era, including in Wharton's *Custom of the Country*. Randi Saloman observes that a "fascination" with "the hotel setting" took hold of many writers of this era: "Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and E. M. Forster . . . were taken with hotels, as were . . . Henry James, a self-proclaimed 'hotel child,' Sinclair Lewis, and Edith Wharton" (Saloman 3).

Rachel moves further out, experiencing a mysterious love with Terence Hewet on a group journey into the jungle. The criticism must be made here that the South American landscape and natives serve as an orientalized Other—they are nothing in themselves, but only a not-Britain. Woolf will not repeat this strategy for defamiliarizing her characters with their lives; this is a beginner's experiment that does not fully work. Going forward, her characters will instead shake loose of routine life even in the middle of the most

ordinary experiences. *Mrs. Dalloway* is the prime example—one of the most moving novels in British literature, with a sense of the ineffable equal to any, it involves a single day in London on which an ordinary party is prepared for and given.

Soon after falling in love, Rachel falls ill and dies. Perhaps this is because Woolf cannot yet imagine how one lives life once one has come in contact with the larger reality that Edwardian society has no place for. Or perhaps it is because love itself—in this novel a powerful, physical, impersonal, and perhaps even slightly unfriendly force that has little to do with the personalities of the two lovers—is dangerous. Rachel's illness is made more plausible by the South American setting and its unfamiliar biome, but there is no doubt this is a symbolic death. Rachel's death makes the name of the novel apt: for her, there is only a voyage out, and no voyage back.

Woolf's novel contains much more bodily maintenance than any of the other novels I am examining. Those novels limit themselves largely to hair adjustment, while in this novel, Woolf includes tooth-brushing, face-washing, and toenail-clipping. She does not put a great deal of weight on these moments, but they are nonetheless striking—she enters characters' private bodily space in a way the other novelists have not, not even Wharton in *Custom*. St. John Hirst's toenail clipping in his room in front of Hewet in Chapter 9 is particularly striking to me—I imagine the room as cavernous, even as a secret exposed. There is a dry criticism of Hirst when Woolf writes that he “was taking advantage of Hewet's company” for his toenail trimming (Woolf, *Voyage* 98).

The truly remarkable moment of self-touch comes later in the novel. The group has begun its journey up the river, ostensibly to find native crafts for Mr. Flushing (an aristocratic side character) to collect. But in the metaphorical terrain of the novel, this is a

journey into the subconscious, into love, and into the heart of darkness.¹¹ On two separate walks alone into the jungle, Terence and Rachel first tell each other they love each other and then agree to marry. Each time they experience a mysterious feeling of transportation. We get the sense that while this is the truest and most profound experience they have in the novel, it is also one of the least well-understood.

The couple goes through an odd, attenuated version of some of the formalities of an engagement from an Austen novel: Terence confesses his faults so that Rachel will enter into her engagement with her eyes open; the couple asks Helen Ambrose for her approval and advice as a kind of proxy mother. But although these motions are gone through in a daze, they seem irrelevant. After they agree to marry, Terence says, “‘What’s happened? . . . Why did I ask you to marry me? How did it happen?’” (Woolf, *Voyage* 273). Closely connected to this is their sense of fully occupying their bodies while simultaneously being perplexed by them. They kiss, though we read only that they “clasped each other in their arms,” and we must deduce the kiss from the statement a few sentences later that “He was afraid to kiss her again” (Woolf, *Voyage* 262, 263). Then comes the novel's most remarkable instance of self-touch:

[A] curious sense of possession coming over her, it struck her that she might now touch him; she put out her hand and lightly touched his cheek. His fingers

¹¹ In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee also compares *The Voyage Out* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899 (Lee, *Woolf* 222). Twenty years before Lee's biography, Rosemary Pitt published an article on the parallels between the explorations of self in the two texts (Pitt). We might also compare *The Voyage Out* to Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904), another novel set in a fictional South American country.

followed where hers had been, and the touch of his hand upon his face brought back the overpowering sense of unreality. This body of his was unreal; the whole world was unreal. (Woolf, *Voyage* 273)

Terence is both more in his body than he has been before and more puzzled by it than he has been before. This paradox is the heart of what Woolf is trying to convey. In a sense she looks forward to existentialism: in Heidegger's term, Terence is "thrown into" the world and simply finds himself in his body, a body that both *is* him and mystifies him. There is also an echo of Freud, whose works were published in translation by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, although Woolf would not begin to read them until 1939 (Lee, *Woolf* 96). Unconscious emotions, all the more powerful for being only glimpsed, move Terence and Rachel here. On the surface, Woolf seems to contradict the view of Merleau-Ponty: self-touch makes Terence feel *less* real to himself. But we should distinguish between self-presence and familiarity. It takes full presence in his body, the kind we elide in daily life, for Terence to realize how strange and inscrutable that body is.

Woolf is interested in moments when the body overtakes and subsumes the mind. Two scenes stand out: first is the scene on the Atlantic crossing of intense swells and seasickness. In this scene, isolation produces connection—Richard Dalloway's experience of isolating seasickness is what pushes him to kiss Rachel, as he himself explains: "In the intervals of sea-sickness I've thought a lot . . . What solitary icebergs we are, Miss Vinrace! How little we can communicate!" (Woolf, *Voyage* 67). The second scene is when Rachel gets sick after the jungle voyage. Here, connection produces isolation—Rachel's experience of love kills her. Woolf is of course evoking the old

connection in literature between (sexual) love and death. Rachel's illness also ends the novel; it is a punctuation mark, and a surprising one. Unlike in a Jane Austen novel, where love leads to marriage as the paradigm of comedy, and ending with death is the paradigm of tragedy, in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel falls in love and *that* leads to death. This observation is echoed by Vicki Mahaffey, who similarly located the "quietly subversive" atmosphere of *The Voyage Out* in its "unraveling of the usual marriage plot" (Mahaffey 900).

The oscillation between connection and isolation is a great theme for Woolf. While the question of life in one's body is larger than the question of sex, the two are connected. The storm comes right before the kiss and produces it, in a sense; the face touch (not itself sexual, but only made possible by a sexual awakening) comes right before Rachel's sickness and death, and produces it, in a sense.

One way of considering Woolf's goal in *The Voyage Out* is to say that she wants to bring discourse about the mystery of living in one's body from the private diary into the public novel. Hermione Lee quotes an extraordinary passage from Woolf's grandfather James Stephen, a man who Lee says "could not talk about . . . his innermost feelings":

Alone, I sometimes am oppressed by myself. I seem to come too closely into contact with myself. It is like the presence of some unwelcome, familiar, and yet unknown visitor. This is a feeling for which I have no description in words. Yet I suppose everyone has now and then felt as if he were two persons in one, and were compelled to hold a discourse in which soliloquy and colloquy mingle oddly and even awfully. (Lee, *Woolf* 61)

Woolf wants to bring these sentiments into the daylight. The difference is that in James Stephen's diary, the valence of this bodily mystery is largely negative as well as mysterious. In *The Voyage Out*, the mystery comes to the fore, but the valence is harder to assess. *The Voyage Out* portrays an internal sublime similar to the external sublime that Edmund Burke found in "scenery that was thrillingly vast, dark, wild stormy, and ominous" (Abrams and Harpham, "Sublime" 390). For Burke, the sublime is danger observed "in a situation of safety from danger," like watching a lightning storm from inside, but for Woolf the moment of self-presence feels as if it may tip over into genuine danger (Abrams and Harpham, "Sublime" 390).

The desire to explode her genre is part of what makes Woolf a modernist. We might say that modernists are concerned with reconstructing genres like the novel and their traditional ideas about which topics are suitable for the public, while postmodernists dig deeper and interrogate the representative power of language itself. There are exceptions—James Joyce and Joseph Conrad both seem to worry at language—but the generalization is reasonable. For Woolf, the ultimate mystery is not the mystery of how language is possible, but the mystery of ourselves. From her first novel through *The Years* in 1937, she continually suggests that it is a mistake to see "identity as fixed and knowable rather than mysterious and fluid" (Mahaffey 906).

When Woolf's characters allow themselves to be more fluid, they also become more able to connect with others. Woolf need not imagine things this way: she could propose that more fixed identities are more easily legible, and so lead to easier communication. But that is not how Woolf's world works.

One of the most interesting characters in the novel is St. John Hirst. We read he is based largely on Lytton Strachey, a close friend of Woolf's and a renowned member of her Bloomsbury group. This accounts for the reader's sense of Hirst's importance; Hirst is peripheral to the plot, yet he has a sense of gravitational pull much larger than his place in the plot suggests. He both repels us and compels us. He is brusque and rude, whether this is because he is unaware of other people, indifferent to them, or hostile towards them. We see him behave shockingly towards Hewet in their first extended scene together, undressing and clipping his nails and otherwise taking no notice of Hewet's presence. Hewet does not seem offended, but rather than reading this as a comfortable intimacy, the tone of the narrator tells us that there is something wrong with Hirst. There is a mix of helplessness and stubborn, superior defiance in Hirst's attitude towards others. Within a few lines of conversation at the large dance party in the middle of the novel, Hirst tells the wise, maternal Helen Ambrose, "There never will be more than five people in the world worth talking to" (Woolf, *Voyage* 150). Within a few sentences and seemingly unaware of the ironic clash of sentiments, he asks her, "Should you say I was a difficult kind of person to get on with?" (Woolf, *Voyage* 150). The text tells us that Hirst asks this "sharply," but we hear a plaintive note underneath it.

One way this is marked is that Hirst has a superior mind but an inferior body: "When naked of all but his shirt . . . Mr. Hirst no longer impressed one with the majesty of his intellect, but with the pathos of his young yet ugly body, for he stooped, and he was so thin that there were dark lines between the different bones of his neck and shoulders" (Woolf, *Voyage* 98). Max Beerbohm's caricature of Lytton Strachey gives an image that suits Hirst (Hall 69):

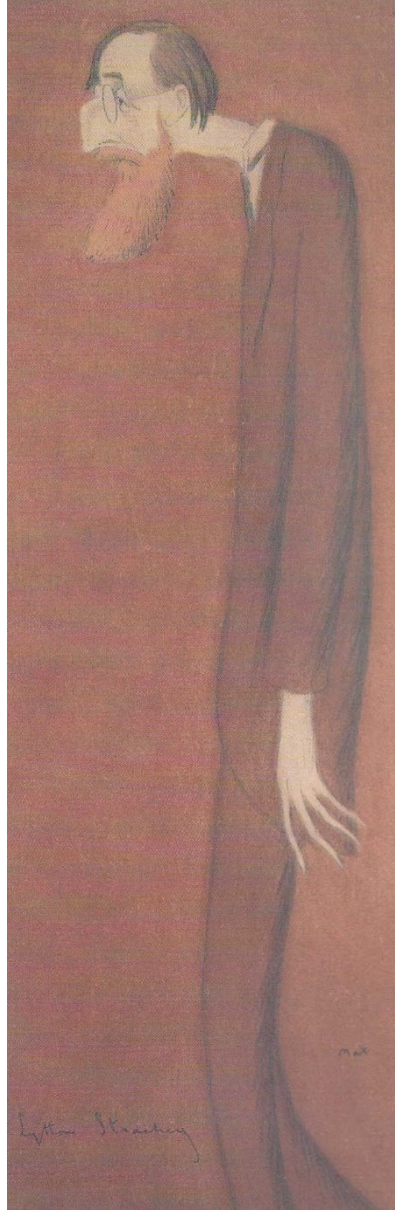


Figure 2. "Lytton Strachey" by Max Beerbohm, c. 1925.

Part of Hirst's general misanthropy and particular misogyny is that he is gay, as Strachey was.¹² Hirst's arrogant brilliance is inadequate compensation for his being so ill

¹² Hirst alludes to this so delicately in his conversation with Helen at the dance party that I wondered at first whether we were meant to be uncertain about it, but commentators concur that we are meant to understand it.

at ease in the world, in himself, and with others. Yet there is a flip side to Hirst. After he unburdens himself to Helen at the dance, we see him allow himself to dance awkwardly but enthusiastically at last, taking a step into life. It is late in the night and the musicians have packed up so Rachel plays piano. As she plays a minuet which she calls “the dance for people who don’t know how to dance,” “St. John hop[s] with incredible swiftness first on his left leg, then on his right” (Woolf, *Voyage* 155).¹³

His physical engagement presages an emotional engagement. At the end of the novel we see Hirst behave lovingly towards Hewet and Rachel: he pushes himself through personal discomfort to tell them he is happy for their engagement, volunteers to stay with Hewet at the Ambroses' villa in Rachel's sickness, and finally makes a solo thirty-mile journey to find a better doctor for Rachel. It is Hirst with whom we spend the final page of the novel, and through whose eyes we contemplate the mystery and sadness of life and death. Strangely, we have come to love him. While the others in the room seem to simply go on with life, Hirst has seen a mystery which he cannot put away so easily. This speaks to a surprising ability in Hirst to do what Woolf most values: to see the mystery in life, and concomitantly to see into other people as much as we can. Hirst in this scene has broken from conventions in the way that Woolf values—not in a superior or isolating way, but in a way that involves a deeper-than-ordinary comprehension of humanity, whether oneself or others.

¹³ This detail too seems drawn from life. Strachey's friend Osbert Sitwell described watching Strachey dancing, “jiggling about with an amiable debility . . . I remember comparing him in my mind to a benevolent but rather irritable pelican” (Hall 70).

And in Hirst's first appearance, we already see a suggestion that he will eventually prove capable of such exceptional understanding. It is a strange moment—essentially, we see Hirst cross from his position as a character into the position of the narrator. It comes at the pivot from Chapter 8 into Chapter 9. Helen and Rachel walk up to the hotel (never named) to see where their friend has decided to take a room. Standing outside, they first observe Hewet and Hirst. Helen and Rachel look into the long rectangular windows of the hotel from outside, seeing but unseen. The lighted windows dramatize isolation: they show scenes that are sealed off from one another in discrete frames.

Yet one character is an exception: Hirst. He has not yet been named. But unlike all the other characters, he is not fully seen: he is only a barely-noticed pair of legs by the drapes. And unlike all the others, he sees his interlocutors, saying they are outside: “A melancholy voice issued from above [the legs]. ‘Two women,’ it said” (Woolf, *Voyage* 94). Hirst reminds us that in fact connection in this scene could flow in two directions: if there are no “left-right” connections between the lighted window scenes, there could still be “forward-backward” connections between the people inside the windows and the women watching them from outside.

Helen and Rachel have nearly become proxies for the narrator, disembodied eyes—nearly, but not quite. They are caught, and they run away, embarrassed at having been caught in their voyeurism. But only Hirst is able to step across this line, to see in the other direction, to do what (we would imagine) only a narrator can do.

Then at the start of Chapter 9 comes a further tour of the rooms of the hotel, each isolated from the next, implicitly continuing the idea of discrete mental spaces between

lives established by the rectangles of light that Helen and Rachel had looked at; Woolf tells us that the rooms (the minds or lives) are different yet similar: “Very different was the room through the wall, though as like in shape as one egg-box is like another” (Woolf, *Voyage* 95). Now we have more openly magical narratorial powers, moving from room to room in a way that characters cannot. Yet Woolf plays with us—we are now a narratorial eye able to know things that a character could not, but when that eye first looks into a room, it must still adjust as if it were a real human eye. As we enter one room, Woolf tells us that, “Growing accustomed to the darkness . . . one could distinguish a lean form,” as if an eye that can float through walls were not also capable of seeing in the dark (Woolf, *Voyage* 97).

This tour of hotel rooms through the narrator’s eye ends in Hirst’s room: “Here was the gentleman who, a few hours previously, in the shade of the curtain, had seemed to consist entirely of legs” (Woolf, *Voyage* 97). We do not yet know Hirst’s name. We see his friend (Hewet, whose name we don’t know yet either) come in. When Hewet speaks, we learn Hirst’s name and the scene pivots from a semi-omniscient perspective with magical powers of discernment back to novel’s default realistic perspective where we are simply present in the room as two characters converse. The exact moment of this pivot is Hewet’s first line of dialogue, where Hirst acquires his name:

“Oh, Hirst, what I forgot to say was—”

“Two minutes,” said Hirst, raising his finger. (Woolf, *Voyage* 98)

We see Hirst’s rudeness here—he interrupts his close friend to finish the sentence he is reading (Hirst is reading one of 19th-century Britain’s favorite historians, Edward Gibbon, though Hirst’s primary work seems to be in mathematics; we will learn he is a

celebrated genius). Hirst is rude to all, but he is especially disinterested in women. This has a few meanings. First we are learning that Hirst is gay. But there is also a homosocial intellectual life in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, an Oxbridge life that is single-sex. This is something Woolf railed at; like many girls of her era, she was never sent to school but was tutored in her home, and she resented “the prejudicial economy which spent money on sending boys to school and university and kept the daughters at home, where the system of lessons kept her, as she always said, ‘uneducated’” (Lee, *Woolf* 125). Woolf’s lessons may well have come from genuine experts, as her father, Leslie Stephen, was a leading British intellectual. Yet Woolf was never able to attend Oxford or Cambridge, the monasteries of learning that still largely excluded even the most brilliant women. Oxford admitted women to full status only in 1921, and Cambridge only in 1947 (Trehub). This is the same homosocial university world, sometimes shading into homosexuality, that E. M. Forster was deeply attached to and captured in his most autobiographical novel, *The Longest Journey* (Forster, *Journey*).¹⁴

Yet what Hirst does next is to talk about the circles that surround people and keep them from each other. Partly, Hirst is simply conscious of class and status differences, more cynical about them and aware of them than Hewet. But there is something else. In Chapter 8, the narrator described rectangles that isolated people—rectangles of light, hotel windows but more than that. Now in Chapter 9, Hirst generates his own metaphor: circles that surround people and keep them from each other. Hirst is seeing like the

¹⁴ This novel is a bit of a puzzle. It is Forster's favorite of his novels, but it is the least-read today and is the only one that was never filmed.

narrator, thinking like the narrator. Hirst's mind isolates him, compensates for his body; Hirst doubles down, through his attitudes, his willingness to lift a finger to cut off his friend in favor of the exquisite mind he must so carefully cultivate, on the isolation he would experience anyway as an uncommonly ugly and awkward body. Yet Hirst's mind also gives him the power to almost step out of his position as a character; he has nearly magical powers of discernment. Only Hirst picks up on a metaphor he could not have known about. Only Hirst looks back through the window to see the women who were watching him. Already, we see that the same isolating, brilliant mind Hirst has is giving him an ability to see across lines that others cannot.

So far this is only knowledge, only perception. There is no sense of sympathy or compassion. At this point Hirst is largely a figure of fun; Woolf turns on him a tone that is mostly gentle chiding, shading almost towards pity, though there is also a dry criticism. But Hirst is introduced as someone special; an outcast, but also a prophet, someone who does in fact have secret knowledge. We should not be surprised in retrospect to see this understanding of others grow into connection with others by the end of the novel.

After Rachel's death, we return to the other guests at the hotel. They go about their ordinary business, but there is a sense that they are failing to deal adequately with Rachel's death. It is as if Woolf has reharmonized a major-key melody with minor chords: nothing is different in the melody, and yet everything is different in how it feels, how it interacts with what lies underneath it—there is a feeling of an unspoken lack, a falling short. In the last chapter of the novel there is a great storm outside the hotel, with the South American natural world standing once more for the deep emotional interior. The characters are impressed, but they quickly recover and react in much the same way

as they have to Rachel's death: "As the storm drew away, the people in the hall of the hotel sat down; and with a comfortable sense of relief, began to tell each other stories about great storms, and produced in many cases their occupations for the evening" (Woolf, *Voyage* 357). It is notable that Virginia Woolf reacted to her own mother's death with shock, feeling nothing at all on the surface: "She would often describe [her mother's] death . . . usually reverting to its most distressing aspect: that she could not feel anything" (Lee, *Woolf* 129). Something of that feeling of shock underlies the residents of the hotel going about their business as if the storm had not just happened.

The feeling we are left with is that only Terence and Rachel touch the very bottom of the lake of life in the novel. Their friends and supporters, Helen Ambrose and St. John Hirst, come the closest after them. But the other characters are mostly unaware of the truth that Terence and Rachel have reached. We do not imagine that Terence and Rachel are a perfect couple, nor that they are perfected as individuals; when St. John watches Terence and Rachel walking ahead of him and revs himself up to congratulate them, we read that "He saw their faults so clearly, and the inferior nature of a great deal of their feeling for each other, and he expected that their love would not last" (Woolf, *Voyage* 301). Though St. John is envious of them, he may well be right in his assessment. Indeed, it does not seem that Terence and Rachel experience this profound love because they are individually mature or worthy, nor because they are especially well-suited to each other. We certainly see that Rachel has a musical gift that bespeaks a special soul, but she does not understand herself well or have much experience. Terence seems bright, interesting, and humane, but also easily hurt, jealous, and (by his own account) lazy—he does not seem particularly extraordinary, whereas Rachel might at least have some of

Virginia Woolf's own extraordinary gift. But the couple does not earn their special love because they are heroes, better or more capable than others. Rather love simply happens to sweep through like the thunderstorm and knock them over. Still, it is a failing in the other hotel guests to overlook this extraordinary experience occurring among them. The Edwardian culture the other guests have inherited, Woolf suggests, does not prepare them to encounter or understand real love. England has left the English unequipped for Terence and Rachel's New World.

CHAPTER 4: LOW-TOUCH CONTEMPORARIES: BEERBOHM, WELLS

Max Beerbohm

Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) was an English wit whose work comprised both drawing and prose. His drawn caricatures of literary personalities were as acclaimed as his written parodies of their styles. His book *A Christmas Garland*, a set of Christmas stories each in the style of a different author, contains the best parody I know of Henry James, “The Mote in the Middle Distance” (Beerbohm, *Garland*). It attests to Beerbohm’s incredible alertness as a reader and extraordinary capability as a stylist.

Perhaps it is because of this gift for language that writers loved Beerbohm’s work. In 1898, G. B. Shaw introduced him as his hand-picked replacement as the *Saturday Review*’s drama critic, calling him “the incomparable Max” (Shaw 683). Virginia Woolf later called his story collection *Seven Men* “a little masterpiece” (Woolf, “The Limits of Perfection” 627).

But Beerbohm’s work is always labeled as minor—his *New York Review of Books* essay collection is called *The Prince of Minor Writers* (Beerbohm, *Prince*). To me, what feels minor about Beerbohm’s work is that it seems to exist only in relation to other literature. Literature in general—at least, Euro-American literature in the 19th and 20th centuries—can be thought of as pointing in two perpendicular directions: back through the history of the language towards other literature, and out of the language towards the author’s own real life and worldview. To me this dual orientation is a meaningful way to imagine what writers try to do: they try to express their own selves by interacting with the

literature they have read and been influenced by, as if they were picking up an ongoing tapestry and weaving its next few feet.

Beerbohm's writing gives no sense of personal expression; his work reads like a game played with past literature, a game played with superlative skill but nothing at stake. The artificiality of his work is more subdued than that of his friend Oscar Wilde's, but unlike Wilde's, Beerbohm's mask never slips—indeed, Beerbohm seems to be only a mask. Louis Marvick makes a similar observation when he notes that Beerbohm's type of artist “comes into his own when he is nowhere to be found” and calls Beerbohm “the greatest of all parodists (when greatness is measured by how nearly it approaches to self-obliteration)” (Marvick 81).

Beerbohm's characters seem like archetypes, without the interiors that realism taught us to expect; they put me in mind of earlier chivalric romances like *Tristan and Iseult*, where the stories have a life-or-death melodramatic intensity yet the characters seem as flat as figures in medieval tapestries (Bedier). Zuleika's emotions are at once cartoonishly intense and completely transient. She falls utterly in love with one man on page 333, scorns him by page 336, and is "able to forget it" all by page 339 (Beerbohm, *Zuleika*).

The characters also seem assembled entirely from references to earlier literature. In “The Happy Hypocrite,” the lead is George Hell, the familiar type of the dissolute aristocrat with a weakness for gambling (Beerbohm, *Hypocrite*). Beerbohm labels the story “a fairy tale,” underlining its archetypal character. In *Zuleika Dobson*, we see the fatal beauty who drives men to death—in this case, a mass suicide of every undergraduate at Oxford; love-struck, they all throw themselves into the river after a day

of crew races (Beerbohm, *Zuleika*). If Zuleika is not a face that launched a thousand ships, she is at least a face that overturned a hundred boats. Beerbohm observes of Zuleika that “her features were not at all original. They seemed to have been derived rather from a gallimaufry of familiar models” (Beerbohm, *Zuleika* 15–16).

The splendid illustration to the mid-twentieth-century Penguin Classics version of *Zuleika* shows her frustrated beau the Duke of Dorset (an Oxford student who nearly always goes by his title) committing suicide.



Fig. 3. *Zuleika Dobson*, Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1971.

He is dressed anachronistically in a cape and plumed hat, and while he is plunging to his death, not a hair is out of place; this suggests melodrama without any interior derangement. Marvick expresses the same point in another way: “*Zuleika Dobson* . . . is

sustained by the surprises and felicities of a style which disguises the complete unreality of its characters" (Marvick 81).

The story of Zuleika should on its face be a heart-wrenching one: a woman comes to Oxford who is so beautiful that she drives all the undergraduates to commit suicide. But although everyone dies, the institution is impenetrable. The utter imperturbability of the fictional Judas College and of Oxford University in general is the target of Beerbohm's best jokes. The Duke is the only member of a club so exclusive that it can admit no one else. Each year he holds a dinner where he nominates and seconds a new member, but regretfully finds that he has no choice but to veto his nominee's admission.

The novel is set during a week of boat races among the colleges, and Judas is bumped up in the rankings before all the undergraduates kill themselves. In celebration, the college holds a "bump-supper." The dons do not notice at first that no undergraduates are present: "They were conscious only of an agreeable hush" (Beerbohm, *Zuleika* 317). When they eventually notice, they are delighted: "now, all of a sudden . . . [there was] a profound and leisured stillness . . . [and] time for the unvexed pursuit of pure learning" (Beerbohm, *Zuleika* 319). The irony that they are happy only when their institution's very reason for being has disappeared is lost on them. Zuleika feels momentary guilt at causing so much death and considers entering a convent, but decides to head on to Cambridge to mesmerize more young men (Beerbohm, *Zuleika* 358).

So the characters do not actually interact: no one changes. Zuleika remains grasping, selfish, and pushy. Bruce R. McElderry, Jr., suggests that one target of Beerbohm's satire is the New Woman (McElderry, Jr.). New Women were women who sought to make "their own way in the world," often literally—there was a powerful

association between New Women and the vogue for bicycles (Buzwell). The movement was perhaps more cultural than explicitly political; it fed into but was distinct from the suffragette movement that is today remembered as First Wave feminism. “Free-spirited and independent,” writes Greg Buzwell, “educated and uninterested in marriage and children, the figure of the New Woman threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood.” With her obvious self-regard, Zuleika might be seen as a villainous version of the New Woman. Oxford University too remains remote from the outside world and unchanged. Neither affects the other. If one of the most archetypal openings for a narrative is that “a stranger comes to town,” *Zuleika Dobson* is a novel in which “A stranger comes to town and then nothing happens.”

Perhaps this is why the self-touch in the novel came as such a surprise. I counted 30 instances of it, but gave me little sense as a reader of identification with the characters. Some instances are the stereotyped ones we have previously described as not very affecting: women clasp their hands; characters cover their faces with their hands. But there are instances I would expect to have more of an impact as well, instances that are more unusual and visceral. When the friends of the Duke of Dorset realize that he intends to kill himself, we read that “Their tongues clove to the roofs of their mouths” (Beerbohm, *Zuleika* 143). Yet moments like this do not have the impact we might expect, perhaps because the reader is so disoriented by the tide of transient emotions that Beerbohm's characters experience.

H. G. Wells

H. G. Wells was a boy from an uneducated family who found his own way to higher education through native intelligence and stubborn determination. He got a

scholarship to study biology in London, where he became absorbed in socialism, debating, and literature and began to reinvent himself as a writer. He used his scientific knowledge to essentially invent science fiction, making him one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. He was once “the most-read novelist in the world” (Morton 6:30).

Wells was prolific, writing 51 novels and working into the 1940s, but his contemporaries felt that his valuable novels were written between 1895 and the First World War. These valuable novels fall into two periods: early “scientific romances” that are still read and filmed like *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and a later “succession of lower-middle-class novels,” in the words of his admirer George Orwell (qtd. in Tomalin 1). This later succession includes novels like *Kipps* (1905), the story of a draper’s apprentice who becomes rich in a windfall, and *Ann Veronica* (1909), the story of a young “New Woman” who wants to pursue higher education and (later) sex unapologetically.

It will surprise many today that the lower-middle-class novels were considered by many “his greatest achievement,” again in the words of Orwell, who shared this view (qtd. in Tomalin 1). To me, the science fiction stands out for its vivid and plausible sensory detail, making the unlikely seem likely. Wells trained in anatomy and zoology (biology was the science he knew best), and his descriptions, especially of alien life, are detailed and concrete. Consider the wonderful description of a Martian from early in *The War of the Worlds*:

The peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of brow ridges, the absence of a chin beneath the wedgelike lower lip, the incessant

quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth—above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes—were at once vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous. There was something fungoid in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of the tedious movements unspeakably nasty. (Wells, *War*)

What puzzles me is that this vividness is missing in novels like *Kipps* and *Ann Veronica*. While readers need no help to imagine a human body in general, it surprises me that Wells uses none of his descriptive power to individualize his human characters.

Arthur Kipps is a character who never learns much, and I would be interested to know how Wells envisioned such an unreflective character physically. Kipps is picked up by circumstance and taken on a wild ride through an aristocracy that constrains him nearly as tightly as the hated draper's shop where he was once apprenticed. He ends up in the right profession, as an independent shopkeeper, and with the right woman, his childhood sweetheart Ann, but it is unclear whether he has learned to trust himself or whether he has simply gotten lucky. Wells was a remarkably stubborn and sometimes self-centered man who may have trusted in himself too much. We might expect Kipps to come to a similar self-trust, even without anything like Wells's intelligence. Indeed, a character in a 1984 radio adaptation of the novel for the BBC does grow in just this way and delivers the message a modern reader might expect: "I don't want to improve. I'm me and I like me like I am" ("The Kippses" 34:38).

But we do not see this same conviction come clearly to Kipps in the novel. In the final scene Artie and Ann are on a punt and she asks him what he makes of all that has happened and of (in the narrator's words) "the wonder . . . that falls so strangely among the happenings and memories of life":

[Ann:] "Penny for your thoughts, Artie."

He considered.

"I reely don't think I was thinking of anything," he said at last with a smile. "No."

. . .

"Ooh, I dunno" he said, and roused himself to pull. (Wells, *Kipps and the History of Mr Polly* 304–05)

In a sense, this ending has a long pedigree: Kipps is Candide, coming at last to the end of adventures and the end of intellectual systems, and simply cultivating his garden. But while the Kipps of the radio play learns self-reliance and Candide decides to abandon systems, the Kipps of the novel seems only to have been run through difficulties and left, comically, in a happy situation, with no new self-understanding. Wells says in the middle of the novel that "Kipps was only in a measure more aware of himself as a whole than is a tree," and Kipps does not seem to progress in this regard (Wells, *Kipps and the History of Mr Polly* 202).

The one instinct Kipps seems to have that always leads him right is his sexual drive. Though *Kipps* is a restrained book, there are hints in it of Wells's own belief that sexual congress was a natural need that should not be constrained by cultural

conventions. In Wells's own long second marriage to a woman he renamed Jane¹⁵, he arranged to have open, tolerated affairs¹⁶. When Kipps's libido drives him first to kiss his childhood sweetheart Ann while engaged (telling neither woman about the other) and then to break his engagement in favor of Ann, there is no doubt he has done the right thing. It is not quite clear how to assess this event in the novel; it falls somewhere in between a romantic idea that "true love will out" and a less-comfortable idea that sexually excited men should be allowed to do whatever they want.

Kipps is quite a sexless book compared to *Ann Veronica* of a few years later, yet it is still puzzling how unphysical and vaguely described it is. There are many instances of self-touch, but they make little impact. Characters often rest their chins on their hands, in speculation or in worry (there are five instances); characters often thrust their hands into their pockets (there are seven instances). Only the snobbish character Chester Coote has a characteristic gesture. Coote holds his hand to the back of his head—his "occiput," as Wells once accurately labels it, perhaps reflecting his zoological training (Wells, *Kipps and the History of Mr Polly* 132). We may imagine that this reflects his worry about how he is perceived by others and how, despite excellent behavior, he may be not entirely able

¹⁵ You read that correctly. Wells's second wife was born Amy Catherine Robbins. Wells gave her a new first name when they married, and she remained Jane Wells for the rest of her life.

¹⁶ There was, however, an asymmetry very much in favor of Wells. If his contemporaries criticized Wells for being too unconventional, today's readers are likely to criticize him instead for being too conventional: Wells was allowed to do whatever he wanted sexually while his wife Jane stayed at home and ran his household, making him a traditional patriarch, except that refused the hypocritical discretion his era required from men having affairs.

to control it: it seems to me that he is worried that the hair at the back of his head is sticking up and he is nervously trying to smooth it while unable to see it. We see Coote do this five times; he is the only character with such a gesture. We get some confirmation that this is part of Coote's controlled and worried character in one excerpt: When Coote "cuts" Kipps (refuses to acknowledge him in public; this was a devastating sanction at the time), we see Coote's tension expressed: Kipps "perceived . . . by the almost convulsive grip of the ample, greenish white gloves behind him a grip broken at times for controlling pats at the black-bordered tie and the back of that spacious head . . . that *Coote did not approve!*" (Wells, *Kipps and the History of Mr Polly* 240–41).

We may perhaps account for the minimal impact of the self-touch in this novel by pointing out that it is largely stereotyped, rarely specific to a character or a situation, and rarely described with vivid detail. There is nothing like the wondering touch of his cheek by Terence Hewet, or the crass clipping of toenails by St. John Hirst, or even the puzzled fishing for his tooth of Mr. Povey's tongue.

CONCLUSION

Imaginative literature differs greatly in which life experiences it finds most important to narrate—a Greek epic and a Jane Austen novel both contain soldiers, but only one would describe a battle. But it also differs in which sensory information it elects to include. To take one example, Seymour Chatman noted that “it is hard to think of an occasion in a novel of [Henry] James when a real taste is tasted or a real smell smelled” (Chatman 30). I have argued that as the British novel made the turn from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, there was a movement to bring bodily experience, particularly touch, more into the novel. Henry James was a notable exception. He included no more tactile information than the novelists of his youth had. What is more, because the three novels of his major phase dwelled on so few events at such length, the absence of tactility was even more noticeable than it was in a novel by George Eliot.

This made his novels read very differently than those of contemporaries like E. M. Forster, Edith Wharton, or Virginia Woolf. Their novels feel vivid and embodied to readers, and one reason for this is the inclusion of moments of self-touch. Some of these moments are emotionally climactic, like Ralph Marvell’s tracing of his skull with his hand as he prepares to shoot himself. But others are much quieter, like St. John Hirst’s clipping of his toenails. Even so, these moments make readers feel physically present in the text, and this leads to greater emotional involvement. Alongside James’s slow pace and old-fashioned decorum, this missing sensory experience played a significant role in

explaining why readers from the early 1900s through the early 2000s consistently found his novels, particularly those of his so-called “major phase,” arid and difficult to read.

But we should not see these novels as merely expressing a personal or literary shortcoming in James. I believe James was also trying to imagine a new kind of intimacy—one where the partners remain always at a middle distance, favoring sight over touch and orbiting one another stably without ever colliding. While earlier critics like Thomas Deans have seen this kind of relationship as a failure, more recent ones like Ashley Barnes have suggested that the relationships between characters like Fanny and Bob Assingham in *The Golden Bowl* are in fact a success. Our culture’s increasing understanding of asexuality as a valid and satisfying way of life offers us a new frame in which to see James and his characters not as frustrated or fearful hetero- or homosexuals but as individuals with desires of their own which have been easy to misunderstand.

Bodily life and interpersonal intimacy each comprise far more than sexual life. But for James, these three issues were interwoven. From his early training as an artist under William Morris Hunt to his fascination with the elaborate rules of courtesy that operated at London dinner parties, James was always drawn to relationships with others that preserved a spectatorial distance. Milly Theale’s visit to London’s National Gallery in Vol. 1, Book 5, Chapter 7 of *The Wings of the Dove* gives an unforgettable example of this, where Milly first encounters and reads Merton Densher as if he were one of the gallery’s paintings (James, *Wings* 175–84). When we choose to see James not as withdrawing from life but as imagining an unexampled way to live it, his late novels cease to be exercises in frustration for the reader or in compositional extremes for the writer. Instead, they become but a resource for helping us—some of us at least—to invent

human relationships beyond those that have been culturally scripted for us. In this way at last, Henry James's tightly circumscribed late novels are exercises not in constraint but in freedom.

APPENDIX: HENRY JAMES'S NOVELS

This list of novels is drawn from the *Critical Companion to Henry James* (Haralson and Johnson). James's publication history is complex. He disowned his first novel, *Watch and Ward*, and it is typically omitted from discussions of his works.

The novels of his early period often discuss the "international theme," the complex clashes between European and American culture, generally as presented to an American in Europe. *The Portrait of a Lady* is regarded as his first masterpiece, and many of today's professors, like Michael Gorra, consider it the greatest of all his novels (Gorra).

The novels of the middle period are long and often deal with social problems. They were less successful. Overlooked for long stretches, they make periodic comebacks; *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Cassamassima* are the most often discussed.

James spent the years from 1890 to 1896 working on plays, notably his traumatic flop *Guy Domville*. *The Other House*, from 1896, was a novelization of a play that has been largely dismissed.

In his late period, James's novels became slower and his style more elaborate and obscure. During the writing of *What Maisie Knew*, he switched to composing by dictation to an assistant. Some have seen this new procedure as an influence on his subsequent style.

Between 1907 and 1909, James brought out the "New York edition," a collected edition of all the novels and stories he wanted to preserve. James significantly revised

many of his novels for this edition. James also omitted a number of his works from this edition.

In his final years, James published one more novelization of a play, *The Outcry*, which has been largely dismissed. At his death, he left two unfinished novels which were published posthumously.

Early period: 1871-1881

Watch and Ward 1871.

Roderick Hudson 1875.

The American 1877.

The Europeans 1878.

Confidence 1879.

Washington Square 1880.

The Portrait of a Lady 1881.

Middle period: 1886-1890

The Bostonians 1886.

The Princess Casamassima 1886.

The Reverberator 1888.

The Tragic Muse 1890.

Interregnum: 1890-1896

The Other House 1896.

Late period: 1897-1904

The Spoils of Poynton 1897.

What Maisie Knew 1897.

The Awkward Age 1899.

The Sacred Fount 1901.

The Wings of the Dove 1902.

The Ambassadors 1903.

The Golden Bowl 1904.

Unfinished or otherwise dismissed: 1911-1917

The Outcry 1911.

The Ivory Tower (unfinished, published posthumously) 1917.

A Sense of the Past (unfinished, published posthumously) 1917.

WORKS CITED

- A Room with a View*. Directed by James Ivory, Merchant Ivory, 1985.
- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Modernism and Postmodernism." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011, pp. 225–28.
- . "Novel." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011, pp. 252–59.
- . "Realism and Naturalism." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011, pp. 334–36.
- . "Sublime." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011, pp. 389–92.
- Agnew, Jean-Christophe. "The Consuming Vision of Henry James." *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 1983, pp. 67–100.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.
- Alexander, Sam. "Where Angels Fear to Tread." *Yale Modernism Lab*, campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/where-angels-fear-to-tread. Accessed 11 July 2022.
- Anesko, Michael. "*Friction with the Market*": *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship*. Oxford UP, 1986.

- Balzac, Honoré de. *Father Goriot*. 1835. Translated by Ellen Marriage, Naxos Audiobooks, 2018.
- Barker, Meg-John, and Jules Scheele. *Queer: A Graphic History*. Icon Books, 2016.
- Barnes, Ashley C. *Love and Depth in the American Novel: From Stowe to James*. UVA Press, 2020.
- Bedier, Joseph. *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*. Translated by Hilaire Belloc, Reissue ed., Vintage, 1994.
- Beer, Janet, and Elizabeth Nolan. "Introduction." *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton, Broadview P, 2005, pp. 9–27.
- Beerbohm, Max. *A Christmas Garland*. 1912. Heinemann, 1921.
- . *The Happy Hypocrite*. 1897. John Lane Company, 1915.
- . *The Prince of Minor Writers*. Edited by Phillip Lopate, New York Review Books, 2015,
www.nyrb.com/products/the_prince_of_minor_writers_the_selected_essays_of_max_beerbohm.
- . *Zuleika Dobson*. John Lane Company, 1911.
- Bennett, Arnold. *The Old Wives' Tale*. 1908. George H. Doran Co., 1911.
- Berry, David M., editor. *Understanding Digital Humanities*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371934>.
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess with a New Preface*. 1976. New ed., Yale UP, 1995.
- Buzwell, Greg. "Daughters of Decadence: The New Woman in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*." *The British Library*, 15 May 2014, www.bl.uk/romantics-and-

victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle.

Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. 1605–1615. Translated by John Rutherford, Penguin Audio, 2020.

Chatman, Seymour. *The Later Style of Henry James*. Basil Blackwell, 1972.

Conversations with History: Hubert Dreyfus. 2006. YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CHgt2Szk-I.

“Crackles.” *Wikipedia*, 5 Nov. 2020. *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Crackles&oldid=987203097.

Cuddon, J. A., et al. “Tableaux Vivants.” *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th ed., John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Deans, Thomas R. “Henry James’ *The Ambassadors*: The Primal Scene Revisited.” *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences*, vol. 29, no. 3, Fall 1972, pp. 233–56.

Dimock, Wai-Chee. “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*.” *PMLA*, vol. 100, no. 5, Oct. 1985, pp. 783–92.

Domestico, Anthony. “Henry James.” *Modernism Lab*, campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/henry-james. Accessed 2 Oct. 2021.

Drabble, Margaret. *Arnold Bennett: A Biography*. 1974. Faber and Faber, 2009.

“Dry Goods, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP. *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com/view/Entry/58085#eid6065818. Accessed 12 Sept. 2022.

E. M. Forster: His Longest Journey. Directed by Adrian Munsey and Vance Goodwin, Odyssey Television, 2019. YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqlmaOzShhs.

- Edwards, Ryan John. "History and the Everyday in Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*." *ELT*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2020, pp. 591–611.
- Emmert, Scott. "Drawing-Room Naturalism in Edith Wharton's Early Short Stories." *Journal of the Short Story in English*, no. 39, Autumn 2002, pp. 57–71.
- Eve, Paul Martin. *Close Reading with Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*. Stanford UP, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.21627/9781503609372>.
- Fisher, Philip. "American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War." *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, Modern Language Association, 1992.
- Foote, Stephanie. "The Wings of the Dove." *Critical Companion to Henry James: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, edited by Eric L. Haralson and Kendall Johnson, Facts On File, 2009, pp. 182–94.
- Forster, E. M. *A Room with a View*. 1908. Edited by Jim Manis, Pennsylvania State U, 2007.
- . *Aspects of the Novel*. 1927. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.
- . *Howards End*. 1910. Edited by Douglas Mao, Longman cultural ed., Pearson, 2010.
- . *The Longest Journey*. 1907. Edited by Gilbert Adair, Penguin Classics, 2006.
- . "The Other Boat." 1972. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth Century and After*, edited by Jahan Ramazani and Jon Stallworthy, 9th ed., vol. F, Norton, 2012, pp. 2121–42.

- . *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. 1905. Edited by Jim Manis, Pennsylvania State U, 2002.
- Freedman, Jonathan. "Hands, Objects, and Love in James and Hitchcock: Reading the Touch in *The Golden Bowl* and *Notorious*." *The Men Who Knew Too Much: Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock*, edited by Susan M. Griffin and Alan Nadel, Oxford UP, 2012.
- Fry, Stephen. *A Hard Act to Follow*. Episode 1, www.audible.com/pd/Stephen-Fry-Edwardian-Secrets-Podcast/B09B496QVF. Accessed 8 Oct. 2021.
- Gabbert, Elisa. "Introduction." *The Voyage Out*, by Virginia Woolf, Modern Library, 2021.
- Gorra, Michael. *Portrait of a Novel: Henry James and the Making of an American Masterpiece*. Liveright, 2013.
- Gunter, Susan E., and Steven H. Jobe, editors. *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*. U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Hall, N. John. *Max Beerbohm Caricatures*. Yale UP, 1997.
- Haralson, Eric L., and Kendall Johnson. *Critical Companion to Henry James: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Facts on File, 2009.
- Herz, Judith Scherer. "A Room with a View." *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, edited by David Bradshaw, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 139–50.
- Howarth, Barry. *The Craft of Arnold Bennett*. 2016. U of Liverpool, PhD dissertation.
- James, Henry. "Project of Novel by Henry James." *The Ambassadors*, edited by S. P. Rosenbaum, 2nd ed., Norton, 1994, pp. 377–404.
- . *The Ambassadors*. 1903. Paperback ed., Modern Library, 2011.

- . *The Golden Bowl*. 1904. Edited by Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Penguin, 2009.
- . *The Portrait of a Lady*. 1881. Edited by Michael Gorra, Norton, 2018.
- . *The Spoils of Poynton*. 1908. Edited by David Lodge, New York ed., Penguin Classics, 1987.
- . *The Wings of the Dove*. 1902. Edited by J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, 2nd ed., Norton, 2003.
- Jones, Charlotte. “*The Old Wives’ Tale* by Arnold Bennett – an Extraordinary Story of Ordinary Life.” *The Guardian*, 1 Jan. 2016,
www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jan/01/the-old-wives-tale-by-arnold-bennett-an-extraordinary-story-of-ordinary-life.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler et al., Critical and Synoptic ed., vol. 1, Garland, 1984.
- Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Kearney, Richard. *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. Columbia UP, 2021.
- Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. Vintage, 2007.
- . *Virginia Woolf*. 1996. Vintage, 1999.
- Mahaffey, Vicki. “Virginia Woolf.” *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, edited by John Richetti, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 900–32.
- Mars-Jones, Adam. “In His Master’s Voice.” *The Observer*, 22 Feb. 2004,
www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/22/fiction.colmtoibin.
- Marvick, Louis W. “Max Beerbohm’s *A Christmas Garland* and the Art of Parody.” *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor*, vol. 17, no. 1–2, 1997, pp. 80–86.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *Henry James, the Major Phase*. 1944. Oxford UP, 1999.

- McCrum, Robert. "The 100 Best Nonfiction Books: No 50 – *Eminent Victorians* by Lytton Strachey (1918)." *The Guardian*, 16 Jan. 2017. *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/16/100-best-nonfiction-books-no-50-eminent-victorians-lytton-strachey-manning-nightingale-arnold-gordon.
- McElderry, Jr., Bruce R. *Max Beerbohm*. Twayne, 1972.
- Milford-Cottam, Daniel. *Edwardian Fashion*. Illustrated ed., Shire Publications, 2014.
- Moffat, Wendy. *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M. Forster*. 1st ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. Illustrated ed., Verso, 2007.
- Morton, Brian. "The Invisible Author." 1995. *The H. G. Wells BBC Radio Collection*, BBC Audio, 2020.
- Otten, Thomas J. *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*. Ohio State UP, 2006.
- Ou, Li. *Keats and Negative Capability*. Continuum, 2009.
- "Peritraumatic Dissociation." *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association, 2022, dictionary.apa.org.
- Piper, Andrew. *Can We Be Wrong? The Problem of Textual Evidence in a Time of Data*. Cambridge UP, 2020.
- Pitt, Rosemary. "The Exploration of Self in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Woolf's *The Voyage Out*." *Conradiana*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1978, pp. 141–54.
- Prose, Francine. "Introduction." *The Old Wives' Tale*, by Arnold Bennett, Modern Library, 1999.

- Saloman, Randi. "Arnold Bennett's Hotels." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2012-2008>.
- Science in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology*. 2016. YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCY-edDd4_g.
- Shaw, George Bernard. "Valedictory." *The Saturday Review*, No. 2221, Vol. 85, 21 May 1898, pp. 682–83.
- Sherborne, Michael. *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*. Peter Owen, 2010.
- Simon, Linda. *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master*. Camden House, 2007.
- "The Kippes." 1984. *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul*, directed by Martin Jenkins, 5, BBC Audio, 1 Oct. 2020.
- The Wings of the Dove*. Directed by Iain Softley, Miramax, 1997, amazon.com/Wings-Dove-Helena-Bonham-Carter/dp/B006LQL92U/.
- Thorburn, David. *Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature*. The Great Courses, 2007.
- Tóibín, Colm. *The Master*. Reprint ed., Scribner, 2005.
- Tomalin, Claire. *The Young H. G. Wells*. Penguin, 2021.
- Trehub, Elaine D. "Women at the University of Cambridge." *The Victorian Web*, 18 Mar. 2013, victorianweb.org/history/education/trehub/3.html.
- Trotter, David. "The Avoidance of Naturalism: Gissing, Moore, Grand, Bennett, and Others." *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, edited by John Richetti, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 699–723.
- . *The English Novel in History: 1895-1920*. Routledge, 1993.

- Wells, H. G. *Boon, the Mind of the Race, the Wild Asses of the Devil, and the Last Trump*. T. Fisher Unwin, 1915.
- . *Kipps and the History of Mr Polly*. 1905. Wordsworth Editions, 2017.
- . *The War of the Worlds*. 1898. Project Gutenberg, 1992,
www.gutenberg.org/files/36/36-h/36-h.htm.
- West, Rebecca. *Henry James*. 1916. Kennikat Press, 1968,
www.gutenberg.org/files/37300/37300-8.txt.
- Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. D. Appleton - Century Company, 1934.
- . "Ethan Frome." 1911. *Wharton: Novellas & Other Writings*, edited by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Library of America, 1990, pp. 61–156.
- . "Old New York: False Dawn (the 'Forties); The Old Maid (The 'Fifties); The Spark (The 'Sixties); New Year's Day (The 'Seventies)." 1924. *Wharton: Novellas & Other Writings*, edited by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Library of America, 1990, pp. 315–550.
- . "Summer." 1917. *Wharton: Novellas & Other Writings*, edited by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Library of America, 1990, pp. 157–314.
- . *The Custom of the Country*. 1913. Edited by Sarah Emsley, Broadview P, 2008.
- . *The House of Mirth*. 1905. Edited by Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan, Broadview P, 2005.
- . "To William Crary Brownell." 1904. *The House of Mirth*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons, 2nd ed., Norton, 2018.

Wonham, Henry B. "The Golden Bowl." *Critical Companion to Henry James: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, edited by Eric L. Haralson and Kendall Johnson, Facts On File, 2009, pp. 82–96.

Woolf, Virginia. "The Limits of Perfection." *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Nov. 1919, p. 627.

---. *The Voyage Out*. 1915. Modern Library, 2021.

---. *The Voyage Out*. 1915. Edited by Jim Manis, Pennsylvania State U, 2001.

Woolf, Virginia, and Lytton Strachey. *Letters: Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey*. Edited by Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, Harcourt, Brace, 1956. *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/lettersviriniaw00wool.

Zola, Emile. *Germinal*. 1885. Translated by Roger Pearson, Penguin Books, 2004.