

THE LURE OF THE OBJECT IN HENRY JAMES'S FICTIONS OF  
THWARTED DESIRE: REFLECTIONS ON THE LIBIDINAL AND  
SOCIAL POETICS OF LITERARY FORMS

Esther Sánchez-Pardo González  
*Universidad Complutense de Madrid*  
esanchez\_pardo@filol.ucm.es

This paper frames the figure of the object – a libidinally invested and desired object– in terms of its progression and development in Jamesian narrative, emphasizing how Henry James's discourse on possession – the process of striving to secure the central object in narration– gains complexity and sophistication in his so called 'major phase' – from 1880 to 1905. Jamesian narratives continually foreground the implication of the novel itself in the plot of 'thwarted desire' these fictions criticize. The narratological tensions in James's texts attest to the self-critical aspect (of the novel by the novel) of this internally directed critique. I have based my analysis of Jamesian late realism upon *The Aspern Papers* and 'The Figure in the Carpet', representative texts of James's short fiction and novellas, in which objects – art or aesthetic objects such as literature, epistemological objects such as secrets or money – are foregrounded and which explore the circuitous routes of desire, systematically thwarted desire, and of libidinal and bourgeois possession.

KEY WORDS: Henry James, object, secret, major phase, late realism, modernism

[A]ny object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.

Virginia Woolf

The novel is always an attempt to reconcile the consciousness of the writer and reader with the objective world at large; so it is that the judgments we make on the great novelists fall not on them, but on the moment of history which they reflect and on which their structures pass sentence.

Fredric Jameson

Contemporary theories of the novel are much indebted to Henry James's important elaboration at the turn-of-the-century.<sup>1</sup> Anglo-American novel theory begins with James: his 'Art of Fiction' (1884) and his prefaces to the New York Edition (1907-09) offer sensitive explorations of the novel's technical capabilities and its compositional problems, together with a formal vocabulary that has endured new critical, structuralist, narratological and poststructuralist adaptations. Despite this broad adaptability, or perhaps because of it, James's contributions to novel theory have often been described as 'pure' formalism, blind to the socio-historical contingencies that shape narrative. Dorothy Hale's recent book on the subject advances a persuasive argument, however, that this is a false presupposition; the theoretical core of James's formalism, Hale demonstrates, is in fact a social one.<sup>2</sup> Bill Brown's innovative work on James's major novels offers a remarkable new way to think about materialism and to show how the novelist was, "eager to describe the physical object world yet eager to chart a kind of consciousness that transcends it" (2003: 14). This paper takes its point of departure from similar intuitions: the sense that a corresponding case might be made for James's formal innovations in the novel –for his practice, as opposed to his theory.

James's increasing interest in the representation of interiority does not lead him to disregard (that is, to suppress or repress) the circulation or social uses of material 'things'. On the contrary, James devotes a large body of his work, especially from the 1880s through 1900 and beyond, to exploring the entanglement of consciousness and desire with libidinal, social and materialist scripts of attainment or possession. The predominant theme in James's novels and tales from the turn of the century is the struggle for possession.

James's narratives of thwarted desire, my focus of study here, revolve around the protagonist's agonized quest to attain and/or possess – that is, to apprehend and appropriate– a rare and mysterious object. These narratives represent the elusive object as a libidinal, social or material object (at the level of plot) and also as an epistemological 'secret' which the narrator or protagonist attempts to glean in the absence of the material 'thing' itself. In narration, James reiterates this doubled plot structure: at this level, the plot for possession is interiorized, rehearsed through the struggle of the first-person narrator or focalizer to apprehend and represent the object – that is, to focus or narrate it for the tale.<sup>3</sup> This is the mark of James's romance-narratives and the essence of their double plot structure: the 'thing' which is to be had is

---

<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge funding for this paper from the Del Amo Fellowships Program and Research Project PR34/07-15781.

<sup>2</sup> In *Social Formalism*, Hale recounts the story of American formalist criticism from James through the New Critics, to Roland Barthes' critique of Lubbock. Her revisionist analysis of novel theory challenges the presumed divide between formalism and cultural theory, arguing that contemporary social theories of identity are deeply influenced by the conceptual heart of James's formalist criticism (1998: 4).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I define narrative discourse as the representation of story. I clarify moreover, that discourse is comprised of the following three operations (or levels): plot (the representation of action), narration (the representation of perspective, i.e. of the story-world focus and /or the narrator's point of view) and style (or prose discourse, the verbal representation of narration).

also a secret to be known. At both levels, the material, epistemological and semiotic object of possession circulates just out of the protagonists' and focalizer's (hence, the tale's) immediate grasp, continually eluding the frustrated seeker.

With his stories of thwarted desire, James strives to accommodate the vision of the novel to a 'respect'— if not a 'passion' — for both the individual and the social values of signifying 'things'. In the gap between his characters' various desires to attain objects and the achievement of their wills, James opens a space in which to represent the stakes of personal relationships and of possession in bourgeois society — aesthetically to mirror those desires, and morally to elicit a response from his readers.

By seeking to grasp the dynamics of Jamesian narrative not exclusively from the perspective of the objects it purports to pursue but rather from the internal logic the text ratifies in grasping or withholding such 'things', we aim at elucidating both the libidinal and social poetics of Jamesian forms in a preliminary way. This paper argues that through the form of the double quest, James draws out the 'hidden' bases of desire that propel his plots: namely, sexuality,<sup>4</sup> the performance of identity, bourgeois wealth and the establishment of social distinction.

In the version of the quest he 'interiorizes' in his narrative centre (i.e. the focalizing or narrating protagonist), James also represents the impulse, so common to the story-world he pictures, to repress those dishonourable bases. Through the figure of the double quest, in other words, James locates a repudiation of the libidinal aim of the narrative in the story-world: an engagement in hedonistic and acquisitive individualism (the libidinal-social plot) alongside the reflector's negation of that motive.<sup>5</sup> The libidinal repudiation is, in this respect, a social narrative that James exposes and which produces concomitant psychic effects.

From the perspective of literary history, James possesses a singular status. Jamesian narrative is at once supremely representative of the novel's formal transition into

---

<sup>4</sup> Speculations about the ambiguous nature of James's sexuality have attracted much critical attention. Biocritical appropriations at the hands of Leon Edel (1985), Fred Kaplan (1992), Sheldon Novick (1996) and Colm Toibin (2004) have paved the way for a new series of essays centred on masculinities and their construction and queer theory. Magisterial in this regard has been the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who — after her important analyses of what she called *homosexual panic in Epistemology of the Closet*, productive of the "explicitly thematized sexual anaesthesia" (1990: 194) of the *fin-de-siècle* bachelor narrative and a concomitant regime of the closet — proposed an influential reading of 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903) that would profoundly affect the course of Jamesian criticism. Today, critics such as Michael Moon (1998) Eric Savoy (2005) and Kevin Ohi (2004) attempt to reread James's texts using the protocols of what they have called "queer formalism" (see Savoy 2007: 103).

<sup>5</sup> James's novels privilege one or more internal perspectives upon the action, even as they retain an extradiegetic narrator. James is not the first to combine these perspectives; Dickens does so also, notably in *Bleak House*. Neither is James the first realist to impose a represented consciousness as mediator to the plot and object-world: the device appears frequently in passages of free indirect discourse, for example, in Austen's and Flaubert's novels; it figures also in 'romantic' first-person narratives, such as in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*. We have nevertheless come to associate these formal innovations with the Jamesian legacy to Anglo-American realism, for no other novelist in English precedes James in deploying these techniques so systematically, or so self-consciously.

modernism and also uniquely situated at the turning point of that change. The old-fashioned notion that James himself modernized the Anglo-American novel, almost single-handedly, by importing French innovations into its forms (such as Flaubertian impersonality) surely overstates the case; nonetheless, James's 1875 foray into the Flaubertian circle, as well as his friendship with Turgenev and even his own 'international' status as adoptive Londoner and American *émigré* served to open the nineteenth century novel in English to a broad range of social and intellectual influences. His own novels betray the influences of American romance, French and English realism, Continental aestheticism and pictorial impressionism. As a result of his experiences in Europe from early on –he attended schools in New York, London, Paris, Geneva, Boulogne and Bonn and was exposed to the artistic and cultural treasures of Europe– he introduced in his fiction what he called *the international subject* –that is, the reaction of expatriate Americans to the impact of the older and more sophisticated Europe.

Henry James, we might say, introduces a new manner of capaciousness into the English novel. This is as true of James's novels discursively as it is, in a broader sense, aesthetically.<sup>6</sup> Disenchanted with the overgrown novels of the nineteenth century, James discarded an antiquated realism overloaded with plot and weighed down by cataloguing and concretizing descriptions. Despite their own narrative circumlocutions and specific particularities, James's novels initiate a late-century shift toward more economical ways of compressing complexity into form. The primary site of discursive complexity, with Jamesian narrative, is no longer the diachronic unfolding of plot but narration –and therefore style. Subordinating his materialist plots to an aesthetic focus in narration, James brings subjects and their perspectives to the foreground of his narratives while permitting action and its objects to recede from direct view.<sup>7</sup>

As I have argued above, James's formal redemption of the possessive/acquisitive impulse (and its aesthetic or epistemological objects) link up with his formal innovations in the so-called 'major phase'. The late style carries forward a project that James announces rhetorically with 'The Art of Fiction', the project of re-imagining the novel as a shared cultural possession. In 'The Art of Fiction' and his prefaces to the New York Edition, James represents the novel as an object held in common by the cultured elite, rather than a divisive instrument of social stratification. In these writings, as in the late style, James figures literary *form* as a means of uniting readers and novelists in a collaborative process of production and exchange. The highly mediated representational method of James's late novels and the densely metaphorical qualities of his late style do not represent, in this regard, formal attempts at escaping the novel's

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Genette (1980) first associated focalization with a 'focal character' and the questions who sees? and who perceives? Following Mieke Bal (1985), however, many narratologists now believe that focalization covers a much wider scope than either vision or perception and that the narrator is a potential 'focalizer', too. First-generation narratologists like Genette and Seymour Chatman (1972) view this expanded scope with considerable skepticism.

<sup>7</sup> In his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James names his mediators explicitly: "My registers or 'reflectors', as I so conveniently name them (burnished indeed as they generally are by the intelligence, the curiosity, the passion, the force of the moment, whatever it may be, directing them)" (2004: 17).

implication in social scripts of status, possession or consumption; they rather aim at differentiating such exchanges from the modes of commodity consumption or display. At the level of form, in other words, James does not repress the novel's own implication in the process of production, consumption and exchange; on the contrary, together with his enigmatic elusive objects, he repudiates it, at once representing the libidinal and social stakes of the novel's possession and at the same time re-envisioning these stakes, formally.

James's narratives, focusing on libidinally invested objects, are structured according to this contradictory logic. Discursively, his novels and tales translate an axiological ambivalence over the 'social' values of possession into a formal dissonance that marks the novel's relation to its own objectified status. In these novels, the unpossessed object of the story is frequently an allusion to the literary text itself; it is explicitly so in 'The Figure in the Carpet', and *The Aspern Papers*. Confronting such objects – objects for material, epistemological, libidinal and 'aesthetic' possession – at the discursive levels of plot, narration and style, James's novels relentlessly return to their own contradictory status in a culture given over to consumption.

What are we to make of this ambivalent position vis-à-vis the cultural politics of possession or the form which encodes it? As Terry Eagleton implies in his criticism, what is at stake in our understanding of James's narratives of possession is nothing less than the social politics of Jamesian realism.<sup>8</sup> This question as to the relation between James's formal innovations and his social critique bears also on our assessment of narrative modernism: for in subverting the idea of closure of a conventional nineteenth-century plot structure, splintering the perspective of narrative omniscience and subordinating plot to style, James charted a course for modern fiction. The modernist novel would exploit to the fullest possibility the formal techniques of impressionism, which James introduces in his late narratives of thwarted desire. James's 'impressionist' mode of narration represents a half-way measure between traditional free-indirect discourse, which requires the interpenetration of an internal perspective and a narrator's voice, and stream of consciousness technique, which dispenses with the narrator altogether. Free indirect discourse produces a heightened effect in the narrative and is generally limited to short passages in a novel; stream of consciousness, by contrast, is virtually inexhaustible. James's stylization of the protagonist's manner of perception in his impressionist novels anticipates the sprawl of the latter technique, yet James holds back from the precipice of this new development. By retaining an

---

<sup>8</sup> In *Criticism and Ideology* (1978), and in his more recent *Introduction to the English Novel* (2005), Eagleton contends that James mediates story by subjective perception in order to suppress "certain real conflicts and divisions" (1978: 141) that are at stake in his plot. He identifies the typical plot of those narratives as "the struggle for material acquisition". But he asserts something more: in Jamesian narrative, he claims, that material struggle is displaced by a parallel quest for putatively immaterial objects: consciousness, epistemological mastery, a detached but "encompass[ing] view" (1978: 141). This epistemological pursuit, Eagleton argues, hijacks the quest narrative, effectively repressing the plot and thereby conjuring away the social underpinnings of James's text. Eagleton locates the central dynamic of Jamesian narrative in this 'aesthetic turn', so to speak, from a social and material world directly grasped to an interior harmony factitiously constructed by thought.

extradiegetic narrator and references to 'exhibitional conditions' in plot, he limits the effect that stream of consciousness naturally produces in the represented consciousness, what James himself called "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation" (1947: 321).

Enlarging the focus of James's experimentation, modernist fiction develops the internal focus perspective through the stream of consciousness technique and relegates plot to at best a secondary discursive position, subordinate to both narration and style. As my conclusion will suggest, James's formal revisions to realism are ultimately bound up with the cultural context of the late nineteenth-century novel in particular, with its social and material relation to an elite class of readers.

### **Desire and fetishization in *The Aspern Papers***

In *The Aspern Papers*<sup>9</sup> we should recognize the familiar formula: as the tale emphatically reminds us, its 'absolute' basis – its cause and closure – rests upon an absent and long dead writer, Jeffrey Aspern. From the outset, however, this tale frankly locates Aspern at a temporal and therefore unbridgeable remove; his name comes from "ages before" (1984: 45) and the tense that accompanies its announcement, i.e. "had never been" (46), is the pluperfect: the tense of the completed past, the dead and buried. The poet cannot properly be 'known' or 'possessed', but the narrator nonetheless travels to Venice, seeking a mediated, or "transmitted contact" (48) with the dead poet. His quest is to possess Aspern's papers, as symbolic literary 'remains' – or containers – of the poet's buried and mysterious identity. At every step, however, the protagonist is blocked from seeing or possessing the papers, or even knowing what they represent.

The tale illustrates another commonplace of James's quest plots, which Todorov's essay 'The Secret of Narrative' may help us to discern: the tendency of romantic 'things' to become conflated with 'secrets'. By their affiliation with the poet, Aspern's papers assume an overwhelming value for the protagonist; they become sacred, mysterious "relics" (1984: 51). Endowed with a curious semiotic status, the papers occupy a position somewhere between representation and sign: whether they compromise or merely represent Aspern's 'secret', we cannot quite be sure. This central complex of uncertainty drives the quest, and is represented as being ultimately responsible for its thwarting: when the protagonist is closest to possession of the papers, he withdraws, "lost in wonder at the importance [he] had attached to Juliana's crumpled scraps" (139). Before the narrator can recover his sense of the paper's crucial value, Tina, Miss Bordereau's niece, has consigned them to the flames. Without Aspern's papers, the tale itself seems bereft of the 'cause' that is its name and figure for coherence. Its title asserts, however, (and with a wink to the reader) that it represents another link along the chain of substitutions: a narrative crux of secrets, mediating and supplanting the forfeited papers, which are known only through the tale that speaks of them.

<sup>9</sup> In the preface to *The Aspern Papers* James pronounces the tale another example of the 'romantic': "I have had occasion in the course of these remarks (i.e. the prefaces) to define my sense of the romantic, and am glad to encounter again here an instance of that virtue as I understand it" (1947: 161).

The Jamesian plot of thwarted desire dramatizes the protagonist's conversion of this mediating object into a signifier, or compensatory substitution, for the relation it represents and later displaces. For in the protagonist's conversion of the means to an end in itself (as the cherished papers become an object in their own right – the spoils of victory – and their significance as a representation of Aspern becomes secondary), the social relation to persons is subordinated to a domination over things. Thus the quest becomes derailed into a fixation on the material possession of the object, alienated from its referential function.

What we observe, in novellas such as *The Aspern Papers*, is James's critique of fetishization, a process which displaces human relations by their idealization in material 'things'. In figuring the inability of Aspern's papers to bear the meaning thrust upon them, James undermines the narrating protagonist's assessment of the papers as an end in themselves. It is crucial to note that the tale does not take for granted the exalted status of Aspern or his papers –we will remember that Juliana recalls the poet in less glamorous terms than those in which the biographer imagines him, and that even the narrator's colleague, John Cumnor, is but moderately persistent about the papers; in this tale, James represents the 'meaning' of the poet and his papers as a function of the protagonist's projected personal and social uses of them. The imputation of libidinal value is one this protagonist would extend from his idol to himself: conflating his libidinally invested scholarly object with himself (as subject), the narrating protagonist equates 'knowledge' with identity –and exclusive rights of possession: "the world, as I say, had recognised Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognised him most" (1984: 47). Here, as in James's definition of *the romantic*, desire redoubles upon itself, mediating and displacing knowledge of any discrete object. Possession no longer entails penetration of the object but has become itself a sign of being, a mark of distinction for the possessor that also entails libidinal attachment.

Despite James's alleged preference for knowing versus having, what these tales in effect dramatize is the short-circuiting of both ends by the fetishistic ethic of possessive materialism, which renders them irreconcilable. James's tales fail to mediate the problems of material possession through the epistemological quest, in other words, because in these texts 'knowledge' (or moral understanding, which presumes the recognition of difference) proves antithetical to the possession of objects imagined as libidinally invested inalienable properties.

It is not clear that James will ever allow us to have both the concrete object and the value or idea it signifies. James's late narratives represent possession split into two parts: through the counterpoint of possessive scripts in plot and narration, James alienates the physical domination of material 'things' from the appraisal of their relational value in consciousness. Here, the consciousness that imputes value ('thought and desire') is what brings the object near, yet it nonetheless holds the 'real' object at an inviolable remove. 'Thought and desire' meanwhile orbit around the protagonist's social and professional aspirations, which have attracted or directed new meanings onto formerly referential 'things'.

In these tales, the ability of 'things' to stimulate personal desire is inextricably bound up with their dual role as instruments and representations of social power. In 'The Figure in the Carpet' and *The Aspern Papers*, for example, acquisition of the

'secret' object represents to the protagonist not only a projected means of personal defence but also a means of professional advancement. Though taboo for unmarried, detached (and narcissistic) 'professionals'<sup>10</sup> – and often kept, as well, from celibate or widowed women – James represents possession as permissible within the context of familial or sexual relations.<sup>11</sup> Tina inherits the papers from Juliana. The desired 'thing', as object and 'secret', circulates like property.

The homodiegetic narrator of *The Aspern Papers* tacitly acknowledges the fact; in considering marriage, he quietly concedes that it is the only means to his desired ends. Yet the protagonist subsequently repudiates this knowledge. In the story, the narrator is similarly determined to procure the papers by his own efforts: "it was absurd that I should be able to invent nothing; absurd to renounce so easily and turn away helpless from the idea that the only way to become possessed was to unite myself to her for life. I mightn't unite myself, yet I might still have what she had" (1984:141).

*The Aspern Papers* struggles to contain 'Aspern' in 'the papers', but represents the letters at one moment as an elusive "treasure" reserved for contemplation, and at another as "crumpled scraps" for sale (1984: 65). It seems clear that what the questors' desire, essentially, is to receive or inherit the symbolic 'thing', to possess it as a sign, symbol and legitimation of the social power they in fact covet.

In conclusion, withholding direct access to the object (Aspern's papers, Vereker's secret) – both as a perceptual object to be focalized and as a linguistic object to be named or defined – the structure of perspective in these tales reproduces the plots' problem of possession (the problem of having) as a representational problem, namely, the problem of *seeing* or presenting, of focalizing or narrating the central 'thing'.

### Textual/sexual secrets in 'The Figure in the Carpet'

Nowhere better perhaps than in his well-known 'Figure in the Carpet' (1895) does James describe the impossible task of the literary critic, and what is quite brilliant in his story is that its very subject matter is the pursuit of a secret without which, James says, there can be no literary work. And in his story the secret remains untold; there is a figure in the carpet, but no one will tell us what it is.

I have just alluded to the 'impossible task' of the critic and applauded James's metaphor of a secret meaning condemned to remain secret.<sup>12</sup> Does that mean that

<sup>10</sup> James generally represents his male protagonists in the romances as professional men of letters: journalists, critics and scholars. In almost all cases, they are singularly devoid of personal attachments or close familial relationships. For James's motherless female protagonists (such as Fleda or Isabel or Milly), by comparison, 'adoptive' family members often prove the means of their entrapment.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Figure in the Carpet' unsettles the suggestion that the 'figure' is merely a cipher for sexual intimacy: Gwendolyn Erme gives birth to two of Drayton Deane's children, and yet this husband appears never to have been initiated into the story's secret, which Gwendolyn is said to possess.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Iser was one of the first critics who read 'The Figure in the Carpet' from the point of view of reception theory. He wanted to deconstruct the idea that there is something hidden in



James's fiction marks the end of literary criticism as we know it? Does that mean that the literature of the twentieth century, for some yet unknown historical reason, will no longer yield what we have up to now called its 'truth'? In a way, it does, unless of course we exchange our 'critical tools' for others that we could call epistemological rather than critical.

'The Figure in the Carpet' is a tale about a secret which seems to be the condition of literary achievement. The question could run thus: what is it that makes a literary work worthwhile? Or what is it that denotes 'good' or 'great' literature? It is of course the question of literary criticism in James's time. But it is true we are facing a very difficult problem, for it concerns beauty, and it concerns truth, and also the relationship between the two. Rapidly, however, in 'The Figure in the Carpet', literary achievement is left aside and the query then becomes more general and amounts to something like this: 'What is literature made of?'

If we approach a summary of the tale, what we have is an enquiry into the genius, or success, of a famous writer whose name, very aptly, happens to be Vereker. Chosen by George Corvick, his senior as a literary critic, the narrator of the story is supposed to write a review of Vereker's last novel. His task is to find out something like the secret of the man's talent. The review is written, and published, and the people at the office declare it "all right", while Corvick, who was obliged to be away in Paris at the time, is dissatisfied and writes that this was not "at all . . . what Vereker gave him the sense of" (2001: 285).

In the next two scenes – or parts, for there are eleven of them – our hero comes to meet the great man at a reception in a country residence to which he has also been invited, and eventually they have a long conversation. Before this, however, at dinner, the review is indirectly discussed. At first the writer's comment is vague, non-committal. Later on in the day, in the middle of the night in fact, writer and critic have a long interview. The author does not want to hurt the young man's feelings and speaks kindly to him; but he nevertheless remains unable to explain why critics always "miss" his "little point" (2001: 289). Vereker calls his urge to write the "finest, fullest intention of the lot" (290) and also speaks of "this little trick" (290) of something we may find in "the order, the form, the texture of [his] books" (290). The approach is very modern, ahead of James's time even, but it does point out what a critic ought to do in such a vague manner that it is no help, simply repeating that it is "the thing for the critic to look for" (290). We may take this for a probable intuition that in 1900 the world of criticism was not properly equipped for the task. That many, even in our day, should fare no better, is a point worthy of consideration.

---

the text, which is precisely a concealed referential meaning. Meaning for him, was rather the product of an interaction between reader and text. In Iser's view, "Such a meaning [the text's] must clearly be the product of an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced" (1978: 9-10).

But should not authors somewhat help the critics in their difficult task? This is what the young man asks: “Don’t you think you ought to – just a trifle – assist the critic?” (290). And Vereker’s answer is almost indignant: Assist the critic? But this is what he does when he writes. “I’ve shouted my intention in his great blank face!” (290). And here of course we shall note the word *intention*, a clue that even James’s writer does not know what his own secret, this impulse that makes him write, is. He then proceeds to speak of his ‘secret’. Again, we are given to understand that the *intention* that was mentioned earlier on cannot constitute an explanation sufficient in itself. Did James have some intuition about this? His Vereker, in any case, is far from unwise: “If my great affair’s a secret, that’s only because it’s a secret in spite of itself” (290). In fact, what the reader is very clearly told here is that writing is not a matter of intention.

In James’s next step we are given to understand that the words a writer produces still remain somewhat mysterious to him. The thing is there, on the written page, but it cannot clearly be described. In the end it remains a secret and our young critic can only sum up the discussion with the author with a very general statement: “This extraordinary ‘general intention’ . . . is then generally a sort of buried treasure?” (292) The writer does vaguely approve, but still leaves us in the dark: “Yes, call it that, though it’s perhaps not for me to do so” (292). So, our young critic has failed to discover what the secret – the “general intention” – was, and he has failed so utterly that he comes to the conclusion that he has no knowledge and that perhaps nobody ever has.

To Corvick, back from Paris and about to get married to Mrs Erme’s daughter, he confesses his failure. Together with Corvick, again, they wonder what the ‘thing’ is, and they decide that, certainly, it is “something to be understood” (293), but go no further. Has Corvick understood something our narrator has failed to see? Probably not, but at this point he seems more eager than ever to go ahead with his search. And the central metaphor in the tale, the one that gave it its title, is introduced, “For himself [Vereker], beyond doubt, the thing we were also blank about was vividly there. It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like the complex figure in a Persian carpet” (295).

The story goes on: Vereker leaves England, and Corvick, “contracted for a piece of work which imposed on him an absence of some length and a journey of some difficulty” (298). He goes to India and is thus separated from his beloved Gwendolen, and it is a separation that we may read as a sign of James’s probably unconscious insistence on the impossibility of love between man and woman. In India, as if by a miracle, Corvick is at last successful. Has the figure in the carpet finally come out, then? A telegram Gwendolen receives says so, but we shall not know what it is. And thus, to verify that what he has discovered is the right thing, Corvick rushes to Rapallo where Vereker is staying. Gwendolen and our narrator will simply have to wait a little longer. The fiancé does write from Rapallo, though, and all he has to say, in fact, amounts to the suggestion of what I will call, a transaction, or an exchange, for his letter consists, “of the remarkable statement that he would tell her after they were married exactly what she wanted to know” (302). The ‘secret’ might very likely have something to do with ‘life’ (sexuality), and this episode about marriage seems to confirm it.

The letter says more, of course, but never what we want to know: the rule of the game, here, seems to be that the secret will always be alluded to, and somewhat

lengthily even, but never revealed. In the end, Corvick and the young lady marry, they go to Torquay for their honeymoon, and, there, the bridegroom dies in an accident! *Deus ex machina* or not, the book he planned to write on Vereker and that was supposed to reveal everything will not be written. Again, we are left in the lurch. He had completed the opening pages, however, but this does not help: “[T]hey were striking, they were promising, but they didn’t unveil the idol” (305). All that is left to our narrator is to question the lady, “Had she seen the idol unveiled? Had there been a private ceremony for a palpitating audience of one?” (305). The lady will now keep the secret to herself. To the narrator, anxious to know what it was that Corvick had found, her answer leaves no hope, “I heard everything . . . and I mean to keep it to myself!” (306).

The next scene, the ninth, almost runs like a confession. Wounded by the lady’s refusal, our narrator still has hopes. But he is wrong, of course, and almost comes to realize it. The price to pay may be higher than he expects, and “intimacy” (306) may be the condition, of the secret. At which point he wonders whether he will have to marry the lady in order to discover the secret.<sup>13</sup> The end of the episode might help us guess what is to follow. To the young man’s desperate question, “Now, at last, what *is* it?”, the young widow can only answer “Never!” (307). It is difficult not to interpret this *never* as an answer produced by unconscious desire. For after all, her refusal is prompted by James. His hero, our narrator, cannot, must not, find out what the secret (of sexuality?) is. This is no doubt the reason why a new character –who of course will marry the widow– is introduced at this point, Drayton Deane. He is also a literary critic, and he has the favour of the lady.

Six months later, when Vereker’s last book is published, our narrator straight away takes it to Mrs Corvick. And already the title is interesting: *The Right of Way*, and that is a right of way from which our hero is obviously barred. The lady, our narrator thinks, “had got what she wanted” (309), and when three weeks after this, the news of Vereker’s death reaches him, he knows he will never find out what the secret was. For before the end of the year, he also learns of the death of Vereker’s wife whom he had hoped, as a last resort to approach. The only way left to our hero is to renounce, “I felt renouncement indeed my appointed lot. I was shut up in my obsession for ever – my gaolers had gone off with the key” (309). Our hero’s renouncement can easily be analysed, for it is indeed the very heart of the tale, the point of no return James wanted his story to reach. So, we are not surprised when Mrs Corvick becomes Drayton Deane’s wife, and perhaps not surprised either when we learn that the critic does not make public what new ‘knowledge’ he may have acquired by his marriage to the lady, what James flamboyantly calls “the splendour of the other party’s nuptial gift” (309). The solution might be to observe the husband and find out what he has learnt. But doubt in any case persists: does the husband know? We cannot be sure, and this is the question. For such matters, indeed, are not so simple, and the new husband may not possess the necessary talent, “He wasn’t interested, he didn’t care. Yes, it quite

<sup>13</sup> The narrator muses and wonders, “There might be little in it, but there was enough to make me wonder if I should have to marry Mrs Corvick to get what I wanted. Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge?” (2001: 307).

comforted me to believe him too stupid to have the joy of the thing I lacked. He was as stupid after as before, and that deepened for me the golden glory in which the mystery was wrapped” (311).

When the lady dies we know we shall never find out, and this of course constitutes one of the aesthetic dimensions of the story. For the information has to be obtained from the husband.<sup>14</sup> There is much in the rest of the scene that deserves analysis but I shall content myself with simply mentioning the obvious desire to remain in the dark, and then an obscure, but, I think, secondary wish to know what the joy of sex is, and also a wish to learn what femininity is. In the end, as announced, the secret remains untold, and James cleverly concludes his story with the mention of “unappeased desire” (313), unaware, for once, that there is no other way to approach desire as such.

### Conclusion: The lure of the object, or beyond realism

In the case of ‘The Figure in the Carpet’ and *The Aspern Papers*, the ‘object’ in the narrative seems to point in a particular direction. Not of course that texts tell us in what way they should be read, certainly not. But because texts were written at a certain moment in history, we might advance the hypothesis that they carry in their very texture, or constitution, something that is significant of that moment. What we are alluding to is that forms, literary forms, have a socio-historical meaning.<sup>15</sup> This socio-historical meaning is, among other things, an information on the epistemological assumptions of the age. Once again, literature does not directly deliver an ultimate truth, but it can be made to reveal some particular truth.

The Jamesian plots of thwarted desire project the conflict between contradictory imperatives, which collide and converge in represented objects. Jamesian romances orbit around ‘things’ figured as material and ideal, as libidinal and social objects and as private secrets – but never finally one or the other.<sup>16</sup> James’s texts internalize the

<sup>14</sup> James explicitly writes, “The information? / Vereker’s secret, my dear man –the general intention of his books: the string the pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet” (311). But Drayton Deane apparently doesn’t know: “Have I been wrong in taking for granted that she admitted you, as one of the highest privileges of the relation in which you stood to her, to the knowledge of which she was after Corvick’s death the sole depositary? . . . I don’t know what you are talking about” (311).

<sup>15</sup> As is well-known, this is the position Mikhail Bakhtin holds in his crucial works devoted to the genre of the novel. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, he states, “The forces that define [the novel] as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day” (1981: 5). And in more general terms, “[T]he boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition, the boundaries themselves are constantly changing” (1981a: 33).

<sup>16</sup> In his preface to *The American* (1877), James identifies the neatly polarized scheme of ‘bad people’ and ‘good’ as an ‘infallible sign’ of ‘the romantic’ mode. There is a degree of overlap between the aesthetic of the pre-novelistic prose romance and romanticism. The formal

contradictory logic of repudiation: they too serve contrary and independent laws, which project two irreconcilable views toward the narrative's central object. In withholding such objects narratologically, suspending them from direct attainment, either in plot or narration, James sustains and even magnifies their oscillation in value.

James's plots of thwarted desire resist their own conclusions; they show the ending as a mere convention, motivated not by the internal mechanism of the narrative but imposed as an external force. Borrowing from the forms of the quest-narrative and the enigma story, James's fictions nevertheless violate the teleologically oriented narrative trajectory that these conventions normalize: the endings of James's fictions, rather than fulfilling their promises or desire, question the plots which precede them. In this respect, James's mature work illuminates a tension which exists in the narrative fiction of his contemporaries, the tension between desires of the narratological 'middle' and the rule of its denouement. In the Jamesian story of thwarted desire, we find a narrative structure that challenges narratologists' accounts of plot-structure in traditional realist narrative fiction.

In these texts James's narrators fail to attain mastery over the stock of things and appearances they seek, perceptually and epistemologically, to possess. Moreover, the characters' failure to perceive, recognize or possess coveted objects stems from a conflict of impulses: in James's narrators the material desire for goods collides with a moralistic judgment upon that wish. Objects of desire thus signify *too much* of the protagonists; the 'romantic' distance at which James maintains these characters from possession signals their inability to absorb and synthesize the contrary and independent ideas they project onto – and *through* – desired and resistant objects.

We would expect James's artistic problem to be the resolution of this contradiction. Yet in re-presenting the oscillation between opposed perspectives on the object and its attainment as a *narratological problem*, James stages his own artistic 'rebellion' of sorts. James's romance-form *represents and questions* both the materialist realism he imputes to Balzac and the realists and its polar opposite, the fetishism of consciousness that critics have come to identify with James's own aesthetic.

James's texts lie between these poles: his stories prove critical of the acquisitive drive that seizes upon 'material' things as representations of the social self. He remains critical as well of the fetishistic abstraction which would detach itself entirely from the sphere of social actions and concrete objects. In his texts of thwarted desire, James yokes together these contrary tendencies, advancing them both through the textual interplay of the narrative: analogous but antithetical figures for attaining desire – both lingering on impressions and exposing the blindspots of this narrative technique for rendering the object-world.

Far from repressing the real – social and material – contexts in which the novel signifies, the dramatic and stylistic oscillations of James's narratives of thwarted desire represent the novelist's engagement with contradictions which structured the literary, social and economic position of the late-nineteenth century novel in a culture increasingly given over to consumption.

---

resonances are particularly evident with regard to their respective treatment of material objects, inclination to subjective idealization and common use of displacement.

Curiously, it is those objects which apparently retain a vital and legible relation to the social history of their production, (that is, to their material and social production as a value) that most appeal to Jamesian possessors and collectors. James's acquisitive characters covet aesthetic treasures and relics such as Aspern's papers. These characters elevate such stories, as James's narrator does in *The Aspern Papers*, into history. By virtue of the historical qualities they ascribe to these objects, James's possessors and collectors regard the prestigious 'relics' as transcendent of mere commodities; they imagine these things to be like 'family' properties, to bear the stamp of history and preserve it from alienation.

As I have tried to prove, James also represents his short fiction – and his novels – as a new object for possession and endeavours to thoroughly reform realism. His narratives redefine the realist mode of production and reception in contradistinction to the acquisitive and fetishistic modes of consumption celebrated in commodity culture. If the combination of an aesthetically experimental form linked to a nostalgic, in some ways deeply conservative, position strikes us as the quintessence of bourgeois modernism, surely James's narratives of thwarted desire herald the arrival of that movement in the novel.

#### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail 1981: 'Epic and the Novel'. Michael Holquist, ed. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: U of Texas P. 3-40.
- Bal, Mieke 1985: *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: U of Toronto P.
- Brown, Bill 2003: *A Sense of Things*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Chatman, Seymour 1972: *The Later Style of Henry James*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Eagleton, Terry 1978: *Criticism and Ideology*. London: Verso.
- 2005: 'Henry James'. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell. 214-31.
- Edel, Henry 1985: *Henry James. A Life*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Genette, Gerard 1980: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Hale, Dorothy 1998: *Social Formalism*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Iser, Wolfgang, 1978. 'Partial Art–Total Interpretation: Henry James' The Figure in the Carpet. In Place of an Introduction'. *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP. 3–10.
- James, Henry 1984 (1884): 'The Art of Fiction'. Christof Wegelin, ed. *Tales of Henry James*. New York: Norton.
- 1984 (1888): 'The Aspern Papers'. Anthony Curtis, ed. *The Aspern Papers and The Turn of the Screw*. New York: Penguin. 43-142.
- 1997 (1877): *The American*. New York: Everyman.
- 2001 (1895): 'The Figure in the Carpet'. John Lyon, ed. *Selected Tales*. New York: Penguin, 2001. 284-313.
- 2004 (1902): Introduction. *The Wings of the Dove*. New York: Modern Library. 1-23.
- Kaplan, Fred 1992: *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. New York: Morrow.
- Moon, Michael 1998: *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Novick, Sheldon 1996: *Henry James: The Young Master*. New York: Random House.
- Ohi, Kevin 2004: 'Narrating the Child's Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*'. Bruhm Steven and

- 
- Natasha Hurley, eds. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP. 81-106.
- Savoy, Eric 2005: 'The Jamesian Turn: A Primer on Queer Formalism'. Kimberly C. Reed and Peter G. Beidler, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Henry James's Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw*. New York: MLA. 132-42.
- 2007: 'Entre chien et loup: Henry James, Queer Theory, and the Biographical Imperative'. Peter Rawlings, ed. *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 100-25.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 1990: *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P.
- Toibín, Colm 2004: *The Master*. New York: Scribner.

Received 22 February 2008      Revised version accepted 19 June 2008

Esther Sánchez-Pardo González is Associate Professor in the Department of English Literature (Filología Inglesa II) at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Her research centres on modernism in a comparative framework and on issues of identity, community and the postnational at the turn of the 20th century. She recently published her work on Ch. Moraga's *La Última Generación* (2007).

Address: Facultad de Filología, Edif. A, Departamento de Filología Inglesa II, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 28040 Madrid, Spain. Tel. (34) 91 3945382 Fax (34) 91 3945762