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Myron Ochshorn

HENRY JAMES: *THE GOLDEN BOWL*¹

CONRAD called him the historian of fine consciences—catching in a precise phrase the very essence of Henry James's value as a novelist. That was his essential territory, his world—the fine conscience in action. Not merely how it behaves but how it *should* behave. With top hat and walking stick he patrolled his beat for more than half a century, discriminating and refining all the time. When he was through he was walking quite alone. He had a few intelligent people to report to, and that was all.

The Golden Bowl is the most complex, the most elaborately exfoliated representation of his mature vision. The range of symbolic meaning imprisoned in the book is enormous. All the characters, scenes, and settings diffuse, as James would say, a sense of function. What the differing functions are, precisely how they mutually interact and complement each other, is difficult, if not impossible to say. The symbolism in James is not as pure as it is in Kafka. In Kafka, operating forcefully and simultaneously on several levels of significance (the psychological, the strictly sexual, the religious, the philosophical, and, above all, the social) the symbolism interlocks, so to speak, and moves forward steadily as a complex though comprehensible mass. What prohibit such a purity in James's art are his many other concerns, especially his concern for "character." Think for a moment of the respective arts of Kafka and Dostoievsky, of their *concern* for symbolic representation and character delineation. It is obvious that James falls somewhere between them. His concern for symbolic repre-

¹ Introduction by Richard P. Blackmur. New York: Grove Press, 1952. 808 pp. \$6.50.

sentation is less than Kafka's and greater than Dostoievsky's; his concern for character delineation is less than Dostoievsky's and greater than Kafka's. Since his symbolism is every bit as complex as Kafka's, the lack of absolute purity of concern makes for the greatest difficulty in interpretation. But there does seem to be a basic symbolic level, namely the reciprocity of evil and good, of appearance and reality.

Among other things *The Golden Bowl* retells the legend of Adam (Verver) and Eve (Maggie) in the Garden (Fawns). Evil and suffering are welcomed into the garden by the two innocents in the form of a desired "social situation"—this last to be supplied by the elegant lady of appearances, the serpentine Charlotte Stant. It's hard to "place" the Prince in the garden. He remains as enigmatic as a Cezanne apple. His presence lends vast temporal and geographical scope to the moral drama. He links the present action—Maggie's reaching out toward the full life, the real Golden Bowl (not the cracked crystal of appearances)—he links this action to all the moral initiations of the past. He is traceable. An entire room in the British Museum is given over to a recording of his family's great and terrible exploits. Innocent Americans can come to the room and take notes. He is there to be discovered. His name is Amerigo, not Columbo. Amerigo, the false discoverer of the Americans. He is not, that is, what he appears to be—the discoverer of the Americans; they discover him. He is the somewhat rotten apple, the worm-eaten fruit of the sinful ages of man. He is there to be tasted. Maggie, of course, takes the big bite.

There are only four characters of importance, all inextricably tied together in a "situation," and a fifth, Fanny Assingham, whose choric voice comments upon and alternately explains and confounds the action. "But the scheme of the book, to make up for that," James tells us in his preface, "is that we shall really see about as much of them as a coherent literary form permits. That

was my problem, so to speak, and my *gageure*—to play the small handful of values really for all they are worth."

The handful of values *are* played for all they are worth—bewilderingly so, in fact. The *values*, that is, are made to encompass a range of symbolic meaning as vast as anything in fiction. But as for seeing all we should of "each of the real, the deeply involved and immersed and more or less bleeding participants"—as James, in the same preface, refers to his characters—why, we get to see only a large part of Maggie, much, much less of Charlotte and Mr. Verver, and next to nothing, really, of the Prince. And this despite the magnificent imagery which in pure blinding flashes brilliantly lights up the innermost recesses of his characters' sense of being. Art is nothing if it does not represent, James says somewhere in his Prefaces; yet it is precisely the feeling that the Prince, and Charlotte, and Adam Verver, and even Maggie are not "represented" enough that one carries away from the book. One gets the disturbing sensation, in short, that there is more to his characters than James himself is aware of. And to have James plead guilty, as he frequently does, is not to have matters appreciably helped. No, Edmund Wilson was right: a vital part of the picture simply is missing. What *is* in the picture is enough, however, to make *The Golden Bowl* one of the finest (if not one of the greatest) novels ever written. This is an important reprinting, and Grove Press has done it handsomely.