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Truth, Knowledge, and Homeopathic Magic in *The Golden Bowl*

Sigi Jöttkandt

Perhaps in response to the novel's own bifurcated structure, readings of *The Golden Bowl* typically tend to fall into one of two kinds. The first, taking their cue from the Prince's researches into the complexities of the Verver's moral form in the earlier half of the book, devote themselves to deciphering the novel's formal questions. The signification of the bowl – or, more typically in recent readings, its unsignifiability – forms the centerpiece of these readings, where the bowl is found to carry the weight of James's formal concerns to do with reading, the production of meaning and value, the failure of closure, and so on. A recent essay by Brenda Austin-Smith offers an exemplary instance of this approach. In "The Counterfeit Symbol in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*," Austin-Smith interrogates to wonderfully persuasive and, to my mind definitive effect the bowl's "sufficiency as a sign", concluding that "rather than refer only to imperfect marriages or persons, the crack refers to the bowl itself as a flawed signifier, forever barred from achieving whatever exalted status as symbol it might have enjoyed in other literary worlds" (Austin-Smith 2004, 55).¹

*In *A Companion to Henry James*, ed. Greg Zacharias, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (London: Blackwell, 2008) pp. 176-92.

The other main approach focuses on Maggie's "act." These readings see the novel presenting an occasion – the pre-eminent one even, in Martha Nussbaum's case – for readerly judgment, and themselves fall into one of two camps: there are those who, like Nussbaum and J. Hillis Miller (albeit very differently), see Maggie's act in heroic terms – as the triumph of love over moral absolutism in one case, and as the creation of an ethically-charged, specifically *linguistic* reality where words "[bring] about the thing they name" in the other (David and Womack, eds. 2001: 280). Other critics, however, regard Maggie's act in distinctly less laudable terms. For Beth Sharon Ash, for example, it represents an ultimate, narcissistic failure to attain a "mature" understanding of sexuality "tempered by the limiting conditions of adult relatedness (and absence, loss, difference, incompleteness even in fulfillment)" (Ash 1994: 82). Between these two moral judgments lies a spectrum of gradated responses, the majority finding less fault with Maggie's aims than Ash, but deliberating on her ultimate success in: creating a "feminine" script (Walton 1992), fully comprehending the extent and inevitable incompleteness and indeterminacy of her "artistic design" (Craig 1982), maintaining the "permeability" of self that Charlotte and Amerigo's relation hold up to her as a more desirable form of being (Priest 1999). At the far end lies a consideration of the effect of Maggie's "act" on poor Charlotte who must bear the brunt of Maggie's reshaping of the familial relations, and whose "high coerced quaver" continues to resound for Hugh Slavens above the ostensible harmony of the "aesthetic and marriage," calling their "apparent victory" into ethical question (Slavens 1993).

In addition to 'performing' a similar division between the two books of the novel, this split between textual and moral approaches reflects a certain tension in the ethical "turn" in literary studies over the past twenty odd years: should ethics be concerned with the formal conditions of (the possibility of) judgment itself (i.e. the implicit stakes of a language-oriented, post-structuralist ethics)? Or is it primarily a matter of practical action and its empirical effects (as new historicists and their related off-shoots of cultural studies hold)? The answer is both, yet neither can be taken on the same plane with the other, as we will shortly see. What I propose in the following is to show how Maggie's act represents the precise point of cross-over between these two logically incompatible, but nonetheless intimately related realms.² We will see how, by imitating a desired state of affairs, Maggie's act involves a form of "homeopathic magic" that effects significant change at the social level yet with recourse neither to the unethical violence of the purely subjective will, nor to a transcendent Other – to some kind of master magician mysteriously directing operations from some external point above the action. The immediate result is to oblige a re-assessment of the concept

of mimesis – troped here as “homeopathy” – to see if it might be retrieved from the political and ethical disfavor it has largely fallen into with post-structuralism.³

Truth and Knowledge

At the heart of our investigation will be the concept of causation in Maggie’s triumphant statement, “that’s how I make them do what I like.” Two questions are explored: one, how does Maggie make them “do”, and secondly, and perhaps just as interestingly, what does Maggie “like”? The second question is perhaps easiest to answer, at least at first sight. To briefly recap the events, by the beginning of Book 2 Maggie is beset by a gnawing suspicion that all is not what it appears in her marriage, and she devotes many hours to “thinking” about the relation between the members of her immediate family: her father Adam, her step-mother Charlotte, her husband the Prince Amerigo. It comes to her, in a series of inspirations, that Amerigo and Charlotte are having an affair and are managing this by “treating” her as if she were, ultimately, too innocent – “stupid” is Maggie’s word for it – ever to come to this realization by herself. It is this innocence or “stupidity” that is supposed to make them “safe.” The essence of Maggie’s plan, her sole “act,” is simply to continue to behave as though she were indeed so stupid, yet by doing so she forces Amerigo to choose between herself and his lover. What Maggie “likes” is thus not so much Amerigo himself (although James is particularly fulsome in his descriptions of her ardent response to his simple presence, as for example in the coach ride home to Portland Place in Chapter 27). What she likes, that is, is not the simple success of recapturing her husband, as an elated Fanny, in an unusual display of obtuseness, gushes: “You’ve done it . . . They’re going.” “Is that what I wanted?” is Maggie’s quick rejoinder (461). Revealing her affinity with an earlier James heroine for whom freedom is the key word,⁴ what Maggie “likes” is for her husband to *freely* choose (her). Simply banishing her husband’s lover is not enough for this acute young woman; she wants him to actively want her.

The question the novel raises, then, is how do you get someone to want you? How do you elicit desire in another, particularly when they already desire someone else? In this sense, surely it is Maggie who is the ‘adulterer’ here as she shifts the direction of Amerigo’s desire away from Charlotte and towards herself? Maggie’s deeply felt guilt towards her old friend evinces her recognition of this and her “groveling” (467) attempts to allow Charlotte to

retain her pride in the face of Amerigo's betrayal of her suggests nothing so much as the deeply conflicted feelings of a woman who has walked off with her best friend's husband.

How do you get someone to desire you then? As an entire literary tradition founded on courtly love has taught us, desire is not something that simply erupts spontaneously; it can be cultivated, made to appear. It can be "forced" (to borrow a term from set theory). Desire possesses "rules," as a popular handbook of desire reminds us (Fein and Schneider 1996). The first, and easiest, method is to have other people to desire you first. Maggie seems well aware of René Girard's theory of the triangular structure of desire which, after all, played an important role in the formation of her own desire for Amerigo. Recall how, in the first book, Maggie jokes with Amerigo how she would forgive her husband anything,

even should he some day get drunk and beat her, the spectacle of him with hated rivals would, after no matter what extremity, always, for the sovereign charm of it [. . .] suffice to bring her round. (108-9)

Nothing makes Amerigo more attractive to her than when she sees other women desire him:

she never admired him so much, or found him heart-breakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had originally and fatally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute *her* substance. (108).

Although James suggests (through Maggie) that her desire for Amerigo was already well in place before the narratorial consciousness shifts to her in Book Second, my sense is that it is only with her growing consciousness of the possibility of Amerigo and Charlotte's affair that Maggie truly begins to desire her husband, that is, to the extent that she can joke about her jealousy with the Prince, she doesn't yet desire him in the profound way that comes truly to "constitute her substance," as Fanny's comment seems to confirm: "[Maggie] has begun to live" (249).

Yet aside from her father, there are few men around to effect the turn in Amerigo's attention in her favor. What other options are available then to Maggie? In her own experience with Amerigo, Maggie seems to have learnt something fundamental about desire, which is that it is profoundly mimetic. Desire does not exist in a vacuum but requires a social context in which

to appear, and Maggie's "mimetic" desire for Amerigo is just one (and the least complex) of the forms that this mimesis can take. But despite her own desiring structure being expressed in this simple, first-level mimetic way, this is not to say that "our young woman," despite her professions, is "stupid." Maggie is clever enough to realize, for example, that simply by acting like Charlotte ("She would go to balls again" (268)), she will have little prospect of changing Amerigo's feelings for her. Imitating the *object* of her beloved's desire will merely make her pathetic in his eyes, and go nowhere towards lighting the spark of desire in him.⁵

Maggie's "plan" in fact evolves into a far more subtle understanding of mimesis than a simple imitation of Charlotte; more subtle, too, than Girard's triangular model that organizes her own desire. As I said, Maggie's "plan" is simply to act as if she doesn't know what is going on, as if she were just as "stupid" as her friends believe. Yet by *imitating* a certain state among the four participants, she actively brings about its reality. This will require an understanding of mimesis that is more than merely imitative; it must be creative. By acting 'like' her husband desired her, and that the relations among the four are precisely as they appear, she makes the imitation into a fact, that is, into a truth.

At the heart of Maggie's plan is the problem of knowledge: who knows what and when. Maggie is forced into the ruses of knowledge once she obtains definite "proof" of Amerigo's infidelity through the golden bowl. Previously, all she had to go on were her hunches – her exquisite sense of being mysteriously "treated" (290); after the bowl, she makes first the Prince, and then Charlotte wonder ("think") about how much she knows. As she puts it to the Prince after their momentous interview following Fanny's smashing of the bowl: "Find out for yourself!" (397).

The Prince's immediate question, on knowing that Maggie knows, is how much her father knows and this question will occupy him and guide his subsequent actions in this second half of the novel. Charlotte's question, on the other hand, is what and how much Maggie herself knows. Maggie, furthermore, remains ignorant of the extent of Adam's knowledge to the end. Indeed, her entire plan revolves around her never knowing what he knows or, more precisely, her refusal to entertain the idea that he might know, since the plan is put into action on the basis of the idea that Adam neither knows, nor ever must know, that they have been deceived. It is for Adam, as Fanny in her more usual acuteness observes, that she acts: "'To live [. . .] for her father – which is another pair of sleeves!'" (251). It is Adam, above all, who must be sheltered from knowledge, a point whose significance we will come back to shortly.

Meanwhile, it suffices to observe how this quartet of knowing and non-knowing persons bears a number of striking similarities to a certain logical problem that Lacan discusses in his essay, “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism” (Lacan 1988). Here, Lacan discusses a logical problem: a prison warden will release one of his three prisoners if they can pass a test. If they can determine what color disk he has placed on their backs, they can go free. There are five discs altogether, two black and three white.

1. Possibility one: prisoner A sees two black discs. She makes the immediate deduction that she must be white and runs for the door.
2. Possibility two: prisoner A sees a white disc on B and a black disc on C. Since B is not running for the door, she concludes she must be white and runs for the door.
3. Possibility three: prisoner A sees two white discs, which means she must make a supposition in order to determine her color. Suppose she is black? She now watches what prisoner B does. If A is indeed black, and B also supposes that he is black, then C should be seeing two blacks and be running for the door. However, C does not run, so B can conclude (as A did in possibility two), that he is white. But what if B also does not run? In this case, prisoner A must revise her initial supposition and conclude she is white. She, along with the other two (who have meanwhile reached the same conclusion), all run for the door at the same moment – and the warden is obliged to release them all.

For Lacan, the interest of this logical dilemma resides in what he calls the “ontological form of anxiety” pertaining to prisoner A’s conclusion. As Ed Pluth and Dominiek Hoens explain, A “is not anxious about losing the game, but anxious that [she] simply will not be able to make a conclusion” (Hallward ed. 2004: 184).⁶ This is because A’s reasoning depends upon her understanding B and C’s standing still as a *hesitation*, during which they are in the process of making the same deductions as herself. The result is as follows:

If A realizes that [she] can come to a conclusion if [she] interprets the other’s standing still as a hesitation, then [she] also realizes that the others must not move. If the others head for the door of the prison, [she] can no longer use B and C’s hesitation as an element in [her] line of reasoning. (Hallward ed. 2004: 184)

The consequences are clear: A must immediately act, even before concluding the train of her thought. As Pluth and Hoens put it, she must “jump to a conclusion that closes the time for comprehending, and makes that time retroactively meaningful. [. . .] A does not make an additional step on the level of thinking.” Rather, she “can and has to end [her] thinking by an act” (184).

Although Lacan’s interest in this dilemma has to do with something very different than with the emergence of desire,⁷ the schema outlined here possesses striking similarities to the situation in which our foursome find themselves. Let us imagine Maggie in the position of prisoner A in the first possibility, allowing the bowl to act as the definitive ‘proof’ of the Prince’s and Charlotte’s infidelity. In this schema, she ‘sees’ two black discs, as it were, she ‘sees’ their guiltiness and should be able to run for the door. Next, the Prince occupies the position of prisoner A in the second possibility: he sees Maggie wearing a white disc and Charlotte a black and, knowing what he does about himself, imagines he also is wearing black. However, since Maggie doesn’t act, he must logically conclude that he is white. Let us now add Charlotte to the schema: Charlotte occupies the position of prisoner A in the third possibility. She sees only two white discs on Maggie and the Prince (i.e. she doesn’t know what Maggie knows, and nor does she know what the Prince knows about Maggie’s knowledge). Supposing herself to wear black, and supposing the Prince to think he also wears black, she imagines he puzzles why Maggie doesn’t immediately ‘run’ (i.e. accuse him). But since Maggie doesn’t, the Prince, like prisoner A in possibility 2, must be concluding that he is white. However, since the Prince himself then doesn’t run – which he would were she, Charlotte, wearing black – Charlotte must revise her initial supposition and conclude she is white, like them all, in which case they must all make a run for the door.

The core of Charlotte’s problem, what makes the game so incomprehensible to her, is precisely Maggie’s immobility – *Maggie doesn’t run*. Charlotte believes she knows she and the Prince are wearing black discs and, with her “perfect critical vision” (272), believes Maggie is gradually coming to recognize this. As Maggie herself admits to the Prince at the end of the novel, “she [Charlotte] knows, she knows! . . . She knows enough” (489). What Charlotte can’t understand, then, is why Maggie, presumably seeing the two black discs so clearly, remains still, making the Prince hesitate about what he sees. Is Maggie standing still because she is stupid and genuinely sees black as white (i.e. the very same stupidity that was originally supposed to “save” the two adulterers)? Or is her immobility the result of hesitation? Charlotte’s inability to answer this question – her inability to “close the time of comprehending” (Hallward ed. 2004: 184) and *act* – dooms her to the

permanent imprisonment to which James so unambiguously condemns her in the final chapters of the novel.⁸

The Prince, meanwhile, has a different set of problems on his hand. His question is what Adam knows. Adam will decide for him whether the Prince is wearing black or white, forging a “cord” between father and husband which, if broken, will decisively determine the young couple’s fate. It is the Prince’s “ignorance” as to his father-in-law’s knowledge that sustains them “in the right”:

[Maggie] had handed him over to an ignorance that couldn’t even try to become indifferent and yet wouldn’t project itself, either, into the cleared air of conviction. [. . .] it had bitten into his spirit, and more than once she had said to herself to that break the spell she had cast upon him and that the polished old ivory of her father’s inattackable surface made so absolute, he would suddenly commit some mistake or some violence [. . .] In that way, fatally, he would have put himself in the wrong – blighting by a single step the perfection of his outward show. (458)

If Charlotte’s fate was decided by her failure to conclude, dooming her to the cage of indecision,⁹ Maggie (and the Prince) remains safe for as long as the Prince continues to hesitate.

Much depends for Maggie, then, not on *what* the Prince is thinking but for *how long* he can continue to think. Maggie must use the Prince’s “time of comprehending” to baffle Charlotte, making it impossible for Charlotte to arrive at the moment of action. For as long as the Prince continues to think, Charlotte must waver in indecision, in a paralysis that makes Maggie free to act: “‘They’re paralysed, the paralysed!’ she commented, deep within; so much it helped her own apprehension to hang together that they should suddenly lose their bearings” (297).

We saw how Maggie’s sole “act” is simply to keep still, to keep “quiet” (405). But this act, which I am calling “mimetic,” is not without an active decision on her part. As she tells Fanny, “‘I *have* judged [. . .] I did judge. I made sure he understood – then I let him [Amerigo] alone’” (403). By standing still, and leaving the Prince to “do” for her, Maggie puts Amerigo “in possession of the difference” (403), an interesting phrase conveys something of the Lacanian distinction between knowledge and truth. To the extent that Maggie ‘knows’ about the Prince and Charlotte’s adultery, she inhabits the realm of empirical knowledge where causes and effects follow in a linear trajectory, and appearances reflect a pre-existing reality.

To be in “possession of the difference,” on the other hand, is to occupy a logical moment characterized by a temporal and spatial impossibility. It is the “time” of the act that precedes complete certainty – the moment when, faced with the immobility of the other prisoners, A must “jump to a conclusion that closes the time for comprehending, and makes that time retroactively meaningful” (Hallward, ed. 2004: 184). To “possess the difference” is thus very different from merely knowing (whether or not Charlotte and the Prince were lovers, and whether the father and daughter are aware of this). To “possess the difference” is to act such that one’s act *makes* a (new) knowledge, transforming it into a truth as we will now see.

Magic: Homeopathic and Contagious

What I am proposing might seem a little wishful, not unlike the “magical thinking” Ash detects in Maggie’s need to arrange the inconvenient realities into the harmonious design of her “narcissistic illusion.” But, in truth, what I am proposing is precisely a kind of magic, its difference from the childish, narcissistic universe being that, in this case (as indeed in the Freudian conceptualization Ash originally draws from¹⁰), the magic *works*.

In his strikingly similarly-named study of mythology, The Golden Bough (Frazer 2002), James Frazer identifies two forms of “sympathetic magic” whose basic principles he discovers operating across manifold cultures and epochs. The first type he terms “homeopathic”. Homeopathic magic works according to the “Law of Similarity” where “the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it” (Frazer 2002: 11). The other form is “contagious.” Its “Law” is of “contact,” operating on the principle that things that have once been joined continue to be so, across the distances of time and space. Thus the magician “infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not” (Frazer 2002: 11).

Both forms of magic are relevant to our discussion, but it is clearly the first, “homeopathic” kind that speaks most directly to Maggie’s “plan.” Let us look more closely at the way it is to work. Both homeopathic and contagious magic, Frazer tells us, operate under the general Law of Sympathy (Frazer 2002: 12). Its basic presupposition is that objects can influence each another from afar. Things are assumed to possess a “secret sympathy” (Frazer 2002: 12) that binds them unerringly together, whose impulses are transmitted to one another through a kind of “invisible ether”

(Frazer 2002: 12). While contagious magic depends upon the existence of a prior link between objects such that anything done to one will also be felt in the other (giving rise to the various charms involving hair, nails, teeth, afterbirth etc. Frazer provides as examples), homeopathic magic acts according to the principle that “like produces like.” Here the examples are predominantly of representations: the creation of images that are to transform what they represent into reality. Thus Frazer describes the Ojebway Indian who “makes a little wooden image of his enemy and runs a needle into its head or heart”; or the Sumatran woman who makes “a wooden image of a child [and holds it] in her lap, believing that this will lead to the fulfillment of her wish” (Frazer 2002: 13-14). Other forms of homeopathic magic, Frazer tells us, involve the “banishing” of properties in an effort to cure sickness. Describing the “ancient Hindoos,” Frazer relates how an elaborate ceremony was performed against jaundice “whose main drift was to banish the yellow colour to yellow creatures and yellow things, such as the sun, to which it properly belongs, and to procure for the patient a healthy red color from a living, vigorous source, namely a red bull” (Frazer 2002: 15).

Although Frazer never addresses this point explicitly, the overarching principle driving both homeopathic and contagious magic is the idea of equilibrium. Actions performed on one thing (whether directly or mimetically) create an imbalance in the world which is then rectified by the charm. An unspoken “Law of Equilibrium” thus supercedes even the “Law of Sympathy” beneath which Frazer consigns the two forms of magic. The difference between homeopathic and contagious magic lies in their concepts of what causes the disturbance in equilibrium. In one case, the effect is transmitted through a prior identity that causes all future influences on one to be felt by the other (contact). In the other, effects on one object are generated through a likeness that is mimetically created – the “cause” of homeopathic magic is produced by a representation of the desired effect. Both types of magic thus rely on the concept of identity but in the first, the identity is pre-given (as in the prior attachment of the body parts to the victim), while in the other it is brought into being as a result of an imitative act. A wooden image of a child has no prior *necessary* link to the actual desired child. Its connection is derived as a result of the mimetic act (of placing it in the woman’s lap).

Bearing this distinction in mind, let us turn back to *The Golden Bowl* and the question of how one generates desire in another person. If to fall in love with someone is to fall to some extent under their “spell” – a word that appears with increasing frequency towards the end of the book, particularly in relation to Adam who is several times described as having an

“indescribable air of weaving his spell” (448)¹¹ – what form of “unfailing magic” (300) does desire take? The Girardian notion of mimetic desire that characterizes Maggie’s own desiring structure initially seems to fall fairly comfortably within the basic idea of contagion. I fall in love with someone because someone else to whom I am in some way connected also loves him; I “catch” their desire (through direct contact). But recall how contagion actually requires a prior contact: things that have once been conjoined will ever be so. Contagious magic thus seems better to describe the relation between the Prince and Charlotte whose mysterious “identities of impulse” (232), “kinship of expression in the two faces” (286) and “identities of behaviour, expression and tone” (290) increasingly begin to strike Maggie.¹² She reflects how, “They’ll do everything in the world that suits us, save only one thing – prescribe a line for us that will make them separate” (311). Although this link or bond should be irrevocable, it seems it can be superceded by a magician of superior powers who can forge his own connection with the object, as Adam does when he appears to Maggie as if in possession of a “long silken halter looped round [Charlotte’s] beautiful neck” (450). The very strength of this form of magic is thus also its weakness. There is nothing to prevent a magician of still more superior powers from cutting Adam’s leash and binding Charlotte to him. This hints, too, at the inherently violent and acquisitive nature of contagious magic, precisely the charges on which Adam (and Maggie) have frequently been arraigned.¹³

But with Maggie things are different. Despite their formal relation as a married couple, there exists no prior emotional link between her and Amerigo and it is this link she must try to forge. But differently from Adam, she approaches the problem from the homeopathic angle. She must *make* the link and, unlike the obligatory or necessary bond of contagious magic (with all of the violent implications this carries), this link must be voluntary: Amerigo must actively choose her, rather than, like Charlotte with Adam, be forcibly bound to her. He must be made to “like” Maggie, in the homeopathic sense – to gravitate towards her just as yellow things gravitate towards other yellow things.

As we saw, Maggie’s approach to this is mimetic: she acts ‘like’ there is nothing wrong between her and her husband, and this likeness ultimately produces its result: “See?” asks Amerigo in the closing words of the novel, “I see nothing but *you*” (502). Maggie imitates a state of being that ultimately becomes a reality. And because it is produced homeopathically, i.e. voluntarily, this reality is far less brittle and therefore less likely to break than her father’s. Amerigo has “chosen” her as a result of their mutual affinity, just as yellow “chooses” to be with yellow. However, the word “voluntary”,

in this context, is a little misleading, because it implies an act of free agency, whereas magic inevitably presupposes that one is making others do your will. And it remains my sense that the novel does indeed describe the ultimately successful bending of the others' realities to Maggie's own will. It would not be enough simply to have Amerigo suddenly discover that he loves Maggie better than Charlotte – this might be a happy novelistic ending, but it wouldn't be a James novel. As Maggie discovers, and as I indicated above, one doesn't "freely" desire (in the sense of a consciously chosen act of will); one is rather, and quite specifically, "forced".

The term is borrowed from set theory and it describes a way of making predictions about the contents of a set that, for various technical reasons unnecessary to go into here, one cannot ever directly know or see.¹⁴ "Forcing" establishes a set of conditions according to which, if it is true in one set, one can determine that it will be true in the other set. When I say, then, that Amerigo is "forced" to desire Maggie, this doesn't refer to any act of violent imposition. Rather, it means that Maggie puts in place a number of conditions such that, if it is true in one (state or condition or more generally, set), then it will (have been) true in the other. By acting *like* Amerigo desires her, in other words, by setting this as a condition in one set (her own), she "forces" it to be true in the other (Amerigo's).

How Maggie achieves this goes back to our discussion of the prisoners. The crucial point, as this logical problem shows, is the dimension of intersubjectivity for, at the most fundamental level, without the presence of the other two, Maggie would be incapable of ever discovering the color of the disc on her back. But even though she 'sees' enough to enable her to arrive at an immediate conclusion (i.e. as prisoner A in the first possibility: she sees two blacks which make her white), she nevertheless *imitates* the others' hesitations. She acts like she sees what she wants them to see (i.e. all whites), which in turn makes the others hesitate as to what they see. In effect, Maggie creates a condition in her 'set' that "forces" a truth in the sets – in the totality of their knowledge – of the others, namely, that they are not guilty (whose ultimate meaning is that it is Maggie whom Amerigo desires). What makes this act an act of forcing, i.e. what makes it 'true' rather than merely the wishful deluded act of narcissistic illusion is, as I said, its intersubjective dimension. Because this is a truth that is in the end 'assented' to by the others (Charlotte cannot move first because she cannot conclude, while the Prince comes to 'see' what Maggie sees), it escapes being the purely subjective act of an individual and acquires the status of a collective truth.¹⁵

Equilibrium

We saw how both contagious and homeopathic magic are governed by a larger principle of equilibrium which holds that something that happens to one will happen to the other and restore the balance. Note how this implies an Aristotelian conception of the world as a plenum – as something ‘full’ in which there are no gaps or void, and over which energy is dispersed in equal measure. Note, too, how this “law of equilibrium” is the principal law governing Maggie’s world. Everything she does is in order to return the state of things to “the equilibrium, the precious condition” (311). The image she devises for this is of a family coach for which Charlotte was originally “had in” to supply a fourth wheel:

“[. . .] if their family coach lumbered and stuck the fault was in its lacking its complement of wheels. Having but three, as they might say, it had wanted another, and what had Charlotte done from the first but begin to act, on the spot, and ever so smoothly and beautifully, as a fourth?” (298).

This need for a fourth is very telling for it expresses something very important about the possibility for a “logique collective” which, for all of the intersubjective thinking and ‘universal truth’ generated among the three prisoners, is ultimately without consequence without the presence of the prison warden, the one *for whom* the thinking is ultimately done. This fourth, who must remain outside the thought exchange, will never know *how* the decision was reached. All he will know is *that* it took place (confronted as he is now with one, two or three prisoners clamoring for release). In this sense, the warden remains the “stupid” one of the title of Pluth and Hoens’ essay. Rather than a possibility, the Other *must* be stupid in order for the truth to emerge.¹⁶

This is perhaps easiest to explain by returning to our Jamesian foursome. It seems clear that none of Maggie’s “thinking” would have had effect on the Prince had it not been for the question of what Adam knows. In this triangulation, Charlotte must remain the stupid one, cut off from the intersubjective thinking process of the other three. But in Maggie’s case, it is Adam who must remain “stupid.” He must be kept outside the loop of knowledge in order for her “occult power” (444) to work. It is precisely because she acts not for herself but for her father that her act is saved from being the merely individual expression of will, i.e. an act of contagious magic that violently subjugates her husband beneath her superior powers.

It is this, I believe, that is ultimately the *cause* of the Prince's desire for her. It is what makes him begin to "think" of her in his long hours alone at Portland Place while the others spend the last summer at Fawns (455). Such thinking, before and after, is the pre-requisite to any act of desire. For once he has begun to "think" of Maggie, the battle is half over: thinking is both the source and nourishment of desire.

Why is thinking the source of desire? It is because it brings the other's name, i.e. a linguistic term, a signifier, into one's head. Thinking of someone, we cannot help but think of their name. Desiring someone, we obsess over their name, repeating it to ourselves like a talisman or good luck charm capable of warding off all negative feelings of shame and guilt. Thus although I previously asserted that Maggie's desire for the Prince was generated by a Girardian structure of imitation, this is only part of the story. There must be something already there upon which such mimetic desire can grow – some seed that was planted, some original spark that can be fanned. In Maggie's case, too, then, it is Amerigo's name that precedes him in her desire. As Fanny tells Bob, "The connexion became romantic for Maggie the moment she took [Amerigo's name] in [. . .]. 'By that sign,' I quite said to myself, 'he'll conquer'" (53). In this sense, desire really does follow rules. Although it can be diverted, trammelled, fanned or extinguished by our thinking, its original cause lies in a linguistic signifier over which we have (barely) any control. To make a person desire you, all you can do is try to make them think of you and in that way plant your name in their heart.

Maggie makes the Prince begin to think of her by a mimetic act: she acts *like* she her husband desires her. Yet this 'acting like' would have had no effect on the Prince had it not been done for her father – it is done in his name, if you like. This is what the Prince calls Maggie's "idea" and the idea of her having ideas makes him begin "to think more of her" (482). Like all genuine ideas, Maggie's "idea" opens the Prince out onto a New World whose existence he had never suspected, and it is this surprise – the true surprise that is the encounter with another subject¹⁷ – that makes him begin to think of her. Maggie's mimetic act could thus be regarded as the *efficient* cause of Amerigo's desire whose *material* cause lies in the planting of her name. But there is another concept of cause present as well, one involving a paradox of desire isomorphic to that of logical time: the name planted in the other has effect only if the other *already* desires you. Yet the planting of the name is the *cause* of that desire. In other words, the name only has meaning once it has been invested with desire, but the name is itself the source or 'cause' of that desire.

This paradox recreates the paradox of the prisoners who find that, at a certain moment, they *must* act. Thinking will only get you so far, then

a decision must be made to act, even though one is never certain of the rightness of one's conclusion. In such cases, one acts in accordance with what Lacan calls "anticipated certainty": it will have been right. The future anterior tense helps indicate the extent to which the act is productive of the ultimate truth of the decision. The act *makes* the decision the right one (because it is only the simultaneous acts of the others that together make it correct, i.e. an intersubjective truth). If one lingers too long, it will not have been true, and the whole thought process must begin again. Similarly, desire takes place in "anticipated certainty." By acting *like* the other desires you, you make them begin to think. But at a certain moment, they must make a decision and act, as Maggie herself discovered:

She had seen herself at last, in the picture she was studying, suddenly jump from the coach [. . .]. She looked at the person so acting as if this person were somebody else [. . .]. The person had taken a decision – which was evidently because an impulse long gathering had at last felt a sharpest pressure. (279)

At some point in one's thinking, one has to make a choice to hold the other's name dear, which sends one off on further thinking adventures (which psychoanalysis calls fantasy). It is only after this choice that the name *will have become* meaningful. In the set that constitutes her knowledge, Maggie can never know whether her mimetic act will succeed with the Prince. All she can know is that, by acting, she puts him into the position of choice: he will either act "with"¹⁸ her or not but, by forcing a truth from him, she puts him in the terrifying "possession of the difference" that constitutes the real freedom of desire, and whose "instant of terror" (501) Maggie experiences when she buries her face in Amerigo's breast at the end of the novel.

"See?" I see nothing but *you*.' And truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast. (502)

Maggie's terror here is that of a subject who has been freed from her prison by her own self-liberating act and discovers a world beyond it. It is the terror of the subject who sees now for the first time that the prison warden is just another prisoner engaged in his own thought dilemma, who can no longer guarantee the consistency of the four square walls of her world. And it is the terror, too, of seeing for the first time that Amerigo has also escaped from his "monastic cell" (482) and begun the process of looking around him. Nothing guarantees that he will stay with her. All she

can do from her “advanced post” in the “geography of the fundamental passions” (473) is, as Amerigo requests, ‘Wait,’ he repeated. ‘Wait’” (491).

Maggie’s homeopathic magic depended on the warden’s existence, but once outside the cell her magic has no more power. With her “jump” (279) a void has been created in the plenum that constituted the set of all knowledge. The world outside possesses no “equilibrium” that dictates the law of sympathy and distributes balance among all existing elements. Now there is no necessary reciprocity between a cause and its consequence, and actions performed on one thing are not necessarily returned to its connected pair. Yet although the law of equilibrium has been broken, this doesn’t mean that Maggie’s new world is completely lawless. The space of desire has its own “laws.”

Desire, as I suggested, operates according to certain fixed laws that are linguistic in nature, that is to say, it follows the law of the signifier. The signifier of the beloved’s name inscribes itself upon one’s mind and the extent of its occult power perhaps explains why some lovers attempt to deflect it by tattooing it on their skin, as if by writing it down, one will be able to silence the endless repetition inside one’s head. This is perhaps a more powerful intuition than it initially seems, and it goes to the heart of our initial question regarding the gulf separating theoretical judgment and practical action.

We saw how this gulf can be crossed only by an act of decision that closes the moment of comprehending (thinking) and replaces it with an act. We saw, too, how – the thinking that preceded it notwithstanding – this decision is necessarily without ground. Based on an *anticipated* certainty, it is only after the fact that the previous thought process is verified as having been correct. But more than this, it is the act itself that makes the thinking correct – the act ‘causes’ the truth of the prisoners’ line of reasoning.

This notion of a retroactive cause, familiar to us from Lacanian psychoanalysis, I have explored elsewhere in James (Jöttkandt 2005). What *The Golden Bowl* adds is to reveal its peculiar, unexpected affinity with the Kantian notion of teleological cause. Teleological or “final” cause, in Kant, is bound up with an object’s “purposiveness”, or “final purpose” and it is brought into play when “we attribute causality in respect of an object to the concept of an object” (Kant 1951: 206). Kant explains how,

Experience leads our judgment to the [. . .] the concept of a purpose of nature, only when we have to judge of a relation of cause to

effect which we find ourselves able to apprehend as legitimate only *by presupposing the idea of the effect of the causality of the cause as the fundamental condition, in the cause, of the possibility of the effect.* (Kant 1951: 213, my italics)

In teleological judgment, the effect somehow precedes the cause, seemingly directing it from the future or from a position of omniscient knowledge (like the warden).

Nothing could seem less psychoanalytic than this idea of a “final purpose,” an ultimate physical and moral “destination,” for isn’t desire precisely the expression of an absolute freedom of choice? Isn’t it precisely this ‘freedom’ I cited as at the kernel of Maggie’s plan: to force Amerigo into a position of having to freely choose (or, in Lacanian terms, to undergo “subjectification”)? And isn’t it this that makes desire’s freedom specifically ethical – the way it impossibly suspends the ordinary sequence of cause and effect to create a new and different reality?

And yet, as my discussion of the paradox of the beloved’s name has shown, desire is not entirely free. You cannot simply choose to desire someone, although this is not to say that desire cannot be led. There must be some fertile ground in which the seed can be planted, some warm embers on which to blow. There must, in other words, be an unconscious receptivity or inclination – a *likeness* – to which one’s objects of desire ‘homeopathically’ can align themselves, certain primordially worn paths along which desire can flow. These are the rivulets that have been carved by the signifier: the earliest words and sounds that have become invested with libidinal meaning only to be subsequently concealed and overlaid – ‘gilded’ – with the shared meanings of a fully representational, symbolic system. Yet they remain present, like the cracks in the golden bowl, determining along which lines our desire will run, into which three (or more) pieces our lives will fall. They are, if you will, the arche-inscriptions of our desire.

These strange, senseless sounds and letters that carve themselves into our minds are what bridge the gap separating the act from the thinking that always precedes and follows it. They constitute the ‘teleological’ cause of our desire, determining who, among the infinite variety of desirable subjects, we will “like”. The key difference between Kant’s teleological cause and the Lacanian retroactive cause is the freedom with which we can interpret these letters, rearranging them into different configurations and “readings”. But given the uncanny persistence of this core group of signifiers, let me end with a word of advice you are not likely to find in The Rules: if all else has failed, and your beloved still cannot see you, you might consider changing your name.

NOTES

- 1 Other examples can be found in Teahan and Davis.
- 2 My argument is thus not so far from Miller's, differing mainly in its attempt to map out the formal operations of the 'leap' he identifies with the speech act.
- 3 See, for example, Cohen for whom mimesis has become a master trope of the delusions of aesthetic ideology. A notable exception, as Pieter Vermeulen reminded me, is Geoffrey Hartman for whom mimesis, as a form of "antiselfconsciousness," continues to resonate as a trope capable of resisting the drive for meaning. He also makes a similar link between mimesis and homeopathy (Hartman 2002: 118, 208). For a succinct description of homeopathic logic, see his chapter, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness" in *Beyond Formalism*.
- 4 For an analysis of Isabel's freedom, see my first chapter, "Portrait of an Act: Representation and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jöttkandt 2005).
- 5 This is a lesson poor Charlotte fails to learn when she is left at the end of the novel trying to catch up with Maggie, telling her in the garden "I see, I must act" (469). By this time, she has realized she has missed the moment of action, although she hopes that by imitating Maggie she will still reap some of the benefit. But her mimetic act has come too late, depriving it of the power to create a truth.
- 6 I gladly acknowledge my debt to their explication of the problem in this essay.
- 7 Lacan's concern is to develop a more general "collective logic" (Hallward ed. 2004: 182).
- 8 Recall James' descriptions of "gilt wires and bruised wings, the spacious but suspended cage, the home of eternal unrest, of pacings, beatings, shakings, all so vain, into which the baffled consciousness helplessly resolved itself" (413).
- 9 which is also, as James reminds us, "the deluded condition" (413) i.e. the belief that one can ever completely secure one's logical reasoning before the necessity of acting.
- 10 For Freud, the "hallucinations" of the organism's pleasure economy are ultimately so successful that a reality principle must enter into play to attend to the "Not des Lebens" (the necessities of life) – a reality principle that is itself ultimately in the service of the continuation of pleasure. For a detailed explanation of how this works, see his "Project for a Scientific Psychology".
- 11 See also 452, 459. Note, too, how Maggie fears Amerigo will break the "spell" she cast over him (458).
- 12 They are also described as "conjoined" (331), two faces on a medallion "for ever face to face, and when she looked from one to the other she found in Charlotte's eyes the gleam of the momentary 'What does she really want?' that had come and gone for her in the Prince's" (287).
- 13 See Kairschner and Alberti. See also Nussbaum (132).
- 14 For those interested, it is a question concerning the existence of "non-constructible" sets, i.e. sets that cannot be organized according to the principle of "well-ordering". For an introduction to the principle of forcing as it relates to Alain Badiou's philosophy, some of whose insights I have been drawing on here, see Hallward 2003.
- 15 Pluth and Hoens explain, "what was subjective about the line of reasoning gets de-subjectified, and becomes a shared, intersubjective truth. Beginning with an uncertain, singular decision A reaches a certain and 'universal' truth" (Hallward ed. 2003: 184).
- 16 understood this time as the warden and not one of the prisoners as in Pluth and Hoens' discussion.
- 17 On the role of surprise in psychoanalysis, see Reik.
- 18 This is another term that increasingly appears towards the end of the novel, see for example 472, 483.

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