

## Leon Edel Prize Essay

“Horrible Impossible”:  
Henry James’s Awkward  
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It was not irritation he appeared to express, but the slight strain of an effort to get into relation with the subject. Better to focus the image he closed his eyes awhile.

—*The Awkward Age* (207)

In a now-familiar account of Henry James’s career, the failure in the theater so spectacularly marked by the *Guy Domville* debacle of 1895 sent the bruised novelist back to the consolations of fiction and on to the achievements of the major phase. The formal experiments James conducted in the final years of the century (this story goes) led him to the aesthetic principles he would expound in the prefaces to the New York Edition and which many of James’s expositors would later adopt as the dogma of the novel itself. Chief among these formal principles—and one particularly crucial to James’s pioneering explorations of interiority in the novels of the new century—was the necessity for dramatic presentation in fiction. The “scenic principle” has a genetic relation to the theater that has been well explored by James’s critics: once James finally abandons his theatrical misadventure, we are told, he is able to incorporate the theater’s lessons into the novel, now grasped as all along his true form. In the process he perfects the narrative technologies that have earned his critical stature as the father of the psychological novel. “The master” is born from the death of the playwright.<sup>1</sup>

But this story—for which the master himself is of course largely responsible—overlooks James’s continued obsession with the theater in the last years of the century and underrepresents the peculiarity of the work he produced in the period. Far from returning triumphantly to his chosen form, James embraced the novel after *Guy Domville* in a mood of profound ambivalence. This hankering for the theater is especially manifest in the deeply uncharacteristic and un-*novelistic*

texture of 1899's *The Awkward Age*, a book in which the vaunted scenic principle takes the form of a near-total suppression of the narrative voice. The novel is so devoted (James wrote in the novel's preface) to "dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form" (AN 106) that it could be used as a playscript with little alteration to the text. Although widely noted,<sup>2</sup> this fact has been insufficiently explored by a critical tradition given over to the myth of James's return to the novel. As a result the singularity of *The Awkward Age* in the Jamesian canon—and in the tradition of the novel—has also been slighted.

We underestimate the complexity of James's work when we survey it from the standpoint of the generic victor. *The Awkward Age* creates imaginative difficulties for its reader that are only resolvable through the often extraordinarily difficult visualization of a hypothetical scene of enactment. Despite its self-announcement as a novel, *The Awkward Age* is designed to read as if it were written in the "wrong" form; the novel is perhaps best understood as a blueprint for an impossible or withheld performance. The text's refusal to vivify its imaginary universe also highlights the relative sensory deprivation of reading and so suggests that reading is a definitionally inadequate substitute for theatrical attendance. In making its readers hunger for an escape from the practice of novel reading, the book also insists on the formal and ideological inadequacies of the novel form; *The Awkward Age* demands to be read not as a way-station on James's pilgrimage back to the novel but as a sustained exploration of the possibilities of resisting that form—particularly the novel of psychological depth that now seems tautologically connected with the epithet "Jamesian." This essay aims to illuminate the connections between the book's formal extremity and the sexual, ethical, and social challenges it poses. To gauge the social provocation of *The Awkward Age*, in other words, we will have to look not only at what the novel's difficulty disallows but at what it positively achieves. We will have to ask what the impossibility of *The Awkward Age* makes possible.

I hope to answer this question by showing that the novel imagines and protects a narrative space of "queer condonations" (AA 149), a world of erotic permission founded on a cultivated disinterest in questions of psychological depth and sexual truth.<sup>3</sup> *The Awkward Age* is distinctive not only for its formal strangeness but for its refusal to identify sexual perversions with discrete individuals, for its demurral from the idea of interiority in favor of a model of group consciousness, for its attack on the power of the marriage plot to assign significance to certain parts of a life story, and for its mapping of a less punishing scene of sexual publicity than those current in fin-de-siècle culture. These projects are all thematically important to the novel, but they are also significantly related to its formal extremism. The novel's obsession with the drama—in particular its interest in the possibilities of dialogue or "talk"—is the rallying point for these interrelated efforts. In its dialogic form *The Awkward Age* allowed James to work against the psychologizing thrust his career is often taken to epitomize. It is when James is least the master of the psychological novel that he offers the most sustained challenge to the demand to be oneself on which identity—particularly sexual identity—is based.<sup>4</sup> Against the background of the late century's stigma-

tization of a whole host of new sexual identities,<sup>5</sup> this challenge merits our attention—the more so because of what seems to be the project's ultimate futility within the space of the novel.

James's theatrical resistance to the logic of the novel is far from simple. It is crucial to register James's ambivalence about a naturalist theatrical culture that under the influence of Ibsen was adopting a notion of psychological truth in turn borrowed from realist fiction. The theater, in other words, was becoming more and more *novelistic* at precisely the moment James turned to it in order to achieve some distance from the interiorizing agenda of the novel.<sup>6</sup> The results of this paradoxical situation on James's practice were complex: in its very distance from the possibility of performance, *The Awkward Age* gestures toward the public event of the theater while remaining unbound by the orthodoxies of the naturalist drama. If, on the one hand, the book strains against the novel toward a kind of performance, it also resists the actually existing theater. In a theatrical culture in which, as Elin Diamond puts it, "realism's eternal room" (26) was becoming the scene of psychological legibility, James's inability to make those heavily significant interiors materialize could have liberating dividends. In *The Awkward Age* James rescued a phantom theater from his dramatic fiasco, creating an "event" whose very failure to take place made it a rich site for imagining relational possibilities beyond the constraints of the given.

### *In the "Sociable Dusk" of The Awkward Age*

For the first readers of *The Awkward Age*, the novel's dialogic quality seemed obscurely but vitally related to its preoccupation with erotic deviance. Confronting a novelistic world rife with flourishing perversion and endless conversation, reviewers acutely perceived that sex and talk had come to stand in for one another. In a typical response, the anonymous reviewer for the *Spectator* impugned both the moral fiber of the characters in *The Awkward Age* and the dialogic mode in which readers encounter them by calling the book "a whispering-gallery of ignoble souls" (Gard 282). This reaction set the terms for the novel's harshest later critics. In his attack on James, Maxwell Geismar discerned a world of "evil sexuality" through the "continuous chatter" of *The Awkward Age* (175–76); Edmund Wilson claimed that the novel is filled with "a whole host of creepy creatures . . . a gibbering, disembowelled crew who hover about one another with sordid, shadowy designs" (192). For all of these writers, the novel's sexual ethics (or lack thereof) are yoked to its dialogism and to the insubstantial, disembodied novelistic universe that dialogism creates. The eroticism of *The Awkward Age*, they agree, is tied not only to talk, but through that talk to a weird insubstantiality: the novel's sexuality is one with its spectrality.

Despite the moralism of these critical responses, they draw attention to a feature of *The Awkward Age* that is central to its imagination of sexual possibility: the novel seems designed specifically to frustrate the reader's efforts to visualize its narrated action.<sup>7</sup> Elaine Scarry has argued that verbal art begins from a severe disadvantage in imparting the sense of "vivacity" to its consumers: unlike theater and film, which are "brimming with auditory and visual commitments" (5), novels must rely on the impoverished sensory data provided by words on a

page. Scarry claims that in order to make an unreal world imaginatively available to readers, verbal narration prompts an effort of “perceptual mimesis” (11), spurring readers to employ the same faculties of perception on the imagined world of fiction that they would on a concretely present object of perception. The success of this operation is tied to its being kept well hidden; this difficult imaginative process must happen behind the scenes of our readerly attention. “[R]eading entails an immense labor of imaginative construction” (37), Scarry writes, but this process of world-imagining must feel all but effortless to the reader in order to function successfully.

If the achievement of vivacity constitutes novelistic success, *The Awkward Age* must be ranked a failure—perhaps a perversely deliberate one. One of the most striking features of the book is its underdescription of everyone who inhabits it. Mr. Longdon, the elderly provincial visitor to the fast London set around which the novel turns, is introduced as lacking in “mass, substance, presence—what is vulgarly called importance. He had indeed no presence, but he had somehow an effect” (20). In this gauziness he is typical of the inhabitants of *The Awkward Age*. Even when James discusses his characters’ bodies, he manages to stop short of physical description; the attribution of some definite physical effect is often a means to evade positing any actual corporeal trait. Harold Brookenham is notable (or not?) for “the acuteness, difficult to trace to a source, of his smooth fair face” (39); his father, meanwhile, “had a pale, cold face, marked . . . by a hardness of line in which, oddly, there was no significance, no accent” (53). Mr. Mitchett has “little intrinsic appearance” (59), while Carrie Donner is described as a mere “apparition” (73). And Nanda, whom we first encounter via the “faded image” (27) of a photograph, is faulted by Vanderbank for having “no features.” He elaborates: “She’s at the age when the whole thing—speaking of her appearance, her possible share of good looks—is still, in a manner, in a fog” (31–32).

The fogginess of these descriptions is matched by the hazy narrative medium in which the novel transpires. As numerous commentators have noted (see Davidson, Teahan, and Poole), *The Awkward Age* contains near constant invocations of what a hypothetical observer *would have seen*, had any such observer been present: “when she spoke it was with a different expression, an expression that would have served for an observer as a marked illustration of that disconnect-edness of her parts” (41); “Poor Mitchy’s face hereupon would have been interesting, would have been distinctly touching to other eyes” (93); “Mr Longdon, who, as compared with her, might have struck a spectator as infernally subtle, took an instant to think” (97–98); “[H]er present method of approach would have interested an observer” (117). The “would have” construction is not wholly alien to realist fiction. But where most novelists work to domesticate such moments in the service of a dominant referential illusion, James seems intent on exacerbating their disturbing force. The fictional world that results from the unusual frequency of this construction exists in an uneasy state of indeterminacy: in place of the preterite, imperfect, or present tenses which are the most common narrative modes, *The Awkward Age* seems to aspire to the past conditional.<sup>8</sup> Grammatical convention dictates that a clause in the past conditional demands a counterpart in the subjunctive; James’s constant conditional utterances (“Mitchy’s

face would have been interesting"; "Her method would have interested an observer") implicitly call for an imagined subjunctive completion: "*had* this world existed"; "*if* you had seen this." If the normal temporal protocols of the realist novel tell readers that this is how it was ("It was a dark and stormy night") or that this is how it is ("It is a truth universally acknowledged"), we might translate the temporal environment of *The Awkward Age* as delivering the much more peculiar message: "You had to be there."

The effect of this incessant invocation of a subjunctive spectatorship is complex. On the one hand, the frequency of this construction conjures an ample imaginary audience for *The Awkward Age*: the multiplication of these moments implies that a whole crowd of observers is watching even the most private scenes from just beyond a transparent fourth wall.<sup>9</sup> On the other, the relentlessly subjunctive nature of the invocations of that audience makes us feel that *we are not* that audience. The novel's readers are encouraged by these clauses to understand themselves as a kind of theatrical audience—but a curiously desubstantialized one, just as delicately sketched as the players in the performance itself. Our difficulty in feeling that we constitute the text's proper audience and our difficulty in feeling that we can adequately perceive the text's action are mutually reinforcing effects. James's novel thus confounds Scarry's program for imaginative vividness almost point for point. In place of the rough surfaces that lend the fictive world texture, we have mysteriously smooth and pale faces. Instead of the specified weightiness that gives density to fictional bodies, we encounter a collection of wispy, immaterial beings. Most important, rather than facilitating the imaginative effort of fictive world-making, *The Awkward Age* works to exaggerate readerly difficulty by suggesting that the narrated action constitutes a performance to which we have not been invited. The novel seems designed to read like some incomplete, preliminary, or second-best version of itself.

The experience James recreates for his reader is thus less that of witnessing a performance than of *reading a play*—one that has not yet been cast with the actors who will give these names and actions bodily density. As with a play's text, *The Awkward Age* contains frequent moments in which the complicated notation of physical arrangements is at once crucial but frustratingly under-elaborated by the verbal description on the page. In many instances, the reader may be tempted to resort to pen and paper in order to diagram the apparently trivial issue of the characters' spatial relations to one another.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of the referential status of playtexts by theater historian Erika Fischer-Lichte can help clarify the cognitive effort James enjoins on his reader. She argues that the orientation of dramatic texts to a future performance makes them heavy with corporeal reference: "we cannot conceive of the dramatic character without a body, even if the character is conceived while reading a playscript" (297). Similarly, James's text is difficult to read without invoking some imagined "staging," one that would give color to all its pale faces, flesh to its ghostly frames, and visual clarity to its complicated stage effects. Given this similarity to a playscript, *The Awkward Age*'s status as a novel only increases readerly difficulty. Where a playtext can rely on a coming enactment to lend density to its descriptive thinness, *The Awkward Age* reads like

a play marked with the caveat *never to be performed*. In severing even the imagined connection between dramatic text and intended enactment, James frustrates our habitual referential expectations and creates for his reader a mild but persistent experience of cognitive impossibility. “[W]e cannot conceive of the dramatic character without a body”—but, *The Awkward Age* insists, we must. This awkward injunction—and not the more familiar difficulty presented by Jamesian “supersubtlety”—is surely what has led critics to complain of the unique readerly effort demanded by the novel.<sup>11</sup>

*The Awkward Age* thus goes to extraordinary lengths to subject its reader to what James elsewhere calls the “ghostly ordeal” of reading a play—of imagining a performance that remains an object of gauzy make-believe (CP 255). The novel is oriented toward the theater in the sense that performance is its desired but unachieved referent. It “wants” the theater and makes its reader want it; we could say that the novel intends the theater, as a cognitive act intends an object it never coincides with. Once we take into account the intensity of the performative desire animating *The Awkward Age*, it becomes clear that James’s withholding of the sense of theatrical presence is meant not to disabuse the reader of an investment in theater but to redouble her avidity for it. Straining the mind to “get into relation with the subject,” performing the awkward mental gymnastics necessary to imagine the scene of action, that reader has not been liberated from public enactment but made to feel her exile from it more acutely.<sup>12</sup> In referring readers to some necessary but unavailable performative space, *The Awkward Age* makes us hunger for the embodied representation that its very status as a novel forswears.

James’s prompting of the reader’s desire to see *The Awkward Age* “put on” is intimately connected to the text’s social desire, its ambition to imagine a world that would sustain the radical values described in the novel. The book’s generic impossibility is closely tied, in other words, to its understanding of social change and the resistance to effecting it. The challenge of sustaining an image of the novel’s action functions as a readerly correlative to the challenge of sustaining a world that would harbor that action. The imaginative labor the novel demands of its readers is a mimesis of social effort. At the same time, the phenomenological thinness of the book and the cognitive labor it demands of the reader serve as a constant reminder of the fragility of the utopian social world it sketches. But if the extremity of James’s formal experimentation accentuates the sense of social constraint, it can also sharpen the desire to overcome it. In this sense, the cognitive and social impossibility conjured in and by the novel provokes readers to imagine a more capacious social world.

For the sexual and relational permission granted in *The Awkward Age* is ample indeed. The deviant relationships that flourish in the novel’s shadows have been well documented, and excoriated, by critics like Geismar and Wilson: the elderly Mr. Longdon’s infatuation with Vanderbank at the novel’s opening and his incestuously toned “adoption” of the teenager Nanda at its close; Mitchett’s cash-for-sex arrangement with Lord Petherton; the latter’s use of a dirty French novel as an erotic prosthesis in his wrestling match with the newly-wed Agnesina; Mrs. Brookenham’s pimping of her son Harold to wealthy family friends; the

Duchess's adulterous liaison with Harold; Carrie Donner's contemplated affair with Mr. Cashmore; Tishy Grendon's predilection for transparent dresses that present "a choice, as to consciousness, between the effect of her being and the effect of her not being dressed" (227); the universal adoption of nicknames that seem virilizing in the case of women (Mrs. Brookenham becomes Mrs. Brook) and feminizing or castratory in the case of men (Mitchett becomes Mitchy); and so on. As Vanderbank (aka Van) sighs at one point, "It's a queer life" (127): *The Awkward Age* makes room for homosexuality, fetishism, masochism, pedophilia, nymphomania, gender inversion, exhibitionism, scopophilia, and prostitution, and thus constitutes a veritable roll call of late-century deviance.<sup>13</sup>

As James's initial critics perceived, the darkness that enfolds the novel's representational field offers protective cover for this polymorphous perversity. *The Awkward Age* never forces its inhabitants to cough up the list I have just crudely provided. It is in fact crucial to the proliferation of these erotic possibilities that they remain conjectural, never confirmed or denied by the represented action of the novel, which is occupied not with depictions of sexual impropriety but discussions of its possibility. "[T]he less tempered darkness favoured talk" (214), James writes at one point, and he might be offering us the law undergirding the phenomenological medium of *The Awkward Age* itself. The novel transpires in what James a few pages later calls "the sociable dusk" (217), an obscure place where visual deprivation logically entails—even provokes—a stream of suggestive discussion. Talk, then, is as important as sex in this novel; or, more precisely, talk is important *to* the sex in this novel. "What is *The Awkward Age* about?" Tzvetan Todorov asks in the closing lines of an essay that perceptively points to the starring role of conversation in the novel. "It is about what it is to talk," he concludes, "and to talk about something" (371). In its circularity this formulation stops exactly too soon and so ignores the connection between the novel's investment in talk and its exploration of erotic possibility.<sup>14</sup> The "something" that the characters are continually occupied with talking about is sex, and their talk creates the medium in which sex flourishes in its various forms and with relative impunity.

The novel and the social world it narrates are both organized according to a belief in the limited but real power of "talk" to rearrange performatively the contours of the permissible and in particular to deflect attention from sexual difference as a socially or narratively *significant* fact. When, early in the novel, the Duchess hears that Lord Petherton "lives on" the wealthy Mitchy, she protests that this relationship constitutes a "social scandal[]" (52). Mrs. Brookenham replies immediately, "Oh, we don't call *that* a social scandal!" (52)—and, as if miraculously, the novel heeds her decree. For the remainder of the book this would-be scandal fails to achieve any narrative importance whatsoever. Mrs. Brook's comment declares an active disinterest in the constative question of whether or not Mitchy's arrangement with Petherton *is* or *is not* a moral outrage and draws attention instead to her coterie's power of designation. However briefly, Mrs. Brook's words enact the fantasy of a discursive production that could performatively cancel the pressures of sexual propriety and sexual identitarianism, "talk" that could engage sex without naming it as the truth of the

subject. The exchange demonstrates in miniature the labor of Mrs. Brook's group to protect a space of relational and sexual possibility.

"Talk" in the novel thus disrupts the assignment of narrative importance to sexual scandals that outside of this coterie and outside of the pages of *The Awkward Age* are commonly understood as catastrophic.<sup>15</sup> A related, and equally important, effect of the novel's commitment to dialogue is a disruption of any notion of psychological depth and a corresponding attention to the elaboration of a group subject. James's career is usually understood as building toward the conviction that a fictional text should be anchored by a central consciousness—by definition singular. But *The Awkward Age* trounces this principle of Jamesian narration: the novel remains constitutively unclear about precisely *whose* story it might be understood to tell. While Nanda's failed marriage plot provides the novel with its temporal horizon, the lack of almost all interiorizing narrative prevents us from naming her consciousness as an object of pre-eminent interest.<sup>16</sup> By not allowing us to choose any single character with whom to identify, through whom to perceive, or even on whom to concentrate, James leaves readers with the single option of cathecting the entire social scene. In its investment in the self-elaboration of a group, the novel is unique in James's career.

The group's distaste for privatized and psychologized conceptions of sexual secrecy is clearest in a passage in which James describes Mrs. Brook's drawing room:

a place in which, at all times, before interesting objects, the unanimous occupants, almost more concerned for each other's vibrations than for anything else, were apt rather more to exchange sharp and silent searchings than to fix their eyes on the object itself. (75–76)

In its exchange of gazes, the passage may seem to belie my earlier contention that *The Awkward Age* folds its characters in a saving obscurity. But in its active disinterest in the question of psychological truth, the activity described here hardly seems to participate in what we recognize as specularly. The "object" to which the passage refers is the unhappily married Lady Fanny, whose possible elopement is much on the minds of the coterie in this scene. But this interest does not issue in any attempt to fix or "read" Lady Fanny, whose sexual escapades instead inspire a play of *lateral* glances among the salon members. And while James figures these gazes as "sharp and silent searchings," it would be a mistake to conclude that they therefore represent attempts at psychological penetration. Rather than trying to plumb one another's depths, the members of the salon tune their attention to the "vibrations" this scene is producing among them; they seem to be exchanging tactile sensations as much as visual or cognitive data. The scene is strikingly close to one James offers in his autobiography *A Small Boy and Others*, in which he explains that his pleasure in the theater has less to do with the on-stage spectacle than with "becom[ing] thus aware of our collective attitude . . . I am not sure I wasn't thus more interested in the pulse of our small party, under my tiny recording thumb, than in the beat of the drama" (85). In both scenes, the thrill of spectatorship does not derive from any epistemological advantage on the

spectacle; indeed, if in James's descriptions it seems hardly necessary to *see* the spectacle, this is precisely my point. Rather, what fuels each of these "theaters" is the apprehension among the audience members of a depsychologized and pleurably embodied collectivity.

James's description of Mrs. Brook's parlor can be read as an account of the novel as a whole. *The Awkward Age*, like the members of the salon in this passage, refrains from making a scene over the sexual transgressions in which it is nonetheless awash. In the process it gives rise to a pleasurable deviance that by virtue of its universality ceases to signify as such. What emerges from the sociable dusk is a sense of collective consciousness—precisely the quantity for which James continually reaches in his curiously desubjectified autobiography.<sup>17</sup> "[H]ere we are together, share and share alike," Mitchy declares at one point, "one beautiful intelligence" (177). The project of *The Awkward Age* is to sustain the narrative conditions under which this corporate consciousness can remain a lived social reality. The importance of this project to these apparently superficial characters should be taken quite seriously: one of the weirder features of the novel is its characters' seeming awareness of the fragility of the fictional medium in which their odd coterie flourishes. Indeed, they fight for their group cohesion as if for their very fictional lives. As Mrs. Brook puts it when justifying one of her recent franknesses, "If the principal beauty of our effort to live together is . . . in our sincerity, I simply obeyed the impulse to do the sincere thing. If we're not sincere, we're nothing" (180). Unlike many another Jamesian character, there is nothing "deep" about Mrs. Brookenham at this moment: with nothing to hide, she has nothing to lose by publicizing her own investment in the struggle to maintain the vitality of the group. Her words are a precise summary of the depsychologizing agenda of the novel itself, its resistance to the demands of interiority and psychic privacy in the name of a group subjectivity.

Mrs. Brook's comment also indicates that this effort is threatened, that the project of sustaining a scene of permissive collectivity faces serious challenges. The conversation in which she utters these words concerns Mr. Longdon's decision to supply Nanda with a dowry in an effort to persuade Vanderbank to marry her—an outcome that, in detaching one of the coterie's key players, would put the beautiful effort at collectivity out of commission. The ethical project the novel outlines is in fact menaced most frontally by the marital imperative. And if "talk" is a key strategy in the valiant effort of the group to defend its own peculiarity, it is also central to the novel's failed marriage plot, since it is the inappropriateness of the talk at the Brookenhams that apparently leads the hypocritical Van to reject Nanda's affections. In most readings of the novel, Nanda's love of Van is taken for granted, as is her mother's sexual attraction to him. But to decide that Mrs. Brook wants Van for her lover and that Nanda wants him for her husband is to disregard both women's explicit statements on the matter. In knowing "better" than the characters themselves this reading ignores the novel's challenge to think against the regime of psychological intelligibility.<sup>18</sup> Kaja Silverman acutely observes that "all libidinal roads seem to lead to Van" (179), but this need not mean that all the characters are invested in his sexual possession. The question that circles around Van is not who will ultimately

possess him, but whether he will help maintain this “collection of natural affinities” (AA 84) or assist in disbanding it—in short, whether he will be used for talk or for marriage. Van is undeniably at the center of the struggle *The Awkward Age* depicts—but this is less a moralized battle between mother and daughter than a struggle between two generic orders, two competing models of psychosexual meaning, and two libidinal economies.

In a recent discussion of the truth games entailed by different aesthetic forms, Paul Morrison has contrasted the “culture of spectacle” with “the dispensation of the Word” (31), arguing that at stake in this opposition are “the modes of human subjectivity and somatic organization—perverse or otherwise—that any given aesthetic form presupposes and promotes” (19). Morrison aligns the former with the externality of the theater and the latter with the novel’s “theatrically inaccessible interiority” and the “heterosexualizing ‘machinery’” (23, 31) of the marriage plot. The generic impossibility of *The Awkward Age* dramatizes precisely the standoff between these sexual and ethical regimes. The suspense of the novel lies not in the question of whether Nanda will marry but in whether the values of novelistic meaning and interiority will win out against the claims of theatrical externality, group consciousness, and queer forms of relation. In this struggle, we will see, mother and daughter—far from being opposed—should more properly be seen as allied against the genre in which they exist.

The most impressive strategy the characters employ in the struggle against novelistic logic is one of tactical delay. The marriage plot and the excitements of its “story” are opposed to the pleasures of dilatory, non-utilitarian conversation, as the characters make clear in their remarkably drawn out discussions of Nanda’s marital prospects. Concluding one such conversation on the likelihood of Van marrying Nanda, Mrs. Brookenham seems to be warily eyeing the narrative arc of *The Awkward Age* itself:

“Dear Van will think conscientiously a lot about it, but he won’t do it. . . . We shall be very kind to him, we shall help him, hope and pray for him, but we shall be at the end,” said Mrs. Brook, “just where we are now. Dear Van will have done his best, and we shall have done ours. Mr Longdon will have done his—poor Nanda even will have done hers. But it will all have been in vain. However,” Mrs Brook continued to expound, “she’ll probably have the money. Mr Longdon will surely consider that she’ll want it if she doesn’t marry still more than if she does. . . . [I]t lacks, as I say, the element of real suspense.” (178–79)

Synopsizing the plot of the novel in which she figures—and thereby mitigating the interest we might take in its progress—Mrs. Brook instead highlights her own utterance (“as I say”) as a site of readerly attention. With a string of future perfect clauses that draw attention to themselves through the sheer oddity of their temporal orientation, Mrs. Brook talks about the marriage plot as a way to forestall moving through it. With her talk she invents a new practice of anti-narrative pleasure.

The detachment Mrs. Brook evinces over Nanda's marital prospects is conventionally read either as a monstrous neglect of her daughter's interests or as an equally monstrous ploy to keep (or obtain) Vanderbank as her own lover. But this reading ignores the fact that Nanda's own speech—the only means, in this novel, for us to gauge what she “really” wants—evinces the same detachment and by using the same proleptic verbal structure. Urged by Mr. Longdon to curtail her time in her mother's sociable salon (“I wish immensely you'd get married!”), Nanda replies, several chapters before her mother's prediction, “I shall be one of the people who don't. I shall be at the end . . . one of those who haven't” (142). By her own report, Nanda falls clearly on her mother's side of the novel's pitched battle between “talk” and narration: “I want to hear all the talk” (97), as she frankly puts it to Mitchy. To read “through” these utterances to decide that Nanda and Mrs. Brook are in fact locked in agonistic combat is not only to miss the congruence of their stated desires. It is also to ignore the challenge they mount to the power of the marriage plot to define an intelligible life. It is, in other words, to participate in the punishment that the novel visits on both women and on the characters who surround them. The pathos of *The Awkward Age* lies in the fact that its generic identity seems ultimately to close down these efforts to resist the logic of the novelistic.

### *James and His Kind: The Possibilities of an Impossible Book*

While the book appears to narrate Nanda and Mrs. Brook's defeat in their performative struggle against the generic constraints of the novel, a different outcome becomes visible when we attend to the fact that James has constructed a virtual theatrical public for *The Awkward Age*—one blissfully *indifferent* to the spectacle of psychic legibility. The clash between novelistic and performative modes of being reaches its crisis in the party at Tishy Grendon's, recorded in Book 8. The party marks the climax of the book's narrated action, but it is more interesting as a scene of generic anagnorisis—the moment when *The Awkward Age* acknowledges the impossibility of sustaining its own play-like texture and the performative desire that texture expresses. The episode turns on a risqué novel—described earlier as an “impossible book” (197)—and ends with a social catastrophe that is compared to the collapse of a theater. Suitably, the episode aggravates the confusion between novelistic and dramatic modes almost to the point of incomprehensibility. The scene is confusingly set thus:

“Mitchy's silent, Mitchy's altered, Mitchy's queer!” Mrs Brook proclaimed, while the new recruits to the circle, Tishy and Nanda and Mr Cashmore, Lady Fanny and Harold too after a minute and on perceiving the movement of the others, ended by enlarging it, with mutual accommodation and aid, to a pleasant talkative ring in which the subject of their companion's ejaculation, on a low ottoman and glaring in his odd way in almost all directions at once, formed the conspicuous, attractive centre. Tishy was nearest Mr Longdon, and Nanda, still flanked by Mr Cashmore, between that gentleman and his wife, who

had Harold on her other side. Edward Brookenham was neighbored by his son and by Vanderbank, who might easily have felt himself, in spite of their separation and given, as it happened, their places in the group, rather publicly confronted with Mr Longdon. "Is his wife in the other room?" Mrs Brook now put to Tishy. (245–46)

As elsewhere in the novel, the difficulty in picturing the action threatens to upstage the interest we are evidently meant to take in its content. The careful laying of the scene, far from conveying a vivid visual image, makes the bewildered reader all the more aware of her exclusion from the scene of enactment that would render the arrangement of these characters immediately comprehensible. This imaginative strain, in turn, underwrites and lends urgency to the thematic crisis that is here gathering. In inquiring after the whereabouts of little Aggie, Mrs. Brook triggers the climax of the book's marriage plot and the dissolution of her coterie: the newly-wed Aggie, it will shortly be revealed, is in an adjoining room "playing" with Petherton and an obscene French novel that Nanda, under her mother's interrogation, will confess to having read. Nanda's innocence revealed as compromised, Mr. Longdon leaves in disgust, and Vanderbank decides he cannot marry her. He abandons her mother's circle, which now seems certain to descend into a final silence.

There is a plausible characterological motivation for Mrs. Brook's self-destructive initiation of this chain of events: she seems simply exhausted by the hypocritical effort of keeping up what she has earlier and justifiably termed "the preposterous fiction, as it after all is, of Nanda's blankness of mind" (170). But we might also describe Mrs. Brook's fatigue as a formal one—as if she, and *The Awkward Age* itself, were finally collapsing under the effort of maintaining the "pleasant talkative ring" in a generic medium that demands less dalliance and more progress, less perverse obscurity and more moral clarity, less talk and more meaning. Mrs. Brook's exhaustion here is doubled by the cognitive awkwardness the reader experiences in this scene, which delivers clumsily in narration a picture that cries out for a stage that would make its meanings readily intelligible.

In discussing this event in the following chapter, the characters compare it to the destruction of a theater, and they do so by invoking a canonical closet drama. "You did it that night at Mrs. Grendon's," Vanderbank tells Mrs. Brook.

"It was a wonderful performance. You pulled us down—just closing with each of the great columns in its turn—as Samson pulled down the temple. I was at the time more or less bruised and buried, and I didn't in the agitation and confusion fully understand what had happened. But I understand now." (253)

Milton's *Samson Agonistes* makes its case against the theater in dramatic form; the poem not only records a theatrical disaster but does so in the form of an unperformed play. In its hero's anguished cries to be spared from the gawking crowds of Gaza, Milton's poetic drama anticipates the inward gaze of the psychological novel. It thus inverts the polarity structuring James's book, which

tries to sustain the value of performance against the claims of interiority in a form that is hostile to the endeavor. But where Milton—propagandist for the regime that closed the theaters—writes bitterly against a restored culture of display, James writes in protest against the novelization of everything. Milton's Samson pulls down the temple in a heroic gesture of antitheatricalism, whereas the collapse of the temple in James's novel registers as a genuine loss. In the preface to *The Awkward Age* James makes the dramatic conception of his novel explicit by comparing his work on the book to the effort of writing a play—an activity he in turn describes as constructing a sturdy edifice: "The dramatist has verily to *build*, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost" (AN 109). James's conception of dramatic writing as architecture suggests that the social demolition job that occupies the novel's climax also describes the disintegration of the book's own structural principles. "We've fallen to pieces" (253), Mrs. Brook insists. Her words might refer both to the doomed project of her circle's shared consciousness and to the very performative conception of *The Awkward Age* itself.

Sheila Teahan has noted that "Van's 'impossible book,' the French novel whose circulation stages Nanda's definitive and fatal exposure, thus figures *The Awkward Age* itself" (156). I would add that we cannot fully comprehend this moral "impossibility" until we see that it is fundamentally tied to a generic impossibility. What is revealed in these scenes, in other words, is not that *The Awkward Age* is just as sexually loose as the novel that precipitates its crisis. This does not count as a revelation at all, given the novel's unanxious harboring of deviant sexual possibilities. What comes to pieces at the novel's climax is not a moral effort but a generic one—*The Awkward Age*'s attempt to shelter performance in the heart of the novel. This capitulation is signaled by the novel's now hasty march toward its close, and it receives its most forceful articulation in the novel's final scene, where the play of meanings around the notion of "impossibility" is reduced to the question of identity the book has been dodging with such ingenuity. Before this scene, the epithet "impossible" has attached itself to a variety of objects and spaces: to the Brookenham house (50) and the "class" of people it welcomes (46), to Mitchy's conversation (64), to Tishy Grendon's parlor (71), to Van's book (197), and, finally, as Teahan notes, to *The Awkward Age* itself—the figure and container for all of these. But impossibility now abruptly attaches itself to one lonely character. Not coincidentally, it does so during a conversation in which Nanda finally seems to avow—in the irrefutable language of the body—her passion for Vanderbank. Longdon is comforting Nanda for losing Van:

"It would be easier for me," he went on heedless, "if you didn't, my poor child, so wonderfully love him."

"Ah, but I don't—please believe me when I assure you I *don't!*" she broke out. It burst from her, flaring up, in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still—in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only after a moment give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a

passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged. . . . “Ah, Nanda, Nanda!” [Longdon] deeply murmured; and the depth of the pity was, vainly and blindly, as the depth of a reproach.

“It’s I—it’s I, therefore,” she said as if she must then so look at it with him, “it’s I who am the horrible impossible and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility. For some different person you *could* have done what you speak of, and for some different person you can do it still.”

He stared at her with his barren sorrow. “A person different from him?”

“A person different from *me*.” (308–09)

In an apparently irrevocable shift, Nanda’s admission of her unsuitability for marriage no longer concerns what she knows or with whom she talks, but, more insidiously, what she is: her avowal is not epistemological or social but ontological in nature. No longer the beneficiary of a circulating traffic of pleasurable “impossible” products, Nanda rewrites herself as their impure source: “It’s I . . . who have covered everything else with my own impossibility.”

But what if we understand Nanda’s thrice-repeated first-person pronoun here not as insistence but as hesitation, a hint of resistance to the logic of identity she articulates? Although critics concede that *The Awkward Age*’s dialogism creates ambiguities around character intention and authenticity, none that I am aware of applies this insight to the truth that supposedly motivates the novel’s plot: Nanda’s deep love for Vanderbank. But surely one of the interpretive options left open by James’s refusal to delve into his characters’ consciousnesses is precisely the possibility that we *do* have all the relevant information, that what the characters speak *is* all we need know of them. Nanda’s passionate disavowal of any love for Van would then constitute fairly flimsy evidence of its existence. We should consider the possibility that her tearful outburst expresses not a long-suppressed truth but her exhaustion with the demand that she embody such a truth. If we view the problem from this angle, it becomes clear that Nanda has been subjected to a kind of gaslighting from all quarters—here, for example, from a friend who remains “heedless” of her protestations and whose concern takes the form of “reproach”—but perhaps more importantly from the very narrative logic governing her fictive existence. Far from disclosing her real feelings, Nanda’s body has simply been tortured into expressive significance. Her stammering self-description is less the voice of her truth than a cry for help as the walls of the novel—and the novelistic—close around her.

While Nanda’s “impossibility” clearly resonates with the doomed project of *The Awkward Age* itself, the contemporary theater may have made precisely the same identitarian demand on Nanda. Theater historian David Wiles has noted that the naturalist theater’s focus on psychic truth demanded a corresponding spectatorial disposition: “The new focus on the interiority of the actor assumes that a passive audience will lose itself in the emotions of the fictional character” (152). According to Wiles “the new aesthetic code” thus sought to “reduc[e] the convivial audience to silence.”<sup>19</sup> Nanda’s breakdown, then, also implies the

existence of a certain kind of audience—in Longdon, certainly, but also in that imaginary audience formed by the corporate body of the novel's readership. *The Awkward Age* has continually invoked the hypothetical observers of its action, and in this final scene James appears to be indicating just what sort of "observers" these are: Wiles's still, expectant, silent audience is fantasmatically conjured here as the natural correlate to Nanda's dramatic outburst. Indeed, we might say that our intent spectatorial attention—our keenness to be present at the moment of revelation—has actually helped to provoke this spectacular "confession." Our quiet expectancy would then be complicit in hounding some final identitarian truth out of our victim. In this reading, James's bleak ending indicates that, in a culture where the investment in psychological meanings has become all-pervasive, even a turn to the performative may ultimately prove futile. If Nanda's anguish here expresses a desire for a theater that would rescue her from the law of novelistic significance, it is a currently nonexistent or "impossible" theater she demands—and one that would play to a new kind of audience.

But *The Awkward Age* does not entirely abandon us—or Nanda—at the generic crossroads. The novel evades the dispiriting triumph of psychological intelligibility by organizing its readership into a different kind of imaginary public. "We," it turns out, may not be as quiescent, or as eager to extract Nanda's interior truth, as the violence of her outburst suggests. In the final scene, Nanda relays an apology from Van to Longdon for not having visited the older man. Longdon, characteristically concerned only with Nanda's supposed obsession with Vanderbank, appears nonplussed: "Nanda's visitor looked so far about as to take the neighbourhood in general into the confidence of his surprise" (305). Longdon's broad histrionic gesture is strictly speaking nonsensical, since he is alone with Nanda. James's evocation of a hypothetical spectatorship has built up *for his readership* a sense of itself as constituting a subjunctive theatrical audience, placed just beyond the framed stage of the novel's action. But this is the first time James has imparted an explicit awareness of *The Awkward Age's* performative contours to one of its characters, and the effect is suddenly to concretize that audience and thus "our" presence at the scene. Longdon, the least showy of the book's actors, here suddenly gestures out beyond the fourth wall, as if to enlist his audience's support. But his uncharacteristic hamming betrays a panicked awareness of the unmanageable meanings being brought to this drama by its audience.

Longdon's stagy surprise, in other words, indicates that the pressure of this fantasmatic spectatorship is operating on him as well, and not necessarily to the advantage of his psychologizing agenda. James opens the novel's final book with a description of Nanda's newly furnished drawing room, and in the process introduces a subtle modification to the book's imaginary theater. "Nanda Brookenham, for a fortnight after Mr Longdon's return, had found much to think of; but the bustle of business became, visibly for us, particularly great with her on a certain Friday afternoon in June" (281). The invocation of a viewing public has been constant in the novel, and the declaration here that Nanda's parlor is "visible" may seem to offer nothing new. But until now that observing public has only ever been designated one viewer at a time—"our" status as a corporate body has only been thinkable through the imaginary multiplication of so many

individually designated hypothetical observers. And the conditional form of that invocation has made “our” attendance at the drama of *The Awkward Age* propositional at best. But here, suddenly, we are: James frankly designates the viewing audience as plural (“visibly for *us*”) and shakes off the conditional tense to push us into the preterite plane of the narrated action (“became”). In coalescing a group of individual spectators into the collectivity of the first-person plural, James enacts exactly that movement toward the social that he attributes to theatrical attendance in his autobiography. This appearance of the collective works to undo at the level of the readerly fantasmatic precisely the individuating cataclysm James has just finished describing at the level of narration. “We shall never grow together again” (253), Mrs. Brook laments after the “smash” at Tishy Grendon’s. But James’s new invocation of his audience indicates that the disbanded collectivity of *The Awkward Age* has reconstituted itself on the other side of the novel’s imaginary footlights.

A few lines later James suggests what type of audience “we” may be. What is ostensibly the object of James’s attention in the following sentences is Vanderbank’s nervous fluttering around the room as he comes for a final good-bye to Nanda:

Vanderbank had not been in the room ten seconds before he showed that he had arrived to be kind. Kindness therefore becomes for us, by a quick turn of the glass that reflects the whole scene, the high pitch of the concert—a kindness that almost immediately filled the place, to the exclusion of everything else, with a familiar, friendly voice, a brightness of good looks and good intentions, a constant though perhaps sometimes misapplied laugh, a super-abundance almost of interest, inattention and movement. (281–82)

On the level of narration—on the level of novelistic meaning—nothing good is happening here: a cowardly suitor is fumbling his way through an awkward scene with a young woman he has led on and jilted. But the obscurity of the passage, along with its invocation of a new and thoroughly disorienting theatrical topography, means that what it narrates is not necessarily the same as what it “becomes for us.” The final sentence apparently applies to Vanderbank’s nervousness as he decamps once and for all from the marriage plot. But James’s separation of Van’s name from its predicates makes it difficult to connect what now seems an impersonal and overflowing “kindness” to his person. Moreover, the attributes of this kindness—superabundance, mobility, omnipresence—bespeak a quality that can scarcely belong to one character. This kindness is in fact more properly described as the “pitch of the concert,” the keynote of “the whole scene,” than the property of any single person.

But what is this concert? Where is this scene? James writes that this impression of kindness becomes available “for us” by “a quick turn of the glass that reflects the whole scene.” A conception of art as a mirror held up to the real is of course a commonplace of aesthetic theory. In the context of the theater this metaphor takes on a curiously literal topographical meaning, one that James is

here exploiting for maximum strangeness of effect.<sup>20</sup> Especially in a theatrical environment where the stage has retreated behind a framing proscenium arch,<sup>21</sup> the flat plane separating actors from audience can be understood as the surface of a mirror. In staring at the stage picture the audience might thus be described (in a way meaningless for the nonvisual media of text or music, for example) as gazing at an image of *itself*. In other words, James's language opens the possibility that the scene under description pertains not to the narrated action at all but to the collective image of the gathered spectators who sit just outside of it. The spinning glass is thus offering us a glimpse of *ourselves* as the public occupying the imaginary audience of *The Awkward Age*.

The "whole scene" that James depicts here is then a picture of the novel's readership remade in the ideal image of a theatrical crowd—glimpsed not in motionless attentive silence but in a labile moment of "interest, inattention and movement." While James has previously described *The Awkward Age* as an off-limits performance, the language now invokes not the gauziness of absence but the plenitude of plural and embodied presence. We have not only suddenly gathered into a plural first person but have done so in the present tense ("becomes for us") of actual spectatorship. In this strange mirror scene the effort of imaginative seeing that the book has hitherto demanded of us is suddenly released in a moment of pleasure. The mirror has spun around momentarily to reflect the audience hazily constructed by all those conditional clauses, and we discover not only that *we now are* that audience, but that we are engaged in conversation, laughter, movement—and a curious form of "interest" devoid of any particular object of "attention." The words echo those James employed to describe *The Awkward Age*'s coterie as engaged in an exchange of tactile gazes, intent not on extracting identitarian information but on vibrating pleasurably at the scene of sexual possibility. The disposition of the audience we now constitute indicates that James has transferred the mantle of permissive collectivity from his characters to his readers.

In an important sense, then, the drama of Nanda's supposed abjection is one to which we are not particularly attending. Just as the book moves narratively toward its superlatively novelistic conclusion, its theatrical contours widen, gesturing out beyond that plot to a collective present where the values of performative sociability are being preserved. This may not seem to mitigate the tragedy of Nanda's—and everyone's—submission to the novel's demand for truth, but we should not underestimate the pressure exerted on the torsion of the story itself by our performative presence across the footlights. An awareness of our collective presence should make us more attuned to how many of the queerly performative energies generated by *The Awkward Age*'s "talk" have survived its climax. (Even in Milton, the messenger who reports on Samson's having brought down the house is obliged to admit that "Gaza yet stands" [506].) Nanda will depart with Longdon, but there are hints that this may only be a temporary retreat before she joins her mother at the center of a circle of scandalous permission.<sup>22</sup> On his visit to Nanda, Van suggests that there is life after the novel when he tells her that she "seem[s] to me to hold the strings to such a lot of queer little dramas" (287). And Mitchy indicates that his marriage to Aggie will do nothing to keep

him from cultivating a pleasurable ongoing conversation with Nanda. On the contrary, his wife's very promiscuity will ensure "a practical multiplication of our points of contact" (298). He assures Nanda that she will be "saddled for all time to come with the affairs of a gentleman whom she can never get rid of on the specious plea that he's only her husband or her lover or her father or her son or her brother or her uncle or her cousin. There, as none of these characters, he just stands." To which Nanda "kindly" replies, "Yes . . . he's simply her Mitchy" (295).

"Kindness" here, as in Van's visit to Nanda, might seem like cold comfort, but in *The Awkward Age* the word pulses with a strangely performative amplitude. "Kindness" figures prominently throughout the novel and particularly at its end. We might recall by way of explanation that "kind" is also a word for a distinct generic class. James alludes to this meaning in the preface to *The Awkward Age*, in a discussion of the extremity of the book's formal experiment. "Everything . . . becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind. 'Kinds' are the very life of literature" (AN 111). James claims to be pleading for the purity of the novel's scenic execution here, and he explicitly goes on to rail against the "confusion of kinds" in literature, but his words curiously indicate that the most interesting thing to do with the law of genre is to *straddle* it. *The Awkward Age* is saturated with "kindness" precisely of this variety: a hyperawareness of generic limitations provokes not a capitulation to them but an effort at bending their contours.

*The Awkward Age*, we might say, kills genre with kindness. It resists the psychologizing and privatizing thrust of both the late-century drama and novel, exaggerating a generic impasse in the name of a coming public. It conjures a phantom theater, a social scene of erotic permission where the lights are down low enough to discourage invasive staring but where the play of interested glances survives in sufficiently robust form to give vibratory pleasure. In its horrible impossibility, its determined failure to function coherently either as fiction or theater, *The Awkward Age* issues a challenge to imagine life beyond the constraints of both forms, as well as beyond the marriage plot and the psychosexual and relational logics it enforces. The awkwardness and effort the novel enjoins on the reader are a measure of how conscious James remains of the difficulty of maintaining spaces of "queer condonations," but in its rich imagination of a group that tries to do just that the book instructs its readers in the social courage it would take to do so. A "kind" is also a name for a human collectivity brought together by a common trait or interest, and in bathing its imaginary landscape in kindness *The Awkward Age* seeks to give its audience the courage of whatever collective condition they might one day attempt to embody. If Mr. Longdon's distress at the odd alliances proliferating at the novel's end represents one common reaction to any such challenge to imagine collective change, Mitchy's encouraging response might also be seen as the novel's:

Mr Longdon, on his side, turned a trifle pale: he looked rather hard at the floor. "I see—I see." Then he raised his eyes. "But—to an old fellow like me—it's all so strange."

"It *is* strange." Mitchy spoke very kindly. "But it's all right." (280)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The story is powerfully elaborated by Edel in the fourth volume of his biography. Edel considers the work of 1895–1899 as a kind of self-therapy James administered to his wounded ego as he rediscovered his fictional vocation. Wiesenfarth, Isle, and Perosa each pay close attention to the formal innovations of the post-theatrical experimental period in order to tell the story of James's unambivalent embrace of the novel. The myth of James's "return" to the novel subtends as well the recent, moving fictionalization of James's life in Tóibín's *The Master*. For a counterbalancing discussion of James's career-long psychic attachment to the theater and the audience it represented, see Margolis (112).

<sup>2</sup>See Isle (43), Dupee (197), and Wiesenfarth (129). Davidson and Poole argue convincingly that the claims of the narrator's suppression have been exaggerated by James and his critics, while Booth (58–60) helpfully defends James from a too strictly "Jamesian" accounting on this score. I am less interested here in the issue of whether James's narratorial "intrusions" belie the novel's scenic objectivity than on the phenomenological and ethical consequences of the text's orientation towards an imagined scene of performance.

<sup>3</sup>While Trask makes a case for James's anti-identitarianism by analyzing *The Awkward Age* through "the backhanded sway of an anal erotics" (110), I focus on the relational possibilities opened by performative "talk" in the novel. For an analysis of Jamesian illegibility as "the only strategy available to men (or women) who wished to elude the new sexological order and the sociopolitical formations it primarily served," see Haralson (57).

<sup>4</sup>Bersani's essay "The Jamesian Lie" is the inspiration for many of my concerns here. Bersani reads Jamesian sociability as a "struggle against a crippling notion of [psychological] truth" (130), and I am indebted to his emphasis on Jamesian "talk" as the strategy of a performative conception of the self. Bersani's aims are central as well to Cameron's project to resist the "temptation to psychologize" (5) in interpreting James. I have been influenced by her insights into Jamesian consciousness as "disseminated" between characters (77).

<sup>5</sup>The clearest and best-known statement of this process is of course Foucault's. Sedgwick was among the first to recognize the thoroughness of James's wrestling with this late-century moment of sexual definition (*Epistemology*). Elsewhere, she traces James's self-fashioning in the prefaces to the New York Edition as "performative" in a sense distinct from that which I am using here (*Touching*).

<sup>6</sup>On the novelization of the theater in naturalism, see Williams (esp. 244–46). For a discussion relating the narrative logic of psychoanalysis to that of theatrical naturalism, see Diamond (3–39). On James's preoccupation with Ibsen during the last years of the century, see Egan.

<sup>7</sup>In emphasizing the ghostliness of his books, James's detractors offer a more accurate account of his achievement than do his partisans. Among the latter the keynote is struck by Lubbock, for whom James's strict adherence to scenic construction intensifies rather than saps the concreteness of the world posited by his novels. Lubbock commends James (in a discussion of *Wings of the Dove*) for conveying the sense of "[s]olidity, weight, a third dimension" (178). My argument here is not only that Lubbock's terminology poorly accounts for the texture of *The Awkward Age* but that it misses the nature of its formal and ethical provocation.

<sup>8</sup>The classic account of fictional temporalities is offered by Genette (esp. 212–62). I speak of *The Awkward Age* as "aspiring" to the past conditional tense because the novel is in fact largely narrated in some form of the past tense. But the insistence of the "would have" construction strains the coherence of what Genette terms "subsequent narrating" (220).

<sup>9</sup>Most critics understand these passages as describing a unitary spectator: for Teahan, these clauses invoke "a fragmentary and abstracted central consciousness" (146), while Poole even finds this observer characterizable as a "sociable shade" (10). I see James's repeated designation of hypothetical observers as invoking not a single ideal spectator but a multiplicity of them, not a solitary presence but a theatrical crowd.

<sup>10</sup>For example: "Lord Petherton, a minute later, had joined her [the Duchess]; Brookenham had left the room with Mrs Donner; his wife and Lady Fanny were still more closely engaged; and the young Agnesina, though visibly a little scared at Mitchy's queer countenance, had begun, after the fashion he had touched on to Mrs Brook, politely to invoke the aid of the idea of habit" (79–80). I discuss below the more extreme version of this play-like notation that occurs at the novel's climax.

<sup>11</sup>Stevenson refers to it as James's "most difficult novel" (150), Isle calls it "difficult to read, tenuous and vague" (168), and Pelham Edgar complains that it suffers from "the physical impossibility of making something out of nothing" (qtd. in Cargill 266). McGurl has more recently analyzed Jamesian difficulty as a strategy "to make the productive force of intellection evident" (19) and thereby to distinguish the art-novel from its downmarket cousins on the fictional market. While I find this analysis convincing, I am arguing here that more than sociological distinction is at stake in Jamesian difficulty.

<sup>12</sup>For an incisive account of “representational awkwardness” as a feature of the novel’s compositional structure rather than of the imaginative labor it demands of its reader, see Teahan (143–59).

<sup>13</sup>This list of course makes the Jamesian universe sound more pervasively decadent than is generally acknowledged. The novel is thus a significant exception to James’s more general project—compellingly analyzed by Freedman—to bring “under firm control the uneasy and often uncanny play with contradictory possibilities [including sexual and identitarian ones] that marks the British aesthetic movement” (132). In its sexual permissiveness and generic contrarianism *The Awkward Age* sits uneasily in the domesticating trajectory Freedman maps.

<sup>14</sup>Similarly, Yeazell argues—illuminatingly but incompletely—that in the late novels “the subject of [the characters’] talk is talk itself” (68).

<sup>15</sup>The recent Wilde trials provide one conspicuous example. James’s own later work offers another: the multiplication of sexual transgressions in *The Awkward Age* and the refusal to make anything of them narratively looks all the more unusual in light of the later novels’ fascinated equation of sex with narrative interest; all of the “major phase” novels turn on extra-marital liaisons. (On the influence of the Wilde trials on the composition of *The Awkward Age*, see Smith.)

<sup>16</sup>Absent a central consciousness, critical efforts to characterologically center the novel or its individual books take on a sometimes humorous tortuousness. (See Bass [who concedes that his recondite reading “may seem to make the novel a game of double acrostics” [156], and Isle [187–89]]. Attempts to identify James’s own sympathies are equally problematic. Edell asserts that Nanda is the bearer of James’s identification, the culmination of a five-year portrait of the artist as a young girl; Silverman claims that despite the book’s evacuation of point of view it is “one of the *most* ‘subjective’ of James’s novels . . . a virtual showcase for his authorial fantasmatic” (174)—a quantity she identifies with James’s “sodomitical” (179) narratorial position; while Mizruchi states without adducing textual evidence that “James identifies successively” with Longdon, Aggie, Nanda, Mitchy, and Van (192). These attempts to assign the novel an authorial identification seem to me to avoid precisely the challenge mounted by the book to the logic of legible identity.

<sup>17</sup>For a fascinating discussion of the philosophical radicalism of James’s conceptualization of the self in *A Small Boy and Others*, see Posnock (167–92).

<sup>18</sup>When Mrs. Brook’s motives for wanting Van for “herself” are canvassed by the other characters, even the unsympathetic Duchess admits that this desire is not necessarily one for sexual possession (154). Mrs. Brook herself only tells Mr. Brookenham that “we were in love with [Van]” (265)—a statement that places the desire for Vanderbank at the level of her entire coterie and thus seems something significantly other than an admission of personal sexual obsession.

<sup>19</sup>James expressed disappointment with the British theatrical public in strikingly similar terms: the English audience, he wrote, is “well dressed, tranquil, motionless; it suggests domestic virtue and comfortable homes; it looks as if it had come to the play in its own carriage, after a dinner of beef and pudding” (SA 101).

<sup>20</sup>James’s writings on the theater made particular use of the mirror as mimesis’s central metaphor (see SA 22, 93).

<sup>21</sup>On the gradual triumph of the proscenium arch, see Trussler (218–22) and Mackintosh (26–40).

<sup>22</sup>Rivkin and Poole have recently demurred from the largely pessimistic critical reception of these final scenes. For Rivkin, Nanda’s departure with Longdon cannot be understood as a “return to patriarchy and traditionalism” because Longdon’s acceptance of Nanda in her “exposed” state has destroyed the “economy of the virgin” that structures the novel (197–99). Poole, basing his upbeat reading less on what happens in these scenes than in the language in which they transpire, notes the abundance of laughter and smiling that punctuates this supposedly tragic finale. My analysis here suggests that Poole’s self-professedly “shallow” (10) and surface-oriented approach to the novel may be precisely the readerly disposition the novel scripts for us.

#### WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

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