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MATTHEW GARRETT
Wesleyan University

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Pleasure

Is it pleasure, what bluestocking Olive Chancellor offers to the charismatic, vacant Verena Tarrant on their first private meeting?

Olive had taken her up, in the literal sense of the phrase, like a bird of the air, had spread an extraordinary pair of wings, and carried her through the dizzying void of space. Verena liked it, for the most part; liked to shoot upward without an effort of her own and look down upon all creation, upon all history, from such a height. From this first interview she felt that she was seized, and she gave herself up, only shutting her eyes a little, as we do whenever a person in whom we have perfect confidence proposes, with our assent, to subject us to some sensation.\(^2\)

How one reads the scene will dictate whether one understands Henry James’s The Bostonians (1886) as lesbian tragedy or heterosexual comedy. Understood as a scene of pleasure, this is the moment in which Verena is introduced to the possibility of same-sex desire, and the novel that lies ahead is a grim reckoning with the scant social space permitted in the second half of the nineteenth century for such desire to take durable form. Taken as a scene of something other than pleasure, this is the moment when Verena allows herself to be “subject[ed]” to Olive’s domineering need; Verena’s compliant nature will keep her with Olive for most of the rest of the text, but in the end James will give Verena what she has come to feel she wants in marriage to Olive’s (equally domineering, equally needy) cousin Basil Ransom. Of course, a definitive choice is impossible: James’s text only names for us “some sensation,” and any attempt to specify it will only reflect our own desires — our sense of what Verena should want, or of what it should be possible to avow in 1870s Massachusetts.\(^3\)

What is undeniable is that sex is on the table. Or rather, it’s in the air: literally in the air, if we follow James’s peculiar insistence that his description is no figure of speech but an account of one woman taking another up into space “in the literal sense of the phrase.” However we navigate this insistence — by deciding that James is simply confused, or by picturing Olive and Verena as Chagall lovers who have floated into a Beacon Hill drawing room — we are clearly present at a scene of rapture. Olive’s impressive wingspan, her avid seizing of her prey, the godlike power indicated by the notion that the women are looking “down upon all creation” — all of this recalls nothing so much as Zeus’s rape of Leda while disguised as a swan, or his abduction, in the shape of an eagle, of Ganymede: these are raptures in the double sense of being both rapes and scenes of ecstatic levitation. The indifferrence to gender in the classical antecedents seems obscurely connected to the ambiguous ontological status of the scene James crafts here, his quasi-magical-realist claim that this levitation is a real diegetic event. That James stages this conflation of the literal and the figural against a background of perverse eroticism is, this chapter will suggest, a significant fact for the theorization of narrative pleasure.

Henry James will be the significant thread in this chapter in part because his work constitutes a career-long analysis of the concept of pleasure — an analysis nowhere more sustained than in the novels of the 1880s that treated “responsible” sociopolitical themes of female suffrage, class revolution, and parliamentary politics. A short stretch of pages in the middle of The Princess Casamassima (1885-1886), for example, shows James referencing all of our most prominent conceptions of pleasure. When the socially aspirant book-binder Hyacinth Robinson first enters an aristocratic parlor, he admires the decor with an “appreciative” eye that signals a comfortable enjoyment of the accoutemments of high culture. After a few days in the vicinity of this outlandish wealth, his pleasure takes on a sharper edge, and even seems fraught with fear and a piercing physicality: “More than once he saw everything through a mist; his eyes were full of tears.” While these two moments embody with uncanny exactness the two varieties of pleasure that Roland Barthes will famously map out in The Pleasure of the Text (1973) as enjoyment (plaisir) and bliss (jouissance), a few pages later we find Hyacinth reflecting on his new awareness that “every class has its pleasures” — a pithy anticipation of the account offered by Pierre Bourdieu and other sociologists of culture for whom the experience of aesthetic pleasure is first and foremost a barometer of social access and social distinction.\(^3\)

I wrote that James “references” these various conceptions of pleasure, but it is more accurate to say that he narrativizes them, embodies them in fictional beings and puts them into dynamic relation to one another in an unfolding fictional sequence that lets us see both their social positioning and their tendency to fade into one another; he is, in other words, a novelist. But James is also one of the earliest and still most influential theorists of novelistic form, and the indissolubility of theory and practice will also be a hallmark of
the texts we will examine. For an account of narrative pleasure, the most useful material will come in unlikely places – novelistic plots that tend toward reflection on their own procedures, seemingly random moments of intense rhetoric in books of narrative theory officially about other topics, pornographic films where the narrative presentation of pleasure is intensely literal. These texts share the taxonomic habit of mind that structures the field of narrative analysis; what sets them apart is a determination to seek out the places where the taxonomies falter or suffer some kind of meltdown. We'll see that certain theorists understand the conceptual meltdown itself as pleasurable, and that they collectively suggest that this pleasure indexes a historical force that they tend to call modernity and that we can think of more loosely as historical emergence itself.

Narrative theory is infrequently accused of being a pleasurable genre, or a genre about pleasure. Many of the classic texts in the tradition that would seem to offer promising starting places for an understanding of the topic turn out on closer inspection to be about something else or to be less interested in pleasure per se than its uses and abuses. Peter Brooks’s landmark *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984) builds a case that narrative movement mimics the pulsions of desire. But desire is not pleasure, and Brooks’s metaphors of restraint, effort, and striving suggest that the former is a rather grimmer affair. Plots, he writes in one characteristic formulation, “struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay”; his words suggest that narrative desire is fueled by a mirage of pleasure but has little do with the thing itself. Meanwhile, one of the best-known essays to conjure the notions of pleasure and narrative in its title, Laura Mulvey’s classic of feminist film theory, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” is devoted not to exploring the phenomenology of pleasure but to describing the phallocentric ego-maintenance that she argues cinematic pleasure upholds. A consequence of this orientation is an overt hostility to the pleasure she delineates: “It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it,” Mulvey writes in one famously bracing line. “That is the intention of this article.”

These refusals of pleasure follow from conceptual and political commitments, but the problem with talking about pleasure may be more fundamental still. Few terms are harder to fill with conceptual content. That it is strongly associated with the erotic, and with the eroticly outré, is undeniable – as if the only way to be sure we are in the realm of the pleasurable is to know that our enjoyment is disapproved of by someone, somewhere. As Barthes, still our preeminent theorist of narrative pleasure, and to whom this chapter will return, put it, “Perversion, quite simply, makes happy.” This is still not quite a definition of pleasure, of course: the term designates a kind of vanishing point on the field of affective possibilities. Fredric Jameson opens his landmark 1983 essay on the topic by underlining this point: “So pleasure, we are told, like happiness or interest, can never be fixed directly by the naked eye – let alone pursued as an end, or conceptualized – but only experienced laterally, or after the fact, as something like the by-product of something else.” (That Jameson begins his essay with a conjunction – as if the conversation were already long under way, or had just wrapped up – is a sly syntactic nod to pleasure’s elusive temporality.)

Pleasure’s vexed relation to questions of time and history resembles that of narrative theory itself, whose structuralist lineage has given it a reputation for accommodating historical questions only tangentially and awkwardly – even when the history in question is literary history. As the narrative theorist Susan Lanser has recently put it, “the relationship between narratology and studies of the novel […] remains something of a standoff, and nowhere more vividly than on the turf of history.” It is striking that Lanser’s own attempt to resolve this impasse makes its case by taking up the question, precisely, of pleasure. Lanser’s essay traces the centrality to the history of the novel of what she calls “sapphic dialogics,” a narrative structure first arising in early modern amorous dialogues in which heterosexual plots emerge from erotic conversations between women. Lanser tracks the structure from Pietro Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* (1534) to eighteenth-century fiction, establishing a centuries-long tradition of queered narrative grammar in which “[t]he arousal of women by women that happens on the level of narration thus depends on a heterosexual story, while the heterosexual story depends on the sapphic structure of its narration.” The power of Lanser’s argument is in no way diminished by its resemblance to the cliché that for heterosexual men the most arousing thing in the world is the imagination of two women’s sex; she is fully aware that Aretino’s dialogues were “doubtless written for the titillation of men.” Lanser in fact shows how that cliché rests on a documentable literary history (clichés, another cliché assures us, have their element of truth): from Aretino to Proust to Prince, the imagination of female same-sex eroticism has been a conventional emblem of unimaginable pleasure, and not just for men.

For those who still require proof, then, Lanser handily succeeds in showing the amenability of narrative analysis to historical questions. Perhaps more important for our purposes, she makes clear how central the imagination of pleasure has been to narrative innovation – and how central the idea of perverse enjoyment is to the imagination of pleasure *tout court*. Lanser does not bring her account forward to James’s moment – she shows that sapphic dialogics fade away in the buttoned-up nineteenth century – but *The Bostonians* would continue her story nicely, since here too narrative
perspective is sexualized in ways that touch centrally on questions of lesbianism’s inextricability from heterosexual structures. In James’s novel, focalization alternates between the symmetrically paranoid visions of Olive and Basil as they pursue Verena and—with an energy exactly equivalent to their desire—attempt to ward off one another. The pattern of alternation is so insistent that the reader understands the outcome of the story long before its dénouement simply because that pattern has become a barometer of sexual possession. We know Basil will end up with Verena because he bears the focalization for the last third of the novel; his desiring and possessive viewpoint seems to guarantee it. Even thus foretold, the conclusion of The Bostonians is cataclysmic, and, as with Olive’s earlier possession of Verena, it is far from clear whether we are meant to take the novel’s final scene of rapture—in which Basil absconds with Verena as she is on the verge of making her first big appearance as a public speaker—in the orgasmic or traumatic sense.

I’ll return to that ending at the close of this chapter, since it allows us to read the very slipperiness of narrative pleasure as a gauge of historical meaning. For now I want to note that in The Bostonians, formal patterning carries a remarkable amount of the story’s dramatic tension, and that this is a shorthand way to describe James’s pivotal role in the history of the Anglophone novel and of narrative theory: we might describe it most simply by saying that James formalized novelistic art—a formalization he went on to advertise in the prefaces to the New York Edition (published 1907–1909), which later became a touchstone for Anglophone theories of the novel. Where an early generation of critics described James’s fiction as marking the novel’s maturity, contemporary scholars are more likely to understand the conspicuous formal patterning of his work as an attempt to “elevate” novel-writing and novel-reading: creating works that demand intense intellectual attention, James effectively declared that only (educationally, culturally, economically) credentialed readers need apply. The critical accounts do not cancel each other out, of course, but they differ on their sense of whether James’s texts offer any readerly pleasure at all, and what kind of pleasure it is. James himself repeatedly (wishfully?) referred to his work as providing “fun” for the reader, a proposal that would have seemed laughable to the critic James Atlas, who in 1997 confessed in the New York Times Magazine that he had “a question” about the Master: “Does anyone enjoy reading him?” Atlas’s performance of half-serious philistinism suggests that the only pleasure one can honestly take in James’s writings is the one you derive by looking down your nose at everyone who won’t or can’t take the time to work at it.

The prefaces in which James articulated the premises of his art can indeed seem forbidding—stylistically, in the tortuous syntax and imagistic density characteristic of his late style, and conceptually, in their elaboration of a multiplicity of sometimes obscure formal categories. But it remains startling—especially for any account of James’s work that insists on its difficulty and conceptual rigor—how incoherent those categories are, and how closely pleasure is associated with their conceptual decomposition. Nowhere is this clearer than in the preface to The Ambassadors, in which James introduces his famous distinction between “scene” and “picture” as narrative principles: he proposes the terms as if their meaning were clear, and insists that the novel “sharply divides” itself between the two methods: “everything in it that is not scene [...] is discriminated preparation, is the fusion and synthesis of picture.” When James goes on to congratulate himself on the “scenic” success of an early chapter in which details of Lambert Strether’s past are given entirely through his conversation with a friend, his words suggest that the “scenic” is to be understood as a principle of action-centered storytelling, narration that dispenses with the expository summaries (presumably “pictorial”) that so many realist texts employ in filling the reader in on characters’ backstories.

But in the preface’s closing pages, James refers us to an exquisitely tense moment in which Strether becomes aware that the “solid stranger” standing behind him in a box at the Comédie Française is Chad Newsome, whom he’d last seen as a feckless youth in Woollet, Massachusetts. By the definition James has just intimated, these pages clearly qualify as “scenic.” James’s allegiance to the unfolding moment is so complete—the narrative pacing is so tightly sutured to the diegetic action—that when the narrator speaks of the “long tension of the act” we are not sure if the reference is to Strether’s mental processing or to the second act of the play the characters watch. So when James’s preface insists that the passage is effective despite the fact that it is an “absolute attestation[.] of the non-scenic form,” it is clear that the meaning of the terms has shifted. Scene is now being contrasted not with summary but with something like dialogue; in this new opposition, the pictorial is aligned not with narrative exposition but with psychological interiority. Such waffling would be a small matter if James hadn’t seemed to insist on the clarity and all-importance of the binary in the first place. Gérard Genette, among the most incisive of the narrative theorists who have attempted to sort through these tangles, remarks that James’s analysis of The Ambassadors “is as vague as it is vehement.” The confusion spawned by this moment can stand for many similar contradictions in the prefaces, which founded a significant strain of narrative theory atop a group of distinctions that James delivers to us, as it were, pre-melted.
The metaphor is less arbitrary than it might seem. *The Ambassadors* is awash in startlingly gooey images of hard distinctions failing to hold. Paris beguiles Strether, in one famous passage, precisely because it is a place where “parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.” Later, Strether admires Marie de Vionnet’s gift for making brief friendships feel so developed, as if she is capable of “melting, liquefying” time itself. And at the novel’s climax, in which Strether belatedly realizes the sexual nature of Marie and Chad’s affair, the narrator deploys in rapid succession the very terms that litter the preface—“picture,” “scene,” “stage,” “play”—in describing the discovery. The reader’s confusion as to how these distinctions are meant is also Strether’s: as he assimilates his awareness of the affair, we read that “the picture and the play seemed supremely to melt together.”

The former term seems to refer to the traumatizing vision Strether has had of the trysting lovers in a boat, the latter to the pretense of normality Marie upholds during the awkward afternoon that follows—but James characteristically insists that the very distinctions he has been insisting on have been defeated. That the agent of that defeat is the discovery of sex is crucial to the more general issue of pleasure’s relation to theorization: the lesson of the episode seems to be not only that the atmosphere of sexual pleasure can melt supposedly hard-and-fast lines but that the process of conceptual meltdown is itself productive of pleasure—a pleasure hard to distinguish from pain. This, it turns out, is perhaps the key insight offered by Roland Barthes, who spent a career erecting and decomposing distinctions in the name of pleasure.

Roland Barthes refers to Henry James only a few times in his work. The strangest of these references is in his 1971 book, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. The book collects essays on the Enlightenment pornographer, the utopian socialist, and the founder of the Jesuits, and proposes to analyze this unlikely trio as “devotees of the ‘Text’”—the latter defined as “the ritual that orders pleasure.” In Barthes’s account, the three writers share a commitment to maximizing pleasure through the creation of intoxicating taxonomies of body parts, modes of prayer, moods, portions of the day, culinary flavors; the contents matter less than the modular grammar that proliferates categories, isolates sensations, savors degrees of intense response. Discussing the Spanish saint (but the logic of the book means he might be talking about any of them), Barthes writes that Loyola’s monastic rituals conjure an “economy in which everything, from the accidental to the futile and trivial, must be utilized: like the novelist, the excercitant is ‘someone for whom nothing is lost’ (Henry James).” In the movement from James’s English to Barthes’s French to translator Richard Howard’s English rendering of Barthes, James’s famous pronouncement in his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction” has been tellingly altered: James claimed that the novelist must be “one of those people on whom nothing is lost,” his preposition signaling an ideal state of total cognitive alertness. Barthes’s version redirects James’s idea from the mental to the acquisitive, with the result that the disposition invoked becomes less about registering everything than experiencing it; the world here does not impress itself on the subject’s consciousness so much as it exists for her—for her use, pleasure, possession.

This is less a departure from James’s dictum than an explicitation of its appetitive energies. Indeed, the account Barthes offers of the distinctive features of his three subjects would work uncannily well as descriptions of James’s writing. If Loyola’s devotional schemes make him sound to Barthes like James’s hyperaware artist, Fourier’s minutely detailed accounts of the utopian future are devoted to the notion (in Barthes’s words) that “nuance […] is a guarantee of pleasure”—clearly the same principle according to which one might describe *The Golden Bowl* as *fun*; likewise, Barthes’s claim that Fourier’s penchant for mad, motley lists “produces a sonorous pleasure and a logical vertigo” will be familiar to anyone negotiating the launchpads of a Jamesian sentence. Even Sade’s orgies, organized according to the principle of the “erotic combinative,” in which “all functions can be interchanged,” follow a choreography similar to that structuring Strether’s lambent libidinal attention, which has him wavering among Maria Gostrey, Chad Newsome, Little Biham, and Marie de Vionnet—and treated by each of them in turn as a half-serious object of flirtatious attention. For Barthes, the maximally modular narrative syntax shared by these writers is mirrored in an inexhaustibly promiscuous style: “The principle of Sadian eroticism is the saturation of every area of the body: one tries to employ (to occupy) every separate part,” he writes. The frankness of the claim might seem to distance it from James’s work—but until Barthes clarifies that “[t]his is the same problem the sentence faces […] for nothing (structurally) permits terminating a sentence: we can always add to it that supplement which will never be the final one.”

This assimilation of group sex to long sentences depends on course on Barthes’s determination to corealize the text, to read its figures and syntax as standing in for, and addressing, a literal body. This determination becomes most explicit, as we’ve seen, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where it underwrites the opposition between texts of pleasure (plaisir) and those of bliss (jouissance). The metaphorical textures that do so much of the persuasive work of Barthes’s writing insistently assimilate this polarity with images of a body either swaddled in the footed pajamas of Culture (“Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture
and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading”) or in the throes of an orgasmic convulsion that breaks with it ("Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions"). The more extreme corporealization, though, attends the latter concept, which thus seems at first glance the clearly valorized term: the book closes with a plea that the text be understood as a projectile, quasi-plastic entity, one that meets the body of the reader as a co-presence in three-dimensional space: "it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.” This must be called the book’s climax, and it seems clear that only the fainthearted would admit to preferring the armchair coziness of plaisir to these more rigorous ecstasies.

This hierarchy may make the plaisir/jouissance distinction seem merely a reformulation, or rechristening, of that between realism and modernism, convention and the avant-garde, that Barthes had been writing about for most of his career under various names (the Work vs. the Text, the readerly vs. the writerly). Even before The Pleasure of the Text, though, these distinctions -- and the programmatic aesthetic vanguardism they supported -- had been implicitly presented by Barthes as a matter of readerly disposition rather than as an ontological distinction between kinds of text; here the orientation of Barthes’s entire project toward the reader becomes overt, and overtly eroticized. In the paragraph following his initial naming of the structuring dichotomy, Barthes shifts his attention from a taxonomy (and tacit hierarchy) of texts to the image of the reader who "keeps [...] in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss," and thus enjoys the "consistency of his selfhood" even as he "seeks its loss": the distinction is now between forms of textual consumption, and it is precisely in traversing or straddling the dichotomy that a whole practice of pleasure -- Barthes calls it "the erotic" -- becomes visible: "Neither culture or its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.”

The Pleasure of the Text thus makes particularly clear an implicit feature of all Barthes’s work: that it doesn’t take entirely seriously the terminological distinctions it spends so much time elaborating. In a reminiscence of Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov recalls that Barthes "was continuously joking about his own constructs when in friendly company, as if he were saying ‘Signifier/signified, connotation/denotation -- we’re not going to really take such terms seriously, are we?” D. A. Miller puts a similar insight more pointedly, and in terms more responsive to the erotic valence of this form of conceptual irony in Barthes’s work. Noting Barthes’s tendency to construct elaborate theoretical paradigms and then retreat from them to immerse himself in (frequently sexualized) examples, Miller writes that the back-and-forth can “make the whole wobbly dialectical apparatus start to look like a perverse erotic enhancer.”

We might take Barthes’s pleasurable melting of the distinctions that have fueled his career as a commentary on the taxonomically obsessed field of narratology itself, a field for which Barthes implausibly figures at once as founding father and perverse (gay) uncle.

The gender and sexual dynamics condensed in Barthes’s persona (and considered with varying degrees of explicitness in his work) have provoked some of the most compelling appreciations and critiques of his writing. Feminist critics like Naomi Schor have noted that Barthes’s pleasure and pleasure-giving “body” is almost always unmarked by gender, a silence that for Schor signals a “denied sexual difference” that ultimately reinstates the gender schemas Barthes would seem well poised to challenge. From Miller’s perspective, it is just that silence – motivated, he compellingly argues, by the closet – that makes Barthes’s narratology suggestive for an analysis of gay men’s position in a sex/gender system structured equally by misogyny and homophobia. The palpable disagreement attests to a deeper concordance: for both critical schools the theory of narrative pleasure for which Barthes here stands is necessarily inflected by gender and sexuality, and even its blindnesses gauge the evolution of and relations between those terms. Narrative theory’s account of pleasure, in other words, is historical all the way down.

Scholars of pornography have put this point less abstractly, stressing that there is a genre that takes the gendered embodiment of pleasure with determined literalness, and moreover that the genre constitutes a sustained theoretical meditation on narrative. The field of porn studies is not usually taken as central to narrative theory, but one of its now-canonical texts, Linda Williams’s Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible” (1999), is notable not only for how centrally it pursues questions of narrative presentation but also for its relation to some of the key texts in the narratological tradition. Discussing the porn convention of the “money shot,” which dictates that male performers ejaculate externally, Williams writes that in the 1970s the trope came to be understood as “the ultimate climax— the sense of an ending— for each heterosexual act represented.” Williams’s breezy reference to Frank Kermode’s landmark The Sense of Ending (1966) makes that book seem euphemistic or avoidant despite its total lack of interest in the question of bodies penetrating bodies (Kermode’s book concerns itself with Christian apocalypticism rather than the filmic rendering of orgasm). If Williams’s joke here is tangential to Kermode’s project, her provocation can be taken as directed at the tradition of narrative study.
more generally, which she implicitly asks how literally it wants to take the bodies and pleasures it so frequently invokes.

It is striking at first glance how little it changes to deal with hard-core material – how contiguous Williams’s analysis is with the theoretical and thematic concerns of (unlikely though the connection seems) Henry James. Never cited in Williams’s book, James’s spirit might nonetheless be said to pervade it. The distinction between picture and scene for which he claimed so much analytic importance hovers in the background, for example, of Williams’s chapter on the narrative structure of 1970s heterosexual porn.

The chapter creates a typology according to how porn emplots the scenes of explicit sex that Williams argues are invested with utopian energy: where “separated utopias” cordon off hard-core “numbers” from narrative exposition, “integrated utopias” allow diegetic concerns – including plotlines about bad jobs, sexual violence, and everyday sexism – to be taken up inside the sex scenes, in a way that allows them to address “the sorry realities that created the desire for pornotopia in the first place.” And in “dissolved utopias,” the line between scenes of intense erotic pleasure and diegesis is utterly blurred, with the result that pornotopia is presented as “already achieved”: “Dissolved utopias present worlds in which power and pleasure are at odds neither in the numbers nor in the narrative.”

We have seen that James too understands his work as alternating between exposition and scene, “narrative” and “number,” and that the distinction is as important as it is unstable. We have also seen that that formal instability derives from moments of thematized erotic tension – when it doesn’t, more weirdly, seem to cause an erotic agitation inside the diegesis. When in The Wings of the Dove Milly Theale dines at the palatial home of a nobleman who is courting her, the details of aristocratic luxury strike her as “touched in a picture and denotements in a play,” and the confusion of metaphors puts her in “a state of vibration [...] almost too sharp for her comfort” – exactly as if she has eavesdropped on her creator’s theoretical musings on narrative structure and received his categorial confusion as some kind of scandalous secret. We recall that a similar dissolution in James’s narrative categories was precipitated by Lambert Strether’s meeting with Chad Newsome – whose figure the older man registers as “brown and thick and strong,” whose new “smoothness” strikes him as palpably “as the taste of a sauce or the rub of a hand,” and whose self-possession seems to him “marked enough to be touched by the finger.” Here again, an insistently corporealized affective state is correlated to a collapse in narrative categories, as if there were something excruciatingly pleasurable about the confusing mode – summary, description, event? – in which these passages elapse. “[S]he bristled with discriminations,” James’s narrator says of Milly at yet another exciting moment, “but all categories failed her.” The will to discrimination, the categorical failure, the bristling that accompanies them – all might serve equally as descriptions of the late-Jamesian novel itself, which seems wholly devoted to an almost tantric ambition to refuse the difference between the excitements of event and the enveloping aura of atmosphere.

Reading these passages in the vicinity of Williams makes it clear that James’s reputation as a prude cannot survive any inclination to read him with a camp inflection – to read, that is, as if the confusion of metaphorical and literal registers were in itself a pleasure. But the resonance between James’s work and twentieth-century pornography is also thematic. In uncanny moments, the films discussed by Williams might be deliberately riffing on James’s texts. In The Resurrection of Eve (1976) – exemplary of Williams’s “integrated” form – the heroine is encouraged by her boyfriend to expand her sexual repertoire, and ends by outspicing his erotic imagination and stamina. After a final and (for him) traumatic orgy scene, the chastened boyfriend asks if they can go back to the “way it used to be,” but (in Williams’s account) “Eve says only, ‘It’s over, Frank,’ and there the film ends.” The exchange closely echoes James’s conclusion to The Wings of the Dove, where Merton Densher assumes that – despite the games he and his lover Kate Croy have been playing with other partners – they can resume their relationship just “as we were.” Kate says only, “We shall never be again as we were” – and there the novel ends. When, at the close of the “dissolved utopia” Insatiable (1980), Marilyn Chambers exclaims that she wants “more, more, more!” (“though,” Williams comments, “she has already had a great deal”), she might be a latter-day pupil of Lambert Strether, who counsels a young friend in experiential maximalism by famously urging him to “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular.” These comparisons are not entirely facetious: the late-century aestheticism that informs Strether’s advice was also a defense of perverse pleasure, and James’s work is no less fascinated with the sexual act than is hardcore porn. Most important, these scenes each testify to moments of a rapidly evolving social balance of sexual power marked by the assertiveness of women and an accompanying waning of traditional versions of male potency – a dissolution that produces an after-glow of ambient pleasure for those in the vicinity. That this dissolution and its accompanying pleasures become visible with the help of narrative theory points again to the utility of this tradition for historical and literary-historical understanding. Even more striking, this dissolution of previously firm categories to a significant degree is the narrative theory of pleasure, which has been built precisely on the will
to shore up conceptual distinctions and to experience their collapse as productive of something like bliss.

The theory of narrative pleasure, I have been suggesting, is carried out most compellingly on the ground, in overtly self-conscious fictional form or in theoretical writing willing to indulge the vicissitudes of critical pleasure. If Roland Barthes is the seductive propagandist for such a critical practice, Gérard Genette is a quieter but no less effective professor of pleasure. His Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (first published in French in 1972) is one of the most technically granular books in the narratological tradition; it patiently itemizes and invents terminology for the narrative building blocks of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time. But Narrative Discourse is notably disinclined to sacrifice pleasure either as an object of analysis or as a critical affect. One of the book’s most striking sections concerns Genette’s identification of what he calls the “iterative,” a narrative modality in which an event that is said to happen regularly at the level of story (“every Sunday,” “summer mornings”) is recounted once in the discourse, sometimes with a specificity that belies the ritual quality it has been explicitly assigned. In Genette’s account, the iterative is at once a figure for a pleasurable blurring between the singular and the repeated narrative event and a mark of Proust’s originality that Genette himself takes an obvious pleasure in identifying. The preponderance of the iterative in Proust, he writes, heralds “a very appreciable modification in temporal texture.” And appreciate it Genette does, in prose that produces its own strikingly palpable textures: “the strictly narrative moments [. . .] seem to emerge from a sort of descriptive-discursive magma very remote from the usual criteria of ‘scenic’ temporality and even from all narrative temporality [. . .] as if [. . .] the narrative wanted, at the end, to dissolve gradually and to enact the intentionally indistinct and subtly chaotic reflection of its own disappearing.” The novel that results, Genette claims, is wholly transformed by this “intoxication with the iterative.”

That Genette is himself intoxicated is clear. As the analysis progresses, it becomes evident that his enjoyment is also a way of registering Proust’s world-historical innovation to novelistic form. Because the iterative makes it impossible to distinguish an account of how things were from an account of what happened, its inflation means that “the traditional alteration summary/scene is at an end” and signals Proust’s “rejection pure and simple—as we watch—of the millenial opposition between diegesis and mimesis.” This is, of course, precisely the same categorical dissolve that so excites James’s characters, James himself as he tries to taxonomize his own practice in his prefaces, and the erotic adventurers who find the world pleasurably infused with sex in “dissolved” pornographic utopias. The convergence suggests that pleasure is at once the sign and the result of the linked phenomena of literary innovation and historical change themselves.

The connection between pleasure and newness is also visible in another of Genette’s signal discoveries, this one featuring Henry James’s novels of the 1880s. In Narrative Discourse Revisited (1988), Genette identifies a change in the conventions governing the opening of novels over the course of the nineteenth century. In the firmly realist mid-century, most novels opened by clearly identifying the characters whose actions kick off the narrative (Genette labels this type of opening “A”). One mark of modernism was the adoption of a convention (Genette calls it “B”) “where the character whose presence opens the action is presumed at the very start to be known”—leaving the reader in the dark (temporarily), and giving even mundane stories a nimbus of mystery. This “historical evolution,” visible at the large scale over the course of the century, is present in particularly stark form in James’s career, where “we find a clear transition, from a predominance of A up to The Bostonians to a predominance of B dating from Casanova (both published 1885) and on to the end. The turning point, perhaps provisionally, is indeed, therefore, located in that zone, let us say symbolically 1885.” In other words, it is The Bostonians that ushers James over the border into an emergent world—where we can call it modernity, or, less grandiosely, the world of the modernist novel—where the predicates of being are up for grabs, where we have only “referentials without referents.” (Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway gives us perhaps the most efficient report from this condition when she reflects that “[s]he would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that”: the words of course appear in a novel that pushes the mysterious “Type B” opening to its extreme.)

It does not seem coincidental that it is The Bostonians that catalyzes James’s move into this new territory, obsessed as that novel is with seismic shifts in gender roles and emergent rules of erotic engagement—both of which preoccupations take shape, as we saw in this chapter’s opening, as the possibility of inventing new forms of pleasure. Nor, given the linkage we have been tracking between intense affective states and the dissolution of narratological categories, is it surprising that the novel reaches a climax in a distended sentence that pushes James’s prized perspectival clarity to the breaking point and in the process disseminates a general mood of agitation in which panic, triumph, and sheer excitement are impossible to disentangle. The scene is laid backstage at Boston’s Music Hall, where Verena is about to skip out on her first large speaking engagement to elope with Basil Ransom. James places us with Basil, looking through a door into the greenroom where Verena hangs back with her friends. He is wildly confident of his imminent erotic success, and it feels like this:
What he wanted, in this light, flamed before him and challenged all his manhood, tossing his determination to a height from which not only Doctor Tarrant, and Mr. Filer, and Olive, over there, in her sightless soundless shame, but the great expectant hall as well, and the mighty multitude, in suspense, keeping quiet from minute to minute and holding the breath of its anger—from which all these things looked only small, surmountable, and of the moment only. 44

The sentence is elaborately subordinated, as if James's contorted late manner is already bearing down. One of the effects of that style is a kind of distribution of consciousness, and the details taken in here are indeed so multifarious that the passage seems to register a rupture in Basil's psychology, as if the story has reached a frontier where the individual and its attendant narrative technology of focalization will no longer serve James's purposes. 45 That psychological dissolution is also marked by the confusion between "scene" and "picture" that we have encountered elsewhere in James: this is overtly a "moment"—in fact the most eventful one in the narrative so far—but the panoramic view James offers suggests the fixity of a tableau. And these formal oddities underscore the passage's imagistic and thematic peculiarity, in which Basil's "manhood," placed in conspicuous apposition with his "determination," appears (literally?) to rise to the rafters. Basil wishes to believe this inflation a mark of his potency; but it is also clearly a compensatory fantasy, and thus an index of how inevitable heterosexuality has come to seem in this narrative world. This psychological undecidability points to a historical one: Is *The Bostonians* a brusque dismissal of faddish feminism or a serious registration of a new historical force? 46 The case for the latter is made in strongest terms by the very intensity of this emotional paroxysm, which if nothing else indicates that the historical energies coming to a head in this scene are forces to reckon with.

It might seem perverse to align anything that's happening here—Basil's panicked assertion of male prerogative, Verena's sorrowful resignation, least of all Olive’s devastation—with pleasure. But we should recall Barthès's insistence that pleasure at its most intense can be hard to distinguish from pain, rupture, self-dissolution. We might also turn to Fredric Jameson's recent claim in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) that such unnamed intensities of feeling (following recent work on the emotions, he calls this "affect") signal that a new item has presented itself to the historical sensorium. Jameson's book is a contribution to narrative theory, as well as a rapprochement with James, a writer he has mostly invoked slightly over the course of his career. Here, Jameson gives James his due as a theorist of the novel, and aligns the surge of affect with the "scenic" principle. 46 This intuition that the Jamesian scene's narrowing to the present conduces to the surge of intense emotions has been borne out by this chapter, and it suggests that the end of *The Bostonians* heralds the advent of some new social arrangement. Basil's vision is of ecstatic elevation; as such it not only recalls Olive and Verena's earlier levitation but also prefigures the ascension that will happen in a moment, when Olive transmutes her erotic despair into determination and steps onto the stage in Verena's place. The novel ends just before we learn whether Olive is hounded from the stage by the angry crowd or comes into a new eloquence that keeps them listening or... something else entirely. It is one of the most strangely inconclusive novelistic endings in the nineteenth century. What the narrator makes clear is that Olive has been transmogrified into a "heroine," as if she's ascended to some higher plane, shortly to be recognized as a new and as-yet-unnamed historical type. 47 That we have come to recognize that type as the lesbian is a crucial part of this novel's literary historical significance, but only a part. For now, Olive is a referential without a referent.

Is it a pleasure, to be thus raptured by History? Like our opening question, this one is unanswerable, and probably nonsensical: Olive's life does not extend beyond these pages, and of course like all literary characters she has always existed on the razor's edge between the idea of a real person and a collection of words. Olive's difference might be that she seems to live that condition as an agitation that shades into fear on one side and exhilaration on the other. The narrative theory of pleasure has sometimes been stymied by this slipperiness, by the tendency of pleasure to escape our analytic attention by becoming something else, or simply vanishing before we can force it to yield up any conceptual content. But just as frequently that theory has been itself exhilarated by that elusiveness, and has taught us to read it as a sign of the dislocations of the modern. To the extent that narrative theory's will to systematicity has been accompanied by a will to dissolve that systematicity, that theory performs a mimesis of historical change, imitating the ways social structures harden and come undone in a ceaseless process. And in linking that process to a "pleasure" that by turn resembles comfort, ecstasy, and pain, narrative theory further suggests the ways history makes itself felt in the most intimate recesses of the subject. Thus does this tradition become a profound if almost accidental phenomenology of historical emergence.

Notes

2. Published serially in 1885–1886, the book is set in the mid-1870s. On the dating of the action, see R. D. Gooder's appendix 2 to James, *The Bostonians*, 439.

4. In this drive to stage the collapse of its own taxonomies, the most inventive narrative theory resembles psychoanalytic writing as analyzed by Leo Bersani in *The Freudian Body*. In Bersani’s account, Freud’s repeated positing of self-undermining binaries constitutes an exploration of “the secretive and pleasurable phenomenon of a self-destroying intelligence.” Although this conception of the pleasure of collapse echoes and arguably grows out of Bersani’s earlier work on narrative forms—particularly *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, where the self-derangements of desire threaten to undo the intelligible characters of nineteenth-century realism—Bersani is not generally read as a narrative theorist. This may in part be due to his tendency to understand narrative tout court as a repressive sense-making mechanism (as in the claim in *The Freudian Body* that “a rigorously psychoanalytic logic [...] implicitly mocks all the philosophically narrativizing procedures and distinctions of Freud the prophetic thinker.” In accordance with this understanding, Bersani’s later work has turned increasingly away from narrative forms to focus on visual and performative arts. That turn notwithstanding, his work has deeply informed my thinking here. See Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 12, 21; and *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1976).


9. Susan S. Lanser, “Sapphic Dialogics: Historical Narratology and the Sexuality of Form,” in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 186. Lanser points out that the received idea that formalist-narratological approaches are incompatible with historical ones has survived the critical fame of Erich Auerbach, Lucien Goldmann, Ian Watt, and Jameson, along with many others who have combined these methods.


15. Wayne Booth understands the picture/scene distinction this way when he reads *The Ambassadors* as attempting to solve “the problem of summary.” For Booth’s ethically oriented criticism, the solution is only half successful, since limiting the reader’s information to characters’ thoughts and conversation means that “the convention of absolute reliability [of the narrative perspective] has been destroyed.” See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; 2nd ed., Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1983), 174–175.


17. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 325; emphasis added.


21. Ibid., 72.


25. Ibid., 67.

26. Ibid., 14.


32. Ibid., 170, 174, 181.
35. Williams, Hard Core, 168.
38. Devoted to precision, Genette makes clear that he’s not going to let the taxonomic get tiresome. In Narrative Discourse Revisited, in which he takes up classificatory challenges to the earlier book, Genette refers to “the excess of precision as an epistemological obstacle,” and confesses that “I see no reason for requiring narratology to become a catechism with a yes-or-no answer to check off for each question, when often the proper answer would be that it depends on the day, the context, and the way the wind is blowing.” This sensibility consorts with his willingness to admit that he assigns value to—and derives pleasure from—narrative innovation, a confession that marks out his marginality to a fully scientific or impartial narratological science. See Genette, Narrative Discourse Revisited, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 26, 74.
39. Genette, Narrative Discourse, 111–2, 126; emphasis in original.
40. Ibid., 167–168.
41. Genette, Narrative Discourse Revisited, 68–69, 70.
43. James, The Bostonians, 455.
44. Seymour Chatman’s The Late Style of Henry James (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972) points to the disorienting effect of James’s habit of making abstract mental qualities the subjects of sentences (as in this one, where “what he wanted” launches the syntactic “action”). Sharon Cameron’s Thinking in Henry James (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1989) is the most sustained analysis of the collectivization of consciousness in James.
45. These options are considered, and the distinction between them convincingly refused, in Jennifer Fleissner, Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004), 123–160.
46. See Fredric Jameson, The Antinomies of Realism (London: Verso, 2013). The conceptualization of affect, which informs the entire book, is elaborated on pp. 26–44.
47. James, The Bostonians, 462. For an account of the centrality of such traumatic scenes of emergence-into-typicality to queer literary history, see Heather Love, Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).