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THE SINGLE NOTABLE THING JAMES said about *The Sacred Fount* (other than that he "mortally loathe[d] it"—he did not include it in the New York Edition) was that it was a joke. A joke, he said, was all that it could be, but it was "a *consistent* joke"; although "doubtless very disgraceful," he said, it had "its own little law of composition" which had been "applied quite rigorously and constructively" (Edel, ed. 4:186). He might have added that never before had he applied and constructed any more rigorously than in *The Sacred Fount*, within any more constraining a law of composition, nor ever before had application been more severe, and subtle, and deliberate and detached and deadpan—with the disheartening result, as clearly he had not anticipated, that absolutely no one seemed to have caught on, so that in one way the joke was on him. Therefore, perhaps, and reasonably, his mortal loathing of the thing.

Nor, for that matter, would the future serve him better. *The Sacred Fount* has lived on to be the primary case for late-James obscurity, no doubt first of all just because of the fact of that very *consistency* upon which James prided himself, which is to say the almost total disallowance of any of what he called "going behind," but then also because if joke it is taken to be, as usually it is not, it requires an adjusted kind of perception to see the humor of it. The novel hovers over matters which are funny only from the most austere and detached point of view, now and then dipping down to alight upon horrors.

It is told entirely in first person by an unnamed narrator who, in the way of late James, is unreliable, but who, now, is singularly persuasive, to the point of intimidation; he intimidates the reader, by the

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might, sheerly, of his fierce and focused intelligence, while, as eventually becomes clear, he is not merely unreliable but is almost entirely untrustworthy because almost totally self-deluding. (The "almost" of it adds to the confusion.) He is an inventor and a wielder of "theory" (the word is constantly at his lips) and is himself, like his author (but he is not the author), at once terrifically rigorous and marvelously subtle in both his constructions and his applications, and at the same time is mostly mistaken as to the facts—which would be to make him comical by way of being a fool and an object of satire, adrift in his elegant constructions, but then, as also eventually becomes clear, accumulatively and retrospectively and by way of both further complication and enrichment, the narrator is also at once a tormented person and is a nasty person whose character is at once displaced into and is serviced by his theorizing. This comes about beyond his own knowing, of course, but the reader will come to know, for the dawning joke of the matter.

Particularly, the narrator constructs a theory about love and lovers which, however, as the novel plays out, requires serial intricate adjustments and ever-renewed strenuous intellectual concentration, as new materials intervene or as the truth of things comes too close. The continuously refined theory is to reveal the truth of that which strangely obsesses him, namely, who among his fellow weekend guests at the country estate Newmarch is engaged in dalliance with whom—and in the disproportion between the tremendous effort and the small object occurs the broader part of the joke of the novel. The theory says that one party to a love affair will wax, in beauty or wit or vitality, and the other will wane. The giver gives of himself or herself as from a sacred fount. "One of the pair," says the narrator, "has to pay for the other" (19). Investigation will be a matter of discovering who has done which, who has given and who has received, although primarily, as the novel works out, the search is for the losers in the transaction, and one especially.

The narrator is himself odd man out among these weekenders. In his way, and therefore, he is more intensely occupied with romantic liaison than anyone else in the brief novel, while for the same reason, for lack of authorizing experience, his conclusions are at once elegant and incredible, beyond credence. Again, as in *The Turn of the Screw* three years earlier, the novel is at once enclosed within the report of its narrator, and, although one tends to forget, is in fact presented as

a recollection of events, and so there is the more reason to doubt the telling as well as to question the motives of the telling; the narrator's tale has been composed, seemingly some long time after the events, and is—candidly—self-serving. And like his predecessor the governess, once again, the narrator interrupts the flow of his perceptions intermittently in order to congratulate himself on his perceptiveness, thereby to forestall questions about the accuracy of his perceptions. What actually had happened that weekend at Newmarch, what there is of evidence, is only to be deduced, and only from interstitial or dropped or otherwise seeped revelations. At the end of the novel, however, the narrator will recall plainly that Mrs. Brissenden, a fellow guest and probable adulteress, or anyway a would-be adulteress, had told him, point blank, that he was crazy. Which is the case.[1]

"Alas," said James in behalf of his novel, "for a joke it appears to have been, round about me, . . . to have been taken rather seriously," although in fact the general note of the contemporary reviews was one of exasperation. So Harry Thurston Peck, in *Bookman*: Henry James, he said, seemed really "to be sinking into a chronic state of periphrastic perversity" (308). Said the reviewer for *Athenaeum* (England), "the whole book is an example of hypochondriacal subtlety run mad" (Hayes, ed. 346). "Mr. James has out-Jamesed himself," said the reviewer for *Current Literature*. James had written "a book which must stagger some of his most unflinching admirers, and of which the effect upon the reader first making the acquaintance of his work could be only a conviction of its absolute lack of sense" (353). And so forth, generally, for the others.

Told entirely in first-person, in the late Jamesian manner, at the length of a novel, by a narrator who is crazy, no doubt the novel made really unreasonable demands upon hard-working reviewers with their obligations to both deadlines and knowingness—which left little room for fun, while the intended joke, which reviewers did not get, was intricate with the fact of the difficulty. But the case was not different even among James's friends and well-wishers. "Harry James has upset me," said Henry Adams in a letter to Mrs. Elizabeth Cameron. "[*The Sacred Fount*] is insanity, and I think Harry must soon take a vacation . . . in a cheery asylum." He reported that John Hay, too, had found the novel "close on extravagance" (qtd. in Edel, *Treacherous Years* 339). Later, writing to his daughter and having just read *The Wings of the Dove*, which he liked, Hay himself would say that James had written *The*

Sacred Fount "just to scare us" (Monteiro, ed. 37). James's one single notable discussion of the novel occurs in a letter to Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and was occasioned by the fact that she had failed to understand it. James had to tell her that the novel was meant to be a joke, that it was "the merest of *jeux d'esprit*" (Edel, ed. 186). Meanwhile, Edith Wharton mourned. "I could cry over the ruins of such a talent," she said (Horne, ed. 350). William Dean Howells certainly was the most loyal of James's readers and perhaps even the most intelligent. He would say, in a late general essay on James, that he had mastered "the secret" of *The Sacred Fount*, but, he added, "for the present I am not going to divulge it" (37). Nor did he ever.

For that matter, even James himself would seem, later, to have had second thoughts about his application and construction, although not really to the point of what were the actual difficulties of the novel. *The Sacred Fount* is unique in James in being the single instance of a novel-length use of first-person narrative. In his preface to *The Ambassadors*, by way of explaining why he did *not* in this later novel use first-person, James would write that "The first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness" (1315). But the problem for *The Sacred Fount* was in fact entirely the opposite, all a matter of compression and intensity. Not only is it confined within the narrator's crazed head, but the novel even approaches a condition of unities in the classical sense, of time and place. Except for some matters in the first chapter, it has its single setting, the country house called Newmarch, and an action going from beginning to end in thirty-six hours.

In a word, *The Sacred Fount* is concentrated, intricate, and tricky, beyond anything else James had ever written or was to write (to speak to the matter of the law of its composition, only). And the fact that nobody seemed to have caught on to what he had been doing would have been reason enough for his promise, as James put it in his letter to Mrs. Ward, that this would be the last joke of the sort that he would ever make, although it would happen that the novels that follow would also have their comedy, their furtiveness.

Rebecca West was accurate and witty, if humorless, when she said of *The Sacred Fount* that it was a record of how "a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant can have used on *The Critique*

of Pure Reason in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists between certain of his fellow-guests a relationship not more interesting among these vacuous people than it is among sparrows" (qtd. in Edel, "Introductory Essay" vi–vii). But, for all of the negatives, the momentum of the sentence carried West to nice insight. She was right to see that while the narrator provides the force, the vacuity of the fellow-guests is also material. For James the fellow guests, too, are a part of the joke, not opportunity, merely, for the narrator's folly. In and for themselves they participate in the chill Jamesian regard; they are defined by their commonplace deceits, philandering, desperations, and jealousies, magnified by the narrator's dogged gaze.

The weekend party at Newmarch is said to be a very large one. At one point the narrator says that there are forty people there, but the characters of importance in the novel are just seven, three women, three men, with the narrator coming in seventh. Grace and Guy Brissenden are married. The others are not. Grace Brissenden dallies—the term is Lady John's—with Gilbert Long, who in turn, and to Grace Brissenden's dismay, dallies sometimes with Lady John, sometimes with May Server. Guy Brissenden also makes overtures to Lady John and sometimes to May Server. May Server makes overtures to both Guy Brissendon and Gilbert Long, sequentially, and also to the painter Ford Obert, who also interests Lady John, while, meanwhile, everyone is engaged in deceiving everyone else, and the narrator observes each of these others as they sequester with each other, serially, in niches and pathways and rooms of Newmarch.

These others have their different kinds of compulsions, and also have their names and other tics of individuality, but it is important that they have something less than personalities; it confirms the humdrum and mere typicality of their affairs that James mostly deprives them of backgrounds. Ford Obert, the painter, has sometime in the past painted May Server's portrait, but otherwise these others seem to know each other only by virtue of being regular guests at weekends at Newmarch. May Server is provided with two sentences of background. She goes from man to man. She is "on the pounce," so it is said, and there might be a reason for that. Guy Brissenden tells the narrator that May Server's circumstances "are nothing wonderful. She has none too much money; she has had three children and lost them; and nobody that belongs to her appears ever to have been particularly nice to her." But that, signifi-

cantly, is the entirety of that. The narrator pays no attention to what he has just been told. Rather, he now asks Brissenden how *he* gets on with her, certainly thereby to confirm the narrator's obsessed obliviousness, but it is also informative that these seemingly salient circumstances do not at all become significant data in the novel—which could perhaps indicate simple forgetfulness on James's part, but probably does not, and which of a certainty signifies that James was not beguiled into exploring for depths of character. No other reference to May's circumstances finds its way into the novel, earlier or later. Like the others, May Server has the reality of typicality, merely. She is only the kind of frantic flirt whom one might well encounter at a party. And so for all of these characters: their tawdry ordinariness—their *vulgarity*, in the two senses of the word—is what is to be said about them.

The same is not to be said for the narrator except for the sameness of authorial distance. The narrator too has been detached from informing background and circumstance. He has neither name nor address nor physical presence (we know that he is older than young Guy Brissenden, but not more than that), nor occupation, nor past other than his engagement with Newmarch and its guests. All of the complicated gnarled inwardness of the character is to be revealed in performance alone, without comment or gloss or explanation, which latter might otherwise secure, or even just allow, sympathy. The narrator is radically on his own. The governess was a governess, the daughter of a poor parson, etc. We have no idea who this narrator is aside from his being one of those who are invited to Newmarch, but then his lack of defining circumstance makes for the situation in which he becomes the story, to be studied and explained and unraveled. Ambition for dramatic neutrality has now taken James this far; more than the governess or any of the other of James's characters of the nineties, the narrator enacts himself and is allowed to betray himself, in the senses both of self-revelation and subversion. And if the novel is difficult, that is the result primarily, finally, of the reader's—one might say the audience's—having to be aware of the continuous irony of the character's self-betrayal. That is where the density and the twistings of the prose come in. Plot, setting, and characterization are suppressed, and the narrator ever more ingeniously goes on and on, until the final diagnosis, that he is crazy. Although he doesn't altogether stop there, either. At the very end, like the theorist he is, he is still congratulating himself on the superiority of

his "method."[2]

He might be one of James's poor sensitive gentlemen. As he enacts himself we can know that he is alone, lonely, and yearning, and is sensitive at the expense of sense, but he is also thin-skinned, petty, jealous, sneaky, meddling, vain, smug, impertinent, vicious, a voyeur and, by so much, a sexual parasite, fearful of passion. Clearly he is related to Mr. Longdon of the previous novel, *The Awkward Age*, and to Lambert Strether of *The Ambassadors*, soon forthcoming, as also to John Marcher, forthcoming in a little while, in "The Beast in the Jungle." And for that matter not only is he a poor sensitive gentleman, but for all of his abstractness, he explicates the type: subterranean implications in those other characters in James's fiction (vanity, voyeurism, parasitism, and so on) are here released into action. And this too is a part of the joke. The characterization—the self-characterization—is brutal, if complicated, and is relentlessly so, and comic in that way. We are made witness to what amounts to pratfalls of characterization, where what seem to be reflections indicating honor or sensitivity or fineness of sensibility, are repeatedly brought to earth.

The initial presumption of a straightforwardness on the part of the speaker which inevitably goes along with a first-person narration, is in fact sabotaged in the first sentence of *The Sacred Fount*. The novel begins in London at Paddington Station where the narrator is about to take the train to Newmarch. Here at the station he will meet Gilbert Long and Grace Brissenden, also on their way to Newmarch and traveling together. "It was an occasion, I felt—the prospect of a large party—to look out at the station for others," he says, "possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going" (3) —and it is that "enemies," dropped into the sentence as a seeming afterthought, that strips the statement of what was to be expected, namely an expository directness. The statement's authority resides now in its unintended irony. Why "enemies" and why, also, "possible"?—which is not to say that this narrator is saying that he actually has enemies (or friends either, for that matter) but that wariness, as a quick second consideration, is policy for him, no matter how perfectly mundane the occasion. And now the narrator goes on, looking forward, but apprehensively, to what we will learn is to be nothing more than a one-hour train ride: "Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy

ambiguities"—which last, as he puts it, is quickly *not* to say something like "happy eventualities." Persons in the train compartment who glowered at one, he says, sometimes after breakfast the next morning proved to be charming, but on the other hand it would happen that "one was spoken to first by people whose sociability was subsequently to show as bleak; and"—worse still—"one built with confidence on others who were never to reappear at all—who were only going to Birmingham" (3).

And if some go to Birmingham, only, now we are to know (by his none-too-forthright account), as the first chapter proceeds, that others have slighted him more deliberately, Gilbert Long in particular. The narrator had met him at Newmarch and in the interval since, Long had "failed to know [him]," which snub, as he takes it to be, he attributes to Long's being "stupid unless I held him as impertinent." But Long "was stupid in fact," he says, and he suspects that Long had been invited to Newmarch in the first place only because of his striking good looks, his six feet and more of stature and his low-growing, tight-curling hair—which it is to be supposed the narrator has not. But on this occasion this "fine piece of human furniture," "the heavy Adonis, who had so often 'cut' me," approaches him like an old friend, speaks of common acquaintances, says that he is glad that the narrator will be going to Newmarch—and much of the plot of the novel springs from the bewildering event. The narrator observes that Long's manners "had distinctly gained in ease" (4). Now it appears that Grace Brissenden has arrived with Long. She is a woman of a certain age—in her early forties (but the narrator quickly speaks of her previously having flaunted her "fifty years"). She too shows a difference. The narrator says that he had mainly remembered her as having been "rather ugly," whereas now she "was rather handsome," and seeming to be much younger than she had been (5). She has married a man, Guy Brissenden, who is in his late twenties, with whom she is not now traveling, for he will be taking a later train, with Lady John. Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley will also be traveling together, "in the wondrous new fashion," as Mrs. Brissenden says (4).

The two, Long and Grace Brissenden, speak of each other to the narrator, separately, and seem to the narrator to confirm and elaborate his judgments. Gilbert Long says of Grace Brissenden that she has charms which her young but dull husband can't appreciate, that while

she has not got younger, her clock has simply stopped, that she has grown no older since her marriage. Grace Brissenden says of Gilbert Long that she had never seen a man so improved, that suddenly he has a mind and a tongue, and that this transformation must be the result of the influence of a very clever woman.

There is information in all of this, of a casual and a passingly sordid sort, which for the narrator, baffled, distraught, and teased as he is, is the beginning of theory and the termination of knowledge.

The reader will know that Long and Grace Brissenden are at play with each other, contemplating a weekend, and think themselves to have been caught by this prying narrator, who is outside of the wondrous new fashion. (Long asks the narrator why he is staring at him so hard.) As is to be suspected from the beginning and as will be clear at the end, there have in fact been no transformations, while that the narrator should so entirely misinterpret, and think, or at least begin to think, that these two have undergone basic change, in mind and body, confirms and compounds what already, from the first paragraph on, is to be known of the narrator's lonely estrangement—from what in James's view is an amusing ordinariness of civilized sexual arrangements outside of marriage. Gilbert Long and Grace Brissenden also talk to each other. The reader but not the narrator will surmise that Gilbert Long has had a relationship with Lady John, which perhaps continues, that Grace Brissenden knows it, that it was for that reason that she had arranged for her husband to travel with Lady John.

Arrived at Newmarch, the narrator will find Ford Obert, May Server, Lady John, and Guy Brissenden, who together complete what he calls his "little gallery" (15). Now, scrutinizing, he discerns that Guy Brissenden has suddenly aged. Brissenden seems to be about sixty years old, while his wife seems to be about twenty. Gilbert Long, meanwhile, so the narrator says, has become predominant among the guests and commands everyone's attention as he could not possibly have done two or three years before without making a fool of himself. And that, at the end of chapter 2, is sufficient for explicit formulation of the theory of the sacred fount.

For all of the rest, and as for plot, the narrator addresses himself primarily to discovering which woman it is who has been responsible for the transformation of Gilbert Long (who had snubbed him and now does not), with the evidence, according to the theory, having to con-

sist of the woman's mental deterioration—in the narrator's words, her "cerebral lesion" (102). The only candidate among those present is May Server, but there are intervening, intertwining complications: first, that at first impression, before he catches himself, the narrator thinks May Server to be extraordinarily pretty, markedly responsive, and conspicuously charming, and secondly that he is, or thinks that he is, or wants to be in love with her. But of course the theory of the sacred fount will be the more importunately sacred, more so than love.

Not, so James has it, that the narrator is without some moments of self-reflection. While he had felt from the first, so the narrator says, that he was on the track of something ultimate, a law that would fit his observations, he does acknowledge that, at least at first, he had thought that he might be exaggerating his observations, "grouping them into a larger mystery (and thereby a larger 'law') than the facts, as observed, yet warranted"—but, he quickly goes on to say, "that is the common fault of minds for which the vision of life is an obsession. The obsession pays, if one will; but to pay it one has to borrow." He cautions himself "not to yield further to my idle habit of reading into mere human things an interest so much deeper than mere human things were in general prepared to supply," but after all, having neither irony nor humility, nor fellow-feeling for those "mere human things," on, nevertheless, he goes (95).

On the other hand, his larger law is not really implausible, thus to make the narrator seem to be the less so himself. The theory in itself is even basically commonsensical—that there is likely to be some kind of inequality between lovers, that one of a pair is likely to be more sacrificing than the other—but of course the common wisdom stops short of vampirism, as this narrator does not. This lonely theorizer makes of common sense something at once absurd, theatrical, and vicious. Theory for this crazy person is a weapon, as well as being subsidy to vanity. He has insistent exchanges with each of the other persons in his little gallery, but by way of visiting his obsession upon them. He probes, he queries, eliciting responses ranging from casual interest to annoyance to fear (many of his observations are of backs turned to him, in flight)—and converts everything he is told into endorsement of his intelligence. The reader will know that Grace Brissenden has her own reasons for wanting to have the narrator think that the woman in the case of Gilbert Long is not herself, and that that is the reason she joins

him in the search for a case of female cerebral lesion, pending her final judgment, that the narrator is crazy. (The weekend will be over and so also will be the affair. Long, says Mrs. Brissenden, is the prize fool he always was; "every appearance to the contrary notwithstanding," and "his stupidity is unimpaired" [160]) Ford Obert offers an interest in the theory, which ultimately, however, he withdraws. (He has been having his own fluctuating relationship with May Server.) These are dubious encouragements which, for the narrator, are nevertheless sufficient. Fortified, he is ready to misinterpret anything in behalf of his brilliance, or, as he puts it, explicitly, "his joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable, that joy of determining, almost of creating results" (129).

He is a fantasist. He is immured in a frenzy. He is driven by a single idea. But if by so much he is a traditional kind of comic figure, James has also singularly embellished him. He is crazy *and* by the sheer energy of his intellect he all but commands plausibility. With his fine distinctions and acute precisions, he sounds like Henry James. Just as "The Turn of the Screw" was an *amusette*, as James was to say, and, for the fun of it, meant to catch those not easily caught, so with the characterization of this narrator.

Moreover—and this too would be part of the fun of it, within the perspective which the novel invents—that same intellectual energy almost but not quite conceals the sheer nastiness of the character. He is vain, smug, impertinent, and is a snoop, a meddler, a boor. His "extraordinary interest in my fellow creatures" (90) as he puts it, is both outrageous and malicious. His theory of the sacred fount creates victims, and clearly it is victimization that delights him. Theory is sadism for him, with the erotic charge in it provided by the fact that the field of his inquiry is, explicitly, sexual dalliance. Hence his metaphors. May Server becomes his "prey." There is broad hint in the novel that the narrator is also, if passingly, interested in Guy Brissenden, who, he says, was "intellectually speaking, plastic wax in my hand" (77). Observing May Server, he recognizes, as he says, "the last, the expiring struggle of her native lucidity," as she moves "groping and panting, in the gathering dusk of her fate" (88). The theory demands that May Server and Guy Brissenden must be fellow victims, related in "a fellowship of doom," she by forfeit of her mind, he by sacrifice of his youth—proceeding in both cases, perhaps, so he contemplates, to a grand climax and *coup de théâtre*, where May will have attained "the point of final simplification"

and Guy "the limit of age recorded of man." And as for his enjoyment: "I could look at neither of these persons," he says, "without a sharper sense of the contrast between the tragedy of their predicament and the comedy of the situation that did everything for them but suspect it. They had truly been arrayed and anointed, they had truly been isolated, for their sacrifice." Their ignorance is his knowledge, a condition which provides him, he says, with an ultimate "intensity of amusement" (102).

In a nice turnabout, he asks himself if he had not "fallen so much in love with Mrs. Server that the care for her reputation had become with me an obsession" (37) which, if so, will demand that he cancel the obsession and thereby enable cancellation of his care. The one way he might square his loving with his theory would be to transmute his love into pity, which he does. Like a sighing lover, with only the one critical term, love, transposed, he says, exactly, "I knew how far I was gone in pity for her" (58). He had in fact been stirred in the first place by a presumption of her vulnerability. Ford Obert early on had advised him of two things, first that Mrs. Server had designs on him (but Obert had had his own reasons for saying so), and that she was beastly unhappy, to which the narrator had responded, in terms only not quite leering, "But isn't that just one's advantage?" (14). Most of a chapter will be given to the narrator's attempt at a seduction, which he recalls as sheer pastoral. It happens in the garden, on the primrose path to dalliance: "There was a general shade in all the lower reaches—a fine clear dusk in garden and grove, a thin suffusion of twilight out of which the greater things, the high tree-tops and pinnacles, the long crests of motionless wood and chimnied roof, rose into golden air. The last calls of birds sounded extraordinarily loud" (78) and so on, he almost sings, with, in any event, an eloquence unlike anything else in the extended monologue of the novel. But these are borrowed terms, as the narrator himself recognizes: "She came slowly and a little wearily down the vista," he says, "and her sad, shy advance, with the massed wood on either side of her, was like the reminiscence of a picture or the refrain of a ballad" (80). Seated together, he puts his hand on hers. Debonairly, he tells her that he has been in love for one whole day, thereby to approximate the attitudes and morals of the other weekenders. But he fails, of course. May is distracted. The reader will know that really she is thinking about Gilbert Long. The narrator removes his hand, which she allows him to

do "with as little sign as on her first feeling its touch" (90).

It is another piece of James's cruel joke that the narrator, ever the odd man out at this weekend frolic, is entirely impotent in the ways of Newmarch. Sex, like everything else, is in his head. Supposing May Server's interest in him (confirmed, so he conceives, by the fact that she has *not* flirted with him while she has flirted with all of the other men at Newmarch, thereby, so he infers, to hide her feelings for him) he considers what he might or might not tell the others who might suspect May's interest in him. "It would have been almost as embarrassing to have to tell them how little experience I had had in fact," he thinks to himself, for he is nothing if not candid about himself, "as to have had to tell them how much I had had in fancy." Pitying May, he blames passion. "I saw," he says, "what consuming passion can make of the marked mortal on whom, with fixed beak and claws, it has settled as on a prey. She reminded me of a sponge wrung dry and with fine pores agape. Voided and scraped of everything, her shell was merely crushable" (83). And therein is a general lesson, which in this narrator's case is redundant. "Who of us all," he asks, "could say that his fall might not be as deep?" For himself, he has managed to obliterate passion in behalf of theory, which, critic that this narrator is, becomes its alternate. In an ultimate extravagance of misunderstanding he offers Mrs. Brissenden his conclusion that it was not his person that gave charm to his theory, but rather, he says, "I think it was much more my theory that gave its charm to my person" (174). Which is to say that theory is his allure, is safe sex.

On the other hand, if the narrator's idea about passion, that it consumes and rends, is here a component of the ongoing joke, at the expense of the narrator, that does not mean that he might not really have something to fear. Whether or not James was right in complaining that readers seemed to be taking the novel seriously, they would have had some reason to do so. The narrator's theory has its inevitable double nature. Passion, for James, is opportunity for comedy. (In "The Given Case," a light tale contemporaneous with *The Sacred Fount*, the lawyer Barton Reeve feels himself "in the grip of his passion, shaken as a rat by a terrier" [38].) And, as often, passion is dreadful, and, almost always, as here in *The Sacred Fount*, it is both at the same time—as it

was from *Watch and Ward* forward, and especially in the novels of the nineties, with their special attention to sex. In the novel just prior to *The Sacred Fount*, in *The Awkward Age*, the name for passion was "the sacred terror" (854). The joke part of it in *The Sacred Fount* is in the fact that the narrator wildly exaggerates the ravages (if any there actually are here to be observed) of what in the milieu of Newmarch is less than love. He theorizes about what he does not know—his awkward dabbling with May going to prove that he knows nothing—but that, in a way further to perplex the reader, does not after all mean that he does not, essentially, know what he is talking about, all joking aside.

It is in any event a common wisdom as well as a universal stuff of literature, that passion is both funny and awful, but the more particularly Jamesian idea for exploitation, here and elsewhere, is that if passion has its ravages, so does fear of passion, with its ravages, but then the fear, too, is both terrible and funny, as this strangely ambiguous, this strangely grave fool of a narrator goes to show.

The insanity of the narrator is explicated by his immediate successors, who similarly will devote their lives to avoidance of passion. In *The Ambassadors*, which James had begun to write within a month after finishing *The Sacred Fount*, Lambert Strether, middle-aged and in Paris, has for his major function the discovery that passion—with sex explicitly at the core of it, in the illicit arrangement between Chad and Mme. De Vionnet—is a metaphor for life itself, and it follows that his previous life, the life of Woollett, is the opposite. "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to" (215), he cries out to Little Bilham, bursting forth from a lifetime of restraint and repression. Notwithstanding his final retreat into sacrifice and rectitude, when he rejects the proffer of romance with Maria Gostrey, the whole of the novel has in fact been given over to enlightening him as to the joy, as may be said, of sex, and particularly the payment exacted by fear of the joy. Lambert Strether, this is to see, casts clarification backwards, even as the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* anticipates Strether—quite exactly, to the point of certain atrocious implications of temperament. For all that Strether is a sympathetic character, like the narrator he is a voyeur and, by so much, a sexual parasite. But then also, to look backwards, Strether on his side implies the suffering, struggling, agonistic side of the narrator.[3]

And so for "The Beast in the Jungle," which James wrote in 1902, just a year after the publication of *The Sacred Fount*. There is echo of

The Sacred Fount even in the names of the characters: John Marcher somewhat recalls Newmarch, and May Bartram recalls May Server. It is also the case that from a certain and available point of view "The Beast in the Jungle" is a jokey kind of a tale. John Marcher's reluctance to recognize what May Bartram offers him is peculiar in itself and is based on an obsessive notion, which in turn is based on hardly anything, that an extraordinary but otherwise unspecified fate awaits him, which so long as it doesn't arrive has the function of subsidizing his vanity. Unlike Strether, who had the Puritanism of Woollett, Massachusetts with which to contend, and whose final renunciation will be based on moral discrimination, John Marcher has only his dim foreboding which, relentlessly, he converts into metaphor—the beast which is waiting to spring—which, like theory and however vivid, is a poor substitute for a life. He is a fool. He frustrates nature. Marcher fails to get into May. But of course the tale is in fact painful and eloquent, made so by a concordance of elements: May Bartram's constancy in her love for Marcher, for one thing, and the advance of the years for the two of them, and May's death, and, finally, the fullness of Marcher's realization of his fate. "The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived," he now knows. "*She* had lived—who could say now with what passion?. . . whereas he had never thought of her (ah, how it hugely glared at him!) but in the chill of his egotism" (540). And these are words which exactly, with only a slight shift in authorial perspective, and by way of reconversion, might have been uttered by the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*.

And so for the governing conceit of *The Sacred Fount*, simply that between lovers one gives and the other receives, that the giver is consequently depleted while the other is enriched. As invented and elaborated by this narrator, the theory of the sacred fount is absurd. But the idea had a history in James's imagination going back almost to the beginning, similarly enhanced, and expressed in similarly ultimate terms, and not always to be regarded as the stuff of a joke.

In the initial episode of *The Sacred Fount*, at Paddington Station, when the narrator takes Grace Brissenden to be younger than she had been, and Gilbert Long to be more sociable, he says to Mrs. Briss with reference to Long, that "'it's a most extraordinary case—such as one really has never met,'" and she says "'Oh, but it happens'" (8).

There is in fact a borrowing here, both verbal and substantive, going back to 1868, when James was twenty-five years old. He had written a story called "A Most Extraordinary Case." In it a young soldier, back from the War, is sick of a mysterious disease. He falls in love. The young woman thrives. In the crucial scene of the story, he has struggled from his sick bed in order to attend a party. He is near collapse while the young woman along with some others makes much of him. The moral is uttered by a friend, Mrs Mason: "'Was there ever anything like the avidity of these dreadful girls?'" she asks. "They like a man to look as if he were going to die,—it's interesting'" (301). The soldier does die; the young woman marries his doctor.

Another story of James's twenty-fifth year, "De Grey: A Romance," is almost a template for *The Sacred Fount*, except that the accents are gothic. There is a curse upon the male De Greys, as recorded in an old bible which is in the possession of a wise priest. The first women whom the De Grey men love, always die. Paul De Grey loves Margaret. In defiance of the curse, they plan to wed. Margaret falls ill. In order to stymie the curse, and because he loves the girl, Paul kills himself, by willing himself to die. The priest speaks prophecy and doom. To Margaret, prior to the climactic event, he says, "'My dear child, Paul is very ill. God grant that, if you manage not to die, it may not be at his expense!'" (353). She resists but the curse is seemingly absolute, and, says the author in her behalf, "she blindly, senselessly, remorselessly drained the life from [Paul's] being. As she bloomed and prospered, he drooped and languished. While she was living for him, he was dying of her. Execrable, infernal comedy!" (354). It is noteworthy, moreover, that James did not quite end the story on that exorbitant note, but retreated towards psychological credibility. Old Mrs. De Grey, Paul's mother, clings to the belief that Paul had died by falling from his horse. The old priest had loved the boy and says to his mother, "Suppose that Margaret had died, would to heaven that she had." (Margaret has merely gone crazy.) Mrs. De Grey says, "'Ah, suppose! Do you make that wish for the sake of your theory?'" (356). At which terminal point it becomes a question as to whether in the first place there had really been a curse upon the male heirs of the De Greys, and if not, then what is left is the secular fact that as Margaret, the bride-to-be, had bloomed and prospered, her lover, mistakenly convinced of the curse, had drooped and languished of his own conviction, so that while she was living for him, he was dying of her.

"Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love," says wise Rosalind. The narrator of *The Sacred Fount*, with his theory, urges the contrary. Not only will it be the case that one of a pair of lovers will be more loving than the other, but one of the pair has to pay for the other, and the payment will proceed to the end, to the maximum of depletion. Young Guy Brissenden will die long before his older wife. May will be an empty sponge.[4] The narrator congratulates himself that he is "on the scent of something ultimate" (15). To comic effect, he imposes his great law upon the passingly sordid, largely commonplace intrigues of Newmarch. As well, the great law serves the narrator personally. Paradoxically, it saves him from passion while it renders the woman, May, vulnerable to what must be his passion. But at the same time there is a jolt to it; it forces a different way of thinking about Newmarch. For all that the narrator is both mistaken and underhanded, he does also speak truth. (And if he is rejected, that is the usual fate of seers.) The love game, while it is a game, also is not. Perhaps some do die of heartbreak. In any event, the narrator's theory goes all the way, to urge the realization that these weekenders are at play with fundamental matters, with, exactly, something ultimate. Oddly enough, the narrator has dignified the place and the persons. With all of their trysts and their fumbling liaisons, Life and Death are informative metaphors for what the weekenders are doing. And by so much, and in this way as well, the novel again undermines its own comedy.

Early on, in chapter 4, the characters assemble in order to view a painting, and here for the moment the comedy gives way entirely, to the sinister. The narrator has invited May to visit one of the galleries at Newmarch. As they proceed, he reflects on May's beauty. Her beauty reflects that of the gallery itself, he says: She might herself have been "all Greuze tints, all pale pinks and blues and pearly whites and candid eyes—an old dead pastel under glass" (32). Come to the painting, they discover that Gilbert Long and Ford Obert have arrived before them. The painting is of a young man in black, "a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past;" and he has "a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown." In his hand he is holding "an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human."

The object appears to be "a complete mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and worn." We are told by the narrator that Long has commented on it brilliantly, impressing the painter Obert, but we don't know what he has said. Asked what the painting means, May Server says that it might be called the Mask of Death. The narrator objects. "Isn't it much rather the Mask of Life?" he asks. "It's the man's own face that's Death. The other one, blooming and beautiful . . . is Life, and he's going to put it on; unless indeed he has just taken it off" (34). May says that the mask wears a horrible grimace. The narrator says that he doesn't see it. May says that she sees nothing else. Obert and the narrator agree that mask and face resemble someone. It could be May (the mask; she has already been identified as a dead pastel), or Long, or Brissenden (the face) or someone else among the guests, and the matter is left at that.

There is nothing of a joke in this scene, in this novel which James said was a consistent joke, nor does the scene in any obvious way advance what there is of a narrative. Rather, it provides a grotesque deepening to the affairs of Newmarch. The painting—located in a gallery which, it is said, has the aspect of a shrine—is plainly frightening. The young man in his quaint tight black suit is a Newmarch forebear, who augurs. He proposes a riddle—to these playful weekenders—having to do with Life and Death. Nor does the painting propose a hectoring, moralizing kind of statement, such as to tell observers how to behave. It is its own sacred fount; the young man has begot the beautiful artifact, has given his own face to it. The statement it makes is bleak and metaphysical. And the answer to the riddle is that May and the narrator are both right, on the side of Death. The livid face without eyebrows, staring, is as much without life as is the wax or enamel artifact—May does not in fact contradict the narrator when he says that the face is Death.[5] The depleted face is Death and so is its alternative. The narrator's decision that the mask is Life, meanwhile, is akin to his converting May, the beloved, into a dead pastel, an artifact of life, and is akin to converting Love, for that matter, into Theory.

Edmund Wilson was probably right when he said, long ago, that if anyone ever really got to the bottom of *The Sacred Fount*, he would throw a good deal of light on Henry James (97). Leaving biographical matters aside, certainly the novel does bring together strategies and concerns and attitudes of much of James's fiction, and particularly of the time

following the playwriting years, and brings everything to an extreme, to the point of tour-de-force. The novel illuminates what has gone immediately before: the ambition for an absolute of objectivity, the interest in desire, in sex, the tenacity of imagination and the pitilessness of it. The novel has clear relation to *The Turn of the Screw*, and as well to *The Other House*, with its distraught heroine who murders a little girl, for love, and to the investigations of desire in *The Spoils of Poynton* and *In the Cage* and the others. It is appropriate climax to James in the nineties. But *The Sacred Fount*, of 1901, is also all but contemporaneous with the large novels which quickly followed: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903—but it was written before *The Wings of the Dove*), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). While in these later novels James obviously was letting loose—he had given up on his frequently voiced struggle for compression—the intelligence after all was the same. And to realize so much is to consider that *The Sacred Fount* was also the tour-de-force version of what was immediately to follow, in what are usually thought to be James's great novels. *The Sacred Fount* is demanding, sly, and tricky in its approach to great matters, and is entirely ironic, and being so, casts a light both backwards and forwards.

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NOTES

1. Since even more stringently than in *The Awkward Age* James has here allowed himself no "going behind," and since in its entirety the novel is a monologue, it is possible to think that the novel is doubly fictional, that it is *entirely* a fiction—an untruthful narrative of untruths—which is the creation of the narrator. But James clearly intended otherwise. The narrator records both event and dialogue with others, which sometimes stimulate him, sometimes provoke him, and sometimes, according to his own testimony, contradict his own presented perceptions. That first of all. Secondly, the other characters in the novel pursue actions and have fates that for the most part have nothing to do with the narrator, and which he typically misunderstands. That is a piece of the joke. And finally, in the letter to Mrs. Ward, which contains his one discussion of the novel, James would say: "As I give but the phantasmagoric, I have, for clearness, to make it *evidential*" (Edel, ed. 4:186), and he proceeds to explain how certain of the characters, excluding the narrator, bear on other characters. Blackall is certainly right in saying that "James's joke was meant to depend on the reader's gradually being able to see through the narrator. . . . It seems unlikely that he meant to overwhelm the reader with insurmountable ambiguities because the joke depends upon the reader's attaining a dual perspective on the scene he witnesses" (10–12).

2. This novel too, like *Maisie* and *The Awkward Age*, outgrew itself, apparently

as James found it to be yielding more and more possibilities. In a July 10, 1900, letter to Jonathan Sturges James said that he had planned a short story of 7000 words, and that it had grown to 70,000 (Edel, ed. 153). In the letter to Mrs. Ward, supra, James wrote, "The subject was a small fantasticality which (as I have to write 'short stories' when I can) I had intended to treat in the compass of a single magazine instalment—a matter of eight or ten thousand words. But it gave more, before I knew it; before I knew it had grown to 25,000 and was still but a third developed" (186). He said the same in letters to his agent James Pinker (154) and to William Dean Howells (251).

3. Richards, from slightly different point of view, lengthily extends the comparison: both Strether and the narrator "have a characteristic in common: that of making wilful assumptions about life, and trusting too much in the truth of these assumptions before they have really had time to test them;" "Strether is a man who is timid, self-centred, ungenerous, over-diplomatic, untrustworthy and on many occasions untrusting. These qualities he shares with the Narrator of *The Sacred Fount* and with several other heroes of James's later novels" (219–43).

4. Chun-san Wang explores analogues to the narrator's theory in terms of nineteenth-century medical studies of sex, dealing specifically with unlimited "expenditure of seminal fluid," as one writer, William Acton, phrases the matter, in agreement with John Laws Milton and Herbert Spencer.

5. "It's the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter," says the narrator (34). Many have volunteered. For instance: Walter Isle writes that "the sort of reality that is hidden behind the narrator's theory of the sacred fount is death-in-life . . . and this is the effect of the pale, livid man in black" (227). Oscar Cargill: The painting refers to the narrator who has "thrust off the mask of life, carries the menace of death" (292–93). Laurence Holland: The painting along with the speculations it arouses images forth the novel itself, "the hazard of smothering life's face with the death-like grimace of artifice; the chance of removing a death-like mask to reveal the features at once pale and livid, of life itself; the prospect of covering the face of death with a mask of life and beauty; the hope of so composing the grimace and the beauties of masking artifice, and so presenting the drama of using it, as to protect life while revealing its intimate presence and constructing imagined possibilities for it" (198). Dorothea Krook: The painting "ensures . . . that the metaphysical problem itself—which *is* reality, which appearance?—shall remain unresolved, while at the same time allowing a bias in favour of the narrator's view of the superior reality of the phantasmagoric over the evidential" (177). Donna Przbylowicz: By means of the painting "James introduces a multiplicity of ambiguities and implications, emphasizing the impossibility of discovering a definitive and privileged interpretation" (72).

Tintner says that James invented the painting but incorporated contemporary symbolist vocabulary, and notes that the mask, representing both disguise of the self and discovery of the self, was an obsession of the Belgian James Ensor, whose work was being shown in England about the time of James's writing of *The Sacred Fount* (138).

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