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**“That Possible Immunity in Things”:
Melancholic Interiors and Secret Objects
in Henry James’s *The Ivory Tower***

Abstract: Henry James’s inability to complete *The Ivory Tower* is one of the most regrettable failures in the history of the XX century American literature. This unfinished work might have become James’s great American novel: both a personal vision and an interpretation of his native land, its landscapes, its people, even its light and its textures. As it is, *The Ivory Tower* turns out to be an exorcism of the past and an attempt to discover in one’s memory something that would give sanction to the present moment. James achieves this by focusing on the novel’s objects and interiors and by showing how they evade our interpretive efforts and cognitive pursuits. What remains is the liberating mystery of the ordinary things as they resist the routine of our expectations and preconceptions.

Keywords: Henry James, *The Ivory Tower*, melancholy, the ordinary

Henry James’s 1904 trip back to America after twenty-year absence proved a decisive and lasting experience to the novelist. The journey, which lasted almost one year and took him as far as Seattle and San Diego, seems to have become for the writer a symbolic event. James was returning to his birthplace as a great artist, the author of the just published monumental trilogy of novels—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*—and virtually the central figure of (soon to be published) *The New York Edition*, a collection of novels and short stories squeezed into twenty three volumes, each one preceded with an impressive critical introduction from James himself. As it turned out later, the American journey informed most of the novelist’s subsequent texts. His 1911 collection of short stories, entitled *Finer Grain*, focused almost exclusively on New York; his last important books (*A Small Boy and Others*, 1913, and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, 1914) were nostalgic memoirs of the New England of the 1850s and 1860s; and his final great novel was to have as its subject dramatic and difficult confrontations with America seen after many years of absence. In all of these texts James attempted to cope, psychologically and artistically, with what he noticed and experienced in the New World.

It is in *The American Scene*, published immediately after James's return to England, that we find the writer's first reactions to the places he had known as a young man and had a chance to examine after no less than twenty years. This is one of James's best and most memorable autobiographical texts, fusing personal recollections and critical interventions, tirelessly nuancing the position of the man who revisits the scenes of his childhood and youth. The mood of nostalgia is conspicuous. James meditates on a "single strong savour" informed by a "hundred happy variations" (389, 378), and, rather importantly, notices that "one's supreme relation... [is] one's relation to one's country" (427). His depictions of the New England landscapes are impressive, sometimes pressingly poetic. At the same time there is a strong sense of the unreality of what the novelist experiences, particularly in numerous passages in which James turns to what he calls "ghostly echoes" and the "infinite penetration of retrospect" (399), and which would culminate in the metaphor of the "trap of memory" (512). James's attitude to America was ambivalent, a blend of fascination and terror, both a gratifying recognition and a suppressed fear of one's own past.

The sentiment that James did not conceal and would articulate both in his later short stories and the finished fragments of *The Ivory Tower* was a feeling of disgust with the modern and capitalist aspects of the American society. This is perhaps best expressed in his picturesque, if violent, descriptions of New York. James's vocabulary oscillates between "monstrous," "horrible" and "hateful" (418, 422), and his reaction to such new sights as sky-scrapers or the New York subway was blatantly negative:

One has the sense that the monster grows and grows, flinging abroad its loose limbs even as some unmannered young giant at his "larks," and that the binding stitches must for ever fly further and faster and draw harder; the future complexity of the web, all under the sky and over the sea, becoming thus that of some colossal set of clockworks, some steel-souled machine-room of brandished arms and hammering fists and opening and closing jaws. (418)

The novelist was equally disapproving of the social fabric of the new America, seeing in it threads of "dispossession" and "individual loneliness" (427, 487). The descriptions are permeated with a strong sense of ambiguity. On one hand, there is a visible enchantment with its continent-wide greatness and the beauty of its innumerable and varied landscapes. On the other hand, there is a sense of the ugliness and barbarism of the new American cities and their inhabitants. Suspended between attraction and repulsion, unable to choose between feelings of personal possession and dispossession, James felt a strong need to turn his complex experiences into a work of fiction, something that would let him see himself reflected in the other, imaginary characters.

We can discern in James's ambiguous stance a likely genealogy of *The Ivory Tower*, his unfinished masterpiece. The novel had a rather uneasy birth and in fact ended in miscarriage. Its first drafts were sketched out in 1910. It was then abandoned for two years. In the fall of 1912 Charles Scribner, James's publisher in America, prompted by Edith Wharton (who suggested that 8 000 dollars be secretly diverted from her royalties to James's bank account), came out with a proposal of publishing the novelist's autobiographies. James Pinker, the writer's agent, responded with an understandable enthusiasm and dutifully added that the Master "was working on a novel of American life" (qtd. in Edel 477). Scribner's answer to this last declaration might serve as model of how to pay compliments to a writer: "As the publishers of your definite edition [*The New York Edition*; J. G.] we want another great novel to balance *The Golden Bowl* and round off the series of books in which you have developed the theory of composition set forth in your prefaces" (qtd. in Edel 477). James was obviously flattered. It seems that he subscribed to the idea of "rounding off" his trilogy by adding a panoramic narrative about Americans in America. It is worth remembering that already at the end of *The Golden Bowl* two of the novel's four main characters—Adam Verver and Charlotte Stant (Verver)—decide to sail to America to start a new life. *The Ivory Tower* may accordingly be treated as a kind of unintended sequel to the story of the Ververs.

The novel was never finished. We know that James was working on it sometime in the first half of 1914 yet the outbreak of the Great War as well as the writer's failing health made it virtually impossible to continue writing on such a grand scale. Of the ten books James planned to write (like in *The Awkward Age*, each book was to be devoted to a different character), only three and the first chapter of the fourth were written. Judging from the existing fragments—written in meandering yet impeccable prose, with long sentences full of splendid comparisons and images—James's scale was indeed grand. One can only agree with Leon Edel when he remarks that "even in the fragment—like some fragment of partially chiseled marble—we can discern the shapes of strong, highly individualized characters" (504). It seems that in its full shape the completed novel would easily yield a comparison with the previous episodes of the trilogy, themselves gigantic novelistic enterprises. Incidentally, it might be argued that James's inability to finish the novel coincided with his growing disbelief in the possibility of creating a contemporary novel under the constraints of nineteenth-century realism that he inherited and helped adjust to the challenges of the new century.¹ This is succinctly expressed in James's authorial comments to *The Ivory Tower* where he

1 See Gutorow (285–287 in particular) for a detailed examination of James's ambivalent stance towards nineteenth-century novelistic realism.

points to the possibility of a story being exhausted by means of its own narrative: "I seem to see already how my action, however tightly packed down, will strain my ten Books, most blessedly, to cracking. This is exactly what I want, the tight packing and the beautiful audible cracking" ("Working Notes" 152). Is it possible that in this roundabout way James unconsciously tried to explain why he could not have brought the story to its close?

Henry James's inability or unwillingness to complete *The Ivory Tower* is one of the most regrettable failures in the history of twentieth-century literature. This unfinished work might have become James's great American novel: both a personal vision and an interpretation of his native land, its landscapes, its people, even its light and its textures. It definitely marked the novelist's return to his beginnings—the Newport of James's reminiscences is conspicuously a remembered, imaginary Newport of his teenage years, not unlike Proust's Combray or Nabokov's Nova Zembla. The nostalgic strain is not dominant, perhaps even suppressed, but it permeates the inner lives of Rosanna Gaw and Graham Fiedler, the novel's two main characters. It is a pity we have only fragments of the work written with such a momentum in the writer's mind and with such impeccable mastery. Judging from James's meticulous "working notes" (added to the main body of the novel) in which meandering motifs are interlocked in decidedly complex trajectories, one can see the amplitude of the novelist's intention. This was going to be a panoramic narrative that would include James's recollections of the past America, his uneasiness about "what America did to individuals" (Edel 502), his abhorrence of the "world of money... the arid world of the American male" (Novick 503), but also remembered pictures of American sunlight and its dazzling vistas.

But not only this, and here I pass on to the main subject of my interpretation. Together with *The Golden Bowl*, *The Ivory Tower* opened up a new perspective in the Jamesian *oeuvre* as it coped with the more and more felt aspects of the physical world: interiors, precious objects, their cool textures and charming symmetries. These in fact provided him with a sense of redemption on the part of America seen after twenty years, the America that he felt was now becoming alien to him. What linked him to the New World was a memory of senses. Read in this way, *The Ivory Tower* turns out to be an exorcism of the past and an attempt to discover in one's memory something that would give sanction to the present moment.

James had always been sensitive to the touch and the feel of some, usually small and elegant, articles—yet treated them in a fleeting fashion, as constituting a rather indifferent background for human dramas. Now he got preoccupied with objects for their own sake. They took on weight and gravity, became central to the story, gained narrative independence. We can feel this shift of emphasis in many passages. There is a significant scene in *The Ivory Tower* when Rosanna and her

father visit a gallery in Dresden and at one moment decide to “wander away from the great things, the famous Madonna, the Correggio, the Paul Veroneses,” and see a “small room of little Dutch and other later masters, things that didn’t matter... but where the German sunshine of a bright winter day came down through some upper light and played on all the rich little old color and old gilding” (25). As is well known, throughout his life James eulogized Italian masters and defined the art of the novel by referring to the spectacular narratives included in Tintoretto’s *The Crucifixion* or Titian’s *Ascension*, the paintings where parts, details and points of view were subjected to the grand scheme of the final impression (something he would call the “mighty pictorial fusion” inherent in Tintoretto’s painting, *French Writers* 1107). Now, for the first time, the novelist turned to the Dutch masters and seems to have shared their obsession with the material aspect of things and their particular qualities: shapes, outlines, textures.

The world of *The Golden Bowl* and (especially) *The Ivory Tower* is crammed with objects jostling for our attention and it provides us with carefully staged tableaux of innumerable rooms seen as spectacles of chiaroscuro and rich ornaments. In the opening chapters of the latter novel there is an almost oppressive presence of entrances, rooms, walls and other architectural elements which constitute something more than just a scenery for the drama of death and reconciliation. They illuminate and indeed communicate it by their sheer existence and aura so that human passions and acts can hardly be separated from the distinctly marked background. It is particularly well seen in the few important scenes set in and around Mr Betterman’s magnificent house, described as a “florid villa, a structure smothered in senseless architectural element” (7). This is where we find Rosanna in the opening paragraphs of the novel, going round the building, looking at the “clean blank windows” that give her an “impression... of showy picture-frames awaiting their subjects” (7), and ignoring the villa’s “rather grandly gaping portal” (8). It would be just another description of the place had James not put such an emphasis on detached parts of the house and draw so much of our attention to architectural nuances.

Later on (at the beginning of the second chapter) the building and its interiors are recalled again, this time with an almost hypnotic effect, as they lead Graham Fiedler, who has just arrived from France, to meditate on the disappointingly American character of the objects around him:

some of [the room’s] material terms and items held him as in rapt contemplation; what he had wanted, even to intensity, being that things should prove different, should positively glare with opposition—there would be no fun at all were they only imperfectly like, as that wouldn’t in the least mean character. Their character might be if it would in their consistently having none—than which deficiency nothing was more possible; but he should have to decline to

be charmed by unsuccessful attempts at sorts of expression he had elsewhere known more or less happily achieved. This particular disappointment indeed he was clearly not in for, since what could at once be more interesting than thus to note that the range and scale kept all their parts together, that each object or effect disowned connections.... There was an American way for a room to be a room, a table a table, a chair a chair and a book a book—let alone a picture on a wall a picture, and a cold gush of water in a bath of a hot morning a promise of purification. (46–47)

Two aspects of this passage are worth stressing. For one thing, the looks and quality of the room are set against Graham Fiedler's general mood of melancholy; they also reflect his uncle's austere Americanism. Objects help to disclose one's suppressed feelings and provide a formula for them. The mixture of suppressed emotions and material surfaces brings to mind the paintings of Edward Hopper, a very Jamesian painter who did not hide his admiration for the author of *The Ambassadors*.² Like the James of his last novels, Hopper surrounded the material world with the human aura, giving an impression of loneliness as the objects around the characters are just reflections of their moods. James would probably agree with the great painter who claimed in an interview: "the way in which a few objects are arranged on a table, or a curtain billows in the breeze can set the mood and indicate the kind of person who inhabits the room" (qtd. in Levin 219). It may be noted that in the just quoted descriptions of Mr Betterman's villa there are also numerous references to the effects evoked by sunlight cast on the surfaces of walls and objects. One cannot help noticing James's painterly credentials and his attempts to create the atmosphere by means of light or semi-light falling in different angles on objects. These again are mingled with the characters' perceptions and moods. For example, Rosanna's troubled deliberations on her father go hand in hand with her delight for the "fair prospect" of a Newport scene engulfed in the early sunlight, for the "great sea spaces" and the "line of low receding coast that bristled" (8), while Graham Fiedler's nervous anticipation of what his uncle wants to tell him is accompanied by his acute awareness of the "great green shutters" closed against the sun (46). Later on, the figure of Mr. Betterman, propped on pillows, is "lighted in such a way that the clear deepening west seemed to flush toward it, through a wide high window, in the interest of its full effect" (58).

The second striking aspect of the longer passage I have quoted is its tendency to engage in a symbolical interpretation of the place. It may be easily overlooked—after all, Graham's main impression is of the literalness of things: a

2 For Hopper's interest in James and some affinities between the two artists, see Levin 275–280.

table is just a table and a chair is nothing more but a chair. However, at the very end of the fragment we find out that Graham associates a “cold gush of water” with the process of purification. This rather unexpected intrusion of the symbolical order must give the reader a pause and may remind him/her of the strongly symbolic title of the novel. Is it possible, we may ask, that on a certain level this is a story about the tension between the literal weight of the material world and one's inclination to perceive it in a symbolical way, as a kind of code that needs decoding or a letter to be read? In fact, a careful reading of the novel provides us with a definitely positive answer to this question. The more down-to-earth James's descriptions are, the more enigmatic and mysterious they seem, leaving us with a sense that the objects and interiors so meticulously and painstakingly outlined must conceal some extra meaning, a kind of added information that would justify the novelist's nearly obsessive concern with the physical and the material. Thus, the novel's central tendency and its promise would gravitate towards symbolical senses of objects and situations. On the other hand, *The Ivory Tower* poses the question of the validity of our readerly inquisitiveness. Perhaps it is not so much the case of our grasping the novel's symbolical meanings as our reading them into the text? And maybe James, in a typical master stroke of ambiguity, anticipated our expectations and played with them?

To answer these questions, I propose to take a look at the object that stands literally at the center of the world of the novel and constitutes its symbolical axis and main point of reference. The ivory tower referred to in the title of the novel is a kind of small cabinet placed on what is called *bahut*. Here is James's description of the precious thing which later on in the novel contains an unopened letter and thus an unresolved mystery:

It was a remarkable product of some eastern, probably some Indian, patience, and of some period as well when patience in such cases was at the greatest.... It consisted really of a cabinet, of easily movable size, seated in a circular socket of its own material and equipped with a bowed door, which dividing in the middle, after a minute gold key had been turned, showed a superposition of small drawers that went upwards diminishing in depth.... The high curiosity of the thing was in the fine work required for making and keeping it perfectly circular; an effect arrived at by the fitting together, apparently by tiny golden rivets, of numerous small curved plates of the rare substance, each of these, including those of the two wings of the exquisitely convex door, contributing to the artful, the total rotundity. (82)

That the cabinet described so lovingly by James becomes the story's main symbol is not surprising. As I said, in his earlier novels James betrayed a weakness for beautiful, elegant and glamorous objects which served as pivots of narratives. The two most famous examples, to be found in *The Golden Bowl*, are the bowl and

the pagoda, synonymous in Maggie Verver's mind with the ivory tower, situated in highly telling and strategic contexts of James's last finished novel. A small and fancy article, the cabinet may remind one of the golden bowl rather than the pagoda; however, it is much more like the latter, not least because it is also described as an ivory tower and thus brings to mind the image of a building. Both objects are impressive, smooth and round, giving a sense of a perfectly completed structure which not only does not let itself be absorbed by the external reality but stands in sheer isolation, apart from the world and self-sufficient. James does much to emphasize the sense of foreignness involved in the two strange and monument-like things. He comes up with their oriental genealogies and exotic names. The pagoda makes us think of Japan, while the cabinet is a "product of some eastern, probably Indian, patience" (82). Such allusions are not accidental. Throughout *The Ivory Tower* James weaves together exotic references: Rosanna's parasol resembles a "Burmese palanquin or perhaps even pagoda" (7), her father's domineering stance is compared to a "large cool dusky temple" with mysterious figures of idols (11), and Cissy, Rosanna's friend, looks like a "seated idol, a great Buddha perched up on a shrine" (40). The impression created is that of the presence of some far-away, exotic and unapproachable beauty. This is strengthened by the perfectly circular shape of both the pagoda and the cabinet, which makes them objects of contemplation rather than spaces to be entered—here are works of art and not places for people to live in. One of the most perplexing scenes in *The Golden Bowl* is that of Maggie Verver standing in front of the visionary pagoda, going around it and wondering if she really wants to enter the fairy-tale building:

She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left for her circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose to high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. She had not wished till now—such was the odd case.... The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. At present, however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedently near. (301)

In *The Ivory Tower* James repeats this motif. Rosanna goes around Mr. Betterman's villa and hesitates before its grand entrance: "she passed round the house instead of applying at the rather grandly gaping portal—which might in all conscience have accommodated her—and, crossing a stretch of lawn to the quarter of the place turned to the sea, rested here again some

minutes" (8). Incidentally, similar reactions are evoked by the cabinet as Graham Fiedler cannot decide whether he wants to resolve the mystery of the letter (125).

James's initial description of the wonderful cabinet is quite realistic. Later on, however, it takes on symbolical significance. It becomes less and less an elegant object as we are being reminded that what we see is not so much a regular item as an ivory tower, an imaginary space of retreat and artistic, or indeed existential, integrity. As both Graham Fiedler and Rosanna Gaw seem to be in search for such an integrity, and as they try to transcend their hereditary ties and discover their real selves by abstracting from the obvious identification with friends and relatives, it is in their presence that the symbolic potential of the cabinet, a "secret of greater weight," as Gray calls it (85), is activated. Or so it seems for the reader who may be dumbfounded by what one of the characters in the novel describes as the "ambiguity" of Graham's and Rosanna's situation (121). In an important scene Vinty Horton, who becomes something of a financial advisor to Graham, refers to the cabinet with a double irony: "It appears to have been your uncle's only treasure.... And it isn't so much too small... for you to get into it yourself, when you want to get rid of us, and draw the doors to. If it's a symbol of any retreat you really have an eye on I much congratulate you; I don't know what I wouldn't give myself for the 'run' of an ivory tower" (119). And, almost in the same breath, and definitely with the same irony, he addresses Rosanna: "the formula of that young lady herself: perched aloft in an ivory tower is what she is, and I'll be hanged if this isn't a hint to you to mount, yourself, into just such another" (119). Horton's ironic understatement points to two important facts—Graham may become a beneficiary of his uncle's fortune and thus remain financially secure until his death, and he also seems attached to Rosanna, a daughter of a rival millionaire and already a rich young woman. The irony somewhat invalidates the mystery of the unread letter and disarms the symbolic meaning of the cabinet. At the same time, though, it sets in motion the very symbolism centered around the precious object.

Its symbolical significance is very much intensified in the two scenes in which Graham handles the letter he receives from his uncle. Very quickly the letter is interpreted by all the characters and the reader alike as the central mystery of the novel. It seems to suggest that what you need when you want to solve all the problems posed by the narrative is just to unseal and read the message. The moments of hiding the letter in one of the cabinet's drawers and taking it out are presented by James as highly dramatic and surprisingly cryptic. Actually, the scenes read as if they were fragments of some pantomime including accurate gestures and careful body movements. What I think should be noted is that the cabinet is as important as the letter—the mystery of the message is set against

the background of the beautiful and silent object which seems to want to communicate something.

In the first scene Gray is holding the letter and standing in front of the cabinet. He realizes that the “shallowest of the drawers would exactly serve for his putting his document to sleep” (83). The drawer is probably so shallow as to be almost two-dimensional and devoid of depth—one could say ironically (after all, the reader finds himself surrounded by many-leveled riddles and distorted mirrors) that there is nothing hidden from view. Gray decides to hide the letter: “he slipped it in, rejoicing in the tight fit of the drawer, carefully making the two divisions of the protective door meet, turning the little gold key in its lock and finally... attaching the key to a small silver ring carried in his pocket” (83). The bizarre clash of the words “sleep” and “slip”—as James describes it, the letter is simultaneously slipped into a drawer and put into sleep—results in a somewhat dream-like and deeply melancholic aspect of the scene. Dreams and letters require interpretation, and the same refers to the whole scene which is presented as if it was a legend or a myth; there is even a gold key on a silver ring.

In the second scene the celebration continues as the letter is to be taken out of the drawer. Gray resembles a priest or a magician standing “before the big *bahut* with both hands raised and resting on the marble top... he stared at the ivory tower without as yet touching it” (120). After a while he “moved his hands, laying them as in finer fondness to either smoothly-plated side of the tall repository, against which a finger or two caressingly rubbed” (120). And after a brief conversation with Horton:

Gray was now quite detached, occupied only in opening his ivory doors with light fingers and then playing these a little, whether for hesitation or for the intenser pointing of inquiry, up and down the row of drawers so exposed. Against the topmost they then rested a moment—drawing out this one, however, with scant further delay and enabling themselves to feel within and so become possessed of an article contained. It was with this article in his hand that he presently faced about again, turning it over, resting his eyes on it and then raising them to his visitor... ‘The distinguished retreat, you see, *has* its tenant.’ (121, original emphasis)

This last remark is significant in the context of an earlier dialogue between Gray and Horton who portrays human beings as facades with doors and windows: “you *are* a façade; stretching a mile right and left. How can you not be when I’m walking up and down in front of you?” (115, original emphasis) Actually, in several places in the novel faces are compared to material objects (for example, Davey’s face is reminiscent of a map with rivers standing for wrinkles, 17; and the face of the sick Mr Betterman reminds Rosanna an “empty glass that had yet held for years so much strong wine that a faint golden tinge still lingered on

from it," 12). Here it is not huge and round edifices that are being seen from all directions by characters going around them but two-dimensional facades which have only front sides. The scenario remains the same, though. After all, the facades have windows and doors which may be opened to a mystery hidden inside. Like so many mute objects surrounding James's characters, human visages are riddles that are supposed to contain meaning. One needs to interpret them.

All the passages I have quoted so far seem to suggest that *The Ivory Tower* is not only a novel abounding in symbolic objects, gestures and situations, but that its very narrative has a symbolic quality inviting the reader to discover a deeper meaning of the story. Thus, we would have to do with a novel about our attempts to fathom its mysterious contents. It is tempting to equate Gray's interest in the letter and James's detailed descriptions of the cabinet as the repository of the letter with the very act of reading and interpretation. The fact that we have only fragments of the novel strengthens our impression of its secrecy. We may feel for a while like archeologists who try to reconstruct a model of the edifice from its ruins. We would like to see what James's intentions were, and in this we resemble Graham Fiedler as he is standing in front of the cabinet and wants to know the secret of the letter that his uncle has given him.

The point is, however, that he doesn't. Actually, later on in the novel he admits to being repulsed by the letter and we can notice for the first time his ambivalent response to the fact that his uncle expects him to open it. We learn very quickly that Gray is not at all sure if he wants to know its contents. To Horton's question "Do you appeal to me by chance to help you to decide either way?" Gray answers: "I don't think I want to decide." And he adds: "I think I must just *like* to drift" (121, original emphasis). We may interpret the words as a manifestation of Gray's deep melancholy but we may also see in them an attempt to preserve the beauty of things enigmatic and ambiguous, not expressed directly and thus containing a more important message—the message of the ultimate mystery of reality which cannot be decoded and seen through as if they were transparent. Gray's unwillingness to dispel the mystery of his uncle's letter echoes Maggie Verver's unwillingness to enter the visionary pagoda. Both scenes are crucial because they demonstrate how the apparent inability is infused in James's characters with wonder and respect for things in their concreteness and opacity.

The material world, as presented in James in his last great novels, is in fact opaque and resistant to our attempts to penetrate it and get to its bottom. And I think that in the characters of Maggie and Gray James wanted to show us that we can indeed pay respect to the mystery of the world by not weighing it down too heavily with our readings of it. Not everything is interpretable, James seems to say, and provides us with several discreet depictions of objects that are silent and do not answer our curious gazes even if they are intensely looked upon. In

fact, things themselves constitute an important counterpoint to the ever-changing reality of human affairs. There is the external world that cannot be reduced to signs and symbols—impenetrable, incomprehensible, literal, mysterious, immune to any kind of interpretation. This is what Gray perceives early in the novel. Just after his contemplation of Mr Betterman's room where tables are tables and chairs are chairs he has a vision of the "universal cleanness" and a "real revelation" of what he calls in his mind "that possible immunity in things" (47). Like in Hopper's paintings, the objects and surfaces in James's last novels preserve their precious mystery and elude our inquisitive examinations as to what they possibly stand for. They are concrete and hard, and this is why we cannot dismiss them, get rid of them, treat them as stepping-stones to something else. They are sites of immunity against the reader's reductive hermeneutic procedures, making us appreciate James's novelistic art as an art of seeing and giving meaning to the world we live in.

The ivory tower, the central object of the novel, lends itself to all kinds of more or less obvious interpretations and symbolic readings. After all, though, it remains a riddle. Or, rather, it remains just another impressive article in Gray's room. James's irony lies in the fact that we first realize the ordinariness of the object, but then come to see the unexpected mystery of the ordinary. Paradoxically (the novelist seems to say), things in themselves are simply more meaningful and interesting when they resist the routine of our expectations and preconceptions. No wonder, then, that the letter which was supposed to bring a solution to Gray's ambiguous situation, remains unread. Actually, it is put back in its drawer in a scene which might summarize what I would call James's happy infatuation with the material world and the mystery of its being: "He [Gray] turned back with his minor importance to his small open drawer, laid it [the letter] within again and, pushing the drawer to, closed the doors of the cabinet. The act disposed of the letter, but had the air of introducing as definite statement as Horton could have dreamt of" (122).

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