

# Music in *The Sacred Fount*

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What may be the most extended description of music in James' oeuvre occurs at the geometric center of *The Sacred Fount*, in a scene that does not seem to have attracted much attention from those who have scrutinized this baffling novel. The scene offers no new clues to the reader who has become obsessed, with the narrator, by the psychological detective story, yet as a unique moment which assembles all the characters in silent contemplation it may provide the keystone in the aesthetic design of the novel and function as the watershed in its action. Taking up this thread, let us see if it can guide our descent into this fictional labyrinth and our safe return:

It may just possibly have been an hallucination of my own, but while we sat together after dinner in a dispersed circle I could have worked it out that, as a company, we were considerably conscious of some experience, greater or smaller from one of us to the other, that had prepared us for the player's spell. Felicitously scattered and grouped, we might in almost any case have had the air of looking for a message from it... The whole scene was as composed as if there were scarce one of us but had a secret thirst for the infinite to be quenched. And it was the infinite that, for the hour, the distinguished foreigner poured out to us, causing it to roll in wonderful waves of sound, almost of colour, over our receptive attitudes and faces. (*SF* 100-01)

The music is produced by the only foreigner to penetrate the precincts of Newmarch, and brings a message from outside, from beyond. But this connects with the constant play of musical effects throughout the text up to that point. These sound-effects—the voices and their “tone,” the elegant but teasing dialogues, the moments of silence, and the shifting rhythms of the narrator’s inner ruminations, even the “music” of the train at the start (*SF* 4)—are matched by what might be called the balletic effects of the characters’ movements around the terraces and landscape gardens. The novel is charged with high consciousness of aesthetic artifice, in its marked observation of the neo-Aristotelean unities, taking place in one extended day, in one privileged space, and with one theme insistently pursued. Knit together as tautly as a classical French drama, it fails, however, to reach an explicit denouement in which all the threads are united in a lucid pattern. Or rather, it holds out to “the reader as detective”<sup>1</sup> the possibility of such a thoroughly satisfying vision. But even if the basic solution is worked out, there are so many ambiguities and puzzles in every chapter that no matter how often the text is reread one’s detective skills will be constantly stretched. In the meantime, the readers are lured and lulled with one exquisite sensation after another, and the musical scene assures them that the quest itself, in its very unfulfillment, is of precious value.

The music occurs at the moment when the narrator comes closest to completing his palace of thought, which crumbles thereafter. After all the intangible intimations that have teased us so far, the language of music, suspending the finite puzzles, multiplies allusions to an ineffable infinite. It becomes a sacred fount, the Egerian spring of the novel’s dominant metaphor, meeting “a secret thirst of the infinite to be quenched” and now “poured out to us” (*SF* 101). The hearers’ search for a “message” in the music matches the readers’ search for the message of the novel. Their care for the conventional appearances of civilized life in their “posture of deference to this noble art” (*SF* 101) is correlated with “the infinite,” as the human attitude best befitting its revelation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Newmarch guests form a community, as they

<sup>1</sup> See Tintner, “A Gay Sacred Fount.”

<sup>2</sup> As a pianist, the young woman in “A Most Extraordinary Case” “would discourse infinite melody” (*Complete Stories 1864-1874*, 277). Wagner launched the notion of infinite melody (*unendliche Melodie*) in his essay *Zukunftsmusik*, first published in French translation (*La musique de l’avenir*) in 1860. Here we may have a very early Wagnerian allusion. Emma Sutton notes that James, who had turned down an opportunity to meet

share not only their well-schooled appreciation of art, and the self-conscious refinement of their behavior, but a sharp interest in one another.

Are there other presences of “the infinite” in the novel? One may say that the narrator’s obsessive speculations about the riddle he has posed to himself entails a quest for the infinite value of truth, or of knowledge. He pursues as well an infinity of reflection, following up every subtle nuance of the situations he glimpses or imagines (as James himself would later milk to the last drop the relationships explored in *The Golden Bowl*). There is also an infinity of art, not only in the graciousness of the week-end gathering in its gorgeous setting, but in the creative imagination of the narrator. One could read the novel as a symbolist work, where the gestures and postures of the characters become emblems of the human being reaching out to mystery, as in Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893) for instance.<sup>3</sup> But such works normally have a coherent plot, though this may not be the case with the *Nouveau roman* with which *The Sacred Fount* has also been compared. To call it “a *stripped* novel, almost a Flaubertian ‘livre sur rien,’ in which only the principle of composition really matters” (Bouraoui 96), sounds like an attempt to make a virtue of hermeneutic failure.

The music is a clue to how the whole novel should be read, as an elegant ballet or drama or painterly composition. The theatricality of the novel also reaches its high point in this scene:

every actor in the play that had so unexpectedly insisted on constituting itself for me sat forth as with an intimation that they were not to be so easily disposed of. It was as if there were some last act to be performed before the curtain could fall. Would the definite dramatic signal for ringing the curtain down be then only—as a grand climax and *coup de théâtre*—the due attestation that poor Briss had succumbed to inexorable time and Mrs. Server given way under a cerebral lesion? Were the rest of us to disperse decorously by the simple action of the discovery that, on our pianist’s striking his last note, with its consequence of permitted changes of attitude, Gilbert Long’s victim had reached the point of final simplification and Grace Brissenden’s the limit of age recorded of man? (*SF* 102)

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Wagner in 1880, “referred to the composer or his works in more than a dozen of his novels and short stories from the 1880s to the early twentieth century” (Sutton 3).

<sup>3</sup> See Moon.

An art of sacral ritual is also evoked here: "They has truly been arrayed and anointed, they had truly been isolated, for their sacrifice" (*SF* 102).<sup>4</sup> The narrator, in this whimsical extrapolation, may imagine with Pascal that *le dernier acte est toujours sanglant*, but in fact his obsession, unlike those of the narrators of "The Aspern Papers" or "The Turn of the Screw," fails of murderous effect, and the curtain will come down on a scene of comic discomfiture as he is dismissed as "crazy" (*SF* 192).

The style of the novel is part of the very substance of its drama. Readers of it in translation would be quite cut off from this aspect. Lines like "You after all then now don't?" (*SF* 192) or "all that at dinner had begun to fade away from me came back with a rush and hovered there with a vividness" (*SF* 101) represent a stylized diction that cannot rejoin the platitude of ordinary converse. Since the conversation picks up the stilted phrases and further varies them, the artificiality of the language, sometimes savoring of Gallicism, becomes cumulative:

"Don't I make things of an ease, don't I make life of a charm, for him?"

I'm afraid I laughed out. "That's perhaps exactly it! It's what Gilbert Long does for *his* victim—makes things, makes life, of an ease and a charm." (*SF* 27)

The constant conatus of style is one with the epistemological striving; the narrator is as much devoted to creating beauty as to discerning truth; indeed his hope to is achieve both at one and the same stroke, despite the threat of contradiction between the two goals.

The word "tone" occurs thirteen times<sup>5</sup> and the word "note" in the quasi-musical sense twelve times. "Talk" (102 occurrences)<sup>6</sup> preponderates over "silence" or "silent" (twenty-one occurrences)<sup>7</sup> in the novel's soundscape. The narrator's laughter, chiming with that of other characters, is a sound-effect of a distinct kind, accentuating the singular style of the novel. The verb "laugh" occurs fifty-four times,<sup>8</sup> the noun five times and "laughter" three

<sup>4</sup> "Sacrifice" as verb and noun occurs 22 times in the novel.

<sup>5</sup> 54 occurrences in *The Ambassadors*, 26 in *The Wings of the Dove*, 67 in *The Golden Bowl*.

<sup>6</sup> 140 in *The Ambassadors*, 132 in *The Wings of the Dove*, 136 in *The Golden Bowl*

<sup>7</sup> 63 in *The Ambassadors*, 64 in *The Wings of the Dove*, 73 in *The Golden Bowl*.

<sup>8</sup> Compare 132 occurrences in *The Ambassadors*, 19 in *The Wings of the Dove*, 47 in *The Golden Bowl*.

times. Thirty-five of these refer to the narrator's laughter, fourteen to Grace Brissenden's, six to Ford Obert's. The narrator's laughs can be adversarial: "I almost triumphantly laughed"; "my certainty made me laugh" (*SF* 127); "We stood face to face a moment, and I laughed out" (*SF* 160). "I continued to laugh.... She didn't like my laughter" (*SF* 162); "It made me somehow break into laughter" (*SF* 175). Or it can be nervous and uncontrolled: "I'm afraid I laughed out" (*SF* 27); "I laughed out doubtless too nervously" (*SF* 87); "I risked the long laugh which might have seemed that of madness.... And whether or not it was the special sound, in my ear, of my hilarity, I remember just wondering if perhaps I mightn't be [insane]" (*SF* 168). Grace's laugh, too, can be a weapon: "She celebrated her humility in a laugh that was proud" (*SF* 43); "she could by this time almost coarsely laugh" (*SF* 180); "'Dear no—you don't perpetrate anything. Perhaps it would be better if you did!' she tossed off with an odd laugh" (*SF* 181); "'He has his amusements, and it's odd,' she remarkably laughed, 'that you should grudge them to him!'" (*SF* 187). The battle of tone between the two becomes a context to see who can laugh the other off the stage.

Fiddling with this Rubik's Cube of a novel would be a grim business were it not for the music of its style. If the phantasmagoria is "a magnificent chiaroscuro of color and shadow" (*SF* 134), it is also a delicate polyphony of evasions, ambiguities, musically expressed in questioning echoes or in false accords. The narrator may slip himself up and tumble clownishly, but the ballet-master integrates every misstep into the choreography. Grace's tone may be rude in the final long-drawn-out dialogue and the narrator may hit many dubious notes, as he nervously feels, but the "touch" of the composer is impeccable. It may be objected that none of these virtues are specific to *The Sacred Fount*, but can be found in all James's novels. I would urge, however, that each of James's major compositions has its distinctive climate and style, just as, say, each of Beethoven's symphonies has.

Moreover, James at this stage in his career is exploring new possibilities of style, finding a pretext for license in the popular genres of Gothic horror ("The Turn of the Screw"), mystery involving time travel (*The Sense of the Past*, begun in 1900), and in the present case the detective story. Nor did he return to sedulous realism in the succeeding three great masterpieces, which have little concern with real-life society but rather give free rein to the phantasmagoric imagination. They reintroduce the "international theme" but the America of these novels is an imaginary vision (James had not been in the US since

1882). Colton Valentine's demonstration that the later James rereads Balzac no longer as a documentary realist but as a fantastical visionary carries over to such works as *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. It would be heavy-handed to seek a well-thought-out critique of capitalism or class struggle in these products of excited imagination, which develop according to their idiosyncratic laws of composition without any sustained reference to socio-political reality. A fortiori, it is misleading to say that "*The Sacred Fount* is not just metaphorically a narrative of vampirism; it quite graphically describes how the ruling class works to take possession of others" (Rowe, *Other* 26).<sup>9</sup> This might apply to *The Golden Bowl*, but the guests at Newmarch are social equals, and their social graces are celebrated rather than denounced. Nor is the "ruling class" of *The Golden Bowl* realistically observed. Rather we are offered an allegorical meditation on the glories of civilization, represented by princes and art collectors, which is haunted by the uneasy awareness of a hidden flaw. The power play in the relationships at Newmarch is more subtly masked. Grace and Long no doubt "take possession of others," but not without the willing collusion of their victims.

There is also at the heart of the narrator's labyrinth the infinity of love: if May Server is a sacred fount wasting away from passionate devotion to her dominant partner, then her self-giving bespeaks an absolute adoration that touches on the infinite. The sacral language would thus be more appropriate than at first suggested by the apparently frivolous McGuffin of the "sacred fount." May is ranked with James's sublime female victim-figures, alongside Daisy, Tina/Tita Bordereau, Maisie, Marie de Vionnet, Milly Theale, May Bartram, and Maggie Verver (whose surname rhymes with hers). The novel's romantic portrayal of May Server shows her as the victim not of some bizarre magic but as a martyr of unrequited love, such as Rilke celebrated in the first *Duino Elegy*.<sup>10</sup> She stands out in the civilized tableau the narrator composes during the recital:

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, "James's text asks directly what is implicit in his other writings: how is individual expression possible given such determinants as convention and tradition" (Rowe, "Authority" 224). Mark Seltzer goes further: "the banishment of the narrator as mad explicitly reconfirms the ruling 'tone' of Newmarch" and "the novel itself... effects a segregation of the literary from the shame of power that trivializes the power of social order even as it leaves that order intact" (161).

<sup>10</sup> "*Jene, du neidest sie fast, Verlassenen, die du/ so viel liebender fandst als die Gestillten*" (Those abandoned ones, you almost envy them, that you found so much more loving than

I followed many trains and put together many pieces; but perhaps what I most did was to render a fresh justice to the marvel of our civilized state. The perfection of that, enjoyed as we enjoyed it, all made a margin, a series of concentric circles of rose-color (shimmering away into the pleasant vague of everything else that didn't matter,) for the so salient little figure of Mrs. Server, still the controlling image for me, the real principle of composition, in this affluence of fine things. (*SF* 101)

This time of silent listening is a moment of peace for the troubled May:

There was for the time no gentleman on whom she need pounce, no lapse against which she need guard, no presumption she need create, nor any suspicion she need destroy. In this pause in her career it came over me that I should have liked to leave her; it would have prepared for me the pleasant after-consciousness that I had seen her pass, as I might say, in music out of sight. (*SF* 102)

Indeed, James allows May to pass out of sight at this point of the novel, as if fearing to spoil her delicate bloom. In the remaining chapters she no longer figures directly and the narrator's conversations with the two people with whom he has shared his speculative analyses (Grace and the painter Ford Obert) supply the chief action. These conversations put in doubt his imaginations, as if the second half of the novel, which takes place at night, were digesting or cannibalizing the first radiant half, as a kind of "self-consuming artifact." One might invoke another art here, that of architecture, which has been called "frozen music."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Pater's dictum that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music" could fit *The Sacred Fount*, and in the musical paroxysm at its center this aspiration reaches an exquisite moment of fulfillment (Pater 86). The remainder of the novel enacts a long falling-off from this pitch, as the narrator's castle of speculation is dismantled, "piece by piece" (*SF* 188), leaving him in a final state of mystification. The centrality of the music is marked by later references to "after the music" (*SF* 118, 154, 172). The beautiful rounded world of Newmarch begins to show its cracks and flaws in this deflationary second half. But the vision of a self-recollected art remains with the reader,

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the contented ones) (Rilke 686). Przybylowicz peremptorily declares that "Obviously the narrator is in love with May Server" (75), but one can love without being in love; nor does the narrator express the regrets inspired by the other May in "The Beast in the Jungle." But Kappeler understates the narrator's sentiment for May Server: "She is of as much interest to him as is Madame Bovary to Flaubert" (122).

<sup>11</sup> For the origins of this saying, see Michailow.

who will try to recover it in the satisfying form of the novel itself. Solving its riddles then becomes one with vindicating its aesthetic perfection.

If May Server is the sublime “vanishing point” in the novel’s romantic perspective, the other “victim,” Briss, also acquires privileged aesthetic salience, underlined shortly before the music is played: “He reminded me at this hour more than ever of some fine old Velasquez or other portrait—a presentation of ugliness and melancholy that might have been royal” (*SF* 96). This refers back to the mysterious portrait, modeled on Velázquez’s “Portrait of the Jester Calabazas,”<sup>12</sup> in which the characters recognize the face of Briss.

Is the novel just a kaleidoscope of musical patterns with no inner core? Tintner’s solution of the detective plot invokes the principle of Sherlock Holmes that “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth” (“*A Gay Sacred Fount* 224). Unlike Holmes or Hercule Poirot, the narrator never has a moment of triumph in which he exposes the culprits. In fact he never finds the solution, but the reader can do so. He fails to pick up the clues that point to the solution, which at times he seems to glimpse but which he does not allow into clear consciousness. The solution—that May is Grace’s “sacred fount,” while her husband is Long’s—bears on “the love that dare not speak its name,” and as such cannot be spoken without dragging into the light a complex of relations that the society depicted represses from awareness even when it tacitly accords a measure of toleration to it.

James takes his readers into a beautiful maze, so constructed that on each reading of the novel one becomes lost in it and has the greatest difficulty finding the way out. The ballet of suppositions, misapprehensions, avoidances, meetings, and surprising recognitions begins in the opening scene at Paddington and on the train:

When she [Grace] mentioned Lady John as in charge of Brissenden the other member of our trio [Gilbert] had expressed interest and surprise—expressed it so as to have made her reply with a smile: “Didn’t you really know?”...

“Why in the world *should* I know?”

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson finds ambiguities in the Velázquez painting itself reflected in the reactions to it by James’s characters (120). Tintner, who sees the novel as reflecting a Venetian *commedia dell’arte*, unconvincingly suggests Pietro Longhi as the model of James’s painting (*Henry James* 145), despite his actually naming Velázquez.



To which, with good nature, she had simply returned: "Oh, it's only that I thought you always did!" And they both had looked at me a little oddly, as if appealing from each other. "What in the world does she mean?" Long might have seemed to ask; while Mrs. Brissenden conveyed with light profundity: "*You* know why he should as well as I, don't you?" In point of fact I didn't in the least. (*SF* 4-5)

This passage is the first to challenge the reader's detective skills. Following up later references to Lady John's travel arrangements, one may piece together the solution. Grace is suggesting that it is Long who gave Lady John the idea of traveling with Briss, which Grace has accommodated "with good nature." but in the end the reader will detect that the arrangement does not serve to screen Lady John's relation with Long, but rather Brissenden's. One of the puzzles for the reader is then to measure Grace's awareness of this, and to discover at what point she becomes aware. Tintner takes it that Grace is aware of "the homosexual truth about the quartet" from the start ("*A Gay Sacred Fount*" 232). But would she allude so lightly and indiscreetly to the relation between Long and her husband, the very matter that leads to her panicked crackdown at the end of the novel?

One suspects a lapse from consistency on James's part in the contradiction between chapter 1: "That's why I [Grace] kindly arranged that, as she [Lady John] was to take, I happened to learn, the next train, Guy should come with her" (*SF* 7), and chapter 3: "'Very well then,' said Mrs. Brissenden, 'doesn't Mr. Long's tenderness of Lady John quite fall in with what I mentioned to you?' I remembered what she had mentioned to me. 'His making her come down with poor Briss?'" (*SF* 21-22). Later the narrator supposes Lady John to recall that "Grace had lent herself with uncommon good nature, the previous afternoon, to the arrangement by which, on the way from town, her ladyship's reputation was to profit by no worse company, precisely, than poor Briss's" (*SF* 113). "The arrangement" must stem from Long, who says he has not seen Grace since her marriage (*SF* 5). Long will have proposed to Lady John to use Briss as a "screen" for their supposed relation (whereas in reality it is she who is used as a screen for his relation with Briss).

In the novel's final retrospective turn, the matter of Briss coming down with Lady John is revisited, and both of these accounts receive a mention:

"If Briss came down with Lady John yesterday to oblige Mr. Long—"  
 "He didn't come," she interrupted, "to oblige Mr. Long!"

"Well, then, to oblige Lady John herself—"

"He didn't come to oblige Lady John herself!"

"Well, then, to oblige his clever wife—"

"He didn't come to oblige his clever wife! He came," said Mrs. Briss, "just to amuse himself." (*SF* 187)

This string of denials masks the solution, of which Grace is now fully apprised, that Briss indeed obliged Long, but in order to screen his relationship with Long. The reference to Guy's "amusements" suggests that Grace is aware of Guy's affair with Long and does not grudge it to him (though now calling a halt to it).

The narrator finds Guy in his own room in the bachelor quarters and guides him to his proper room there; the passage bristles with suggestion:

He had been put by himself, for some reason, in the bachelor wing and, exploring at hazard, had mistaken the signs. By the time we found his servant and his lodging I had reflected on the oddity of my having been as stupid about the husband as I had been about the wife. (*SF* 14)

The "epistemology of the closet" gives the hermeneutic key to two conversations in which both Gilbert and Guy become jumpy and defensive.

"Behind you; only don't turn round to look, for he knows—" But I dropped, having caught something directed toward me in Brissenden's face. [This is not immediately explained]. My interlocutor remained blank, simply asking me, after an instant, what it was he knew. On this I said what I meant. "He knows we've noticed."

Long wondered again. "Ah, but I *haven't!*" He spoke with some sharpness.

"He knows," I continued, noting the sharpness too, "what's the matter with him."

"Then what the devil is it?"

I waited a little, having for the moment an idea on my hands. "Do you see him often?"

Long disengaged the ash from his cigarette. "No. Why should I?"

Distinctly, he was uneasy—though as yet perhaps but vaguely—at what I might be coming to. That was precisely my idea, and if I pitied him a little for my pressure my idea was yet what most possessed me. "Do you mean there's nothing in him that strikes you?"

On this, unmistakably, he looked at me hard. "'Strikes' me—in that boy? Nothing in him, that I know of, ever struck me in my life. He's not an object of the smallest interest to me!" (*SF* 16)

Denial, especially when so emphatic, amounts to confession in this novel, if not everywhere in James. There is a similar edginess in an exchange with Guy in chapter 7:

I had made him uneasy last night, [this refers to Guy's look when the narrator was talking to Long] and a new reason or two for my doing so had possibly even since then come up; yet these things also would depend on the way he might take them. The look with which he at present faced me seemed to hint that he would take them as I hoped, and there was no curtness, but on the contrary the dawn of a dim sense that I might possibly aid him, in the tone with which he came half-way. "You 'know'?"  
 "Ah," I laughed, "I know everything!" (SF 67)

Guy looks up to the narrator as what Lacan would call "the subject supposed to know," in pathetic hope of release from his trapped state; this is sensed even as it remains unspoken. When the narrator suggests that Guy is "charmed" with Mrs. Server, the implication is that their shared condition draws them together:

"I'm not at all easily charmed, you know," he the next moment added; "and I'm not a fellow who goes about much after women."  
 "Ah, that I never supposed! Why in the world *should* you? It's the last thing!"  
 I laughed. "But isn't this—quite (what shall one call it?) innocently—rather a peculiar case?" (SF 73)

Hence Mrs. Server's qualities of being "beautiful and gentle and strange" are for Guy "not an attraction. They're too queer" (SF 74).

James's cryptic remarks to Mrs. Humphry Ward suggest that Grace cracks down on Guy's affair with Long and on her own with May:

As I give but the phantasmagoric, I have, for clearness, to make it *evidential*, and the Ford Obert evidence all bears (indirectly) upon Brissenden, supplies the motive for Mrs. B.'s terror and her re-nailing down of the coffin. I had to testify to Mrs. S.'s sense of a common fate with B. and the only way I could do so was by making O. see her as temporarily pacified. I had to give a meaning to the vision of Gilbert L. out on the terrace in the darkness, and the *appearance* of a sensible detachment on her part was my imposed way of giving it. Mrs. S. is back in the coffin at the end, by the same stroke by which Briss is—Mrs. B.'s last interview with the narrator being all an ironic *exposure* of her own false plausibility. But it isn't worth explaining, and I mortally loathe it! (L 186)

The narrator's phantasmagoria cannot be corrected from within, so clues must be planted by external observation that can guide the reader to the light—a process compared with the exit from Plato's cave: "I was really dazzled by his image.... 'Your image is splendid, ... your being out of the cave'" (*SF* 134). Ford's "evidence" includes the comment that May's lover (male) "isn't here," which the narrator thinks mistaken—"Delighted as I was that he should believe it"—though he concurs with it: "No; he isn't here" (*SF* 133). Ford goes on to say he has done without May's male lover as he watches the Brissendens, "And naturally, above all, ... the wife" (*SF* 133). "What I call the light of day is the sense I've arrived at of her vision... Of what they have in common. *His*—poor chap's—extraordinary situation too... the sight of another fate as strange, as monstrous as her own" (*SF* 135). This must refer to May's vision of Guy's role as sacred fount. Grace re-nails the coffin of her marital authority, leaving Long desolate. Guy looks around the smoking-room on his last appearance, no doubt looking for Long, "as if, for me, he were seeking such things—out of what was closing over him—for the last time" (*SF* 137). Guy moves from the bachelor quarters back to his wife's room (*SF* 132), his holiday ended; for his real romance can flourish only in the free realm of a country house. Now, he is "thoroughly got back into hand" and is "the same poor Briss as before his brief adventure" (*SF* 120). The *false* meaning ascribed to Long in the darkness is that May has detached herself from him; she is now "all right," making the narrator "all wrong" (*SF* 139); the true meaning is that Grace has detached Guy from him, and cast May into outer darkness as well. There is a striking parallel with a later novel: Maggie Verver arranges the fates of four people, as she closes the marital lid on Amerigo, and detaches Charlotte from him, imprisoning her in the wedlock with her father. Grace's arrangement of the fates of Guy, May, and Long is neither as elegant as the narrator's speculative version nor as satisfactory as what the real desires of the four would dictate, did society allow.

The phrase "poor Briss" (never "poor Brissenden") occurs no fewer than sixty-one times in the novel, with provocative insistence (along with nine occurrences of "Guy Brissenden" and fifty-three of "Brissenden"). The sympathetic narrator accompanies him in a ritual of compliance with his doom within the structure imposed by society and his wife:

I trod with him, over the velvet and the marble, through the twists and turns, among the glooms and glimmers and echoes, every inch of the way, and I don't

know what humiliation, for him, was constituted there, between us, by his long pilgrimage. It was the final expression of his sacrifice. (*SF* 136)

Guy again displays a panicky jumpiness in a moment that is at once comic and tragic:

“Good-night, Brissenden. I shall be gone to-morrow before you show.”  
 I shall never forget the way that, struck by my word, he let his white face fix me in the dusk. “‘Show?’ *What* do I show?”  
 I had taken his hand for farewell, and, inevitably laughing, but as the falsest of notes, I gave it a shake. “You show nothing! You’re magnificent.”  
 He let me keep his hand while things unspoken and untouched, unspeakable and untouchable, everything that had been between us in the wood a few hours before, were between us again. But so we could only leave them, and, with a short, sharp “Good-bye!” he completely released himself. (*SF* 137)

When a word is echoed in this novel, it is often with a slide or modulation giving it a new sense, as happens blatantly here. There can be little doubt what most figured as “unspeakable and untouchable” six years after the Wilde scandal.<sup>13</sup> The narrator’s laughter at Briss’s “Show?” is perhaps false in that it affects to treat lightly what is of tragic import to Briss, whom he congratulates implicitly on keeping the secret of his homosexuality or of his affair with Long. When the implicit threatens to become explicit, their communion must break off. “He let me hold his hand” suggests that the words that might be spoken are ones admitting erotic attraction. The narrator has “tears in my eyes” (*SF* 137) as he leaves Guy, tears that cannot be explained by readings that reduce the story to neurotic phantasmagoria. The mixing of genres produces exquisite harmonies of humor and pain.<sup>14</sup> The narrator’s elegiac farewell to Briss may be addressed to his own renounced identity as well:

With my hand on the latch of the closed door I watched a minute his retreat along the passage, and I remember the reflection that, before rejoining Obert, I made on it. I seemed perpetually, at Newmarch, to be taking his measure from behind. (*SF* 137)

<sup>13</sup> See Forster: “I’m an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort” (159). Forster’s *Maurice* belongs to the same time as *The Sacred Fount* was published when Forster was twenty-two.

<sup>14</sup> “Such doubleness is productive of, is practically the very definition of irony. What separates camp from irony tout court is camp’s historically determined anchoring in the problems of a proscribed sexuality” (Gutkin 118).

It is worth noting the symbolic details in this scene: the dark passage in which the two are isolated, “the velvet and the marble” of soft but firm social constraint, “the twists and turns, among the glooms and glimmers and echoes” of closeted existence, “the latch of the closed door” that none dares to open.

In the long-drawn-out final scene, Grace is visibly nervous and hiding something, as her shifting set of alternatives to the narrator’s supposition indicate. She had proposed Mrs. Server as the sacred fount for Long, supposedly in the spirit of speculative play. But it may be that from the start she has conceived this teaming as the ideal double screen to conceal the true partners of both. Now she has changed her mind, alarmed by the narrator’s lack of discretion and alerted by it to the danger of social disgrace and the need to clamp down on the relations that might occasion it. Perhaps it’s a slip that she refers to Mrs. Server by her first name, indicating a nearer relationship than she’d earlier avowed.

As strange as anything was this effect almost of surprise for me in the freedom of her mention of “May.” For what had she come to me, if for anything, but to insist on her view of May, and what accordingly was more to the point than to mention her? Yet it was almost already as if to mention her had been to get rid of her. She was mentioned, however, inevitably and none the less promptly, anew—even as if simply to receive a final shake before being quite dropped. (*SF* 149)

James’s remark about Grace’s “re-nailing down of the coffin” indicates this purpose of concealing and repressing the two gay relationships. Grace withdraws the Long/May combination as an inadequate screen and promotes the obviously false Long/Lady John one instead. While pretending to finally lay her cards on the table, she produces the most obvious, blatant lie, taking us back to the very first supposition of the entire plot, in her repeatedly trumpeted “Lady John *is* the woman” (*SF* 183). Even as logic totters, “mere sound” comes powerfully to the rescue:

It was preposterous, hang though it would with her somersault, and she had quite succeeded in giving it the note of sincerity. It was the mere sound of it that, as I felt even at the time, made it a little of a blow—a blow of the smart of which I was conscious just long enough inwardly to murmur: “What if she *should* be right?” (*SF* 184)

The musical effect of her “tone” carries the day. She triumphs by a wildly opportunistic display of shifting logic sustained by a loud rhythmic rhetoric, as in an operatic duet wherein one singer sings down the other with a repeated phrase.

As Grace demolishes his “perfect palace of thought,” the narrator pleads for his “frail, but, as I maintain, quite sublime structure” that “weren’t the wretched accident of its weak foundation, it wouldn’t have the shadow of a flaw” (*SF* 188). Her last bid to silence the narrator is a tale that Briss was “annoyed” to discover that Long and Lady John are lovers (*SF* 187); whether this is Grace’s or Briss’s invention it strengthens the screen against discovery of the relation of the two men. In addition she claims that Briss told her that “horrid” May “made love to him” (*SF* 191). Grace is proud of these two screens: “what he tells... is not always so much to the point as the two things I’ve repeated to you” (192). The narrator gasps at “the presentation of her own now finished system” (*SF* 192). The last sentence of the novel echoes an earlier one: “I *should* certainly never again, on the spot, quite hang together, even though it wasn’t really that I hadn’t three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone” (*SF* 193); compare: “Things *had*, from step to step, to hang together, and just here they seemed—with all allowances—to hang a little apart” (*SF* 138). “From step to step” is the exertion of scrupulous “method,” a sedulous art, but one that has become a ritual obsession, at the service of an aesthetic vision.

One critic suggests that “the receptacle of the narrator’s secret but overflowing spring is his ‘crystal palace,’ the flower of his theory, into which all his strength, his energy and his intelligence are poured,” leaving him depleted (Kappeler 123). But this effect is reinforced by the way Grace takes the upper hand in her third interview with the narrator, drawing on him as an inspiring fount of wisdom, and leaving him “drained” (*SF* 49). In her final demolition of his theory, she again acts a ruthless domineering part, making the narrator her third victim alongside the rejected May and the recoffined Briss (or the fourth if we count Long). In the battle of wits with Grace, the narrator speaks of his “priceless pearl of an inquiry” as “so private and splendid a revel—that of the exclusive king with his Wagner opera” (*SF* 179). Why “exclusive” rather than “reclusive”? Perhaps to underline the high quality of the exquisite inward music the narrator retains, over against the triumphant “tone” of Grace. Even if Ludwig II was crazy, that does not detract from the radiance of *Lohengrin*. To the reader, as detective and even as artist, is handed the task of saving a solution and a satisfying pattern from the apparent wreckage.

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