

demands an unreal show of affection (as *I*, with my identity, interpret the first scene), I get especially angry at him, and I justify his being thrust out in the storm by my angry feelings. In short, I continually build the tragedy from my own ideas and feelings in my own style. It admits or confirms them in varying degrees, and they are then varyingly available for me further to build up the play with. There is a feedback between the emotional and intellectual hypotheses I put forward in my personal style ("identity") and the answers I hear from the play that affect the new hypotheses I bring to it—a feedback very like the perceptual mechanisms described by the psychologists. Yes, I sense "force" and "power"—but they are the strength of my own emotions and ideas.

We can, then, explain both samenesses and differences in response if we take as the basic fact about literary transactions, not the sameness of the text, but the variety of our responses to it. For example, take Boardman's recall of my MLA talk. I contrasted my feelings about the deaths of Cordelia and Lear to Dr. Johnson's, evidently with such unusual candor for an MLA meeting that Boardman replaces my guilty satisfaction with more familiar schemata: I "argued" my vengeful feelings or offered them as "interpretation" or "inferences." How can one "argue" feelings or arrive at them by inference? Even this small instance shows our judgments and our interpretations are never "objective" in the dictionary sense: "Uninfluenced by emotion, surmise, or personal prejudice" (*American Heritage*). How could they be?

More important, *should* they be? Suppose we could find "forces" in *King Lear*, suppose we were simultaneously "conditioned" and "free," and even suppose we could distinguish these two modes in a single experience—one question still remains. Why should we assume in literary studies (as we rarely do in any other context) that some forced, collective (and hypothetical) response automatically counts for more than a free, and very real, personal one? This is the deep assumption of our profession that my essay asks us to question.

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Notes

¹ *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; rpt. New York: Meridian, 1955), p. 204.

² Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth Century Drama* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 79; Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 196; Knight, "The Lear Universe," *The Wheel of Fire*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen,

1949), p. 191; Main, *The Tragedy of King Lear with Inter-textual Commentary* (New York: Odyssey, 1962), see iii.ii.59-60.

³ I am following Ulric Neisser, *Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Appleton, 1967); Jerry A. Fodor, Thomas G. Bever, and Merrill F. Garrett, *The Psychology of Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics and Generative Grammar* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Donald A. Norman, David E. Rummelhart, and the LNR Research Group, *Explorations in Cognition* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1975). See also my forthcoming "What Can a Concept of Identity Add to Psycholinguistics?" *Psychiatry and the Humanities*, 3 (1978).

Talking in James

To the Editor:

In the last two paragraphs of "Talking in James" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 66-77), Ruth B. Yeazell argues that in *The Golden Bowl* "Maggie constructs a saving interpretation of her world—an interpretation we may be inclined, especially if we are fond of Maggie, to take as truth. But we have no way of verifying our theories: . . . we are confined in the second half of *The Golden Bowl* to the chambers of Maggie's consciousness and, briefly, of the Assinghams' drawing room." Yeazell then concludes that, confronted with "Densher-like questions" about the pain Maggie inflicts on others and Maggie's "ominous" "final silences," the reader must conclude that the "morality" of *The Golden Bowl* and of James's last novels "remains irreducibly ambiguous."

One hesitates to take issue with two statements in an article that is generally shrewd and sometimes brilliant; but the argument of Yeazell's concluding paragraphs raises a question important to all readers of contemporary fiction: how does one "verify" a theory with respect to the values or "morality" of a work in which all the interpreters of the action are "unreliable"? Is the reader of such a work condemned to "irreducible ambiguity"? Or have modern writers, denying themselves the use of a chorus or a reliable interpreter of the action, other means of establishing the "morality" of their works? I think it is clear that they have and that if we examine the whole structure of their novels—including plot, character, "thought," and diction—we can indeed verify our theories concerning the moral values of the work.

Now it is true that James has created in *The Golden Bowl* a world in which good and evil are mixed. All of James's characters, Maggie included, are both selfish and, as Fanny Assingham says, "innocent." But if the world of the novel is ambiguous, the moral evaluation of that world is not. To understand James's "morality," we have only to examine carefully the structure of the images in the novel. Northrop Frye has observed, in his study of T. S. Eliot, that a poet's "meaning" is to be

found in “the structure of his images.” Where a chorus or a reliable interpreter of the action is absent, as in much modern fiction, it is the image patterns we must examine if we wish to discover the “meanings” and the moral premises that enable the reader to interpret and evaluate the action. (For every image is an evaluation of the subject to which it is applied, and a pattern of images extending throughout a novel may provide a total evaluation of the world created by the novelist and of the action occurring therein.) Now the structure of the images in *The Golden Bowl* leaves no doubt, I think, as to James’s evaluation of his characters. Charlotte and Amerigo are figured as predatory beasts, “clumsy brutes,” warriors, aggressors; they live exclusively in the jungle of society, that world of “pursued and pursuing,” that “beast-haunted land”; they are irredeemable materialists, incessantly counting, weighing, measuring, and appraising the material “values” that they hope to seize. Again, they are figured as handsome objects or surfaces in a world of appearances and “show,” and James makes it clear that this is the *only* world that’s real to them—a visible, tangible world, a world of time, matter, and extension. Charlotte is indeed “splendid” and “great” in this world. For she is thoroughly at home in it. But of a higher world, neither she nor Amerigo has any understanding at all. It would never enter *their* minds to sacrifice themselves for others, to take everything upon themselves and to “pay . . . all,” as Maggie does.

As for Maggie, she is—ambiguously, of course—the “lamb” and the “nun.” If her selfish attachment to both Adam and the Prince produces evils, she is quick to recognize her mistakes and to set about correcting them. It is true that she becomes, in the second half of the novel, a “timid tigress,” a “commandant,” a “leading lady” on the stage of appearances; that she “counts” and “calculates”; that she becomes, to all appearances, as worldly as the blackest of materialists. At the same time, however, she is seen as “rising”: she throws off passivity and sloth; she becomes active instead of passive; she assumes “the responsibility of freedom”; she *proves* her virtue in the warlike conditions of existence. And while fighting energetically to thwart the effort to manipulate her, she is also capable of renouncing the temptation to surrender to anger, capable of sacrificing herself, and of working not for selfish advantage but for “love.”

Her way of saving the marriages is not ideal; but it is at least a solution that permits the Prince and Charlotte to save face, to retain their pride and dignity and their places in society; and it is the least painful solution in a situation in which neither the adulterers nor the betrayed spouses are willing to dissolve their marriage vows. To avoid “destroying” them all, Maggie *must* play the world’s game—in order to cheat the world of its triumphs.

Fraud and injustice are thus checked; and Charlotte, though she’s being led to her “doom” on Adam’s silken leash, doesn’t “so much as know what it is.” In the last analysis, the novel requires us to see that the doom of Charlotte and the Prince, like that of Eliot’s wastelanders, is their being condemned to live on purely material and secular terms. They don’t see that doom for what it is. But the reader aware of James’s pervasive image patterns recognizes that it is the doom of an unregenerate mankind, of men condemned to be their “sweating selves,” men incapable of rising (like the “overworked little trapezist girl,” Maggie Verver) above desire.

Yeazell might well reply at this point that my entire interpretation of the image patterns is conditioned by my “fondness” for Maggie. Yet even when we have said the worst we can about James’s heroine—when we have acknowledged her selfishness and her desire to have everything on her own terms—we have to recognize that she alone in this novel has what may be called a sense of sin and strives to rise above mere base appetite and mere appearances; that she alone accepts responsibility while the others constantly disclaim it; that she alone has not only “imagination of the states of others” but also the desire to act, when she recognizes the evil she has caused, to undo that evil and to serve “love.”

Perhaps Yeazell has Maggie’s spiritual aspiration in mind when she states that “Maggie is ultimately the superior artist”—that Maggie’s “language makes for the most harmonious and inclusive order her world can sustain.” If so, she and I are in agreement. In that case, however, what we agree upon is that the morality of James’s novel is *not* “irreducibly ambiguous” and that there *is* a way of verifying our theories regarding the morality of the novel.

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Ms. Yeazell replies:

Much as I am drawn to James’s last and most complicated heroine, I cannot accept Daniel Schneider’s explanation of her power. Nor do I think that we can settle our critical disputes about this and other novels in the terms he proposes: As the endless debate over the moral patterns of *The Golden Bowl* suggests, the issues here are not so easily resolved.

Schneider distinguishes between the “world” of *The Golden Bowl*, which he grants is “ambiguous,” and the “moral evaluation” of that world, which he argues is not. Yet to assert, as he rightly does, that the world of James’s last novel is one in which “good and evil are mixed,” a world in which all the characters are at once innocent and selfish, is surely to engage in an act of moral evaluation: What are “good” and “evil” if they are not the terms of moral judgment? The force