

Geometrical Design of

The Golden Bowl

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1

The Golden Bowl is a tapestry into which elaborate patterns are diversely interwoven. In no other novel of James are many literary elements—character, imagery, point of view, etc.—so geometrically, symmetrically, or well-balancedly designed. Such a highly artificial diagram, not a technique of the nineteenth-century fiction, no doubt, is generally incompatible with literary realism, though *The Golden Bowl* still does represent ‘life’, as James, in reference to the *raison d’être* of the novel, avowedly required it to.¹ This last completed novel of James, with its propensity for ‘form’, for consciousness, or its freedom from the ascendancy of plot, stepped out of the nineteenth-century fiction, but stopped some way short of Modernism. His artistic development towards *The Golden Bowl*, when set in the tradition of the British fiction, not in Leavisite sense, shows, on a smaller scale, a brief history of remarkable literary transition.

2

One of the salient features in the tapestry of *The Golden Bowl*, in comparison with his other works, is its exquisite design of imagery. This does not mean, I hasten to add, that James is unwontedly making much use of the embellishment; he is an adept at the dissemination of images, each of which, however, mainly has a rhetorical efficacy just for an immediate context, with the possible exception of, say, ‘dove’ in *The Wings of the Dove*. We have never seen such images as, mostly elevated to symbols,

schematically preside over a book.

Three images are dominant in *The Golden Bowl*: (1) voyage (sea, ship, boat, adventure), (2) golden (gilded), (3) cup (bowl).

(1) Voyage symbolizes the course of human life, an adventure towards unknown future; ship, a vehicle of body and soul for it. Prince, who is strolling about London, brooding apprehensively over his forthcoming marriage, thinks of ‘the story of the ship-wrecked Gordon Pym, who, drifting in a small boat. . .’ and feels ‘his own boat move upon some such mystery’ (p.56).² He confide his uneasiness to Mrs. Assingham, and asks for her help, saying:

‘I’m starting on the great voyage—across the unknown sea; my ship’s all rigged and appointed, the cargo’s stowed away and the company complete. But what seems the matter with me is that I can’t sail alone; my ship must be one of a pair, must have, in the waste of waters, a—what do you call it? — a consort. I don’t ask you to stay on board with me, but I must keep your sail in sight for orientation. I don’t in the least myself know, I assure you, the points of the compass. But with a lead I can perfectly follow. You *must* be my lead.’ (p.59)

The name of Amerigo is associated, in Mrs. Assingham’s and possibly other people’s minds, with the man ‘who followed, across the sea, in the wake of Columbus and succeeded, where Columbus had failed, in becoming godfather, or name-father, to the new Continent’ (p.94).

Adam Verver also retrospectively identifies himself with 'Cortez in the presence of the Pacific' in Keats's sonnet (p.139). When Amerigo has returned from Matcham, Maggie, with a budding awareness of the relations between Amerigo and Charlotte, meets him as if he is 'restored from some country, some long voyage...' (p.340). After that she stays with Charlotte at Eaton Square, eager to worm Matcham business out of her, only to be left all the more forlorn:

The perfection of her success, decidedly, was like some strange shore to which she had been noiselessly ferried and where, with a start, she found herself quaking at the thought that the boat might have put off again and left her. (p.353)

A transient tension caused by Charlotte's reconciliatory kiss to Maggie, which was witnessed by the people at Fawns, has outwardly subsided, when, a few days later, Maggie and her father enjoy a small hour of candid talk:

They were husband and wife—oh so immensely!—as regards other persons; but after they had dropped again on their old bench, conscious that the party on the terrace, augmented as in the past by neighbours, would do beautifully without them, it was wonderfully like their having got together into some boat and paddled off from the shore where husbands and wives, luxuriant complications, made the air too tropical. In the boat they were father and daughter, and poor Dotty and Kitty supplied abundantly, for their situation, the oars or the sail. Why, into the bargain, for that matter—this came to Maggle—couldn't they always live, so far as they lived together, in a boat? (p.501)

There Mr. Verver suggests his intention to 'ship back' to America (p.512), and Charlotte, with the voyage in mind, visualizes, she tells Maggie

afterwards, 'the long miles of ocean and the dreadful great country, State after State—which have never seemed to me so big or so terrible' (p.535). We can also find such an idiom or a varied form of one as, reduced to its original sense, forms a link in the chain of the 'voyage' imagery: 'he should see his ships burn' (p.192), 'in the same boat' (p.228), 'at bay' (p.535).³

(2) Gold emblemizes not only such fair elements as the dawn, elixir of life, excellence, glory, incorruptibility, love, majesty, perfection, power, preservation, purity, wealth, vitality, wisdom; but at the same time foul ones as corruptibility, degradation, jealousy, temptation, treason, worldly wealth.⁴ Apart from the golden bowl, this book glistens with many golden or gilded ornaments, literal or figurative: 'fine eminent "pieces" in gold' (p.139), 'gilded and befrogged bands' (p.189), 'a great gilded Venetian chair' (p.296), 'gilt and crystal and colour' (p.305), 'a gold chain of a firm fineness' (p.350), a 'gilded cage' (p.355), 'bars richly gilt' (p.484), 'a party of panting gold-fish' (p.524). Homage with the adjective is also paid to the Roman history or culture, which Prince bears on his shoulders: 'the *cinquecento*, at its most golden hour' (p.49), 'old golden Rome' (p.332). One October afternoon in which Mr. Verver and Mrs. Assingham are whiling away the time at Fawns is described as 'a wonderful windless waiting golden hour' (p.175). We sometimes see people moving in the 'golden morning' (p.188,291), 'the golden mist' (p.347), or 'the golden air' (p.502). Between Prince and Charlotte, after their respective marriages, there still exists 'a mystic golden bridge' (p.268). The 'golden roll' (p.271) stands for a galaxy of ladies and gentlemen who are supposed to be present at Matcham party. When Maggie is sitting in the Park with her father, trying to breach a proposal of a little trip with Prince, her retrospective mind reflects their happy days at Fawns with 'most golden tone', 'the ancient tone of gold' (p.384). Mrs. Assingham perceives in Maggie the 'little golden personal nature' (p.402).

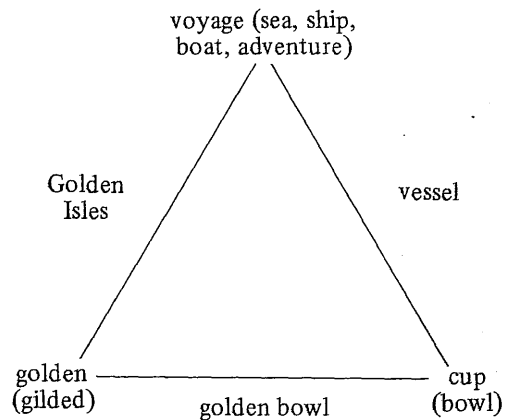
After Maggie knew the relations between Prince and Charlotte, she hears the imaginative voice of Charlotte lamenting for 'the golden flame' of love with him (p.553). At the very last stage of the story, after seeing Mr. and Mrs. Verver off, Maggie, waiting for Prince in a solitary room, knows she has been after 'the golden fruit', the taste of which she has never had (p.579).⁵

(3) Cup is the emblem of love, wisdom, or the destiny of mankind.^{6,7} Cups—literal and figurative—are also arranged on the fabric of *The Golden Bowl*, jocosely chinking here and there. First, literal ones (excluding the golden bowl): 'bowls and vases' (p.93), 'cups' (p.115, 522), 'cup' (p.253), 'the bowls of gathered flowers' (p.570). After his daughter's marriage, Mr. Verver somehow enjoys his daily life in spite of his 'full consciousness, overflowing the cup like a wine too generously poured,' of, in short, the transmutation of his life caused thereby (p.144). Mrs. Assingham, in reference to Charlotte's arrival at Fawns and the consequent departure of the Lutches and Mrs. Rance, says: '... I don't in the least mean that Charlotte was consciously dropping poison into their cup. She was just herself their poison, in the sense of mortally disagreeing with them' (p.177). Prince makes an attempt to estimate Mrs. Assingham or those 'people among whom' he married, resting with the conclusion that none of them are 'worthy ... of the personal relation', or so important to be insidiously plotted against with 'the cup' of poison (p.261). One morning at Matcham, where Prince and Charlotte enjoy a brief rendezvous, he feels that 'their cup' is full (p.290), and in the elevated mood, tells her that he feels the day 'like a great gold cup' which they must 'somehow drain together', the simile reminding Charlotte of the golden bowl of Bloomsbury (p.292). At the beginning of Volume Two (Book Fourth), uneasiness with a slight inkling of her husband's adultery—if I can call it—provokes Maggie into a vehement appeal to him:

It's all very well, and I perfectly see how beautiful it is, all round; but there comes a day when something snaps, when the full cup, filled to the very brim, begins to flow over. That's what has happened to my need of you—the cup, all day, has been too full to carry. So here I am with it, spilling it over you—and just for the reason that's the reason of my life. (p.337)

When Maggie knew her father's plan to ship back to America with Charlotte, 'the cup of her conviction, full to the brim, overflowed at a touch', the conviction that he had sacrificed himself for her, and was going to. (p.512).⁸

These three images, however, are not arranged independently of each other. There are another set of as many copulative images, connecting the former three like three sides of a triangle: 'Golden Isles' connecting (1) and (2), 'vessel', (1) and (3), and 'golden bowl', doubtlessly the principal symbol, (2) and (3).



Mrs. Assingham encourages Prince, restless bridegroom, saying, 'Your tossings are over—you're practically *in port*. The port. . . of the Golden Isles' (p.60). 'The port of the Golden Isles' apparently means his matrimonial alliance with the Ververs, which will, Mrs. Assingham is convinced, lead to great happiness. Mr. Verver,

in his serene retrospection, confronts, with aesthetic avarice, 'the Golden Isles' (pp.139-40), to which, this time, Europe is likened.

The word 'vessel' is adopted to mean both 'ship, boat' (p.59,508) and 'cup, bowl' (p.448,451,458), superbly linking the two images.⁹

The symbol of 'golden bowl' has already appeared in the Bible,¹⁰ and much later in Blake's poem,¹¹ though neither gives us a definitive clue to our present conundrum: what is the 'golden bowl', that sheds lustre in the centre of our tapestry? A review in *Academy* says, with apparent misapprehension, that it allegorises 'the character and fate of the Italian Prince'¹²; Gore Vidal interprets it as 'the symbol of the flawed marriages'¹³; Nicola Bradbury explains that it symbolizes 'perfect happiness'.¹⁴ The decipherment of its meaning, though imperfect, thence incites us to tackle the meaning of three symbolic actions: why is it Prince who at first sight perceives a flaw in the bowl, in spite of the dealer's assurance that it won't be discovered by 'a gentleman'?; what is the meaning of Mrs. Assingham's smashing the bowl; and Maggie's desperate attempt for its restoration? Although we can provide for each of the actions a plausible explanation, which will after all deviate from my present argument, we cannot be too alert lest symbolism should take an ell. We must pause on the confines of symbolic hermeneutics just for the reason why James did of Modernism.

3

Jamesian conversation is embarrassing, or, in R.B. Yeazell's word, 'humberging'.¹⁵ It won't make any sense, I am assured, if held in our daily life. What first strikes us as remarkably different from actual current speech is his too much dependence upon pronouns, even in the passages where proper names are situationally needed for clear identification. Secondly, we know the type of dialogue, which seemingly undergoes an uneconomical prolongation all the more for a petty verbal omission: the first

speaker makes a certain statement, leaving something unsaid; the other inquiringly utters his surmise at the 'something'; the first speaker, denying it — indeed it rarely gets the mark — discloses what he really meant—I call this not-A-but-B type dialogue:

He hesitated; then he said: 'I'm thinking, I dare say, of Miss Theale's. How does your aunt reconcile his interest in her —?'

'With his interest in me?'

'With her own interest in you,' Densher said while she reflected.

...

'You oughtn't to make me say too much. But I'm glad I don't.'

'Don't say too much?'

'Don't care for Lord Mark.'¹⁶

These two types of Jamesian trick, great pathogenesis of his inveterate ambiguity, or 'intangibility', as Chatman put it,¹⁷ are combined into another pattern which is quite familiar to the readers addicted to his style:

... "We shall stay till she arrives."

She turned upon him. "Mrs. Beale?"

"Mrs. Wix. I've had a wire," he went on.¹⁸

This not-A-but-B type dialogue, though terribly vexing, has its effect to impress upon us, by means of the negation of the former, the ensuing revelation with a subtle note of unexpectedness. But one precondition is needed for this pattern to be possible: more than two characters must be, in the interrogator's or the reader's imagination, contextually replaceable for the 'someone' meant by the pronoun, the replacement making due difference. The most multivocal pronoun in *The Golden Bowl* obviously is 'they (their, them)', mostly in reference to a pair. The next dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Assingham — *nota bene* they are also the possible *signifié* of the pronoun — is one example to show how much complication it conveys:

“Well, are you trying to make out that I’ve said you have? All their case wants, at any rate,” Bob Assingham declared, “is that you should leave it well alone. It’s theirs now; they’ve bought it, over the counter, and paid for it. It has ceased to be yours.”

“Of which case,” she asked, “are you speaking?”

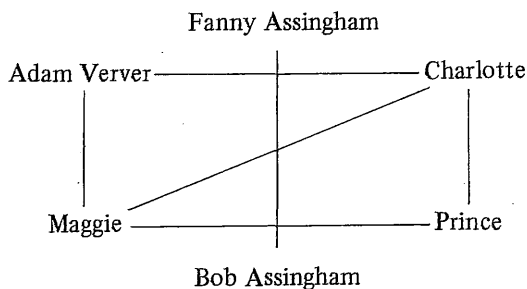
He smoked a minute: then with a groan: “Lord, are there so many?”

“There’s Maggie’s and the Prince’s, and there’s the Prince’s and Charlotte’s.”

“Oh yes; and then,” the Colonel scoffed, “there’s Charlotte’s and the Prince’s.”

“There’s Maggie’s and Charlotte’s,” she went on — “and there’s also Maggie’s and mine. I think too that there’s Charlotte’s and mine. Yes,” she mused, “Charlotte’s and mine is certainly a case. In short, you see, there are plenty, but I mean,” she said, “to keep my head.” (p.92)

We must likewise reckon, according to the situation, with Maggie’s and Mr. Verver’s, or Mr. Verver’s and Charlotte’s case. In this novel there are many ‘they’s of equal weight and different quality, linked together, keeping balance. Notice that ‘balance (equilibrium, proportion)’ is one of the key words in this novel.¹⁹



Moreover, schema resides in the way the people appear on the stage; they do either as individuals in their respective interior monologue, or in pairs in dialogue. Each of them, or

each of the pairs shows us in turns, with equal rights — we should not be beguiled by the headings of the two volumes into favouring Prince and Princess — a huge mass of peripheral information, but not a hint of what’s what.

4

It is a well-known fact that the plot of *The Golden Bowl* is first designed for ‘a little tale’.²⁰ Although what finally came out is far from one, the large volume at length amounts to his first sketch with a little retouch, so far as plot is concerned. What has made the story so inflated into the present *chef-d’oeuvre* is not the addition or complication of plot, but a superabundance of eloquent consciousness. We hardly enjoy this novel, if ever, by asking with relish what will happen next, as we do in reading Dickens, Hardy, or even, in a lesser degree, James’s early novels like *Roderick Hudson* or *The American*. Towards his so-called ‘Major Phase’, the chief material of his novel has changed — or, I dare say, dissolved — from plot (as ‘story’ or ‘action’) to ‘consciousness’. And at last in *The Golden Bowl*, plot also resigned its post as a framework in favour of symmetrical diagram or symbolic ‘form’, as we have surveyed hitherto. The combination of ‘consciousness’ and symbolic framework is a necessary condition of Modernism, but not a sufficient one.

Here we must stop arguing the modernity of this novel, for, after all, James is neither the pursuer of ‘symbolism’ nor of ‘(sub)consciousness’. We should not think little of Leavis’s warning that ‘to stress the symbolism too much would tend to misunderstanding’,²¹ ascribing it to his adherence to moral. As to ‘consciousness’, what James presents to us is not ‘subconsciousness’ or ‘unconsciousness’ which flows in a poetic stream. David Lodge writes:

While James’s art and aesthetic theory certainly have affinities with the symbolist movement, he draws back at the brink of a total commitment to it. One way of

formulating this, is to say that he is more of a nineteenth-century novelist than a twentieth-century one, an explorer of the intelligence rather than of the subconscious. Another, is to say that his language allows the maximum degree of play to the complexity of experience that is compatible with the retention of a logically ordered discourse.²²

James has never ceased to be the pursuer of 'life'. *The Golden Bowl* represents life and consciousness so familiar to us that we are willy-nilly inclined to 'value' the people and make moral judgements as to their relations and deeds, as we do in actual life, fully aware that it will lead us to nowhere. Those critics, who lay too much stress on the dichotomy of his international theme, content themselves with the declaration of the first victory of American moral beauty over European 'manners'. But can we look upon Maggie as an embodiment of moral beauty as Milly Theale? Isn't she after all one of ordinary girls in her manner of love and jealousy? She has just got a knowledge, morally developed, and waits until the situation takes care of itself. Is the ending a happy one? So far as Maggie is concerned, yes. This story, however, is also the tragedy of Charlotte, another American girl, who is often classified with Kate Croy and unjustly counted as hard, malignant, or even repulsive.

Conrad writes:

One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James' novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of life still going on.²³

This is also the case with *The Golden Bowl*. No end of thoughts and questions whirl around James's artistry and intention. We stand in front the tapestry, giddy and mystified, just sure of its greatness.

Notes

1. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884; rpt. in *Partial Portraits*, Macmillan and Co., 1888).
2. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904; rpt. Penguin Books, 1985). All page references are to this edition.
3. Images of 'voyage' are also seen in p.95, 195, 238, 300, 338, 343, 385, 416, 417, 502, 507, 540.
4. Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1962), 'gold'.
5. Images of 'golden', also in p.138, 282, 421, 424, 428, 567, 572.
6. *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, 'cup'.
7. Talking of the symbolism of 'cup', we remember the gourd (also called as 'cup') of the statue in *Roderick Hudson*, which symbolizes, Roderick, sculptor, tells Rowland, 'knowledge, pleasure, experience. Anything of that kind!'; I feel like connecting the idea with the symbolism of the golden bowl, as Marius Bewley suggests in "Henry James and 'Life'", *The Eccentric Design: Form in the Classic American Novel* (Chatto & Windus, 1959).
8. Images of 'cup', also in p.179, 251, 269.
9. It is also used idiomatically: 'a weak vessel' (p.233).
10. 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.' (Eccl. 12. 6).
11. 'Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?
Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?'
(Blake, *The Book of Thel*, 1789)
12. 'An unsigned review, *Academy*' (1905; rpt. in *Henry James: The Critical Heritage* ed. by Roger Gard, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

13. Gore Vidal, 'Introduction' to *The Golden Bowl*, p. 14.
14. Nicola Bradbury, *Henry James: The Later Novels* (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 123.
15. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p.117.
16. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Chapter 20.
17. Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Basil Blackwell, 1972).
18. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, XXII.
19. Other key words are 'life', 'knowledge (know)', 'quantity'—James's favorite words on the whole — and especially in *The Golden Bowl*, 'find out for oneself', 'form', 'value'.
20. See *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. by F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdoch (Oxford University Press, 1947).
21. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; rpt. Penguin Books, 1962), p.150.
22. David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p.190.
23. Joseph Conrad, 'Henry James: An Appreciation', p.46.