

**Nanda “Sits Downstairs”:  
Discourse Network and the Representation of Sexuality  
in Henry James’s *The Awkward Age***

Chun-san Wang

Intergrams 13.2(2013):  
<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/intergrams/132/132-wang.pdf>  
ISSN: 1683-4186

**Abstract**

In Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* (1899), the exposure of Nanda Brookenham, the heroine of the novel, to the licentious talk of her mother’s coterie of friends furnishes both the thematic germ and the narrative method for the novel. In that Nanda’s virginal innocence is irredeemably compromised by the conversational freedom of the adults around her, James’s scenic method of “organic and dramatic dialogue” not only represents but enacts Nanda’s exposure to the stigmatized knowledge about sexuality. Viewed from this interpretive perspective, Nanda’s sexuality is not an inborn quality, but something created or even fabricated by the interrelations of the discourse network comprised mainly by the free talk in the London salon. The main purpose of this study is then to examine how this discourse network works to inscribe itself on the female body and to incorporate it into the salon exchange. Moreover, as the verbal exchange in the novel is structured and regulated by sexual and economic exchange, the various configurations of relationships among them will also be explored. As implied by the complicity between thematic substance and compositional strategy, the “Awkward” in the title of the novel does not merely show the awkwardness produced by the adolescent daughter’s coming of age and her “sitting downstairs”: It also connotes the awkwardness closely related to the representation of the sexual in general. Consequently, this latter awkwardness will also be addressed in relation to social decorum and censorship, as well as to the more general issue of representing the sexual in the novel.

**Keywords:** Henry James, *The Awkward Age*, sexuality, discourse network, exchange, censorship

I cannot so much as imagine Dickens and Scott without the “love-making” left . . . out. . . . In all their work it is, in spite of the number of pleasant sketches of affection gratified or crossed, the element that matters least. Why not therefore assume . . . that discriminations which have served their purpose so well in the past will continue not less successfully to meet the case? What will you have better than Scott and Dickens? (Henry James, “The Future of the Novel,” *Literary Criticism* 1: 108)

[In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*] the presence of “sexuality” is only equaled by the absence of it. (Henry James, *Letters* 3: 406)

## I. Introduction

The subject matter of *The Awkward Age* (1899), as James writes in his post-mortem examination of the novel in the preface, is the “sitting downstairs” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1121) of the adolescent female who is eligible for marriage. This sitting downstairs, which is in the novel an euphuism for the exposure of the young daughter to the licentious talk of the adults’ circle, creates a crisis for both the daughter and the adults, for the presence of “sweet virginal eighteen”<sup>1</sup> in the drawing room exposes her to the danger of corruption by sexuality while curtailing the pleasure the adults obtain from their talk. The compositional method—the scenic method<sup>2</sup>--employed by James to present this central situation has a continuity or complicity with his thematic content. The exposure of Nanda Brookenham, the heroine of the novel, to the “free talk” of the adults around her furnishes both the thematic germ and the narrative method of the novel. In that Nanda’s innocence is compromised precisely by the conversational freedom of her mother’s circle, the scenic method of “dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1127) not only represents but enacts Nanda’s exposure to stigmatized knowledge about sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Viewed from

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 256; subsequent references to this text will be cited in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Actually James does not adhere to his dramatic method as scrupulously as he claims, for his commentary often gives much more than could be contained in the stage directions it purports to replace. Francis Gillen counts thirty direct authorial comments in the course of the novel, in addition to the “semi-comments and those which are linked to a piece of stage action” (671).

<sup>3</sup> According to Sergio Perosa, James’s “experiment with the *roman dialogué* seems to be well suited to

this perspective, Nanda's sexuality is not an *a priori* given or an innate quality, but something created by the cross-relations of the discourse network comprised mainly by the adults' free talk. How this discourse network works to incorporate the "original" female body will be the major concern of this article. And since the verbal exchange in the novel is complicated by sexual and economic exchange, the various configurations of relationships among these exchange systems will also be examined. Furthermore, as implied by the complicity between thematic substance and compositional strategy, the "Awkward" in the title of the novel not only indicates the awkwardness produced by the adolescent daughter's coming of age and her "sitting downstairs" but the awkwardness that is closely associated with the representation of the sexual. Therefore, the latter awkwardness will also be addressed in relation to social decorum and censorship, as well as to the issue of representing the sexual in the novel.

In *The Awkward Age*, what is at issue is the nature of Nanda's knowledge<sup>4</sup>. On various occasions, Nanda says "I know everything" (340, 397, 525), but what does she know and from what sources does she obtain her knowledge? If knowledge and the act of knowing are the main concerns of the later James, *The Awkward Age* differs from other major works of this period<sup>5</sup> in that it does not provide a "center of intelligence" from which the reader can obtain an overview of the protagonist's knowledge. In both *The Sacred Fount* and *The Ambassadors*, the protagonists are denied access to sexual knowledge and experience; therefore, they can perceive and understand sexuality only in and through the fragmented impressions and dispersed images they gather from the outside world. Imaginative seeing is then their pathway to knowing or even to precarious experiencing. In both works, the reader can undergo the same phantasmagoric experiences with the protagonists since these experiences are presented by the first-person narrator (in *The Sacred Fount*) or are registered by the center of consciousness (in *The Ambassadors*). *What Maisie Knew*, the immediate predecessor of *The Awkward Age*, is told from the point of view of a child who ages in its course from six to about twelve. By highlighting the gap between the child's

---

the story precisely because it is through the dialogues of the grown-ups that Nanda is exposed to the danger of corruption" (69-70).

<sup>4</sup> According to Kaja Silverman, sexual knowledge is the "knowledge of adult sexuality" and in *The Awkward Age* such knowledge "leads not to power and social integration, but to loss and isolation" (162). For a critique of Silverman's developmental view of Nanda's sexuality see Michael Trask, esp. 108-109. See also Eve Sedgwick, 156ff. Shlomo Singer's etymological study of the word "know" is relevant here; according to him, the word is derived from the Biblical Hebrew root *yada*, which explicitly means both "to know" and "to have sexual intercourse" (345).

<sup>5</sup> The whole of *What Maisie Knew* is an explication of the multiple significations of the title. In *The Sacred Fount*, James teases the reader all through the labyrinth of the text with what the unnamed narrator does or does not know, or with what he pretends to or not to know. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether's quest for the "truth" about the nature of the liaison between Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet comprises the main action of the novel.

perception and the adult's, the novel leads us to correct Maisie's construction of what she has seen and to register the licentious and exploitative behavior of the adults around her.

However, in *The Awkward Age* James drastically changes his method. As he no longer gives us a definite center of intelligence, we can hardly obtain an outside viewpoint from the inside of the text to explain the complex relationships it presents. Nanda appears to be the heroine solely because the events revolve around her. But ultimately the whole notion of what it means to be a heroine becomes blurred and uncertain in this novel. Unlike Maisie, who is genuinely different from other characters because of the knowledge and vision of life she acquires, Nanda knows only what the others have known all too well. She cannot be separated from the events around her, for she is simultaneously the product, the participant, and the observer of these events. This determination of the heroine by the relations and events that make up her world may place the reader in a position where he or she is denied any critical privilege in relation to the finished product and where he or she can construct meaning not through a totalizing consciousness but through the interrelations that encompass and define individual consciousness as part of a larger and ever-shifting design. Shut up "wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself" (*Literary Criticism: 2: 1134*), we are thus left to work out connections for ourselves. These cross-relations multiply themselves and form into an incredibly complicated web. "Scenes are," as Margaret Walters says, "presented mostly in dialogue, with movement, gesture, position in a room as carefully plotted as in any stage scenario" (198). It is through reading and interpreting the highly elusive and allusive scrip of the adults' talks and gestures<sup>6</sup> that Nanda can obtain access to the secret knowledge of the sexual and achieve her own sexual identity, and it is only from within this complex network of discourse that the reader can construct his or her own version of the awkward age.

## II. The "cabalistic" diagram and the story of "Oh!"

In the preface to *The Awkward Age*, James recollects how he sketched his writing project to the conductors of Harper's Weekly, the original publisher of the novel, by drawing a "cabalistic" diagram on a sheet of paper:

[T]he neat figure of a circle consist[s] of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was

---

<sup>6</sup> Although the talk is supposed to be expurgated for her, Nanda, as James notes, "inevitably hears, overhears, guesses, follows, takes in, becomes acquainted with, horrors" (*Notebooks of Henry James 117-118*).

my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps . . . the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. (*Literary Criticism*: 2: 1130)

Each of the “lamps” is a single “social occasion” in which James proceeds to exhaust the scenic possibilities; the “occasions” correspond to “successive Acts of a Play.” In a self-laudatory language, James labels the Books (the Acts) of the novel as “occasions”: “I reveled in this notion of the Occasion, as a thing by itself, really and completely a scenic thing, and could scarce name it, while crouching amid thick arcane of my plan, with a large enough O” (2: 1131). Each of the acts is divided into numbered units which we may call scenes. There are thirty-eight such scenes rather evenly distributed among the ten characters-named books of the novel. The ten books illuminate the central subject which gives the novel its title—the awkward age. We are therefore in the presence of a celestial system almost like the solar system: a center with ten great celestial bodies around it, each one being orbited by three or four satellite-chapters. But this system has an astonishing peculiarity which inverses the original meaning of the comparison: instead of emanating from the center to its surrounding planets, the light (James uses the image) goes in the opposite direction. It is the satellites that illuminate the center, and the center, which is the emerging sexuality of the adolescent daughter, is the black hole of the text that absorbs most of the light radiating from its surrounding planets, with its ghostly contour only partially and alluringly revealed. The center therefore remains obscure and the “subject in itself” almost invisible.

The complex figure of the concentric circles of “Occasions” around a central object—the “new and innocent, a wholly unacclimated presence” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1122) of the virginal daughter in a “circle” of free talk—resonates with the “vicious circle” or the “going round” of sexual intrigues in Mrs. Brook’s “circus” ring (188). There appears a homology between the plot’s rounds of sexual intrigues and the narrative rounds of “Occasions,” between the licentious talk and the circle of representation. The juicy contents yielded by this vertiginous play of the virginal circles and rounds have the immediate effect of making James fumble and stumble in a tropic jungle:

[The story-teller is] cultivating fondly its possible relations and extensions, the bright efflorescence in it. . . . [His mind] has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning. . . . The story-teller has but to

have been condemned by nature to a liberally amused and beguiled, a richly sophisticated, view of relations and fine inquisitive speculative sense for them, to find himself at moments flounder in a deep warm jungle. (*Literary Criticism*: 2: 1122-1123)

However, in the novel this lush growth of passion is replaced by the dissemination of morbid desire. Evoking the figure of circles and rounds in the preface, the expletive “Oh!”, which is repeated throughout the novel, does not show that its user has real passion but only marks his or her languid desire. When used by Mitchy, “Oh!” indicates that Mrs. Brook’s business is being carried out well. Mitchy shrewdly explains this to Longdon at Van’s when the latter tells him that Mrs. Brook is coming: ““Oh!’ Mitchy himself felt, as soon as this comment had quitted his lips, that it might sound even to a stranger like a sign, such as the votaries of Mrs. Edward Brookenham had fallen into the way of constantly throwing off, that he recognized her hand in the matter” (120). One of its obdurate users is Edward Brookenham. The following snippet of the first conversation between him and his wife—which shows the wife’s interest in the possible adulterous affair between the Duchess and Petherton--superbly reveals his inanity and hollowness, which are two essential aspects of the “modern morbidity” (100):

When Mr. Brookenham appeared his wife was prompt. “[The Duchess is] coming back for Lord Petherton.”

“Oh!” he simply said.

“There’s something between them.”

“Oh!” he merely repeated. But it would have taken many such sounds on his part to represent a spirit of response discernible to any one but his wife. (66)

Aside from its covert and general association with Mrs. Brook’s activities, this expletive is also a female symbol, much as in the novel by Pauline Réage, that echoes James’s emphasis on the social “circle” with which every character in the novel is so concerned. For example, “Oh!” becomes more licentious and even more obscene when the “abysmally coarse” Petherton uses it:

“Look here—you must help me,” the Duchess said to Petherton. “You can, perfectly—and it’s the first thing I’ve first asked of you.”

“Oh, oh, oh!” her interlocutor laughed.

“I must have Mitchy,” she went on without noticing his particular

humor.

“Mitchy too?”—he appeared to wish to leave her in no doubt of it.

“How low you are!”

. . . .

“He doesn’t like me.”

Her interlocutor looked at her with all his brutality. “Oh, dear, I can speak for you—if that’s what you want!” (115)

Such usage of “Oh!” fits in a context in which the Duchess wants urgently to barter away Aggie to Mitchy. On the other hand, though James tries to obscure the real nature of the relationship between the Duchess and Petherton as he does between Mrs. Brook and Van, he at least suggests that intercourse for them can be verbal and sexual innuendo is more exciting than a real relationship for only in their talk can these people rediscover and renew their vitality.

### III. The comradeship in obscurity and the rhetoric of “everything”

The novel’s dramatic form echoes its characters’ life style. Talk is both their medium and their main theme as it is James’s. They talk about talking and almost all their conversations are self-reflective and self-reflexive. Even literal-minded as she is, the Duchess pays malicious tribute to its charm: “The men, the young and the clever ones, find [the Buckingham Crescent] a house—and Heaven knows they’re right—with intellectual elbow room, with freedom of talk. Most English talk is a quadrille in a sentry box” (225). For the core members of Mrs. Brook’s circle, such as Van and Mitchy, talk is a highly calculated and sophisticated performance. They watch themselves playing verbal feats and take pride in being able to solve double entendres or innuendo-laden phrases. The following fragment of dialogue finely expresses their “comrade[ship] in obliquity” (446):

“Not of course on the chance of anything’s happening to the dear child [Aggie]—to whom nothing obviously *can* happen but that her aunt will marry her off in shortest possible time and in the best possible conditions. No, the interest is much more in the way the Duchess herself steers,” [Mrs. Brook said]

“Ah, she’s in a boat,” Mr. Cashmore fully concurred, “that will take a good bit of that.”

It is not for Mr. Longdon’s historian to overlook that if he was, not unnaturally, mystified he was yet also visibly interested. “What boat is

she in?" (196)

Here the marine metaphor connotes that the Duchess' ability to steer between the Scylla of shielding Aggie from corruption of sexuality and the Charybdis of conducting her illicit affair with Lord Petherton. But Longdon is too literal-minded to understand the ambiguous jargons of Mrs. Brook's clique: "he might have been a stranger at an Eastern court," as the narrator says, "comically helpless without his interpreter," (198). Therefore, as the conversation proceeds, Mrs. Brook asks Van to explain the whole matter to Longdon, but Van declines. Cashmore, on the contrary, would like to tell Longdon "like a shot" if there were no ladies present in their conversation. Cashmore's vulgarity and his obdurate tendency to explain too much and too explicitly lead Mrs. Brook to announce later that he is not "one of us" (197).

The dialogue provides a brilliant façade for the characters as they go about their business of gratifying their illicit erotic fantasy. Among the strategies most often employed to hide in order to increase and to exchange their private desire is the rhetoric of "everything." This rhetoric is established in the first scene of the novel, in which Van and Longdon hold their first conversation. Still sticking to a closed system of language in which each signifier has its definite signified and attempting to make firm his fantasy about Lady Julia, Longdon asserts to Van that "Lady Julia had everything" (23). In response to Van's inquiry regarding whether that is just what Mrs. Brook has, Longdon replies, "Yes, she's very brilliant, but it's a totally different thing" (23). Van's shrewd play on the plural significance of "everything" then continues for two pages as Longdon, helplessly struggling to define the word, attributes to Lady Julia various and contradictory qualities. For Longdon, the word presents the idealized beauty of Lady Julia (25); yet, Van turns it about to make it mean the subsurface business of "everything that goes on in Mrs. Brook's circle." It invokes for Longdon the absent presence of Lady Julia and the unrealized desire he has had for her while it connotes for Van the verbal/sexual exchange in Mrs. Brook's drawing room. This play on the rhetoric of "everything" arouses Longdon's resentment while keeping Van's "gaiety overflow[ing]" (25).

In the same conversation, concerning Nanda's dim prospect in marriage market, Van says to Longdon, "She's at the age when the whole thing—speaking of her appearance, her possible share of good looks—is still, in a manner, in a fog. But everything depends on it." Rather nonplussed, Longdon asks, "what, once more, do you mean by everything?" (25-26). This time "everything" is associated with Nanda's eligibility for a timely marriage, a thing most desired by the members of Mrs. Brook's inner circle for it will eliminate, as Van puts it, the "strain," the "implication" of Nanda's being "downstairs." Still confused, Longdon asks, "Where's the 'strain'—of



her being suffered to be a member of [Mrs. Brook's drawing room]?" (26). "Everything" and its interpretations thus mark Longdon's rite of initiation into the salon exchange and the exchange of desire implicated in it.

James arranges the assertions of "everything" to reverberate throughout the novel. In a discussion with Mrs. Brook about the initiation of young ladies into the society, the nominal business of the novel, the Duchess claims that young men are not on the lookout for girls who "have been pitchforked—by talk and contacts and visits and newspapers and by the way the poor creatures rush about and all the extraordinary things they do—quite into *everything*" (57). Later in the same conversation, the Duchess says "[We] must take what we can get and I shall be the first to take it. You can't have everything for ninepence" (62-63). In the first remarks, "everything," means, among others, the adults' salon exchange, the penetrative violence of which is aptly conveyed by the image of pitchfork; in the second, it means profitable marriage. The rhetoric of "everything" thus finely and laconically reveals the various materialistic and sexual doings hidden behind the conventional concept of propriety. Near the end of the novel, Mr. Brook asks his wife if Van knows, in regard to Longdon's wealth, "anything of the general figure?" Mrs. Brook replies, "Everything. It's high" (457). Thus "everything" becomes the monetary and materialistic motivation that brings about the selling of Nanda to Longdon. In contrast, Longdon consistently uses the term to refer to his romantic fantasy about Lady Julia. In making his offer to Van concerning Nanda, he says: "I think I've thought of everything" (271). The irony arises from the fact that while he believes he is reinventing Nanda in the image of Lady Julia, he is actually strapped in Mrs. Brook's scheme of selling her daughter. Unwittingly influenced by Mrs. Brook's circle, he finally uses the term "everything" the way its members often do.

Like Maisie, Nanda is also "condemned" to know "Everything" (*What Maisie Knew* 213). Playing a part in the "circus" run by Mrs. Brook (189), Nanda performs her own verbal acrobatics and becomes an expert at the rhetoric of "everything." At one point in the novel, when Van asks her about "poor Harold's borrowings," Nanda simply answers "Oh I know everything!" (340). Later, Mitchy asks her what she knows of the Duchess and her life, and Nanda answers, "Oh I know everything!" (355) and she continues with the warning to Mitchy: "Don't 'try' anything then. Take everything for granted" (360). Given in the *anything-everything* terminology, such a suggestion is a sure sign of Nanda's successful initiation into the center of her mother's circle. And this success is further confirmed by Van in a repetitious statement to Mitchy: "she always knows everything. . . . She always knows everything, everything" (377). To this, Mitchy simply responds: "Everything, everything" (378).

#### IV. The “abject horrid unredeemed” book

For the core members of Mrs. Brook’s circle, talk arouses, circulates, and fulfills desire. It fits the situation then that the “hideous book” is one of the most recurrent topics in their talk and, toward the end of the novel, becomes the stage property that helps set off its climactic moment. Significantly, the first subject of the first conversation between Mrs. Brook and Mitchy in the novel is the two “French books” the former has borrowed from the latter. In the conversation, Mitchy asks Mrs. Brook if the books are “particularly dreadful”:

“A kind of a morbid modernity? There is that,” she dimly conceded.

“Is that what they call it? Awfully good name. You must have got it from old Van!” he gaily declared.

“I dare say I did. I get the good things from him and the bad ones from you. But you’re not to suppose,” Mrs. Brookenham went on, “that I’ve discussed your horrible book with him.”

“Come, I say!” Mr. Mitchett protested: “I’ve seen you with books from Vanderbank which if you *have* discussed them with him—well,” she laughed, “I should like to have been there!”

“You have not seen me with anything like yours—no, no, never!” She was particularly positive, “Van on the contrary gives tremendous warnings, makes apologies, in advance, for things that—well, after all, have not killed one.”

“That have perhaps a little, after the warnings, let one down?”  
(79-80)

As their talk continues, Mrs. Brook unwittingly discloses the embarrassing fact that she has read through the “abject horrid unredeemed” books Mitchy lent her. Beneath the surface flow of polished talk there are strong undercurrents of illicit desire seeking for gratification in verbal exchange. Obviously, Mitchy is here trying to take verbal advantage of Mrs. Brook while she is assuming a mask of modesty in order to fend off his verbal thrust. However, her tactic does not damp but arouses and tantalizes his desire.

Though their contents are not revealed in the text, these books indisputably contain pornographic subject matters. Mrs. Brook’s reference to “[c]harming literary remains” and Mitchy’s remarks that “the most awful things *are* found” (81) indicate that, in the sexually repressive Victorian age, there was great clandestine interest in

pornography, as evidenced by private collections which came to light after their owners' death. This undercover dissemination of pornography in the text can be further detected in Mitchy's remarks, in the same conversation, to Mrs. Brook, "Do you suppose [Harold] spends his time over Dr. Watt's hymns?" (81). Moreover, the danger of exposing her niece to the widespread influence of pornographic materials even makes the Duchess "a little nervous about the subjects" taught at Mr. Garlick's class in "Modern Light Literature" where she sends Aggie (44). The Duchess has ample reasons to be upset, for "Mr. Garlick," a pun on "garlic," means explicitly that the literature he teaches may reek of obscenity and moral corruption. Another case in point is that Aggie also reads *Stories from English History* which, according to the Duchess, leaves "the horrors" out (145). Pornography then not only mirrors the characters' desire but also becomes a widespread threat to the innocence of their adolescent children.<sup>7</sup> As shown in the Duchess' handling of Aggie's readings, the expurgation of the horrible contents from all books becomes a preliminary step for the social engineering of emergent female sexuality.

James's pornographic imagination reaches its apex in his graphic rendering of the party at Tishy's, a scene that comprises the climactic moment of the novel and nearly brings Mrs. Brook's circle to the verge of collapse. As the party coalesces, Mrs. Brook, noting the strange absence of Aggie and Petherton, pointedly asks Mitchy, "where in the world's your wife?" (423). Appealed to for information, Tishy tells the company that Aggie is in the other room "playing with" Petherton (424). The passage that follows effectively illustrates how James, while limiting himself to the details of his characters' drawing-room behavior, can still suggest something of their bedroom activity. The focus of the scene is, ironically, a French novel, which, according to Tessa Hadley, is "a marker for performances of permitted and impermissible sexual knowledge" (232). Petherton's "proper behavior," that is, his effort to shield Aggie from the danger of corruption by the improper and "hideous" book, suggests the full impropriety of both characters. To save Aggie from the book, he has to snatch it from where she has hidden it, that is, from under her buttocks. The consequent struggle between them suggests a sublimated seduction, for Petherton is after that on which Aggie sits. And the sexual connotation is made even more obvious by Mrs. Brook's observation: "See, and it was a *real* pull. But of course . . . from the moment one has a person's nails, and almost his teeth, in one's flesh--!" (431).

## V. The desire of and for the other

In Mrs. Brook's "temple of analysis" (349), a phrase anticipating the "palace of

---

<sup>7</sup> As Peter Brooks notes, the reading of the "revolting" French novels is in itself a "defloration" (211).

thought” of the unnamed narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, discussions of an experience are more exciting than the experience itself, which—as Mitchy finds when he visits Beccles—is hardly real until it becomes a “wonderful theme for discourse in Buckingham Crescent” (349). They are less interested, for example, in Aggie or Lady Fanny than in their own perception and analyses of their affairs. As the narrator notes, “[Buckingham Crescent] was a place in which, at all times, before interesting objects, the unanimous occupants, almost more concerned for each other’s vibration than for anything else, were apt rather more to exchange sharp and silent searchings than to fix their on the object itself” (107). Even when their own feelings are concerned, they are preoccupied with working out their significances by weaving them into an elaborate verbal fabric. Thus, Van explains to Longdon: “We hate and we love—the latter especially; but to tell each other why is to break that little tacit rule of finding out for ourselves which is the delight of our lives and the source of our triumphs” (407).

On the other hand, this highly intellectual pose is only used by them to hide the vacuity and morbidity that is the essence of their collective life. What they desire is always what other people desire; in desiring others’ desire, they betray their own ontological lack, a lack that needs to be filled out by the discourse of and for other people. The fact of whether someone is having an affair with someone else is not of interest to the group: What interests them most is how to turn other people’s passion and suffering into topics for their salon exchange and how to derive pleasure from their continued speculation. For instance, when Van asks her why not just let Lady Fanny “bolt” with her hypothetical lover, Captain Dent-Douglas, Mrs. Brook answers, “Go? Then what would become of us? . . . She’s the delight of our life. . . . She’s the ornament of our circle. . . . She will, she won’t—she won’t, she will! It’s the excitement, every day, of plucking the daisy over” (178). When Cashmore tells her that he is no longer pursuing Carrie Donner, Mrs. Brook is disappointed as if “a fabric had crumpled” (171). But she soon finds a new interest in speculating on his relationship with her own daughter. Later, she even placidly accepts her son’s affair with Lady Fanny as a further twist in the saga of the lady’s adulteries and takes immense pride and pleasure in her son’s success with her.

“His success is true,” Mrs. Brook insisted. “How he does it I don’t know.”

“Oh *don’t* you?” trumpeted the Duchess.

“He’s amazing,” Mrs. Brook pursued. “I watch—I hold my breath. But I’m bound to say also I rather admire. He somehow amuses them.”

“She’s as pleased as Punch,” said the Duchess.

“Those great calm women—they like slighter creatures.”

“The great calm whales,” the Duchess laughed, “swallow the little fishes.”

“Oh my dear,” Mrs. Brook returned, “Harold can be tasted, if you like--“ (415)

Mrs. Brook enjoys being involved in the amorous affairs of others, attempts all the time to perpetuate “interesting” situations, and even uses her children to gratify this perverse desire.

Despite all its perversity and shallowness, Mrs. Brook’s salon discourse literally creates and dominates the lives of people around her. Cashmore, the parliamentary member of the circle whose name suggests vulgarity and greediness, is, as Mrs. Brook says, “more or less produced” by the circle, and it is only because Carrie Donner takes him for one of them (172) that she strikes up an affair with him. As Mitchy declares to Longdon, the members of Mrs. Brook’s circle are “governed at any rate everywhere by Mrs. Book, in our mysterious ebbs and flows, very much as the tides are governed by the moon” (127). However, if Mrs. Brook reinvents and manipulates other people’s lives, she also depends for life on those whom she governs, for their admiring devotion is a continuing confirmation of her wit, creativity, and vitality: “Mrs. Brook became as wonderful as if she saw in her friend’s face some admiring reflection of the fine freedom of mind that . . . she could always show,” as the narrator says (182). Without that reflection, she could hardly exist. This helps explain why she feels despair over Nanda’s presence in her circle, for it threatens to take away all the pleasure and freedom she has obtained from others’ admiration. In the end, she is so desperate that she prepares to gamble on herself and her salon world rather than take the place second to Nanda.

Throughout the novel, like Mrs. Brook, Van constantly sees his self-image reflected from the admiring eyes of his friends, who in turn project onto him some dreams they wish to realize. This dominant personality trait of Van’s is finely established by James in the first pages of the novel. We find that in his first conversation with Longdon, Van is less interested in the latter than in his own image reflected back from his eyes. Furthermore, derived from his relentless narcissism, his “sacred terror”<sup>8</sup> is a way of dominating people by insisting on a one-sided relationship, in order to preserve his own emotional non-commitment and moral superiority. This is evidenced by his relationship with Mitchy. Mitchy finds in him the

---

<sup>8</sup> The “sacred terror” is read by Cynthia Ozick as the “sacro terrore” of imperial Rome and as awe in “the face of a knowledge that is beyond our knowledge” (Introduction xix); read by Dorothea Krook as charisma (14); by J. Hillis Miller as Van’s “homosexuality” (139), his “heterosexual charm” (142), and as fear; read by Tessa Hadley as Van’s “male mystique,” which conveys “both the deep, the magical appeal, and the scent of blood” (76).

ideal image of everything he would wish to be and sees him as a great case of “privilege,” who goes through life “guaranteed” by his own charm (484) and by his power to attract other people’s fantasies: “You’ll walk in magnificent ‘later on’ not a bit less than you do today; you’ll continue to have the benefit of everything our imagination, perpetually engaged, often baffled and never fatigued, will continue to bedeck you with” (307). Van’s ability to arouse other people’s desire is further confirmed by the Duchess. Paying him patronizing tribute and subjecting him to the process of reification, the Duchess describes him to Longdon as a beautiful object to be admired and enjoyed as everyone’s “property” (402). For all his self-mockery and his admission that he trades on his charm, Van is entirely locked up in his narcissism and becomes its victim. It is significant that in our one glimpse of him alone (at Tishy’s), he first reacts uneasily to the sight of his own name written by Nanda on the French novel, and then looks in the mirror (384). And it is still more significant that, as he acknowledges, it is he that should take the responsibility for “setting the beastly thing [the French novel] in motion” (433). As James sets off the reader’s pornographic imagination without satisfying it, Van arouses and fuels others’ erotic desire but refuses to gratify it.

Van’s love of his own “sacred terror” ultimately leads him to refuse Longdon’s offer of a marriage with Nanda. As Longdon’s fairy-godmotherly beneficence and Nanda’s long-suffering sexual passion define it, marriage would mean, for Van, a fall into the circle of sexual and economic reproduction and the consequent loss of the lucidity and sovereignty of self-consciousness. In this respect, Van is like the unnamed narrator in *The Sacred Fount* and Strether in *The Ambassadors*. All of them show a strong will to celibacy, that is, a willed resistance to involving oneself sexually with other people and to implicating oneself in the circle of natural procreation.<sup>9</sup> Van’s “conscious[ness] of the charming whole” (303) is a product of the “cross-relations” of the salon discourse, a discourse which both invents and displaces Van’s “authentic” desire. Desire produced by such discourse is a parody, a repetition, or even a subversion of authentic love and passion. Like anything outside this discourse network, marriage points to the realm of the absolute or the transcendental, defines the limits of the discourse, and hence reveals the limits of the surface self that discourse brings into existence. Therefore, Van’s loyalty to his self-image must be supported by free talk, just as his sacred terror must be sustained by his phallic gaze at the amorous affairs fabricated by his or others’ imagination.

## VI. The community of discourse vs. the traditional family

---

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the will to celibacy and the novel, see Edward Said, *Beginnings* 137ff.

In Mrs. Brook's circle, the expression of deep feelings or strong emotions is something to be avoided at all cost. "None of inner circle at Buckingham Crescent was ever angry" (297), we are told, and at one point of the novel Mrs. Brook even announces, rather stoically, that they "haven't had the excuse of passion" (313) in their dealing with each other. This free-wheeling talk set into motion and presided by Mrs. Brook is inevitably superficial or, at least, tends not to stick to one relation or one relational configuration. Yet, as a community of free-ranging discourse, Mrs. Brook's circle, apart from fulfilling the various needs and desires of its members, also performs the socio-political function of controlling sexual dissemination. Mrs. Brook is a "consoler of women in a society that institutionalizes feminine grief and consolation, just as it institutionalizes feminine wantonness and constraint" (Mizruchi 105). She runs a clinic for the betrayed and dissatisfied wives in the novel who have entered upon "a vicious cycle of discontent, debauchery, surveillance, and regulation" (Mizruchi 122). Like a practitioner of modern talk cure, she holds "consultations," and "prescribes" (104) antidotes. Toward the end of the novel, Mitchy says to Nanda that Mrs. Brook is "wonderful for wives" (522), and then apotheosizes the institution of her salon: "The generation will come and go, and the *personnel* . . . of the saloon will shift and change, but the institution itself, as resting on a deep human need, has a long course yet to run and a good work to do yet. *We* shan't last, but [Mrs. Brook] will" (523).

If, by conducting sessions of talk cure in her salon, Mrs. Brook carries out the socio-political function of regulating the disruptive and destructive sexual passion of the wives around her, such as Lady Fanny and Carrie Donner, her role as Nanda's mother is much more complex. Nanda's sitting downstairs threatens to curtail the freedom of her talk and to reveal the shallowness of the verbal fictions and frictions on which she bases her life. Mrs. Brook is aware of this impending threat:

"Good talk: you know—no one dear Van, should know better—what part for me that plays. Therefore when one has deliberately to make one's talk bad--!"

"Bad'?" Vanderbank, in his amusement, fell back in his chair, "Dear Mrs. Brook, you're too delightful!"

"You know what I mean—stupid, flat, fourth-rate." (284)

Obviously, Mrs. Brooks is here referring to the fact that Nanda's "perpetual," "inexorable" participation in their talk has forced them to "sacrifice," to "compromise" the freedom of talk (285). On the other hand, this passage also shows that Mrs. Brook's pride in her own conversational skills is hugely curtailed by the

recognition that, for all the freedom and pleasure it has offered, the free talk cannot resist the encroachment of the affairs outside the salon. This is more thoroughly presented in the scene in which Mrs. Brook, Van, and Mitchy discuss on Longdon's offer of a possible marriage with Nanda to Van. In the scene, while they are flaunting their verbal skills, their sarcastic comments on their own conversation betray an increasing ennui, a deep-felt irritation that threatens to destroy their fine pose. Each of them is under heavy stress and is not as disinterested as they claim to be. Mrs. Brook is obviously jealous of Nanda that she manages shrewdly to dissuade Van from accepting Longdon's offer; though irredeemably trapped in his self-image, Van is frightened by others' desire and demand; dwarfed by Van's handsomeness and "sacred terror," Mitchy is worried about his own unattractiveness. Their talk seems not so free-floating, so free-ranging as it used to be, but is heavily burdened with social and economic considerations. As each picks up and questions the other's words and threatens to expose the other's sly maneuvering, it becomes clear that their game can no longer contain their impatience and frustration. Finally, under the disguise of praising their style, Van comes close to destroying all their pretenses: "what stupefies me a little . . . is the extraordinary critical freedom . . . with which we discuss a question touching you, dear Mrs. Brook, so nearly and engaging so you most private and most sacred sentiments. What are we playing with, after all, but the idea of Nanda's happiness?" (306). However, Nanda is not the only victim of their verbal game: They are also its victims. Even though their talk can be self-referring and self-sustaining as they wish it to be, it still cannot achieve the closure with which they hope to fend off the encroachment from the outside world.

The community of discourse created by Mrs. Brook's salon has the effect of displacing the traditional family and speeding up its decay. As a "family of six members" which would fulfill the function of biological reproduction (Mizruchi 117), the Brookenham family is, ironically, subject to the process of degeneration. Harold and Nanda's younger sister and brother are never present in person throughout the novel—a fact indicating that the young can only maintain their innocence insofar as they are shielded from social intercourse. Harold is cynical and aged in a corruption beyond his years. His main activity in the novel is the borrowing of five-pound notes when they can be borrowed and the stealing of them when they cannot. His only ambition is to marry a rich American girl, and the only kind of work he thinks of doing is to curry favor with one of the "new" millionaires (326-327). Toward the end of the novel, he finds a career as Lady Fanny's lover.

Edward Brookenham, socially ineffective and irremediably inane, figures in his wife's drawing room, in the Duchess' words, "only as one of those queer extinguishers of fire in the corridors of hotels" (255). His unsatisfied wife is forever



seeking pleasure in conducting “intercourse” with the core members of her circle. In order to secure this pleasure, Mrs. Brook is always asking her son and daughter to spend their time at other people’s houses. Consequently, Nanda always stays at Tishy’s or at Longdon’s Suffolk estate, and Harold is always forced by his mother to get invitations from other households<sup>10</sup>. We never see the family gather together to share the affection and warmth of the hearth. The son and the daughter come and go, and the Buckingham Crescent becomes a sort of hotel for them as it is turned into a gathering place for its hostess’ circle. This phenomenon blurs the boundary between the private and the public space that is essential to the idea of the family.

The Buckingham Crescent is, as discussed earlier, the “home” for the development of the complex relations of discourse that make up the novel. Yet, the Brookenham family is evoked in order to be grafted on, parodied, and ultimately subverted by its hostess’ salon discourse (Cohen 159). This grafting occurs in a literal sense as the Brookenham family is extended through the friends that often gather at its drawing room. The terms used by the family’s friends to describe their circle—such as Van’s “merging,” “collective impression” (34), Mitchy’s “a collection of natural affinities” (124), and Longdon “a little sort of a set that hang very much together” (124)—show that Mrs. Brook’s community can fulfill a function similar to that of traditional family. Yet, in what they suggest of the stability and emotional affinity of the family, the terms such as “collective,” “set” are respectively counterbalanced by the qualifiers “impressions,” “sort of.” As Paula Marantz Cohen expertly points out, it is a language that defines the “family” only to place it “under erasure” (160). For we see an incompatibility between language and the emotional coordinates it invokes when we examine how the group actually manifests itself in the novel. Like the members of the Brookenham family, its members are forever scattered or hidden; only once in the novel do we see everyone gather (at Tishy’s) and this is at the moment when “everything” has presumably gone to pieces.

Given the emotional shallowness and vacuity of the Mrs. Brook’s group, it still poses a threat to the traditional idea about family devotion and protection. For its very existence as the site of “good talk” runs counter to the ideology of the family as a tidy and well-defined private space where the innocent are shielded from improper knowledge of the outside world. This contradiction is exemplified in the case of Nanda, who, as an unmarried girl, is pronounced threatened by exposure to the talk of her mother’s circle. From the moment she sits downstairs, Nanda starts to play many

---

<sup>10</sup> The invitation of Harold to Brander family is a sufficient example, underlined three times by James, in Mrs. Brook’s successive interviews with Harold, the Duchess, and Edward. It is not that Mrs. Brook has required Harold to cadge an invitation to Brander, but that he is being forced to act on a general invitation; “any etiquette book of the time makes clear that this was only a polite noise, never to be taken” seriously (Elizabeth Owen 77). The effrontery of the proceeding is insisted on: Harold has written to ask for a specific invitation and received none.

mutually contradictory roles Mrs. Brook assigns to her. At one point in the novel, Mrs. Brook describes her as “quite maternal” like “the modern daughter” who “won’t have a difference in [Mrs. Brook’s] freedom” (166). But a few pages later, Mrs. Brook casts her in the role of a peer or even a competitor: “From the moment she is down, the only thing for us is to live as friends” (177). Such remarks indicate that Mrs. Brook’s relationship to her daughter is not based on the traditional linear succession but on a much more protean mode. Rather than being a stable relationship, it is one that is formed in and through the free discourse of Mrs. Brook’s circle, and at the same time fuels and even redirects it. In the same way, for Mrs. Brook, the difference between being a mother, a wife, and a friend is not really discernible: All these relationships are subject to the interpretive intervention of her salon discourse. Her plan to marry off her daughter is pursued, but so are other intrigues and interests. Nanda’s future is only one part of the extension and ramification of a more complex design involving all the socio-economic and sexual/verbal relations in which Mrs. Brook is implicated and implicating others. When her daughter’s attempt to marry threatens to unravel the fabric of these relations and endanger her position within it, she sabotages the attempt, and manages to settle her daughter with Longdon in order to keep her own position intact.

Nanda has long been exposed to her mother’s style of life, which helps build her identity. “Everything, literally everything in London, in the world she lives in, is in the air she breathes—so that the longer she’s in it, the more she’ll know,” explains Van to Mitchy (378) in an explicit description of the way in which the barrier between the outside society and the family has dissolved for Nanda. Nanda is at least partially aware of the fact that she is the product of salon discourse. Comparing herself to her grandmother at one point of the novel, Nanda says, “when I say things she wouldn’t then I put before you too much . . . what I know and see and feel. If we’re both partly the result of other people, *her* other people were so different” (230). What this reveals is more than that Nanda knows about sex and betrayal in the way that her grandmother didn’t: It also means that she knows about her own involvement in all these things and that she knows that knowledge “depends on other people.” But this dependency is never complete or static but is, as shall be discussed later, subject to the intervention of the individual’s “instincts,” “forebodings, and “suspicions.” All meanings are, therefore, provisional and subject to distortion, disruption, and revision. James mimics Nanda’s knowledge in the form of his novel, for, in his refusal to privilege a “center of intelligence,” he in effect admits that his characters are not knowable as individuals but only parts of the continually changing and indefinitely interpretable relations. They cannot be separated from the multiple-layered configuration of social discourse, and are mutually dependent even in their most

private and self-interested act.

## VII. Representing the sexual: Censorship and decorum

Nanda is in many ways a “monstrous” product of her mother’s circle. “Monstrous” (52, 283) and its variants are key words in the novel, applied especially to the ambiguity and licentiousness of the talk of Mrs. Brook’s circle. In the preface James characterizes *The Awkward Age* and all other outgrown works of his as “monsters” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1120). This monstrosity is what marks the unpredictable, aberrant, or even perverse elements of language and narrative in his novels, and it is opposed to the organic imagery of the “germ” in his prefaces. In one of its aspects, *The Awkward Age* revises the prefaces’ organicist theory of the novel as a natural object, playing ironically on their recurring images of germs, seeds, and fruit. For James, this revision is made necessary by censorship and decorum, the two straitjackets applied rigorously to the writers of the Victorian age. As the mother will produce a “monster” if her growing body is constricted and remolded by unnatural gadgets, so when censorship and decorum are being applied, the writer’s “matrix” will produce monsters, that is, all kinds of deviations and deflections from the original intentions and designs. In quite the same way, the free talk in Mrs. Brook’s circle is not as free as its members would wish it to be. Rather, it is conducted under the strict surveillance of self-censorship and social decorum. Self-censorship and erotic desire are not, for the core members of this circle, necessarily mutually exclusive but mutually enhancing. The precondition for its members to gain access to the illicit pleasure it may offer is that they should be competent interpreters of the secret codes of its language; that is, they should be capable of decoding double entendres and innuendoes in order to exchange their desire and to obtain pleasure.

Nanda tells Van at Mertle, “my being now so in everything and squeezing up and down no matter whose staircase. Isn’t it one crowded hour of glorious life? . . . What preceded it was . . . an age without a name” (214). For Nanda, there is no period of smooth transition from the nameless and speechless age of innocence to the age of adults’ speech. The effect of adults’ speech on young females is finely expressed by Longdon’s comparison of Aggie and Nanda to two different slates: “There were practically there for good or for ill; experience was still to come and what they might work out still a mystery; but the sum would get itself done with the figures now on the slate. On little Aggie’s slate the figures were yet to be written; which sufficiently accounted for the difference of the two surfaces” (238-239). To enter the adults’ circle, Nanda’s virginal surface must suffer the picking and scratching of their talk, and the “blank page” or the “age without a name” is already an effect of language.

However, if Nanda's sexual consciousness is constructed by the civilized talk of her mother's circle, she is not well-equipped with the key to its code so as to obtain its pleasure. As Longdon aptly puts it, as one of the "lambs with the great shambles of life in their future," Nanda has to struggle with "instinct and forebodings, with the suspicion of its doom and the far-borne scent, in the flowery fields, of blood" (239). These instincts, forebodings, and suspicions form a phantasmagoric theater on which Nanda is to stage her desires, conscious or unconscious. Unwittingly placed in the metonymic chain of desire, Nanda desire what has aroused her mother's desire; that is, she desires Van. However, what her mother desires is not Van himself, but the performance of his tantalizing and tantalized desire. In this respect, Nanda is not, as her mother is, a competent interpreter of the complex relationship between desire and the salon exchange, for, as Mitchy says, she is too "serious" and does not have a "sense of humor" (143). She tends to stabilize and essentialize the nomadic desire that Van would call an expression of "universal vagabondism" (210). This interpretive incompetence results in her excessive desire for and fear of Van. For instance, at Mertle Nanda says to Van that she is "horribly," "hideously" afraid of him, and that she always thinks of him with "fear" (211). As Van is the source of the "sacred terror" for Mitchy, so he is the source of unnamable fear for Nanda. However, her fear of Van is much more complex than Mitchy's, for it is inextricably implicated in her unconscious anticipation of an incestuous relationship among her, her mother, and Van, that is, among the daughter, the matriarch, and the patriarch of Mrs. Brook's salon. This helps explain why throughout the novel Nanda is besieged with an ever-growing sense of guilt that is derived from her repressed passion for Van.

As a desire defined and regulated by the system of civilized exchange, Nanda's repressed desire is displaced onto the Christmas gifts Van gave her. As she tells him at Mertle, these gifts are "[a]ll the relics of you that I've treasured and that I supposed at the time to have meant something!" Van replies rather jocularly, "The 'relics'? Have you a lock of my hair?" (209). In the scene, Nanda rubs her cheek with the "polished silver" of Van's cigarette case, and the sexual connotation of this act is reinforced by her poking her parasol at the ground.<sup>11</sup> This passionate love for Van has made her, as the Duchess says to Longdon, "fairly sick—as sick as a little cat" (252), and caused her to collapse into sobbing twice in the novel. Her most violent display of emotion can be found in the dialogue between Longdon and her near the end of the novel:

---

<sup>11</sup> The parasol is one of the metaphors most frequently employed by James to imply his female characters' sexual obsession. In *The Spoils of Poynton*, losing sight of her umbrella means for Fleda losing Gereth Owen (187). In *The Sacred Fount*, as the unnamed narrator observes, the sexually frustrated Server "folded up her manner in her flounced parasol, which she seemed to drag after her as a sorry soldier his musket" (98). In *The Ambassadors*, Madame de Vionnet's parasol becomes an explicit phallic symbol in the river scene.

“It would be easier for me,” he went on, heedless, “if you didn’t, my poor child, so wonderfully love [Van].”

“Ah but I don’t—please believe me when I assure you I don’t!” she broke out. It burst from her, flaring up, in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still—in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only after a moment give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged; her old friend meantime keeping his place in the silence broken by her sound and distantly—across the room—closing his eyes to his helplessness and her shame. (540)

Having been generated and irremediably reified by salon exchange, Nanda’s desire for Van is doomed to be free-floating, unable to anchor itself at any point in the chain of verbal/sexual exchange. If too much knowledge of sex has made her unmarriageable to Van, she also recognizes that she can only, as Mitchy puts it, “love in vain” (359).

As the novel and its preface make clear, the relationship between Mrs. Brook and Nanda and that between the Duchess and Aggie represent, respectively, the English and the French theory of educating adolescent daughters. In his preface, James defines, solely in terms of the propriety of language, both the English and the French theory of raising adolescent daughters:

The French, all analytically, have conceived of fifty different [linguistic] propriety, meeting fifty different cases, whereas the English mind, less intensely at work, has never conceived but of one—the grand propriety . . . As practice, however, has always to be a looser thing than theory, so no application of that rigor has been possible in London world without a thousand departures from the grim ideal. (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1125)

Having been raised and educated in the British way by Mrs. Brook, Nanda does not have, as the Duchess puts it, “a principle of growth” (214) and becomes a “monstrous” product. Unlike Mrs. Brook, the Duchess is an enthusiastic advocate of the French theory, raising her young charge according to the prescription of the “immemorial custom of [her] husband’s race” (55), and bringing her up to play an already established role. The most important step in the Duchess’ treatment of Aggie<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Burrows detects a “logic of delegation” in the relationship between the Duchess and Aggie: because unmarried Aggie does not have a social self, her virtue refers not to herself but to the Duchess

is the determination of what she should not hear or read: if the type of young girl is innocence, then the end result of her education is to turn her into a “blank page.” Therefore, on many occasions in the novel, we see the Duchess manage to keep Aggie from the adults’ free talk or show her urgent concern about the propriety of her readings.

When Aggie first appears in the text, her innocence and virginity are emphasized: she is “as delicately lovely as a gathered garden lily” and presents “an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasized virginity” (93). Later, her freshness is described as “warranted” as a commodity conspicuously displayed in the shop (249) and “deliberately prepared for consumption” (238). However, if while she remains a virgin, Aggie is nothing more than what the Duchess makes of her, her marriage constitutes a full initiation into the society and a complete conversion from chastity to debauchery, for, as the Duchess sarcastically puts it, “If you’re married, you’re married; it’s the smoke—or call it the soot—of the fire” (249). After her innocence is consumed by the fire of marriage, Aggie becomes the woman of the world and is immediately involved in the free exchange in the drawing room, striking up an affair with her guardian’s lover, Petherton. If the Duchess embodies the triumph of the socio-sexual engineering of the adolescent female body, that triumph is also its failure. For, like Nanda’s eruption from speechlessness to speech, there is no middle ground between Aggie’s virginity and her promiscuity: Having once entered the “vicious circle” (126) of representation (be it the salon exchange, marriage ritual, or James’ writing), the virginal page is instantly inscribed in and traced by verbal/sexual exchange. It is then not accidental that the adulterous affair between Aggie and Petherton is suggested, as discussed earlier, in terms of their struggle over an allegedly pornographic book.

From her narrow theoretical perspective, the Duchess criticizes the Brookenhams’ confused approach to Nanda’s education as “a muddle, a compromise, a monstrosity” (55), and applies this criticism to the general failure of the English people to develop a coherent theory for the education of their adolescent girls. In the eyes of the Duchess, the most perverse aspect of this education is the application of censorship to their talk, which displaces significance, as Stuart Culver puts it, from “the verbal surface onto what lurks behind it” (375). Unashamedly adhering to her one-dimensional theory of language<sup>13</sup>, the Duchess says, “It’s amazing what you’d rather do with a thing—anything not to shoot or make money with—than look at its

---

(86).

<sup>13</sup> From an interpretive viewpoint surprisingly similar to the Duchess’, Tzvetan Todorov reads the novel as the exposure of the “obliquity of language and the uncertainty of the world.” However, he pushes the British inveterate penchant for not looking directly at the meaning of things to the point where there is no longer obliquity, for “the connecting lines between words and things . . . have been cut” and “language functions in a space which will forever remain linguistic” (368).

meaning” (249), and criticizes the English for relegating intimacy and knowledge to the realm of free-floating interpretation supplied by what she calls their “fond English imagination”: “I understand either one thing or the other—I understand taking a man up or letting him alone” (254). Consequently, if Mrs. Brook “wants ‘old Van’ for herself” in an extramarital relation, she cannot express her interest directly because it would be socially and morally impermissible. She must show it indirectly and obtain pleasure from what Culver calls the “oblique intimacy” (375). The Duchess and Mrs. Brook represent two different concepts of language system and produce two different kinds of young females.

### VIII. Conclusion

When she leaves London with Longdon, will Nanda accompany him as an adopted daughter or as a prospective wife? Nothing is dramatized to provide a clear, conclusive answer.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Brook, for example, asks Nanda if she would marry the old man (324); Mitchy, for another, jokingly refers to their departure as an armed elopement: “he’ll be ready for it on the spot with post-chaise and the pistols” (525)—a hyperbole also used by Mrs. Brook to describe the possible elopement of Lady Fanny with Captain Dent-Douglas (178). This pairing together brings into sharp focus all the hints of perversity and sterility that have shadowed the work, and their possible marriage would be emblematic—in the sterility and in the incompatibility of their age—of all the novel’s marriages.

The circularity of the plot that sees Longdon’s departure for Beccles with his belated appropriation of a surrogate Lady Julia seems to push the value system of the novel back to Longdon’s youth and to signal, however temporarily, the triumph of the old patriarchal order he represents. With the help of his tremendous wealth, Longdon has accomplished the ultimate feat of the “retarded” “incorporation” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1126) of Nanda and of bringing the dead back to life. As a Lady Julia he can own, Nanda will accompany the “dead” women whose “portraits” (336) line the wall of Beccles estate. The novel’s final word “tomorrow,” while closing off the vicious circle of salon discourse in the awkward age, seems to subject Nanda to another circle of fetishistic representation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Wilson points out the sexual implications of the final relationship between the two (*Triple Thinkers* 126-127, 146-147).

## Works by Henry James

- The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- The Novels and Tales of Henry James: New York Edition*. 24 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-1909.
- Henry James Letters*. Ed. Leon Edel. 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Henry James: Literary Criticism*. Ed. Leon Edel. 2 vols. New York: The Library of America, 1984.
- The Sacred Fount*. New York: New Directions Books, 1995.

## Other Works Cited

- Brooks, Peter. "Henry James and Dirty French Novels." *The Henry James Review* 28 (2007): 202-212.
- Burrows, Stuart. "The Place of a Servant in the Scale." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.1 (June 2008): 73-103.
- Cohen, Paula Marantz. *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Culver, Stuart. "Censorship and Intimacy: Awkward in *The Awkward Age*." *ELH* 48 (1981): 368-386.
- Gillen, Francis. "The Drama in His Drama: Theory vs. Effect in *The Awkward Age*." *TSSL* 12 (1970-71): 663-674.
- Hadley, Tessa. *Henry James and the Imagination of Pleasure*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- , "Seated alone with a book. . . ." *The Henry James Review* 26 (2005): 229-236.
- Krook, Dorothea. "Prefigurings in Two Early Stories of Henry James." *Modern Language Studies* 13 (1983): 5-21.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
- Mizruchi, Susan L. "Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*." *Representation* 38 (1992): 101-130.
- Owen, Elizabeth. "'The Awkward Age' and the Contemporary English Scene." *Victorian Studies* 11 (1967): 63-82.
- Ozick, Cynthia. Introduction. *The Awkward Age*. London: Everyman's, 1993.



- Perosa, Sergio. *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978.
- Rowe, John C. "The Authority of the Sign in Henry James's 'The Sacred Fount.'" *Criticism* 19 (1977): 223-240.
- , *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Said, Edward. *Beginnings: Intention & Method*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993.
- Silverman, Kaja. "Too Early/Too Late: Male Subjectivity and the Primal Scene." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20 (1988): 147-173.
- Singer, Shlomo. "A Linguistic Note on the Sexual Meaning of 'Knowing' and 'Seeing.'" *American Imago* 20 (1963): 345-347.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Verbal Age." Trans. Patricia Martin Gibby. *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1977): 351-371.
- Trask, Michael. "Getting into it with James: Substitution and Erotic Reversal in *The Awkward Age*." *American Literature* 69.1 (1997): 105-138.
- Walters, Margaret. "Keeping the Place Tidy for the Young Female Mind: *The Awkward Age*." In *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*. Ed. John Goode. London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 190-218.
- Wilson, Edmund. *The Triple Thinkers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1948.

---

*Chun-san Wang, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Asia University*  
*Email: cswang@asia.edu.tw*