Henry James, "the Death of God," and "Theory": *The Aspern Papers*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The Sacred Fount*

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> Religion is the relation of man to his own nature . . . but to his nature not recognized as his own, but regarded as another nature, separate, nay, contra-distinguished from his own: herein lies its untruth, its limitation, its contradiction to reason and morality; herein lies the noxious source of religious fanaticism, the chief metaphysical principle of human sacrifices, in a word, the *prima materia* of all the atrocities, all the horrible scenes, in the tragedy of religious history. (Ludwig Feuerbach)

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

I

In a wry mood—the one mood currently most appropriate to lettered people—we might reconstruct intellectual history as the regular conceptual killing-off of God, accompanied now and again by actual celebrations, most, like Robespierre's Terror or Russia's or China's protracted Communist agony, having the sanguine character of a leisurely but extensive massacre.

Shakespeare's conspirators having trumped up the case against and then murdered the one who appears to them a God ("He bestrides the world like a colossus," says Cassius), they then fall to haggling over the stipulation of death-lists: "Prick him down"—as though it were not enough to kill the deity but necessary rather also to knock off all his follower-believers. The deed that solicits the *et tu Brute* affords the chief perpetrator nothing ultimately

because the victim proves stronger in his grip in death than he did in life, returning to haunt his slayer in unmanning visions. The selfsame *Imperium* that Brutus thought to avert by direct action soon deifies the exact one whom the preemptive regicide predicted would establish it, the victim of assassination soon being "numbered among the gods . . . by a formal decree," as Suetonius writes.(1) A century or so after the death of Caesar the Stoic philosopher Seneca would compose a satiric *Apocolocyntosis of Claudius,* making fun of apotheotic promotion and mocking the cult of emperor-worship. Seneca wrote the piece for Nero, who had almost certainly connived in the death of Claudius, and who commissioned of himself while emperor, among other extravagances, "a colossal statue . . . a hundred and twenty feet high"; Nero also, again in the words of Suetonius, "utterly despised all cults, with the sole exception of that of the Syrian God, and even acquired such a contempt for her that he made water on her image, after he was enamored of another superstition, which was the only one to which he constantly clung."(2)

What was Nero's *other superstition*? Suetonius never specifies it. Perhaps the remark refers to Neronian megalomania and *auto-louange*, as attested by the stone colossus and much else. Nero felt himself released from the community, liberated from moral boundaries, and supreme in his will. The programmatic humblers and killers of God or the gods almost invariably see themselves as the equals in status, or the would-be equals, of those whose status drives them in the first place under the supremacy of resentment and makes self-inflating monsters of them. Even Epicurus, the ancient world's most rigorous materialist, understood this, denouncing religion mostly (but not entirely) as degrading superstition, but carefully not writing the gods out of existence. Epicurus' Latin follower Lucretius followed suit, suggesting in *De rerum natura* that imperial politics necessarily meant rule by dictators who would arrogate to themselves the prerogatives ascribed by myth to deity; Lucretius, like Epicurus, indeed retains the gods, a bit demoted and no longer effective, in his cosmological scheme, to remind mortals of their mortal limitations. Yet *for Lucretius,* Epicurus himself becomes, not godlike in the Jovian mode, but Titanic, a Jove-defying Prometheus who can stand in place of the immortals whom he demotes, and whose epistemological corrections offer salvation from degrading superstition: "When human life lay groveling in all men's sight, crushed to the earth under the dead weight of superstition whose grim features lowered menacingly upon mortals from the four quarters of the sky, a man of Greece was the first to raise mortal eyes in defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. . . . Fables of the gods did not crush him . . ."(3)

The ancients merely rehearsed, without attaining the perfected discourse to justify the related actions, what would become in modernity, tracing that era from the Enlightenment, a savage and persistent habit, fortified by endless multi-volume *rationale.* When Ludwig Feuerbach accuses religion of fostering "fanaticism," as he does in his Hegelian projective theology, he inadvertently (let us say) lays the groundwork for a new fanaticism, which, in deceptively abstract language, always takes coloring from what it obsessively sets (or imagines itself to set) in its aggressive sights. Like Lucretius, deity for Feuerbach always

implies mandatory propitiation, for being *a metaphysical principle of human sacrifices.* One must remember the title of Feuerbach's book, however, which is not *The Essence of Religion* but rather *The Essence of Christianity;* his charge is not generic, it is specific. Friedrich Nietzsche owes much to Feuerbach, not least in the specificity of his indictment. In *Zarathustra,* Nietzsche's anti-prophet proposes that: "*if* there were Gods, how could I endure it to be no God! *Therefore* there are no Gods."(4) Or again, "What would there be to create if there were—Gods!"(5) One notes the equivocation between the singular and the plural, by no means the only ambiguity. In the second of the two sayings, for example, the *therefore,* with its negation, has gone missing, but the words still imply the conclusion. That both of these propositions are enthymemes rather than syllogisms, Nietzsche, the grammarian and logician, no doubt deliberately and carefully intends. Nietzsche famously asserts in *The Twilight of the Idols* that *being,* the metaphysical singular, "is just a word," and that in consequence, "we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar."(6)

The *Wille zur Macht* asserts itself in all atheistic formulas. Henri de Lubac, who quotes Zarathustra's minatory candor, writes in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* of Nietzsche's "outburst of lyricism," but then links it to later *anti-theistic* discourse, as he calls it, in Dietrich Kerler and Martin Heidegger. "Nor was it enough," says Lubac, "for a man like Martin Heidegger to deny God: in order to rule out more completely any risk of a swing toward belief again, he had to go beyond mere denial and refuse to allow the question of God even to be raised."(7) Eric Voegelin, too, has called attention to this prohibition of questioning by the promulgators of libidinous resentment-inspired theory, finding it in Auguste Comte, as well as in Marx and Nietzsche, and describing it in its acute form as "demonic mendacity."(8) As for Lubac, tracing anti-theism from Feuerbach through Nietzsche and Marx to their twentieth-century successors, he concludes that "it was not surprising that the drama that had taken shape in human minds quickly reached the point at which it burst forth in fire and slaughter."(9) After the death—or rather the murder—of God, "it is man himself who is threatened,"(10) just as it is actual men and women by the millions whom ideological fanaticism in the name of reactionary denial has spent a century in murdering. The slaughter occurred, *pace* the Feuerbach-type of view, with the accompaniment of the smashing of synagogues and the blowing up of churches.

2

Lubac's analysis founds its plausibility on the massive correlation between what influential thinkers said and what soon happened as the laicism of modern society assimilated increasingly extremist and reactionary themes. How often do logicians tell us that correlation implies neither causation nor connection? But Lubac, while sensitive to the vehemence of modernity, perhaps insufficiently remarks a point about anti-theism suggested by Nietzsche's employment of enthymeme in place of syllogism and by the peculiarity of his madness, when he signed notes to his sister and others under the

alternating names of “Dionysus” and “The Crucified One.” Generative Anthropology, without a direct reference to Nietzsche, makes good this lack by addressing the inexorable inadequacy of complacent atheism and militant anti-theism alike. Gans writes in *Originary Thinking* that “the very fact that we have a concept of God is proof that something beyond everyday empirical existence exists as a source of this concept.”(11) It is a kind of petulant quibbling, Gans argues, to deny the validity, and therefore also to deny the legitimacy *in one mode or another,* of a “human . . . center of attention consciously distinct from” the people who attend it.(12) The positive anthropologist, from his external viewpoint, thinks that he understands the naivety—even the fatuity—of the tribal people who, from their internal viewpoint, imagine themselves in the presence of and in communication with an actual entity. For the tough-minded modern, the ontological commitment in belief is simply false and perhaps offensively so. And we remember that whether it is Sir James G. Fraser or Richard Dawkins, the critic in fact takes aim at higher religion, not tribal cult; indeed, tribal cult often functions in criticism as a preferred alternative to Judaism or Christianity.

Yet the positive anthropologist’s skepticism lacks the one characteristic that would enable it to trump all fideist professions. It wants the character of *firstness,* as Gans likes to say, of the tribesman’s credulity or the Jew’s or the Christian’s, which, whether or not its object possesses certifiable *being* in a metaphysical sense, nevertheless produces real-world consequences and so impinges on existence and belongs to experience. The anthropologist’s denial, on the other hand, while it assumes a context of *science* as opposed to *religion,* never in any way, logically or experimentally, falls subject to proof. It would smack at least of what William James once called “Mephistophelian skepticism,” if it failed fully to qualify as Voegelin’s “demonic mendacity.”

Gans carries the argument further, distinguishing, as positive anthropology does not, between the sacred and God. Whereas “the history of civilization has been a long process of desacralization,” it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the sacred “can ever shrink to nothingness, as the unbeliever affirms.”(13) Because God constitutes “the subsisting center of the scene of representation,”(14)which is both the origin of human self-awareness and the synchronic basis of linguistic understanding, the idea of God underlies, and so makes possible in the history of belief, any declaration of God’s non-existence. “We retain the idea of God without necessarily believing in it because of the indispensable presence of the communal ground of the scene independently of the individual members of the community.”(15) The truth of this remark probably explains the rhetorical sallies against “presence” in deconstructive discourse of the 1980s. It follows in Gans’s argument that “even if someday not one believer remains, the atheist will remain someone who rejects belief in God, not someone for whom the very concept is empty.”(16) Generative anthropology explains the reactionary vehemence that Lubac observes in the sequence of atheistic and anti-theistic thinkers beginning with Feuerbach and culminating in the default mode of the contemporary secular person who has been to college. Such a person knows that belief and oppression travel together and that modern people differ from historical

people in their having been delivered from belief and oppression. Anti-theism, identifying (also, of course, mis-identifying) God as the locus of temporal authority, displacing personal resentments into this (mis-) identification, and nourishing its ire on the knowledge, rhetorically repressed, of its own derivative status, naturally and inevitably lifts itself higher and higher into dudgeon. Resentment being the *most mimetic* of poses, the outrage of the reactionary deniers soon spreads into the multitudes, which, in their tepid and *bourgeois* way assume the basic resentful tenets of reactionary doctrine, ritually excoriating the images of oppression.

"How few people," writes Lubac, "see what is at the bottom of the movements by which they are carried away!"(17) The complacent atheism that furnishes the default assumption of the contemporary secular person likely understands nothing of its origins despite the historical proximity of those origins. Yet like the explicitly anti-theistic critique, the unreflective default assumption gives evidence of unease: it wants to hide from its view the signs that remind it of the phenomenon from which it claims to be fully detached and liberated. From this unease stems the determination in Europe and North America to rid the public square of allegedly offensive imagery during the holidays of the Christian calendar. This programmatic hostility copiously *gives reasons* for itself; these reasons belong to the ambient quasi-official or entirely official deconstruction of received wisdom but especially that which the rationalist associates with revelation, either in Hebrew prophecy or the Gospel. Bits and pieces of Nietzschean and Marxist anti-theistic prose—little detached items of vocabulary—lend to this explanatory discourse their nineteenth-century antinomian-liberationist zeal. A law of inverse proportion exerts its effect so that as institutional religion loses its influence and mandatory skepticism takes its place, mandatory skepticism must produce an ever-greater quantity of justification and such justification becomes a new, secular substitute for scripture. Reason's understanding of the emptiness of theology, as Feuerbach puts it in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, "takes the pace of religion and has the essence of religion in itself," so that "in truth, it is itself religion."(18)

The vulgar version of egophany operates this way, echoing distantly and distortedly the Gospel saw concerning the locus of God's kingdom; among intellectuals, it is endless rehearsal of Voltairean ire, Nietzschean reversal, and Marxist toppling-of-the-structures—the point of which is to validate doubt over credence in what doubt sees as a zero-sum game of moral legitimacy that can only issue in saints on one side and devils on the other. Doubt, or negation, wants above all to be on the winning side. In intellectual and non-intellectual alike, because conformism to a basic reactionary notion assimilates one to the other, the attenuated anti-theism, shot through by resentment and repression, produces a human type whose behavior reflects a pathological self-division prodded into destructive action by pure *libido*. The novelists have recorded the phenomenon, few as subtly as Henry James.

II

Few have seen in *The Aspern Papers* (1888) by Henry James a death-of-god narrative; that would be a theme one rather more expected to find in the American's Russian contemporaries than in James's own work. One can hardly ignore, however, the novel's highlighting of scriptural *Ersatz* and substitute sacrality. *The Aspern Papers* has inspired in recent decades a number of "possession novels," none of which manages to achieve its combination of economy and intensity. For one thing, James's *récit* concerns something else and something more than merely getting one's hands on an item of coveted property, although it involves that in a trivial way. A Promethean demonism makes itself evident, which one critic has compared to that in Alexander Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*—a plausible precursor text, and one that affiliates James to the Russians. James's nameless first-person protagonist and narrator delays only a paragraph or so before declaring, without the least betrayal of embarrassment or of *mauvaise foi,* that the story's late titular Jeffrey Aspern, a fictional "Shelleyite"(19) American Romantic poet of the first half of the nineteenth century, ranks for him as a deity. A blocking agent who stands between the narrator and certain effects of Aspern also refers to the poet as a "god."(20) Traces of that exalted being promise to yield up "esoteric knowledge"(21) to the right claimant. The narrator's friend and confidant, the archly named Mrs. Prest, aware of her friend's "monomaniacal"(22) search for Aspern's missing correspondence, has gently chided his zeal and has indirectly demoted the object of his enthusiasm. He ignores Prest on this point, letting on to readers that "one doesn't defend one's god," but rather by a convenience, "one's god is in himself a defense."(23) In the novel's sordid climax, an offended and outraged victim will curse the narrator in the words, "you publishing scoundrel!"(24) In the telling of the tale, the principle that "one's god is in himself a defense" operates by teleology for an *alibi;* the narrator inserts it into his account of events *a posteriori* in order to exculpate his calculated moral shoddiness *a priori.*

3

But what kind of character, precisely, gives *The Aspern Papers* its point of view? The narrator's anonymity, not entirely opaque, provides one clue, while the Shelley-aura of Aspern, to which he so powerfully responds, provides another.

The questing publicist's namelessness stems from his acute mimetic relation to his idol, in whose identity he has sublimated his own. The emergence of anti-theistic culture, which James represents in *The Aspern Papers,* coincides with the emergence politically of the cult of personality and socially of the phenomenon of celebrity. The Romantic poets certainly qualify as prototypical celebrities and Shelly in particular, the model of Aspern, thought of himself as a Promethean *unacknowledged legislator.* The anti-theistic subject being a reactionary person of the most acute type, he locates identity elsewhere than in himself, on the theory that the structure of an inimical social reality always and already alienates one from his proper existence. Feuerbach assumes such alienation as the cornerstone of his critique, arguing that "the personality of God is thus the means by which man converts the

qualities of his own nature into the qualities of another being."(25) This formula makes Feuerbach appear neutral and formal, as though the alienation of "qualities" constituted no offense. The sequel makes the offense clear: "Wherever morality is based on theology, wherever right is made dependent on divine authority, the most immoral, unjust, infamous things can be justified and established."(26) The anti-theistic stance would seem to be in perpetual resentment-charged revolt against the very necessity that ethical relations be mediated through a representation; he is a subject who aggressively asserts his want of self as proof of his plaintive contention. His dramatized misery garners sympathy and serves as the scene of his rhetorical campaign to reveal normative justice as actual injustice and normative order as actual disorder. The old woman against whom James's story teller schemes merely diagnoses a prevailing malaise by saying to him when he seeks to let rooms in her dilapidated Venetian *palazzo,* "I don't care who you may be—I don't want to know," and she adds, "it signifies very little today."(27)

The narrator is one of the chief organizers, as it seems, of a prospective complete edition of the work of "the divine poet."(28) He credits himself, in an odd phrase, with "the nerves of an editor."(29)He refers to his collaborator, one John Cumnor, in consistently religious vocabulary as a "fellow worshiper"(30) of Aspern. Cumnor has discovered by inquiry that certain of Aspern's uncollected letters remain in possession of Miss Juliana Bordereau, whom the poet had "served" amorously and (some say) "treated . . . badly" in his "masterful way" around 1825.(31) Aspern thus offers a model for egocentric and antinomian behavior, which the narrator endows by his adjective with the alluring luster of imitable lordship. Cumnor, having introduced himself by name to *les femmes Bordereau* in his own missives, has thereby disqualified himself from hunting down the secreted documents. The two would suspect him immediately. The narrator, however, an unknown person to Miss Bordereau and her niece, finds himself in the position to infiltrate their household and poke around after the alienated "relics and tokens"(32) of the master. He adds one justification to another: "The world, as I say, had recognised Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognised him most. The multitude today flocked to his temple, but of that temple [Cumnor] and I regarded ourselves as the appointed ministers."(33) In what amounts to his sacerdotal office, "hypocrisy [and] duplicity" constitute his "only chance," for "there's no baseness I wouldn't commit for Jeffrey Aspern's sake."(34) So he tells Mrs. Prest. He extends his claim of justification so far as to include the proposition that the letters really belong more to him than to Miss Bordereau.

The narrator reasons in this manner: Aspern's voice, "one of the most charming ever heard," exercised such a effect that women regularly "had flung themselves at his head."(35) Where a morally normative observer would see a seducer, taking advantage of his charm, the narrator sees a victim, blameless himself, of feminine wiles and entrapment. "It appeared to me that no man could have walked straighter in the given circumstances" than Aspern, for it was after all a case of "Orpheus and the Maenads."(36) He adds finally that "almost all the Maenads were unreasonable and many of them were unbearable."(37)

In telling his story, he will take care to represent Miss Bordereau and her niece as two specimens of the unbearable class of Maenads, who impose on him as the one of them had once imposed on Aspern. It is perhaps the moment to remark that Juliana's niece bears the given name foreshortened as "Tina," or fully, *Christina.* For the narrator, the notion of unbearable appropriation melds with that *for which* the venerable Orphic mode of existence functions as substitute.

Orpheus, like Dionysus or Prometheus, often figures for the Romantics as a substitute martyr-savior, who could be deployed to displace Moses or Jesus. James has cannily incorporated this trait in the psychology of his defective protagonist. The Romantic poets themselves—like Shelley and Byron—dying young after having lived in scorn of propriety, seemed to the subsequent generation like avatars of lamented pagan deity, after whose decease in the prevalence of the cross the ontological intensity of the world suffered a catastrophic depletion. Shelley's own *Adonais* makes just this elegiac claim about John Keats; and one might plausibly read *Adonais* as forming a diptych with *Prometheus Unbound,* with the latter setting forth in mythopoeia the revolutionary scenario—articulated around the defiance of and triumph over a tyrannical deity—that redeems the ontological poverty declared in the former. That which the god, Jove, had misappropriated from consciousness, the insurrection of the Titan would restore. Shelley's essay "A Refutation of Deism" anticipates Feuerbach, just as it provides the prosaic assumptions for the myth of a new Prometheus: "There is no attribute of God which is not either borrowed from the passions and powers of the human mind, or which is not a negation. Omniscience, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Infinity, Immutability, Incomprehensibility, and Immateriality, are all words which designate properties and powers peculiar to organized beings, with the addition of negations, by which the idea of limitation is excluded."(38)

In superstitiously ceding these powers to the projected image, humanity emptied out not only itself but also the world. In *The Aspern Papers,* in one of their testy exchanges, Miss Bordereau says to James's narrator, "There's no more poetry in the world"(39) since the old Byronic and Shelleyite days. The narrator concurs, having earlier in an aside attributed to Aspern the quality of *firstness.* Unlike his dull countrymen, Aspern "had found the means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, to understand and express everything."(40)

James, ever a keen critic of Romanticism, anticipates a tenet of originary analysis as applied to the succession of esthetic phases in Western Civilization. Gans argues in *Originary Thinking* that "the romantic replaces the esthetic primacy of the public scene with the private,"(41) another way of saying that the agenda of the early nineteenth-century Prometheans emphasized subjectivity and egocentricity at the expense of the inherited social order. This shift from the public to the private expressed itself curiously in a language often purporting itself to be political. Thus, "the historical link of romanticism to the French Revolution suggests that its birth should be described in revolutionary terms."(42) The

Jamesian narrator's description of Aspern as determined "to be free and general and not at all afraid" would fit well in a propaganda broadside issued by the Directorate, invoking its goals to justify its regime. A great trick of revolutionary propaganda since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been its rhetorical reversal of terms, declaring the existing order to be "reactionary," as stubbornly opposing a just restructuring of society, while reserving to itself the description of "progressive." Yet as Gans argues, the "progressive" agenda, beginning with Rousseau's laying of the theoretic foundation for the events of 1789, springs from the reactivity of undomesticated egocentric resentment against externally mandated stricture. "Rousseau's resentment, which provides the model for his romantic followers, was directed at the old order, but he had the genius to see the hierarchical social order in general as unnatural in comparison with the equalitarian order of 'nature.'"(43) With the bloody fatuity of radical revolution having exhausted itself in the Terror, but also with the *ancien régime* having been abolished by the Revolution, the social scene lay open after Bonaparte's Empire for the new middle-class order, which would be receptive to radical themes. The name for this middle class radical outlook is Romanticism.

4

"The romantic esthetic," as Gans writes, "appears in the specific historical conditions of the birth of modern bourgeois society," in which "the freedom granted to the individual by the social order is exercised as a critique of that same order."(44) The subject may also exercise that freedom in *abusing* the bourgeois social order in a manner that an objective assessment would find gratuitous or cruel. The gesture entails, in the Gansian term, a "constitutive hypocrisy"(45) of which James, in *The Aspern Papers,* shows full awareness.

Throughout the narrator's account of his quest *jenseits von Gut und Böse* for the eponymous papers, he regularly contrasts his own design of re-appropriating for a discerning consciousness of the "spoils"(46) of those "sacred relics" with the tastelessness of commercial transactions, gradually imbuing Miss Bordereau with the repellent qualities of "avidity,"(47) "acquisitive propensity,"(48) and preoccupation with "the pecuniary question."(49) Alluding perhaps to his earlier remark about his having "the nerves of an editor," the narrator says in respect of the third of the just mentioned trio of qualities that "it had begun to act on my nerves."(50) Expatriate Aspern, in sailing from the United States to the European continent would have removed himself from what *The Federalist Papers* call a *mercantile republic;* Venice, where Miss Bordereau appears to have repaired after her *passade* with the bard, also enjoyed its *floruit,* in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as a *mercantile republic,*the center of a famously affluent *trade empire.* The narrator, who denounces the "cupidity"(51) of the times, sees himself, by contrast, as laboring for "beauty, for a devotion."(52) He, for his part, appears to have a good deal of cash at his disposal while two women live, as Mrs. Prest says, in "a state of penury."(53) Miss Tina says, "we're poor, we live very badly—almost on nothing,"(54) so no sinister interpretation can really attach to Miss Juliana's wanting as much as the market will bear when the narrator shows

up proposing that he rent rooms in the nearly empty *palazzo.* The narrator arrives with a hidden nefarious purpose, but the negotiations over the tariff are orderly and symmetrical; the parties come to a contractual agreement that satisfied buyer and seller.

The Bordereau poverty seems to derive, in fact, from Miss Juliana's fateful *rencontre* with Aspern. Cumnor floats the theory that Miss Juliana must have been "a governess in some family in which the poet visited and that, in consequence of her position, there was from the first something unavowed, or rather something quite clandestine, in their relations."(55) The narrator, on the other hand, speculates that Aspern's paramour would have been "the daughter of an artist."(56) But it is Miss Juliana's own remark regarding the niece, so called, which settles the matter for readers, even though the narrator himself never draws the obvious conclusion from what he casually records. Miss Juliana says, recommending Miss Tina: "She has very good manners; I bred her up myself."(57) It is all in the literal force of that phrase, *bred her up.* Tina would be the bastard daughter by Aspern on Juliana. The poverty and reclusion of the odd pair would represent Miss Juliana's adaptation, in the aftermath of abandonment, to the stigma in bourgeois society against the unwed mother and her offspring. This makes Aspern, of course, whatever his artistic achievement, an ordinary cad, the price for whose Bohemian indulgences he left the abused parties to pay. James does drop a hint that someone—perhaps Aspern, but then again perhaps not—arranged anonymously for occasional support for Miss Tina when she was younger, but this appears to have been a mere token. The narrator has said that the "bright ghost" of Aspern seemed to accompany him "fraternally"(58) in his endeavor. The esthetically mediated liberty and fraternity that bind the narrator in "mystic companionship"(59) with the author of those "most exquisite and most renowned lyrics,"(60) and which grant him license to dissimulate and scheme, thus exists in irreconcilable tension with, and probably requires the suspension of, the civic order. Marriage, as mediated and sanctioned by inherited religion, functions in the civic order as the basic unit. Marriage is an exchange, but it is not, strictly speaking, a transaction. After her aunt's death Miss Tina, in her awkward and reticent way, will offer to the narrator, in trade for his promise of marital union, the alluring papers that he has connived to possess.

The narrator, however, having begun by offering at the door his "false card,"(61) and having continued by following Mrs. Prest's suggestion cynically "to make love to the niece,"(62) has predetermined himself to come to the issue in the same fraudulent way. The despiser of the market turns out also to be a despiser of the usual ethical considerations, and a betrayer of the innocent, all for the cult of poetic beauty.

The rebel's ire against the social reality of inherited ethical forms, including marriage, finds precise formulation in early nineteenth-century anti-theistic discourse. According to Feuerbach, in *The Essence of Christianity,* "in the contradiction between Faith and Love . . . we see the practical, palpable ground of necessity that we should raise ourselves above Christianity, above the peculiar stand-point of religion."(63) The self-liberating

consciousness will grasp that “the pretension of religion,” hence also of established ethical stricture, “is that it can hallow its object by its essentially external cooperation,” so that “it thereby assumes to be itself the only holy power.”(64) Feuerbach introduces marriage as an example: “But marriage—we mean, of course, marriage as the free bond of love—is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage, which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage—of love. And so it is with all moral relations.”(65) One can easily imagine that in his liaison with Miss Juliana, the passing lover made a whispered prelude in that charming voice of his in language less abstract but basically to the same purpose. That she still reveres her lover only indicates the supreme suavity of his approach and the ready rebelliousness on her part mimetically exaggerated through acquaintance with the poet. Consistent with his idea that in religious forms “man sacrifice[s] man to God,”(66) and taking a page from Rousseau, Feuerbach argues: “When in times in which peculiar sanctity was attached to religion, we find marriage, property, and civil law respected, this has not its foundation in religion, but in the original, natural sense of morality and right, to which the true social relations are sacred *as such*.“(67) As with marriage, so too with property, which “did not become sacred because it was regarded as a divine institution, but it was regarded as a divine institution because it was felt to be itself sacred.”(68)

James is giving readers, in *The Aspern papers,* the psychology of the would-be Promethean man-of-resentment, whose subjective experience of oppression, or of any limitation at all, becomes the basis for unbounded libidinous retribution against the enforcers, as he perceives them, of stricture. The ire can reach a metaphysical pitch because the subject imagines himself in the most radical possible situation—that of lacking his own existence and believing it *retrievably* possessed by someone else. We have remarked that the diminutive *Tina* foreshortens the full name *Christina;* we have also remarked how the narrator himself repeatedly describes the great Aspern in theological terms. If Miss Tina were, as seems likely, the daughter of Aspern, then, Aspern being metaphorically (at any rate) a god, Miss Tina would be—not, of course, the son—but rather the daughter of the metaphorical god; Aspern embodies freedom against stricture, and the narrator acts and waits in hope of the “miracle of resurrection”(69) that will realize the model and revivify the world or allow him to absorb the model into himself and regain the being of which he feels deprived. As mediators of the substitute-God’s existence, the two women inevitably assume the role of blocking-agents against the fulfillment of the narrator’s increasingly desperate desire. Miss Juliana is the one who, before her death, brands the narrator “a publishing scoundrel,” but Miss Tina, having fallen romantically for the narrator, thinks that she could let him access the papers “if there were a relation.”(70) Miss Tina thinks such a thing possible because the narrator has plied her with midnight talks in the garden of the *palazzo,* with flowers daily, and has escorted her to the piazza for ices at Florian’s. He has in his own phrase *made love to her.* What else therefore should she surmise? On the condition of a “relation,” she tells him, “You could see things—you could use them.”(71)

The narrator, already seeing himself as a "victim,"(72) and "galled" by his "humiliation,"(73) now flees from Miss Tina, who has burst into tears, and he "float[s] aimlessly"(74) among the city's canals. Standing before the Church of Saints John and Paul, he indulges in his conviction that existence—symbolized by the bronze statue of a "triumphant"(75) Venetian *condottiere*—has crushed him. The figure is reminiscent of Cassius' resentful notion of Caesar as a victorious "colossus" in Shakespeare's play; while *The Aspern Papers* is not a political novel the psychology that it delineates often has a political context. This collapse of the narrator's subjective world into misery and petulance would indicate that the substitute god, Aspern himself, has also failed him, even after seeming to speak to him from a cameo. "I grew to wish I had never heard of Aspern's relics, and I cursed the extravagant curiosity that had put John Cumnor on the scent of them."(76) In rejecting Miss Tina's offer of love, in betraying her, he has proven himself entirely beyond because utterly scornful of the Gospel message of love. In his demonic pursuit of the papers he has transformed himself into a purely destructive force. It is not murder, either of God or man, but it qualifies, to borrow a phrase from Henri de Lubac, "an act as definite and brutal as that of a murderer."(77) The narrator experiences vertiginous abrupt shifts between apoplexy and spasms of renewed irrational hope; he returns to Miss Tina the next day, still morosely scheming. Perhaps he shall marry her, after all. He now finds the lady not "a ridiculous pathetic provincial old woman,"(78) but rather "angelic . . . beautified . . . younger,"(79) at which moment she tells him that she has burned the papers. "It took a long time—there were so many."(80) Fire constitutes in context a fine Promethean irony. The narrator now sees Miss Tina as again repellent. But hers is the final gesture: "She turned her back upon me, as I had turned mine upon her twenty-four hours before."(81)

III

The Russian expatriate Nicolas Berdyaev, writing in Paris just after World War Two about the Russian Revolution and its prelude, called attention to the paradoxically religious character of the generations of revolutionaries. "The fact that the idea of God is driven out of man's consciousness," Berdyaev argues, "in no way leads to man and the things of man finally being freed and finding their self-expression; the result is that certain strange inhuman or superhuman forces appear in this consciousness and begin to oppress him."(82) Because "man is by his nature a religious being, and the soul of man cannot live empty of religion," it follows that "a fundamental fact in anti-religious psychology is the appearance in the human soul of idols and idolatry."(83) Berdyaev also remarks the central role played by "literary critics and publicists,"(84) or what James in *The Aspern Papers* names *publishing scoundrels,* in formulating and communicating the exacerbated resentments on which a political paroxysm, when it comes, must be based. The narrator of *The Aspern Papers* confesses in a tense interview with Miss Juliana that "I'm a critic, a commentator, and historian, in a small way."(85)

Berdyaev characterizes the Russian Atheism-Nihilism of the 1860s and 70s as *"ascetism without grace"*; it is, he writes, *"ascetism not in the name of God, but in the name of the future welfare of mankind, in the name of perfect society."(86)* Yet in the game of political and metaphysical resentment, new contenders for the role of vanguard inevitably reject the prevailing doctrinal vehemence as not vehement enough. Berdyaev offers the Marxist-Communist appeal that superseded Atheism-Nihilism in Russia as a case in point. Marxism, although like Atheism-Nihilism "it comes from Feuerbach," lacks any shred of the "humanitarian element"(87) still visible in Atheism-Nihilism. As Berdyaev sees it: "It was not in the name of man that Marx raised the standard of revolt, but in the name of the mightiness of a new deity, the social collectivity. He is not so much moved by pity for the suffering humiliated proletariat . . . as by the idea of the coming might and power of the proletariat, the future messiah destined to organize an earthly empire."(88)

Lubac makes a similar point when he writes of "a passionate denial that underlies . . . and vitiates" the successive waves of anti-theistic discourse, and which renders the anti-theistic project "beyond hope."(89) If God were the alienated projection of human qualities, such that man is a God who has merely forgotten his own status, and if by the declaration of this truth—that is, by the knowledge of it alone—man, or *a man,* should recover his alienated powers to become God once again, then the discovery itself should be sufficient *by itself* to empower man to alter the structure of existence. The recalcitrance of existence forms the ultimate object-of-resentment of the anti-theistic subject, but because existence broadly construed is not itself a subject that can respond to rhetoric, revolutionary fervor always returns to *other subjects,* who function in the fantasy as blocking-agents against the spontaneous reorganization of the world. "It may seem a wild paradox," writes Emma Goldman in "The Philosophy of Atheism" (1916), "and yet it is pathetically true, that this real, visible world and our life should have been so long under the influence of metaphysical speculation, rather than of physical demonstrable forces."(90) With its taproot set "in earth," atheism, in Goldman's argument, aims at "the emancipation of the human race from all God-heads" and when the movement triumphs so then will "freedom and beauty be realized."(91) God being non-existent, however, the real foe can be none other than the human advocates of God, rather than "all God-heads."

The anti-theistic position thus entails a pronounced contradiction. It assumes the form of a *profession* at precisely the historical moment when what Gans characterizes as "the centerless moral community," stemming specifically from Gospel morality and "presided over by a God who has renounced any further intervention in human affairs,"(92) liberates the individual from compulsory professions of faith and permits "every individual [to be] an unbeliever"(93) because the function of belief has passed to the abstract, non-ritual community.

In *The Aspern Papers,* James gives us *un homme seul de ressentiment* who interprets the disappearance of binding ritual as a license excusing him from the ethical mandate—and

granting him leave to betray—because he has a personal vision of morality embodied in beautiful poems. Culturally, the narrator signifies an atavism. Although, as a critic, he would seem to participate in the refined immateriality of words, his attitude toward the *mere papers* resembles that of a primitive to the fetish-remnants of a sacrifice. Indeed, Jeffrey Aspern is the idol *to which,* through trespass and breach of promise, the narrator makes his offerings. In *The Princess Casamassima,* James delves into the political and conspiratorial manifestation of the same massively anti-social demeanor. The signs of cultural atavism, and of a lapse into sacrificial and sparagmatic behavior, as ever, abound. In a London Bohemia of the 1880s (more or less contemporary with the time of writing), James deploys his cast of *déracinés,* pariahs, *communards-proscrits,* and slumming aristocracy, in the center of whom the orphaned bastard of an English lord and a French concubine succeeds in making the opposite motion from the narrator of *The Aspern Papers.* Hyacinth Robinson, whose name echoes an ancient mythic sacrifice, is "the bastard of a murderess, spawned in a gutter, out of which he had been picked by a sewing-girl,"(94) as a ruthless acquaintance will tactlessly put it. The natural mother, a French prostitute, killed her titled English lover when he threatened to abandon her and gave birth in the jail where she remains under a commuted death-sentence.

6

This theme of the cad who gets his paramour with child and then designs to jilt or succeeds in jilting her is one that *The Princess* Casamassima shares with *The Aspern Papers.* The "sewing-girl," Amanda Pynsent, makes up for the straitened conditions in which she raises her friend's child by lavishing saintly devotion on him; James has lifted Pynsent out of the Dickensian tradition of impoverished decency. Assisting the seamstress, a musician friend Anastasius Vetch finds a place for the adolescent Robinson in "an 'Academy' in a genteel part of Islington, where there was 'an instructor for foreign languages,' a platform for oratory, and a high social standard,"(95) the last no doubt being meant even more ironically than the phrases that James places in inverted commas. Robinson's fellow pupils, "the sons of dealers in edible articles,"(96) habitually bring into the classroom "for their exclusive consumption, or for exchange and barter, various buns, oranges, spices, and marine animals, which the boy, with his hands in his empty pockets and the sense of a savorless home in his heart, was obliged to see devoured without his participation."(97) Mentored by Vetch, who lends him books from his own library and obtains others, Robinson discovers that "reading was his happiness."(98) James thus arranges it so that language, in philosophy and literature, should compensate for disbarment from participation in the alimentary ritual. Robinson's esthetic view nevertheless embraces activities that Bohemia typically abhors. During walks in London with Millicent Henning, a childhood friend for whom he nurtures romantic feelings, he likes to observe "the quickened crowding and pushing and staring at lighted windows of fishmongers and hucksters."(99)

Circumstantial exclusion from the market has not inflated Robinson with irrational

resentment against the market but rather has piqued his curiosity about it: “He liked the people who looked as if they had got their week’s wage and were prepared to lay it out discreetly; and even those whose use of it would plainly be extravagant and intemperate.”(100) In Robinson’s view, “striated sides of bacon . . . golden cubes and triangles of cheese [and] graceful festoons of sausage” mix with “halos and dim radiations, trickles and evaporations, on the plates of glass”(101) in the Soho shop windows.

If the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* were a low-grade “Shelleyite,” then Robinson would be a critical post-Romantic of the Baudelaire-type, able to see in the vulgarity of truck and traffic a reflection, as it were, of sublimity, partly moral and partly esthetic. Paul Muniment, the author of the “bastard” description of Robinson, slights his comrade again by treating him as “ornamental” to the *avant-garde,* possessing only a kind of “socialistic utility” and “constituted to show that the revolution was not necessarily brutal and illiterate.”(102)

Later, after he has enjoyed the unexpected opportunity of making a Continental tour to see the architecture and art of the European capitals, Robinson writes—*from Venice,* no less—to the novel’s titular Princess, the estranged English wife of an Italian nobleman who uses her alimony to finance revolutionary and anarchistic schemes in London. In the contradictory hierarchy of London anarchists, egalitarians, and revolutionaries, the Princess enjoys her station at the apex of all machinations; she has been instrumental in drawing Robinson into a conspiracy according to the terms of which he must, at a specified moment, undertake the assassination, as it seems, of a Member of Parliament’s House of Lords. The encounter, if it were to fall out as planned (it does not), would be as fatal for the perpetrator as for the victim, and Robinson knows this. Two experiences provoke Robinson to reject the violent social agenda of “the great rectification.”(103) One notes the pseudo-eschatological vocabulary, consistent with the ubiquity in this, as in other of James’s novels, of such terms as *sacrifice* and *sacrificial* or *consecration.* In Paris, when Robinson visits the Place de la Révolution, he sees in “a rapid vision” the “the guillotine . . . the inscrutable obelisk . . . the tumbrels, with waiting victims.”(104) These inspire awareness, as he thinks, of “magnificent energy” and of the Revolution itself as “the spirit of life . . . not the spirit of death.”(105) Immediately after this access of vehemence, however, “a sudden sense overtook him, making his heart sink with a kind of desolation . . . of the sweetness of not dying, the fascination of great cities, the charm of travel and discovery, and the generosity of admiration.”(106) In Venice, viewing Saint Mark’s and the *Piazza* and the poor of the city, as he records apologetically for his addressee, Robinson feels that he “has lost sight of the sacred cause.”(107) While “want and toil and suffering are the constant lot of the immense majority of humanity,” the fact that has set its seal on Robinson’s judgment “is the great achievements of which man has been capable in spite of them.”(108) To his readjusted vision, Robinson explains, these achievements now appear as “inestimably precious and beautiful.”(109)

Robinson composes a long and passionate period, challenging the Princess: “The

monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, based, if you will, upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less impracticable and life more tolerable"—*these,* he says, the theory of revolution "holds too cheap" and in what revolution proposes to substitute for them he now "can't somehow believe," as he powerfully *can believe* and resolutely does "in things with which the aspirations and the tears of generations have been mixed."(110) Robinson's ability to accord himself with a tragic view of life partly, but never wholly, balanced by the attestation of spirit in art and institution builds on his earlier naïve appreciation for the celebration of life and desire in the market streets and shop windows of Soho. There too one sees "the spirit of life . . . not the spirit of death," whereas in the outlook of the subversive coterie he increasingly sees only a terrible appetite for dismemberment and so-called redistribution. The socialist or communard "wouldn't have the least feeling for this incomparable, abominable old Venice," but rather "he would cut up the ceilings of the Veronese into strips, so everyone might have a little piece."(111) In Robinson's metaphor the *sparagmos* obliterates the immaterial aspect, the significance, of the intact paintings—all on Biblical subjects for ceilings of the ducal palace. The wickedness springs from the "invidious jealousy which is at the bottom of the idea of a redistribution," says Robinson, and from a "grudging ingratitude."(112) The egalitarian who would slice priceless canvases into tokens, one for each outstretched hand, embodies what Gans, in *Originary Thinking,* calls "the romantic dream of transforming society into a total fraternal community," which delusion "has inspired the most sinister social experiments in history, beginning with the French Revolution itself."(113)

The revolutionary subject common to James's conspirator-theoreticians in *The Princess Casamassima* yearns to abolish the exchange of signs on the periphery, or rather *in the market,* in favor of the distribution of physical tokens from a dominating, Godlike center. That subject focuses its resentment on the *centerless* character of the existing society because it cannot abide its own (as it seems subjectively) demoted non-centrality; but *"centerless-ness"* is a tough object on which to focus, so the focus inevitably shifts to victimary representatives of *"centerless-ness."* Karl Marx speaks candidly to just this point. In his essay "On the Jewish Question," Marx writes that "The splitting of man into his public and his *private* self and the *displacement* of religion from the state to civil society is not one step in the process of political emancipation but its *completion."*(114) Marx argues that "Political emancipation from religion allows religion . . . to continue in existence" whereupon "the religious and theological consciousness regards itself as all the more religious and all the more theological since it is apparently without any political significance or worldly aims, an unworldly and spiritual affair, an expression of the inadequacy of reason, the product of caprice and fantasy, an actualization of the life to come."(115) The phrase, "all the more," is a condemnation. Because the Christian was from the beginning "the theorizing Jew,"(116) and because "the *empirical* essence of Judaism" is "the market and the conditions that give rise to it,"(117) the intolerability of post-ritual religion and the

intolerability of bourgeois economics are *one* and interchangeable; in subverting the market one simultaneously subverts God or the idea of God.

7

The diffusion of God in the economy of peripheral exchange puts a stumbling block in the way of direct action emanating from an agent occupying an authoritarian center. Abolishing the post-sacred religion, which has hardly anything of a religious appearance at all, thus permits the reestablishment of sacred—that is, *sacrificial*—gestures that will permit the panic-stricken lovers of crisis and rebels against existence to perform the hoary actions of social intervention. When he still feels the tug of conspiracy, Robinson can say, anticipating the language of his later flagging enthusiasm, "I pledge myself, by everything that is sacred"(118) to carry out murder for the cause. Captain Godfrey Sholto, an architect of the plot, says to the Princess of Robinson, "certainly, he will have to be sacrificed."(119)

The resentment of the subversives manifests itself in degrees in James's cast of antinomians. In Vetch, Robinson's mentor, irritation against the prevailing society runs shallow rather than deep; it is precisely a Bohemian pose, a version of protective irony. Robinson's seamstress foster-mother knows Vetch as "a blasphemous republican," whose "radical views" emerge in "the contemptuous manner in which he expressed himself about the nobility" and in "diatribes against the British middle-class, its Philistinism, its snobbery."(120) Vetch's later actions redeem him by showing him as fundamentally decent: he condemns the murder-plot and begs Robinson to renounce his involvement in it, which Robinson does by committing suicide rather than carrying through the ambush. Vetch's friend Eustache Poupin—who labors at his craft in Mr. Crookenden's bookbindery where Vetch secures a position for Robinson—while not a fanatic, nurses nevertheless a deeper sense of ontological outrage than the mentor. "Poupin," writes James, "had come to England after the Commune of 1871, to escape the reprisals of the government of M. Thiers."(121) Like Vetch, Poupin "was a Republican of the old-fashioned sort . . . infinitely addicted to fraternity and equality."(122) Thinking "the fabric of Church and State" to be "iniquitous," Poupin "believed that the day was to come when all the nations of the earth would abolish their frontiers and armies and custom-houses . . . and cover the globe with boulevards, radiating from Paris, where the human family would sit . . . listening to the music of the spheres."(123) The utopian prospect has a dark side, for, as Poupin sees things, the "family of man" can only come about through "a force that will make the bourgeois go down in their cellars and hide, pale with fear."(124)

During their first conversation, Paul Muniment tells Robinson that he wants to extend, not abolish, capital punishment, and "impose it on those who habitually lied or got drunk."(125) As for jails, in Muniment's revolutionary view, "we will want to keep them standing, and even to build a few more; but the difference will be that we shall put the correct sort in."(126) The committed should "make it [their] religion" to accomplish such things

because, as the speaker says prophetically, “The world is full of unclean beasts whom I shall be glad to see shoveled away by the thousand.”(127) Robinson suspects that these outbursts belong “to a faith that transcended logic.”(128)

James draws the given names, except in Robinson’s case, from hagiography, not least *Paul* but also *Anastasius* and *Eustache.* Poupin’s vision of a unified world, with Paris at its center, at once amuses readers and instructs them: it is, instructively, eschatological; it borrows much of its imagery from the Gospel, especially its positivistic version of the Holy Family, or what the *proscrit* calls, in language that James likely borrows from Auguste Comte, the “family of man.” The order in the “family” image (a concrete synonym for *fraternity*) rests not on freedom, however, but on that “terrible force” that magically banishes the bourgeois devils. Opposed to the devils in such a struggle are, of course, the saints. Poupin leaves the “force” undefined, but Muniment defines it for him, as the death sentence and the *shoveling away* of all those “unclean beasts.” Muniment tells Robinson defensively, “I don’t believe in the millennium, but I do believe in democracy,”(129) a Promethean utterance revealing the speaker’s conviction of his role as the shaper of destiny. Paul sees himself, to use Berdyaev’s term, as a *future messiah*. The Princess, too, professes a belief in “the people,” but Robinson wonders, “Why are some human beings the people, and the people only, and others not?”(130) The Princess will tell Vetch that, in her view, Robinson “is a deplorable little backslider,” who “worships false gods.”(131) In fact, except in the quasi-theological language of the revolutionaries, the notions of God and religion appear nowhere else in James’s narrative. Robinson certainly has no conventional religious affiliation; it is the devotees of rectification who complain of betrayal and invoke the *“nom de Dieu!”(132)* The phrases “for God’s sake,” “Good God,” and “before God” find utterance at last only in the presence of Robinson’s corpse, with “a horrible thing, a mess of blood, on the bed, in his side, in his heart.”(133) In their willingness to sacrifice Robinson in pursuit of their millennial scheme, the cabal of shabby schemers reenacts the Calvary-moment that once and for all exposed the vanity of sacrifice, revealing themselves as partisans of death. Life, in *The Princess Casamassima,* belongs with the very truck and traffic that the revolutionaries revile.

IV

“The complicity of Christian doctrine with the market is not found on the surface,” writes Gans in *Originary Thinking,* “but at the root, in their shared ‘omnicentric’ ethical structure.”(134) This “omnicentrism,” as we have seen in the case of *The Princess Casamassima*’s conspirators, has to do with the productivity of culture, the characteristic activity of which is the production of signs by individual speakers *at will* apart from direct mediation through a ritual focus. God departs from the center into language. Even in the primitive “Big Man” economy, the magazine of goods functions only through its dispersal from the center in the form of the gifts, in receiving which the beneficiaries return to the giver status and significance. Insofar as the “Big Man” wants to retain status and

significance, he must repeat his gesture, applying energy once again to the creation of a surplus beyond his own existential need. As Gans says in *Originary Thinking,* "human inequality is a product of freedom from the moral configuration of the originary scene, a freedom granted by the scene itself."(135) The "Big Man" violates the "moral equality" of the ritual order, but he also liberates his beneficiaries from the fixed configuration of that order, opening the possibility that they too might, as Gans puts it, manage a "usurpation of the ritual center."(136) Nevertheless, because he is "a superior producer" who "captures and turns to his own human purposes the originary source of difference,"(137) his status breeds or at any rate *exacerbates* resentment. Liberation and resentment against liberation proceed apace.

In its purely reactionary form, resentment is a kind of stupidity that refuses to grasp the origin of the status that it resents; such resentment wants to imitate what appears to it to be *the mystery of possession* rather than to imitate the productivity antecedent to and generative of possession. Hesiod, in *Works and Days,* already distinguishes between an invidious "strife" *(Eris)* and a productive "strife," noting the strong temptation of the former over the persuasive logic of the latter, but urging the latter nevertheless. Robinson's figure, in *The Princess Casamassima,* of the revolutionary who scissors the grand Renaissance canvas into confetti-ribbon tokens for mass-distribution stands perfectly for a type of politicized resentment that responds to the existing order with nihilistic contempt because others possess, through their labor or their barter, what the invidious subject himself does not. In the economy of signs, the artist, it might be Veronese, is a "Big Man," who labors to create a surplus of significance, which the individual connoisseurs of the *objet d'art* recognize and in which they participate, not only while viewing it but also in remembering it; this acknowledgment *cum* participation of pleasure-in-significance entails no material reduction of the object, as the imagined laceration does. One would think therefore that a technique allowing for distribution to the mass of copies of the canvas, on the model of the replication of words, so that everyone could have his own memento, would satisfy resentment; this is how the market, against which almost everything calling itself *theory* since Marx has articulated itself, works. When resentment becomes politicized or "theorized" this logical satisfaction turns out, however, not to be the case. One thus finds the contradiction of Walter Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which denigrates the retail of simulacra on the theory that, because each buyer thinks of his simulacrum as property, and because property is as in Rousseau theft, the "aura" of the original becomes depleted. Esthetics is then, for Benjamin, a zero-sum game just as is the larger economics in which it takes its place; so *theory,* too, is the delusion that *existence itself, in the whole,* is a zero-sum game.

8

As it happens, a painting plays a role early in *The Sacred Fount,* James's fantasy about a man who falls under the spell of a spontaneously generated *theory* that imputes to human

robustness a vampire-like character active selfishly in the absoluteness of a zero-sum game; the entire vocabulary of this theory is that of a primitive cult, with the usual Jamesian iterations of *sacred, sacrifice, consecration,* and so forth, on almost every page. At Newmarch, one of those country houses of the extravagantly wealthy that furnish the architecture in so many of James's stories, the anonymous narrator conceives the idea that the weekend partiers are all—most of them unconsciously—engaged in the predatory activity of robbing one another of a fixed quantity of life-force in circulation among them. In a gallery of the manor the narrator in company with the painter Ford Obert, the married lady May Server, and one Gilbert Long, views a depiction of a Hamlet-like "young man in black—a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown."(138) The painter has executed his figure with calculated nuance, so that the viewer at first fails to notice exactly what the pale-faced man holds in his hand: "But on a second view" it proves to be "a representation of a human face, modeled and coloured, in wax, in enameled metal, in some substance not human."(139) May Server says that the picture should bear the name "The Mask of Death," but the narrator contradicts her, saying that it more appropriately should bear the name "The Mask of Life."(140) The psychic fluid, so to speak, of the black-clad "clown" seems to have flowed from him into the mask, which blooms with the color that the source of its life has forfeited in the transaction. The picture is an allegory of alienated patrimony and thus it is also an emblem of the *idée fixe*—of plundering the finite store of vitality—that has been gestating in the narrator's mind.

Unlike his anonymous counterpart in *The Aspern Papers,* the anonymous first-person narrator of *The Sacred Fount* nourishes (or at least seems to nourish) no discernible resentment in any particular cause, nor does he see himself explicitly as exempt from decorum or ethics. On the contrary, he regards himself as a model of friendly solicitousness. He does, however, share with his counterpart a psychological detachment; with the exception of Obert, for example, all the other guests at Newmarch appear to be married although the erotic volatility of these pairings contributes to the overall atmosphere of disintegration and crisis in the tale. The narrator's peculiar idea first occurs to him in a railway compartment, which he shares with Long and Grace Brissenden *en route* to the weekend at Newmarch. The narrator knows Gilbert Long, whom he had previously met "at Newmarch only," as "stupid," as "a fine piece of human furniture."(141) Now, however, Long suddenly strikes the narrator as "less and less like the heavy Adonis,"(142) whom he remembers; Mr. Long indeed seems to have "come out."(143) At first, the narrator altogether fails to recognize Grace Brissenden. Not so long before, she married Guy Brissenden, a man considerably her junior; the narrator thus holds an image of her as the distinctly senior member of the marital union. In the compartment, Mrs. Brissenden suddenly appears to the narrator to have "changed . . . extraordinarily for the better," so that he wonders to himself, "how could a woman who had been plain so long become pretty so late?"(144) When the narrator remarks privately to Mrs. Brissenden about Long's transformation, she attributes it casually and without implication to Lady John, whose

society *"is,* you see, a lift"(145)to the man. Lady John, says Mrs. Brissenden, possesses in store an influence that "she pumps into others."(146) At Newmarch with the guests arriving, Long displays a marked "predominance" and is "in possession of the scene to a tune he couldn't have dreamed of a year or two before."(147) At Newmarch also at this opening moment the narrator sees Guy Brissenden, who, although younger than his wife, now seems "older . . . oldest," looking "quite sixty."(148) With a conviction that surprises him, the narrator now feels "conscious, vaguely, of being on the track of a law, a law that would fit . . . the delicate phenomena."(149)

While the narrator develops what he is soon calling his "theory,"(150) the "full-blown flower of [his] theory,"(151) and his "torch of analogy,"(152) he begins his attempt to convince certain others of its validity, protesting against skepticism that the insight stems from his "sense of reality."(153) Obert hints that the narrator's observations regarding the two Brissendens have piqued his curiosity and made the theory, tentatively broached, plausible. "One of the pair," says the narrator, "has to pay for the other."(154) He then swiftly trades the economic metaphor for a biological one, saying, "Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom, somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy [Brissenden] himself?"(155) Next, leaving behind the biological, he adopts a mythological metaphor, in which Grace Brissenden "by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain" has contrived "to tap the sacred fount,"(156) the "Egeria,"(157) to her selfish "profit."(158) Obert draws out the implication in a question that combines the different metaphors: "So that, paying to his last drop, Mr. Briss . . . can only die of the business,"(159) becoming a "victim" and a "sacrifice."(160) The narrator also—most carefully—confides in Mrs. Brissenden herself, limiting his explanation to the instance of Long, awareness of whose promotion from dullard to "the most brilliant of our companions"(161) she has confessed. They wonder together, consistent with the theory, who constitutes the source of this anomalous energy and by what signs they might identify her. Obviously, the narrator concludes, "the thing we're looking for ought logically to be the person, of the opposite sex, giving us the maximum sense of depletion."(162)

Mrs. Brissenden thinks that it must be May Server, known for her torpidity and lack of mental sharpness. The narrator experiences no little reticence at this point because he does not want to develop his idea so far in his interlocutor's presence that she might divine how he thinks it explains *her* transformed brightness. He grasps that his idea implies an ugly accusation.

The vampire-theme plays a role in *The Aspern Papers,* as we have seen, just as it does in *The Sacred Fount.* In the *dénouement* of *The Aspern Papers,* the "publishing scoundrel" who is the narrator notices a change in Miss Tina, who has previously exhibited herself as aged and depleted but who, in the moment when she tells him that she has burnt Aspern's letters, manages to effect a mien "angelic," as the narrator says, making her "younger . . . not a ridiculous old woman."(163) In the context of *The Aspern Papers,* Miss Tina's access of

vitality would have everything to do with her having vengefully reversed the betrayal perpetrated on her by the narrator, reducing him from master to slave and promoting herself, if only transiently, from slave to master. It is a case of shifting dominance in a zero-sum game involving the contested documents, a dance of the would-be sacrificer (and actual betrayer) and his designated victim. One must stress the importance of point of view in both *The Aspern Papers* and *The Sacred Fount.* In both, the first-person narrator mediates all information for the reader.

In *The Aspern Papers,* the poet's remaining uncollected *post mortem* effects constitute a numinous fetish that confers power; Miss Juliana possesses this potent gist and the narrator wants it. The action resolves schematically into a power-struggle of the most primitive sort. In *The Sacred Fount,* the narrator is not so obviously involved in a power-contest, but he sees everyone else as being involved in one. Like the title character in *The Princess Casamassima,* who believes that she has been "humiliated, outraged, [and] tortured" in such a way that her existence "could only be put on a tolerable footing by a revolution,"(164) and who likes "to swear by Darwin and Spencer, as well as by the revolutionary spirit,"(165) the narrator of *The Sacred Fount,* also a person of wealth and privilege, while not sharing the Princess's specific complaints, has come to view life as an interminable sequence of sacrifices in which the stronger tracks the weaker as though he "were trapping a bird or stalking a fawn,"(166) and in which the prey, "abased," becomes the sign "of what consuming passion can make of the marked mortal on whom, with fixed beak and claws, it has settled."(167)

9

These Darwinian metaphors resemble the anti-theistic and anti-market formulas of actual radical discourse, including the imputation to the reviled bourgeois exploiters of an enabling false consciousness. Thus James's narrator asserts of his fellow partiers at Newmarch that "they were all unconscious" of their psychic vampirism, even Grace Brissenden while she "was eating up poor Briss inch by inch."(168) Gans, in *Signs of Paradox,* argues that such terms as "exploitation" and "appropriation," familiar from Rousseauian and Marxist discourse, find their most general meaning in the agitating palaver about "race, gender, and sexual orientation [that] have become the chief rubrics of what used to be 'class analysis.'"(169) Typically, such putative racism, *et cetera,* is supposed to be *institutional* rather than intentional, just as in the original Marxist false consciousness; but whether the malefactors are aware of their malice or not, they remain the perpetrators of expropriation in the "antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes,"(170) as Marx himself says in *The Communist Manifesto.* As Gans observes, however, "the kernel of Marx's argument against the bourgeoisie is his definition of the ostensibly reciprocal exchange of the worker's labor for the capitalist's wage as 'exploitation,' which is really no more than a scientific-sounding term for victimization."(171) In the race- or gender-based critique of prevailing social structures, Gans points out: "The place of the victim becomes the sole locus of human

truth," the "sole human truth" being the fact of "victimization."(172)We have already observed the ubiquity of victimary vocabulary in *The Sacred Fount,* where the discovery that some people live at the expense of others figures for the discoverer as a type of "sublimity"(173) and where the glimpse of the sublime phenomenon fills the *illuminatus* with the rhetorical power to "talk" a person "under."(174)

Gans also notes that the function of victimary discourse is "blackmail."(175) The bearers of the victimary truth attract attention as liberators and, by their manipulations, become arbiters of (illusory) justice and brokers of (quite real) power. James's narrator in *The Sacred Fount* candidly sees his own theory as conferring on him something like this status. He speaks of his "superior vision" and of the "undiluted bliss, in the intensity of consciousness I had reached."(176) Acknowledging that his idea might be nothing but "a frenzied fallacy," he nevertheless praises its "naturally intoxicating"(177)effect on his sense of himself. He says, "I struck myself as knowing again the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable, that joy of determining, almost of creating results, which I have already mentioned as an exhilaration attached to some of my plunges of insight."(178)

In *The Princess Casamassima,* Anastasius Vetch and Hyacinth Robinson himself at last see through the misrepresentations in guise of theory, by a "contagion of excited purpose,"(179) have drawn them into the invidious conspiracy. In *The Sacred Fount,* the narrator stubbornly sticks to his theory; it is for others, evaluating it, to reject it. Obert, who has found plausibility in the idea, tells the narrator that, in pursuing on the presumption of its validity "our hands are not clean."(180) The phrase, which has a Gospel connotation, assimilates this strange novel to the discussion of anti-theism and the revolutionary psychology in *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Aspern Papers,* where it is more obvious than in *The Sacred Fount.* Without the phrase but with the meaning, Obert senses "the contagion of excited purpose" in the narrator's "view" of existence, and remarks to him that "as you had planted the theory on, it began to bear fruit."(181) Obert latterly rejects the idea, as does Mrs. Brissenden, who describes it, building on her earlier phrase, "the imagination of atrocity,"(182) as "the vision of horrors."(183)

Once readers see the narrator this way, Wilson Follett's benchmark interpretation of the novel, published shortly after James's fiction appeared, and later endorsed by R. P. Blackmur, fails to convince. Follett and Blackmur see *The Sacred Fount*'s narrator as a stand-in for James himself and his theory as evidence of a genuinely refined sensitivity and imagination. Blackmur concludes, in his Afterword to *The Sacred Fount,* that Mrs. Brissenden having been "hallucinated . . . into accepting [the narrator's] vision of life against her own will and without her knowledge,"(184) this represents a redeeming triumph of *art* for which the lady is shamefully thankless. "Thus we see," as Blackmur writes, "that . . . James [as narrator] is the hidden conscience of his characters, and as conscience he is himself their sacred fount."(185) On the contrary, the narrator, who is *not* James, is a prig and a manipulator who is spiritually akin to the first-person point of view character of *The*

Aspern Papers and to the homicidal plotters of *The Princess Casamassima.* He mockingly dares Mrs. Brissenden, when she criticizes the theory for a piece of invidious fantasy, to make the case that will force him "to abandon my false gods."(186) In a simile of mendacious reversal, the narrator accuses Mrs. Brissenden of looking at him "as a Roman lady at the circus may have watched an exemplary Christian."(187)

In *The Sacred Fount* James has posed, perhaps by canny prophetic design, a scandal and a challenge for twenty-first-century readers. The very setting of *The Sacred Fount,* the country estate of the hereditarily wealthy, with its extensive Arcadian grounds, its picture galleries, and its near-mythic leisure, puts one on edge. So steeped are contemporary readers in the falsely victimary view of existence, that they reflexively take sides with an evaluation of affluence that characterizes it in Rousseauian or Marxist fashion as ill-gotten in some monstrous exploitation of the oppressed. The sexes are at war, according to the feminist version of neo-Marxist discourse, and marriage is, under that theory, a trap for women. *The Sacred Fount,* like *The Golden Bowl,* vindicates, among other traditional institutions, marriage. Many, many are the stumbling blocks. There are victims in the novel, to be sure—the people, like Grace Brissenden, whom the narrator in effect slanders in his description of them as thieves of vitality belonging rightfully to others.

V

The *Weltanaschauungen* of the "publishing scoundrel" in *The Aspern Papers,* the revolutionaries in *The Princess Casamassima,* and the narrator in *The Sacred Fount* qualify as Gnostic. Eric Voegelin defines the Gnostic dispensation as ontological dissatisfaction, sometimes expressing itself in the form of dissatisfaction of an intense kind with the subject's personal situation; as a conviction that "the world is poorly intrinsically organized" and that human inadequacies stem from a pervasive "wickedness of the world."(188) In Voegelin's definition, the Gnostic also believes "salvation from the world" will only come about by alteration of the existing, unsatisfactory world "in a historical process" and that this manipulation of history "is possible through man's own effort."(189) This effort, finally, requires a type of magical knowledge, "the construction of a formula for self and world salvation," from which arises "the Gnostic's readiness to come forward as a prophet."(190) In *The Aspern Papers,*the prophet is Jeffrey Aspern himself, the "Shelleyite" revealer of the man-god. In *The Princess Casamassima,* he is the German revolutionary Hoffendahl, whose sojourn in prison for revolutionary activity has imbued him with a "sublime" quality for his admirers, who "desire to stand face to face" with him, "to hear his voice, to touch his mutilated hand."(191) In *The Sacred Fount,* the narrator sees himself as the revealer of the predatory reality of existence and directs his energy to persuading others of the special knowledge of his truth. By resisting the narrator's rhetoric, Grace Brissenden becomes the positive central figure of the novel. To Voegelin's characteristics of the Gnostic prophet, one might add a determination to do away with all competing interpretations of existence.

Of the Gnostic or aggressively theosophical position, Henry James knew a great deal. His father, Henry James Sr., in addition to being a convinced Swedenborgian, was also a devotee of Charles Fourier, whose doctrine of *Phalansterisme,* which anticipates features of Twentieth-Century totalitarianism, provided the conceptual basis for bizarre experiments in practical socialism in the United States in the early nineteenth century, such as Brook Farm and the Oneida Colony. Fourier typifies the reactionary personality of the Romantic period: his dissatisfaction with the existing order of things found its chief objects in the market and in inherited religion, both of which he declared to have a toxic influence on human happiness. In *The Theory of Social Organization,* Fourier claims that "there exists for Man a unitary destiny—a Divine social order to be established on the earth for the regulation of the social and domestic relations of the human race."(192) The *phalanx,* a Sparta-like collective, is Fourier's formula for the reconstruction of social reality; in it, the submissive individual becomes attuned to the cosmos itself and a bland harmony prevails.

Operative in this prescription for paradise on earth is a desire to exercise total control over the behavior of other people by constructing their "unitary destiny"—to realize happiness, in other words, through the destruction of freedom. The Gnostic is fundamentally a man of resentment who especially resents not having been consulted in the constitution of reality, whether cosmic or social. Henry James's brother William, in his study of *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* writes of the "sick soul," the subject whose way of thinking and judging entails "maximizing evil . . . based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence."(193) The "sick soul" sees in existence only: "failure, then, failure!"(194) In the "sick" frame of mind, "we strew [the world] with our blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation" so that, as it seems, the world "with damning emphasis does . . . blot us out."(195) The vengeful or morally self-licensing character common to the three Henry James novels that we have examined instantiate what William James means by the "sick soul." The psychologist adds that "the deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint, if it is to take effect; and that seems a reason why the coarser religions, revivalistic, orgiastic, with blood and miracles and supernatural operations, may possibly never be displaced."(196)

The Princess Casamassima in this sense provides the clue that lets us understand *The Aspern papers* and *The Sacred Fount.* The titular Princess herself, Paul Muniment, and to a lesser extent Eustache Poupin and Anastasius Vetch all feel themselves to have been blotted out by existence. In them, the sense of the world as an intrinsically evil place, which can only be rectified through being destroyed, is acute. They have found a doctrine—never named, but identifiable as the atheist humanism and immanent eschatology about which Lubac and Voegelin in different ways write—that affords them justification for perpetrating what amount to blows of revenge against existence itself. One can easily see the narrator of

The Aspern Papers or the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* turning up in the subversive and conspiratorial *milieu* of the *Casamassima* conspirators; and one can easily imagine Hyacinth Robinson's reaction to the nastiness of the "publishing scoundrel" or the manipulative behavior of the invidious bachelor at Newmarch. Robinson differs from the two anonymous narrators in his capacity for love. Although, as earlier remarked, the *milieu* of *The Princess Casamassima,* as of the other two novels, incorporates almost no explicitly religious element, no theological discourse, *as such,* nevertheless Robinson does engage in what rightfully can be labeled theodicy. When he writes to the Princess from Venice, he finds, as he says, that "I don't want every one to have a little piece of anything" and that "there has crept over me a deep distrust of that same grudging attitude—the intolerance of positions higher and brighter than one's own; a fear, moreover, that I may in the past have been actuated by such motives, and a devout hope that if I am to pass away while I am yet young it may not be with that odious stain on my soul."(197)

A few days before Robinson kills himself so as not to have to carry through the assassination with which his conspiratorial comrades have charged him, Robinson actually finds himself in church. The occasion is one of his outings with Millicent Henning, a girl whose simple integrity, if slightly diminished by girlish self-awareness, yet stands in absolute contrast with the cynicism of the Princess. Robinson has known and, in his shy way and without professing it, loved Millicent since they were children together in Lomax Place. Writes James, "Hyacinth had already been impressed, more than once, by the manner in which his blossoming friend stickled for the religious observance: of all the queer disparities of her nature, her devotional turn struck him as perhaps the queerest."(198)Significantly, Robinson has concealed his "unlimited wickedness of opinion"(199) and "godlessness"(200) from Millicent out of concern for the genuineness of her disposition. Robinson observes how Millicent, sitting "with majesty" in her pew, "seemed to answer, in her proper person, for creeds and communions and sacraments," and her very "severity" during the service becomes "a kind of magnification of her rich vitality."(201) The contrast could not be greater, as Robinson thinks, for "the Princess wished to destroy society and Millicent wished to uphold it."(202) After the service, Millicent treats Robinson solicitously, almost flirtatiously, "uttering her sentiments in a high, free manner."(203) The keynote is the word *free.* The Sunday morning sequence highlights the foundation of freedom in a notion of free will as promulgated in the Gospel, whether one takes the Gospel as the inspired words of God or simply an exemplarily wise text; and the greatest attestation of free will, from the Gospel perspective, is to act, not on the principle of vengeance, but on the principle of love. Lovelessness is godlessness, so to speak, in James's indirect but poignant argument. By a corollary, the deadly assault against God is also an assault, necessarily also deadly, against freedom and love. To this stark issue James forces us to attend.

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