

Thesis statement of Ágnes Pokol's "The Concept of Reciprocity in Henry James's Fiction: A Sociological Approach"

1. Scope

"Reciprocity" and such related concepts as "gift" and "gratitude" belong to several disciplines—sociology, anthropology, economics—yet they have been neither clearly defined nor discussed as exhaustively as they merit. They bear further connection to the concept of the self (the self's relation to itself), the relationship of self and other, the dilemma of being an individual and simultaneously a social member, and the creation and maintenance of human relationships, which are central questions of various disciplines once again—not only of sociology, moral philosophy, and psychology, for instance, but also of literature. Henry James is a case in point here with his lifelong preoccupation with the moral dimension of literature, with manners and mores (culture), his general interest in social life and the viewing of the individual as a social being.

In fact, as a researcher—participant observer—of the social world, James was nothing less than a sociologist, who gave his observations the form of a work of fiction instead of a sociological treatise. My claim as to his (however unwitting) multidisciplinary approach—the fusion of sociology and literature in the endeavor to fulfill the supreme (moral) task of every artist—falls in with his artistic credo so much akin to George Eliot's,¹ namely that art has a strong social binding force and a moral function in that it succeeds in surprising "even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the material of moral sentiment." This can be brought about because, to quote Eliot again, "art is the nearest thing to life and it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."

Despite his socializing, James had always remained an outsider who was something of a welcome curiosity with his American background. Sufficiently detached and immersed at the same time, the position he had created for himself as an American artist traveling and working in Europe bore wonderful fruit. An example of this is the evergreen Jamesian issue of the clash between Europe and America. This is, furthermore, one of the fertile grounds to investigate the social context of individuals, which are so many different cultures with

¹ From George Eliot's book review on W. H. Riehl's "The Natural History of German Life." For further bibliographical details, see the list of works consulted at the end of this thesis statement.

different attitudes towards the disposition to reciprocate. Yet another recurring Jamesian motif is the story of the innocent American girl's quest for self in the guise of her adventure of coming to Europe, the land of experience, where she has to come to terms with the fragmented nature of reality and the existence of the Other if she is to grow up and become an independent individual (Virginia Fowler 11).

By emphasizing the social and moral function of reciprocity—a fundamental moral virtue to be acquired so as to facilitate the individual's socialization (the putting her/himself in context and thereby establishing and maintaining lasting human relationships) and the endeavor to reach moral excellence (Lawrence C. Becker 74-5, 149-51)—I propose to examine whether the chosen Jamesian protagonists (most importantly, the three American girls, Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Milly Theale of *The Wings of the Dove*, and Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl*) in the course of their moral education (their quest to grow up) manage to acquire the essential disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) and whether they succeed or fail when they are put to the test. In cases where the formation of personality has taken place before a character is met and so her or his moral education is supposed to have already been completed, the stress is on the evaluation of her/his character in situations where her/his reactions reveal whether—besides the (Aristotelian perception-based) moral sense (her/his use of perception and imagination complimented by the intelligent application of general moral rules as “rules of thumb”)—(s)he also possesses the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful).

Approaching the issue of morality so crucial to Jamesian fiction in a multidisciplinary spirit and, more particularly, from a sociological standpoint—analyzing the concepts of “reciprocity,” “gift,” and “gratitude” in general, and in connection with the American girls' moral education in particular—I aim at revealing aspects of James's works hitherto neglected by James criticism. My method and focus are intended to shed a new light on the (moral) conduct—particularly the motives of the (non) actions—of several characters besides the three American girls of central importance; there are Maud Lowder and Lord Mark in *The Wings of the Dove*, as well as Prince Amerigo, Charlotte Stant, and Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, for instance.

Importantly, the dissertation is built up in a way that it may serve as a monograph of Jamesian fiction that covers his whole oeuvre, proceeding from his early phase towards his last finished novel, *The Golden Bowl*. Moreover, besides such landmarks in his writing career as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, I also analyze pieces that have not received so much attention, but bear relevance to a more complete

understanding of the better-known works. An example of this may be “A Light Man,” “Longstaff’s Marriage,” and “Georgina’s reasons,” or even *Watch and Ward*.

2. Method

As the theoretical framework due to my multidisciplinary approach is built up of various systems of thought, I provide an overview of my most important sources, namely Lawrence C. Becker, Georg Simmel, Peter Blau, Robert A. Emmons, Helmuth Berking, Pierre Bourdieu, Marcel Mauss, Donald L. Mull, Jonathan Freedman, Winfried Fluck, Martha C. Nussbaum, Lionel Trilling, Virginia Fowler, Paul B. Armstrong, Slavoj Žižek, and Jacques Lacan. Along with “reciprocity,” I focus on the following key terms closely connected to my argument: “gift,” “benefactor,” “beneficiary,” “capital,” the dynamics of “give and take,” and “gratitude.”

The most essential tenets concerning my understanding of “reciprocity” and “gift” are the following: 1. agreeing with Becker, I take reciprocity to be a fundamental moral virtue (in order to approach the ideal of her/his type, any individual has to acquire the disposition to reciprocate (74-5, 149-51); 2. the ancillary disposition (moral virtue) of gratefulness is likewise fundamental in order to reach happiness and enhance solidarity among the members of society (Emmons 7-10, 54); 3. I refuse to believe in the existence of the so-called “free” or “pure” gift—there are always strings attached, donors always have some kind of expectation, be it self-gratification via enjoying the pleasure given to the recipient, or a more transparent mercenary motive (Mauss, Blau, Marshall Sahlins, Derrida); 4. as the concept of the free/pure gift repudiated by me precludes the obligation to reciprocate, I consequently hold the gift and reciprocity to be interlinked at all times; 4. this further implies my agreement with Mauss’s tenet concerning the eternal chain of reciprocity: “A” gives with the expectation of return, “B” receives it, and reciprocates (39).

So as not to turn the beginning of the analysis into a cut and dried theoretical block—what with the essential importance to give a detailed consideration to the problematic “moral issue” as well—I outline only “reciprocity,” “gift,” and “capital” in the introductory Part. I turn to the other concepts as soon as they become of relevance in the discussion, which thereby allows me to explain them with using primary sources in my demonstration.

Accordingly, the figures of the “benefactor” and “beneficiary” are examined in James’s works preceding *The Portrait of a Lady* (“A Light Man,” *Watch and Ward*, *Roderick*

Hudson, *The American*, and “Longstaff’s Marriage” in Part II.) and through *The Portrait* itself (Part III.). As Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism (Fowler) plays an important role in my approach towards the quest for adulthood via learning to live as social beings that the three American girls (Isabel, Milly, and Maggie) face, I give a brief overview of Lacanian terms as soon as the discussion turns to Isabel’s concept of self.

Next, the dynamics of “give and take”—the gist of the Jamesian concept of reciprocity—is looked at in detail when the discussion focuses on *The Wings* (Part IV.). This novel’s depiction of the system of “the workers and the worked” is a case in point indeed, which is why this is the longest Part of the dissertation.

Last but not least, “gratitude” is in the limelight in Part V. *The Golden Bowl* with its ungrateful sposi (the Prince and Charlotte) serves as an ideal ground for the analysis of this concept, which is complimented by a re-thinking of the “gift” and “sexual/erotic capital” as well.

3. Findings

Jamesian protagonists were seen as so many transactors bent on exchanging their capital—be it the economic, social, cultural, symbolic, or the erotic variety—among each other; a scenario where nobody was left empty-handed. Indeed, the Jamesian concept of reciprocity was seen to fall in with my initial tenet concerning the eternal chain of reciprocity: to give with the expectation of a return, to receive, and to give back, *ad infinitum*. *Do ut des*, as the Latin expression has it: “I give so that you may give.” This is to say that none of the Jamesian protagonists—the (innocent) wealthy American characters not exempted—was exploited; everybody was a “worker” and a “worked” at the same time, to use the phraseology of Lancaster Gate depicted in *The Wings of the Dove*, which was seen as the epitome of the Jamesian concept of reciprocity.

The first Jamesian girl in focus, Isabel Archer, was seen as benefactor, beneficiary, and also as gift—her relationships with her fellow beings necessitated that these roles be acted out, however willy-nilly. The stance that may be said to have come closest to hers was probably that of Oscar Wilde’s “new individualist” depicted in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” But, in any case, both her initial position (her idealistic belief in an unfettered self and her consequent aversion to appurtenances, be they humans or objects) and her final outlook (life/experience/relationships as sources of suffering) proved to be inadequate. Isabel

not only failed to acquire the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful), but she thereby also (unconsciously) forwent the possibility to be happy. From a psychological point of view (Lacan), she was seen as an individual reluctant to grow up and come to terms with the fragmented and corrupted nature of the world. Whatever variety of capital happened to be at her disposal, if she bothered to become engaged in any exchange with another associate at all, she always contrived to come out on top. To be in a superior position is the next best thing to remaining independent, as one's self-sufficiency is not jeopardized and it is a gesture that may be included under the heading of generosity—a much “safer” virtue.

Similarly, Milly Theale's “career” could not be called an epitome of success either. She was likewise reluctant to engage in lasting human relationships, which would have entailed the taking of her share in a corrupt and fragmented world. Not that she remained inexperienced and exploited; I was bent on proving that Milly was less of a victim and Mrs. Lowder (Lancaster Gate) was less of an unscrupulous social climber than critical opinion generally allows for. The system of “the workers and the worked” was seen to yield a far more balanced exchange than critics usually would have it; both Milly and Aunt Maud gave and took and nobody remained with empty or overly full hands.

However, just because Milly did engage in the give and take of socialization, it does not mean that her life can be taken as a model for (young) individuals “facing the whole assault of life” and trying to be instructed concerning the (Aristotelian) ethical dilemma of “how to live” (Nussbaum). So as to overcome the terrifying thought that: 1. the world (and the self) is fragmented; 2. it is in a constant state of flux; and 3. the individual has to keep on choosing the adequate masks/roles in her/his endeavor to (re)construct a self according to the given circumstances, after experimenting with being the dying rich American girl, a princess, a Byzantine lady, a dove, Milly eventually opted for the role of the Wildean critic as artist, which strengthened her original tendency towards idealism, leading to her isolation and untimely death. Increasingly passive and aloof, she came to resemble other icons of aestheticism, like the sphinx and the *belle dame sans/avec merci*.

Maggie Verver has been “nominated” the winner. James's last finished novel depicted a morally ambiguous world through the ordeals of four main protagonists, whose relationships with each other were saved by the endeavors of this brave American girl. Putting much more emphasis on the culpability of the insolvent sposi of the Ververs than James critics usually do, I was trying to prove that, despite the questionable morality of the Ververian outlook—monistic standard conflating humans and objects; solipsistic union with each other regarding

the Other(s) as perfectly knowable; the striving for moral goodness/simplicity/perfection in order to forego complications/conflicts/complexity—Maggie grew up to be a responsible human being who: 1. has acquired the fundamental moral virtue(s) of the disposition(s) to reciprocate (and be grateful) and was thereby ready to engage in lasting human relationships; 2. has adopted the new (Aristotelian) perception-based morality that does not neglect particulars and does not, therefore, steer clear of possible conflicts (Nussbaum); 3. has learnt to know and accept Evil as concomitant of this (complex, imperfect) world; but 4. kept on striving to have Good prevail; and so 5. was neither unnecessarily vindictive nor cruel. It was not for Maggie's private pleasure that she lied and inflicted pain on those who had lied and hurt her in the first place, but because Sartrean conflict is the other side of the coin that has Heideggerian care on its shinier side (Armstrong).

Indeed, while discussing the issue of gratitude (another closely related but separate fundamental disposition to be acquired that facilitates the individual's finding happiness via socialization), I have concluded that the conduct of the Prince and Charlotte was deeply unsatisfactory. With the former putting himself in an impossible situation (trying to finance his fresh start by exchanging his non-transferable and fragile symbolic capital and remaining multiply passive in his endeavor to get along) and the latter consciously manipulating events and simultaneously blaming all on the "force of circumstances," they became guilty of base ingratitude. Whether both benefactors were aware of this remains an enigma. Adam, the culmination of the Jamesian collector—male millionaire, aesthete, connoisseur, who is good-natured in the bargain—either knew and played along or remained blissfully ignorant of the whole affair. Maggie, however, utilized it as the painful experience that had been needed to "wake her up," learn to appreciate (be grateful for) her husband, and realize that the excessively strong bond tying her to her father had to be loosened so as to let her grow up and establish an autonomous (even if fragmented) self that sees itself in context and is ready to engage in the give and take called (social) life.

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