

NYELV **VILÁG**



English

10

2010

The role of lies in the *Golden Bowl*

ERIKA HUSZÁR

College of International Management and Business Studies

Henry James's last novel, *The Golden Bowl*, attracted numerous interpretations, some of which amount to impressive theories on James's art and even on American literature. The novel is known for its ambiguity, no wonder that the interpretations differ at significant points. There is, however, one common element: the withholding of truth, duplicity, or plain lies are considered as the cornerstones of *The Golden Bowl* storyline. Most interpretations and theories focus on one, indeed really relevant, question: at the end of his late phase why is James so much preoccupied with fallacies? From a theoretical point of view it seems to be less interesting why James bestows complete victory on one of the deceivers, and why he punishes another one with expulsion from Europe, or, as the novel implies, from civilisation. And, anyway, how complete is Maggie's victory? While enumerating the lies that make up *The Golden Bowl* story and matching them with the interpretations that in my opinion explain them best, also sometimes rejecting the ones that I find unacceptable, I would like to find answers to the latter two questions.

In his milestone work on James, *The Complex Fate* (1952) Marius Bewley puts down James's interest in fallacies to the American artists' traditional preoccupation with the conflict between appearance and reality. (We only have to think of Hawthorne's lifework.) As for Maggie and Charlotte's conspicuously different treatment, Bewley explains that Maggie's lies are not lies of convenience, they are invested with a certain sanctity (89). This is a view that is likely to influence Dorothea Krook's (1962) interpretation. Krook sees a Redeemer figure in Maggie, who saves her nearest and dearest with the force of her love. Bewley considers Charlotte a liar of inferior quality: not only are her motives common, lowly (she is seeking the love of one man while being conveniently married to another), but also "she is not, to Maggie's degree, a player on appearances" (91) and "she is not a virtuoso on the finer hypocrisies" (91). The problem with this approach is that such a value judgment on Charlotte's character brings us close to reducing the novel to a flat narrative on the fight of the baddie and the goodie, instead of regarding it as the struggle of two very complex, and as we will see, equally special female figures.

In his monograph, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, Paul B. Armstrong argues that James and modern existential phenomenology have something important in common: both are primarily interested in the relation of "Me and the Other" (137). This is not saying much as most novelists and philosophical schools probably share this interest. James and the modern phenomenologists, however, put the emphasis on the opacity, ambiguity of relations, on the fact that I can never have full knowledge of another human being. Or, as Sartre puts it: "the object that I am for the Other can never coincide with the subject that I am for myself" (qtd by Armstrong, 139). Sartre regards this "non-coincidence" as the root of permanent conflicts between the self and the other. It would be difficult to find a better illustration of this truth than *The Golden Bowl*, a novel which apparently focuses on the ambiguity and disambiguation of human relations. Armstrong points out that the extreme opacity of the Others in this novel is often achieved by explicit lies (140), and claims that "if James is fascinated with the lie it may be because duplicity exhibits in extreme form many of the problems that complicate the relation between Self and the Other" (140).

Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste* (1990) also offers a coherent interpretation of the two major female characters' lies. Freedman sees them as typical representatives of the decadent phase of aestheticism: they are both femmes fatales, mysterious, speechless, deceitful; only, this

status of Charlotte is gradually fading, while in Maggie's development we can observe this notorious literary figure in the making.

James warns us early in the novel that lies, the difference between appearances and reality, will play an important role in this work of his. In practically the very first dialogue that we have in the opening chapter the Prince requests Maggie to declare that she knows: her intended is not a "hypocrite," he is not someone who "lie[s], dissemble[s], or deceive[s]" (8). James puts it down to Maggie's innocence, to her American roots, that she finds the question too emotional, and is only able to react to it in a puzzled, half-joking manner. Unlike his fiancée, the Prince is aware of the problem of the Other, and of his limitations in that respect, so also in the opening chapter he summons Fanny Assingham's help to see human relations in their reality: "...I want, [...] I shall always want, your eyes. Through *them* I wish to look – even at any risk of their showing me what I mayn't like" (17). As opposed to the novel's "early" Maggie, Fanny Assingham represents another extreme: she devotes most of her time and energy to the interpretation and formulation of human behaviour and relations. She trust herself to be a good judge of character, a good reader of the opaque Other. "I'm not speaking of what she [Charlotte] has told me", she boasts to her husband; "That's one thing. I'm speaking of what I know by myself. That's another"(42). Her attitude, however, turns out to be equally dangerous, as it takes her close to meddling in other people's fates.

Her husband, the Colonel, as a former soldier, shares Sartre's view that conflict is the inherent characteristic of human relations. He reduces the number of the people he trusts to the minimum, to his wife, and can imagine anybody lying. When Fanny tells him that the Prince said he had never been told about Maggie by Charlotte, the Colonel's reply is quite abrupt and shocking: "And he does not lie?" (43). The Colonel's question calls our attention to the fact that even the conduct of such a paragon of good breeding as the Prince cannot be taken for granted.

Among these people arrives Charlotte Stant, on the transparent pretext of buying a wedding present for Maggie. When they are left alone Charlotte tells the Prince plainly that she came to see him once again before his marriage. This, however, is apparently still not the truth, for she also reveals to her former lover that she has tried to find a partner herself but failed. It takes little effort to realise that with these words Charlotte practically admits: she could not forget the Prince, and came back with the conscious hope of getting him back. Charlotte herself is able to read human behaviour ("she *knows* the Prince" [50], Fanny notes of her), she knows the difference between appearance and reality. While the Prince is afraid of not knowing others well enough to be safe, Charlotte is only "afraid of herself" (30), which further complicates the problem highlighted by Armstrong: the Self itself can also be opaque not just the Other. The source of Charlotte's fear is apparently the fact that she wants the Prince but does not know how far she can go in her struggle for him.

Her chances are not bad, despite the Prince's solid intention to make a good husband and son-in-law. At the beginning of the novel Adam and Maggie Verver live in a kind of "solipsistic blindness" (Armstrong 140), either do not care about the people that surround them, or, if they do, they treat them as simple objects. We only have to think of the often quoted dialogue between Maggie and the Prince, in which Maggie explicitly tells her fiancé that he is "a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price" (6) in her father's art collection. In the relations the Ververs share with those closest to them, with the Prince and Charlotte, there is no reciprocity. As the latter two claim, "there is nothing, absolutely, that one need do for her [Maggie]" (60). Meanwhile, as the Ververs only maintain superficial relations with their environment, that environment is only able to form a stereotypical view of them: that of the innocent lovely girl who is not to see evil and of the reserved, shy art collector. In that respect there *is* reciprocity in

human contacts: I would say that this treatment is also a form of objectification. These stereotypes of course turn out to be as false as any, Maggie's ability to recognise the Prince's real status in her family right at the beginning of the novel already foreshadows her later capability to judge and form human relations, while Adam's past as a successful businessman implies that his manipulative power is only dormant, not missing.

Frozen in their stereotypes, neither Maggie nor Adam Verver can be told unpleasant truths. The former is considered too innocent, the latter too reserved and distant for that by Fanny Assingham, Charlotte and the Prince. I see this as the primary reason for none of them speaking about Charlotte and the Prince's Roman love affair to the Ververs. This withholding of truth is chronologically the first important lie that appears in *The Golden Bowl* "fabula."

The marriages of both the Prince and Charlotte cost a lie, a bit of immorality. The weight of the two lies, however, seems to be different. By the time of his wedding the Prince already had got over Charlotte and is only reminded of her by her visit. As the Colonel says to Fanny, "The effort to forget Charlotte couldn't, I grant you, have been so difficult" (45), and Fanny agrees with him. In a strong contrast with the Prince's emotional freedom, Charlotte knows at the time of her marriage that she still likes the Prince. One cannot forget her words on their parting after visiting the antiquarian: "Well, I would marry, I think to have something from you in all freedom (72). Though they are talking about the possibility of giving and taking presents, the sentence remains ambiguous (?) and seems to refer to something Charlotte can get from the Prince as a married woman but not as a maiden. Before, however, we would declare her decision to marry Mr. Verver wholly immoral, we must also consider the numerous mitigating circumstances. Charlotte is painfully lonely, and her American visit only deepened this feeling. It is true that she is also wishing for a solid financial background, but we must not forget that she is too intelligent, her interests are too manifold to be confined to hoarding money. Though she does wish to be near the Prince she also seems to give her husband a fair chance to get closer to her. "I've done, earnestly, everything I could (155)," she says to Fanny at the Ambassador's party. She is, however, to realize that at this stage of his life Mr. Verver's interest in his daughter is "the greatest affection of which he is capable" (155). It is another issue that Charlotte seems to be too cheerful, upbeat when eventually telling the Prince: there is moral ground for the resumption of their relationship as they are both excessively neglected by their spouses.

Not surprisingly, not much later their love affair is rekindled. Armstrong says that the main motive for that on the Prince's side is a (probably subconscious) wish to reestablish his identity, to put an end to his objectification, to do something unexpected by the Ververs (155). As for romance, his attraction to Charlotte seems to weaken soon after the beginning of their liaison; not much later Fanny tells her husband that the Prince does not really care about Charlotte, since "it [starting the affair] has all been too easy for him" (240). I would say that by this time the Prince has already proved to be a worthy member of his new family; he also uses Charlotte as the means of reestablishing his identity, or in other words, as an object. As for Charlotte, her motives are less selfish: she could find nothing that could fill the void left by the Prince in her life, so she probably still feels a real mental and physical attraction to him. I would add though that the motive of identity re-establishment towards the Ververs is present in her case as well, but certainly in a weaker form than in the case of the Prince.

The adulterous liaison necessitates further lies very soon if appearances are to be maintained at all. Fanny Assingham is quick to recognise what is going on between Charlotte and the Prince but decides to say nothing to Maggie. "We know nothing on earth. We are absolute idiots" (297), she clarifies her strategy to the colonel. Maggie herself also becomes suspicious after her husband's Gloucester outing. The birth of this feeling is a turning point in Maggie's life, and consequently in

the novel, marked by the appearance of the famous pagoda symbol. This symbol signifies the beginning of the young woman's development, the abandonment of her solipsistic relationship with her father, and the recognition of the depth of her love for the Prince. Human relationships begin to show in their complexity and ambiguity for her. She becomes aware of human faults (only think of her severe judgement of Lady Castledean). Significantly, at this point she also joins the group of liars: she hides her suspicion from her husband to preserve their marriage, and from her father to protect his peace, the very thing that puts an end to their solipsistic relation. Moreover, Maggie also seems to lie to Fanny when telling her that she believes her lie; she believes in Fanny not knowing anything about Charlotte and the Prince's liaison. As both women cry by the end of this conversation (316), it is apparent that both know the truth but find it too painful to talk about. The scene consequently looks like a game (we will see other examples of it in the novel), the aim of which is to ask and give advice, as well as to offer sympathy and comfort, the advice being that if Maggie is to maintain the delicate balance of the foursome's relationship she has to pursue her prevailing strategy, she has to pretend she does not know anything.

Maggie's development makes her interesting in her husband's eyes: "He never has been half so interested in you as now" (351), claims Fanny Assingham. Genuine interest in a pretty young woman is very close to real love, something that up to this point seems to have been missing from the Maggie-Prince marriage. Instead of this, there is likely to have been hollow romantic notions on Maggie's side and a desire for stability on the Prince's. Maggie's development affirms, as it were, the moral basis of their relationship.

Suspicion and the subsequent development also induce the Ververs to carry out some self-analysis. Both Adam and Maggie accuse themselves of selfishness, which is most probably nothing else but the recognition of their abuse of Charlotte and the Prince. Adam is very careful in his choice of words when he first comes up with the notion: "...we're selfish together – we move as a selfish mass. ... We want each other, ...only wanting it, each time, *for* each other" (298). Though his 'we' includes Charlotte and Amerigo, the reader mainly thinks of the Ververs' conduct, of Maggie wanting Charlotte for Adam, and Adam buying the Prince for Maggie. Later on, when she becomes fully aware of her husband's adultery, Maggie also openly accuses herself of selfishness: "I'm at this moment frozen stiff with selfishness" (402), she tells her father. Though she says she is talking of the sacrifice of her father for the sake of her husband, the reader cannot help thinking of another form of selfishness, of her desire to get rid of Charlotte to repossess her husband.

Maggie's gaining absolute certainty of her husband's conduct, the result of the antiquarian's visit, ends old lies and necessitates new ones. Maggie tells both her husband and Fanny Assingham that she knows the truth. She is intelligent enough to do no more, she never forces the Prince to make a choice or plead guilty. With a masterstroke she merely lets him think. The adulterous liaison is likely to end not much after Maggie's revelation, as she soon sees Charlotte in the cage of delusion, as "a prisoner looking through bars" (381). The Prince's giving up Charlotte so quickly is not at all surprising if we think of his aristocratic passivity, his dislike of complications, as well as the nature of his motivation for starting the relationship. (By shocking Maggie he has already achieved his aim.) Maggie is certain that the Prince explicitly lies to Charlotte, that he tells Charlotte Maggie does not know anything. The Prince's motive is also to force his former (or soon-to-be-abandoned) lover not to change her conduct towards Maggie, and consequently to maintain the foursome's relationship. Emotional outbursts and scenes cannot take place, appearances are to be preserved for Adam Verver's sake, of whom nobody knows how much he knows. James keeps up this uncertainty about him till the very end to sustain tension. The Prince

and the Princess are now allies in protecting, if not Adam Verver's peace of mind, then at least his dignity.

Charlotte will make a desperate attempt to learn something about Maggie's state of mind in the frequently analysed terrace scene. The scene begins with Maggie observing from the terrace the members of her family and Fanny Assingham playing bridge. At this time she is already so far from her original innocent-young-girl self that she feels as if she were the "author" of a play in which the others are actors (385). Charlotte joins Maggie and asks the ominous question: "Is there any wrong you consider I have done you?" (392). Maggie's elaborate answer: "I have never thought of you but as beautiful, wonderful and good" (394), is perhaps too long for Charlotte to be true, as she says that she only wanted Maggie's denial. Maggie duly provides it too, which leaves us with another obvious lie. Her apparent aim again is to keep up the foursome's relationship. Before, however, we would speak of her "redemptive task" (Dorothea Krook's term [Krook 255]), we must also see that Maggie has nothing to gain by provoking a scandal. In addition to hurting her father's feelings she would only be openly confronted with the fact that she was cheated on. Besides, though the Prince is unlikely to side with Charlotte as a result of a scandal, he is also unlikely to find pleasure in such a common scene.

Not much later an already mentioned conversation of Adam and Maggie, during which the latter talks of her selfishness, ends with the two agreeing on the Ververs' return to America. Maggie is soon to see that the decision has been communicated to Charlotte, as she sees her rival as "removed, transported, doomed" (406). Now practically certain of her victory over Charlotte, she can afford having a bad conscience and being very sorry for her. (It is interesting to see how these feelings strengthen in her in direct proportion with her self-confidence.) These feelings lead to another famous scene and another much-discussed lie: Maggie follows a pensive Charlotte into the garden under the pretext of taking some reading for her. A conversation is inevitable, during which Charlotte announces that she feels she needs rest and has decided to take her husband back to America. Maggie allows Charlotte to come up with her version of the story, something considered "sadistic" by several renowned literary critics, for example Jonathan Freedman (237). I think we must not forget that by letting Charlotte speak Maggie provides her with an opportunity to restore some of her dignity. When she is listening "smiling and smiling" (432) to Charlotte, who is just telling her that she places her husband first, and that is why they go back to America, Maggie's smile is rather a smile of relief and not the smile of a sadistic gloater. A smile of relief on seeing that Charlotte was creative enough to make up such a story of face-saving. Though the conversation is about Maggie loathing the Ververs' marriage (something she actually did), both women know well that their real battle was fought for the Prince, and that battle was won by Maggie. Charlotte's final statement: "you've worked against me" (433) applies both to her marriage and - most significantly- to her love affair. Maggie's answer, "I've failed!" (434), is true if we consider the surface meaning of the dialogue and false if we consider its real meaning. As a lie it is the generous lie of a winner who is willing to play the game the rules of which were set by the loser. The major rule - duly accepted by Maggie - is that Charlotte will never ever admit defeat openly.

When talking about their selfishness in Regent's Park Adam tells Maggie that he does not know at whose expense he is happy. At the end of the novel Maggie is forced to see that it is Charlotte who loses most in the "new arrangement" that ensures her her husband. Being happy at somebody else's expense seems immoral, but, as we have just seen, Maggie does what she can to mitigate Charlotte's suffering. She is simply destined to win over Charlotte due to her solid financial background, which enables her to obtain the Prince, and also due to her ability to master the management of human relations, which enables her to keep him.

Armstrong thinks that Maggie's marriage is in a delicate state at the end of the novel, claiming that a relationship which is based on the humiliation and "scapegoating" (183) of Charlotte (her removal he calls by this name) is far from being promising. There are, however, positive signs as well. The Prince apparently becomes fully aware of his wife's exquisiteness by the end of the novel. He thinks Charlotte "stupid" (452), as despite all her refinement she is unable to recognise Maggie's real greatness. He becomes very protective of Maggie; before the Ververs' farewell visit he even offers to tell Charlotte plainly he lied to her, and Maggie knew everything. Despite his aristocratic refinement he offers to hurt and humiliate his former lover. His motive is to show to Charlotte that Maggie is no longer a child, that she is not a fool, that she is, and has long been, aware of all things that concern him. I suspect, though, that besides this noble incentive the Prince probably also wants to demonstrate to Charlotte that he is no mere fortune hunter, that he has made no painful compromise when marrying as his wife is up to any relevant standard and is as exquisite as Charlotte herself. Maggie anyway rejects the offer, the reason for which is probably twofold: her sensitivity opposes it, and her victory is complete without it. One of the sentences of rejection, though, I find telling: "What business is it of yours?" (456). Maggie is now likely to be in charge of allocating tasks in this marriage, she has earned a reputation as a master-manager of human relations. One, however, can count on her tact and on the Prince's many-times-mentioned passivity that this state of power will be of long duration.

As for Charlotte and Mr Verver's common future, Maggie and the Prince share the opinion that Charlotte "will make it" (452) in the American social scene as well. Charlotte's unflagging willingness to observe forms and to avoid scenes also implies that she sticks to her marriage and intends to save it. With Maggie's maturation into a real wife Adam's emotional life is emptied, so it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Ververs' relationship has no development potential.

I could not agree more with Armstrong that the falsehoods that make up *The Golden Bowl* story do not always signify a conflict in the Sartrean sense, as Heideggerian care is equally present in the discussed human relationships (Armstrong 139). By enumerating the duplicities we could see how love, the intention to protect the Other, or to reduce his/her pain, permeate these deceits. It is easy to recognise that this is nothing else but the integration of Krook's interpretation into Armstrong's theory, only replacing Christian love and care with a more modern, 19th century version of it. Also I would add that, contrary to commonplace morality, it is not evil, not something detestable that derives from these deceits, but human relations with the capacity to develop. From this an important conclusion can be drawn: with James lie becomes an inevitable element of human relations, and as such it ceases to be the manifestation of evil, an important move from his American roots (e.g. Hawthorne), a move that already heralds modern phenomenology, and the modernist phase of literature.

References

- Armstrong, Paul B. *The Phenomenology of Henry James*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina Press, 1983.
- Bewley, Marius. *The Complex Fate. Hawthorne, Henry James and some American Writers*. 1952. New York: Gordian Press, 1967.
- Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste. Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*. Stanford: SUP, 1990.
- James, Henry. *The Golden Bowl*. 1904. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.
- Krook, Dorothea. "The Golden Bowl I-II." *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*. Cambridge: CUP, 1962. 232-280.