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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2016.0011

PUBLISHER

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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Murray, Rachel. 2019. ““delightfully Dense”: The Art of Stupidity in Late James”. figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/37487.

# "Delightfully dense": The Art of Stupidity in Late James.

In The Golden Bowl (1904), Henry James establishes Adam Verver's "emulation of the snail. The snail had become for him, under this ironic suggestion, the loveliest beast in nature" for it "marked what he liked to mark" (GB 132). The snail appears to be a symbol of Verver's undisclosed intelligence; rather than marking out precisely what the creature signifies James is providing a "visible trace" (OED) of the presence of a discerning mind. It may also be a mark of obscurity, the sign of a mind that has retreated too far into itself. Verver becomes an increasingly insular figure who friends and family hesitate to deem either "sublime" or "stupid" (GB 423). The unresolved ambiguity as to whether he is a wise man or a fool marks out a trail of "ironic suggestion" in late James where stupidity has become indistinguishable from sublimity. Like Adam Verver, Adorno and Horkheimer find something marked in the snail:

> The emblem of intelligence is the feeler of the snail, the creature "with the fumbling face," with which, if we can believe Mephistopheles, it also smells. Meeting an obstacle, the feeler is immediately withdrawn into the protection of the body, it becomes one with the whole until it timidly ventures forth again as an autonomous agent. If the danger is still present, it disappears once more, and the intervals between the attempts grow longer. […] The snail's sense is dependent on a muscle, and muscles grow slack if the scope for movement is impaired. […] Stupidity is a scar. It can relate to one faculty among many or to them all, practical and mental. Every partial stupidity in a human being marks a spot where the awakening play of muscles has been inhibited instead of fostered. (213-14)

Adopting the feeler as an emblem of intelligence conveys an unexpected proximity between two seemingly opposing qualities. Relocating intelligence from inside the safe confines of the skull to the exposed antennae of a snail highlights the vulnerability of a faculty that reaches out into the unknown. If, as Adorno and Horkheimer claim, exercising intelligence is a risk, this raises questions about the extent to which stupidity is utilised as a means of self-protection in James's work. For instance, when Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant are devising the impromptu trip that marks the beginning of their affair, she coyly remarks: "Ah, for things I mayn't want to know I promise you shall find me stupid" (GB 293). Made manifest, Jamesian stupidity may be nothing other than the tactical concealment of intelligence.

With this in mind, it could also be the case that Jamesian intelligence is nothing other than the careful concealment of every "partial stupidity in a human being". In The Spoils of Poynton (1897), Fleda Vetch observes that Mrs Gereth "had really no perception of anybody's nature – had only one question about persons: were they clever or stupid? To be clever meant to know the 'marks'" (SP 126). What are the 'marks' that only a clever mind can know? Mrs Gereth's brand of cleverness is exclusive; its criteria remain hidden from view. A clue can be found in the 'Preface' to Spoils, in which James makes an attempt to distinguish cleverness from intelligence, arguing that Mrs Gereth "was not intelligent, was only clever". Fleda, on the other hand, "was only intelligent, not distinctively able" (33). It is easy to become mired in the slight distinction between the two terms, but in both cases James makes it clear that an able mind is only able to thrive at the expense of some other necessary quality. In Fleda's case it is the ability to be practical, whereas Mrs Gereth's "sharpness" (SP 91) has impaired her subtlety of insight. The singularity of each woman's mind is "only" that: in both instances James is suggesting that there is something disabling about relying on the intellect alone.

The mysterious 'marks' of Mrs Gereth come to resemble scars of stupidity left by her overweening cleverness. Fleda is not fooled, and as her observation suggests, she soon realises that the "masterful and clever" (SP 39) mistress of Poynton is actually rather imperceptive. Mrs Gereth's mental resources are often used to obscure rather than to reveal the truth, leaving Fleda feeling stupefied by the older woman's destructive intellect.[1] When Fleda starts to play this "hideous double game" (SP 119) Mrs Gereth suffers the same fate, admitting: "you plunge me into stupefaction" (SP 186). The etymology of both stupid and stupefy is the Latin verb *stupēre*, which denotes being physically stunned or stopped in one's tracks (OED). Exemplifying the gravitational pull of bathos, Fleda's depth of thought plunges Mrs Gereth into obscurity. By demonstrating the ways in which both women actively thwart one another's powers of understanding, James presents intelligence as a destructive force that leaves individuals unable to see a situation clearly.

Similarly, in The Golden Bowl, after Bob Assingham takes umbrage at being deemed "immoral" by his wife Fanny, she responds: "I'll call you stupid if you prefer. But stupidity pushed to a certain point is, you know, immorality. Just so what is morality but high intelligence?" (GB 89). Fanny's use of chiasmus enacts a criss-crossing of terms resulting in the confounding of a double opposition. The sentence bears the scars of stupidity as again "only one question" comes of Fanny's flattening of two separate categories – the ethical and the epistemological – into near equivalence. What is significant about this moment is that it is "clever" Fanny (GB 144), rather than "stupid" Bob (GB 89), whose moral failings are being highlighted here. By using these terms interchangeably Fanny allows the subject of intelligence to obscure the issue of morality. Like Mrs Gereth, who cares "only" whether people are clever or stupid, Fanny Assingham is guilty of privileging her intellectual ability at the expense of her principles.

This is not the only time that James calls the ethics of intelligence into question. In her first impression of Owen Gereth, Fleda sets up an implicit contrast between him and his mother, noting how it was "rather remarkable to be stupid without offense – of a pleasanter effect and more remarkable indeed than to be clever and horrid" (SP 40). Fleda loses sight of this over the course of the text, but it is something that James asks the reader to bear in mind. Stupidity, embodied in Bob Assingham and Owen Gereth, adds an ethical imperative to The Spoils of Poynton and The Golden Bowl by demonstrating that it is more important to be kind than to be clever. Fleda also refers to Owen oxymoronically as "delightfully dense" (SP 40). The term "dense" encapsulates the all too easy slippage of Jamesian intelligence into its opposite, stupidity. Density signifies simplicity, denoting a "degree of consistence of a body or substance", as well as "thick-headed" people (OED). It also denotes a level of stylistic complexity that verges on obscurity, as is apparent in Bradley Deane's reference to the "dense syntactical thicket" (93) of James's late works.

At a micro level the term "dense" reflects the stupid-clever dialectic of late James. A cognate of stupidity, the notion of density is rooted in a physical property and only developed informal connotations in the nineteenth century. During the time that James was writing the semantic range of the term expanded in order to belittle.[2] This paradoxical movement is complicated by the fact that James's late texts often achieve the opposite effect, transforming stupidity from a negative into a positive trait of characters such as Owen Gereth and Bob Assingham. In contrast to the calculated and at times devious behaviour of those closest to them, Owen and Bob demonstrate a "consistence" and even a benevolence of character that stems from their simple outlook on life. Through them, James demonstrates a growing recognition of the value of stupidity as a foil to the artfulness of intelligence.

There were a number of factors that forced James to recognise the value of stupidity. Spoils was written during a period of mourning for James, who was lamenting both the

decline of high culture as well as his own creative mortality in the face of a hostile public. The publication of the text followed a six year novelistic "interregnum" (Graham 101) between 1890 and 1896, in which James moved away from the bourgeois form of the novel, partly, it seems, as a response to the demands of an increasingly concentrated mass readership for short stories and plays. After extending his feelers into the realm of popular culture James was forcefully rebuffed, with his first attempt at playwriting, Guy Domville, reportedly booed off the stage on its opening night in January 1895. In a letter to his brother William written soon afterwards, James describes how he was left feeling "bruised sickened and disgusted" (HJL3 507), and subsequent works bear the scars of this encounter. In The Ambassadors (1903), Lambert Strether recalls the moment when he no longer had the illusion of being free: "I was either […] too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don't quite know which" (AM 132). A similar vein of self-deprecation overshadows James's reflections on the failure of the play. The sheer hostility of his account of the "usual vulgar theatre-going London public" and his "densely stupid and vulgar" reviewers (HJL3 508) appears to be an attempt to mask feelings of foolishness for exposing himself so directly to criticism.

Although James's hyperbolic account of Guy Domville's opening night is disputed,[3] it is clear that he was confronted directly with a hostile reception in a way that he never had been as an author. Emerging briefly from his shell two weeks later, James documented an idea for a short story in which a man attempts "to do something vulgar, to take the measure of the huge, flat foot of the public". This sketch was quickly scrapped after he decided: "It's all of no use—it is always 'too subtle', always too fine—never, never vulgar enough" (CN 109-10). Subtlety and vulgarity appear to be operating along the same axis as Mrs Gereth's opposition between cleverness and stupidity, yet the distinction does not appear to be so clear-cut for James. Although he is clearly berating himself here for being too subtle, it is as though subtlety has mutated into inflexibility and even stupidity in his failure to adapt to vulgarity.

An implied disdain for subtlety is also present in James's account of the vulgar craftsman in Spoils, as Fleda observes that the "very bareness" of Owen's writing style "called attention to his virtue" (SP 125).

It is curious, therefore, that stupidity becomes increasingly overt in the late works just as they become progressively difficult and inaccessible to the "dunces" and "philistines"[4] of an emerging mass readership that, as Richard Salmon notes, James was increasingly under pressure to appease (47). Many readers felt that James's style was too refined, and even early on in his career after submitting some letters to the New York Tribune he was instructed by the editor to "make 'em baser and paltrier".[5] James's aversion to this practise is demonstrated in Spoils when the "barbarian" Brigstocks (SP 60) deliver their appraisal of Mrs Gereth's beloved Poynton. As with his characterisation of "dense" Owen, James is eager to foreground the physicality of mother and daughter, but unlike Owen their density is utilised for destructive purposes. Mrs Brigstock is a proverbial bull in a china shop, brutally upturning plates and administering her "big knuckles to porcelain cups" (SP 56). A "bored tourist in fine scenery", Mona:

> was not so stupid as not to see that something, though she scarcely knew what, was expected of her that she couldn't give; and the only mode her intelligence suggested of meeting the expectation was to plant her big feet and pull another way. (SP 50)

Both mother and daughter display an inflexibility of mind that manifests itself as a forceful resistance to subtlety or refinement. Mona is too unreceptive to succumb to Mrs Gereth's attempts at stupefaction, yet at the same time she arouses suspicion that she may actually be a "monster of cleverness" (SP 111). This in turn reflects James's paranoia that the unreceptiveness of his "vulgar" audience might in fact say more about his own mental insufficiency. Mona's "big feet" are continually foregrounded, an image that recalls the "big

flat foot" of James's hostile public. Indeed, just as James presents himself as the victim of this faceless mass, throughout the text there is a sense that "the massive maiden at Waterbath" (SP 169) may step on fragile Fleda at any moment.

For James, the threat posed by Mona's "obscurely active" ignorance (SP 50) was all too real. The plot of Spoils developed from a "mere" anecdote in which James, by now somewhat exasperated, recognised "clumsy Life again at her stupid work" ('Preface' 23-25). Spoils is marked by James's heightened level of engagement with the concept of stupidity, with the term densely populating his related notebook entries, the 'Preface', not to mention the text itself. As he would later recall, the story of a mother at war with her son over the spoils of his inheritance caused James's imagination to wince "as at the prick of some sharp point" ('Preface' 23). The piercing sensation experienced by James suggests that while stupidity is able to galvanise the creative mind, the writer must be prepared to bear its scars. The risk that James undertook in engaging with stupidity head-on is analogous to his characterisation of another snail-like creature, May Server in The Sacred Fount, whose "shell" becomes "merely crushable" (SF 81) after her intellect is drained away by her idiotic lover, Gilbert Long. James's engagement with the sheer force of stupidity seems to be weighed against the opposite extreme: as a vehicle of transcendence, unbridled intellect borders on a complete dissociation from "Life" in all its clumsiness.

As well as representing James's painful exposure to the "densely stupid" onlooker, Spoils may also be read as an attempt on the part of James to accommodate the "densely vulgar" reader (HJL3 515). In the wake of James's anxiety that his writing was becoming "too subtle", Spoils allegorises Fleda's failure to recognise the value of Owen's stupidity as a complement to her "subtle mind" (SP 42). Throughout the text the site of stupefaction is the mouth, the physicality of which is continually foregrounded over its function. Owen's mouth in particular is the obstacle from which clever Fleda (like the snail with the "fumbling face")

retreats. In the first of a number of impromptu face-to-face encounters, Fleda recognises Owen in a London street after his "white teeth […] almost flashed through the fog" (SP 74). It becomes apparent during this meeting that Owen is enamoured of Fleda's cleverness, which ostensibly places her in a position of power over him. But in the "dim" light and "thick" (SP 76) autumn air of their stroll through the park, Fleda is quickly caught up in a fog of a different kind. While James intended Fleda's character to shine a light on the "comparative stupidity" of those around her, Owen's physical and intellectual density quickly thrusts his "central light" ('Preface' 32) into a haze of stupefaction:

> "I want you to understand, you know – I want you to understand."
> What did [Owen] want her to understand? He seemed unable to bring it out, and this understanding was moreover exactly what she wished not to arrive at. (SP 77)

Here and elsewhere, Owen's tendency to repeat himself fails to be incremental, and the narrator later confirms it to be part of his thick idiolect, his "helpless iteration of the obvious" (SP 91). Yet it is Fleda who is being dense here in failing to register the content of his speech; in apprehending Owen as a physical entity she overlooks his presence of mind. To the reader it is almost painfully obvious what Owen wants Fleda to understand before she finally admits to herself that he "liked her – it was stupefying – more than he really ought: that was what was the matter with him and what he desired her to swallow" (SP 77). She then immediately puts this belated recognition into physical terms as something "he desired her to swallow", a phrase which indicates Fleda's preoccupation with the sexual rather than the romantic dimension of Owen's attraction to her. In Fleda's mind Owen's feelings resemble a bodily ailment, leading her to conclude that there is something "the matter with him". James demonstrates that Fleda's excess of subtlety renders her unable to deal with Owen's straightforwardness. Dumbly repeating "Good-bye! good-bye!" she breaks into an "ugly

gallop" (SP 77-78) across the park. Clearly Owen's desire for Fleda is more than merely that of sexual attraction, but it is as though this creature of the mind has already written Owen off as a mere creature of the flesh.

The clumsiness of Fleda's movement confirms that she is an individual who does not easily inhabit her own body. As a result, her actions quickly become farcical. When, during their next encounter, Fleda finds herself trapped in another "helpless iteration" of good-byes and unable to run away from Owen, she reacts violently by "closing the door in his face" (SP 102). Like her "ugly gallop" this jerkiness indicates a sudden surge of suppressed physical energy, the muffled protests of "her little gagged and blinded desire" (SP 113). Fleda's resistance to Owen, aside from her moral qualms regarding his commitment to Mona, seems to stem from an irrational anxiety that sexual desire poses a threat to her "subtle mind", which as James establishes from the beginning, is her "only treasure" (SP 42), the only thing that protects this un-housed and therefore socio-economically vulnerable woman from ruin.

Fleda finds herself in a double bind: by putting out her feelers she risks rejection and ruin, but by retreating into herself she obstructs her only chance of happiness. This is further complicated by the fact that she is marked by an indelible strain of masochism. As though transforming herself into a voodoo doll, the only gift that she will allow Owen to buy for her during their first meeting in London is a "small pin-cushion, costing sixpence, in which the letter F was marked out with pins" (SP 75). While it may seem like Owen's stupidity is threatening to swallow Fleda's intelligence, it is more the case that like Owen, Fleda is utilised as an instrument of Mrs Gereth's destructive intellect as she "transmits" (SP 88) between the estranged mother and son. In a sense, Fleda's resistance to Owen helps her to evade the "old tricks and triumphs" (SP 71) of Mrs Gereth's self-serving cleverness. But ultimately, by refusing to marry her intellect to Owen's stupidity, Fleda becomes the true "idiot" (SP 117) of the text. Spoils gapes with opportunities; it is full of open doors, open

mouths, open arms, open-ended letters – possibly even open relationships. The freedom to act is thwarted by a tendency to overthink, as Fleda finds herself trapped amid the confusion that she herself has created.

Part of the reason that Fleda is so struck by Owen is because, like Fanny Assingham, she had previously made the mistake of equating morality with intelligence. The real tragedy of Spoils is that Fleda overlooks the obvious potential for her physical attraction to Owen to evolve into something more deep and lasting. The narration of Spoils adds to our impression of the ways in which Fleda's subtlety impedes her progress. Encountering Owen dressed up in "London form" James's narrator reveals that for Fleda, "this in turn gave him – for she never could think of him, or indeed of some other things, without the aid of his vocabulary – a tremendous pull" (SP 135). This admission is tantalising, particularly in its suggestive allusion to the "other things", the otherwise unvoiced expressions that cause Fleda to yield to Owen's opaque vocabulary in an attempt to deny her own increasingly transparent self-knowledge. There is also something curiously vulgar about James's isolation of the final phrase, "a tremendous pull", particularly in light of the phrase's conspicuous re-emergence in the genitive at the end of the next sentence: "Yes […] – his pull was tremendous." The words of Fleda's dense interlocutor help to expose what her intelligence is trying to keep hidden, and this extends to James's mediation of her consciousness through a third person narrator. Just as Fleda comes to rely on Owen's artless turn of phrase to fill the gaps in her carefully censored consciousness, the narrator utilises Owen's vocabulary to draw Fleda out of herself.

Fleda's tendency to retreat from bodily knowledge is reflected in her regressive mode of expression.[6] Earlier in the text, immediately after slamming the door on Owen, James's narration discloses Fleda's cryptic realisation: "In knowing a while before all she needed she had been far from knowing as much as that" (SP 103). This statement materialises the scars of stupidity on the body of the text, with James revealing how Fleda's resistance to the

language of desire results in a curious inarticulacy. Coupled with an oblique frame of reference and compounded by an absence of punctuation, the vague pronominal subject "that" requires careful unpacking. At the same time the statement must be read superficially and even paraphrased carelessly – for instance "he likes me more than I thought" – in order to be clearly understood. Allon White's reading of late James contains the incisive observation that the "irony is that if it is correct that textual opacities often serve to prevent a certain kind of knowledge, it is often only that kind of knowledge which can be used to understand them" (4). This is the crux of James's engagement with stupidity; what had previously been an obstacle is now utilised as a hermeneutic tool.

In its most effective moments Owen's artlessness leaves Mona's subtlety with "nothing to answer" (SP 157), forcing her to overcome her propensity for self-denial. Owen's density is "delightful" precisely because it is capable of "laying low the great false front [Fleda] had built up stone by stone" (SP 161). It becomes increasingly apparent, however, that Fleda has already retreated too far into herself to be drawn out permanently. After a long silence, Owen's final letter to Fleda provokes useful feelings of stupidity in its recipient as she finds herself drawn back to Poynton in search of answers. But rather than being enlightened she is again left stupefied by what she discovers, her open-mouthed horror providing evidence of her encounter with what Michel Foucault terms "the shock of difference" (193) engendered by stupidity that paralyses the onlooker. Blinded by a fog of shock and indecision (not to mention smoke) Fleda's final words, "I'll go back" (SP 213), reveal that her instinct to retreat is now fully ingrained within her character. There are painful parallels here between this scene and the "infernal row at the fall of the curtain" on Guy Domville's opening night. In an echo of his own "cruel ordeal" (HJL3 507), James extinguishes his "central light" in a blaze of destruction that marks "the triumph of stupidity" (GB 257).

There is a sense with the ending of Spoils that James may have gone too far in the direction of stupidity, to the point that there is little room left for intelligent thought by the end of the text. James's notebooks reveal that the dramatic denouement of Spoils resulted from his attempts to make up for his "wasted years […] of theatrical experiment" (CN 127) by rupturing his subtle central-consciousness with the force of "dramatic action" (CN 156). As we have seen, Fleda's consciousness, like her inhibited sexuality, is too densely impenetrable to expose itself in this manner. The incongruous eventfulness of the fire risks scarring the entire novel by eclipsing James's protagonist from view entirely, offering little hope of a compromise between the divergent modes of understanding that circulate through the text. An insight into James's motives can be found in his correspondence from the time. Responding to the popularity of his murder-mystery plot, The Other House (1896), written at around the same time as Spoils, James informed his brother William with mixture of pride and contempt: "if that's what the idiots want, I can give them their bellyful" (qtd. by Kaplan 417). The sudden generic shift of Spoils into an action-plot indicates James's desire to appease the idiots that now formed a dominant part of his imagined readership. In method and content alike Spoils demonstrates its author's painful awareness that without adapting to circumstances, without widening "in a rather barbarous fashion" what he termed "the gate of communication" (PE 89), he risked closing the door on his readership.

But is the sensational ending of Spoils really an attempt on the part of James to make the text appeal to the masses? As subjective as the term "idiot" is, it is hard to shake the sense that while Spoils is about individuals behaving idiotically – the Gereths, the Brigstocks, most importantly Fleda herself – it is not really for them. One contemporary reviewer states caustically:

> It is, indeed, almost a pity that so many dunces have been banged, bullied, and frightened into saying that they like the work of Mr Henry James, but that he is

> really too subtle. It is a pity, because, in the first place, no dunce ever liked the work of Mr Henry James, and, in the second place, because the trouble with Mr Henry James is, that he is not subtle enough.[7]

In being both too subtle and not subtle enough it seems James cannot win. This assertion compounds our impression of the cultural dominance of stupidity at this period, both in the "dunces" who this critic alleges are too stupid to recognise quite why they don't like Henry James, and in James himself, who is guilty here of a lack rather than an excess of cleverness. In effect, just as Fleda and Mrs Gereth neutralise the powers of one another's intellects, these extremes of stupidity cancel one another out.

The reviewer does, however, draw attention to the ease with which stupidity is attributed a collective identity, as well as the frequency with which it is directed towards specific individuals. Keston Sutherland identifies the way in which high culture has always been dependent on "the nomination of an identity", be it collective or singular, for "absolute stupefaction" (3). In the above example, however, stupidity appears to be everywhere and nowhere, and is perhaps indicative of the reviewer's inability to draw strict parameters between high and low amid the sudden influx of mass culture. Christopher Stuart argues that James was particularly anxious about "the seeming collapse of Europe's high culture" (166) at this point in his writing career. In contrast to the extremes of idiocy that impair the ending of Spoils recognising the value of stupidity in moderation, as he would come to do in The Golden Bowl, helped James to overcome the more fundamental cultural antagonisms of high and low, superficiality and depth, transforming the fear of collapse into the hope of regeneration.

The remarks of this contemporary reviewer highlight the sheer physicality of the imposition of stupidity upon the reader, with the individual "banged, bullied" into

submission. In the Cartesian sense, the stupid body is denigrated to the level of a primitive force that threatens the autonomy of the mind. This is not to say that the victim of this textual onslaught is powerless to retaliate. Joseph Conrad, in his informal review of the text to a friend, pictures an agonising confrontation between Spoils and the stupid reader: "I imagine the pain of the man in the street trying to read it. […] One could almost see the globular lobes of his brain painfully revolving and crushing, mangling the delicate thing" (339). As with the preceding review, Conrad follows in a long tradition of reducing the common reader to a dull stereotype.[8] The delicacy of the text as material "thing" recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's traumatised snail with its retracted feeler. Perhaps with the failure of Guy Domville in mind, Conrad is warning James that he is doing too little to concede to the common man, who in his eyes represents a powerful legislative force.

Both of these reviews capture the atmosphere of commercial pressure and cultural cynicism in which the admittedly nervous and sensitive (HJL3 508) author was attempting to survive. James himself was not exempt from such sweeping assertions, however, remarking after Guy Domville's opening night that "the stupid public is the big public, and the perceptive one the small, and the small doesn't suffice to keep a thing afloat" (HJL3 515). One of his most controversial reviewers was a former friend and fellow author, H. G. Wells, who argues that James is "the culmination of the Superficial type", before likening him to a different kind of creepy-crawly:

> here he is, spinning, about like the most tremendous of water-boatmen – you know those insects? – kept up by surface tension. As if, when once he pierced the surface, he would drown. It's incredible. A water-boatman as big as an elephant. I was reading him only yesterday, 'The Golden Bowl'; it's dazzling how never for a moment does he go through. (102)

Read superficially and out of context, the vices that Wells outlines appear as virtues – an elephantine water boatman that doesn't after all "go through" is a genuinely impressive feat. Wells inadvertently confirms that James's attempts to "keep the whole thing afloat" had been a success. Just as James is attempting to envisage density as a "delightful" quality, Wells's cruel assessment affirms the dazzling balancing act of lightness and weight achieved by The Golden Bowl. Rather than relying on the slow and often painful extension of the intelligent feeler, the "surface tension" at work in one of James's most difficult and provocative late works is achieved by the dance of stupidity and intelligence.

Published only a few years before Woolf's delimitation of a seismic change in human character "on or about December 1910" (421), The Golden Bowl adheres to T. J. Clark's definition of modernism as "deriving its power from a range of characteristics that had previously come under the worst kind of pejorative descriptions—from ugliness, for example […] from the plain and limiting fact of flatness; from superficiality" (27). If The Golden Bowl is the culmination of Jamesian superficiality then this is partly because it is courageous enough to make its own failings visible on its surface.[9] Just as I have ventured to read Wells's lambast (originally meaning to beat or thrash) of James as a positive affirmation of the strengths of his late style, Clark draws our attention to the transformative potential of the modernist text – its ability to sublimate base metal into gold.

Conrad and Wells could easily be describing Bob Assingham during their characterisation of "the man in the street" and the "Superficial type". I have attempted to demonstrate how these apparently obtuse criticisms of James can serve positive ends, and equally, the simpleminded Colonel may be utilised as a useful hermeneutic tool, a philistine using his ignorance for good. Throughout the text, "stupid" Bob (GB 89) functions as both counterpoint and foil to his wife Fanny's intense scrutiny of the marital entanglements of the Verver family. At times Bob's crassness affords him a level of insight that is inaccessible to

his "supersubtle" wife (GB 377). His "gross" (GB 78) questions and frequent displays of puzzlement – "I don't quite see, my dear" (GB 71) – introduce a "flat common sense" (GB 86) that forces the reader back to the surface of the text, even if only as a device to elicit answers to obvious questions.

In contrast to May Server and Gilbert Long, or to Fleda Vetch and Owen Gereth, the Assinghams represent the successful marriage (perhaps the only successful marriage of the text) of stupidity and intelligence. This is particularly apparent during a moment of "crisis", after Bob becomes aware that Fanny may have inadvertently enabled Charlotte and Amerigo to commit adultery:

> He went to her and put his arm round her; he drew her head to his breast, where, while she gasped, she let it stay a little – all with a patience that presently stilled her. Yet the effect of this small crisis, oddly enough, was not to close their colloquy […] what was between them had opened out further, had […] taken a positive stride, had entered, as it were, without more words, the region of the understood, shutting the door after it and bringing them so still more nearly face to face. They remained for some minutes looking at it through the dim window which opened upon the world of human trouble. (GB 303-4)

Together the Assinghams become insightful readers of "human trouble", and this extends from their delicate attuning to one another. During this moment of intimacy, as much as they are looking through the window, they are also framed against this "dim" surface. James subtly suggests that while other characters may see through a glass darkly, the couple find themselves "nearly face to face".[10] This rare instance of stillness – a momentary pause in their agonistic dissection of events – marks the dawning of an understanding. Bob draws his wife's clever head to his thick chest, a gesture that reflects the way his stupidity frequently

bolsters and anchors Fanny's intelligence. This is a far cry from Fleda's flight across the park; the only door closing here is the couple's exclusion of the outer world to achieve a peaceful union of the intellectual and the physical. Consequently, it is through the Assinghams that James makes his peace with the stupid reader by sublimating a marriage of opposites into a dialectical union.

Rather than being forcefully opposed to intelligence, stupidity functions best in James's writing as a teasing spouse, determined not to let the intellect take itself too seriously. This makes it a vital foil, for as my early examples demonstrate, the operations of a "high intelligence" (GB 89) can be unscrupulous and even destructive. Just as Fanny initially dismisses her husband's words as "senseless physical gestures or nervous facial movements" (GB 75), James originally leads the reader to understand that to be stupid is to function as a mere brainless body capable of contributing only tics and grimaces. This heightens the surprise that follows, for as the text progresses Bob frequently cuts through the dense cerebral textures of his surroundings, providing little rest-breaks and recaps for an often bewildered (at least from personal experience) reader.

Avital Ronell argues that stupidity "tends to sever with the illusion of depth and the marked withdrawal, staying with the shallow imprint. Unreserved, stupidity exposes while intelligence hides" (10). Crucially, Bob Assingham's cognitive density helps to alleviate the stylistic density of the text. As we have seen, Jamesian intelligence can be a slippery and evasive quality, difficult to hold to account. Jamesian stupidity on the other hand offers a sense of stability and trustworthiness in its sheer obviousness – its inability to transform or conceal itself. Bob Assingham is the true "central light" of The Golden Bowl. In offering a clear perspective on the "world of human trouble" (GB 304) he provides a safe-haven from the "full thick wash of the penumbra" (SP 'Preface' 32) entailed by James's "deep" immersion of the reader into the minds of his main characters.[11]

It is towards the end of the text that the Assinghams reach their illuminating realisation about Adam Verver. While speculating on how much he may know about the entanglement of his young wife Charlotte with his daughter's husband, Amerigo, Fanny admits:

> "he's beyond me – which isn't an idea either. You see he may be stupid too."
>
> "Precisely – there you are."
>
> "Yet on the other hand," she always went on, "he may be sublime: sublimer even than Maggie herself. He may in fact have already been. But we shall never know." With which her tone betrayed perhaps a shade of soreness for the single exemption she didn't yearningly welcome. "That I can see."
>
> "Oh, I say–!" It came to affect the Colonel himself with a sense of privation. (GB 423)

The breakthrough for Fanny in particular (and perhaps for James) comes in accepting the all too real sensation of being unable to know something. Although it often looks like Fanny is doing all of the intellectual work in their conversations, Bob's ability to edit "the play of her mind, just as he edited, savingly, with the stump of a pencil, her redundant telegrams" (GB 74) coaxes and sculpts Fanny's mass of thoughts into intelligible insights. Fanny's intimate reader rescues her from her "redundant" communication, preventing her from falling – perhaps in a similar fashion to Wells's water boatman – to the depths of solipsistic obscurity. The Assinghams work together to achieve this insight into the perplexing presence of Adam Verver. In doing so they share a similar sensation, with Fanny acknowledging "soreness" and Bob a "sense of privation". The couple's mutual discomfort lies in recognising that being stupid might not be so different from being sublime. Just as Kant characterises the sublime as a "formless object" (98), the uncomfortable truth about Adam's slippery and evasive stupidity is that it is at some level unknowable. Through the Assinghams, James helps the reader to recognise that stupidity may not be so dense after all.

Nietzsche proposes a cultural model of sublimation that helps to illuminate James's approach to stupidity:

> Man makes the best discoveries about culture within himself when he finds two heterogeneous powers governing there. […] For wherever the great architecture of culture developed, it was its task to force opposing forces into harmony through an overwhelming aggregation of the remaining, less incompatible powers, yet without suppressing or shackling them.[12]

In James's late texts the demarcation of stupid and clever characters becomes a way of externalising the opposing forces that the author found at work within his cultural surroundings. Just as the Assingham's collective insight transforms Adam Verver's potential stupidity into a strength of character, they themselves form an integral part of the productive surface tension of the text. In The Spoils of Poynton, but particularly in The Golden Bowl, harmony can only come from recognising that morality and stupidity are not opposing forces, and together they can even be the mark of a clear and fair mind.

By marrying two divergent but equally valuable modes of understanding, James unifies an agonistic vision of his readership. Without exactly healing the schism of high versus low, stupid versus intelligent, which, as his notebooks and letters reveal, appears to be located as much "within himself" as in his external cultural surroundings, James achieves a playful compromise of opposing forces. Readers of Henry James can make their own peace with the sublime stupidity of his late works. The mere attempt can be stupefying but the result is delightful.

[1] An early example of this is when Mrs Gereth subtly conflates the value of her possessions with the purity of Fleda's conscience, explaining 'you know, you feel as I do myself, what's good and true and pure', 54.

[2] The first example is attributed to Charles Lamb in the London Magazine in 1822, and the other examples provided by the OED occur during the timeframe in which James was writing.

[3] As Linda Simon reveals, the play did receive some positive responses, and ran for a further five weeks after its disastrous opening, 20. However, James's account of the event to William only registers the "hoots and jeers and catcalls of the roughs", HJL 3, 508.

[4] See: 'Unsigned Review, Academy, 27 February 1897' and 'Unsigned Review, Bookman, May 1897', in The Critical Heritage, 266-267.

[5] Whitelaw Reid, paraphrased by James, and quoted by Millicent Bell. Bell goes on to argue that James's experimental phase, beginning with Spoils, was a failed attempt to "write worse" as in James's eyes "only the hack was capable of consistent vulgarity", 218.

[6] My ideas were here informed by Kent Puckett's essay 'Stupid Sensations'.

[7] 'Unsigned Review, Academy, February 1897', in The Critical Heritage, 266.

[8] Sutherland cites Pope's "dunce" and Wordsworth's "common man" as examples of this, 3.

[9] In making the transition from stupidity to superficiality I am indebted to Thomas J. Otten and Victoria Coulson's ideas on the subject.

[10] "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known", 1 Corinthians 13:12.

[11] Indeed, the word "deep" densely populates The Golden Bowl, surfacing throughout the text over a hundred times. In Spoils, Fleda Vetch is described as "a deep little person for whom happiness was a kind of pearl-diving plunge", 76.

[12] Human, All Too Human, 130. See Ken Gemes on Nietzsche and sublimation.

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