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**EXCHANGE ECONOMY IN HENRY JAMES'S
*THE AWKWARD AGE***

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A review of scholarship on *The Awkward Age* shows that critics have followed James's own lead in the preface, wherein he calls attention to the novel's "dramatic" form.¹ This term supposedly explains a story dominated by bewilderingly elliptical conversations from which even the most patient readers have difficulty extracting clear meaning. We are additionally confounded by a shyly self-effacing narrator who strikes a pose of confusion regarding the action analogous to the reader's difficulty. Addressing this difficulty, Tzvetan Todorov argues that it is not easy to answer the simple question of what *The Awkward Age* is about.² Todorov notes that we feel "an uncertainty about the very meaning of words" in the story which is like the "uncertainty a foreigner would naturally feel whose knowledge of the language was imperfect" (p. 351). But since there is no foreign language spoken in *The Awkward Age*, the reader comes to feel that "it is not the vocabulary that one is ignorant of but the referent[s] of the vocabulary used by the conversants" (p. 352). Todorov believes "that the characters themselves seem to have just as much trouble understanding as [the reader] does," which explains why characters repeatedly ask one another, "What do you mean?" (p. 351). Their questions may be taken as a guide for the reader who also struggles to decipher meaning from the conversations. The characters' questions to one another cue the reader to the problem of whether determinate meaning is possible from the text itself: "It is, therefore, the act of interpretation which gives rise to the symbolism of the text—the answer which creates the question. This much understood, one must still identify the hidden meaning whose existence has been recognized" (p. 358). But in detecting the determinate or "hidden meaning," we discover what Todorov elsewhere identifies as a central tenet of James's fiction: that hidden meaning can never be known. As he states in "The Secret of Narrative," "Henry James's secret...resides precisely in the existence of...an absent and absolute cause....This secret is by definition inviolable, for it consists in its own existence."³ For Todorov, then, *The Awkward Age*, like James's other fictions, never yields up its secret meaning, for to do so would violate its nature as a text whose purpose

is indeterminacy. As Mrs. Brooks says, "Explanations, after all, spoil things" (p. 198). Todorov also comments: "The reader is therefore more than ever involved in the construction of the fiction, and yet he discovers in the course of the project that his construction cannot be completed" ("Verbal Age," p. 369). In sum, Todorov concludes that *The Awkward Age* "is one of the most important novels of our time" because of its "perfect fusion of form and content;" it is "an oblique book about obliquity" ("Verbal Age," p. 371). While Todorov does not use Derridean terminology, his essay suggests that he sees *The Awkward Age* as a meditation on language's self-reflexivity, a literary text that deconstructs itself. James "writes" a novel in which he creates the illusion of "speech," but since this fictive speech so often seems undecidable to the other characters in the novel, James seems to be anticipating Derrida's argument that speech does not have a privileged status in relation to writing, that speech is in fact a kind of writing in that it too is subject to the problematics of absence and undecidability.

Thus, Todorov's insight into the novel's obliquity, deriving from the reader's confusion about the referents of the conversations, leads him to conclude that there is no determinacy in this language. As in the characters' own efforts to complete the meanings of one another's speech, the reader's possible interpretations seem endless. Although Todorov correctly points to the theme of meaning and interpretation in the novel, the language within the novel and subsequently the novel itself do not conform to Todorov's open and indeterminate reading. The characters *do* draw conclusions about the meaning of the conversations, and their actions *are* manifestations of their referential decisions in this regard. Since the characters represent readers as interpreters, their determination of meaning should inspire our own ability to determine meaning from James's text. Thus, while the text is fluid, it is nonetheless decipherable. It is precisely at this level of a decipherable code that I wish to study *The Awkward Age*. Here, as in many James fictions, encoded language, particularly economic language, provides a veiled window onto an otherwise-hidden exchange system which proscribes all characters' behavior.

Consistently, James's novels depict characters attempting to create demand for the assets they possess, whether these are as concrete as physical attractiveness or wealth or as abstract as culture or title. These characters seek to trade or to sell their assets to another member of this society who possesses an equivalent or even more

marketable set of qualities. In other words, they participate in an economic exchange system in which relationships are based on the transactions of human attributes as commodities.

While exchange of some kind is a universal feature of social interaction, as game theorists have argued,⁴ there are three features which define the particular language of exchange in James's fiction. First, metaphor is used to encode or hide the exchange system from non-initiates. Here, just as in any internally coherent semiotic system, from Christ's use of parable in the Gospels to Joyce's web of allusions to *The Odyssey* in *Ulysses*, the encoding process excludes outsiders from understanding while facilitating communication among insiders who share a set of interpretive strategies and thus constitute a community of interpretation.⁵ While Todorov may attempt to maintain the openness or indeterminacy of written discourse through ingenious interpretation, James demonstrates that, within the local confines of a cohesive community, textual meaning is stable and determinate, however problematical it may seem at first to the outsider. Of course the power of a given community to stabilize and enforce the meanings of its discourse can erode, and this is precisely what happens in *The Awkward Age* when Mrs. Brook attempts but fails to manipulate the exchange code for her personal ends. Second, this verbal currency becomes the dominant vehicle through which the members of this society view one another. Thus, the repeated use of economic language to describe relationships inevitably reduces all human qualities to their mere economic utility. And finally, the structuring aspect inherent in the language of economic exchange governs behavior, constituting as it does a set of rules that allows certain moves while ruling out others.

James's attitude toward this exchange system as an undesirable given of society is inferrable from the nature of the protagonist's encounter with it. Protagonists, initially outsiders, enter this society understanding neither the existence of this system nor the linguistic code by which its exchanges are covertly transacted. In fact, many of the examples Todorov cites as he argues the indeterminacy of language in *The Awkward Age* are moments in which Longdon, the outsider, expresses his confusion concerning the codes of the interpretive community dominated by Mrs. Brook. Todorov fails to note that, as the encounters between Longdon and the Londoners continue, the intended meanings of speakers emerge with increasing clarity. As we shall see, there is a moment when the full implications of Mrs. Brook's

manipulation of the economic code become clear, and this revelation is the climactic moment of the novel. Initially, however, Longdon enters London much as the reader enters the text; both are confused about the codes in place, but both become progressively acclimated until the illusion of indeterminacy dissolves.

Typically, in James, protagonists such as Longdon use the same economic metaphors as do the members of the exchange system, but the protagonist uses these as *metaphor*, as a linguistic equivalent for another concept, while the insiders of the exchange system literalize the metaphors with which they describe and thereby delimit one another's complexity. For example, in *The Awkward Age*, the Duchess anatomizes Mitchy in economic metaphors. She describes him as "forty thousand a year, an excellent idea of how to take care of it and a good disposition" (p. 63). That she values Mitchy only for his economic utility is proven by her ruthless efforts to marry him to Aggie, despite the prospect of their future unhappiness since he loves Nanda. That is, she not only describes him in these forms, but this is also her dominant mode of perceiving him. Her view is analogous to the literal-minded reader who wishes to reduce a text to one meaning and thereby reduce that text to a commodity, to be consumed once and then discarded.

This literalized use of economic metaphor is central to the plots of James's fictions, which grow out of the conflict between the protagonist's and society's differing uses of the same terms and which are propelled toward the protagonist's discovery of this semiotic and moral gulf between him and her and his or her community. Economic language, then, is not simply a stylistic quirk of James's prose; rather, it is integral to his tragic vision. In his stories, so many human relationships fail precisely because they are defined by economic discourse. With the exception of *The Golden Bowl*, no protagonist successfully "intermarries" with a member of the exchange system. And within the exchange system, financially successful relationships also fail because human feelings have been excluded from the bases of these partnerships. But these are results of what *is* present in the economic code rather than the consequences of indeterminacy.

What threatens James's protagonists, then, is the rigid *determinacy* of the economic encoding process governing human relationships. Thus, the indeterminacy which Todorov points to as the theme of James's fiction reflects *only* a partial explanation of the novelist's work. While Todorov suggests that the absent cause in James's fiction

can never be made present through analysis, I suggest that when encoded economic language is literalized consistently by a fictional society, the protagonist's discovery of this fixed meaning "names" a presence of such venality that, as a result, the protagonist is henceforth radically alienated from his society. As John C. Rowe argues, in "The Authority of the Sign in Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*," the "form of the Jamesian novel [examines] the tensive relationship between [the protagonist's] desire for originality and [the author's] reflection on those social and linguistic constraints frustrating that desire."⁶

To turn then to *The Awkward Age*, even the most devoted James scholars may not be able to bring the plot of this middle-period novel (1898) to mind. Briefly, two women, Mrs. Brookenham (Mrs. Brook) and the Duchess, are each responsible for a young woman of marriageable and, hence, the awkward age: Mrs. Brook's daughter, Nanda, and the Duchess' niece, Aggie. Each woman wants her charge to marry the wealthy Michett (Mitchy). Mitchy loves Mrs. Brook's daughter, Nanda, but the girl refuses his marriage proposals because she loves, albeit hopelessly, handsome, young Vanderbank. Her love is hopeless because Van prefers an intellectual, emotionally superficial, pseudosexual relationship with Nanda's mother, Mrs. Brook. Mr. Longdon, the catalyst in the plot, re-enters London after thirty years in the countryside to meet the family of the only woman he ever loved—Mrs. Brook's mother. Nanda, coincidentally, is an exact duplicate physically, if not psychologically, of her grandmother. Longdon, moved by Nanda's resemblance to his dead love and by the Duchess' suggestion that he provide Nanda with a dowry, offers Van a sizable income to marry Nanda.

Structurally, Mrs. Brook dominates the first half of the novel, while Nanda emerges in the second half to turn the novel's game-playing from strictly economic ends to more humane goals. The first half resembles an *agon* between the Duchess and Mrs. Brook for a wealthy son-in-law, thus making this section more typical of the "social, realistic novel about love and money, and therefore about marriage" ("Verbal Age," p. 369). This *agon* is first dominated by the Duchess' opening move: manipulating Longdon into doting on Nanda as an inducement for Van to propose to her. The Duchess' motive is, of course, to leave Aggie as the only remaining available female to whom Mitchy can propose. The Duchess' gambit, however, is countered in the second part of the *agon* by Mrs. Brook's powerful double thrust:

first, she tells Mitchy that Longdon has offered Van money to marry Nanda, thus humiliating Van into rejecting Longdon's offer; second, she impels Longdon to remove Nanda from her mother's corrupt and uncaring society by her crude behavior at Tishy Grendon's party (p. 439). In the last half of the novel, Nanda dominates the action by trying to hold together her elders' society with an adhesive other than a common interest in sex or money. Nanda understands that her mother's society operates upon the encoded economic language of exchange. She learns how to manipulate this language to her own ends by witnessing the Duchess and her mother commit the same error: forgetting that, as members of a system, they are manipulated by it far more than they can control the system. Into the power vacuum created by the two women's losses enters Nanda, with her own ideas of how to play this game. She learns to exert the same verbal power over Van, Mitchy, and Longdon by learning to use the same encoded economic language of her mother and the Duchess, but Nanda transforms the game's meretricious goals into compassionate, non-sexual, non-economic exchanges with these three men.

Detailed analysis of the game-playing logically begins with the Duchess, a powerful but frequently unnoticed creator of plot events. She makes the first move in the marriage-brokerage game played with Mrs. Brook, and also the Duchess' constant and blatant literalization of economic metaphors makes her language representative of the values of the exchange system, a society in which "the relative values of usage are disguised as absolute laws of judgment" (Rowe, p. 231). Hence, she epitomizes the cunning survivalist tactics of this society. She first announces her intentions to "divert the stream of Mr. Mitchett's wealth" unless Mrs. Brook claims a prior interest in Mitchy for Nanda (p. 64). The Duchess' apparently free gift of a first chance at Mitchy to Mrs. Brook is, in fact, a strategy by which she covertly gains what she really wants—Mrs. Brook's proud silence because she will never admit to an economic interest in him for Nanda. In contrast, the Duchess frankly acknowledges her own unscrupulous plans for Aggie:

"I've got Aggie's little fortune in an old stocking and I count it over every night. If you've no old stocking for Nanda there are worse fates than shoemakers [Mitchy] and grasshoppers. Even with one, you know, I don't at all say that I should sniff at poor Mitchy. *We must take what we can get and I shall be the first to take it.*" (p. 62, italics mine)

The Duchess' initiation of the game's first move is clear to both women who "tacitly...exchanged" a non-verbal but unmistakable "further stroke of intercourse" that the hunt for Mitchy has begun (pp. 64-65).

But the Duchess' more significant move occurs with Longdon, at his country home, Mertle. In this conversation, her language is that of a chess player who attempts to move characters like pieces on a board, rearranging their lives until their relationships to her and Aggie conform to her mental diagram of how they should fit into society. She will "give" Longdon to Aggie as a philanthropic godfather (p. 234); so also, she needs to "place" literally Mitchy next to Aggie so that he will remain metaphorically by her side in marriage (p. 236).

The Duchess, as in her apparently generous offer to Mrs. Brook of the first crack at Mitchy, claims here with Longdon only to be interested in Nanda's welfare. She reasons that, in the risky "business" of marriage, mothers must "move fast," speculate wisely, and win a monied male before their daughters lose their assets of beauty or suspect the marital doom to which their mothers sell them:

"But we must move fast...If Nanda doesn't get a husband early in the business—...she won't get one late—she won't get one at all. One, I mean, of the kind she'll take. She'll have been in it over-long for their taste...in the air they themselves have infected for her."
(p. 258)

She anatomizes Van's assets on the marriage market just as she previously estimated Mitchy's: he is handsome, entertaining and has only one correctable social handicap—poverty. Despite Longdon's shocked response to the Duchess' suggestion, "What it comes to then, the idea you're so good as to put before me, is to bribe him to take her?" (p. 251), she is non-plussed, replying that she suspects him of having already thought of the same idea (p. 251) and that she is ready to "put [her] cards on the table" (p. 247) to win Mitchy for Aggie.

While the Duchess may be ready to lay her cards on the table in the marriage game, she feels exactly the opposite about her sexual games; specifically, she is secretive about her affair with Lord Pether-ton even though everyone in their circle is aware of the liaison (p. 64). Ironically, the economic victory that her arrangement of Aggie and Mitchy's marriage signifies is simultaneously her own sexual loss when Aggie, once initiated by marriage into this society's sexual/economic values, takes Pether-ton, her aunt's lover, for her own:

“But poor Jane —...She took her stand so on having with Pether-ton’s aid formed Aggie for a *femme charmante*—!” “That it’s too late to cry out that Pether-ton’s aid can now be dispensed with? Do you mean then that he is such a brute that after all Mitchy has done for him—?” “I think him quite capable of considering with a magnificent insolence of selfishness that what Mitchy has most done will have been to make Aggie accessible in a way that—for decency and delicacy of course, things on which Pether-ton highly prides himself—she could naturally not be as a girl. Her marriage has simplified it.” (p. 442)

Thus, the Duchess’ pyrrhic economic victory perfectly realizes a subplot representative of the competent, cunning players of the exchange system, the novel’s largest circle of characters including the Duchess, Aggie, Pether-ton, the Cashmores and Harold Brookenham. This group assumes that marital and sexual happiness are mutually exclusive goals. Marriage is a serious game because it involves money; sex is an entertaining but not always profitable one, given its social and emotional risks. In both arenas, the cunning players’ social language becomes more conventional in direct proportion to the degree of their illicit sexuality, hiding behind a mask of clichéd language which has no direct reference to people’s actual behavior. As the Duchess sums up Carrie Donner’s error regarding the public character of her adultery: “It’s only in this country that a woman is both so shocking and so shaky...If she doesn’t know how to be good” — “Let her at least know how to be bad?” (pp. 99-100). Indiscretion, then, for these competent, cunning players, refers not to any specific sexual behavior, but rather to the violation of their cardinal rule to protect themselves by never verbally exposing one another’s venality. Their decorous, conventional language is analogous to their literalized use of economic metaphors in that both codes allow their users to deceive themselves about their venal actions. To employ the same economic metaphor, they cannot “afford” to recognize the brutal human consequences that their linguistic misuse both creates and signifies. Hence, these characters’ “failure” grows from their “lack [of] imaginative powers [or moral insight] to recognize the conventionality [that is, the immorality] of their lives” (Rowe, p. 225).

The second move in the marriage-market competition is made by Mrs. Brook in response to the Duchess’s initial gambit. Mrs. Brook, Van, and Mitchy form a smaller, inner circle which shares the larger circle’s assumption that money is a necessary condition for happiness in this society. See, for example, Mrs. Brook’s declaration that a

person's wealth is "the very first thing I get my impression of" (p. 179). However, this trio abstains from the outer circle's recreational use of sex. Instead, for recreation, they play verbal games for their aesthetic pleasure. The various games of the outer circle are the subjects of this inner group's verbal contests; the goal of the conversations is to remain covert about the sexual and economic subject of these games while still predicting an affair's outcome. Todorov, undercutting his argument about language's indeterminacy, notes that Mrs. Brook's circle "not only understands everything that is said but also permits anything to *be* said....the two fundamental and complementary rules which regulate the use of language in this salon are: one may say anything and one must never say anything directly" ("Verbal Age," p. 363). Thus, this group's winning conversations are its most metaphorical, elliptical and ambiguous. Consequently, such conversations prove the most difficult to analyze. The characters "try to penetrate words, to get behind them, to seize the truth; but on the other hand the possible failure of this quest is as if neutralized by the pleasure they take in *not* saying the truth—in condemning it forever to uncertainty" ("Verbal Age," p. 363). In discussing the reliance of discourse on absence, Derrida somewhat fancifully compares discourse to autoeroticism, both dependent on the absence of an object.⁷ If truth is assumed to be the object of this inner circle's conversation, pleasure derives not from evoking truth's presence but in prolonging its absence, ostensibly increasing their desire for its presence by perversely never fulfilling that desire. The pleasure these characters take in discussing the sexuality absent from their own lives but presumably present elsewhere seems, then, to have a proto-Derridean quality to it. But as Todorov himself stated, Mrs. Brook's circle "understands everything that is said;" thus, the elliptical and indirect conversations of these people do not support a thesis concerning the indecipherability of language in this novel.

Through the control of language, augmented by her personal beauty, Mrs. Brook competes with the Duchess in the marriage market. However, Mrs. Brook handicaps herself from blocking the Duchess by her own rule of public silence regarding her sexual and economic goals. She pretends to everyone but her family and Van that she is *not* interested in either Mitchy's or Longdon's money for Nanda (see her contrasting public and private attitudes toward Longdon's money for Nanda, pp. 179-192). In addition, she pretends to everyone, including Van, that she is *not* blocking his marriage to Nanda pre-

cisely because she is in love with him herself (see, as a representative conversation, pp. 304-305). The Duchess devastatingly sums up Mrs. Brook's double bind as "she must sacrifice her daughter or...her intellectual habits" (p. 255). In the preface, James describes Mrs. Brook's conflict as "freedom menaced by the inevitable irruption of the ingenious mind" (p. ix). The liberating "free talk" (p. vii) of Mrs. Brook's circle becomes detrimental when, during a conversation with Van and Mitchy, she reveals that Longdon offered Van money to marry Nanda. This is a strategy to maintain her ambiguously but nonetheless distinctly sexual relationship with Van and at the same time to effect her economic goal of marrying Mitchy to Nanda. She makes her prediction a reality by publicly announcing that Van will never accept the offer: " 'Won't you, Van really?' Mitchy asked... 'Never, never' ...said Mrs. Brook... 'he can't face this fact of appearing to have accepted a bribe' " (pp. 299-300). But, in exposing Van's secret, she breaks a cardinal rule of their verbal games ("One must never say anything directly;" Todorov, "Verbal Age," p. 263), turning the rules against Van but also ultimately upon herself. The price she pays is the loss of Van, who articulates Mrs. Brook's error as being too clearly willing to sacrifice her daughter's marital happiness in order to insure her own intellectual pleasure:

"...what stupefies me a little," Vanderbank continued, "is the extraordinary *critical freedom*—or we may call it if we like the high intellectual detachment—with which we discuss a question touching you, dear Mrs. Brook, so nearly engaging to your most sacred sentiments. What are we playing with, after all, but the idea of Nanda's happiness?" (p. 306, italics mine)

Thus, Mrs. Brook's unrestrained "freedom" to discuss explicitly Van's economic advantage in marrying Nanda is ironically the moment in which her speech is the least free in the sense of having any freeplay of associative meaning. She has been too free in her choice of subjects and not sufficiently indeterminate about her meaning in regard to her subject.

Not only does her tactic cost Mrs. Brook an emotional loss; it fails to secure her economic goal as well. She prevents Van from proposing to Nanda, but she never anticipates Nanda's subsequent rejection of Mitchy precisely because he does love her after her mother has taught her that she is unloveable. As Nanda describes her feeling to Mitchy, "there's a kind of delicacy you haven't got... The kind that would make me painful to you...my situation, my exposure—all the results of them

I show" (pp. 357-358). Secondly, Mrs. Brook does not anticipate Van's revulsion towards her willingness here to scrap Nanda's future in order to save Van for herself. Finally, when she forces Longdon into taking Nanda off her hands by behaving crudely at Tishy Grendon's party, she amply demonstrates the corruption from which Longdon should rescue her daughter now that Van will not marry her out of it. But when she reveals to Longdon her *monde's* mercenary, sterile "self-consciousness" (p. 302), she forces Van to confront it as well. So then, just as the Duchess represents the exchange system's venality, Mrs. Brook symbolizes her group's excessive cleverness which renders its members emotionally impotent. Her wit is a fatal kind of potency which she exerts in a milieu where female game-playing finds no other arena than the drawing room and its marriage-market bargaining. Mrs. Brook's "free" speech has always been in the service of control and social manipulation. Here, she blindly assumes that she can remain "free" of the explicitly economic implications of her speech. Ironically, her unencoded economic speech creates structures that in turn limit her emotional options, just as each move in a chess game limits as well as creates options.

As speaker, Mrs. Brook fails to see herself as an object also controlled by the discourse she and those around her perpetuate. Whether Mrs. Brook's wit is the cause or the effect of her stunted emotions is impossible to determine here. In either case, her coldness while in power is particularly evident in comparison with her daughter's subsequent generosity when Nanda replaces her mother as a verbal power broker. Thus, the first half of the novel concludes with Mrs. Brook losing her *agon* with the Duchess in the marriage market. She fails to assess the reflexive effects of her economic discourse, which unexpectedly and ironically limit her options. Furthermore, each woman also loses her lover in trying to secure her daughter's marriage. In the novel's remaining half, Mrs. Brook's diminished influence over Van, Mitchy, and Longdon and Nanda's increasing verbal power over these same three men signify the costly loss associated with transgressing the rules of this linguistic game.

Nanda is absent from much of the first half of the novel, and James uses her introduction to Longdon at Van's to demonstrate how "extraordinarily simple" she is initially (p. 137). In this scene, Longdon, Van, and the reader understand that Mrs. Brook has sent Nanda to Longdon to secure the family's financial future. But Nanda so openly repeats her mother's directions to make Longdon like her that

she unknowingly clears herself of any complicity in her mother's scheme. In addition, the narrator comments throughout this meeting on "her crude young clearness" (p. 148) and a "directness that made her honesty almost violent" (p. 149). Mitchy even questions Nanda's ability to "understand" what Mrs. Brook expects from her daughter's relationship with Longdon, describing the girl's literalness as a "tragic" lack of "a sense of humor" (p. 143). Her present defect is a want of irony or ability to speak in and understand the multiple levels of meaning in her elders' conversations. Thus, we accept her complete indifference to Longdon's money in asking him "Do you like me?" here (p. 151). Guilelessly unaware of her mother's motives, she pursues Longdon to fulfill her own emotional needs. Sensing his hesitation to trust her, she guesses that "You're not sure how much I shall understand" (p. 153). She predicts her future role in the novel by assuring him that "I shall understand...more, perhaps, than you think...I promise to understand" (p. 153).

Nanda's reappearance in Book Six sharply distinguishes her present verbal dexterity from her previous simplicity. With her mother again, after a long stay at Longdon's country home, Beecles, Nanda's acquired subtlety is the fruition of her earlier promise to Longdon "to understand" (p. 153).⁸ She is now doubly dangerous to her mother's society: she is still unafraid to tell the truth because she seeks neither the sexual nor economic powers which motivate her mother and the Duchess; in addition, she now discerns irony in others' conversations and speaks ironically when she wishes to combat their sexual economics. For example, she apprehends and immediately rejects her mother's "vulgar" (p. 323) mercenary interest in Nanda's stay at Longdon's. While Mrs. Brook gnaws over her concern to provide "money, money, money" (p. 326) for the family's ever-mounting needs, Nanda lightly recounts the economic abundance she enjoyed at Longdon's, completely indifferent to his money as a measurement of her pleasure in his friendship. Delicately, she tries to show her mother how important Longdon's acceptance, rather than his money, is to her:

A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl's face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar, together with a general consciousness that the way to meet vulgarity was always to be frank and simple and above all to ignore. "He makes one enjoy being liked so much—liked better, I do think, than I've ever been liked by

anyone." (p. 323)

Thus, Nanda politely rejects Mrs. Brook's notion that she owes it to her family to "work" (p. 329) Longdon, even in the light of her mother's tactless attention to Nanda's inability to procure a wealthy husband. Sadly, Nanda's counter offer to her mother—that at least she will no longer be financially dependent upon them—does not evoke relief in Mrs. Brook, but rather an envious resentment that Nanda will escape the financial necessity to sell herself sexually to which all of the novel's other female characters have submitted: "Mrs. Brook spoke as with a small sharpness...produced by the sight of a freedom in her daughter's life that suddenly loomed larger than any freedom in her own" (pp. 327-328). For while Nanda will have to sacrifice sexual fulfillment in her union with Longdon, Mrs. Brook has not found that either. Furthermore, Nanda gains emotional and financial security while her mother festers in a loveless, bourgeois marriage.

Subsequent witnesses of Nanda's increased verbal power and her mother's loss of the same are Van and Mitchy, who talk first with the mother, then the daughter in the final chapters of the novel. In these conversations, James uses the "characters...[as] inventions...to expose the grammar of society" (Rowe, p. 228), a grammar that Nanda transforms by effectively reversing positions with her mother. Mrs. Brook has become desperately and tastelessly explicit about her greed for Longdon's money. Both Van and Mitchy, just as Nanda in the previous conversation, reject her no longer subtly encoded economic language. In contrast, the once "extraordinarily simple" (p. 137) Nanda is now extraordinarily subtle in reworking her mother's conversation, turning its previously economically-oriented signifiers into generous, humane means of communication. In other words, she restores a symbolic or hidden meaning to her mother's economic language, but substitutes a non-economic series of referents for that same language.

In Van's final talk with Mrs. Brook, he coldly indicates that he cannot help but "understand now" that her garish demand to have Nanda back from Longdon at Tishy Grendon's party was, in fact, a deliberate action so coarsely performed that Longdon would be impelled to take Nanda away forever. Van describes Mrs. Brook's behavior at that party as a "smash," a "wonderful performance" in which she smashed the temple to taste she once shared with Van and Mitchy (p. 439). He leaves her, refusing to commemorate their circle's "*bon temps*" by refusing to play their verbal games one last time (p.

439). As in his revolted response to Mrs. Brook's exposure of Longdon's secret offer to Mitchy, here Van emphasizes that his resistance stems from his comprehension of the unmistakable determinacy of her words: "I...didn't...fully understand what had happened. But I understand now" [p. 439]. In both cases, what damns her in his eyes is the crude clarity of her language; her desperation drives her to explicitness; consequently, her auditors can no longer avoid witnessing her greed. Her determinacy here painfully contrasts with her once rich manipulation of social language and with Nanda's present adaptation of that same language.

Just as Nanda and Van's withdrawals from Mrs. Brook indicate her loss of power, so also Mitchy's nervous, evasive behavior in his last scene with her records the change in the social barometer toward her (pp. 466-474). In response to Mitchy, Mrs. Brook's actions further manifest her shrinking influence: she continues to feign ignorance of her desire to palm Nanda off on Longdon at Tishy Grendon's (p. 466); she is not aware that Van, Mitchy, and Longdon all seek out Nanda now (p. 450); and as a result, she makes inaccurate predictions about these characters' behavior (p. 462). Clearly, she is no longer the powerful figure in her *monde* who "strokes her chin and prescribes..advice" (p. 104) to the lovesick that she once was in this Jamesian transmogrification of a courtly love counsellor.⁹ We last see her alone in her downstairs parlor, confused and frustrated by her inability to draw any circle of admirers around her while upstairs her daughter is sought out by all three men in the same way but for different reasons than those which once drew them to Mrs. Brook (p. 474).

In contrast to her mother, Nanda demonstrates her deepening complexity through an ability to use the encoded economic language of her mother's world without letting that language reduce human worth to monetary value. For example, when Van suggests about her friendship with Longdon that she has "been thinking of [herself]...as a mere clerk at a salary, and [she] now find[s] that [she's] a partner and [has] a share in the concern" (p. 334), she quickly cautions him that this economic explanation is only an analogy for the relationship: "It seems to be something *like that*" (p. 334, italics mine). Further, she reminds him that her contribution to the friendship has no worth except on an emotional level; hence, his economic metaphor breaks down: "But doesn't a partner put in something? What have I put in?" (p. 334). As if to make clear to Van that she is now aware of the subtle linguistic level at which this society's values are evident, she

cautions him that "I'm not struck only with what I'm talked to about. I don't know...only what people tell me" (p. 335). To demonstrate her understanding, she directly acknowledges the economic exchange basis on which this world functions and the servile role her family plays within it: "Aren't we a lovely family? ...We seem to be all living more or less on other people, all immensely 'beholden'" (p. 346). With this awkward recognition comes her self-definition as opposed to that system: "'Well'—she pulled herself up—'I'm not in *that* at any rate'" (p. 346). Thus, Nanda knows of the system but wishes to remain outside of it unless she can redefine it. She first attempts a redefinition by pushing Mitchy into marriage with Aggie to "keep her...from becoming like the Duchess" (p. 355) and because Aggie will "save" Mitchy (p. 362) from some undetermined fate as well. Nanda's intrusion here is in contrast to her mother and the Duchess' self-interested attempts to maneuver Mitchy into marriage for purely selfish reasons because of Nanda's generous but naive motive to bring together two people whom she loves.

Of course, Aggie's marriage, instead of saving her, makes her more like the Duchess by allowing her to steal the Duchess' lover, Petherton, for her own. As a result of this disaster, Nanda defines herself even further in opposition to the sexual economics of her society and particularly against their desire to control as the destructive element in their relationships. As a case in point, Nanda assesses Van's failure to marry her as the result of Mrs. Brook's effort to manipulate him: "...it was when you were most *controlled* —... That we were most *detrimental*" (pp. 338-339, italics mine). She translates this effort to control into a lack of free play, just as when Mrs. Brook exposed Longdon's offer of money for Van to marry Nanda, next when she demanded that Nanda "work" Longdon for money for the family, and finally when she forced Longdon to take Nanda away forever by acting so garishly at Tishy Grendon's party. So, in Nanda's final conversations with Van, Mitchy, and Longdon, her language contains economic metaphors, but she uses them *as* metaphor to effect the non-economic exchanges by which she hopes to heal the wounds her mother's determinacy has gashed into this community.

In Nanda's talk with Van, which directly follows his confrontation with Mrs. Brook, Nanda offers him a surprising exchange, neither sexual nor explicitly economic, which eases his strained relations with both her and her mother. She reverses her typical posture with him from that of eager listener hoping for a long-awaited pro-

posal to that of a supplicant toward whom he can appear generous in granting her a simple favor—to remain kind to her mother. What distinguishes Nanda's "bargain" (p. 513) from all others in the novel, except Longdon's, is her lack of self-interest, her wish not to control others' behavior, and her humility while repairing damage done by values alien to her own. She has inaugurated a new meaning to her mother's discourse:

Where indeed could he have supposed she wanted to come out, and what that she could ever do for him would really be so beautiful as this present chance to smooth his confusion and add as much as possible from his having dealt with a difficult hour in a gallant and delicate way? To force upon him an awkwardness was like forcing a disfigurement or a hurt, so that at the end of a minute, during which the expression of her face became a kind of uplifted view of her opportunity, *she arrived at the appearance of having changed places with him* and of their being together precisely in order that *he— not she—should be let down easily.* (p. 500-501, italics mine)

She offers to influence Longdon favorably towards him which, in turn, so moves Van that he agrees to stay by Mrs. Brook: "Well, let us call it a *bargain. I look after your mother—*' 'And I—?' Nanda had had to wait again. '*Look after my good name*' " (p. 513, italics mine).

As with Van, Nanda offers Mitchy an exchange which is neither sexual nor economic. We see again that her values, unlike her mother's, are not materialistic, but are nonetheless far more valuable to Mitchy. She agrees never to "abandon" (p. 526) him, thus granting him his wish which is, pathetically, the opposite of the exchange she enacts with Van wherein Van never has to commit himself to her. In response, Mitchy emphasizes the salvific effect which the ritual language of Nanda's friendship performs for him and for all characters who recognize the value of human exchange based upon motives other than greed:

"I shan't abandon you." He stopped short. "Ah, that's what I wanted from you in so many clearcut golden words—though I won't in the least of course pretend that I've felt I literally need it. I don't literally need the big turquoise in my neck-tie; which incidentally means by the way, that if you should admire it you're quite welcome to it. *Such words—that's my point—are like such jewels: the pride, you see, of one's heart. They're mere vanity, but they help along.*" (p. 526, italics mine)

It is as if he has only her words and, thus, has no other way of reifying

them except by analogizing Nanda's precious loyalty, the signified of his words, with his big, turquoise jewel, an obviously valuable economic signifier. Finally, Mitchy articulates the transformed nature of the final exchanges made in the novel as the result of the shift from Mrs. Brook to Nanda as the creator of these exchanges. His expression is closely akin to his speech on the value of ritual language in friendship quoted above. Human needs remain the same, but these needs can be either starved or nourished by the mercenary or loving quality of the necessary exchanges made among characters in society:

“You may remind me of Mrs. Brook's contention that if she did in her time keep something of a saloon, the saloon is now in consequence of events, but a collection of fortuitous atoms; but that, my dear Nanda, will become nonetheless, to your clearer sense, but a pious echo of her momentary modesty or—call it at worst—her momentary despair. The generations will come and go, and the personnel, as the newspapers say, *of the saloon will shift and change, but the institution itself, as resting on a deep human need, has a long course yet to run and good work yet to go.*” (p. 522-523, italics mine)

Thus, Nanda's own verbal exchanges restore the positive connotation to the free play of language and action that her mother's “saloon” once symbolized and which “remains a deep human need.” In contrast to the Duchess and her mother's language which becomes increasingly explicit as their expectations become more self-interested, Nanda's language becomes increasingly metaphorical as she relinquishes any expectations for herself. Just as the older women's language loses its free play in proportion to the control they seek over others' lives, so also Nanda's language successfully retains this freedom when she employs its ambiguity to fulfill others' needs rather than her own.

In Nanda's final exchange with Longdon, she gains a listener, if not a lover, with whom she can test her growing sense of herself. Longdon acquires a companion, a living icon of his unconsummated love, but he must sacrifice his aesthetic wish that the reproduction correspond exactly to the original. However, Nanda's friendship with Longdon cannot counter her blighted self-concept as lacking the beauty her grandmother possessed and the wit her mother squandered, a permanent handicap acquired while growing up in a sexual/economic exchange system. Nonetheless, Nanda promises never again to leave him in return for his wholehearted acceptance of her as

she sees herself (p. 541). As a result, Nanda escapes the seemingly inevitable loveless marriage or life alone represented in her parents' society. She discovers a loving relationship in which human value is not determined by the number of social marbles one can win, but instead by the quality of fair play shown toward others throughout the game. Thus, it is not the elements of play, game, or exchange to which Nanda and Longdon object; rather, it is the society's refusal to accommodate their demand for fair play among the players which impels them to leave. Like so many unmarried Jamesian protagonists, Nanda's own exchange is very costly; she escapes marital slavery only by sacrificing the possibility of a passionate, loving relationship.

While this conflict between the protagonist and his society which I have just described in *The Awkward Age* remains the same at a stylistic level throughout James's work, its structure undergoes transformations from the early to the middle and finally to the major phase novels. In James's early fiction, the protagonist makes this linguistic discovery and suffers the consequent moral alienation at the fiction's conclusion, leaving him completely victimized by society's exploitation of his ignorance, as in *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, "An International Episode," and *The Portrait of a Lady*. For example, Isabel Archer learns that Osmond's and her own understandings of the freedom which they would have in sharing her money are opposed. While he meant to feel free literally spending her money as he chooses, she understood the term metaphorically in which the actual money would be used to satisfy the aesthetic and moral requirements of her, and as she once thought his to be, rich imagination.

In the middle novels, this discovery occurs earlier and, as a result, the protagonist voluntarily chooses some form of exile, psychological or physical, from his corrupt society in order to avoid the victimization of the early phase, as in the following middle phase novels and stories: *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Tragic Muse*, "The Pupil," *The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Awkward Age* in which Nanda exemplifies the difference between these protagonists and their earlier counterparts such as Isabel. Having discovered that the members of her society can only see one another as the economic terms with which they describe themselves, Nanda creates with Longdon an alternative society wherein she is allowed, as Barthes describes it, a "writerly" text to her discourse, unconstrained by literalized economic language.

Finally, the central figures of the major phase represent the com-

pletion of this pattern's development. These figures remain in their societies after discovering the exchange system in the hope of converting at least one member of this society out of his economic motivations. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether tries, although unsuccessfully, to talk Chad out of his preference for his mother's money over Marie de Vionnet's love and is, sadly, much more effective in showing de Vionnet that she has been victimized by her mercenary world. In the process Strether, like Nanda, exchanges an old world for a new, at once losing and gaining. In *The Wings of the Dove*, when Milly Theale leaves Merton Densher the money for which he sought to marry her, she effects the kind of conversion upon Densher which Stretcher failed to achieve with Chad. Finally, Maggie Verver, in *The Golden Bowl*, is the single successful protagonist to detect, negotiate, and manipulate the exchange system without becoming either its victim or hopelessly alienated from her society. Maggie's success in achieving her own non-economic desire lies in her manipulation of the Prince and Charlotte as members of a society who cannot directly confront their economic dependence upon her. Significantly, Maggie does not become a member of this system by her exploitation of its values and tactics. Hence, she is the only outsider to negotiate this system and its encoding process toward her own end: the preservation of her marriage. But even her success must nonetheless be within the economic structure the arbitrariness of which she discovers and reworks. As John Rowe suggests, "All of James's novels seem to demonstrate that the individual is free to the extent that he recognizes his bondage to a language that is never his own" (p. 227). Still, the protagonist struggles against these linguistic boundaries, decoding the "arbitrariness of the sign which is masked by these false authorities" of the exchange society, continually seeking "to discover how he functions in relation to such [social] codes, and how their boundaries may be measured" (Rowe, p. 239).

In sum, then, while the nature of society's corruption remains the same over the entire canon, James's protagonists become modestly more capable of penetrating this system and defending themselves against it. They acquire its economic dialect, but then adapt this corrupt dialect into a mode of non-economically based communication and exchange. But in laying bare one level of meaning and asserting another in its stead, the constancy of encoding is reaffirmed. To equivocate from my original use of "economic," the protagonists retain an "economy" of exchange at the same time that they have

attempted to alter the referents of the economic terms used to operate this exchange system. Nanda, as I hope to have shown, wins one battle for herself; she negotiates several compromises for her mother, but she fails to end the war of distrust waged among the players of sexual and economic exchange in *The Awkward Age* and throughout James's fiction.

In each novel, James's protagonist moves from a state of innocence to one of experience as he or she learns the implications of the sexual/economic discourse he or she is forced to encounter. This learning process could not occur if the novels maintained the state of verbal indeterminacy Todorov argued for in "The Verbal Age." Contemporary criticism has attempted to "save" literature from the fate of our culture's numerous disposable commodities, and it has attempted to do this by making the text infinitely reproducible; "the writerly text" is something fresh and new each time an act of reading reproduces it.¹⁰ But for this to occur, the language of the text must somehow remain open and indeterminate—a vessel to be filled only by the reader. In imposing this aesthetic upon the novels of the past, we must also take stock of what we might be losing as we "save" them. James creates a society in which human affairs are conducted in a verbal world which is deceptive and problematical, but it is ultimately a world in which people can, if they will, come to know what others mean.

NOTES

¹ Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (New York, 1908), p. xvi; all subsequent references to the text will be to this, the New York edition.

² Tzvetan Todorov, "The Verbal Age," trans. Patricia Martin Gibby, *CritL*, 4 (1977), 351; all subsequent references to this article will be included in the text.

³ Tzvetan Todorov, "The Secret of Narrative," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N. Y., 1977), p. 175. All future references to this article will be included in the text.

⁴ See, for example, *YFS*, 41 (1969), 5-167.

⁵ Stanley Fish presents this concept of interpretive communities in "Interpreting the Variorum," *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 167-173.

⁶ John C. Rowe, "The Authority of the Sign in Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*," *Criticism*, 19 (1977), 225; all future references to this essay will be included in the text.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 155 ff.

⁸ After she returns from a three month stay at Beebles, Longdon's country home, Nanda explains to Van that Longdon's "listening" to her has made her feel more important than she has ever known: "Between his patience and my egotism, anything's possible (p. 215). Thus, this is a crucial piece of action which is reported rather than shown. Todorov, however, claims that "no important event takes place in the lapses of time which the book does not recount" ("Verbal Age," p. 367).

⁹ Mrs. Brook, as she is described here by the Duchess, becomes a parody of the queen presiding over the love trials within her court, as Andreas Capellanus describes in the late medieval and early Renaissance courtly love tradition: Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love* (New York, 1941), pp. 32-36.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1981); see especially "Words and Wounds," pp. 118-157.