

Bloomsbury set in motion, in which we can look back upon our benighted Victorian forebears from the heights of our superior enlightenment. From this perspective the Victorians did indeed write “invisible” writing, its invisibility stemming not only from the ignorance of subsequent critics, but from the very failure of the Victorians to understand themselves. Our own blindness remains resolutely occulted to this manner of criticism, and the writings of the past cannot be adduced to expose our own acts of inattention. We’re the heat, and they’re the lemon juice. Perhaps this whole problematic can now be escaped only by abandoning the word “Victorian” and the overloaded cultural assumptions that are inextricable from it.

### Simon Dentith

---

#### ***Henry James: A Certain Illusion*, by Denis Flannery. Nineteenth Century Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.**

Henry James enjoyed Anthony Trollope’s novels on the whole; but one thing annoyed him – Trollope’s “suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, make believe.” James applauded Trollope’s “solidity of specification,” but his nods and winks at the reader were for James acts of bad faith. Yet no one was more conscious than James of the art of novel-writing, of how illusions are created, and in his own novels he was as much a self-aware modernist as he was a realist. Denis Flannery’s book concerns itself with James’s examination of the ways in which illusions are produced – and how they are used and abused by the novels’ characters. If illusions can be deceptions and self-deceptions they are also aesthetic performances and works of art. Illusion, as Flannery says, “combines both the sense of a perceptual error and an almost excessive representational success.”

Flannery’s book touches only briefly James’s own critical and prefatory writings which are, it might be pointed out, often concerned with how his own or other writers’ fictional “illusions” are fashioned. He focuses rather on the ways in which the idea of illusion is dealt with in a group of James’s novels and stories. There is a judicious balance between the “big” works – *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl* – and the less-celebrated: *The Bostonians*, *The Tragic Muse* and *The Princess Casamassima*. “The Aspern Papers” and “The Figure in the Carpet,” as well as the rarely discussed “Velvet Glove,” are among the short stories dealt with.

In his introductory chapter Flannery reassures us that our habit (mine, certainly) of sometimes discussing James’s characters as though they had lives outside the pages of the novel is compatible with the novelist’s illusionistic enterprise. We should recognise the aspiration to make us respond to a text as a “visual, historical and corporeal phenomenon” and not be inhibited by the forbidding theories of the 1980s. Flannery identifies this as one of three aspects of novelistic illusion. But he also sees allied to this function a second aspect, “an almost bodily and invasive danger,” imperilling the reader through its insistence on credulity. Thirdly, illusion is a phenomenon in itself, “whose reality presents both a representational problem and a

goal." Here, and throughout this study, Flannery convincingly associates James's use of illusion with his lifelong passions for painting and the theatre.

Writing about James is indeed not without its dangers. "In the battle to be as subtle as Henry himself," it has been remarked, "it is easy to lose the anchoring." Generally Flannery's instinct is to keep his feet on the ground. The clarity of his argument is best demonstrated in his treatment of *The Wings of the Dove*, where our tendency to invent extra-textual lives for a novel's characters is shown as being integral to the novel and, in particular, to Milly Theale's desperate desire to survive. In finally throwing off the illusory identities and narratives that others have invented for her for their own ends, she creates her own "illusion" of a future. Although ironically she dies shortly afterwards, her performance of generous and radiant life has been so enchanting that indeed she does "survive" in the mind of Merton Densher, thus torpedoing his and Kate Croy's plot to inherit the Theale millions. Milly's "illusion" subverts her own death, and Flannery convincingly argues that there is a powerful element of revenge in her posthumous continuity. Her reality beyond the text is intriguingly bound up with the always vivid but long-dead figure of Minny Temple in James's own "story" – thus, as Flannery says, promoting "the illusion of her existence as far outside the novel as possible." This seems to me an original and careful reading of the novel which accounts for my own sneaking sympathy for Kate, and of there being something uncanny about Milly.

Illusion and identity are also at stake in Flannery's account of *The Princess Casamassima*, and I find convincing his contention that the means by which the hero, Hyacinth Robinson, is brought into being are what finally destroy him. The problem with Hyacinth – apart from his disastrous name – is that like Milly he is the object of others' fantasies, the tool of others' ambitions. His origins are obscure, and the information he has about himself is damagingly conflicting and possibly false. His own world of the disaffected London working-class is measured against illusory worlds of "palaces and properties," and art and literature of the past. These two loyalties tear him apart, denying him a final identity. His world of political and class conflict is grittily real, but as James himself said, "art makes life, makes interest" – and the "illusions" of art, which he has come to value so highly, have surely an absolute reality in the construction of his identity. His answer is to put a bullet through his brain.

*The Tragic Muse* is not often the subject of critical attention, but with its focus on the twin arts of painting and the theatre, it deserves its place in a study of the uses of illusion – "it most flagrantly equates the achievement of artistic success with illusion" (Flannery). Together with *The Bostonians*, Flannery sees illusion as bound up with questions of sincerity – though not necessarily opposed to them. Peter Sheringham, in love with the actress Miriam Rooth, muddles the concept of acting with notions of falsity. Despite his real enthusiasm for the theatre, he has failed to make the connection between art and life. As Flannery points out, "the illusions with which James's stories concern themselves are produced by personalities." When Sheringham demands that Miriam leave the theatre to become his wife in his "real" world of foreign diplomacy, she reminds him that he has fallen in love with her as an

actress, a role that is not separable from the woman. Her world is as real as his – or, indeed, as unreal. Why, she asks, does he not join *her*, being rather more successful in her line of business than he is in his? Can successful illusion supersede reality? The novel's other artist, Nick Dormer, gives up a political career for the uncertainties of portrait painting, but James leaves his chances of success open. In an odd touch, James causes Gabriel Nash, the inspiration for Nick's change of mind, simply to vanish from the novel as well as from a painted canvas. Nash is an aesthete, not a creator, and James requires more than clever ideas as a condition for the achievement of illusion. Nash's disappearance seems a quiet Jamesian joke to show just what he can do with illusions when he wants.

Flannery declares himself free of the limitations of "theory" in his first chapter, but it has to be said that the shadows of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler hang heavy over some of this book. Given his clarity elsewhere, it seems a pity that Flannery feels impelled to join the chorus and succumb to what Frank Kermode recently called "barbarous jargons." The term "performativity" has a respectable provenance in analytic philosophy and linguistics, but it is so often repeated here that it loses all meaning. There is a real point to be made about gender confusions (or illusions) in *The Portrait of a Lady* – globe-trotting Mrs. Touchett plays a more masculine role than her ailing son or be-shawled husband. Mme. Merle provides the dynamic for Osmond's marriage to Isabel and his hopes for the marriage of Pansy to Warburton. To endorse readings which point to such confusions is one thing, but it is another thing entirely to join Flannery in assertions of homoerotic desire for Isabel on Mme. Merle's part or a fancy for Warburton on Osmond's.

Meanings in *The Golden Bowl* are notoriously elusive. In his chapter on the novel, Flannery's urge to psychoanalyse the characters leads him into games of advanced obscurity that have no rules, no limits, and that neglect the social and historical meanings more likely to convince the reader. Flannery makes connections between illusion and "absorption" – "absorption" here being somehow linked to alimentary and excretory themes. I can see that illusion can "absorb" a character (or reader) but the emphasis on male homoeroticism seems overworked here. I see no evidence that the desire of Adam Verver for Amerigo "cuts across the marriages," and that Maggie is complicit in this, until she resists and sends Adam to America. This sidelines Charlotte quite unjustifiably. Nor, frankly, am I convinced that the Golden Bowl is a toilet bowl for excretion – however metaphorical the connection might be. This particular insight is advanced by Flannery on the basis that the bowl sits on Maggie's mantelpiece above an antique commode. Eighteenth-century dining rooms provided chamber pots in commodes for the needs of diners, usually the gentlemen, but longer usage was not envisaged. There might have been a point in saying that the bowl conceals evidence of adultery, while the commode concealed evidence of a basic human function, but there is no clear connection between this and "absorption" or anal eroticism. Flannery's reading seems too muddled to help clarify the text.

The oddity of some of Flannery's chapters do not detract, however, from the fact that *A Certain Illusion* provides new insights on some of James's most important as well as lesser-known fictions, and addresses itself intelligently to a slippery topic –

illusions are by definition elusive. This study provides a springboard for examining James's transitional position as a novelist between nineteenth-century Realism and the more self-aware strategies of Modernism. Professor Flannery undoubtedly makes a substantial contribution to current debates on James, and makes one look again at novels such as *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Princess Casamassima*. A study which returns one to the text is always worth reading.

Clair Hughes

---

***Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit*, by John Bowen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.**

Restoring to the novel the full title that accompanied its serialisation in *Bentley's Miscellany* – *The Adventures of Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy's Progress* – John Bowen asks “What is at stake in that title?” before teasing out the choices of name and identity and the questions of narrative trajectory it involves. What is at stake in the title of his own book, *Other Dickens*, is a challenge to the canonisation of Dickens's later fiction – the “Dark Novels,” so-called by Lionel Stephenson in a 1943 essay – and a determination to offer a fresh account of the earlier novels in the light of recent developments in critical theory and practice. Eschewing the descriptor “early,” with its implied developmental model of writing, Bowen pursues the “otherness” of the Dickens that emerges in a reading of all of the novels and some of the minor writing published between the appearances of *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). Disclaiming the adoption of any single, coherent, theoretical approach, the book is nevertheless distinguished throughout by the influence of Derrida, Bakhtin and Freud. These influences fuel its pervasive delight in linguistic play and the carnivalesque – in punning, hyperbole, excess, hybridity – and its focus on the transformational energies of Dickens's writing. But in utilising these broadly deconstructive approaches, Bowen never allows them to outplay the writing itself. Reading the novels in sequence, his aim is to “witness to each text's singular force” (2) while showing the various ways in which these novels “enact one of the more sustained projects of textual experimentation in the language” (3). And he succeeds.

As the first two chapters point out, common readers over the decades (and many of Dickens's contemporary reviewers) have admired Dickens's early novels, valuing their humour and pathos. The higher value placed upon the later novels largely emerged in the context of twentieth-century literary criticism's preoccupation with questions of imaginative unity, aesthetic form and symbolic complexity. But the impact of poststructuralist theory in recent decades – with its interest in the proliferation of signification, teasing out of textual contradictions and undoing of binary oppositions – has made the early novels of Dickens ripe for re-reading. Thus while witnessing to the “singular force” of each text considered, the readings offered in *Other Dickens* find a recurrence of linguistic play and a common pattern in the