

PATRICIA MCKEE

Heroic Commitment in Richardson, Eliot, and James



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HEROIC COMMITMENT IN RICHARDSON, ELIOT
AND JAMES

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RICHARDSON, ELIOT

AND

JAMES



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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For Donald Pease

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am concerned in this book with human relations and narrative relations which work as relations of committed alienation. To say so is not to clarify those relations, perhaps, but it is to clarify that such relations are not subject to clear formulation. Commitment and alienation are among many differences in this book that are, in themselves, contradictory and that for clarity ought to be kept distinct. I have put them together in order to insist on relations of differences that exceed distinction—not only in language but in society. I have found such relations in the novels of Richardson, Eliot, and James, and it is more acceptable, according to the tenets of New Criticism, for example, to identify such excesses in fiction than to find them in nonfiction. Fiction does not have to make sense, though nonfiction is supposed to. I am particularly indebted, therefore, to writers who have written in recent years about social relations and about literature in ways that make more than sense. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari do so, for example, in *Anti-Oedipus*, their radical and energetic critique of psychoanalysis. So does Leo Bersani, considering both psychoanalysis and literature in *A Future for Astyanax*. Such works of theory and criticism have made a great difference, though often more an implicit than an explicit difference, to my thinking and writing.

I want to thank the members of the faculty and administration at Dartmouth College who awarded me a Faculty Fellowship while I was working on this book. And I want particularly to thank James Cox, who has been especially helpful to me with Henry James; Sharon Cameron, who read an early version of the chapter on *Pamela* and made many helpful suggestions; and Susan Wadsworth, who gave me her interest and encouragement as I worked through the manuscript.

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Donald Pease read and reread all of it, at every stage. Their responses and their responsiveness are in this book. The difference they have made is incalculable.

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Hanover, New Hampshire
April 1985

HEROIC COMMITMENT IN RICHARDSON, ELIOT
AND JAMES

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION OF
CRITICAL ISSUES

In the chapters that follow, I offer readings of novels by Samuel Richardson, George Eliot, and Henry James in which human identity and representation exceed the bounds of conventional forms of identity and narrative. The excesses of these novels—both excesses of human behavior and excesses of narrative form—mean, on the one hand, that in content and form they function in terms at odds with prevalent critical and theoretical assumptions about both human relations and literary representation. I am interested, however, not only in identifying how emphatically these works exceed conventions of social and literary meaning but in elaborating the fullness of experience that inheres in their excesses. Yet traditional concepts of human identity and literary meaning make acceptance and appreciation of such experience difficult; for the wealth of these novels depends on the inclusion within meaning of elements of experience that traditionally are excluded from our sense of what is meaningful.

The critical work of this book, therefore, is an elaboration that struggles with prior assumptions about life and art. It is an elaboration *of* struggle, both because I am concerned with how ideas in the fiction of Richardson, Eliot, and James differ from more conventional ideas, and because the novels themselves are engaged in such a struggle. These authors' vision of experience is a vision of struggle: the struggle to redeem meaning itself from the losses entailed in conventional forms of thought and behavior, and a struggle that is clarified in the novels by careful representations of alternative attitudes and the friction between such alternatives. Such struggle occurs, however, not so much because other ideas get in the way or in order to get the conflict of ideas out of the way but because

struggle itself is meaningful. It is crucial to my sense of meaningful experience that meaning in these novels is always at issue. They insist that meaningful experience entails a commitment to struggle and a commitment to relations among differences rather than a distinction of or settlement of differences.

The particular novels on which I have chosen to focus—*Pamela*, *Clarissa*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *The Golden Bowl*—are different in many ways. But they share a commitment to struggles of meaning and in that commitment exceed the bounds of meaning that hold in other novels of their periods. As I will be arguing throughout this book, critical reactions to these narratives have tended to neutralize their differences and in part this is due to the assumptions inherent in conventional critical practices, which always tend to have that effect. But these particular novels also have more to lose by such readings; they are, in ways I will try to elucidate, more vital than many other fictions.

In order briefly to mark their difference from other major novels, I would suggest that there is more at issue in these narratives, more at stake in their struggles. Whereas Jane Austen, for example, represents struggles of individual characters with their own conflicting feelings and with the difficulty of seeing what others mean, her novels rest on certain social conventions and orders, which are challenged during the course of her narratives only insofar as they are also finally validated. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, on the other hand, can be said to undermine any conventional ideals about human behavior. But here, too, a particular conception of human behavior can be depended on to account for events: all human relations are equally vain. And the narrator knows this as surely as Austen's narrators know their material. Such novels reduce the dimensions of uncertainty, therefore, by asking fewer questions than the novels I am considering. Though much of Dickens' work shares the concern of these novels to transform relations, in Dickens' novels, too, less is at issue. Characters are, for one thing, usually finally right or wrong, whereas in the five novels I am considering, characters tend

to be increasingly *implicated* in events to the extent that whether they are right or wrong is rendered undecidable.

There is, then, both more at issue and less that is resolved in these novels than seems to me evident in most other novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet in their refusal to settle issues they also refuse to represent irresolution in terms of indifference or nonchalance. *Tristram Shandy* is a novel which, one might say, even more clearly exceeds the bounds of determinate and conventional meaning in its constant irresolution. But such a narrative differs from works of Richardson, Eliot, and James in its narrator's lack of commitment to conflict: a lack of commitment that makes *Tristram Shandy* less intense and less meaningful, in the sense of committed meaning that I will be considering in this book.

My concern in this introductory chapter is to locate this concept of meaning in relation to other concepts of meaning, both literary and social, in order to provide theoretical contexts for the discussions of the novels that follow. As my earlier description of struggle suggests, the concept of meaning elaborated here verges closely on poststructuralist theories of meaning and on concepts of meaning underlying deconstructive critical practices. My consideration of the indeterminate and conflicting nature of meaning is largely dependent on the work of Jacques Derrida and critics who share his sense of meaning as a differential, relative, and infinite process. On the other hand, it would be fair to say that certain of the assumptions underlying American New Criticism are recognizable in the argument of this book. My readings make little reference to authorial intention, for example, and argue in fact that the meaning of words gets carried away from intention, that words always mean something different from what they are intended to mean. Moreover, particularly in the novels of Richardson and James, artistic or artful representation is recognized as a peculiar mode of representation, one that is freer to exceed the bounds of clarity and determination than are other kinds of expression in society; though my argument is that what have been considered privileges of art are put to common and practical use in these novels. Particularly because

both New Critics and poststructuralists recognize an excess of meaning in language, I want to begin by considering the differences between their concepts of meaning and the meaning I find in Richardson, Eliot, and James.

Though New Critics find meaning in excess, their sense of meaningful excesses is limited to the experience of aesthetic language. "It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox," Cleanth Brooks writes; whereas "apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox."¹ Robert Penn Warren argues that the "impurity" of contradiction and irony is necessary to poetry because poetry must represent a struggle: "the poet wishes to indicate that his vision has been earned, that it can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience. And irony is one such device of reference." Yet the struggle for meaning in poetry is a struggle toward an end of struggle, "a movement through action toward rest."² And not only is impurity overcome; it is overcome in an imaginative representation that distinguishes both poetic impurity and purity from nonpoetic experience. The New Critics' separation of poetry from other kinds of writing occurs in part in their insistence that the poem's struggle is both contained and resolved in the poem. Paul Bové therefore sees that

The structure of Brooks's criticism rests upon a foundation which may best be described as a "spiritual monism" reinforced by an almost visionary belief in the existence of an Ideal Absolute order in a separated world or Spirit. The ironic poet "re-discovers" and "represents" this order and returns man to these lost "origins," where

¹ Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. 3.

² Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," in *The Kenyon Critics: Studies in Modern Literature from the Kenyon Review*, ed. and intro. John Crowe Ransom (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 40, 39.

he may be refreshed by the creative source of unity and wholeness.³

Thus it is that Brooks and Warren together insist on the special nature of poetic excess, a specialness that privileges poetic experience, leaving criticism a secondary process, a mere means to an end. In their introduction to *Understanding Poetry*, they conclude that "criticism and analysis" are "ultimately of value *only insofar as [they] can return readers to the poem itself*—return them, that is, better prepared to experience it more immediately, fully, and, shall we say, innocently."⁴ The "poem itself," then, somehow retains its independent unity, while the mediating critical relation or the critical struggle—somewhat like the struggle that is resolved in the poem itself—gives way to an immediate, full, innocent relation with the poem, arriving at purity after all.

Here most emphatically a difference is signaled from the poststructuralist treatment of both poetry and criticism, since poststructuralist theory insists that language, whether of poetry, science, or criticism, is a means which never reaches an end and thus never provides any sense of fullness. For Derrida, struggle is endless and impurity inescapable, because meaning is never immediate or present.

The economic character of *differance* in no way implies that the deferred presence can always be recovered, that it simply amounts to an investment that only temporarily and without loss delays the presentation of presence, that is, the preception of gain or the gain of perception. Contrary to the metaphysical, dialectical, and "Hegelian" interpretation of the economic movement of *differance*, we must admit a game where whoever loses wins and where one wins and loses each time. If the diverted presentation continues to be somehow definitely and irreducibly withheld, this is not because a particular present

³ Paul A. Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 104-105.

⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 16.

remains hidden or absent, but because differance holds us in a relation with what exceeds (though we necessarily fail to recognize this) the alternative of presence or absence.⁵

Since a process of differing rather than a determination of differences occurs in language, the struggle for meaning is never won but is both won and lost in the perpetual struggle of meaning. Differance replaces difference, then, and always exceeds any distinction that would tell differences.

But Derrida also limits excesses of meaning: not because he limits them, as New Critics do, to aesthetic language but because he limits them to language itself. The role of the reader or critic or any participant in language is effectively demeaned, as is the role of the critic in *Understanding Poetry*, since meaning is limited to language on the one hand and limited to poetry on the other. Derrida insists that "the subject . . . is inscribed in the language, that he is a 'function' of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech . . . to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences, or at least to the general law of differance."⁶ Thus the proposition that "the signified is originally and essentially . . . trace, that it is always already in the position of the signifier" means that, whatever the excesses of language, there is no meaning that exceeds language itself.⁷ As Barbara Johnson says of Derrida's reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*, "Rousseau's life does not *become* a text through his writing: it always already *was* one. Nothing, indeed, can be said to be *not* a text."⁸

There is, however, the unsaid, by which I do not mean a

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Differance," in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-46.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 73.

⁸ Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction" to *Dissemination* by Jacques Derrida, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. xiv.

void of meaning. The sense of meaning for which I am arguing depends on unsaid excesses, both in that it depends on social rather than merely linguistic excess and in that it depends on language to leave room for more meaning than language can express. Language does not represent or mean human experience so much as it repeats the experience of social relations, which exceed language just as they exceed any form. Language, then, just because of its gaps of meaning, leaves room for more meaning than it formulates; and in this excessiveness it can be said to work as human relations work when they are meaningful.

To argue that the crucial excess of meaning lies in social relations may seem to move my sense of meaning right out of any context shared with New Critical or poststructuralist notions of meaning. But if we consider the implications of those theories of literary and linguistic meaning, we can see that there is indeed implicit in them a human relation. Though it is a relation of a human being to a text, it is a relation that in fact displaces human relations per se with the relation of human being and text, which is privileged *as* the most meaningful, or the only meaningful, kind of relation. At the same time, it is given as a relation in which the human being has less meaning than the text or no meaning at all that differs from texts. The very complexity of struggle which is crucial to these writers' sense of meaning is a struggle in which human beings do not seem to take part. The reader or subject does not participate in meaning, which occurs in the text, or participation is limited to the discovery that the self makes no difference to the meaning the text has in itself. This is to say not only that such critical writers give us a human relation but that in their sense of human relations the human being is, at best, of secondary significance. The text takes over in such a relation, both because it is put into a position that is claimed to contain meaning within its own terms and because this meaning, whether complete or incomplete, has priority over, or already has expressed, any subjective interpretation. This is a relation of strictly separate parts, then, unless we

accept that we do not exist outside of language, and a relation of mastery and privilege as well as of exclusion.

The sense of meaning in which the novels I am considering themselves take part is a sense of meaning that exceeds these concepts of meaning nowhere more pointedly than in the inclusion of social, nonlinguistic relations within meaning. Most of my attention in this book is given to the relations of human beings in the novels: relations that render the individual self a dependent, relative, and indeterminate phenomenon, whose meaning is inseparable from the meaning of others. Self and other become implicated in each other, both because the meaning of one implies the meaning of the other and because each is responsive to and responsible for the meaning of the other. The meaning of the self thus exceeds the bounds of separate and independent individuality, and the relations of self and other exceed the bounds of any economical or mastered exchange.

This suggests a concept of human relations that resembles the complicating and implicating struggle of meaning that both New Critics and Derrida identify in texts. But it constitutes a wealth of meaning that is clearest in the refusal to privilege any form or end of meaning and the refusal to acknowledge any mastery or predominance among the parts and means of meaning. The heroic characters of these novels, insistent on identifying themselves in indeterminate relations with others, thereby preclude any distinction or mastery of individuals. One effect of this is that social privileges are demeaned or precluded: the privileges of the master in *Pamela*, for example, or the privileges of Christian gentlemen in *Daniel Deronda*. Moreover, characters and narrators alike perceive and represent experience in terms that do not limit meaning either to art or language. Relations of human beings and of concepts, too, are clearly more meaningful in these novels than are their mere representations, and language is employed in order to leave room for meaning that exceeds it. One effect of this is that the privileges New Critics afford to art and those the poststructuralists afford to language are put to common, or excessive, use.

In all of the novels I am considering here, one crucial insistence is that there is no clear or necessary distinction between “real” and fictitious representations and that human life becomes more meaningful as the special privileges of representation—particularly the privilege of leaving meaning indeterminate and open to interpretation—are employed for practical, though uneconomical, effect. The concept of meaning at work in these novels thus revises aesthetic and social conventions of meaning in part by its refusal to separate aesthetic and social meaning. Richardson’s *Pamela*, for one, is a character whose “artful” behavior, which is already to indicate behavior that conflates art and politics, has political effects in everyday life; and Richardson’s narrative makes it difficult to tell the difference between artful and political effects. Artistic and practical modes of representation become inseparable in all these novels as characters as well as narrators exercise the privileges of the artist and thereby refuse to privilege art itself. And the interpretations of experience by characters and narrators, in these novels in which any representation is acknowledged to be mere interpretation, similarly conflate the practices of creator and critic.

Thus the sense of meaning that emerges in these novels differs from assumptions and implications of both New Criticism and deconstruction just at the point at which they can be said to have most in common. For what is crucial to meaning in these novels is the engagement of multiple subjects in meaning, which because of such engagement exceeds the terms of representation. Meaning is never, therefore, independent of interpretation and thus implicates differing subjects in differing meaning. The very conception of the self as a part and a means of the relations that constitute meaning, which is the very commitment of the self to meaning, necessitates that meaning is always a human relation. Thus the meaning of any representation is dependent on some self, who makes a difference, though an indeterminate difference, to its meaning. Whereas both New Critical and deconstructive practices insist on the disengagement of the interpreter from the meaning of a text, on the assumption that meaning is limited to the terms

of the text itself, meaning in these novels depends on the participation of human beings who, because of their own excessive differences, keep meaning in the process of indeterminate differing. Thus excesses or indistinctions of meaning occur as they occur in human relations: because there is no precise or economical division of functions in the relations of art and life, or of representation and reality, as there is none in the relations of self and other.

All of these excesses of meaning may be seen to resemble the excesses critics have assigned to the meaning of literary language. Geoffrey Hartman has written most pertinently about such excesses, identifying them as uneconomical but identifying them too with the very power of literature:

There are many ways of describing the force of literature. The priority of language to meaning is only one of these. . . . It expresses what we all feel about figurative language, its excess over any assigned meaning. . . . Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between written sign and assigned meaning.⁹

Language, then, may seem to exceed meaning. Or, on the other hand, meaning may seem to exceed language. For example, Hartman goes on to say that there always remains a "difference between a text and the commentaries that elucidate it, and which accumulate as a variorum of readings that cannot all be reconciled."¹⁰ Thus, given the multiplicity of meanings for any given text, we may feel an excess in the meaning, which seems irreducible to the language of the text.

That language does not coincide with meaning, then, opens up excesses on two sides of the exchange we assume to occur if we assume that language is exchangeable with meaning. Literary language either says too much or says too little to

⁹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Preface" to *Deconstruction and Criticism* by Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. vii-viii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

have a clearly equivalent, definite meaning. When we are given such language and take it to mean something else, then, the exchange is not an even exchange. Given the language, we do not "get" exactly what it represents. This indeterminate exchange can be differentiated from unambiguous or determinate kinds of exchange that offer us complete meaning, Hartman says:

Naming, like counting, is a strong mode of specification. It disambiguates the relation of sign to signified, making the proper term one end and the thing that is meant the other. Two terms complete the act; signification itself is elided, or treated as transparent. . . . Naming of this kind does not draw attention to itself. Literary speech does, however; and not by an occult quality (a secret third term), but rather by structures like periphrasis which under- and overspecify at the same time.¹¹

Whereas proper naming masters meaning by ignoring the process of meaning, literary language calls attention to that process as something that makes a difference to meaning: a difference that cannot itself be determined or settled. For such language characteristically evades rather than comes to "the point," in forms that are ambiguously related to meaning and that give us either too much or too little to give us determinate meaning.

But the pertinence of Hartman's description of literary language lies not only in its acknowledgment of the excesses of figurative signs and meaning but in the relation in which he sees the reader to those excesses. If "what we all feel about figurative language" is "its excess over any assigned meaning," then at the same time that we provide signs for its meaning, we feel meaning exceeding our signs too. Thus in our relation to the signs of literature we sense a meaning in literature beyond its representations; and our response to literature is

¹¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 352.

also an experience unrepresentable by the signs we can use. This is the kind of relation, a *relation* in excess of terms of representation, that I am identifying throughout this book. It is a relation in which the self's experience exceeds language as the self responds to another's excessive meaning. The exchange between reader and text here entails a powerful excess, but it is not an overpowering excess of meaning in literature; it is rather an *empowering* excess, for the reader responds to that excess by experiencing an unrepresentable excess in the self too. In this, not only is mastery precluded by a mutually empowering relation, but power itself becomes an uneconomical relation precisely because it is recognizable on both sides of the exchange of reader and text, just as an excess is recognizable on both sides of the exchange of language and meaning described above.

Such relations are characteristic of the novels I consider in this book. The indeterminate relations of language and meaning, that is, are inseparably implicated in indeterminate human relations which are as unsettled and excessive as those relations. Formally, then, circumlocution is characteristic of the language of these narratives; we find in reading them more words than we need in order to get a clear sense of what is going on. In addition, it is not possible to identify structures in the novels themselves, such as clearly delineated and unifying plots, that will contain their meaning by providing explicit, determinate relations among their parts. And such formal excesses are repeated in the content of the novels; human relations proceed similarly, to the extent, in fact, of rendering form and content somewhat indistinct. It is not possible to identify the heroic characters of the novels making exchanges with others that enable us to determine the relation between, or the difference between, self and other.

This overlap of form and content is perhaps most obvious in Richardson's novels. The letters that make up his narratives and the characters that make up the letters "correspond" with each other in much the same way. The letters themselves often overlap and overtake each other, so that they do not fit together to form a continuous development in which each part

is distinct from other parts. Shifting from one point in time to another, the parts of the narrative go back and forth among characters as well as backward and forward in time, remaining in circulation and covering and recovering the same ground. And yet in this the form of the novels is not more elusive and evasive than the behavior of the heroines, who are themselves intent on evading the efforts of B and Lovelace to "get" them. Like the narratives that bear their names, Pamela and Clarissa evade plots. At the same time, in their inability to separate themselves from B and Lovelace, these characters remain implicated in those others' behavior.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* are also excessive in the amount of language and experience they include. In both novels there are too many characters and too many plots for readers to be sure which have priority, and the relations among those parts of the novels remain indeterminate though binding. A sense of the various parts exceeds a sense of singular whole, and with such excesses Eliot insists that signification cannot be completed or unified. Eliot's narratives repeatedly emphasize, moreover, the ambiguous relations of forms of representation and what is represented. For she recognizes that any sense of determination or completion necessitates a reduction of meaning:

The driest argument has its hallucinations, too hastily concluding that its net will now at last be large enough to hold the universe. Men may dream in demonstrations, and cut an illusory world in the shape of axioms, definitions, and propositions, with a final exclusion of fact signed Q.E.D. No formulas for thinking will save us mortals from mistake in our imperfect apprehension of the matter to be thought about.¹²

There is always an excess of meaning, Eliot insists: more meaning than our forms of representation can hold, whether those forms be fictive or nonfictive. To assume that a repre-

¹² George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth, Mx.: Penguin, 1967), p. 572.

sentation can contain complete meaning is to exclude or “cut out” something from meaning: reductions occur both in the terms of representation and in the matter represented. Unwilling to exclude anything from meaning because it does not fit the terms of something else, Eliot uses language that emphasizes an excess in both the terms of representation and the represented meaning. The language of this passage is characteristic of such excesses, and characteristic of Eliot’s persistent indistinction of imaginative and practical representation, as it combines argument with hallucination, dreams with demonstrations, illusions with axioms. Such terms do not logically fit together, but Eliot puts them together anyway and thereby renders the meaning of each term ambiguous and indeterminate, as the words are put into an inclusive rather than exclusive relation with each other. She is telling us that apprehension is always imperfect, and she is giving us language that insists on imperfect apprehension.

With Henry James, we are probably even more aware of the excess of meaning and language that Hartman identifies in literature; and James also puts increasing pressure on the distinction of artistic excess and practical economics, rendering the one indistinct from the other. One must often sense that James would not have used his language if he had wanted to get to the point or wanted his readers to get a clear sense of meaning; for either his language or his meaning exceeds an exact exchange. And *The Golden Bowl* is redundant both in the excess of its language and in the excess of its “plot.” It keeps repeating itself, reconsidering the same events and re-enacting the same scenes. But if we get more than we need—more, perhaps, than many readers want—this is because James does not, any more than does his hero, Adam Verver, believe in even exchanges. Mr. Verver “taxed to such small purpose . . . the principle of reciprocity” in his dealings with others that it is difficult for other characters to know where they stand with him.¹³ But it is such indeterminate relations, among characters as among words, that James insists are meaningful.

¹³ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth, Mx.: Penguin, 1973), p. 30.

This is to say that in all of these novels the indeterminacy of meaning is not simply a condition of literary language. It is actively generated, by both narrators and characters, with emphatically uneven exchanges among self and others; and the determination of meaning is actively resisted. These narrators and heroic characters assume indeterminate meaning as an empowering condition, identifying indeterminacy with the freedom of human beings and human relations to mean more than determination allows. Thus something like the peculiar force of literature that Hartman identifies with its indeterminate meaning and language is the power experienced by characters in these novels as they both increase and unsettle the meaning of experience. They insist on identifying themselves and their relations with others in terms that preclude any determination of meaning and instead enable conflicting elements of experience—their own differing impulses and feelings, for example, and the differing desires of self and others—to be meaningful.

To extend the critical context or critical implications of such practices, we can look at them in relation to theories of narrative and human meaning that explicitly identify such meaning with forms of mastery and determination. One such form is literary realism; another is Freud's reality principle. The novels of James, Richardson, and Eliot that I am considering here do not present us with such forms of representation and behavior except as practices that work against meaningful experience. And in these novels' resistance to forms of mastery, they can be seen to exceed governing principles of narrative form and human behavior in much literary and psychological theory.

Just at the point where characters in the novels break down the boundary between aesthetic or indeterminate meaning and realistic or determinate meaning they are of course subject to being called unrealistic; and they are called unrealistic by other characters in the novels. They are unrealistic to the extent that realistic behavior is considered to consist of mastery or the desire for mastery. To the same extent, the novels themselves can be considered unrealistic, as they exceed the terms of a

“commanding structure of significance,”¹⁴ which Leo Bersani identifies with realistic fiction. The “realistic” novel may be considered a form of human experience that limits experience to stable terms, then, and on several counts the novels I am considering reject the conventions of realism. One such convention is that language refers to some reality outside of language that provides real grounds for significance, grounds that are not indeterminate. Thus George Levine, even as he redefines realism in *The Realistic Imagination*, maintains that Victorian realists, though they wrote “with the awareness of the possibilities of indeterminate meaning and of solipsism, . . . wrote *against* the very indeterminacy they tended to reveal.”¹⁵ Bersani also identifies the tendency of realistic novels both to reveal and to work against indeterminacy in his considerations of another convention of realistic narratives: the plot that functions to limit meaning to more secure terms than poetic structure, for example, provides. Bersani sees that

The realistic novel, for all its apparent looseness, is an extremely tight and coherent structure: it encourages us to believe in the temporal myth of real beginnings and definitive endings, it portrays a world in which events always have a significance which can be articulated, and it encourages a view of the self as organized (if also ravaged) by dominant passions or faculties.¹⁶

This is to suggest that the realistic novel orders meaning as it limits meaning to the terms of its representation. It is also to suggest that the organization of a self-controlled human being is implied in the organization of realistic novels.

In fact, insofar as the determination of individual identity is itself constituted as a narrative, the meaning of the realistic individual self and the realistic narrative plot may come to

¹⁴ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 53.

¹⁵ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 4.

¹⁶ Leo Bersani, “The Subject of Power,” *Diacritics*, 7, no. 3 (1977), 7.

much the same thing. This is what Peter Brooks has suggested by identifying narrative plot with the “masterplot made necessary by the structural demands of Freud’s thought.”¹⁷ Brooks clarifies how both conventions of narrative and conventions of selfhood discount or repress indeterminate meaning and instead find meaning in determination and resolution. Although final “recognition cannot abolish textuality, does not annul the middle which, in its oscillation between blindness and recognition, between origin and endings, is the truth of the narrative text,” yet “the desire of the text is ultimately the desire for the end,” and “we have repetitions serving to bind the energy of the text in order to make its final discharge more effective.”¹⁸ The indeterminate midst of experience is discounted, and the end is what counts as the end of tension. This plot, as a structure that is mobilized by the very tensions of differences it is determined to resolve, is a plot alienated from its own core or middle, working against its own energy. Such a plot is clear not only in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as Brooks suggests, but in most traditional readings of the Freudian history of the ego. I want briefly to consider here how this history is read as a plot and how the plot depends on exchanges that make mastery possible and alienation inevitable. For the plotted narrative, the plotted self, mastery, and alienation are all phenomena to which the novels of Richardson, Eliot, and James create alternatives.

Freudian theory assumes an original, “primary anxiety” in human beings, “an overwhelming state of stimulation with a minimum of protection from stimuli.”¹⁹ This state of excitement is a state of tension because the infant has no way of knowing whether the stimulation—hunger, for instance—will be relieved. Because the need for relief is experienced separately from the relief, in that there is no way of knowing that relief will follow need, the need is always experienced in excess

¹⁷ Peter Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot: Questions of Narrative,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977), 285.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁹ Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945), p. 34.

of means of satisfaction. The precariousness of this situation is relieved by mastering the uncertainty of satisfaction. And mastery means

a gradual substituting of actions for mere discharge reactions. This is achieved through the interposing of a time period between stimulus and reaction, by the acquisition of a certain tension tolerance, that is, of an ability to bind primitive reaction impulses by countercathexes. The prerequisite for an action is, besides mastery of the bodily apparatus, the development of the function of judgment. This means the ability to anticipate the future in the imagination by "testing" reality, by trying in an active manner and in a small dosage what might happen to one passively and in an unknown dosage. This type of functioning is in general characteristic of the ego.²⁰

This is an economy in which certain exchanges occur to make mastery possible. One kind of exchange substitutes a reduced "dosage" for the larger reality that exceeds manageable proportions. Other exchanges work to bind together, or make connections between, previously disconnected elements of experience. A stimulus and reaction to it, a need and its satisfaction, are seen as parts of equations: reaction answers stimulus, and satisfaction answers need. And so these elements are tied together, made parts of a unit as beginnings and ends of experience. The differences between them are repressed by such equations: the tension of waiting that occurs between a need and its satisfaction, for example, no longer has significance equal to the need and the response to it once these are seen as the two parts of a whole.

This is also how a narrative plot is said to work. " 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story," E. M. Forster says in *Aspects of the Novel*. " 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot." The latter event is bound to the former by causality, which insists that the latter event is given its meaning in terms of the former event. "Or again,"

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

Forster writes, “ ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.’ This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.”²¹ This plot suspends much more meaning than the simpler plot and limits much more meaning in the end. When the cause of the queen’s death is discovered, all that has been suspended between his death and hers seems unimportant; the end gives significance. When events are plotted, then, they are bound together in a way that limits their meaning to what they have in common; how they differ is discounted. The ability to equate two elements so that despite their differences they balance each other out is necessary to the construction of a plot. The “minimal complete plot” defined by Tzvetan Todorov develops by identifying equivalents for elements of experience and so balancing imbalances and resolving tension. The plot

consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another. An “ideal” narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established. . . .²²

The “ideal” here is the balance or equivalence of differences in order to relieve the tension between them.

The individual self actively plots experience, then, if it learns that its own activity can bring about the resolution of tension through the resolution of differences. By making up and resolving substitute situations in the imagination, the self is able to take active control of them. As in most other plots, the end becomes predictable even though the middle of the experience remains uncertain. Mastering differences by acting out for itself, in games and imagination, the situations that are suspenseful if dependent on others, the ego creates masterful fictions that enable independence and self-control in the face

²¹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), p. 130.

²² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 111.

of uncertain reality. In doing so, the self can be said to behave like novelists who, in Edward Said's words, "do work that compensates us for the tumbling disorder of brute reality."²³ Making up the difference between a reality we cannot control and the security we desire, the creation of fiction becomes a means of giving order to experience and securing the relation between self and world.

Moreover, the ego makes up the difference between self and world in another sense as it learns to behave in terms of the outside world. For to become realistic, Freud suggests, is to repress parts of the self as we learn the difference between what we want and what we can realistically have:

The ego learns that it must inevitably go without immediate satisfaction, postpone gratification, learn to endure a degree of pain, and altogether renounce certain sources of pleasure. Thus trained, the ego becomes "reasonable," is no longer controlled by the pleasure-principle, but follows the REALITY-PRINCIPLE, which at bottom also seeks pleasure—although a delayed and diminished pleasure, one which is assured by its realization of fact, its relation to reality.²⁴

As in the realistic plot, gratification is both deferred and guaranteed, though the security is gained, as the emphasis in this passage on various losses suggests, at the cost of other pleasure. Thus to compensate for the difference between self and world always seems to entail losses. Both in masterful fictions and in adjustments in accord with the reality principle, the ego represses part of the experience of the self in order to gain some security.

The internalization of others' values in the super-ego is another process in which such a trade-off occurs. "In classical theory, the super-ego is described as the heir of the Oedipus complex in that it is constituted through the internalisation

²³ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 50.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), p. 365.

of parental prohibitions and demands.” Once “the child stops trying to satisfy his Oedipal wishes, which become prohibited, he transforms his cathexis of his parents into an identification with them—he internalises the prohibition.”²⁵ What is thereby made possible is not only an adjustment to others’ demands but an increased sense of self-possession. For, having internalized those demands, the self is able to assume the role of others in making such demands and controlling the self. Here the distinction of the self-possessed individual seems to resemble the confusion of self and world that characterizes the archaic or narcissistic self, which is unclear about what is self and what is other. But this later identification is achieved at the cost of the earlier instinctual self, which is repressed.²⁶

Yet what is striking about the development I have outlined here is that elements of experience do not in fact change very much. The difference between the primitive self and the developed self is said to be an adjustment to reality: the later ego has accommodated itself to the real difference between instinctual needs and available satisfaction. But reality does not seem to be the issue: the issue is control. For this development of self is a development of power over the tension of differences between self and world, a power that attempts to overcome such differences. Yet if the developed ego does not experience the constant tension that the archaic self experiences in relations of self and other, tension itself is not eliminated, it is internalized. The “plotted” self puts the experience of differences inside the bounds of the self, defines those differences, and experiences them independently of the outside world. But it protects itself from the tension between self and

²⁵ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 436.

²⁶ The fact that both archaic and mature selves identify themselves with what lies outside them suggests the resemblance of narcissistic behavior and the behavior of the ego and suggests thereby that the various stages or parts of the Freudian self are not distinct. Nicholas Duruz stresses the structural similarities of narcissism and the ego in “The Psychoanalytic Concept of Narcissism,” *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 4, no. 1 (1981), 3-68.

world only by assuming alienation within its own bounds and actively participating in its own frustration.

In order to posit and possess the self, whatever aspects of the world and the self exceed or differ from the posited meaning must be negated. Self-possession thereby entails the division of self from world and the division of self from self; and self-possession is achieved at the cost of losses. Thus the economy of the self-possessed and masterful self is a matter of definitive exchanges which determine gains and losses in order to determine and secure the meaning of the self. The compensatory exchange is one in which differences are reduced to the terms of substitution. Such an exchange assumes that one thing can make up for another, as when the self makes up a fiction in order to make up *for* the insecure relation of self and world. But in order to maintain such an equation of differences, the differences themselves must be cut down to common terms and so, at least in part, lost.

The novels of Richardson, Eliot, and James that I am considering here seek to avoid such losses. And one mark of this is that their language represents experience in uneconomical terms: terms that exceed the bounds of determination and resist the reductions of meaning necessary to masterful plots and masterful selves. In these indeterminate terms, a self may not be able to tell the difference between self and others; for the representation of self leaves that relation ambiguous. We might say that the heroic selves of these novels do not want to be selves. For the sense of self as an independent and sufficient being is something they want to get rid of rather than reach. " 'There is no end to these debatings,' " Clarissa says to Lovelace; " 'each so faultless, each so full of self.' " ²⁷ Recognizing that to be full of self is to be separate from and opposed to others, Richardson's heroines wish to identify themselves as parts of their relations with others. And Eliot's and James's heroic characters also insist that selves are bound

²⁷ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, intro. John Butt (London: Dent, 1976), II, 301.

to others for their meaning rather than being distinct or distinguished from others.

The self thereby becomes as redundant and difficult to “plot” as are these narratives themselves. The boundaries of the self become unclear, as the self is identified in its relation to others rather than in itself. To move the location of the self into the relation of self and others is to move the self into an archaic or narcissistic identity according to the Freudian scheme of development.²⁸ It is, moreover, to move the self closer to a feminine self according to feminist theorists. As women and men develop, Nancy Chodorow says, their personalities are

affected by different boundary experiences and differently constructed and experienced inner object-worlds, and [they] are preoccupied with different relational issues. Feminine personality comes to be based less on repression of inner objects, and fixed and firm splits in the ego, and

²⁸ I do not mean to suggest here that Freud’s work either maintains consistently or can be contained by this scheme of development but to emphasize the traditional and prevailing interpretation of his work. What more recent readings of Freud suggest is that such an emplotment of his concept of the self chooses to read completeness and security into his concepts only while denying the real conflict and inconclusiveness of his writings. See, for example, Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. and intro. Jeffrey Mehlerman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and François Roustang, *Psychoanalysis Never Lets Go*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

In fact, Freud’s work provides a “model” for the kind of relations of self and other that I am identifying in the works of Richardson, Eliot, and James. In the relation of analyst and patient, the role that Freud assigns to the analyst is a role in transference: the analyst, that is, never plays a role of his or her own but always assumes roles in response to the needs of the particular subject being analyzed. The notion of countertransference, moreover, suggests that the same thing is happening on both sides of the exchange, as the patient assumes for the analyst an identity responsive to the needs of the analyst. Freud’s own most productive relationships, this suggests, would occur as engagements with others from whom he was not distinct and as relations in which neither participant determined his or her own meaning but had meaning in relation to the other.

more on retention and continuity of external relationships. From the retention of proedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate.²⁹

The essential difference between feminist theories of human selves and the conception of self I am elaborating is that I am not distinguishing the indefinite self as feminine. It occurs in both male and female characters and in novels written by both men and women. The sexual differences of women and men in these novels are differences that remain as indeterminate as other differences: always differing but seldom subject to necessary distinctions.³⁰ It is in part because these narratives remain as uncertain about the boundary that separates women from men as they are about the boundaries of the self that

²⁹ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 169. Judith Kegan Gardiner, extending part of Chodorow's argument, says that "female identity is a process" and a process that has a particular effect on narratives written by women. See "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry*, 8, no. 2 (1981), 349.

³⁰ This is not to say that there are not clear distinctions made between the roles of women and men by the conventions of meaning that prevail in the societies of the novels. Richardson and Eliot particularly are attentive to the fact that many more limits are placed on women than on men by conventional codes of behavior. But Richardson's B and Lovelace are characters as essentially indeterminate as Pamela and Clarissa. Their assumption of mastery is presented more as their choice of a conventional identity than as a form of behavior necessary to their selves. Eliot's Daniel Deronda is a male character who is far more a related than a separate self, as in her later novels Eliot exceeds the sexual distinctions of *The Mill on the Floss*. The reason I do not consider conventional distinctions more is that I see these novels as working to exceed those conventions. My emphasis is on the potential power of the indefinite and relative self, a power whose potential, I am arguing, exceeds the power of distinction and mastery.