LITERATURE, LOGIC AND THE LIBERATING WORD: 
THE ELUCIDATION OF CONFUSION IN HENRY JAMES

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ABSTRACT: The literary style of Henry James has attracted the attention of a number of leading analytic philosophers who are drawn to make claims for the philosophical significance of works of literature. Many of these philosophical commentators share a common approach: namely, they locate the philosophical center of gravity of James’s style in a philosophical view that his way of writing is understood to embody or corroborate. The aim of this essay is to argue that such an approach fails to capture what is philosophically most significant about how James writes. By contrast, the essay works out a comparison between James’s literary forms of expression and the logically perspicuous modes of representing thought developed by Gottlob Frege. It highlights one use to which Frege sought to put his Begriffsschrift: namely, as a tool for the task of clarifying forms of philosophical confusion. This comparison helps to illuminate what is philosophically most distinctive and powerful about the modes of perspicuously representing human life that James develops. These literary forms inherit a time-honored aspiration of philosophical writing: seeking to represent a reader’s life to the reader herself in such a way as to allow her to recognize her own confusions in living.

The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the constant force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character.
—Henry James

It is not unusual, when reading a great work of literature, to feel that something of philosophical importance is being achieved. Sometimes the philosophical
significance seems fairly explicit and easy to characterize. In a Dostoyevsky novel, for instance, characters raise philosophical issues by explicitly debating them. In a Sophocles play, characters face conflicting demands of family and state that explicitly require a reconsideration of central moral concepts such as justice or courage.

For a philosophical tradition that prioritizes what is said while relegating how it is said to the margins, it has been natural to focus upon works of literature in which philosophical questions are clearly raised by what happens. This can seem to be anti-literary. For philosophical criticism of this kind, the literary merit of the work—the painstaking care devoted to crafting how the story is told—registers at most as adding force or vividness to the philosophical interest of what takes place. In other words, the philosophical interest and the literary merits of a work are treated as largely separable from and irrelevant to each other.

But there are some works of literature whose literary virtuosity and philosophical interest are not so easily prized apart. The novels and tales of Henry James are a case in point. It’s difficult to read James’s novels as anything but experiments designed to push what happens as close as possible to nothing, while amplifying and elaborating the importance of how it is depicted to the furthest possible limit. It wouldn’t be quite right to say that nothing happens that could occasion philosophical reflection, although the way James writes often seems calculated to interfere with our capacity to determine what has happened at all. But even when it is possible to settle with confidence upon what has happened, much of its philosophical interest simply evaporates if one separates it from the complexity, precision and nuance of how James presents it. If one insists upon bracketing attention to how James writes, it is difficult not to feel that one has simultaneously obscured from view those dimensions of James’s work that recommended him to the philosopher in the first place. The philosophical interest of these works seems to lie in the cerebral, contemplative quality of James’s writing, and in the kinds of demands it makes on its readers. One way to phrase this is that there is a density, precision and sheer intellectual difficulty to James’s writing, especially in his major phase, that invokes comparison with the density, precision and difficulty of the best philosophical writing. The philosophical interest of these works is primarily, not secondarily, a matter of how James writes.

This would seem to make James an unlikely and difficult interlocutor for a philosophical tradition that has relegated the question of how something is written to the philosophically extraneous. And yet, despite this, much of the recent philosophical interest in literature within this tradition has centered upon his novels and tales. I think this is precisely because James presents a problem: our habitual ways of understanding philosophy make it difficult to account for the persistent sense that there is something of deep philosophical interest about James. In order to do justice to this sense, a more adequate philosophical self-understanding will be required, one that might perhaps make more available the best possibilities of that tradition.

Cora Diamond (one of James’s best philosophical interpreters) brings this difficulty into focus in her discussion of the work of Martha Nussbaum (another of
James’s best philosophical interpreters). Nussbaum’s work has often been misunderstood and underestimated, Diamond argues, precisely because it is so difficult for philosophers to register the possibility that the philosophical interest of a work of literature might lie in “how the story is told, the ‘unplainness’ of the telling, its ‘density,’ the kinds of demand that that makes on readers.”8 To their credit, all of James’s best philosophical interpreters have seen this possibility clearly and have taken on the difficult task of clarifying the philosophical interest of how James writes. We will consider some of these interpreters in the first section of this paper. However, we will see that, in an important sense, they have remained committed to the philosophical priority of the “what”: not in this case what happens, but rather what philosophical view is implicit in, or corroborated by, how James writes.9 For these philosophical interpreters, the philosophical kicker is, in the end, still in the “what.”

In this paper, I will explore the possibility that we might understand the philosophical significance of how James writes without tying it in this way to a “what.” How James writes is philosophically important, I will argue, not primarily because it contributes to or changes what we think, but because it aims to transform how we think—even how we live—by clarifying confusions which infect our thinking and living. I will do this by comparing the form of expression which James develops—its precision, compression and ambition—with a form of expression for which philosophical significance has already been claimed: a logically perspicuous form of expression.

From its inception, analytic philosophy has been preoccupied with the philosophical possibilities opened by the development of a logically perspicuous mode of representing thought. The philosophical payoff of such a form of expression has often been understood in terms of the expression or justification of general philosophical views. Gottlob Frege, for instance, invents a special notation, *Begriffsschrift*, designed to express thought in a logically perspicuous manner, and he does so at least in part in order to justify his claims about the status and nature of mathematical truths. However, even in Frege’s case, it is clear that he does not conceive of the philosophical pay-off solely in terms of its utility as a tool for the expression or justification of a general philosophical content. He also conceives of it as a tool for the philosophical task of clarifying confusion. As he puts it, a logically perspicuous form of expression aids the philosopher in freeing thought from the confusions fostered by our habitual ways of using ordinary forms of expression.

As Frege understands it, *Begriffsschrift* serves many different purposes, and it might be argued that, by his own lights, the purpose of freeing thought from confusion is a secondary one. Nonetheless, it was arguably this aspect of Frege’s thought that most influenced central figures of the analytic tradition—most notably Carnap and the early Wittgenstein.10 His use of *Begriffsschrift* for this purpose, therefore, is not of marginal importance to that tradition. What would come as surprising news to the founding members of this tradition is that the sort of illumination a *Begriffsschrift* can confer in exploring confusion opens up an alternative way of
understanding what is most philosophically powerful and distinctive about James’s stories and novels. Of course, James does not develop a new form of notation, but he does develop a literary form whose compression and rigor loses nothing through comparison with *Begriffsschrift*. I will argue that this literary form is philosophically important because of what it contributes to the task of freeing not just our thinking but our living from the confusions fostered not just by ordinary forms of expression and our habitual ways of using language but by ordinary forms of living and our habitual ways of participating in such forms.

The project of illuminating James’s works by means of a comparison to Frege is bound to strike many readers as odd. Since James writes fictional stories about human relationships, it has seemed natural, in attempting to identify the source of a felt sense of the philosophical significance of James’s work, to locate that work with respect to philosophical discussions of moral or ethical topics: to find in his novels a conception of the good life that is interestingly related to Aristotle’s or a conception of historical change that bears comparison to Hegel’s. It would be crazy to look to James for a conception of logical entailment or of the relation between logic and arithmetic that is interestingly related to Frege’s. It is not my intention to deny this, but rather to maintain that certain aspects of Frege’s thought can provide a useful object of comparison because they allow a hitherto neglected dimension of James’s work to come more sharply into focus. Comparing James to a philosopher whose concerns do not fall at all within the topics of moral philosophy, traditionally construed, brings more clearly into view the possibility of a different kind of ethical contribution: one that is primarily a matter of the ethical work done by James’s sentences—the work of liberating thought from confusion—rather than primarily a matter of the particular ethical topics which he happens to treat.

To say that these aspects of Frege’s thought can serve as a “useful object of comparison” is to say that they can illuminate aspects of James’s thought both by highlighting parallels between the two and by enabling us to focus our attention more sharply than we otherwise would be able to on those moments where the parallels break down. The initial burden of this exercise therefore lies in bringing out wherein the parallels lie.

I will not be arguing that, in any simple way, James does with his literary forms of expression what Frege does with his logically perspicacious form of expression. My claim is rather that if we allow ourselves to register some surprising similarities between their very different enterprises, we can make available for further reflection a dimension of James’s work that is philosophically rich and powerful. For the purposes of illuminating this dimension of James’s achievement, it can be as important to attend to relevant differences as to the similarities between Fregean and Jamesian clarification of confusion. However, we will see that the similarities are perhaps deeper and the differences perhaps less obvious and more difficult to adequately characterize than they at first appear. It might be tempting to characterize the differences between Frege and James by positing a sharp distinction between the kinds of confusion that Frege and James respectively treat. Frege, it might be...
tempting to think, clarifies confusions that arise with respect to the subject matter of logic. (Notable examples here would include confusions of concept and object and confusions of the logical and the psychological.) James, by contrast, clarifies confusions that arise with respect to the subject matter of ethics. (Notable examples here would include the following: the confusion of an end-in-itself with a mere-means, or a human life with a work of art, or the confusion of self and other.) In the grip of this way of thinking, one might be inclined to the following objection: perhaps both Frege and James make a certain kind of common contribution that might be called “ethical” by freeing us (our thinking and our living) from confusion, but the confusions that James clarifies are themselves ethical (as opposed to logical) ones. According to this understanding, his primary contribution is to illuminate the subject matter of ethics by clarifying confusions that infect our thinking about this subject matter. But I hope to show that if we think in terms of logical confusions on the one hand, and ethical confusions on the other, we will have already obscured the character of the sort of confusion, and the sort of clarification, at issue, right at the outset. Adequately characterizing James’s “ethical” contribution will require a shift of perspective such that we conceive of the “ethical” and the “logical” no longer as labels for distinct and unrelated subject matters, but rather as two faces of a single form of philosophical work.

I. JAMES AND GENERALITY

We look for arguments, for theories, for supporting data or counterexamples. The idea that we need to learn to read with a different sort of eye, attentive to different sorts of things, may strike us as very strange; but there are no short cuts for philosophers.

—Cora Diamond

All of James’s best philosophical interpreters have rightly understood his philosophical significance to be a matter of how he writes. Such interpreters often single out aspects of James’s literary form or style that are indeed central to his philosophical contribution. But they also by and large take a further step that I want to resist: they assume that the philosophical payoff of that form and style must be a matter of implying, or providing evidence in support of, a philosophical view of some sort. We can see this by looking at three such interpreters: Martha Nussbaum, Daniel Brudney and Robert Pippin.

In her important interpretation of James’s The Golden Bowl, Nussbaum brings sharply into focus the difficulty of James’s later style and the particular kind of experience reading it affords. The difficulty of James’s sentences, she argues, impresses upon us as readers the inadequacy and limits of our responsiveness to its central characters:

With [The Golden Bowl], as perhaps with few other [novels] in English literature, we are struck at every point by the incompleteness and inadequacy of our own attention. We notice the way we are inclined to miss things, to
pass over things, to leave out certain interpretive possibilities while pursuing others. (Nussbaum 1990, 144)

Nussbaum here puts her finger on a philosophically crucial feature of James’s style, but she presses this feature into a kind of philosophical service with which I want to take issue. On Nussbaum’s interpretation, the primary philosophical pay-off of our experience of reading is supposed to be that it licenses conclusions about “features that hold of human life in general,” thereby contributing to a “persuasive argument” for a general view to the effect that certain “failures of responsiveness are more or less inevitable features of” human experience (Diamond 1991, 139–140). 18

Brudney, too, highlights features of James’s prose that are central to his philosophical contribution. He draws attention to what he calls the “opacity” or “aggressive ambiguity” of James’s prose which both “demands interpretation and hamstring it” (Brudney 1990, 435). But while I think that Brudney rightly focuses upon features of James’s prose that do important philosophical work, he, like Nussbaum, adduces philosophical significance by casting these features in the role of “evidence” for a “philosophical thesis” about moral obligation. Brudney argues that James, by writing as he does, makes available, “in the modest way a novelist can,” an experience of “caring about individuals and wanting to know things about them—what they know, what they feel, what their condition is—but having to be content, in the end, not to” (Brudney 1990, 437). Again, the primary philosophical pay-off of such experience is supposed to be the evidence it provides for a general view to the effect that sometimes, difficult as it may be to accept, we are morally required to forgo knowledge of another being whom we care deeply about. 19

Pippin also rightly locates James’s philosophical significance in how he writes, drawing attention to the exacting nature of James’s prose which makes “far greater and far different sorts of demands on the reader” than the prose of other novelists (Pippin 2000, 86). As Pippin reads him, James writes in such a way as to convey the difficulty of “figuring out what is going on” and this has important philosophical implications. But Pippin also brings to bear the same template for adducing philosophical significance as do Nussbaum and Brudney. Here, too, the primary philosophical pay-off of James’s style is supposed to be in the “general views” it “implies.” 20 According to Pippin, James writes in such a way as to make possible a delicate philosophical balancing act: on the one hand, he succeeds in implying certain “idealistic claims about social and psychological reality” (e.g., “being able to settle on some interpretation cannot now be like discovering some hidden fact of the matter”), while on the other hand he avoids nihilistic or skeptical conclusions (e.g., because “there can be no final fact of the matter to settle everything . . . the whole question of ‘getting it right’ is hopeless”) (Pippin 2000, 7, 14 and 86).

It is worth noting here that not only do Nussbaum, Brudney and Pippin each accord philosophical priority to how James writes, but each also understands the philosophical significance of James’s “how” in terms of the way it engages or affects his readers. In this way, these interpreters push against the grain of another
Anglo-American philosophical habit: that of consigning such textual effects to the dustbin of the psychological. I think these philosophers are right to accord philosophical pride of place to James’s engagement with his reader. But I take issue with their shared assumption that the philosophical significance of this engagement is necessarily, or best, understood in terms of a general philosophical view implicit in it.

My cursory examination of these important philosophical interpreters of James does not allow the nuance of, or the important differences between, their readings to register. But what is important for our purposes here is the common assumption that unites them. Because James writes novels and tales that depict human relationships and important human conflicts, it can seem obvious that his philosophical significance must be a matter primarily of the general philosophical insights he affords on ethical topics such as the nature of the good life or of moral obligation. However, we can begin to get an alternative way of approaching his texts into view by considering some suggestions made by another of James’s most insightful philosophical interpreters: Dorothea Krook. Krook is no exception to the general rule: she too locates the philosophical importance of the late style in the general “view of reality as a whole and the world of human relations in particular” that she takes to be implicit in it (Krook 1962, 408). Nevertheless Krook unpacks that late style in a way that suggests a different possibility, albeit one that she herself does not thematize or develop.

In “The Method of the Later Works of Henry James,” Krook draws attention to a peculiar feature of James’s style: a surprising preponderance of “what might be called logical terms, expressions and images” (Krook 1954, 55). She points out representative instances of recourse to the logical vocabulary of “inference,” “ground,” “implication,” and “consistency” and draws attention to recurrent mention of the “necessary conditions” of perception and of thought. Krook also examines in some detail instances of “disjunctive syllogisms” in James’s prose and an extended discussion of “cutting down one’s prior term” from The Golden Bowl.

For Krook, the preponderance of logical vocabulary is philosophically important because it is the means by which James is able to “generalize to the furthest limits the particulars of experience” (Krook 1954, 70). The logical terms contribute to a literary method that allows James to “exhibit” an individual human life in such a way as to make perspicuous the necessary or “internal” relations that constitute it. The individual life is thereby exhibited in a manner that clarifies its relation to, its instantiation of “a metaphysical principle . . . a view that sees all reality as a tissue of implications, in which everything is internally related to everything else” (Krook 1962, 407 and 412). In other words, for Krook the presence of logical vocabulary is philosophically important because of the generality of content, the metaphysical view, it affords.

But some of Krook’s comments not only suggest the value of paying close attention to James’s use of logical vocabulary, but also invite a comparison between James’s literary method of exhibiting a life and a logically perspicuous method of
exhibiting thought. Krook has this to say, for instance, about the literary method by which James exhibits the “internal relations” that constitute the “given case” of a human life:

The artist at once creates the conditions in which life can be “ideally” exhibited and exhibits it thus ideally by exploring and articulating the fullest implications of the given case. Life is made to yield its fullest, richest meanings when subjected to the artistic process; Art . . . [discovers] the full implications of the [given case] by creating the conditions in which they may most beautifully and instructively unfold themselves. That is how art exhibits life at its maximum intensity, at its highest reaches of interest and importance. (Krook 1962, 410)

Krook’s formulation here allows us to see how comparison to a philosopher like Frege might be illuminating and to the point. Her way of characterizing James invites comparison with the way Frege formulates one purpose of his logically perspicuous notation, *Begriffsschrift*. *Begriffsschrift* makes it possible to exhibit with maximum clarity the content of a thought or chain of inference, thereby clarifying the logical structure that is “almost always only hinted at” in the ordinary-language expression of the same thought or inferential chain. One might paraphrase Krook’s point here by saying that just as a philosopher might employ a logically perspicuous language in order to make clear the logical structure of, and the logical relationships between, the propositions in a chain of inference, so James develops a way of writing that exhibits with maximum clarity the content of a life, the necessary connections and structures of implication that constitute that life.

Krook makes her observations in order to bring out what is, for her, the philosophically important point: that James’s method of “exhibiting a life” signals a “power of grasping generality” which is “equal in scope, depth and intensity” to that of any philosopher. She doesn’t dwell on, or even make explicit, the comparison between James’s form of writing and that of a logically perspicuous notation. But I want to argue that James’s philosophical significance is helpfully understood by comparing the uses to which James puts his literary form of expression to the philosophical uses to which a logically perspicuous form of expression has been put.

In developing such an account of James’s philosophical significance, I will shift the emphasis of the comparison invited by Krook. Krook’s observation suggests a comparison between James’s method and one use to which a logically perspicuous notation might be put: that of exhibiting different kinds of “organic” or “necessary” structures of implication. By contrast, I will develop a comparison between James’s method and Frege’s use of *Begriffsschrift* as a tool for overcoming confusions that interfere with the activity of thinking:

If it is one of the tasks of philosophy to break the domination of the word over the human spirit, by laying bare the [illusions] that through the use of language often almost unavoidably arise concerning the relations of concepts and by freeing thought from that with which only the means of expression of ordinary language, constituted as they are, saddle it, then my
Frege reveals here an abiding concern with the ways in which human forms of expression—natural language, and human habits of using natural language—foster confusions and thereby imprison the human spirit. In what follows, I will argue that James develops a form of expression that serves as a tool for overcoming confusions which interfere not only with thinking, but with living and that his work is correspondingly oriented by a deep and abiding concern with the ways that ordinary forms of living—social forms—foster confusion and thereby imprison the human spirit.

Ordinary language fosters confusion, on Frege’s conception, because it obscures the logical structure of thought, in the demanding sense of “thought” with which Frege is concerned. The word “thought” admits of different categorical inflections: we can use the word in a “psychological” sense—the sense in which we might say of someone that her thoughts are wandering, or that she is drawn to think of (or imagine) a tasty meal or a beautiful garment. But we can also use it in a “logical” sense in order to indicate a “judgeable content,” i.e., a content which could in principle be grasped by anyone and of which it makes sense to ask, “Is it true?” When Frege speaks of thought, he uses the term in its logical sense. By his lights, logical distinctions and rules of inference (which govern our assertion of one thought on the basis of another) are constitutive of thought, so understood, in the sense that the content of a given thought is individuated in terms of the role that thought can play in chains of inference. We exhibit mastery of such rules and distinctions not just in executing sophisticated pieces of mathematical reasoning, but in expressing any thought, or making any inference at all.

Although the logical structure of a thought is reflected in ordinary-language expressions of that thought, it is reflected through a glass darkly. We can see this readily, Frege thinks, in the way that sentences with identical grammatical structures may be used to express thoughts with very different logical structures. This opens the door to several kinds of confusion, confusions that are forms of failing to “keep in sight” the logical rules and distinctions, mastery of which is
exhibited in expressing any thought or making any inference at all. Frege calls such confusions a “widespread philosophical disease” and he devotes large portions of The Foundations of Arithmetic and of his other writings to treating this disease in the “variety of guises” it assumes.

Some such confusions are aptly characterized as forms of confused thought. Because the logical structure of thought is not exhibited perspicuously, we are likely to make mistakes regarding the logical relations between thoughts, lapsing into invalid inferences or failing to recognize gaps in our reasoning. But ordinary language, as Frege understands it, renders us vulnerable to an order or degree of confusion more extreme than anything that is aptly characterized merely as confused thinking (if confused thinking is supposed to be a species of the genus thinking). It renders us vulnerable to illusions of thought, to suffering the illusion that we are thinking or expressing a thought when, in fact, we aren’t doing so.

This possibility arises because ordinary language is such that it is possible to formulate a sentence that is well formed according to the rules of grammar but that expresses no thought. A subject can sometimes find herself wanting to “assert” such a sentence and in “asserting” it mistakenly take herself to be expressing a thought. Such a subject does engage in a kind of psychological activity, but she suffers an illusion in taking this activity to add up to thinking or expressing a thought (in the demanding sense in which Frege is concerned to characterize a subject as thinking). One cannot dispel such illusion simply through argument. To argue against the apparent “thought”—to endeavor to demonstrate its falsity—is to participate in (and thereby in a sense to reinforce) the illusion that a thought has been expressed. What is needed is rather a form of clarification or elucidation that makes it possible for the subject who suffers such an illusion to recognize it as an illusion. As we will see in more detail later, Begriffsschrift makes it possible to exhibit a subject’s “thought” to her in such a way as to allow her to recognize that she suffered the illusion of thinking.

In what follows, I will argue that the confusions with which James is concerned can be illuminated by comparison with the confusions fostered by ordinary language in the following important respect: they are confusions that arise because ordinary forms of living can obscure what I will call the “socio-logical” structure of our living, where “living” is understood in the demanding sense of the term with which James is concerned. The word ‘life,’ like the word ‘thought,’ admits of different categorical inflections. If we use the word in an undemanding sense, we might say of anyone who continues to breathe or draw sustenance that she “lives.” But we also use the word in a demanding sense, a sense in which we might say to someone, “Get a life!” or say of someone that she has “failed to live.” In the demanding sense of “living” with which James is concerned, I will argue, there are forms of self- and other-recognition at stake which play constitutive roles with respect to living analogous to the constitutive roles played by logical distinctions and rules of inference with respect to thought. The contents of a person’s acts—the phases of his “life” in the demanding sense—are, of course, not individuated according to
the roles such acts can play in the progression of anything like a chain of inference, but are rather individuated through the role they play in an individual’s life as that life is itself part of the life of a community as a whole. We exhibit a recognition of ourselves and others—of ourselves and others as separate beings with individual lives, of ourselves as part of a community of other such beings—in any of our more significant actions and interactions.

My use of the locution ‘recognition’ here is potentially misleading. It might seem to suggest that the phenomenon at issue is appropriately understood as one act among others, a particular act of recognition. But part of the force of the analogy with the logical context is precisely to bring out the sense in which the “recognition” at issue is not adequately understood in this way. The forms of self-and other-recognition at issue figure in and are constitutive of our moves in a social world; they do not figure as some subset of those moves, standing at the same level and on a par with them. In making any such move, one exhibits mastery of oneself and an awareness or recognition of others as separate beings capable of activity.

Just as ordinary language is a mode of representing thought that can obscure its logical structure, so ordinary forms of living are forms of living that can obscure its socio-logical structure. In this way, ordinary forms of living foster confusions which are forms of failing to “keep sight” of the basic forms of self- and other-recognition exhibited in our actions and interactions. Although some such confusions might be most aptly characterized as forms of confused living, I will argue that James is primarily pre-occupied with forms of confusion of a degree more extreme than anything that is aptly characterized in this way. James’s phrase for such a possibility—the possibility of a degree of confusion such that we are moved to say, not just that a person is living badly, but that she suffers the illusion of living—is “death in life.” The person who suffers a living death might be said to “live” in one sense—she continues to breathe and draw sustenance—but with respect to the demanding sense of “living” with which James is concerned, she suffers an illusion in taking herself to live. This condition deeply preoccupies James throughout his career. I will argue that he achieves something of philosophical significance not primarily by equipping us with more adequate general views about our susceptibility to such a condition, but by developing a mode of exhibiting such a subject’s life to her so as to make it possible for her both to recognize that she occupies such a condition and to recognize the contours of the particular form of illusion from which she suffers. It is by elucidating such illusions, by eliciting and working through his reader’s susceptibility to suffer them, that James makes his deepest and most distinctive philosophical contribution.

The comparison here is a difficult one and immediately raises questions about the scope of its validity. Perhaps most pressingly, the unity and progression of a meaningful life is not governed by a finite and limited set of rules in the way in which the unity and progression of a chain of inference can be said to be governed by “rules of inference.” The role that even the most significant of our actions can play in the unity and progression of a life is correspondingly more fluid, less clearly
codifiable, than the role a given thought can play in an inferential chain. The point of the comparison of Frege to James is not to deny or to minimize such important differences between Frege and the original object of our investigation here—namely, the palpable but illusive philosophical dimension of James’s undertaking. It is rather, as Wittgenstein characteristically puts it when seeking to explain the method of philosophy he practices, to draw attention to certain characteristics of our object of investigation. The fruitfulness of the comparison will depend upon its usefulness in bringing out and throwing into sharper relief the philosophical richness of important dimensions of James’s work.

Before continuing, let me briefly register one clarification. By suggesting that James aims to elicit and work through a reader’s temptations to obscure and disrupt her most basic forms of self- and other-recognition, I do not mean to deny that different readers bring to James’s tale different levels of tolerance for self- and other-recognition or self-responsiveness, or that different readers will come to the tale at very different stages in the work of overcoming confusions with which we disrupt and interfere with such self-and other-recognition. But such working through is the work of a life not only in the sense that its object is to perfect the life of which such work forms a part, but also in the sense that we don’t, at some point in time, complete the task and move on. I mean to suggest that James endeavors to make contact with a reader’s temptations to such confusion, at whatever stage a given reader has reached in working them through. Perhaps there are readers who do not feel the force of such temptations at all. Such a reader will, I think, have little use for James’s novels and tales, or at any rate at least not for the dimension of them that I will bring to the fore.

II. JAMES AND THE LIBERATING WORD

The more one learns, so to speak, the hang of oneself, and mounts one’s problems, the less one is able to say what one has learned; not because you have forgotten what it was, but because nothing you said would seem like an answer or a solution: there is no longer any question or problem which your words would match. You have reached conviction, but not about a proposition; and consistency, but not in a theory. You are different, what you recognize as problems are different, your world is different. . . . And this is the sense, the only sense in which what a work of art means cannot be said.

—Stanley Cavell

In what sense might James be understood to develop a form of expression that aims to “liberate” us from confusions fostered by ordinary forms of living? We can begin to bring into focus such a liberating ambition of James’s prose by focusing upon the very features of his style to which Krook draws attention: the abstract and general language he employs. Some comments by Richard Poirier, a critic who is not explicitly concerned with the philosophical implications of James’s writing, provide a starting point. In his reading of The Portrait of a Lady, Poirier argues
that James uses such language in order to free a fictional character, Isabel Archer, from an act of interpretive aggression on the part of the reader.

As Poirier reads him, James anticipates that his reader will be inclined to “hem” Isabel in—to confine her—by assuming that he or she knows all about her, by, as Poirier puts it, “grinding” Isabel in the “convenient typologies of literary and social convention” (Poirier 1960, 238). In order to intervene in this inclination, in order to undo our temptations so to imprison Isabel, James resorts to “general” or “abstract” language in describing her:

James, as her creator, makes a considerable and unusual effort to protect her from being hemmed in by any too exclusive definitions of her character which may be inferred from the dramatic action. His language in the passages of analysis is general to the point of being abstract. (Poirier 1960, 241)

Poirier makes this remark about James’s style in passing and does not elaborate it (he is not primarily concerned with James’s relation to his reader). But his remark makes it possible to identify an initial sense in which James might be understood to use his form of expression in order to liberate, not us exactly, but a character from an imprisoning way that he anticipates the reader will be inclined to use social and literary conventions: to “place” or “define” Isabel, to “hem her in.”

We can get this kind of liberating use to which James puts his literary modes of representing life more clearly into view by examining what is, I think, another instance of its operation: The Wings of the Dove. The Wings of the Dove begins with a familiar scene in a James novel: a struggle between parent and child whose stakes are palpably high but whose content is difficult to specify. In this case, the parent and child are Lionel and Kate Croy. Lionel Croy has been ruined. Though he retains the perfect appearance of a gentleman, we learn that Kate believes he has “done something wicked.” The content of his deed is left unspecified, but Kate believes that it has made him “impossible for the world at large” such that he simply “doesn’t exist for people.”

Kate has been rescued from the “general collapse” by a wealthy benefactress, Maud Lowder. As the novel opens, Kate visits Lionel, at his request, in the “sticky” and “greasy” rooms in which he is living out his exile. Lionel’s purpose in summoning Kate is ambiguous, as is Kate’s purpose in acquiescing. But James depicts this scene in a way that at times seems to invite explanation in terms of the “convenient typologies of social and literary convention.” For example, there are hints that Lionel has perhaps sent for Kate in order to impress upon her the familial responsibility to support him, a responsibility that requires her to abide by Aunt Maud’s strict terms and abandon her love, Merton Densher. Likewise, there are hints that Kate responds to Lionel’s summons in hopes that he will recognize her relationship with Densher and thereby legitimate it in the eyes of the world and counter the pressure that Aunt Maud is bringing to bear.

But although aspects of James’s depiction invite an explanation of Kate and Lionel in such conventional terms, there are also aspects of that depiction that might be understood as designed to anticipate and interrupt the reader’s
temptation to apply such conventions with a certain kind of rigidity and know-
ingness, to use such conventions as a means to “deflect” or “avoid” what Cora
Diamond calls the responsibility for “seeing and attending with warmth and
sympathy to the complex reality of human life” (Diamond 1997a, 246 and 252).
The Croy family collapse, for instance, is initially described in a way that seems
to repel explanation altogether:

The whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid volu-
minous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes
without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words or notes at all.
Why should a set of people have been put in motion on such a scale and
with such an air of being equipped for a profitable journey, only to break
down without an accident, to stretch themselves in the wayside dust without
a reason? (James 1909b, 4)

This characterization exemplifies what Ian Watt has called the “special problem”
posed by James’s later novels: “we do not quite know whether the perspective
implied in a given passage is the narrator’s or that of his character” (Watt 1960,
127). It is therefore not obvious what kind of authority to accord it. However, as
described, the breakdown is not precipitated by anything: to suggest that it could be
an effect of some particular cause—an outcome of some chain of events—would
be to trivialize it. It brooks no explanation and there is, correspondingly, no hope of
limiting the scope of its consequences to anything as local or particular as financial
ruin or loss of social standing.

The unspecifiable enormity of the collapse is mirrored in the unqualified, ab-
solute terms that characterize much of Kate and Lionel’s conversation and trivial-
ize the quite specific, conventional ways we have also been invited to understand
their motives. Lionel tells Kate that he has sent for her so that “you might see me
as I really am.” This is not specified in terms of anything particular that Lionel
wishes Kate to see or understand about him, or any particular way that he takes
her perception of him to have been lacking. He simply requires, now, that she see
him as he really is—full stop.

Similarly, Kate is characterized as “looking for a foothold to cling to her father,”
and as offering to “stay” and “go” with Lionel in ways that are not qualified or
specified. Stay with him when? Where? Cling to him in what way? To what end?
Her appeal to him, “You can do nothing at all for me?” is likewise unqualified and
unspecified. She doesn’t seem to be asking him—or registering his failure—to do
anything particular that one person might do for another. The appeal and the failure
are both empty—any particular content that would specify the request would limit
it in a way that trivializes and misses the truth of what is really at stake. Kate’s
felt need for a “witness” to “testify” that she has “spoken” only serves to further
intensify both the enormity and the mysteriousness of what is at stake. Her father’s
ironic response, “Would you like me to call the landlady?” exposes the fact that
any testimony that could be given by a specific person would fail to meet the desire
that Kate is expressing.
As I have interpreted him here, James depicts Kate and Lionel in such a way as to both invite and interrupt a too rigid application to his characters of social and literary convention, a use of such conventions that is in effect an act of aggression: an attempt to “place,” even to imprison. If James is successful, we stop trying to “define” a character like Kate or Isabel and recognize her instead: her life is disclosed as we forgo definition in favor of what Jonathan Freedman has called an “acknowledgment of the fundamental mysteriousness of others” and what John Bayley calls the capacity to see with the “vision of love” (Freedman 1994, 78; Bayley 1960, 38).

I have focused on the way James elicits and resists the reader’s temptation to, in a certain sense, imprison characters, but many of James’s novels also bring sharply into focus the possibility of bringing such violence to bear upon oneself, of imprisoning one’s own life by subjecting oneself to certain kinds of social and moral expectations. Thus, in Portrait of a Lady, Ralph cautions Isabel:

Take things more easily. Don’t ask yourself so much whether this or that is good for you. Don’t question your conscience so much—it will get out of tune like a strummed piano. . . . Don’t try so much to form your character—it’s like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will take care of itself. . . . You’ve too much power of thought—above all too much conscience . . . Put back your watch. (James 1908a, 319)

Instead of responding to herself with the warmth and sympathy which would make it possible for her to open and flower, Isabel takes herself in hand, determined to remake herself in the image of the standards and expectations to which she rigorously adheres. As Kate Croy will put it to Merton Densher, “You’ve had to take yourself in hand. You’ve had to do yourself violence” (James 1909b, 393).

What is at stake here is a distortion in a subject’s most basic forms of responsiveness to herself and others, which might be understood as constitutive of her living in something like the way logical rules and distinctions are constitutive of thought. We can see the constitutive role played by such forms of responsiveness because James allows us to see the way in which a distortion in such forms of responsiveness is reflected in everything a character says or does, the way such a distortion intimately shapes the kinds of possibilities such a subject projects for herself, the kinds of involvement with others she seeks and cultivates. Isabel experiences herself as living within a social space of possibilities that is delimited by “placement” and “definition.” All of the moves possible within that space, as Isabel understands it, take the form of placing, being placed, or avoiding placement. Isabel anticipates placement from others. Thus, when Lord Warburton proposes to her, she experiences herself as “some wild, caught creature in a cage,” the cage of the conventional expectations of the romance novel:

It suddenly came upon her that her situation was one which a few weeks ago she would have deemed deeply romantic: the park of an old English country-house, with the foreground embellished by a ‘great’ (as she supposed)
nobleman in the act of making love to a young lady who, on careful inspection, should be found to present remarkable analogies with herself. (James 1908a, 146)

She herself relates to others by attempting to place them, dividing people, for example, into “groups of half-a-dozen specimens.” When she meets someone who, as Freedman puts it, “fails to conform to her pre-existing mental categories,” she places them by transforming them into “static portraits” to be hung “on the wall in [her] mental portrait gallery” (Freedman 1990, 68–69). Moreover, Isabel also attempts to place herself. Although she resists Osmond’s effort to conform her to his expectations, Ralph reflects Isabel back to herself in such a way as to make it evident that she, in effect, relates to herself in the just the way that Osmond relates to her.

James is a master at exhibiting the lives of his characters in such a way as to make evident how this kind of disturbance in their most basic forms of self- and other-responsiveness intimately shapes the social space of possibilities that such characters project for themselves, the way it shapes their experience, even their perception, at the most basic level. Consider, for instance, two details of the way he characterizes Kate Croy’s experience when we are first introduced to her. While waiting for her father, Kate restlessly shifts position, “moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once—she had tried it—the sense of the slippery and sticky.” She then moves to the balcony from which she sees “narrow black house-fronts, adjusted to a standard that would have been low even for backs.” The first detail to notice is the placement of the clause, “she tried it.” This clause is interjected into the middle of the first sentence in such a way as to bring out and hold in suspension two different readings of the sentence that hinge upon two different ways of hearing the phrase “gave at once.” When it is first introduced, the phrase “gave at once” appears to function in one way: to modify the chair, suggesting that the chair provides no resistance or support, giving at once under Kate’s weight. The interjection of the phrase “she had tried it,” serves to emphasize this reading by delaying the resolution of the phrase in a different and unexpected way: to modify not the chair, but the chair’s cloth: it gave the impression of being both slippery and sticky.

Together, these two alternate readings begin to bring out the way that Kate’s perspective is pervasively shaped at the most intimate perceptual level by a sense of herself as powerless, as subject to a world that impresses itself upon her without taking her impression. The chair impresses her with its stickiness and slipperiness, but she anticipates that she would leave no impression upon it: if she tried to sit on it, it would give at once and she would slide off and it would resume its original shape. This sense of her most basic relation to the world is reflected in what she sees when she looks into the street as well. What she perceives is something upon which a foreign and ill-fitting standard is impressed: houses-fronts adjusted to, as James puts it, even subjected to, a standard suited for house-backs.

In the novel’s opening sentences, then, James exhibits Kate’s life in such a way as to make patent to the reader the latent operation of a kind of rigidly constricting
experiential filter. But my interest does not primarily lie, nor do I think James’s interest primarily lies, in the latent operation of such filters in his characters. It lies, rather, with the way that James is able to put his reader in a position to feel the operation, or the potential operation, of such a filter in her own ways of experiencing and perceiving. His method of exhibiting the lives of his characters is the primary means by which he affords the reader a critical vantage point with respect to her own life. I began by arguing that James works to elicit from his reader the temptation to place or define characters such as Isabel or Kate. By drawing the reader’s attention to her own participation in these basic forms of relating to oneself and others while, at the same time, allowing the reader to see the intimate and pervasive ways these basic forms of self- and other-responsiveness figure in and constrict the lives of his characters, James enables the reader to begin to recognize the ways in which these forms of self- and other-responsiveness figure in and constrict her own living. In this way, James affords the reader a perspective from which to see her own life differently.

The relation between James’s reader and his characters as I describe it here can be illuminated by means of the language of “an object of comparison” that I used in order to characterize the juxtaposition of James to Frege at issue in this paper. As I have described them, James’s characters function, not so much as the basis for, to use Nussbaum’s phrase, generalizations about “features that hold of human life in general,” but rather as objects of comparison which draw attention to and illuminate aspects of the reader’s own life. The generality of such an object of comparison is a function of its successful application—that is, its usefulness in illuminating the lives of a wide range of readers who come to the text at very different stages in the work of overcoming confusions which disrupt and interfere with such a reader’s most basic forms of self- and other-responsiveness.

It is the possibility of such disturbances in our most basic forms of self- and other-recognition or responsiveness that, in their most extreme forms, James registers not so much as the possibility of failing to live well or fully, but as the possibility of failing to live at all, of suffering the mere illusion of living. Lambert Strether voices this possibility to Little Billham in one of the most famous passages in all of James: “It’s as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. . . . Do what you like so long as you don’t make my mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!” (James 1909a, 138). The mistake that Strether recognizes is not the mistake of living badly, but of not living, and without even having recognized that he hasn’t. In his notebooks, James characterizes this possibility as a “death-in-life” in which “the consciousness is said to survive . . . so that the man is a spectator of his own tragedy.” Such a person “lives” in one sense: he continues to breathe and to draw sustenance. But his form of “living” is not properly characterized as a form of life, but as a form of death. It is only apparently a form of living, merely the illusion of a life.

The possibility of living death preoccupies James in many novels and tales. It recurs as well in his autobiographical writing, letters, notebooks, and essays. In
the remainder of this paper, I will examine in more detail James’s elucidation of such illusions of life. But in order to do so, it will be helpful first to reconsider, in the next section, what all this has to do with philosophy.

III. PHILOSOPHY AND THE ELUCIDATION OF CONFUSION

[James] was possessed by the vision of an ideal society: he saw (not fancied) the relations between the members of such a society. And no one, in the end, has ever been more aware—or with more benignity, or less bitterness—of the disparity between possibility and fact.

—T. S. Eliot

I have begun to show how several of James’s writings contribute to a single, sustained project: that of developing forms of representation that serve to represent a reader’s life to the reader herself in such a way as to allow her to recognize her own confusions in living. But my way of formulating his elucidatory activity I might appear to undercut the distinction I sought to draw at the beginning of this essay between my own approach and the kind of ethical interpretation developed by authors such as Brudney, Krook, Nussbaum and Pippin. When I attribute to James the activity of elucidating “illusions” or “confusions” of life, don’t I assume and attribute to James an ethical norm—namely that we ought to live lives free of confusion? Doesn’t this involve attributing to James a view about how we ought to live? And if so, aren’t I, like Brudney, et al, locating James’s philosophical significance in the philosophical views implied or justified by his novels and tales?

I do not want to deny that engaging in elucidation as James does involves significant ethical commitment to the reader. Nor do I want to deny that we could extrapolate from that commitment something of James’s conception of how to live or that this conception would be of philosophical interest. But the philosophical center of gravity in my reading of James is not James’s conception of how we ought to live. It is, in a certain sense, in the reader’s conception of how to live. The philosophical center of gravity in my reading of James is in the way that James’s literary modes of representation, in their application to a reader’s life, can help such a reader to discover that, by the lights of the normative constraints internal to her living—that is, by the lights of her own conception of how to live—her living is confused. I do not locate James’s primary philosophical interest in an “ethical content” that is “relevant to the moral philosopher” who is interested in arguing for a “particular account of human nature or human psychology” (Brudney 1998, 275 and 277). My primary interest is in James’s penchant for finding a “liberating word”—that is, a form of representation that, in its application to a reader’s life, helps the reader gain clarity about her living, where this may involve helping her to discover that, by her own lights, her living is confused.

It will further clarify the distinctiveness of my approach to consider in more detail how that approach builds upon possibilities opened by one exemplary ethical interpretation—Nussbaum’s “Flawed Crystals: The Golden Bowl and Literature as
Moral Philosophy”—but develops those possibilities differently than Nussbaum does herself. In locating the core of James’s philosophical interest in the responsiveness of perspective that he achieves and makes available to his reader, I build on possibilities opened by Nussbaum. By Nussbaum’s lights, the responsiveness James achieves is a “moral ideal,” one which James pits against a competing ideal with “very deep roots in the moral tradition of our entire culture”: that of “living flawlessly” (Nussbaum 1990, 132). As she reads it, The Golden Bowl argues against this culturally prevalent ideal and makes a persuasive case for his favored alternative: the ideal of being “finely aware and richly responsible” (Nussbaum 1990, 136). James provides such an argument, Nussbaum thinks, both by providing us with exemplary characters that exhibit such responsiveness (Maggie and Adam Verver are, by Nussbaum’s lights, two such exemplary characters) but also, and perhaps more importantly, by creating a text which exhibits such responsiveness. As Nussbaum puts it:

It is, in fact, not possible to speak about the moral view revealed within the text without speaking at the same time of the created text, which exemplifies and expresses the responses of an imagination that means to care for and put itself there for us. . . . The entire text [is] revealed as the imaginative effort of a human character who displays himself here as the sort of character who reads lives and texts so as not to cheapen their value. (Nussbaum 1990, 140–141)

On such a reading, James’s text as a whole embodies the same kind of responsiveness—both towards the characters within the novel and the reader of the novel—that one character, Maggie Verver, embodies with respect to another, Charlotte Stant.

Cora Diamond amplifies this latter dimension of Nussbaum’s work, bringing out how radical it is for a philosophical critic to direct attention in this way to the “complex vision” of the novel as a whole instead of focusing solely upon the characters or events within the novel.51 For my reading of James, this distinction—between the perspective afforded by the novel as a whole and the perspective of any given character—is a crucial one. It is in the space between these two perspectives that the important philosophical work is done. It is by affording a critical distance with respect to his characters that James is able to provide a path for the reader to a vantage point on her own life that allows her to see the confusions and illusions that she herself suffers. The achievement of such a vantage point requires that the reader first deeply identify with a character and then achieve a critical distance on that character by means of the critical perspective afforded by the text. The responsiveness that James mediates to his reader makes an important philosophical contribution to this process but not because it gives “full and fitting” expression to James’s view of how we ought to live. Rather, it is important because it is in virtue of such responsiveness to the reader that James is able to enable the reader to recognize and overcome confusion. It is James’s “vision of love” that makes it possible for the reader to tolerate seeing what he shows about our lives. It is the
balance between what Watt calls James’s “warmth” and his “irony” (that, the critical distance he affords) that makes possible the elucidatory process he facilitates (Watt 1960, 480).

Although Nussbaum does important work to bring into view the distinction between the perspective afforded by the text as a whole and that of an individual character, she also goes on to significantly undermine it—in particular, by identifying James so completely with certain of his characters that she effectively erases the distinction. For Nussbaum, both the novel as a whole and certain of its characters are philosophically important because they exemplify the same moral virtue. What is important from Nussbaum’s perspective, therefore, is not the distance between these perspectives but their proximity to each other. This precludes recognition of the irony in “warm irony,” collapsing the critical distance upon Maggie, and upon ourselves, that James’s text affords. And it is precisely in this distance, however warm it might be, that the space is opened between reader and character that makes the space of elucidation possible.52

We can further clarify the salient differences between arguing for a moral ideal and elucidating confusion by bringing out differences between how Nussbaum and I respectively conceive the responsiveness at issue in James’s texts. If we follow Nussbaum’s interpretation, we will be led to treat James’s achievement of a loving, responsive perspective as part of an argument in favor of one “moral ideal” among competing ideals. This involves treating the responsiveness at issue as itself having the status of a possible principle—one that we might either adopt or discard as a guide to living. We are encouraged to ask ourselves the following question: should I or should I not strive for the responsiveness captured by the phrase, “finely aware and richly responsible”? Perhaps, after a great deal of argument, I am persuaded that I ought to strive for such responsiveness, not least because James gives me a taste of what it would be like to be so responsive.

The interpretation I develop involves treating the responsiveness at issue in James’s texts differently: the forms of self- and other-responsiveness that James’s literary representations serve to clarify are not such that there is sense to be made of arguing either that we ought or ought not adopt them as principles that underwrite this as opposed to that way of living. Rather they are forms of responsiveness to, forms of recognition of, ourselves and others that are constitutive of living, in the demanding sense of “living” with which James is concerned. James is not concerned to argue that we ought to adopt such responsiveness. Rather, he is concerned to elucidate the confusions that disrupt and obscure the responsiveness to ourselves and others that is exhibited in so much of what we do.

This is a tricky distinction to make and it is here that the comparison to Frege can be of help. Because logical distinctions and rules of inference are, on Frege’s conception, constitutive of thought, there is no sense to be made of arguing that we ought to make use of logical distinctions or adopt rules of inference as principles which guide our thinking. There is no sense to be made of justifying our use of such rules and distinctions. My claim is that just as logical distinctions figure in thought...
not as the content of some subset of thoughts but as the form of our thinking, so the self- and other-recognition at stake in the Jamesian context figures in our living not as the content of some subset of our actions or interactions but as the form of our living. Just as we exhibit mastery of logical distinctions and rules of inference in expressing any thought at all, so we exhibit awareness of and responsiveness to our selves and of others in making any move in a social world. It makes no more sense, on James’s conception, to suggest that we ought to decide to adopt such recognition or responsiveness as a guide to our living than it does to suggest, on Frege’s conception, that we decide to adopt modus ponens or the principle of non-contradiction (as opposed to some alternative principles) as guides to our inferring. Just as our ordinary forms of representing thought obscure its logical structure and thereby foster confusion, so ordinary forms of living obscure the socio-logical structure of our living and thereby foster confusion.

In his reading of Portrait, Jonathan Freedman allows us to deepen this comparison of James to Frege by clarifying the sense in which the confusion that Isabel suffers infects not just Isabel, but her social world as a whole. It is a form of confusion that is fostered by ordinary forms of living that, like ordinary language, are deeply habitual to and shared by a human community. And the confusions to which Isabel is subject are confusions to which not just Isabel but the community as a whole is rendered vulnerable by these ordinary forms of living together. The social, moral and linguistic conventions that mediate life in community with genuine others invite a kind of false picture, what Freedman calls an “implicit notion,” of both self and other. According to this implicit notion, the self is understood as a “smug, observing entity, a private and self-satisfied point of view” and the other as the object of the self’s “reifying” vision, that is, as either conformable to the self’s “pre-existing mental categories” or as transformable into a work of art to be collected and hung in the self’s “mental portrait gallery” (Freedman 1994, 67 and 69). As Freedman understands it, this false picture infects the world of Portrait like an “endemic contagion.” It infects the perception and experience of characters as different as Osmond, Isabel and Ralph, constricting the possibilities they project for themselves and fostering deeply confused living. It accounts, for instance, for “how a ‘sterile dilettante’ like Osmond can exert so powerful a force”; it accounts for Isabel’s susceptibility to Osmond and for the life-destroying error in judgment that leads her into a marriage that is shown to be a suffocating form of imprisonment.

In the preceding paragraph, I have drawn on certain aspects of Freedman that are quite helpful. Nevertheless, I think Freedman himself mischaracterizes the “endemic contagion” to which he draws attention. On Freedman’s account, James treats this contagion as a kind of “tragic necessity.” What I have characterized as confusion, a disturbance in a subject’s most basic forms of self- and other-recognition, is understood by Freedman as a “perceptual donnée,” a “cognitive necessity” such that the confused living of characters like Ralph and Isabel is “forced upon them.” Seen in this light, criticism of such living is beside the point because it is the
“inevitable” consequence of the “structure of their perception.” In other words, the false picture is constitutive of the forms of living that structure the social world of Portrait. By contrast, I have suggested that James treats this false picture, not as intrinsic to ordinary social forms that structure the world of Portrait, but rather as susceptible to slow, gradual, but nevertheless genuine, even potentially profound, transformation. By making patent the latent operation of such a false picture in his characters, James places the reader in a position to feel the operation of such a picture in her own way of experiencing and perceiving. In so doing, he makes possible a different kind of participation in the social forms that invite such a false picture, participation that is less susceptible to such confusion.

IV. ILLUSIONS OF THOUGHT AND ILLUSIONS OF LIVING

Now that the illumination had begun, however, it blazed to the zenith, and what he presently stood there gazing at was the sounded void of his life. He gazed, he drew breath, in pain, he turned in his dismay, and, turning, he had before him in sharper incision than ever the open page of his story.

—Henry James

What I have said thus far might encourage the following misunderstanding. It might appear that the most important point of comparison is Frege’s use of Begriffsschrift to clarify what I have called confused thinking: just as Begriffsschrift allows us to see mistakes or gaps in inference as mistakes or gaps, so James exhibits the lives of characters such as Isabel in a way that allows us to see the mistakes they make in their lives (such as Isabel’s decision to marry Osmond) as mistakes. But as we have already seen, there are good reasons to think that James is concerned to elucidate not only, and not primarily, forms of confused living, but forms of confusion more aptly characterized as illusions of life, as forms of “living death.” But this raises a question: in what sense are the confusions which James is primarily concerned to elucidate best understood (not merely as forms of confused living, but rather) as confusions of an order or degree so extreme that we understand ourselves to be deprived of the resources for ascribing living, for ascribing life at all to the subject who is suffering the confusion? It is not difficult to see how a subject could suffer an illusion about the kind of life she is leading. But in what sense could she suffer an illusion in taking herself to be living at all? In order for it to so much as be possible to suffer an illusion, isn’t it necessary to be living? What is the demanding sense of “living” with which James is concerned, such that the possibility of this kind of illusion comes into view?

In order to address this question, it will be helpful to return to our Fregean point of comparison and consider an instance of Frege’s elucidation of an illusion of thought in some detail. Although it is not easy to get clearly in view the possibility of suffering an illusion of thought, it is still easier to see how one might fall prey to such an illusion than to see how one might be said to suffer an illusion of living.
This is one way in which our object of comparison here can play a useful role in illuminating our object of investigation.

In elucidating illusions of thought, *Begriffsschrift* plays a role, not in representing a subject’s “thought” in such a manner that he can recognize it as confused, but in making it clear that there is no thought to be translated into *Begriffsschrift*, that the subject was confused in imagining that he was thinking or expressing a thought. As Diamond puts it, *Begriffsschrift* “makes clear to us” when we are “in a muddle in thinking that we had something in mind, that we were expressing a thought at all” (Diamond 1991, 131).

One specific instance of this generic form of illusion of thought will be particularly pertinent to our examination of Jamesian elucidation: the illusion suffered by a subject who imagines himself to be expressing a special kind of thought. To the subject suffering this kind of illusion of thought, the thought he takes himself to be entertaining will appear to him to be no ordinary thought, but a very special one: one that violates the logical distinctions that figure in ordinary thoughts. In the example of Fregean elucidation that we will consider, the illusion that one is thinking or gesturing at such a special thought gets a grip in the context of attempting to express truths about the logical distinction that we make use of in expressing any thought or in making any inference. In order to express the “truth” about the logical category of concept, for instance, it appears necessary to express a “truth” that violates the distinction between concept and object by making a concept into the object of a thought. Benno Kerry’s “assertion,” “The concept horse is a concept easily attained,” would seem to be an instance of this kind of unusual “assertion” in which the words “the concept horse” picks out a concept that is the object of the thought expressed.

Kerry makes this “assertion” in order to challenge what Frege has characterized as an “absolute” distinction between concept and object. Frege responds to Kerry’s challenge by making “elucidatory remarks” designed to draw attention to particular aspects of Kerry’s “assertion,” presenting it in such a light that Kerry is able to recognize that he is confused: that his “assertion” doesn’t express the kind of “thought” he imagines that it expresses. Consider one such elucidatory remark, “The concept horse is not a concept.” The explicitly “self-defeating” character of this remark is, as James Conant interprets it, “meant to draw attention to what is already self-defeating (though less self-evidently so) in the form of words that Kerry calls upon” to express his “thought” (Conant 2002, 389). If we subject Kerry’s utterance to the pressure of logical clarification, representing his thought in a logically perspicuous form, we discover that the words “the concept horse” do not pick out something that functions “predicatively,” i.e., they do not pick out a concept. Frege glosses the point in the following way:

In logical discussions one quite often needs to say something about a concept, and to express this in the form usual for such predications—viz. to make what is said about the concept into the content of the grammatical predicate. Consequently, one would expect that the *Bedeutung* of the grammatical
subject would be the concept; but the concept as such cannot play this part, in view of its predicative nature; it must first be converted into an object, or, more precisely, an object must go proxy for it. (Frege 1984, 187)

To the extent that Kerry succeeds in asserting a thought, it isn’t a thought of the kind he took himself to be asserting.

Frege’s response to Kerry has been the subject of much discussion and there are at least two ways to understand the purpose of his clarification of Kerry’s “thought.” Some of Frege’s remarks suggest that his clarification is intended to defend his distinction between concept and object against Kerry’s challenge, while acquiescing in some version of the conviction that there are special thoughts of the kind Kerry takes his form of words to express. For instance, Frege says of expressions like Kerry’s that “by a kind of necessity of language . . . I mention an object when I intend a concept” and that, for this reason, “my expressions . . . miss my thought” (Frege 1984, 193). This strongly suggests that there is a thought, whose object is a concept, even though one has failed to express it. Our struggle to express these thoughts, even though unsuccessful, illuminates the nature of concepthood: we gain insight into the truths we fail to express by attending to these structures and the ways they “misfire.” So understood, Frege engages in “hinting” at the kind of illogical thought that Kerry took himself to be expressing.

In “What Does a Concept Script Do?” Cora Diamond expresses impatience with this kind of reading of Frege. Diamond interprets the purpose of Frege’s elucidation of Kerry’s confusion differently: as presenting Kerry’s “thought” to him in such a way as to allow him to recognize that he has suffered an illusion of thought, that he was in a “muddle” in thinking that there is a thought of the kind he took himself to be expressing. On Diamond’s view, Frege’s elucidatory remarks serve the purpose of clarifying the distinction between concept and object, not by allowing us to grasp inexpressible truths about concepts, but by overcoming the illusion that there are thoughts about concepts other than thoughts in which such concepts function predicatively:

What you find is that you can indeed take [horse]—the concept—as an object of thought only by its not being an object of thought at all. That is, in the sense in which you think about an object by having a thought in which it figures as object (expressed in a sentence in which a proper name referring to it occurs), you think about a concept by having a thought in which it occurs as a concept, i.e., a thought expressed by a sentence containing an expression used predicatively, referring to it. (Diamond 1991, 138)

An instance of such a thought might be the thought expressed by “Bluebell is a horse.” But such a thought fails to answer to Kerry’s original ambition because the object of this thought is Bluebell, not the concept horse. So understood, the attempt to represent Kerry’s “thought” in a logically perspicuous manner allows us to see that “there is no such thing as saying, or thinking” what Kerry imagined himself to be thinking: there is no thought of the kind he imagines he is attempting to express. (Diamond 1991, 131)
I’ve spent some time with this instance of a Fregean elucidation of illusion because the illusions that James is primarily concerned to elucidate are confusions that have certain structurally analogous features: they are confusions suffered by a subject who imagines himself to be living a *special* life, one that requires forgoing the recognition of, the responsiveness to, himself and others, that is constitutive of ordinary living. I am suggesting that, in a manner that bears comparison with Frege’s deployment of *Begriffsschrift*, James’s literary method makes it possible to represent such a putatively specially circumstanced subject’s “life” to the subject himself so as to allow him to recognize that he has suffered an illusion of living—there is nothing that comprises the sort of life that he takes himself to be living.

In the remainder of this section, I will examine a Jamesian tale in which this kind of illusion of living is at its most explicit and extreme, *The Beast in the Jungle*. This tale centers upon John Marcher, one of James’s “sensitive gentlemen,” who imagines that he is living a special kind of life. He believes himself to be singled out for a special fate which he describes as “the spring of the beast,” and so lives his life “under the figure” of the beast. Although Marcher *appears* to lead a normal life, going through the social forms that would mediate his participation in a human community, what he understands to be the *real* form his life takes is comprised of waiting: waiting for the “spring” of his “beast.” His conviction that he awaits its spring intimately shapes his perception and experience, and, indeed, the entire space of possibilities he projects for himself. Marcher shares this secret, the “real truth” about his life, with one other person, May Bartram. At his request, May agrees to “wait” with Marcher and the tale documents the destructive impact, on both his life and May’s, of his tenacious conviction, showing us a subject whose basic form of self-recognition is so distorted, the corresponding constriction of the possibilities he projects for himself so severe, that he suffers a mere illusion of living.

Although this tale may give us, in Marcher, a thoroughgoing and extreme form of the illusion of living, it might seem a poor tale to focus upon if our primary interest lies in James’s elucidation of the illusions suffered by his reader. For the exaggerated, almost comical extremity of Marcher’s illusion seems ill-suited to reflect to the reader anything of her own life. Marcher may elicit more powerfully than any other Jamesian tale the harshness and finality of judgment with which we reinforce a divide between the tale’s protagonist and ourselves: that person is not me. But in his later fiction, James often depicts a moment in the life of a character with whom the reader *is* encouraged to identify in such a way as to invite comparison to Marcher and thereby to raise the following kind of worry: is this life, which appears so rich and complex, in fact merely the illusion of a life? In this way, *The Beast in the Jungle* serves as a device that allows the reader to gain a critical vantage with respect to more sympathetic characters and thereby to gain a critical vantage with respect to her own life. In what follows, I will first examine Marcher as a case study in the illusion of living. I will then turn to the question of how James elucidates his reader’s temptation to suffer such illusions.
Robert Pippin observes that *The Beast in the Jungle* is an extreme version of James’s capacity for “Picasso-like sketches” that establish, with the fewest possible strokes, a “full, real character whom we care about”: “we know even less about Marcher and May than we know about other characters sketched so quickly and dropped into some dramatic setting. Relatives, other friends, confidants, money, business affairs, and even most of daily life . . . have been stripped away” (Pippin 2000, 95). This scarcity of detail is best understood, I think, as a paring away of everything that doesn’t contribute to clarifying the comprehensive and thoroughgoing way in which a disturbance in Marcher’s most basic form of self-recognition intimately shapes his actions and interactions, the possibilities that he projects for himself. The law of the story’s composition is to simplify the presentation so that not one word remains that doesn’t contribute to James’s exposure of Marcher’s captivity.

It is fairly easy to see the way in which the “figure” of the beast plays a constitutive role with respect to Marcher’s perception. For example, after May’s death, Marcher “travels the world” in an effort to retrospectively understand the “spring” that May assures him has already taken place. No matter what he looks at, however, what he sees is the “commonness” which is his portion now that he is no longer singled out by the eyes of an ever-vigilant predator: “the things he saw couldn’t help being common when he had become common to look at them” (James 1996, 535). In this way, a disturbance in Marcher’s most basic form of self-recognition intimately shapes his perception. The figure of the beast also plays a constitutive role with respect to Marcher’s relationships and interactions, the social space of possibilities that he projects for himself. It is only once the beast is introduced that Marcher can register the possibility of conversation or relationship. Before May reminds Marcher that they share his secret, Marcher fails to register the world of Weatherend as a social world at all. People do not interact, they “mingle” and “disperse” randomly in ways “not to be calculated.” They do not *speak* to each other, they “mingle sounds” which are “uttered quite without intention.” It is only once May reminds Marcher that he confided his secret to her, and thereby introduces the “beast” into their exchange, that “intercourse”—i.e., speech and relationship—“springs into being” (James 1996, 508). Once introduced, the figure of the beast rigidly determines the movement and content of “intercourse” between Marcher and May:

They had at first, none the less, in the scattered hours spent together, made no allusion to that view of it [his life]; which was a sign he was handsomely ready to give that he didn’t expect, that he in fact didn’t care always to be talking about it. Such a feature of one’s outlook was really like a hump on one’s back. The difference it made every minute of the day existed quite independently of discussion. (James 1996, 509)

Marcher’s false picture of himself and his relation to his social world rigorously organizes their exchanges, whether or not the beast is their explicit topic of conversation.

To Marcher, the “life” that he is leading appears to be a *special* one, one that violates the socio-logical structure of ordinary living. He gives the appearance of
participating in the social forms which mediate the involvement with others, the participation in a human community constitutive of ordinary living: the forms of “his little office under Government, those of caring for his modest patrimony, for his library, for his garden in the country, for the people in London whose invitation he accepted and repaid.” But in doing so, he takes himself to be engaging in a “long act of dissimulation” (James 1996, 510). The real form his life takes is that of waiting for the beast to spring. This “form of life” requires him to forgo any involvement with others, or any participation in a human community. Such involvement and participation would compromise his availability to his fate when it should arrive, his real life when it should begin. Marcher denies involvement even with May, the person to whom he comes closest to recognizing a genuine form of attachment. As Marcher sees it, May does not participate in his life—after all, he tells us, “one cannot invite a lady on a tiger hunt”—rather she observes it, “judging and measuring it,” as she alone can, in light of Marcher’s “real truth,” “in light of the thing she knew” (James 1996, 509). Marcher’s attachment to May is dependent upon her remaining external to his life, providing a perspective upon it; it is dependent precisely upon her, in a certain sense, not being part of it.

James exhibits Marcher’s “life” in such a way as to allow his reader to recognize how the disturbance in Marcher’s most basic form of self-recognition involves him in the mere illusion of living. At the end of the tale, the possibility of suffering an illusion of living rises to the surface of the prose. In his encounter with the mourner, Marcher’s “life” is reflected back to him in a manner that makes it possible for him to recognize, for the first time, that he has altogether failed to live: the “glare” of the mourner’s grief “flares” like a “smoky torch” and “illuminates” for Marcher the “sounded void” of his “life.” The state of Marcher’s “tragic recognition” at this point in the tale is admittedly problematic. As Pippin emphasizes, Marcher “enacts again, rather than frees himself from” his illusion because he still holds on to the idea that he is “the ‘one man’ with the special fate,” even if that special fate is that of being the “one man” who entirely fails to live, to whom “nothing happens” (Pippin 2000, 105). But although Marcher almost certainly fails to gain a clear view of the illusion he suffers, James exhibits Marcher’s “life” to us in such a way as to make that illusion perspicuous.

I focus upon The Beast in the Jungle because, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue it fully, I believe this tale is a kind of limit text in James’s oeuvre, itself functioning as a useful object of comparison for gauging the project of James’s more realistic fiction in something like the way a mathematical object (a circle, for instance) functions as an object of comparison or standard of measurement for natural phenomena. The tale exhibits an illusion of living in its starkest, most “pure” form. Often characters in other of James’s novels and tales, characters whose lives in many ways appear quite rich and full, are depicted in such a way as to invite comparison with Marcher and this serves to make perspicuous the emptiness that threatens, the contagion that infects, them. There is admittedly no one “Marcher” or “May” character in a work as complex, for instance, as The Wings of
the Dove, but the form of relationship that Marcher and May so rigidly instantiate haunts different relationships—between Densher and Milly, between Milly and Kate, between Kate and Densher, even between Milly and Susan Stringham—at different moments of the narrative. At such moments, we are made to feel the application of the question: are Densher and Milly (or Milly and Kate, or Densher and Maud Lowder) locked into, or headed toward, the living death which Marcher and May exemplify in such an explicit and thoroughgoing way?

Consider one example of the way such a comparison is invited. The first time in the novel we are introduced to each of the three primary protagonists—Kate Croy, Merton Densher and Milly Theale—we see them waiting. In fact, the first two words of the novel are “she waited”: “She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably . . . .” It is important that the first thing we learn about Kate, even before we learn her name, is that she waits. This immediately invokes comparison with Marcher who achieves the “simplification of everything but the state of suspense,” and who, as Mark Krupnick puts it, exemplifies “waiting in its pure form” (Krupnick 1976, 118). At first glance, Kate’s waiting appears quite distinct from Marcher’s: unlike Marcher, Kate appears to wait for something quite particular—for her father to enter the room. However, her waiting is depicted in such a way as to raise the worry that this appearance is merely an appearance, that Kate is in fact engaged in a form of waiting that, like Marcher’s, signals a voided life, a mere illusion of living.

The possibility of suffering an illusion of living registers in the opening paragraphs of The Wings of the Dove in a comparison between, on the one hand, the unity and progression of a meaningful sentence and, on the other, the unity and progression of a meaningful life. The Croy family collapse is described, in a passage we have already considered, as the degeneration of such a meaningful phrase into a mere succession of meaningless marks. No one but Kate’s mother has actually died, but their “living” has been evacuated of meaning; it has lapsed into a mere succession of marks with no content (“words” with “no sense”). Although we are told that Kate “might have seen” that she has escaped this fate, that she is not herself a “fact in the collapse,” her “waiting” is depicted in such a way as to emphasize Kate’s proximity to, not her distance from, a life that has lapsed into such a succession of meaningless marks. She waits for her father in a state of suspended irritation that has reached, and remains, at “the breaking point.” She seeks relief from the intensity of her state by “changing her position”: first by “moving from the shabby couch to the armchair,” and then by moving from her father’s sitting room to the balcony that overlooks the street below, from “the vulgar little room” to the “vulgar little street” (James 1909b, 3). The repetition in the phrases “vulgar little street” and “vulgar little room” emphasize the fact that the “change” proves to be no change at all. The “change” is merely a shift from one indistinguishable place to another that affords no relief.

The possibility of a failure of genuine differentiation and development—of a mere shifting from place to place that is associated with a mere succession of meaningless marks—is picked up again each time we are introduced to the novel’s
other main protagonists. When we first meet them, Densher and Milly are both in the same kind of holding pattern we identified in Kate, shifting from place to place. Densher shifts from place to place, waiting for Kate: “he moved, seemingly at random, from alley to alley; he stopped for no reason, and remained idly agaze; he sat down in a chair and then changed to a bench; after which he walked about again, only again to repeat both the vagueness and the vivacity” (James 1909b, 47). The scale of Milly’s shifting is grander—she shifts between continents—but it is qualitatively proximate to Kate and Densher’s. She exchanges (and treats as interchangeable) the “view” by the “dizzy edge” of a precipice in the Swiss Alps and the view of the “human scenery” afforded by London (James 1909b, 123–124).

Each time we are introduced to one of the protagonists of The Wings of the Dove, then, we see them “waiting,” and each time this waiting is depicted in such a way as to raise worries that what might appear to be a very specific and limited form of waiting—the kind of waiting that could form part of the unity and progression of a meaningful life—in fact involves each of Kate, Milly and Densher, in the kind of illusion of living that Marcher’s waiting—“waiting in its pure form”—exemplifies.

I draw attention to the details of our introduction to each of these characters in order to provide a taste of the way that The Beast in the Jungle functions as a limit text with respect to James’s œuvre. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full account of the myriad ways in which this text haunts The Wings of the Dove as well as other of James’s longer, more realistic works. But as such a limit text, The Beast in the Jungle functions as one of the means by which James makes it possible for his reader to begin to recognize the operation of a disturbance in her most basic forms of self- and other-recognition. By affording the reader a critical distance with respect to characters with whom she is encouraged to sympathize and identify, the tale functions to afford such her a critical vantage with respect to her own life. Such application of the tale to the reader’s life is incorporated into the contours of the story itself in the tale’s closing pages when Marcher is explicitly depicted as a reader. When Marcher visits May’s tomb, he visits it as a reader, scanning May’s tomb “like an open page” in which both to read the “facts of the past” and “to lose himself”: “The open page was the tomb of his friend, and there were the facts of the past, there the truth of his life, there the backward reaches in which he could lose himself” (James 1996, 537). How, we are invited to ask, does Marcher’s act of scanning the open page of May’s tomb compare with our act of scanning the open page of James’s tale? How does Marcher’s “life”—his living death—compare to our own?

I have suggested that, when confronted directly with this tale in isolation, the reader is likely to be resistant to acknowledging this kind of application to his own life of Marcher’s truth. It is only over the course of reading and rereading this tale in the context of James’s other works that the elucidatory power of those works is truly able to register, that the possibility they offer of a deep and gradual transformation of our most basic forms of self- and other-responsiveness begins genuinely to take hold.
V. CONCLUSION

One thing is certain, that the books of Henry James form a complete whole. One must read all of them, for one must grasp, if anything, both the unity and the progression. The gradual development, and the fundamental identity of spirit, are both important, and their lesson is one lesson. . . . James did not provide us with “ideas” but with another world of thought and feeling.

—T. S. Eliot

In this paper, I have put forward a reading of James that provides one way of thinking about what T. S. Eliot calls the “unity” and “progression” of his works as a whole. As I read them, James’s works are unified by a shared preoccupation with the myriad ways in which the possibility of illusion haunts our living. This is not just about the characters represented in his works. James develops a literary mode of representing the reader’s life to the reader herself in such a way as to allow her to recognize the operation of confusions and illusions in shaping and constricting the social space of possibilities she projects for herself. By making patent the latent operation of such confusions, James facilitates a kind of “progression” for his readers. The progress at stake is a gradual one: as we began to see in the preceding section, its deepest registers come into play, not in the reading of any single novel or tale, but only in the space opened between such individual works by reading (and rereading) them in light of each other. It is by facilitating such progress—by allowing for the transformation of the very space of possibilities we project for ourselves—that James gives us not “ideas” but “another world of thought and feeling.” The “other world,” so understood, is our own world, other only in the sense that it is no longer obscured by the “phantasms of possibility” that we, in our confusion, project.

Eliot’s remark might be understood as something of a polemic against the kind of philosophical approach to James that I identified in Nussbaum, Brudney and Pippin: a philosophical approach that aims to clarify and evaluate the philosophical ideas embodied or implied in James’s texts. Eliot suggests that if one focuses upon what such a philosophical approach finds interesting—ideas—one will miss what is of interest about James. Although such an approach may be able to find ideas in James, even ideas that are philosophically interesting and important, in so doing, it will not have made contact with what is most valuable, what is most deeply original about James. The interpretation I have developed makes it possible to see that what is most philosophically interesting about James cannot be separated from what, by Eliot’s lights (at least as I have interpreted his remarks), is most deeply valuable and original in James’s writing. It is precisely by giving us such access to “another world,” by engaging and working through the confusions of his individual reader rather than by embodying general philosophical ideas, that James makes his most powerful and distinctive philosophical contribution.

I have sketched the contours of this reading of the unity and progression of James’s corpus by concentrating upon individual instances of elucidation in several
of his most canonical works—*The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Beast in the Jungle*. I take these readings of individual moments to provide a template for approaching James’s work as a whole—one that makes it possible to go on to more extended readings of these canonical works and other texts in James’s oeuvre. It is perhaps easiest to see how to apply this template with respect to a work, such as *The Ambassadors*, in which the thematic of failing to live is most pervasive and explicit and a comparison to the limit text, *The Beast in the Jungle*, most persistently invited. But James is preoccupied with a wide range of ways in which his subjects’ uses of many different social, literary and linguistic conventions foster many different forms of confusion or illusions of life. Thus, for instance, *In the Cage* makes perspicuous forms of illusion fostered by a subject’s use of the literary conventions of the romance novel. *The Sacred Font* exposes the evasions and illusions made possible by conventional ways of talking about death. A fuller account of Jamesian elucidation would explore and map such a wider range of forms of illusion and elucidation that are less closely related to the instances with which we began.

In developing the aforementioned template, I have turned at several crucial junctures to aspects of Frege’s work as a useful object of comparison. Throughout the paper, I have limited my attention, however, to the way such a comparison can help to illuminate James’s literary project, allowing what I take to be its real philosophical significance to come more sharply into focus. I would like now, very briefly, in conclusion, to draw attention to one way in which a comparison with James might also serve to illuminate neglected aspects of Frege’s own project: by bringing out a wider sphere of possible application for the form of philosophical work that Frege describes as the “liberation of the human spirit” from confusion.

In the interests of bringing an elucidatory dimension of James’s texts initially into view, I have concentrated in this paper primarily upon bringing out the surprising parallels between James and Frege. But one illuminating feature of the comparison to which I have several times directed attention is that it also brings into sharper relief certain salient *differences* between them. One such point of difference concerns the scope of their respective forms of elucidatory activity. Frege’s elucidatory activity is quite narrow in scope both in the sense that it figures as only a small part of his body of work and in the sense that it targets confusions that arise with respect to only one dimension of our everyday practices: how we go on in expressing thoughts and making inferences. As I have described it, James’s elucidatory activity, by contrast, is wider in scope both in the sense that it runs throughout and unifies his corpus and in the sense that it targets confusions that pervade all aspects of the everyday practices that constitute how we go on in living. A fuller exploration of Jamesian elucidation would therefore afford insight into a wider range of the confusions that arise with respect to our everyday practices and of the methods of elucidations suited to overcoming them.

At the beginning of this paper, I drew attention to the fact that although by Frege’s lights the use of *Begriffsschrift* to clarify confusion plays a merely secondary
role in his overall project, such clarification is recognized by central figures of the analytic tradition, namely Carnap and Wittgenstein, as philosophical work of the first importance. One central dimension of the inheritance of Frege’s work within the analytic tradition, especially in the hands of the later Wittgenstein, has been a gradual widening of appreciation for the diversity of forms of philosophical confusion there can be, along with an exploration of the correlative diversity in forms of methods of clarification best suited to their treatment. As surprising as such a suggestion may at first blush appear to be, this paper has been concerned to propose, in effect, that central aspects of the literary project of Henry James can bring into view possibilities for yet further stages in such a development.

I, of course, do not mean to suggest that James self-consciously understood himself—as Carnap and Wittgenstein understood themselves—as participating in the inheritance of a specifically philosophical project of elucidation, let alone one inaugurated by Frege. My aim has rather been to suggest that further exploration of (what I have allowed myself to call) Jamesian elucidation would contribute to a fuller understanding of the nature and scope of the sort of clarificatory philosophical activity that played such an important role, at the inception of the analytic tradition, in Frege’s work. Thus through an encounter of just the right sort with the work of Henry James, analytic philosophy might come to understand some of its own central projects in new ways and come to see new possible directions for its own internal development. My aim has been to arrange such an encounter.

ENDNOTES

1. James 1908b, xiii.
2. My way of framing things here is indebted to Conant 1997.
3. William James glosses this uncharitably by suggesting that his brother often “chewed more than he bit off.” Daniel Brudney makes this point about James’s The Golden Bowl by saying, “The Golden Bowl is a quintessential Jamesian novel. Almost nothing happens. In the course of more than five hundred pages there are two marriages, one affair, and a single act of violence, the smashing of the golden bowl. The rest is reflection, nuance, detail” (Brudney 1990, 397).
4. Compared to the dilemmas faced by Antigone, or the atrocities contemplated by The Grand Inquisitor, the intimate possibilities of failure and betrayal that shadow James’s characters can seem comparatively thin grist for the philosophical mill. Dorothea Krook puts this point by acknowledging that “Henry James’s social material is, or appears to be, severely limited . . . and this to many, especially those who find an unqualified virtue in the greater variety and range of the social material of a Tolstoy, a Dostoevsky, a George Eliot and even a Dickens, has always seemed to set a fatal limitation on Henry James’s greatness. James limits his characters to fairy-tale figures like counts and princes, millionaires and heiresses and then perversely confines them “to their town-houses and country houses, . . . for the sole purpose, it would seem, of engaging in the analysis of their intricate personal relations and the processes of their own consciousnesses” (Krook 1962, 3 and 10).
5. Ruth Bernard Yeazell formulates the problem this way: “The Jamesian critic . . . [makes] himself familiar with what ‘really’ happens in the late novels: he knows that Madame de Vionnet is actually Chad’s mistress, though Strether would like to believe she is not; that Milly Theale is literally dying, however unnamed her disease, and that Kate and Densher genuinely deceive her, however noble their talk. . . . Critics of any fiction, but especially of novels as elusive as these necessarily begin with much that is unwritten plot summary and character sketch; the very act of intelligent reading demands that we implicitly summarize. . . . But one thus translates James’s late novels at the risk of doing violence to what is most idiosyncratic and exciting in them, of making their peculiarly fluid and unsettling reality something far more stable and conventional. The distance at which critics must inevitably talk about novels is particularly dangerous here: the disquiet we feel on first reading these novels should not be so easily assuaged” (Yeazell 1976, 2).


7. In Boyce 2010, I explore the different ways philosophical interpreters have argued that particular works of literature have required a transformation in the self-understanding of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition.


9. Diamond’s work, and also Stanley Cavell’s, are exceptions to this. My approach to James has been inspired and shaped both by their readings of James, and by their philosophical work more generally.

10. Cf. Conant 2001 for an examination of the competing ways Carnap and the early Wittgenstein inherit this dimension of Frege’s thought.

11. For the purposes to which I will put Frege, here, Wittgenstein’s Tractatus might work just as well. Indeed, in a certain respect, Wittgenstein might seem a better object of comparison, since he does not conceive of the activity of clarification as necessitating a notation that supplements natural language. However, the Tractatus presents formidable interpretive difficulties of its own and it would not be possible to meaningfully invoke it in the abbreviated way that I will invoke Frege.

12. As John Bayley describes it, James’s “supreme preoccupation” is to develop a way of writing in which the “closest compression of form” makes possible “the widest expansion of meaning” (Bayley 1960, 47). Watt puts this by saying that James develops a “narrative texture as richly complicated and as highly organized as that of poetry” (Watt 1960, 5).

13. I hope that it will be obvious that when I speak of “ordinary forms of living” here, I am not using the term “ordinary” in the sense in which Cavell uses the word “to speak of an intimacy with existence, and of an intimacy lost, that matches skepticism’s despair of the world” (Cavell 1988, 4). I use the word here to refer to the social and linguistic forms that mediate our daily life with others. I will argue that James clarifies confusions that infect our participation in or “use” of these forms. In so doing, I understand him to contribute to the ongoing task of returning us to “an intimacy with existence” that we have perhaps lost, the ongoing task, that is, of returning us to the “ordinary” understood in Cavell’s sense of the word.

14. Sallie Sears thematizes what I am calling the “confusion” of an “end-in-itself” with a “mere means.” She writes of The Wings of the Dove that “the theme . . . of regarding a fel-
low human being not as a person but as an object for use is present from the beginning of
the novel. . . . The acceptance of this principle [of anyone’s right to use anyone who might
be in a position to be useful] is the primary distortion of human values in the novel and
it operates on a number of levels, reversing the meaning even of ordinary terms of moral
discourse” (Sears 1968, 553–554).

15. Brudney thematizes what I am here calling the “confusion” of a person with a work
of art in The Golden Bowl: “This persistent failure to know the personal quantity points to
what ‘aestheticizing’ comes to. To treat someone as a work of art is to treat the person as
a surface . . . where the question of ‘what lies behind’—and its claim on you, the claim to go
behind your own surface—does not arise” (Brudney 1990, 403–404). Also cf. Nussbaum
1990 and Diamond 1997a and b.

16. This dimension of James’s text is brought out by William Veeder: “That each of us wants
to be both lover and beloved in order to deny the very possibility of any true other is a self-
negating propensity that Henry James chronicled more extensively, fiercely, delicately than
any novelist in our language” (Veeder 1991, 44).

17. Diamond 1993, 137.

18. In her general remarks about the philosophical interest of literature, Nussbaum formulates
the following methodological principle: “Any style,” she writes, “makes, itself, a statement . . .
about what is important and what is not” (Nussbaum 1990, 7). As an interpreter, Nussbaum
seeks to characterize the “statement” made by a given style, whether James’s, Proust’s or
Beckett’s.

19. In his general remarks about the philosophical interest of literature, Brudney formulates
his methodological principle this way: “one’s case for some particular account of human
psychology or human nature is strengthened to the extent that it is supported by the best
available reading of a literary text, and weakened to the extent that it is at odds with such a
reading” (Brudney 1998, 277). If, as Brudney claims, The Golden Bowl provides the reader
with an experience of contenting herself with not knowing, then it “adds weight to a philo-
sophical thesis” about human nature that emphasizes the moral importance of so contenting
oneself.

20. Pippin’s methodological principle is to make explicit the general views about morality
that are “implied in how characters explain and defend themselves, and in what ways our
sympathies and judgments seem to tip and turn in the face of such evidence about motives
and purposes” (Pippin 2000, 3).

21. For instance, even though a character like Merton Densher has “a very difficult time
simply trying to understand . . . [his] own and other’s intentions or motives, the right de-
scription of [his] action,” and even though there is “no fact of the matter” about what he has
done, he “gets it right” when he realizes that his treatment of Milly was wrong, that “Milly,
. . . as an individual subject with her own life to lead, just was entitled to considerations she
did not receive, and so was treated wrongly” (Pippin 2000, 4–5).

22. For both Nussbaum and Brudney, the way James’s writing affects the reader, the kind
of experience it invites, performs not simply the psychological work of persuading readers
to accept a general view of how we ought to live, but the logical work of justification. Pipp-
in is more cautious here. He understands James to imply claims that are “much wider and
much more controversial” than his “mere intimations could ever justify” (Pippin 2000, 90).
But he does see such textual effects as the means by which James communicates his views:
such views are implied in “how the characters explain and defend themselves, and in what ways our sympathies and judgments seem to tip and turn in the face of such evidence about motives and purposes” (Pippin 2000, 3).

23. I explore these interpretations, and the important differences between them, in more detail in Chapters 2 and 5 of Boyce 2010.

24. This methodological presupposition—that James’s philosophical import must be a matter of the general philosophical views implicit in his texts—is shared also by many of James’s most philosophically sophisticated literary critics. Sharon Cameron, for instance attributes to James a critique and revision of “psychologized” accounts of consciousness (which Cameron illuminates through comparison to the Husserlian project of criticizing “psychologized” views of consciousness):

   In the following pages I shall argue in several contexts that what is most ambitiously being revised by James is conceptions of consciousness. . . . An account of consciousness as psychologized understands consciousness as phenomenon associated with subjectivity: as internal, centered, circumscribed, fixed. . . . consciousness in James’s novels is not internal, not centered, not associated with subjectivity. . . . Thus I suggest that in James’s representation of consciousness, psychology is subverted.
   (Cameron 1989, 19 and 21)

John Henry Raleigh draws attention to an older literary critical tradition in James scholarship that treats the “legendary ‘late manner’” as an “elaborate structure which metaphorically expresses” the views of philosophers, including Henry James, Sr., William James and Locke (Raleigh 1951, 107).

25. The substance of this article, with some additions and alternations, was also published as an appendix to Krook’s book length study of James, *The Ordeal of Consciousness*. I will be making reference to both pieces.

26. It is perhaps worth remarking that Krook’s understanding of the “logical” is largely taken from F. H. Bradley’s *Principles of Logic* and is therefore more inclusive than contemporary understandings of logic. While many instances of what she cites as logical vocabulary are terms which philosophers today would recognize as logical (e.g., “inference,” “implication,” “consistency”), many are also instances of a vocabulary that philosophers today might be more inclined to think of as transcendental idealist philosophical vocabulary (e.g., “terms of thought” or “conditions of perception”).

27. For instance, “In *The Ivory Tower* . . . we read that ‘the general hush . . . pushed upward and still further upward the fine flower of the inferential’”; in *The Golden Bowl*, we read that “Unless she were in a position to plead, definitely, that she was jealous she should be in no position to plead, decently, that she was dissatisfied. This latter condition would be a necessary implication of the former; without the former behind it, it would have to fall to the ground”; in *The Ambassadors*, we read that “the proportions were at all times, he philosophized, the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought” (Krook 1962, 396–397). Such examples could be multiplied indeﬁnitely.

28. Ian Watt reinforces Krook’s approach here, by analyzing further features of James’s prose which manifest his “power to generalize to the furthest limit the particulars of experience”:

   The main grammatical subjects are very often nouns for mental ideas . . . and that the verbs tend to express states of being rather than particular ﬁnite actions affect-
The main use of abstractions is to deal at the same time with many objects or events rather than single and particular ones; and we use verbs that denote states of being rather than actions for exactly the same reason . . . what needs exploring, therefore, are the particular literary imperatives which impose on his style so many of the verbal and syntactical qualities of abstract and general discourse. (Watt 1960, 471)

29. It is particularly interesting in this regard that *Begriffsschrift* makes it possible to display the implications of “fruitful concepts.” Frege describes these implications as “contained” in the definitions of such concepts as “plants are contained in their seeds” (Frege 1980, 101). James similarly speaks of his stories as displaying the “tree” that was contained in the “seed” of some “subject.” With respect to his novella, *What Maisie Knew*, for instance, he says, “I recognize again . . . another instance of the growth of the ‘great oak’ from the little acorn; since *What Maisie Knew* is at least a tree that spreads beyond any provision its small germ might on first handling have appeared likely to make for it” (James 1908b, v). It is also interesting to note that Krook chooses the metaphor of “unfolding,” a metaphor for which Frege also finds application when he speaks of “unfolding” the contents of the predicate “true.”

30. When she speaks here of the doctrine of internal relations, it is clear that she is again thinking above all of the understanding of logic as set forth in the work of F. H. Bradley. But I take it that a less abstruse but no less apt comparison here is to the way a principle like *modus ponens* guides our methods of inferring.

31. Just as Frege takes his logically perspicuous mode of representing mathematical inferences to license certain claims about the status and nature of arithmetical truths, so Krook takes James’s perspicuous mode of representing human lives to license claims about human life generally.

32. Michael Kremer puts this point by saying that the content of a thought is “individuated in terms of [its] consequences” (Kremer forthcoming, 13).

33. For instance, suppose I assert, “All rabbits are mammals,” and also, “Felix is a rabbit,” but then deny the assertion, “Felix is a mammal.” We would be justified in concluding that I haven’t understood what I’ve said, that I haven’t grasped the thoughts that I appeared to assert. This brings out the sense in which rules of inference are constitutive of the content of a given thought, and also the sense in which my grasp of, or my expression of, a thought is inseparable from my grasp of the inferential relationships between this thought and other thoughts.

Logical distinctions are similarly constitutive of thought content, and our grasp of such distinctions is similarly exhibited in the expression of any thought at all. For a mastery of the logical distinction between concept and object is inseparable from a mastery of rules of inference. For instance, consider inferences from generalization to instance. A grasp of this mode of inference requires a grasp of the fundamental logical distinction between the “saturated” and “unsaturated” parts of a thought. For instance, in order to grasp the inferential relations between “All rabbits are mammals” and “Felix is a mammal,” I have to grasp the distinction between the concept, “(_____ is a rabbit)” (which must be completed by substituting an object in the empty argument place) and the object (a particular rabbit, Felix) who can fill the concept’s empty argument place. I am indebted here to Thomas Ricketts’s forthcoming paper, “Concepts, Objects and the Context Principle.”

34. Consider two ordinary language sentences: “Whales are mammals” and “Some fish are whales.” These two sentences have similar grammatical structures. But the thoughts they
express have very different logical structures. Using standard logical symbolism (indebted to Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*), the first sentence is written: $\forall x \ (Wx \Rightarrow Mx)$; the second is written: $\exists x \ (Fx \& Wx)$.

35. The locution “keep in sight” comes from the preface to *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, where Frege lists as one of his three fundamental principles, “Never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object” (Frege 1980, x).

36. My formulation here is indebted to Conant 1991. With respect to psychologism—i.e., the failure to “keep in sight” the distinction between the logical and the psychological—Conant puts the point this way: “There is a sense therefore in which ‘Psychologism’, in Frege’s terminology, is not so much the name of some particular philosophical view as it is the name of a widespread form of confusion—one which can assume a variety of guises” (Conant 1991, 135). I am indebted to lectures by Michael Kremer for clarifying the pervasive way that Frege’s elucidation of confusions of concept and object—sometimes explicit in the text and sometimes not—shapes the *Foundations of Arithmetic* as a whole.

37. In his “Logic 1897,” Frege puts this in the following way: “Instead of following grammar blindly, the logician ought rather to see his task as that of freeing us from the fetters of language. For however true it is that thinking, at least in its higher forms, was only made possible by means of language, we have nevertheless to take great care not to become dependent on language: for very many of the mistakes that occur in reasoning have their source in the logical imperfections of language” (Frege 1979, 143).

38. By coining the term “socio-logical,” I do not mean to suggest that James’s preoccupations are primarily sociological in nature, preoccupations with, as the OED puts it, the “science of human society, and of social relations, organizations and change.” By introducing the neologism, “socio-logical,” I aim to highlight what I will argue is a significant parallel between the structure of thought (the logical structure of thought), as Frege conceives it, and the structure of human living (the socio-logical structure of our living), as James conceives it. The justification for my use of this term will therefore depend upon its fruitfulness in illuminating James.

39. Kierkegaard provides a philosophical predecessor for this kind of distinction. For Kierkegaard, “existence” is a word that can be inflected in both an “objective” register and a “subjective” register. Understood objectively, any breathing member of the species Homo sapiens “exists” and the unity of such “existence” comes cheaply. Understood subjectively, “existence” is a success term: the unity and progression of a meaningful existence is an unusual and difficult achievement.


41. Poirier focuses briefly upon James’s relation to his reader because it reinforces his primary point: that *The Portrait of a Lady* is thematically preoccupied with “all those aspects of life which are tainted and deadened by the predictable [and] conventional” (Poirier 1960, 241).

42. Not only is the content of the deed left unspecified, but the mechanism by which Kate arrives at these convictions is also strikingly free of the usually requisite specifics. Kate arrives at her conviction by means of the testimony of her sister, Marian: “I suddenly heard her say, out of the fog, which was in the room, and apropos of nothing: ‘Papa has done something wicked.’ And the curious thing was that I believed it on the spot and have believed it ever since, though she could tell me nothing more—neither what was the
wickedness, nor how she knew, nor what would happen to him, nor anything else about it” (James 1909b, 67).

43. For example, Lionel admonishes Kate that “One doesn’t give up the use of a spoon because one’s reduced to living on broth. And your spoon, that is your aunt, please to consider, is partly mine as well” (James 1909b, 1 and 15).

44. For example, Kate appeals to her father, “It isn’t that I’ll pretend I could have believed a month ago in anything to call aid or support from you. The case is changed . . . my difficulty is a new one. But even now it’s not a question of anything I should ask you in a way to ‘do’. It’s simply a question of your not turning me out” (James 1909b, 22). Lionel Croy interprets Kate’s “trouble” as “love” and her appeal as a plea for reinforcement in the face of Aunt Maud’s opposition. He refuses.

45. We might understand the relation between James’s narrator and his character here as James himself understands the relation between his narrator and another, younger protagonist, Maisie Farange. James speaks of the difficulty of limiting his “picture” to that of a small child: “small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their producible vocabulary” (James 1908b, x). James proposes, therefore to “attend and amplify” Maisie’s perceptions. Perhaps the situation is different in degree, rather than different in kind, with respect to a narrator’s relation to adult characters so that with respect to an adult character like Kate, the narrator “attends and amplifies” Kate’s perspective, providing a “vocabulary” for articulating, for rendering that experience choate, which Kate does not avail herself of.

46. As the novel continues, our appreciation for the ways in which the rigidity of this filter imprisons Kate continues to accumulate. I discuss this more fully in Chapter VI of Boyce 2010. I take the image of a “filter” from Brudney 1998. In the context of a reading of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, Brudney argues Conrad shows narcissism to function as a “filter,” shaping “how the world appears” in something like the way a person’s moods do (Brudney 1998, 68).


48. Brown gives this list of tales in which “death in life” is a prominent and explicit preoccupation: “The Death of the Lion,” “The Private Life,” “The Friends of Friends,” “Maud Evelyn,” and “The Altar of the Dead” (Brown 2003, 49). Leon Edel adds to this list *The Ambassadors*, *Daisy Miller*, and “The Real Thing.” Poirier, as we will see, argues that the possibility of death-in-life is central to *The Portrait of a Lady*. He also gives the following list of occurrences of this thematic in James’s autobiographical writings, letters, and essays: James’s “beautiful and elegiac passages about the death of Minnie Temple” in *Notes to a Son and Brother* (Dupee 1956, 282–284), in letters to his mother (March 26, 1870, in James 1955, 32–36), to his brother William (March 29, 1870 in Matthiessen 1961, 259–263), to Grace Norton (March 5, 1873 in James 1987, 100–102), and to William Dean Howells (Matthiessen 1944, 50), and also in the essay, “Is There Life After Death?” (Matthiessen 1961, 602–614). The possibility of death-in-life is also arguably central, although less explicitly so, to works such as *The Europeans*, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Golden Bowl*. In a later section of this paper, I will argue that it is central to *The Wings of the Dove*.

50. Adapting Conant’s way of characterizing the elucidation of confusions that infect the activity of thinking, the point might be put this way. On my reading of James, the philosophical center of gravity lies in the transition from a psychological experience of living what appears to be a full and flourishing life to the experience of having that appearance disintegrate. No “theory of how to live” could ever “bring about the passage from the first of these experiences (the hallucinatory one) to the second (the experience of discovering oneself to be a victim of a hallucination). As long as we retain the relevant phenomenology of meaning (as long as it appears to us that, by golly, we are really living), our conviction in such an experience . . . will always lie deeper than our conviction in anything we are told by a theory” of how we can and cannot live (adapted from Conant 2001, 59). Even if a theory, a view, about how we ought to live, can be extrapolated from James, my interest does not lie in spelling this theory out. My interest lies rather in the transition from a psychological experience of living what appears to be a fully human life to the experience of having that appearance disintegrate. My interest lies in how James is able to facilitate this transition for his reader.

51. When Diamond herself characterizes James as inviting the reader to share in a “style of affectionate interest in human beings and imaginative engagement with them,” she is, by her own lights, aspiring to inherit this dimension of Nussbaum’s work.

52. I have criticized Nussbaum for collapsing the distance between author and character, but in “The Moral of the Story,” Candace Vogler criticizes philosophical critics for affording “character” a central place in their interpretations of literature at all. Vogler argues that philosophical critics are “stymied by the proper name on the page” into reading “fictional figures” such as Merton Densher or Elizabeth Bennett “for character,” attributing to them “determinate core subjective traits” (Vogler 2007, 5 and 22). Vogler criticizes such character-driven reading because it suggests that the ethical issues at stake in literary works are such that they “can be grasped, conceptualized, and potentially given adequate philosophical treatment through focus on character” (ibid., 31).

I find it difficult to reach a satisfying conclusion about how Vogler’s criticisms of her target philosophers—Nussbaum, Pippin and Cavell—bear upon my own philosophical approach to James. On one hand, I do focus upon the reader’s relation to James’s “literary figures” and I argue that this relation facilitates a kind of slow, deep, transformation in how the reader lives. In this sense, my reading remains within a tradition of philosophical criticism that Vogler criticizes for its “impulse to reciment individuality-with-consciousness at the center of critical thought” and its habit of treating literature as a form of “self-cultivation” (ibid., 5 and 33–34). It is not clear to me, however, why a reading (such as mine) cannot retain these aspects of a traditional approach to literary texts without avoiding the more egregious of the dangers against which Vogler properly warns.

My reading is not focused upon explicating the “specificity” and “particularity” of the “core subjective traits” of individual characters—their beneficence or avarice, their cowardice or courage. Moreover, one of Vogler’s most compelling objections to “reading for character” is that it is “deadening”: “if one can’t kill Jane, one can at least develop a sense for her character . . . if one already knows what and how to think about Jane, one needn’t pay much attention to her . . . [This] can take on the desperate attempt to ward off contingency” (ibid., 30). I have argued that James is centrally concerned with eliciting and elucidating the reader’s inclination to relate to characters, to herself and to others in just this way.
I am tempted to summarize my proximity to and distance from Vogler here in the following way. Vogler describes her paper as a response to Gayatri Spivak’s remark that fiction is “often read as ‘gossip about imaginary people.’” As I have read him, James is deeply aware of, and deeply resistant to, his reader’s desire to read in just this way. However, as I understand him, James’s response to this is not to direct his reader away from a form of reading that focuses upon the “person-like figures” marked by the “proper name on the page,” but to transform the quality of the focus that informs that reading.

53. Critics such as Eliot, Pippin and Brudney have emphasized that James is preoccupied not, or not exclusively with individual characters, but rather with the shared forms of living that structure the “life” of a community. T. S. Eliot, for instance, contends that “the general scheme is not one character, nor a group of characters in a plot or merely a crowd. . . . The real hero in any of James’s stories is a social entity of which men and women are constituents” (Eliot 1945, 110). Brudney argues that in the Golden Bowl, James is less concerned with moral failings of individuals than he is with a moral problem that afflicts the Verver familial community as a whole: “whatever problem afflicts the Verver family, it afflicts them all, setting the moral frame of their common situation. Maggie may have begun the vicious circle but she needed the others to keep it going” (Brudney 1990, 401). Pippin, too, argues that James is less interested in the “failures of individuals” than he is in the failure of a “form of life,” i.e., the failure of a “set of conventions and expectations” that structured the life of a community to continue to “orient” that communal life (Pippin 2000, 90–91). As I understand him, James is less concerned to document the ways a set of conventions “loses authority” than he is to clarify the confusions that such conventions foster, thereby making it possible to participate in the use of such ordinary social forms from a critical vantage point.

54. I have suggested that the reifying vision is something that is often directed, first and formost toward the self.

55. We can clarify the implications of Freedman’s interpretation here by returning again to our object of comparison. A Frege comparable to Freedman’s James would treat the confusions to which ordinary language renders us vulnerable as so entrenched that we are faced with two options: (1) give up ordinary language altogether or (2) resign ourselves to the confusions in which using ordinary language necessarily involves us. But Frege does not confront us with such options. He does not propose Begriffsschrift as a replacement for ordinary language: Begriffsschrift affords a critical vantage that allows us to participate in the use of ordinary language differently, that is, in a way that succumbs less easily to confusion.

Here, as everywhere, it is important to attend not just to the parallel between our object of comparison and our object of investigation, but also to the place where the parallel breaks down. One important way the parallel breaks down is that Begriffsschrift is codifiable. This has two important implications. First, in theory anyone can learn to make use of it in order to exhibit her own “thought” in such a way as to allow her to recognize confusions as confusions. Second, Begriffsschrift is meant to be universally applicable in the sense that any confusion or illusion that infects the activity of thinking can be clarified by means of Begriffsschrift.

James’s literary methods are not codifiable in either of these ways. It is not the case that any reader can, in theory, master James literary methods in order to represent her own life to herself in such a way as to recognize confusions as confusions. Neither is it the case that
James’s literary methods have universal application. Although the literary representations found in works such as *Portrait of a Lady* or *The Wings of the Dove* have application to a wide range of confusions, there is no pretense that such literary modes of representation are suited to clarify *all* forms of confusion that interfere with the activity of living.


57. Indeed, Poirier suggests that, by the end of *Portrait*, Isabel has crossed the boundary between confused living and death-in-life. Ralph’s death, he argues, is a metaphor for Isabel’s living death, her “return to the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation.” Thus, “the movement towards the end of the novel puts into juxtaposition the varieties of death and deadness which concerned James so deeply” (Poirier 1960, 242).

58. In “Truth-Value Gaps,” John McDowell draws attention to ways that a reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of suffering an illusion of thought has shaped, and sometimes distorted, interpretation of Frege.

59. As we will see, the illusions of living with which James is concerned often take the form of the illusion of one’s life or how one is circumstances as *special*.

60. Frege does not explicitly make use of *Begriffsschrift* here as a tool for clarifying Kerry’s “thought.” However, his elucidatory remarks serve the same purpose: they put pressure on Kerry to clarify how he is using his expressions, whether those expressions are picking out a part of a “thought” that is “saturated” (i.e., an object) or that is “unsaturated” (i.e., a part of the thought that is functioning predicatively).

61. Cf. also Frege 1979, 130.

62. “I find it difficult to be tolerant about the ascription of such nonsense to Frege (or about the same ascription in the case of Wittgenstein). When there is no way of saying properly what we are trying to say, what we come out with is in fact a kind of nonsense and corresponds to no ineffable truth” (Diamond 1991, 140).

63. Diamond’s interpretation here is controversial. Even philosophers who agree with her about what is philosophically “most radical about Frege’s vision”—the connection between his development of *Begriffsschrift* and the elucidation of illusion—are hard pressed to find Frege faithful to that vision in his response to Kerry. (Cf. especially Conant 2002, 386–398.) For our purposes, though, Diamond’s interpretation is important because it gives us an example of Fregean elucidation as it would be if Frege were unwaveringly faithful to his own best insights. So understood, Frege is attempting to lead a subject who imagines herself to be thinking or expressing special “thoughts” (“thoughts” that violate logical distinctions) to recognize that she has suffered the illusion of thinking.

64. In his headnote to *The Beast in the Jungle*, Leon Edel connects the tale to the notebook entries quoted earlier from January 9, 1894 and February 9, 1895.

65. For readers who are unfamiliar with the tale, a more detailed plot summary might be of help. The tale begins when Marcher and May meet at a country estate, Weatherend. They realize that they have met briefly many years before. They desire to continue their renewed acquaintance, but are at a loss for a “basis” for doing so. Just as they are about to part company, May decides to “save the situation” by inquiring about something Marcher told her that she’s “never forgotten”: “It was very simple. You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you.” Marcher is shocked—both
that he disclosed this secret to May (he has shared it with no one else) and that he unaccountably lost track of having done so. He confesses that he is still waiting for what he calls the “leap” of his “beast.” Marcher asks May to “watch” with him and she agrees.

In this way, they grow older together, May watching with Marcher and letting the “real truth” about him “give shape and colour to her own existence.” But their “intimate community” is disrupted when Marcher gradually becomes convinced that May knows something that he doesn’t about his “fate,” that she has an “idea within her that she [doesn’t] dare to express.” When May begins to show visible signs of aging and confesses a “disorder in her blood,” Marcher is tortured by the fear that she might die before their “wait” is over, and before disclosing to him her secret knowledge. He determines to elicit this knowledge from her, but the harder he tries, the more oracular and impenetrable she becomes.

Before May dies, she summons Marcher in order to “check his obsession and wind up his long trouble.” “You’ve nothing more to wait for,” she tells him, “It has come . . . It has done its office. It has made you its own.” Soon afterwards she dies. Marcher believes what May has told him, but it brings him no respite. Instead of living in anticipation of an unknown future, he now “lives entirely with the question” of his past. He travels to the “other side of the globe,” “hunting up and down” for this “lost stuff of consciousness.” After a year, he returns, unsuccessful, to May’s grave, where the “part of him that alone he now valued,” his past, lies buried. He falls into the habit of regularly visiting May’s tomb, the “open page” on which he can read “the facts of the past” and “the truth of his life.”

During one of these visits, Marcher encounters another mourner in the cemetery. The “raw glare” of this stranger’s grief “flares” for Marcher like a “smoky torch” and abruptly—with the “insolence of accident” and the “disrespect of chance”—“illuminates” Marcher’s own life. For the first time, he sees that this “life” is a “sounded void.” He missed the chance to “love May for herself” and he thereby missed the chance to live. In missing the opportunity to love May, he “achieved his fate”: that of being the “man of his time, the man to whom nothing on earth was to have happened.” Overwhelmed, he flings himself facedown onto May’s tomb.

66. Similarly, when he encounters the mourner, he sees only what is pertinent from the perspective of the “beast,” the raw grief which exposes the paucity of Marcher’s own bereavement in light of his preoccupation with his fate: “nothing else in the picture lived for it, neither his dress, his age, nor his presumable character and class; nothing lived but the deep ravage of the features he showed” (James 1996, 538).

67. In characteristically Jamesian fashion, the tale opens with a locution that first invites one reading and then resolves into another: “What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters . . . ” The opening phrase at first seems to raise a question, “What determined the speech . . . ?” but then resolves a complex subject, “[What determined the speech] scarcely matters.” However, as is often the case with James, the reading that is initially invited is crucial. I am suggesting that the tale is, in important ways, precisely concerned with what “determines speech” in the sense of making it possible.

68. James wrote The Beast in the Jungle in 1902, after completing The Ambassadors and while working on The Wings of the Dove. The intimacy between this tale and The Ambassadors is more generally acknowledged. Cf. Bell 1991, 262; Yeazell 1976, 167; and Crowley 1975–1976. (I am indebted to Buelens 1998 for these references.) But commentators such as Banta 1972, 211; Auchard 1986, 111–112; and Buelens illuminate the connections between The Beast in the Jungle and The Wings of the Dove as well.
69. Here is the passage again: “The whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words nor any notes at all. Why should a set of people have been put in motion, on such a scale and with such an air of being equipped for a profitable journey, only to break down without an accident, to stretch themselves in the wayside dust without a reason?” (James 1909b, 4).

70. Like the breaking point of Kate’s anger which functions for her as a kind of precipice.

71. Without explanation or preparation Lionel Croy reappears in the novel’s final chapters, “cowering” and “crying” in a terror that no words can touch. Kate, without deliberation or hesitation, “goes” to him, becoming immediately reabsorbed in “waiting” while he cow- ers and cries. Kate’s unqualified “waiting,” then, functions as a kind of outer limit of the narrative, marking both its beginning and its end. From the perspective of this outer limit, everything that happens between the opening and closing chapters is empty of significance, a mere marking of time while Kate waits.


73. I take this phrase from Nicola Nixon’s insightful interpretation of In the Cage in Nixon 1999.

74. Although I have argued that a text such as The Beast in the Jungle has application to a wide range of particular illusions of living, there is no pretense that it has universal scope, that it could (or should) be useful in elucidating any sort of illusion that interferes with the activity of living. A fuller exploration of Jamesian elucidation might perhaps identify other “limit” texts within James’s oeuvre, limit texts that serve to illuminate a different family of related forms of living death.

75. Nicola Nixon brings this dimension of In the Cage into sharp relief in Nixon 1999.

76. Freedman touches upon this dimension of James’s novella in Freedman 1990, 204.

77. I am grateful to Daniel Brudney, James Conant, Michael Kremer, Jonathan Lear and Daniel Morgan for many conversations that have helped me develop the ideas in this paper and for valuable comments on drafts. Vicky Albritton, David Finkelstein, Erika Holberg, Jennifer Lockhart, William Veeder, members of the Contemporary Workshop and the Wittgenstein Workshop at the University of Chicago also provided valuable comments on an earlier draft.

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