

Henry James on the Bench

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of Neil Reeve.

Thou art so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack,
and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon
benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to
demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know.

(Henry IV 1 (I. 2. 2-5))

We spend our life, it's ours, trying to bring together in the same instant a ray of
sunshine and a free bench, in some oasis of public verdure.

(Beckett, 'Text 3', Texts for Nothing, 88)

Shrivelled men have determined that the average time spent on a park bench is
seventeen minutes.

(Colson Whitehead, 'The Colossus of New York' (2003), 102)

Falstaff sleeps on benches, at least according to Hal, and forgets the great questions; in James, no one falls asleep on a bench, and instead benches permit, or even prompt, reflection, at times searching and indeed profound. Across James's writing, the bench takes on a rich accumulated significance, which this essay will dwell on for a little longer than the average session mentioned by Colson Whitehead. Victoria Coulson, in her 2004 Leon Edel Prize Essay, 'Sticky Realism: Armchair Hermeneutics in Late James', has made out 'a complex, nuanced and highly consistent lexicon of domestic furniture' in late James; and for instance the chair in which Isabel Archer sits and sits for her meditative vigil in Chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady* after an unpleasant conversation with her husband certainly

merits attention. I want to get out of doors (mostly) for this rummage in the Jamesian prop-basket, and to focus on one surprisingly recurrent element (among many) of Jamesian scene-making, a tool of his craft – as well as to suggest ways in which ‘bench’ might be understood as aspiring at times to the condition of an Empsonian ‘complex word’, not perhaps ‘compacted doctrine’ as such, but at least compacted *association*, both extra- and intra-textual.

This won’t be ‘thing theory’ as such, and won’t invoke consumer culture at all directly, or innovations in technology, but it may take a hint from Gaston Bachelard and his thoughts in *The Poetics of Space* on ‘inhabited space’ (5) here and there in thinking about the rôle and appeal of the bench in James – and implicitly, about ways in which James’s imagination, and thus his fiction, works. It arose, I should say, from working as a General Editor on James’s story ‘The Bench of Desolation’ with its late, much-missed editor Neil Reeve, for the Cambridge University Press edition of the final volume of James’s tales in the *Complete Fiction of Henry James* – and wondering how much of the symbolic complexity of the bench in that text of 1910 is there elsewhere in James’s oeuvre. The essay will conclude by considering that extraordinary tale.

But first, some senses and definitions: some benchmarks, to measure things by (a benchmark is a measuring point cut in stone – a 19th-century surveying term). The *Oxford English Dictionary* states the main senses for us, and the word’s origin in the Old English *benc*, of Germanic origin. First, the *thing*: ‘1. a. A long seat, with or without a back, usually of wood, but also of stone, etc.’ As Dr Johnson nicely says in the 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, it is ‘A seat, distinguished from a *stool* by its greater length’. A one-person bench isn’t a bench. Then, the *cultural symbol*: ‘2. a. The seat where the judges sit in court; the judge’s seat, or seat of justice; hence, the office or dignity of a judge, as in ‘to be raised to the bench’. b. Hence, the place

where justice is administered. And **hence** c. Any court of justice; a tribunal.’ And then it becomes metonymically *a collective noun*: ‘d. The judges or magistrates collectively, or the judge or magistrate sitting in the seat of justice.’ Metaphorically this can be transferred to other judging bodies: so Ben Jonson’s poem on John Fletcher’s play *The Faithful Shepherdess* speaks of ‘The wise, and many-headed *Bench*, that sits / Vpon the Life, and Death of *Playes*, and *Wits*’ (ll. 1-2). Benches, then, are items of basic furniture which are associated with processes of judgment. The sporting sense of ‘on the bench’ dates, incidentally, according to the *OED*, from only about 1912: ‘A seat provided for the members of a team who are waiting to bat, play, etc.’

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There *are* indoor benches in James, but I will mostly exclude them. The main bench of the Jamesian imagination is out of doors, usually placed at a remove from the world’s comings and goings, often with a view: when there’s *no* view we feel the bench is misplaced. The bench is a point of rest in the intervals of motion, but a temporary one. Life, one might say, is like a bench – a home, a perch, a last resort, but only for a while. Some benches are public, open to all; but some, in private gardens or grounds, offer a refuge or emphasise privileged possession. Some are free, others require millions, or acquaintance with a millionaire who owns a country house like James’s fictional Gardencourt or Fawns (as we will see later). They are mostly not places of work (unless sometimes for artists and writers) but of leisure; they imply some attempt to escape from the indoor world of duties and proximity to others, if only briefly – or to escape *to* a freedom of intimacy *with* some particular other.

Mostly a public place, the bench potentially favours also the tête-à-tête. As its ‘greater length’, noted by Johnson, suggests, a bench implies the possibility of

company – meaning, probably, for our purposes here, a ‘scene’ in the Jamesian sense – or ‘drama’, a transaction between (usually) two people. Equally, it thus permits a more pointed solitude, brought home by someone’s non-arrival or departure; and the absence of others usually leaves the bench-sitter with a view of some kind (garden, landscape, seascape), but also to her or his reflections, a world of internal consciousness which in James’s Prefaces would be termed ‘picture’. Picture and drama are alternating elements in James’s understanding of fiction; so that the bench peculiarly and comfortably accommodates the shifts of James’s fictional world – and meets the requirements of his imagination. As he says in the preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, ‘Beautiful exceedingly, for that matter, those occasions or parts of an occasion when the boundary line between picture and scene bears a little the weight of the double pressure.’ (FW 1298)

Benches, for James, also nurture solitary processes of reflection – and they start to appear quite early in his career, in one of his most substantial and important apprentice tales. Longmore, the hero of ‘Mme de Mauves’ (1874), goes on a country excursion which anticipates the one Strether takes in *The Ambassadors*, to be discussed later, and likewise comes across an inn in his ramblings – ramblings which are prompted by a startling scene in which he’s been urged to commit adultery with the American heroine, whom he’s in love with, by her French husband’s own very French sister. He finds the arbour he’s in too warm:

The *tonnelle* was rather close, and he preferred to lounge on a bench against the pink wall, in the sun, which was not too hot. Here, as he rested and gazed and mused, he fell into a train of thought which, in an indefinable fashion, was a soft influence from the scene about him. His heart, which had been beating fast for the past three hours, gradually checked its pulses and left him looking at life with a rather more level gaze. (CS1 881)

Leisure is vital here – physical relaxation; to rest, gaze and muse. The bench is a site of thought, but also a source of vision, both outer and inner: here it's 'a train of thought which, *in an indefinable fashion*, was a soft influence from the scene about him.' Emotion is recollected in tranquillity; the heart slows; the vision, inner and outer, come into a calmer equilibrium – though at first Longmore's appreciation of nature points away from renunciation.

Another instance from the 1870s is our first really elegiac one, in 'The Diary of a Man of Fifty' (1879), a story involving the revisiting of a place by the older man of the title, and the memory of a lost woman, this time in a Florentine setting. The set-up of the tale prepares for the revisionary playing over of a past action in the present, with crucial differences that indicate a process of reinterpretation:

I wandered for an hour in the Boboli Gardens; we went there several times together. I remember all those days individually; they seem to me as yesterday. I found the corner where she always chose to sit—the bench of sun-warmed marble, in front of the screen of ilex, with that exuberant statue of Pomona just beside it. The place is exactly the same, except that poor Pomona has lost one of her tapering fingers. I sat there for half-an-hour, and it was strange how near to me she seemed. The place was perfectly empty—that is, it was filled with *her*. I closed my eyes and listened; I could almost hear the rustle of her dress on the gravel. Why do we make such an ado about death? What is it after all but a sort of refinement of life? She died ten years ago, and yet, as I sat there in the sunny stillness, she was a palpable, audible presence. (CS2 454-5)

(The missing finger might recall – that is, anticipate – the one that belongs to, or rather is missing from, Spencer Brydon's *alter ego* in James's late ghost-story 'The Jolly Corner' (1908).) The outer scene is the same, excepting that finger; the inner

scene is too, and indeed claims recovered palpability. ‘Almost hear’ shifts to ‘audible’. Revisiting the same bench, really ‘empty’ but emotionally ‘filled’, is the trigger for a wave of vivid memories, ambivalences and regrets, a partial recovery of the past.

James’s characters seek out benches when they need time, and a place, to think: they resort to them in a crisis. Thus in Chapter XII of James’s first full-length masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), when Isabel Archer has been proposed to at Gardencourt by Lord Warburton she goes back to one:

She had promised him she would consider his question, and when, after he had left her, she wandered back to the bench where he had found her and lost herself in meditation, it might have seemed that she was keeping her vow. (*PL* 106)

The reality, James shows us, is somewhat different: rather than considering his question, she’s sitting there feeling frightened at herself, and at the possibility that she’s ‘a cold, hard girl’.

There’s a girl in ‘meditation’ on a bench in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), too. The novel begins with the aesthetically demanding Mrs Gereth, and it is in her wanderings around the Brigstocks’ hideous house Waterbath on the second page that we encounter our real heroine, Fleda, to whom we then switch our attention:

Suddenly, at the turn of a walk, she came on a member of the party, a young lady seated on a bench in deep and lonely meditation. (*SP* 36)

Fleda’s ‘deep and lonely meditation’ (she and Mrs Gereth both suffer from the Brigstocks’ *décor*) will be the medium and even the subject of the book, in many

respects. So the bench can represent a sanctuary, a retreat from pressing preoccupations into memory and meditation. That's also how and why it figures in the dream-tale 'The Great Good Place' (written 1899), where the writer George Dane in his phantasmagoric escape from the stress of his real life finds himself in a strange secular convent:

The oddity was that, after a minute, he was struck as by the reflection of his own very image in this first interlocutor seated with him, on the easy bench, under the high, clear portico and above the wide, far-reaching garden, where the things that most showed in the greenness were the surface of still water and the white note of old statues.. (*CS5* 157-8)

In this utopia of peace, meditation, self-communion, self-recovery, a place of reflective surfaces, the friar-like 'Brother', is like 'the reflexion of his own very image', and the bench is placed at a perfect point in the landscape, becoming a symbol of companionship. The auditory becomes physical, as in 'The Diary of a Man of Fifty':

The quiet footsteps were quiet figures; the quiet figures that, to the eye, kept the picture human and brought its perfection within reach. This perfection, he felt on the bench by his friend, was now more in reach than ever. (*CS5* 159)

The perfection in this tale is of course only a dream: but it's striking that ten years before James's most striking invocation of the bench in 'The Bench of Desolation', where it's tragically charged with associations of despair, the dream of perfection is also placed on a bench.

This may be because, whether beautiful or grim, the view out from a bench allows critical distance. Early in the posthumous and unfinished *The Ivory Tower* (1917), the heroine Rosanna Gaw, on the low sunny cliffs of Newport, among the elephantine ‘cottages’ of the unthinkable wealthy, in the dying millionaire Mr Betterman’s grounds,

...sought indeed after a moment the support of an elaborately rustic bench that ministered to ease and contemplation, whence she would rake much of the rest of the small sloping domain; the fair prospect, the great sea spaces, the line of low receding coast that bristled, either way she looked, with still more costly ‘places’, and in particular the proprietor’s wide and bedimmed verandah. (*IT* 3)

‘Ease and contemplation’ permit the leisure of spectatorship. The bench is theatrical: it ‘rakes’ the landscape. ‘Elaborately rustic’ says that the bench is a version of pastoral, allowing access on easy terms and smooth paths to the grandeur of nature, which is carefully subdued in the interests of health, safety and pleasure. The intellectual command allowed by a comfortable bench, as Rosanna leans back to take a general view in talk with a companion, appeals to her.

Rosanna leaned back on the bench, her cigarette between her strong and rounded fingers; she sat at her ease now, this chapter of history filling, under her view, the soft lap of space and the comfort of having it well out, and yet of keeping it, as her friend somehow helped her to do, well within her control, more and more operative. (*IT* 33)

The occupant of a bench may have a command of space (over what has earlier been a ‘domain’); may take an ideal view; leaning back is an expression of comfort

and confidence. A remembered ‘chapter of history’, as if in a book, fills ‘the soft lap of space’: the real and the imaginative space are interfused.

James’s benches aren’t always locations of ease and command, though; sometimes they represent emotional distress or the pressure of an urgent problem. This is where ‘desolation’ can come in – as people take a view of their lives. Thus Warburton, baffled by the way Isabel refuses his proposal, takes to an indoor bench in the gallery at Gardencourt:

He sat down on a bench, unceremoniously, doggedly, like a man in trouble; leaning his elbows on his knees and staring at the floor. (*PL* 125)

Warburton *is* ‘a man in trouble’, of course; the reason we’re told he sits down ‘*like* a man in trouble’ is perhaps that James characters, in particular aristocrats, are usually very good at maintaining an outward surface that suggests feelings *unlike* their true ones. The bench in a gallery is officially there for sitters to look at the paintings; whereas Warburton here is ‘staring at the floor’, and his eyes are turned inward, we might assume.

Warburton ‘sits down’, but there are two *vivider* verbs *more* used in James in connection with benches.

The first verb applies to the author in ‘The Death of the Lion’ (1894), who is troubled, and looks down, like Warburton:

Neil Paraday had dropped upon the garden-bench and sat there at once detached and confused; he looked hard at a bare spot in the lawn, as if with an anxiety that had suddenly made him grave. (*CS4* 365)

Maisie is even more distressed after a showdown with Mrs Wix:

Maisie dropped back on the bench and burst into sobs. (*WMK* 203)

And at the climax of ‘The Altar of the Dead’ the probably dying Stransom is reconciled with Mary Antrim in the chapel he has adopted to honour his dead:

He let himself go, resting on her; he dropped upon the bench, and she fell on her knees beside him with his arm on her shoulder. So he remained an instant, staring up at his shrine. (*CS4* 485)

The other main verb James associates with benches suggests immersion in a thicker, more aqueous element. The dying author Dencombe in ‘The Middle Years’ (1893)

sank down on his bench. ‘I’m very ill myself, but I’ll try!’ (*CS4* 351)

Often the sinking is a sign of a crisis – a failure of strength or health. In other words, the bench is a place of collapse as well: it certainly is for the desperate Mrs Server in *The Sacred Fount*:

‘I think you’re very kind,’ she said for all answer to the speech I have reported, and the minute after this she had sunk down, in confessed collapse, to my bench, on which she sat and stared before her. (*SF* 80)

She also ‘stares’, unseeingly, like Warburton and Stransom. Dencombe likewise stares, on learning how Doctor Hugh’s worldly prospects (of inheritance) are damaged by his loyalty to Dencombe; and from his cliff-top (or not quite -top) bench he has a view that is also a symbolic vision:

He sat trembling on his bench, staring at the waste of waters, feeling sick with the directness of the blow. (*CS4* 351)

Here the bench is a temporary perch, only a very provisional refuge for a character in trouble (and it overlooks the sea, a position to be discussed later).

Less frequent in James, but at the other extremity of the behavioural spectrum around the bench, is the restlessness that makes it impossible to stay on a bench for long. If the average (according to the ‘shrivelled men’ cited by Colson Whitehead) is seventeen minutes, these hoverings are at the short end, balancing out the long stays, like those of Herbert Dodd in ‘The Bench of Desolation’. Thus Merton Densher early in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), in Kensington Gardens,

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. Distinctly he was a man either with nothing at all to do or with ever so much to think about. (*WD* 57)

And in *The Ivory Tower*, the hero Gray Fielder, similarly, in Newport,

strolled and stopped again and stared before him without seeing; he came and went and sat down on benches and low rocky ledges only to get up and pace afresh; he lighted cigarettes but to smoke them a quarter out and then chuck them away to light others. (*IT* 123)

In these two cases the man does the first thing ‘only to’ revert to the other, in one instance alternating between bench and chair, in the other between bench and low

rocky ledge. In both cases too he *both* ‘sat down’ and ‘stopped’ – to be ‘idly agaze’ or ‘[stare] before him without seeing’. It’s a register of a level of mental agitation more unsettled than a session on the bench can calm.

Another subset is the stone bench, often Italian (perhaps suggested by Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860), where Miriam and Donatello several times sit together on stone benches). Most notably, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the front of Osmond’s house is

furnished with a stone bench which ran along the base of the structure and usually afforded a lounging-place to one or two persons wearing more or less of that air of under-valued merit which in Italy, for some reason or other, always gracefully invests any one who confidently assumes a perfectly passive attitude. (*PL* 217)

This isn’t quoted by Tony Tanner in his brilliant account in ‘The Fearful Self: *The Portrait of a Lady*’ (1965) of how ‘Osmond’s house is brilliantly described’, ‘laced with subtle portent’ (154); but it easily could have been. When we get to know Osmond, we realise that he himself wears an ‘air of undervalued merit’ which is only a misleading front; realise, indeed, that his ‘perfectly passive attitude’ veils his active manipulations.

In another aspect, as my title suggests, the bench can be more than a place of meditation, it can be a place of judgment, a ‘judgment seat’: ‘the judge’s seat, or seat of justice.’ Thus ‘bench’ can function as a complex word for James, who had been to Harvard Law School and by his own testimony in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) assiduously if uncomprehendingly attended its lectures (‘The forenoon lectures at Dane Hall I never in all my time missed’ (*A* 464)). James’s friend there,

Oliver Wendell Holmes, stayed the course and became Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from 1902 to 1932, and ultimately Acting Chief Justice. A few instances bear witness that for James the word can bear a judicial charge, that it includes these associations. In a revised passage of *The Tragic Muse* (1890; New York Edition, 1908), Nick Dormer looks over a rich summer country-house landscape where ‘The wide, still trees in the park appeared to be waiting for some daily inspection’: it recalls to him

something of the impression he had received when younger from showy ‘views’ of fine country-seats that had pressed and patted nature, as by the fat hands of ‘benches’ of magistrates and landlords, into supreme respectability and comfort. (*TM* 168)

Here the collective metonymical noun “‘benches’ of magistrates’ (which arrives in revision) is primary, and the idea of a scene laid out for viewing from the well-placed actual bench only an association. In ‘The Private Life’ (1893), a bench is the site for a quasi-legal process when the actress Blanche Adney questions the narrator:

She had dropped on a bench to listen to me and, as we sat there, had briefly cross-examined me. (*CS4* 75)

Cross-examining is more lawyerly than judgely, but we’re in the zone. As we are in *The Spoils of Poynton*, where Fleda Vetch, with her high-handed patroness Mrs Gereth speaking of lawyers and referring to her son in a manner ‘as if addressing Fleda in the girl’s virtual and actual character of Owen’s representative’, finds it difficult not to fall into the position of a lawyer *pleading* before a judge – even if the bench in question is a common or garden one on the terrace at Ricks:

Our young lady crept to and fro before the bench, combating the sense that it was occupied by a judge, looking at her boot-toes. (*SP* 109)

And above all in Book V of *The Awkward Age*, where in the smoking-room at Mertle James makes play with a bench on a higher level overlooking the billiard-table. First,

Vanderbank, perched aloft on the bench and awaiting developments, had a little the look of some prepossessing criminal who, in court, should have changed places with the judge. (*AA* 215)

And a few pages later,

Mr. Longdon meanwhile had mounted to the high bench and sat there as if the judge were now in his proper place. (*AA* 221)

Here the judicial possibilities of the bench are overt, symbolically reinforcing Longdon's processes of judgment.

The sentences uttered from a bench can correspondingly register as judgments passed, as dooms. Toward the end of 'The Beast in the Jungle,' when May Bartram is fatally ill, John Marcher reaches a state of semi-acceptance:

...poor Marcher, at this hour, judged the common doom sufficient. It would serve his turn, and even as the consummation of infinite waiting he would bend his pride to accept it. He sat down on a bench in the twilight. (*CS5* 528)

The proximity of ‘doom’ and ‘bench’ – in a story where a little later the dying May speaks with ‘the true voice of the law’ – suggests a way in which extra-judicial processes work themselves through everywhere in private, intimate scenes. (Marcher has of course judged himself.)

There is in France another kind of legal bench, incidentally, not for judges. This French bench doesn’t, I think, have an equivalent in English, but the *Larousse Classique Illustré* (1915) tells us of a bench set aside for the *objects* of the law – which occurs in Balzac and Taine, so James would have known it:

La sellette était un petit banc en bois des tribunaux de l’Ancien Régime où s’asseyaient les prévenus. La petitesse et la position basse du banc visait à ôter sa dignité à l’accusé. Sous la Révolution française, c’était devenu un symbole de l’oppression de la noblesse. (946) [The sellette was a small wooden bench of the tribunals of the Ancien Régime where the defendant sat. The smallness and the low placement of the bench was meant to strip the accused of his or her dignity. In the French Revolution, it had become a symbol of oppression by the nobility.]

It was abolished in the Revolution. The phrase that survives, not strictly judicial, which I imagine James knew, is ‘être sur la sellette’, meaning to be exposed to scrutiny and likely punishment. Marcher’s bench in the twilight could be a *sellette*.

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The proximity that the bench allows has, James sees too, an erotic, or at any rate romantic, dimension. People can sit apart and talk in a detached way, or they can squeeze up close for an embrace. If we go back to James’s first masterpiece we see

such contiguity become an image of intimacy – when Caspar Goodwood reappears at Gardencourt near the end:

He said nothing at first; she only felt him close to her. It almost seemed to her that no one had ever been so close to her as that. (*PL* 564)

This is a passingly charged moment in the first book edition (pressing it home, the *NYE* revises to ‘she only felt him close to her—beside her on the bench and pressingly turned to her’ (*PL : NYE* IV 430)). There’s one other bench in James that sizzles with an equal erotic charge, but across a bench scene that spans three chapters and lasts for 3600-odd words, beginning thus.

...they crossed the street and went in and sat down on a bench. She had gathered by this time one magnificent hope about him—the hope that he would say nothing vulgar. She knew what she meant by that; she meant something quite apart from any matter of his being ‘false.’ Their bench was not far within; it was near the Park Lane paling and the patchy lamplight and the rumbling cabs and ‘busses. A strange emotion had come to her, and she felt indeed excitement within excitement; above all a conscious joy in testing him with chances he didn’t take. (*IC* 111)

If we wonder what ‘chances’ the sexually impulsive, indeed hapless, Captain Everard doesn’t take in Hyde Park with the (unnamed) shabby genteel heroine of *In the Cage*, the wildly imaginative but outwardly demure telegraph-girl, we get a strong hint not long after this:

The evening had thickened now; the scattered lamps were red; the Park, all before them, was full of obscure and ambiguous life; there were other

couples on other benches, whom it was impossible not to see, yet at whom it was impossible to look. (*IC* 115)

Petting, canoodling, smooching – this is what men do with girls on benches in the Park. They – the young lady and her aristocratic customer – are made a ‘couple’ by the phrase ‘other couples’ – and such possibilities are in the air (part of her ‘strange emotion’) even while she’s insisting on their difference. *Are* they so different from the ‘other couples’?

During this moment he leaned back on the bench, meeting her in silence and with a face that grew more strange. It grew so strange that, after a further instant, she got straight up. ...

‘See here—see here!’ He tried, from the bench, to take her hand again. (*IC* 132-3)

Nothing actually happens, but the possibility of physical passion is marked by her in memory:

That was what it had come to: his having sat with her there, on the bench and under the trees, in the summer darkness and put his hand on her, making her know what he would have said if permitted; his having returned to her afterwards, repeatedly, with supplicating eyes and a fever in his blood. (*IC* 222-3)

‘What he would have said if permitted’ – would it have been anything ‘vulgar’? We have been told ‘she was not a bad girl’; but she knows the desire that she has to repress in him and in herself. To be ‘on the bench’ is to have ‘his hand on her’. As the story goes on she’s on the point of *not* repressing her desire:

What beset her above all, and as she had almost never known it before, was the desire to bound straight out, to overtake the autumn afternoon before it passed away for ever and hurry off to the Park and perhaps be with him there again on a bench. (*IC* 156)

It is a sign of how much weight James has put on the bench in this story that he so builds to that climactic last phrase, loads it with such suggestiveness.

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The bench often has a coastal aspect. In 1877, in Ilfracombe (‘North Devon’), comes the first seaside cliff-top bench in James. This is slightly wild country, but tamed, in English-municipal style (this is the slightly-revised *English Hours* text):

The cliffs are superb, the play of light and shade upon them is a perpetual study, and the air a particular mixture of the breath of the hills and moors and the breath of the sea. I was very glad, at the end of my climb, to have a good bench to sit upon – as one must think twice in England before measuring one’s length on the grassy earth; and to be able, thanks to the smooth footpath, to get back to the hotel in a quarter of an hour. (*CTW* 88)

The bench is genteel; it stops one’s respectable outfit becoming dirtied with grass-stains or worse, or saves one from being discovered sprawling disgracefully on the ground like an American. Nature is controlled and made accessible.

‘The Bench of Desolation’, which I’ll save till last, is the high point of this tendency; but the coastal bench figures increasingly in James’s work as the South Coast of England becomes what we could call a ‘thing’ in his fiction and life. Perhaps the appeal of the coastal, and especially the cliff-top or cliff-side bench, is

its pronounced liminal status. It's not a shelter, is often wind-swept, and its view of the sea can expose the sitter to extreme weather; the vision of the sea stretching to the horizon confronts the infinite, the non-human, gives (in Freud's term) an oceanic feeling. On the other hand, the bench is an outpost of progress, indeed often quite municipal, as in Ilfracombe. The oceanic bench is indeed part of the recommended coastal cure (sea air, gentle exercise) for invalids like Dencombe, at places like Bournemouth (where James visited both his sister Alice and Stevenson in the 1880s): thus Dencombe receives from the postman a proof-copy of what will be his last novel, *The Middle Years*, and we follow him 'creeping to a bench that he knew of, a safe recess in the cliff' – we hear later that 'Dencombe's bench was half-way down, on a sheltered ledge' (*CS4* 335, 338)

In *The Golden Bowl* Adam Verver 'speaks' – proposes – to Charlotte Stant in Brighton, at a spot carefully selected to combine the grandly natural and the safely domestic. It is of course a bench.

He had spoken—spoken as they sat together on the out-of-the-way bench observed during one of their walks and kept for the previous quarter of the present hour well in his memory's eye; the particular spot to which, between intense pauses and intenser advances, he had all the while consistently led her. Below the great consolidated cliff, well on to where the city of stucco sat most architecturally perched, with the rumbling beach and the rising tide and the freshening stars in front and above, the safe sense of the whole place yet prevailed in lamps and seats and flagged walks, hovering also overhead in the close neighbourhood of a great replete community about to assist anew at the removal of dish-covers. (*GB* I 220)

The not very wild sea view at this fateful moment may recall ironically Adam's earlier invocation (as an image of his own discovery of a vocation as bringer of

culture to America) of ‘stout Cortez’ and his moved first vision of the Pacific from a ‘peak in Darien’ in Keats’s sonnet on Chapman’s Homer (*GB I 142*). The coastal bench, as we’ll see later, occurs also in *What Maisie Knew*, both in Folkestone and Boulogne.

Benches themselves, material enough to be sat on by James’s characters, make memorable images within his texts – help in their pictorial framing through metaphor and simile. In *The Tragic Muse*, near the start, the English Dormers are exhibited as themselves works of art like the ones in the Paris Salon they’re on a bench recovering from:

The fresh diffused light of the Salon made them clear and important; they were finished creations, in their way, and, ranged there motionless on their green bench, were almost as much on exhibition as if they had been hung on the line. (*TM 7*)

‘On the line’, which means ‘at eye level’, is the most conspicuous and desirable place for a painting to be hung, but whether the occupants of a bench wish to be looked at in that way is questionable: they’re of course James’s ‘finished creations’, which he’s putting in the best (most searching) light; they’re also exemplary products, the epitome of Englishness.

The bench can also be *part* of an image, or give rise to further images. Thus in *The Golden Bowl* again, the Prince seems to have compared Maggie to a figure who might have been painted by Degas (whom James had by 1904 come to appreciate) – in ‘Waiting’ of 1882, say, or one of the ‘Two Dancers on a Bench’ (1900-05): pointing out

her resemblance, as he had hit it off for her once in Rome, in the first flushed days, after their engagement, to a little dancing-girl at rest, ever so light of movement but most often panting gently, even a shade compunctiously, on a bench. (*GB I 327*)

Or the bench in itself becomes the object of a simile – in the same work:

They were husband and wife—oh, so immensely!—as regards other persons; but after they had dropped again on their old bench, conscious that the party on the terrace, augmented, as in the past, by neighbours, would do beautifully without them, it was wonderfully like their having got together into some boat and paddled off from the shore where husbands and wives, luxuriant complications, made the air too tropical. (*GB II 262*)

The underlying idea seems to be that Adam and Maggie are ‘in the same boat’; so that the bench becomes amphibious, as it were, floating away as James’s prose casts off its moorings. Or a simile renders another kind of removal from immediate pressures in ‘The Great Good Place’ (1900), where Dane and the Brother sit on their quiet bench considering the world elsewhere – which they’ve escaped. Their vision in the place of retreat and reflection is abstract – of that which no longer presses on them:

they sat in silence a little, seeming pleasantly to follow, in the view of the green garden, the vague movements of the monster—madness, surrender, collapse—they had escaped. Their bench was like a box at the opera. (*CS5 161*)

This may call to mind the Ben Jonson ‘*Bench*, that sits / Vpon the Life, and Death of *Playes*, and *Wits*’; and certainly James’s benchers are usually spectators in one sense or another, gazing inwards or outwards or both.

*

For the rest of this discussion I will consider something which I only recognised while investigating the Jamesian bench for this essay – the extent to which James builds benches as one element among others into the larger construction of his novels as a way of marking or heightening echoes and symmetries across spans of time. Thus, as we’ve seen, in ‘In the Cage’ James makes much of the bench in Hyde Park as the prime site of possible sexual adventure with Captain Everard; and the *park* gets its later pair, as she goes with her actual *fiancé* Mr Mudge to Regent’s Park – but there they sit on penny-chairs, not benches. However, there *is* an answering bench-scene with Mudge – in Bournemouth, where, we’re told,

it was enough for her to sit on benches and wonder at the sea and taste the air and not be at Cocker’s and not see the counter-clerk. (*IC* 137)

It’s sitting on a bench that she tells Mudge about Everard: after which she wants to move on, but

Mr. Mudge, who had remained on the bench, looked up at her; she often preferred to be quiet when he proposed to walk, but now that he seemed to wish to sit she had a desire to move. (*IC* 150)

She is still straining, in other words, against Mudge – for the time, at least. And the symmetry of scenes – with the men, Everard and Mudge, remaining seated while

the telegraphist tries to get away – makes sure that, at least subliminally, we register the connection.

Likewise in *The Wings of the Dove* there's a rhyme which seems significant. When the stricken Milly walks alone through London after receiving her grim diagnosis from Sir Luke Strett, she enters Regent's Park, full in her vision of suffering humanity, and

All she thus shared with them made her wish to sit in their company; which she so far did that she looked for a bench that was empty, eschewing a still emptier chair that she saw hard by and for which she would have paid, with superiority, a fee. (*WD* 203)

Unlike the up-and-coming Mudge she doesn't pay for a penny-chair, but wants a democratic bench – though not wanting to 'share' with the people 'so far' as to *share* a bench. Later in the novel we are to recall this scene, as we follow Densher: quite remarkably,

He reached, like Milly, the Regent's Park; and though he moved further and faster he finally sat down, like Milly, from the force of thought. For him too in this position, be it added—and he might positively have occupied the same bench—various troubled fancies folded their wings. (*WD* 249)

The echo – the coincidence, though less egregious than that of the bowl and the shopman in *The Golden Bowl*, since it's more plausible and at that only a '*might ... have*' – is flagged up. Though there would be something to say about the narrator here, who suddenly abrogates the particular authority that would allow the specification of whether Densher does or doesn't sit on the same bench.

In *What Maisie Knew* too there are a pair of benches, coastal ones again, on either side of the Channel – the bench in the garden of the Folkestone hotel where Maisie is found and confronted by the fearsome Ida, and the bench overlooking the sea in Boulogne frequented by Maisie and Mrs Wix. The way the bench comes into the story in Boulogne is striking: first

They sat together on the old grey bastion; they looked down on the little new town which seemed to them quite as old, and across at the great dome and the high gilt Virgin of the church. (*WMK* 196-7)

No mention of a bench. But Maisie and Mrs Wix are in fact sitting on a bench as well as a bastion, which we realise several pages later when James mentions ‘one of the ear-ringed old women who had been sitting at the end of their bench’ (*WMK* 199). Mrs Wix like Ida has a sort of showdown with Maisie there. And a bit later, they’re together again:

They gazed once more at their gilded Virgin; they sank once more upon their battered bench. (*WMK* 210)

So now it’s a ‘battered bench’. And in due course Sir Claude makes a proposition – that Maisie should abandon Mrs Wix – and

the picture it made persisted somehow in being a combination quite distinct—an old woman and a little girl seated in deep silence on a battered old bench by the rampart of the *haute ville*. (*WMK* 246)

So it becomes a bench, then a battered bench, and now a battered old bench – it’s become a *thing*, a symbolic landmark, part of a ‘picture’, in the narrative. And it rises to a clearly symbolic resonance when Maisie tells Sir Claude, as they negotiate,

‘I’ll sit on that old bench where you see the gold Virgin.’ (*WMK* 254)

The original ‘gilt’ has turned to ‘gold’ – or *is* gold for Maisie, and is visible from the battered old bench.

An equal significance comes to gather round the pastoral ‘old green bench’ early in Book V of *The Awkward Age*, which offers the young heroine Nanda, visiting Mitchy’s rented house at Mertle, ‘in the most English way in the world, the color-spot of an old red village and the tower of an old gray church’ (170). Her ambiguous friend Vanderbank turns up and ‘She made room for him on the bench’. After their extended, careful, poignant exchange they don’t get far before bumping into Mr. Longdon, who when he hears they have been ‘Only talking—on a bench’, insists that ‘Well, I want to talk on a bench!’ (180). Which is what they do, in a discussion of central importance, for the whole of the Book’s second chapter (Ch. XVII)—the paired scenes here coming consecutively in the course of an English country summer afternoon.

Some of James’s most remembered scenes, one realises, take place on benches, though not all as overtly and symbolically marked as these in *Maisie* and *The Awkward Age*. In his rendering of what was the germinal, first-conceived, scene of *The Ambassadors*, where an ageing American in a Parisian garden urges another, younger American not to waste his youth, James finds a bench convenient, and his hero finds a convenient bench – a private one, but at an interesting mixed, grand but Bohemian party. In the artist Gloriani’s garden, Strether, the unworldly New England widower who has been sent out by his rich *fiancée* Mrs Newsome to rescue her son Chad from the clutches of a presumed bad woman, in Chapter 11 finally meets the mysterious Madame de Vionnet:

They moved away from the house, and, with eyes on a bench at some distance, he proposed that they should sit down. (*Amb* 131)

Their dialogue as summarised by James is disconcertingly bland. The unhappily married, notionally unavailable Marie de Vionnet is on her best behaviour.

And wherein was her talk, during their moments on the bench together, not the same as would have been found adequate for a Woollett garden-party?—unless perhaps, truly, in not being quite so bright. (*Amb* 132)

Then the conversation is brought to a close:

A lady and two gentlemen had meanwhile, however, approached their bench, and this accident stayed for the time further developments. (*Amb* 133)

Madame de Vionnet is carried off by a Duchess and a gentleman who is possibly an Ambassador, at Chad's behest in fact (or so we can assume), and poor Strether is left alone to his bench – a bench of desolation, for a moment, we might say; but then a bench of cogitation:

He sank again upon his bench and, while his eyes followed the party, reflected, as he had done before, on Chad's strange communities. He sat there alone for five minutes, with plenty to think of; above all with his sense of having suddenly been dropped by a charming woman overlaid now by other impressions and in fact quite cleared and indifferent. (*Amb* 134)

Chad's amiable friend the young American Little Bilham comes to fill the gap, and 'sat down beside him' (*Amb* 134). Strether's great speech which follows, then,

including his famous words to Little Bilham ('Live all you can; it's a mistake not to' (*Amb* 135)), arises from his thoughts on the bench, and are spoken on a bench. The chance to step aside from the course of one's life, to take a philosophical or large view of the shape of things, is one of the advantages a bench affords. The speech is heartfelt and stirring – Little Bilham is moved – and when Chad brings Jeanne de Vionnet, daughter of Marie, to meet Strether as if *she* were the object of his supposed 'virtuous attachment', and Strether is charmed, Little Bilham, perhaps morally squeamish about the deceit, slips away. Chad has promised to return.

Chad was not in fact on this occasion to keep his promise of coming back; but Miss Gostrey had soon presented herself with an explanation of his failure. There had been reasons at the last for his going off with *ces dames*; and he had asked her with much instance to come out and take charge of their friend. She did so, Strether felt as she took her place beside him, in a manner that left nothing to desire. He had dropped back on his bench, alone again for a time, and the more conscious for little Bilham's defection of his unexpressed thought... (*Amb* 140)

The bench is here a prime site of speech and of the unsaid. Four chapters later, James is reverting to the scene in a way that is tagged as belonging to this particular item of furniture, as Strether

remembered the tone into which he had been betrayed on the garden-bench at the sculptor's reception. (*Amb* 174)

One might, moreover, see a subliminal rhyme between this scene of one kind of vision, of one kind of French painterly set-piece (a garden-party), and a later one, for many readers the next most memorable in the novel, where Strether sees his ideal dismantled, revealed as something he hadn't allowed himself to expect or

assume. He retreats to the country from the dizzying complications and compromises and pressures of the situation in Paris, and finds himself in the rustic world of the much-cherished, fondly-remembered Lambinet painting he coveted in his youth. At the Cheval Blanc, an inn overlooking the river, James has Strether repeat his movement at Gloriani's, out from interior to garden, and to a bench:

Monsieur might meanwhile, if he liked, pass into the garden, such as it was, where she would serve him, should he wish it—for there were tables and benches in plenty—a ‘bitter’ before his repast. Here... he would have the *agrément* of the river. (*Amb* 348)

Strether gets the *agrément*, James tells us, ‘of a small and primitive pavilion that, at the garden’s edge, almost overhung the water’.

It consisted of little more than a platform, slightly raised, with a couple of benches and a table, a protecting rail and projecting roof; but it raked the full gray-blue stream... (*Amb* 348)

In other words, sitting there he is on a bench, a bench with a view of the river, on which he then sees ‘exactly the right thing’ drifting round the bend, a rowing-boat with a gentleman in shirt-sleeves holding the oars and ‘a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol’ (*Amb* 350). When Strether sees these presumable lovers – and is about to be plunged into the scene of recognition and embarrassing revelation that follows – he has risen from the bench for a better view – but the echo has been awakened, I think, and the reader, consciously or unconsciously, is ready to associate this scene of further disillusion with the earlier one.

The discovery by James that this hints at, of the potential of the bench as a narrative and symbolic element (among many others), a structural tool for evoking

spans of time and processes of change, goes back at least to *The Portrait of a Lady*. You not only can't step in the same stream twice, you can't, philosophically speaking, sit on the same bench twice – and certainly the same *you* can't. However, it might *seem* that you can, and that's just why, as it were, James has his characters return to the same bench. 'The Diary of a Man of Fifty', just before *The Portrait*, may be where he realises this possible function – of apparent identity bringing home differences. At any rate, here's Isabel at Gardencourt early in the novel:

She had walked into the park, in company with the sociable Bunchie, and after strolling about for some time, in a manner at once listless and restless, had seated herself on a garden-bench, within sight of the house, beneath a spreading beech, where, in a white dress ornamented with black ribbons, she formed, among the flickering shadows, a very graceful and harmonious image. (PL 95)

Isabel here on her bench is displayed as 'a graceful and harmonious image.' She thus registers like the Dormers 'almost as much on exhibition as if they had been hung on the line' in *The Tragic Muse*. Isabel's image lodges in the reader's mind for later: this is one of the 'portraits' we are offered of her. And much later James gives us the pay-off, at the climax, after Ralph's funeral and just before Caspar Goodwood comes along to sit down beside her, and give her the sense 'that no one had ever been so close to her as that':

At the end of a few minutes she found herself near a rustic bench, which, a moment after she had looked at it, struck her as an object recognised. It was not simply that she had seen it before, nor even that she had sat upon it; it was that in this spot something important had happened to her—that the place had an air of association. Then she remembered that she had been sitting there six years before, when a servant brought her from the house the

letter in which Caspar Goodwood informed her that he had followed her to Europe; and that when she had read that letter she looked up to hear Lord Warburton announcing that he should like to marry her. It was indeed an historical, an interesting, bench; she stood and looked at it as if it might have something to say to her. She would not sit down on it now—she felt rather afraid of it. She only stood before it, and while she stood, the past came back to her in one of those rushing waves of emotion by which people of sensibility are visited at odd hours. The effect of this agitation was a sudden sense of being very tired, under the influence of which she overcame her scruples and sank into the rustic seat. (*PL* 563)

And James makes a point of turning this moment on the bench into a painterly image that will contrast with the earlier one: ‘you would at least have allowed that at this moment she was the image of a victim of idleness. Her attitude had a singular absence of purpose; her hands, hanging at her sides, lost themselves in the folds of her black dress; her eyes gazed vaguely before her.’ As with other elements of novelistic plotting and treatment that James seems to discover in *The Portrait* with a sense of revelation, there’s a touch of manifesto-like explicitness, a portentousness, in the way the point is marked, in case the reader misses it. ‘It was indeed an historical, an interesting, bench’ – in fact, James hints that like Tennyson’s Talking Oak it might become a Talking Bench, speaking to his heroine of her innermost feelings.

We can see that in *The Golden Bowl* James redeploys the Gardencourt bench, as it were; at Fawns, another English country house occupied by Americans. First, in Ch. IX, Maggie and Adam make their way to it, to get away from visitors and for the discussion which ends in their bringing back Charlotte Stant:

A bench had been placed, long ago, beneath a great oak that helped to crown a mild eminence, and the ground sank away below it, to rise again, opposite, at a distance sufficient to enclose the solitude and figure a bosky horizon... They knew the bench; it was ‘sequestered’—they had praised it for that together, before, and liked the word. (*GB I* 162)

Compared with the oceanic views of other benches, and their public accessibility, this private one – in keeping with the restricted but intense scope of this novel – has a bounded view and ‘a bosky horizon’, drawing the circle within which relations happily appear to stop.

And then near the end of the novel, in Ch. XXXVII, when the same visitors, Dotty and Kitty and the now-harmless Mrs Rance, reappear, Adam and Maggie take

just such another stroll together, away from the rest of the party and off into the park, as had asserted its need to them on the occasion of the previous visit of these anciently more agitating friends—that of their long talk, on a sequestered bench beneath one of the great trees, when the particular question had come up for them the then purblind discussion of which, at their enjoyed leisure, Maggie had formed the habit of regarding as the ‘first beginning’ of their present situation. The whirligig of time had thus brought round for them again, on their finding themselves face to face while the others were gathering for tea on the terrace, the same odd impulse quietly to ‘slope’. (*GB II* 260)

As in *The Portrait*, the recurrence (‘just such’) is present to the mind of the protagonist; and the bounded view the bench yields is understood now as having made them ‘purblind’ – the scene becomes sheltered, Edenic, ignorant – but

correspondingly the great tree becomes a tree of knowledge of which they have eaten. The allusions are both to dark moments in Shakespearean fifth acts. ‘First beginning’ is almost certainly, I’d suggest, the first Quarto of *Hamlet*, very close to the end: ‘*Horatio*: Content your selues, Ile shew to all, the ground, / The first beginning of this Tragedy’ (*Hamlet*). And the whirligig of time is Feste in *Twelfth Night* 5.1.375: ‘thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.’

At any rate, a few pages later, as they talk, Maggie’s sense of the past communicates itself to Adam; the scene is an echo of the one long years before.

She had awakened, his daughter, the echo; and on the bench there, as before, he nodded his head amusedly, he kept nervously shaking his foot.
(*GB* II 266)

For us too, then, amusedly, nervously, as we sit and contemplate this Jamesian array of them, each bench becomes an echo of others, a generic trope but also a concrete (or wooden, or stone) site-specific object – where a scene (pictorial) is implied, but also where a scene (intimate or even internal) can be enriched, doubled, deepened.

Many of these benches, finally, are echoed and at least partly subsumed in the last bench to figure in a finished fiction by James, ‘The Bench of Desolation’ (1910), in which ‘bench’ occurs nineteen times, thirteen of them in what becomes a refrain, the titular phrase. It’s a story which with its eternal triangle and its location on a bench seems to anticipate Beckett’s *Come and Go* of 1965 (where it’s three women, and the secret they whisper of is even more enigmatic). The ‘Bench’ in the story is intimately tied to a legal case, and Herbert Dodd, the victim-perpetrator who sits on it, is as much a defendant on a *sellette* as a presiding judge.

Dodd, the feeble, oversensitive, snobbish, self-pitying hero of the tale, is a shabby-genteel inhabitant of a self-consciously respectable English South-Coast town named Properley, and becomes the casualty of a ruinous (to him) breach-of-promise case when, after a misunderstanding and recriminations, he breaks off his engagement to the confident, unrefined Kate Cookham. To pay her anything like ‘Four Hundred Pounds down’ he has to sell his antiquarian bookshop and take a dismal job clerking at the Gas Works – and he takes up with another, more congenially genteel woman, Nan Drury. He and Nan resentfully discuss Kate Cookham as

they sat together, when time and freedom served, on one of the very last, the far westward, benches of the interminable sea-front. (*JC* 354)

Here is the bench, the ultimate James bench, we might say, with its prospect of grey-green sea and the spur that is locally known as ‘the “land’s end”’ (*JC* 354). It’s Dodd’s habitual place – and continues to be with Nan, whom he marries, but who lacks the energy that might cheer his melancholy:

It little mattered, meanwhile, if on their bench of desolation, all that summer—and it may be added for summers and summers, to say nothing of winters, there and elsewhere, to come—she did give way to her artless habit of not contradicting him enough... (*JC* 357)

The marriage he has preferred becomes a grotesque Beckettian routine, but he achieves a

final command of detachment, on the bench of desolation (where each successive fact of his dire case regularly cut itself out black, yet of senseless silhouette, against the red west) in respect to poor Nan’s flat infelicities,

which for the most part kept no pace with the years or with change, but only shook like hard peas in a child's rattle, the same peas always, of course, so long as the rattle didn't split open with usage or from somebody's act of irritation. (*JC* 359)

In due course, Nan, and their child, die; but, we learn,

With all that had come and gone the bench of desolation was still there, just as the immortal flush of the westward sky kept hanging its indestructible curtain. (*JC* 360)

As R. P. Blackmur says in 'The Country of the Blue', 'The bench of desolation is where you sit still with your fate – that of which you cannot be deprived' (72). It becomes Dodd's solitary perch, its title justified by his bleakness:

he would drop down on it, the bench of desolation—which was what he, and he only, made it by sad adoption; where, for that matter, moreover, once he had settled at his end, it was marked that nobody else ever came to sit. (*JC* 364)

Kate, we later discover, first encountered Dodd in his bookshop and then 'found him sequestered and accessible' on this same bench; it's called 'their old place of tryst' (*JC* 381, 389). Now, years on, she reappears there, and finds him again.

Yes, he had come back there to flop, by long custom, upon the bench of desolation *as* the man in the whole place, precisely, to whom nothing worth more than tuppence could happen; whereupon, in the grey desert of his consciousness, the very earth had suddenly opened and flamed. (*JC* 367)

(This, incidentally, makes Dodd a downmarket version of James's earlier hero John Marcher in 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903), who realises at the climax that he is 'the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened' (CS5 540).) Kate now announces that in some unrevealed fashion she has turned his money (he couldn't raise the full £400) into more than a thousand pounds. She offers it to him, no strings attached, an offer which after all he and his have suffered is 'at once a fairy-tale and a nightmare' (JC 383).

The perspiration broke out on his forehead. 'Everything's mine?' he quavered as for the deep piercing pain of it.

'Everything!' said Kate Cookham.

So it told him how she had loved him—but with the tremendous effect at once of its only glaring out at him from the whole thing that it was verily she, a thousand times over, who, in the exposure of his youth and his vanity, had, on the bench of desolation, the scene of yesterday's own renewal, left for him no forward steps to take. (JC 381)

The unmovingness of the bench in space feels like an irony at the shifts of the whirligig of time: it's too late, Herbert feels, for anything to be redeemed, Nan and their child having died *because* of the poverty Kate's claim has left him in. The 'thousand times over' of Kate's original lawsuit cancel out, as it were, the more than a thousand pounds of her offer. At the tale's poignantly ambivalent conclusion, we have furthermore an echo of Caspar Goodwood's closing probably incredulous response in *The Portrait of a Lady* at Henrietta Stackpole's shallow optimism about his future prospects with Isabel: 'On which he looked up at her.' (PL 569) Here Kate seems to Dodd a woman who means too much, more than he can bear.

He waited a moment, dropping again on the seat. So, while she still stood, he looked up at her; with the sense somehow that there were too many things and that they were all together, terribly, irresistibly, doubtless blessedly, in her eyes and her whole person; which thus affected him for the moment as more than he could bear. He leaned forward, dropping his elbows to his knees and pressing his head on his hands. So he stayed, saying nothing; only, with the sense of her own sustained, renewed and wonderful action, knowing that an arm had passed round him and that he was held. She was beside him on the bench of desolation. (*JC* 393)

‘Doubtless blessedly’ conveys Dodd’s sense that to embrace the happy ending Kate announces he would have to betray the memory of his family and their fate – and yet in his posture of despair, he can feel her ‘wonderful action’ – ‘he was held’ – and is no longer alone on the eternal bench. It is a fitting tableau with which to end this discussion of the manifold uses of the bench in James – as a place where significance accrues, where a scene can be *made*, and which becomes at last a full-blown symbol, we may feel, of only ‘too many things’.

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