

“Wondrous Texture”: Henry James’s Brocades

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Summary

This essay begins with a brief history of the cultural status of brocade in the 19th century, and then offers a critical account of the ways in which brocade features in Henry James’s work. James’s association of brocade with the aristocracy and the metropole, and his treatment of it as both an embodied object and a metaphor, reveals the textile to be a significant index of a number of his abiding concerns. The essay concludes with a consideration of how brocade both supports and contradicts poststructuralist positions about the referentiality of things in James’s writing, as well as of how brocade provides a fitting analogy for his later style.

Opsomming

Hierdie essay begin met 'n kort geskiedenis van die kulturele status van brokaat in die 19de eeu, en bied dan 'n kritiese uiteensetting van die wyses waarop brokaat in Henry James se werk aangewend word. James se vereenselwiging van brokaat met die aristokrasie en die metropool, en sy behandeling daarvan as beide 'n beliggaamde voorwerp en 'n metafoor, toon dat die stof as beduidende indeks van 'n aantal van sy standhoudende belangstellings dien. Die essay word afgesluit met 'n oorweging van hoe brokaat poststrukuralistiese beskouings aangaande die wyse waarop aspekte in James se werke na dinge buite hulleself verwys, sowel steun as weerlê, en hoe brokaat 'n paslike analogie vir sy latere styl voorsien.

Henry James, if Desmond MacCarthy is to be believed, could “stand a great deal of gold” (Edel 1985: 646); it would appear that he could stand a good quantity of brocade, as well. When, in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), the “very fingers of [Fleda Vetch’s] glove [thrill] at the touch of an old velvet brocade, a wondrous texture” (SP: 80) that defines a sofa that Mrs Gereth has purloined from Poynton and installed at Ricks, Fleda undergoes a sensual, ethical and self-shaping experience that is both enjoyed and suffered by a surprising number of James’s characters, as well as by James himself.

Brocade finds its distinction and definition in the method of its construction, in which gold and silver wire, or gorgeous material threads, are woven into the weft of a base fabric (usually silk or velvet) so as to create raised patterns or images; as such, it offers a glorious challenge to two dimensionality. It is also densely troped with associations of history, taste

and rare cultural value. By the time James began his writing career, brocade was in many respects quite literally a thing of the past: in 1831, George Porter, in his *Treatise on the Origin, Progressive Improvement, and Present State of the Silk Manufacture*, wrote that the

highly ornamented and rich brocades in which our great-grandmothers used to find such delight have now entirely disappeared from use, and, indeed, scarcely exist for us, except in the verses of our poets or the essays of satirists of those days. It would be useless, therefore, to attempt giving a description of the mode of manufacturing articles so apparently consigned to oblivion, if it were not for the probability that, in some of the ceaseless mutations of fashion, these sumptuous fabrics may yet once again lay claim to admiration in our drawing-rooms, to the exclusion of the less substantial and less gaudy finery with which the fickle leaders of public taste are now satisfied.

(p. 287)

Nearly a century later it would appear that brocade had lost none of its nostalgic evocation of lustre. Writing in 1918, the American connoisseur of decorative art, George Hunter, described brocade in his impressive volume, *Decorative Textiles*, as one of the “aristocrats among shuttle fabrics made for the decoration of walls and furniture”, a status conferred at least in part by virtue of its physical texture and complexity – unlike, for example, its close relative, damask, whose “distinctive characteristic”, in Hunter’s opinion, is “*flatness*” and whose patterns are “*simple*” (p. 1; italics in original).

However, brocade is not only “aristocratic” in the sense of its physical complexity, but also in terms of its associations. As Richard Glazier recorded in *Historic Textile Fabrics* (1923), brocade’s noble origins were established on the ancient looms of Japan, China, India and Iran, from whence were made elaborate, dazzling, coveted ceremonial garments and hangings in the service of royal patronage. It reached its European zenith in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and in the courts of Versailles in eighteenth-century France. In early eighteenth-century England, silks and brocades became freighted with contested cultural value when, as J.R McCulloch described in his *Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical, and Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (1841), embargoes were placed upon the import of foreign textiles in order to protect the Spitalfields weaving industry (p. 488). As a consequence of these prohibitions, “inventions and discoveries [were rendered] of comparatively rare occurrence in the [English] silk trade” (p. 489); moreover, forbidden, foreign brocades became all the more coveted, and a lively smuggling trade developed. In addition, the introduction of the Jacquard loom in 1801 meant that brocades could be manufactured in greater quantities and with relatively unskilled

labour. In 1831, Porter would judge this development to be welcome progress:

In the course of the very few years which have elapsed since its first introduction into this country, the Jacquard loom has entirely taken the place of every other method of figured silk weaving, and has been, in no small degree, instrumental in bringing that curious and beautiful art to its present state of advancement. The elaborate specimens of brocade which used to be brought forward as evidence of skilfulness on the part of the Spitalfields weavers of former days were produced by only the most skilful among the craft, who bestowed upon their performances the most painful amount of labour. The most beautiful products of the loom in the present day are, however, accomplished by men possessing only the ordinary rate of skill, while the labour attendant upon the actual weaving is but little more than that demanded for making the plainest goods. The carefulness and skill now required in preparing the various arrangements of the harness in the loom ... are out of all proportion less than were called for before the introduction of Monsieur Jacquard's invention.

(p. 245)

What Porter could not have foreseen, however, was how the increased production of silks would serve to make less accessible, pre-Jacquard weaves even more desirable. This distinction between the worth of the old and the new is clearly to be discerned in Hunter’s early twentieth-century assessments, in which he unashamedly privileges origin and pedigree over copy, and rarity over plenitude. He scoffs that cotton brocades, for instance, which were made possible by machine manufacture, “are, of course, mere imitations, that by their very existence glorify the superior virtues of what they imitate” (p. 1) and is firmly of the opinion that industrial advances did nothing to add to brocade’s aesthetic value: “Once the pattern is punched on a series of Jacquard cards, and the loom is mounted, it is just like playing a pianola or working a hand organ. Repetition is easy and costs little. Diligence is more important than intelligence, and the weaver need not have the slightest art knowledge or feeling” (p. 4). Later, he writes that the “possibilities of the newly invented Jacquard attachments were perverted. Apparently the overcoming of textile difficulties was more sought than the production of beauty ... in other words the [period after Louis XVI] was as much distinguished for lack of taste as the French periods immediately preceding for the possession of taste This lack of taste continued to overshadow Europe during the whole of the nineteenth century” (p. 53).

Given brocade’s physical qualities, its aristocratic affiliations and its circulation within cultural and aesthetic economies, it is perhaps not surprising that its embossing elaborations weave their way throughout the material world of Henry James’s texts, where its luxuriant colours and textures upholster key moments in his novels as well as his non-fiction. James seems well attuned to the same superior aesthetic, commercial and

figurative values that Hunter attributes to brocade in *Decorative Fabrics*, so much so that in his writing the textile becomes *textual*, and acquires a meaning that exceeds the merely ornamental – or at least puts the lie to the implications of superficiality that the phrase “merely ornamental” suggests.

The young Henry James’s first recorded glimpse of brocade can be found in a telling reference in *A Small Boy and Others* (1913). Describing his family home at 58 West Fourteenth Street, New York, James recollects how his “attachment” to Italy was born of his parents’ taste for interior decoration, which extended to a

classic marble bust on a pedestal between the two back windows, the figure, a part of the figure, of a lady with her head crowned with vine-leaves and her hair disposed with a laxity that was emulated by the front of her dress, as my next younger brother exposed himself to my derision by calling the bit of brocade (simulated by the chisel) that, depending from a single shoulder-strap, so imperfectly covered her. This image was known and admired among us as the Bacchante; she had come to us straight from an American studio in Rome, and I see my horizon flush again with the first faint dawn of conscious appreciation, or in other words of the critical spirit, while two or three of the more restrictive friends of the house find our marble lady very “cold” for a Bacchante.

(SB: 210-211)

The impression that the “imperfectly” covered female form had on the twelve-year old James might be measured by his recollection of her rather wanton “laxity”, the fact that the “bit of brocade” hanging tantalisingly (if irremovably) from a “single shoulder strap” does little to protect her modesty, and the transference of her “exposure” to the safer object of his ridiculed younger brother, Wilky. The suggestiveness of the “bit of brocade” and the statue together inspire James’s first adolescent “flush” of conscious appreciation; they are also markers of a romanticised Italy and an Old World that will beguile him from this moment on.

The cold, marble, representative scrap of the James’s Bacchante in New York would soon bloom into opulent colour when the family travelled to Paris in 1856, where their rented home benefited (or suffered) from “the redundancy of mirror and clock and ormolu vase, from the irrepressibility of the white and gold panel, from that merciless elegance of tense red damask, above all, which made the gilt-framed backs of sofa and chair as sumptuous, no doubt, but as sumptuously stiff, as the brocaded walls” (SB: 257). During this visit to Paris, the impressionable James was to set his eyes for the first time upon the paintings of Paul Veronese, the “great Venetian decorator” whose “colonnades and brocades ... sweeping contours and silver tones” would cause “one’s eyes [to] have been dazzled forever” (PE: 85). No doubt one of these works was Veronese’s *Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562-1563; housed since 1798 in the Musée du Louvre), in which the brocades of the

wedding guests gleam and shimmer from the canvas in an kaleidoscope of colours, textures and iridescences that profanely outshine those of Christ’s holy aura.¹

James’s eyes would be “dazzled” once more, in 1869, when he saw Veronese’s *Rape of Europa* (1580) in the Doge’s Palace in Venice. The painting drove James into a near-frenzy of appreciation: “it is impossible to look at it without aching with envy. Nowhere else in art is such a temperament revealed; never did inclination and opportunity combine to express such enjoyment. The mixture of flowers and gems and brocade, of blooming flesh and shining sea and waving groves, of youth, health, movement, desire – all this is the brightest vision that ever descended upon the soul of a painter” (*IH*: 31). In a letter to his brother William he would describe the painting in such a way as to suggest that the cold Bacchante from New York had at last come, erotically and blowzily to life: she is, James writes, “a great rosy blond, gorgeous with brocade and pearls and bouncing with salubrity and a great mellow splendour of sea and sky and nymphs and flowers do their best to demoralize the world into a herd of Théophile Gautiers” (*LHJ* 1:138).²

From his first visit to France onwards, James’s European writings are accented with references to brocade and its historic connotations. In *Italian Hours* (1909), for instance, the glories of Venice are marked synecdochically by “old lace and old brocade and old furniture” (*IH*: 74), and in Florence, describing the Medici palace and the Boboli Gardens, James apprehends

(perhaps on too easy terms, you may think) a sense of *history* that takes away my breath. Generations of Medici have stood at these closed windows, embroidered and brocaded according to their period, and held *fêtes champêtres* and floral games on the greensward, beneath the mouldering

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1. Christopher Newman will gaze upon this painting in *The American* (1877); and while Veronese’s brocades are not mentioned, they undoubtedly play a role in Newman’s appreciation of the work as representing an ideal (that he shall never actualise): “he found the picture entertaining; it had an illusion for him; it satisfied his conception, which was ambitious, of what a splendid banquet should be” (*TA*: 11).
 2. Veronese’s brocades appear once again, in his essay “From Chambéry to Milan” (1875). After complaining that Turin has little to boast of, he observes that there is “nothing left to visit but the Museum of pictures. The Turin Gallery, which is large and well arranged, is the fortunate owner of three or four masterpieces; a couple of magnificent Van Dycks and a couple of Paul Veroneses; the latter a Queen of Sheba and a Feast at the House of Levi, – the usual splendid combination of brocades, grandees, and marble colonnades dividing skies *de turquoise malade*, as Théophile Gautier says” (*TS*: 76).

hemicycle. And the Medici were great people! But what remains of it all now is a mere tone in the air, a faint sigh in the breeze, a vague expression in things, a passive – or call it rather, perhaps, to be fair, a shyly pathetic responsive – accessibility to the yearning guess. Call it much or little, the ineffaceability of this deep stain of experience, it is the interest of old places and the bribe to the brooding analyst.

(IH: 427)

Brocade figures here quite heavy-handedly as something of a master trope for Europe, empire and luxurious, opulent, history-saturated Old World – a lack of referential subtlety that James himself seems ruefully to acknowledge in his revealingly accurate confession that his imagination is engaged “on too easy terms”.³ This heavy-handedness is made all the more laboured because his enthusiasm for brocade’s aristocratic reference is easily matched by his disdain for any attempt to recontextualise it. James is deeply sceptical of any attempt on the part of America to “scatter abroad again this seed of the eventual human soul of a place” (IH: 427), as he writes at the end of the passage about the Boboli gardens, and he is pitying of the “young American painter unperplexed by the mocking, elusive soul of things” (IH: 74) represented by Venice’s old brocades. Such scepticism is made

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3. Brocade is as reductively emblematic of the European aristocratic idyll in James’s 1876 description of a painting by Boldini: “The figures are very small – they belong to the class of what the French call *bonshommes*; but their animation, expressiveness, and grace, the shimmer of their brocades and velvets, the gleam of their tense silk stockings, the way they hollow their backs and turn out their toes, are all extraordinary and delightful. The artist has a real divination of the costume of the time and the way it must have been worn” (PS: 112). A similarly naive use of brocade can be found in “A Passionate Pilgrim” (1875), in the bewitched American narrator’s imagined reconstitution the past at Lockley Park: “the scene had a beautiful old-time air: the peacock flaunting in the foreground like the genius of stately places; the broad terrace, which flattered an innate taste of mine for all deserted walks where people may have sat after heavy dinners to drink coffee in old Sevres and where the stiff brocade of women’s dresses may have rustled over grass or gravel; and far around us, with one leafy circle melting into another, the timbered acres of the park ...” (CS I: 573). Ironically, James had little tolerance for any tendency in other writers to rely too heavily on brocade’s aristocratic associations. In a review of Madame de Sabran’s letters, he writes that while they are to be treasured for “the fascination of the background” (FPN: 369) they provide, an “acute sense of untidiness is brought home to us as we move from group to group. Their velvets and brocades are admirable, but they are worn with rather too bold a confidence in their intrinsic merit, and we arrive at the conviction that powder and pomatum are not a happy combination in lady’s tresses, and that there are few things less attractive than soiled satin and tarnished embroidery” (FPN: 370).

piercingly clear in a central passage from “New York Revisited”, in *The American Scene* (1907). James describes how the Waldorf Astoria stages itself (and by association, American society) “promiscuously”: it “paraded through halls and saloons in which art and history, in masquerading dress, muffled almost to suffocation as in the gold brocade of their pretended majesties and their conciliatory graces, stood smirking on its passage with the last cynicism of hypocrisy” (AS: 103-104). James’s cultural conservatism – not to say snobbishness – causes him to pack this sentence with as many synonyms for artifice as he can muster: “parade”, “masquerade”, “pretence”, “hypocrisy”. The Astoria, he implies, has stripped brocade of its sedimented pedigree, and shamelessly colonized it to confer distinction on the basis of wealth rather than class or history or taste; it is used to “feed” the Astorian chimera with “the finest illusions about itself” (AS: 103).

This pattern of association, in which brocade is allied with the metropole, aristocracy, history and Old World values, and, when placed within the American periphery, figures as a sign of incongruity or the alien, is used to rich effect in James’s fiction. In one or two cases, brocade’s metaphoric purchase is fixed quite rigidly by James, as it tends to be in his non-fiction; for example when we note that other textiles – silks, velvets, linens and cottons, even satin and damask – are all to be found in the homes and on the bodies of James’s American characters; but, as if to underscore the metropole’s exclusive rights over brocade, it fails to make a westward crossing over the Atlantic with any conviction. James’s archetypical Americans – Austin Sloper (*Washington Square*, 1880), Basil Ransom (*The Bostonians*, 1886) and Adam Verver (*The Golden Bowl*, 1904) – have wardrobes and homes that seem pointedly brocade-free. James makes the futility of attempts to introduce brocade into the Puritan world dramatically clear at the end of *The Europeans* (1878), when a fretful, discontented Eugenia intuits how her brocades and all that they signify have failed to impress her decidedly unadorned audience:

Eugenia, turning and still holding her candle aloft, only looked about the little sitting room at her gimcracks and curtains and cushions. “My maid shall pack up,” she repeated. “*Bonté divine*, what rubbish! I feel like a strolling actress; these are my ‘properties’”. ... And she gathered up two or three of her dispersed draperies. She glanced at the beautiful brocade, and then, “I don’t see how I can have endured it!” she said.

(E: 171)

James confidently places brocade centre stage at Eugenia’s most self-aware (and most self-critical) moment, knowing that the fabric will stand, with clear metonymic force, for the clutter of cultural stuff, both tangible and intangible, that she has brought to New England, the value of which is dramatically depreciated by the contrasting minimalism of her Puritan

family. It would appear that the “texture of American life” is not only a place characterised, as the young James memorably wrote in *Hawthorne* (1879), by “[n]o sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church ... no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manor, nor old country houses” (*H* 43), but no brocade, either.

The catastrophic potential of unwisely imported brocade, demonstrated in *The Europeans*, is anticipated (with considerably less subtlety) early in James’s fiction. In “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” (1868) a “beautiful piece of white silk, brocaded with heavenly blue and silver”⁴ is sent to Perdita Willoughby by her European fiancé, Arthur Lloyd, much to the chagrin of her sister Viola, also in love with Lloyd and more suited to “carry stiff brocade and masses of heavy lace, such as belong to the toilet of a rich man’s wife”:

Viola got up from her place, and looked at the great shining fabric as it lay spread over the back of a chair. Then she took it up in her hands and felt it, – lovingly, as Perdita could see, – and turned about toward the mirror with it. She let it roll down to her feet, and flung the other end over her shoulder, gathering it in about her waist with her white arm bare to the elbow. She threw back her head, and looked at her image, and a hanging tress of her auburn hair fell upon the gorgeous surface of the silk. It made a dazzling picture. The women standing about uttered a little “Ah!” of admiration. “Yes, indeed,” said Viola, quietly, “blue is my color”. But Perdita could see that her fancy had been stirred, and that she would now fall to work and solve all their silken riddles. And indeed she behaved very well, as Perdita, knowing her insatiable love of millinery, was quite ready to declare. Yards and yards of lovely silks and satins, of muslins, velvets and laces, passed through her cunning hands, without a word of envy coming from her lips. Thanks to her efforts, when the wedding-day came Perdita was prepared to espouse more of the vanities of life than any fluttering young bride who had yet challenged the sacramental blessing of a New England divine.

(*CS I*: 251-252)

The introduction of the brocade into the New England Puritan space is an intrusion that sets off a number of fatal consequences. The sight and touch of it compels the hitherto passive Viola to work, not only as a seamstress, but as someone determined to usurp her sister’s matrimonial status – her

4. James might have had in mind the “satin brocade, in two shades of blue, trimmed with Honiton lace enough to have fed a whole village for a month” worn by the “saucy” courtesan Carabine, in De Balzac’s 1846 novel, *Cousine Bette* (De Balzac 394). James had read De Balzac in his youth (Horne 2000: 2; Hutchinson 2012: 23) and refers to him in an 1867 review of Anne E. Manning’s historical novels in the *Nation* (Gale 1989: 52), published just a few months before “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in February 1868.

“cunning hands” suggesting not only skill with a needle, but deception and subterfuge: from now on she will cultivate an identity as a “devilish fine woman” (*CS I*: 261). The brocade also entwines the naïve Perdita into its postlapsarian, Old World embrace: as Viola sensually flaunts her auburn hair, bare white arm and thrown-back head, she and the brocade together forcefully embody of the “vanities of life”, anathema to the Puritan ethic, but which Perdita now recognises as imperative to “espouse” along with her fiancé. On her deathbed, Perdita acknowledges the precise nature and depths of her sister’s envy and deception, and the moral darkness that accompany the “vanities of life”. This recognition is accompanied by an insight about brocade and all that it signifies that easily matches, even transcends, that of the Baroness at the end of *The Europeans*. Asking her husband to preserve her jewels and clothes for their daughter, she adds: “I’ve given [Viola] that blue and silver; it was meant for her; I wore it only once; I looked ill in it” (*CS I*: 255). This act gives the false impression that Perdita is seeking ressimilation into aesthetic and moral purity; in fact, as she well knows, bequeathing the brocade to her sister is an accusation and a revengeful curse that inaugurates a chain of events that will end in Viola’s death.

By contrast to this wholesale circumscription of brocade’s signifying power in the colony, James offers a more understated treatment when peripheral Americans make the eastward transition to the metropole. The extent and success of their assimilation is, on more than one occasion, measured by the degree to which brocade is naturalised in their homes or about their person. For instance, when Christopher Newman, in *The American* (1877), having returned to Paris from Poitiers, frets over his failure to overcome the Bellegarde’s continued resistance to his American charms, and ponders over how he might make most use of Henri-Urbain’s incriminating death-bed accusation:

He went home, and feeling rather tired – nursing a vengeance was, it must be confessed, a rather fatiguing process; it took a good deal out of one – flung himself into one of his brocaded fauteuils, stretched his legs, thrust his hands into his pockets, and, while he watched the reflected sunset fading from the ornate house-tops on the opposite side of the Boulevard, began mentally to compose a cool epistle to Madame de Bellegarde.

(*TA*: 310)

The awkward sprawling of this “long, lean, ... muscular” (*TA*: 1) and “superlative American” (*TA*: 2) over the delicate contours of the brocaded fauteuil (the dainty, neoclassical chair of choice for the decorators of Versailles) makes us fear for its structural integrity and vividly stages Newman’s fatal cultural and ethical incongruity. His relation to a family that is occupied in the business of industrial manufacture of “vulgar” objects (his brother-in-law manufactures “india rubber on a colossal scale” (*TA*: 133), when viewed against the rare fabric of brocade, evokes a contrast of things

so striking and apparently insuperable as to index unmistakably the conflicts and concerns of the novel as a whole. Furthermore, the “brocaded fauteuils” may be “his”, but the possession implied here is considerably undercut by the fact that the apartment is neither owned nor furnished by Newman himself: the rooms are rented, “selected for him by Tom Tristram, in accordance with the latter’s estimate of what he called his social position” (TA: 72). Newman has “no taste for upholstery; he had even no very exquisite sense of comfort or convenience. He had a relish for luxury and splendour, but it was satisfied by rather gross contrivances. He scarcely knew a hard chair from a soft one, and he possessed a talent for stretching his legs which quite dispensed with adventitious facilities” (TA: 73-74): Newman has, critically, no sense of what upholstery (and by implication, brocade) *means* in this European context. His inability to know “a hard chair from a soft one” implies to the reader a naivety about the how things can signify, as well as indexes his cultural naivety more generally. Newman ironically protests that he regards himself “utterly incompetent” as far as the matter of the relationship between ornamentation and “social position” (TA: 72) is concerned: a slightly flippant remark at the beginning of the novel that will acquire significantly darker import by the novel’s end, where the consequences of this ignorance are made abundantly clear. Perhaps appropriately, the “gilded apartments” and their brocades “stand ready to receive him; but they serve only as a spacious residence for Mrs. Bread, who wanders eternally from room to room, adjusting the tassels of the curtains, and keeps her wages, which are regularly brought her by a banker’s clerk, in a great pink Sevres vase on the drawing-room mantel-shelf” (TA: 356). James’s disdain, in *The American Scene*, for the way in which brocade is installed in the Waldorf Astoria as a manifestation of wealth rather than cultural depth can also be heard in his description of Newman’s acquisition of the apartment; in many respects the brocaded fauteuils and the rest of the gilded accommodation “feed” Christopher Newman “with the finest illusions about” himself (AS: 103); but in the end, because it is money, not acculturation, that allows Newman to keep the residence (a fact vividly and ironically symbolised by the wages housed in the “great pink Sevres vase”) the illusion is exposed and the likelihood of any meaningful inclusion obliterated.

By way of contrast, in *The Ambassadors* (1903), the comprehensiveness of Maria Gostrey’s cultural assimilation into the select enclaves of Paris is swiftly assessed by Strether when he observes the evidence of her “little *entresol* of the Quartier Marboef into which she had gathered, as she said, picking them up in a thousand flights and funny little passionate pounces, the makings of a final nest”:

Her compact and crowded little chambers, almost dusky, as they first struck him, with accumulations, represented a supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions. Wherever he looked he saw an old ivory or an

old brocade, and he scarce knew where to sit for fear of a misappliance. The life of the occupant struck him of a sudden as more charged with possession even than Chad’s or than Miss Barrace’s; wide as his glimpse had lately become of the empire of “things”, what was before him still enlarged it; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple. It was the innermost nook of the shrine – as brown as a pirate’s cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects all that caught, through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows. Nothing was clear about them but that they were precious, and they brushed his ignorance with their contempt as a flower, in a liberty taken with him, might have been whisked under his nose’

(*Amb*: 141)

Given what we know about the different values attached to new and old silks in the nineteenth century, the reference to an “old” brocade here is significant, because it suggests that the origins of the brocade predate the manufacture of machine-woven textiles, and clearly signals a cultural heritage with a valorised past. As with the case of Christopher Newman, the brocade and “things” that furnish and define this “empire” stand in striking contradistinction to the “vulgar”, “small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use” (*Amb*: 97) manufactured by the “great industry” owned by the Woollett Newsomes. The terms used to describe the apartment – “empire”, “temple”, “rarity”, “precious”, “gold” and “patches of purple” – constitute a vocabulary of the sacred and imperial; they are also terms, of course, that might be used to describe both the figurative and the embodied status of brocade itself.⁵ The “old brocade” occupies a key function in this description, underscoring the comprehensiveness of Maria Gostrey’s cultural assimilation, her “supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions”. The same might be said, incidentally, of Miss Barrace: notwithstanding Strether’s impression that Miss Gostrey’s

5. The association of brocade with the sacred can also be seen in a passage from James’s essay “From Normandy to the Pyrenees” (1876). James recollects a visit to a church in San Sebastian, in which there “was a life-sized effigy of the Virgin perched upon a table beside the great altar (she appeared to have been walking abroad in a procession), which I looked at with extreme interest. She seemed to me a heroine, a solid Spanish person, as perfect a reality as Don Quixote or Saint Theresa. She was dressed in an extraordinary splendour of laces, brocades and jewels, her coiffure and complexion were of the finest, and she evidently would answer to her name if you should speak to her. Mustering up the stateliest title I could think of, I addressed her as Dona Maria of the Holy Office; whereupon she looked round the great dusky, perfumed church, to see whether we were alone, and then she dropped her fringed eyelids and held out her hand to be kissed. She was the sentiment of Spanish Catholicism; gloomy, yet bedizened, emotional as a woman and mechanical as a doll. After a moment I grew afraid of her, and went slinking away” (*PP*: 179-180).

brocaded apartment indicates a “possession” superior to that of Chad or Miss Barrace, the reader might nevertheless deduce that the depths of Miss Barrace’s “supreme general adjustment” could be sounded by the sign of the “dark blue brocade” (*Amb*: 184) that upholsters the interior of her carriage. However, inasmuch as Maria Gostrey’s and Miss Barrace’s brocades are signs of their successful acculturation, they also contrastingly reflect the alienation of other characters. The impediments to Strether’s own chances of “supreme general adjustment” are suggested by his “scarce knowing where to sit for fear of a misappliance” (in which he demonstrates, at least, an instinctive awareness of material culture that Christopher Newman revealingly lacks in his flinging of himself “into one of his brocaded fauteuils”), and by what he imagines to be the contemptuous taunting of the brocade and other objects. His discomfort and incompatibility are comically matched by that of Waymarsh, when he and his “sacred rage” are bundled up and “whirled away, amid flounces and feathers” (*Amb*: 184) for an adventure in Miss Barrace’s brocaded carriage.

Another instance of how brocade is staged so as to imply the risks and challenges presented to American expatriates when seeking absorption by the European aristocratic metropole is to be found in James’s tale, “Mrs Temperly” (or “Cousin Maria”, 1887), in which the extent of the eponymous matriarch’s triumph in establishing herself as a *dame de Paris* is vouchsafed by the decoration of her hotel room: “The odour of success was in the warm, slightly heavy air, which seemed distilled from rare old fabrics, from brocades and tapestries, from the deep, mingled tones of the pictures, the subdued radiance of cabinets and old porcelain and the jars of winter roses standing in soft circles of lamp-light” (*CS* 3: 171). Mrs Temperly’s salon seems to be a prototype of Maria Gostrey’s; however unlike Maria Gostrey, and more like Christopher Newman, these furnishings are not owned by her, but by the hotel. While her strategy of indicating her “high success” by presenting herself within this context saturated by the old and the rare is, however, apparently much more successful than Newman’s, it is a triumph of assimilation that comes at a price, paid not by Mrs Temperly herself but by her daughter Dora and by Raymond Bestwick, whose fate of thwarted desire matches that of James’s vanquished American.

The use of old brocade as a sign of acculturation into the metropole also appears in *Roderick Hudson* (1875). Never is a compliment paid more generously to a citizen manqué of Europe’s exclusive cultural spaces than when Rowland Mallet observes how swiftly Roderick has

caught, instinctively, the key-note of the Old World ... had divined their logic and measured their proportions, and referred them infallibly to their categories ... he had intuitively ... what one may call the historic consciousness A single glimpse of a social situation of the elder type enabled him to construct the whole, and Rowland more than once assured him that he made him believe in the metempsychosis, and that he must have lived in

European society, in the last century, as a gentleman in a cocked hat and brocaded waistcoat.

(*RH*: 225-226)

Roderick’s imagined entitlement to the fabric of empire is a consequence of his ability to – at least in Rowland’s estimation – recognise and articulate the powerful call of Europe’s “historic consciousness”. Of course, Roderick’s promise of relatively effortless assimilation is fragile. It is, after all, only imagined here; matters are made all the more problematic when it transpires that Rowland’s belief in the “metempsychosis” is misguided, and that Roderick’s failure, ultimately, to understand the deep, disguised cultural codes of Europe will be his undoing. Indeed, Roderick’s fatal fall from a mountainside in a storm is described by James in such a way as to strip his figure of all complication or ornamentation, of all the attributes that attach to brocade: “the rain had spent its torrents on him, and his clothes and hair were wet as if the billows of the ocean had flung him upon the strand The rain had washed away all blood; it was as if Violence, having done her work, had stolen away in shame. Roderick’s face might have shamed her; it looked admirably handsome” (*RH*: 509-510). Moreover, the reference to a “brocaded waistcoat” can be found only in the 1875 edition of the novel. James excised it from following editions – an indication, perhaps, of just how tenuous Roderick’s hold on the fabric of the metropole really is.

That brocade is properly and exclusively the stuff of aristocracy is underscored by James’s references to its unauthorised use as a sign of the inauthentic. We have seen this in his description of the interiors of the Waldorf Astoria and Newman’s Boulevard Hausmann apartment; we see it again, albeit with a much lighter touch, in *The Tragic Muse* (1890), when Miriam Rooth appears “splendid in a brocaded anachronism, a false dress of the beginning of the century, and excited and appealing, imperious, reckless and good-humoured, full of exaggerated propositions, supreme determinations and comic irrelevancies, showed as radiant a young head as the stage had ever seen” (*TM* 3: 80). Miriam’s knowing assumption of brocade as “false dress” here successfully calls our attention to her characteristic (and for Peter Sherringham, frustrating) representivity, and to the entire problem of originality and performance that the novel explores. In alluding to the way in which brocade is assumed in the service of the artificiality of acting here, James may be recollecting an observation made some years earlier, in his essay on the Théâtre Français (1878), in which he regrets that the “present conditions of artistic production [at the theatre] are directly hostile to the formation of actresses as consummate and as complete as Madame Plessy. One may not expect to see her like, any more than one may expect to see a new manufacture of old lace and old brocade. She carried off with her something that the younger generation of actresses will consistently lack – a

certain largeness of style and robustness of art” (*FPN* 438).⁶ The “*new* manufacture of ... *old* brocade”, we might assume, based on the troubled history of brocade production, is either impossible or fraudulent, and the re-emergence of actresses of the Plessy style is, for James equally, and unequivocally, unlikely or illegitimate.

The wrongful use of brocade is put to wonderfully satirical effect in *The Awkward Age* (1899). Early in the novel, we find Harold Brookenham – he who makes liberal and rarely endorsed withdrawals from other’s riches – “lolling” in his mother’s parlour: “Deep in a large brocaded chair with his little legs stuck out to the fire, he was so much at his ease that he was almost flat on his back. She had evidently roused him from sleep, and it took him a couple of minutes – during which, without again looking at him, she directly approached a beautiful old French secretary, a fine piece of the period of Louis Seize – to justify his presence” (*AA*: 39). James’s purpose here seems to be to counterpoint Harold’s oafishness with the finesse of the brocade and the French secretary to make his incongruity in such a setting – to say nothing of his lack of taste and sensitivity – all the more apparent. And in a passage from the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, James admits, ruefully, to being guilty himself of – figuratively at least – brocading with the intention to conceal. Regretting that his “conception” of Rowland’s affection for Mary Garland “remained happier than [his] execution of it”, he identifies his failure to “take more closely home the impression made by Mary Garland. The ground has not been laid for it, and when that is the case one builds all vainly in the air: one patches up one’s superstructure, one paints it in the prettiest colours, one hangs fine old tapestry and rare brocade over its window-sills, one flies emblazoned banners from its roof – the building none the less totters and refuses to stand square” (*RH NYE*: xviii).

The problematic status of the unassimilated subject when situated within brocaded contexts is not limited to the Old World/New World or metropole/colony oppositions in James’s novels, but also characterises other dialectical relations, such as those between occupations or classes. In *The Tragic Muse*, the configurations of the political/aesthetic divide are delineated by James’s placement of Nick Dormer, fresh from a political victory that he only wanly desires, against the backdrop of George Dallow’s Palladian mansion at Harsh, a “place of perfection as well as of splendor, [dressed] in delicate tints, with precious specimens of French furniture of the last century ranged against walls of pale brocade” (*TM I*: 223). Nick’s incongruity at Harsh (and his unsuitability as a successor to George Dallow, be it political or marital) is deftly implied by the contrast set up here between the soon-to-be artist renegade, and those consummate markers of the Establishment, the “walls of pale brocade”.

6. A suggestive anticipation of the “old lace and old brocade and old furniture” that James will use to describe Venice in *Italian Hours*.

Brocade is put to considerably more complex and suggestive use as an indicator of class divide in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). When Hyacinth Robinson first enters the Princess’s Mayfair apartment, he

considered, one after the other, the different chairs, couches and ottomans the room contained – he wished to treat himself to the most sumptuous – and then for reasons he knew best sank into a seat covered with rose-coloured brocade and of which the legs and frame appeared of pure gold.

(*PC I*: 284)

James’s tantalising phrase, “for reasons he knew best”, calls irresistibly for the reader’s speculation. There are two, possibly conflicting reasons for Hyacinth’s choice. First, his sinking into the brocade could be intended by James as confirmation of his hero’s aristocratic birth, an instinctive attraction that testifies to the fact that he has “blood in his veins that would account for the finest sensibilities” (*PC I*: 177), that his “claim to a pedigree” (*PC I*: 248) is legitimate. Certainly, the rather reductive way in which James uses brocade elsewhere in his writing would suggest that it is serving such a purpose here. On the other hand, Hyacinth’s ability to decode brocade’s cultural worth could be shaped not so much by the heritage of a fine sensibility but, quite simply, exposure: first, through his upbringing by Miss Pynsent, the romantic dressmaker and purported creator of “court-dresses” (*PC I*: 34), “who adore[s] the aristocracy” (*PC I*: 8) and who prides herself on being well acquainted with the tastes of those who live in the likes of Belgrave Square (*PC I*: 262);⁷ second, by way of his occupation as a book-binder. Brocade itself was used as a binding for treasured books and manuscripts until the eighteenth century; it was foresworn – and consequently rendered even more treasured – in favour of leather and cloth, in the mechanised nineteenth (Matthews). Hyacinth would be no stranger, then, to the association between the wealthy and their preferred fabrics, and

7. Hyacinth’s intuitive sense of brocade’s aristocratic associations are not unlike those of the equally impoverished and (equally sensitive) telegraphist in *In the Cage* (1898), who imagines Lady Bradeen’s draping at the hands of a dressmaker: “Marguerite might be ‘awful’ but she knew how to dress a goddess. Pearls and Spanish lace – she herself, with assurance, could see them, and the ‘full length’ too, and also red velvet bows, which ... were of course to adorn the front of a black brocade that would be like a dress in a picture” (*CS 4*: 841). Note how the phrase “of course” in this description underscores the assumed naturalness of the connection between the “goddess” and brocade. Both Hyacinth and the telegraphist, interestingly, acquire their vision of brocade indirectly, through the figure of a seamstress, someone who is granted physical intimacy with, but held at a firm social distance from, the people that she serves. This tension between contact and displacement colours both Hyacinth’s and the telegraphist’s sense of their own inclusion/exclusion within/from brocade’s cultural ambit.

the exclusivity of brocade's empire – there will be no brocade, he knows, in Lomax Place. In this context, then, Hyacinth's decision to "treat himself to the most sumptuous", to couch himself in the Princess's brocade, is an act of republican insurrection, a breach, however insignificant or ineffectual, of "the high human walls, the deep gulfs of tradition, the steep embankments of privilege and dense layers of stupidity which fencing the 'likes' of him off from social recognition" (*PC 1*: 170). Paradoxically, both of these possibilities for his choice are equally valid, and yet mutually exclusive: inasmuch as the novel is about the competing claims of Hyacinth's individual and social identities, and between the political and the aesthetic, the seemingly incidental placement of brocade in this episode braids together, remarkably, the novel's central preoccupations.

The case of Hyacinth Robinson alerts us to a more nuanced accenting of brocade than the samples gathered so far in this discussion would seem to suggest. As Hyacinth Robinson's choice of the "rose-coloured brocade" indicates, James also uses brocade in the service of ambiguity and as a challenge to assumptions about the assimilation/alienation oppositions that it elsewhere interpolates. Another such instance of brocade's ambiguous reference might be found in James's tale, "Collaboration" (1892), which opens with a description of the narrator's studio, set in a colony of foreign artists in the heart of Paris:

The air is as international as only Parisian air can be; women, I surmise, think they look well in it; they come also because they fancy they are doing something Bohemian, just as many of the men come because they suppose they are doing something correct. The old heraldic cushions on the divans, embossed with rusty gold, are favourable both to expansion and to contraction – that of course of contracting parties – and the Italian brocade on the walls appeals to one's highest feelings.

(*CS 4*: 234)

The description of the studio is beset by contradictions. The Italian brocade that "appeals to one's highest feelings" and that is "favourable to both expansion and contraction" and (as the tale will ultimately confirm) "contracting parties", bestows on the studio a strong sense of authenticity and value. This is not mere scene setting: on the contrary, the narrator's studio is presented, here and throughout the tale, as a rare, unique space in which the imperatives of empire, nation and class are forsworn in the interests of art. As Heidenmauer proclaims, "It's good for poetry – it's good for truth" (*CS 4*: 248). On the other hand, the studio's brocaded walls also provide a backdrop against which posturing and the affectation of appearances are enabled: "women ... think they look well in it", others affect Bohemian insouciance, and yet others a show of social probity. This early contradiction provides a warning of how this story about the triumph of art over nationhood, and music's ability to straddle the cultural and political

divides that have been steeped in recent and ancient history, is shot through with troubling ambiguities that undermine its idealism at every turn. One is keenly aware that the collaboration that takes place in the artist’s studio is highly unlikely to extend its influence beyond its brocaded frame; that the truth, authenticity and compassion that it espouses are not extended to the nations that the collaborators (mis)represent. Vandemer’s and Heidenmauer’s collaboration is as much an idealistic, selfish folly as it is a rejection of bigotry and patriotism. There is a haunting pathos in the figure of Paule de Brindes playing the German composer’s music at the end of the tale, alone and without the company of the man who has chosen art over love. And when the narrator promises, at the end of the story, “Don’t we live fast after all, and doesn’t the old order change? Don’t say art isn’t mighty! I shall give you some more illustrations of it yet” (*CS* 4: 255), his confident promise is followed by a telling silence. The triumphs of the brocaded studio, its appeal to “one’s highest feelings”, all that it seems to promise, and all that it apparently achieves, are qualified at best; at worst, they are confined to an ethical and cultural ghetto.

The tension that exists between the ethical and the aesthetic is also imbricated into the cultural textures of brocade in *The Spoils of Poynton*. In a well-known scene, Fleda Vetch visits Mrs Gereth at Ricks, into which the elder woman has illicitly installed some of the treasures from Poynton:

She had been perfectly prepared to be surprised at Ricks, for Mrs. Gereth was a wonder-working wizard, with a command, when all was said, of good material; but the impression in wait for her on the threshold made her catch her breath and falter. Dusk had fallen when she arrived, and in the plain square hall, one of the few good features, the glow of a Venetian lamp just showed, on either wall, the richness of an admirable tapestry. This instant perception that the place had been dressed at the expense of Poynton was a shock: it was as if she had abruptly seen herself in the light of an accomplice. The next moment, folded in Mrs. Gereth’s arms, her eyes were diverted; but she had already had, in a flash, the vision of the great gaps in the other house. The two tapestries, not the largest, but those most splendidly toned by time, had been on the whole its most uplifted pride. When she could really see again she was on a sofa in the drawing-room, staring with intensity at an object soon distinct as the great Italian cabinet that, at Poynton, had been in the red saloon. Without looking, she was sure the room was occupied with other objects like it, stuffed with as many as it could hold of the trophies of her friend’s struggle. By this time the very fingers of her glove, resting on the seat of the sofa, had thrilled at the touch of an old velvet brocade, a wondrous texture that she could recognise, would have recognised among a thousand, without dropping her eyes on it. They stuck to the cabinet with a kind of dissimulated dread, while she painfully asked herself whether she should notice it, notice everything, or just pretend not to be affected.

(*SP*: 75)

The ability of Fleda to identify the “wondrous texture” brocade without so much as looking at it (and, what is more, through the barrier of her glove) offers us a keen, tactile impression of brocade’s unique sensual and three-dimensional properties; her act also testifies unequivocally to her fine senses, both sensual and aesthetic. Adela Gereth’s selection of a velvet brocade as one of the treasures of Poynton most worth saving speaks of her discernment and keen appreciation of value, as well as, perhaps less positively, her “wizard[ry]”. However, as Fleda touches the brocade, she “wonders” indeed, not only about the textile’s undeniable cultural value and Adela Gereth’s indefatigable taste, but also about its signification as a spoil of war, as an emblem of theft, betrayal, determination, and selfishness. Without looking she knows that an aesthetic injury has been committed in the interests of aesthetics. The nature of this injury is underscored by the fact that the brocaded sofa, along with the Venetian lamp, the tapestries, and the great Italian cabinet, are particularised in this passage. The precise identity of the spoils at Poynton is, with two exceptions, never revealed in the novel, and this resistance to specificity serves to mystify and expand their perceived worth, at least of the part of the reader. What must be noted here is that when the spoils are removed from Poynton, when the collection is violated, they become named, and their value depleted – most notably, in this case, the velvet brocade sofa, which stands so centrally, and multi-valently, in this passage as desired object, as cultural signifier, as spoiled sofa. It is a remarkable case of, as Eric Savoy has suggested, the way in which “synecdoche approaches its absolute limits as a trope capable of sustaining a punctual grasp of the spatial configuration of things beyond the palpable thing, of things that shade into not merely “ideas” but values” (p. 274). The easy oppositions that brocade seems to represent in the texts mentioned earlier in this essay, are significantly destabilised here, to rich effect.

Just what brocade really means is made, to my mind, most problematic and suggestive, in a passage from *What Maisie Knew* (1897). Maisie is taken by Beale to the apartment belonging to Mrs Cuddon (also known as the “brown lady” and “The American Countess”). It is a

place that ... struck her as the most beautiful she had ever seen in her life. The next thing she perceived it to be was the drawing room of a lady – oh of a lady, she could see in a moment, and not of a gentleman, not even of one like papa himself or even like Sir Claude – whose things were as much prettier than mamma’s as it had always had to be confessed that mamma’s were prettier than Mrs Beale’s. In the middle of the small bright room and the presence of more curtains and cushions, more pictures and mirrors, more palm-trees drooping over brocaded and gilded nooks, more little silver boxes scattered over little crooked tables and little oval miniatures hooked upon velvet screens than Mrs Beale and her ladyship together could, in an unnatural alliance, have dreamed of mustering, the child became aware, with

a sharp foretaste of compassion, of something that was strangely like a relegation to obscurity of each of these women of taste’.

(*WMK*: 127-128)

In this account, the painful conflict that exists in Maisie between an innocent, unmediated wonder at beauty and a less naive sense of how things *mean* is finessed by James. On the one hand, the decorative excess of the apartment (clearly indicated by the insistence of the word “more” in this passage) signifies, for Maisie, the acme of prettiness, confirming the principle that an abundance of beautiful, material *things* must equate to an concomitant increase in (non-material) *beauty* – the essential code, as every parent knows, for the successful decoration of a Christmas tree. But this naive impression is soon infected with her apprehension, swiftly made, that the brocades and silver boxes and velvet screens, and their “mustering”, have significance beyond their material lustre, including their index of taste as a competitive value, and as both reflecting and creating identity. Maisie’s sense of who Mrs Cuddon is, is instant: she knows by her apartment that she is a formidable challenger to her mother and Mrs Beale, at least in part because neither can “muster” brocade and what it represents. However, both Maisie’s simple appreciation of the apartment’s appeal and her more subtle sense of what it means are worryingly disturbed by the evidence of the “weird aspect” (*WMK*: 139) of the “brown lady” herself, whose appearance (described, in one of James’s nastiest phrases, as resembling “a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat” (*WMK*: 138)) “dissipated the happy impression of the room” (*WMK*: 139). Maisie is unable to make the Countess and the apartment cohere, and what this implies is as mystifying to us as anything else in this novel of screens and mirrors and brocaded relations. Is the apartment all simply a superficial construction of an identity that is swiftly shown to be specious by the evidence of the Countess herself? Does James give his brown lady brocades as a form of racial shorthand to demonstrate that her pedigree is simply a posture, as unlikely as her title? Unsettling implications of cultural conservatism, at best, and deep racial prejudice, at worst, abound.

However, there is another way in which the brown lady and her brocades might be read. I think John Carlos Rowe (in McWhirter 2010: 250) is correct in his suggestion that Mrs Cuddon is not an American Negro, but of Creole, French post-colonial descent, and I would add to his argument the evidence of her brocades. In her 1921 account of *Creole Families of New Orleans*, Grace King observes that in the houses in the “old registers of St Louis Cathedral” could still be found “[b]its of old furniture, jewelry, glass, old miniatures, portraits, scraps of silk and brocade, [and] flimsy fragments of lace” (p. viii); later she describes one aging Creole aristocrat as a “sample through the fading, wearing years of the fadeless brocade of which old court dresses and Creole families were made” (p. 303). In this context, then, the

accenting of the Countess's apartment with "brocaded ... nooks" could be a subtle and subversive indication of her disruptive claim to a lost heritage, her "maintenance de noblesse" (p. vii) – in much the same way as Hyacinth Robinson stakes his claim to brocade's privilege in *The Princess Casamassima*. If this is the case, James slyly bestows a pedigree upon Mrs Cuddon dramatically superior to that of anyone else in the novel. It follows then, that the inability to see past the impossibility of brownness being synonymous with brocades, taste and aristocracy, needs to be regarded not as James's impediment, but Maisie's. Either way, the "brown lady" and her brocades remain a disturbing intrusion – neither she nor her apartment fit into the finely drafted symmetries of relationships in the novel, and what Maisie or James "know" about brown ladies and brocades remains provokingly unresolved.

The complicating of brocade's apparently simple cultural equivalence is further enhanced by the textile's association, elsewhere in James' work, with the past, especially as it is troubled by loss and nostalgia. This is demonstrated in a number of instances already mentioned in this essay – for example, the passage from *Italian Hours*: "But what remains of it all now is a mere tone in the air, a faint sigh in the breeze, a vague expression in things, a passive – or call it rather, perhaps, to be fair, a shyly pathetic responsive – accessibility to the yearning guess" (*IH*: 427). Inasmuch as the Boboli gardens and the Medici Palace recall vividly and unmistakably the Medici's brocaded glory, that brocade is, conversely, above all an imagined thing, a figure of an unrecoverable past. It is a textile that exists in the present of James's reconstructive imagination, but whose lack of material presence speaks more hauntingly of absence, "a yearning guess". The comparison of Mme Plessy's talent with the rarity of old brocade (*FPN*: 438) presents the same case, in which brocade-as-real-thing is more striking for its temporal absence than for its presence.

The display of brocade as a textured, ornate fabric of excess whose superfluity recalls, paradoxically, a lost past is extended to the problem of personal loss in James's work. For example, in his allusion to Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi in *Wings of the Dove* (1902): "The lady, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full red lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage only unaccompanied by joy. And she was dead, dead, dead." (*WD I*: 221)⁸ While Lucrezia's beauty and wealth are forcefully embodied by her jewels and brocade, there is an equally penetrating suggestion of something *disembodied* here. The intensity of the reds in the portrait, the sumptuousness of the brocade, to say nothing of the

8. The red dress itself, interestingly, is *not* brocaded in Bronzino's rendition – James may be recalling Lucrezia's plum-coloured undersleeves, which appear, as far as I can tell, to be in brocade.

extraordinary specificity of the portrait itself, all combine to refer to nothing so much as loss – “she was dead, dead, dead”.

If the Bronzino portrait offers us one of the most memorable of James’s brocades, it is no doubt matched for both memorableness and pathos in a scene from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in which Lydia Touchett, receiving Isabel at Gardencourt (where Ralph is dying), remarks to her niece:

“... That is a very odd dress to travel in.”

Isabel glanced at her garment. “I left Rome at an hour’s notice; I took the first that came.”

“Your sisters, in America, wished to know how you dress. That seemed to be their principal interest. I wasn’t able to tell them – but they seemed to have the right idea: that you never wear anything less than black brocade.”

“They think I’m more brilliant than I am; I’m afraid to tell them the truth,” said Isabel.

(*PoL* 2: 406)

In spite of Isabel’s assumption that her sisters will not read her brocade correctly, Lydia Touchett trusts them to intuit that the black on black of Isabel’s dress – an excess of blackness, a fabric in which the density of the black background is superimposed by an even denser, almost impossibly blacker pattern – signifies the complexity and depth of her mourning and misery, a doubled mourning for both her son and herself. What Isabel’s American sisters also no doubt understand is that Isabel’s donning of this fabric (so redolently and exclusively the property of the metropolitan elite) measures the extent to which she has become one of its spoils (the comprehensiveness with which “black brocade” characterizes her wardrobe is clearly indicated by the fact that it is “the first that came”), and the impossibility of her return to her unbrocaded home. Isabel’s black brocade – worn intimately, not on her walls but on her body – is a marker of personal, familial and cultural loss: James showing us, thereby, how tragically Isabel has learned Madame Merle’s dictum, initially rejected by his heroine, that “we’re each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances ... I’ve a great respect for *things!*” (*PoL* 1: 288).⁹

Whether used simply to indicate the gulf that separates the Old World from the New, or more ambiguously to test the distinctions between authenticity and copy, or the tensions between taste and ethics, or as an emblem of death, brocade is often a marker of something always already gone before. It is in the recollection of a slip that covers the New York

9. Isabel’s black brocade certainly appears to have made an impact on Edith Wharton, who, in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), adopts it for Isabel’s namesakes: “[Mrs and Miss Archer’s] physical resemblance would have been complete if an elderly *embonpoint* had not stretched Mrs Archer’s black brocade, while Miss Archer’s brown and purple poplins hung, as the years went on, more and more slackly on her virgin frame” (Wharton 1974: 32).

Bacchante; it is in the dead Medicis and their painters of the Renaissance; it is in the old inaccessible French worlds never to be entered by Strether or Newsome or Hyacinth Robinson. Looked at accumulatively this way, it is the fabric of nostalgia, which, in spite of its composition characterised by excess and overlay and gloss, nonetheless implies rarity, unattainability, loss and absence.

Bill Brown and Eric Savoy, speaking from a position well-schooled in poststructuralist suspicion of the referentiality of language and the things language describes, have persuasively noted how the (hyper)presence of things in James's work frequently draws attention to absence and is more often than not used in a challenge to realism (Brown 2002: 228). Certainly, there are, as I have shown, notable occasions in which brocade serves as a sumptuous object that paradoxically speaks to the past's irrecoverability and thus takes on the characteristic, as Brown argues, of the Lacanian "Thing", "the emptiness at the center of the real" (Brown 2002: 222; Lacan 1992: 121): when it signifies mourning, or death, or a lost past, or an ambivalent heritage, or a compromised collaboration.

However, to be responsive to brocade's nostalgic status and its effects of absence, is one matter: to suggest that its metaphoric reach transcends or completely obscures the material is quite something else. A prolonged and comprehensive gaze at James's collection of brocades suggests a challenge to Savoy's radical claim that the thing, put in the service of synecdoche by James, "suffers a marked occlusion of its proper indexical function and loses its purported solidity of specification" (Savoy 2001: 274). "Solidity of specification", however, is precisely the phrase we might apply to the catalogue of brocades studied in this essay: "the bit of brocade ... depending from a single shoulder-strap" of the Bacchante in New York, the Princess Casamassima's "rose-coloured" brocaded chair, the "heavenly blue and silver" fateful brocade that passes from Perdita to Viola Willoughby, Isabel's "black brocade", the "brocaded and wasted reds" of the Bronzino, the "palm-trees drooping over brocaded and gilded nooks" of Mrs Cuddon's apartment, and of course, the velvet sofa under Fleda Vetch's gloved fingers. To this list can be added many more brocades mentioned elsewhere in James's writing, whose "proper indexical function" is surely as vividly asserted as their transcendent function, appealing to a variety of senses; detailed as to shape, size, angle, condition, placement or age; functional or decorative; on walls, as upholstery and as clothing for both men and women. In the interests of supporting this claim, as well as to present the effect of accumulation and collation, I offer here a Jamesian swatch-book: the "sight of unmistakable velvet and brocade and tartan" in the novels of Sir Walter Scott ("Walter Scott": 12). The "shimmer" of brocades in a painting by Boldini (*PS*: 112); the "curious flowered and brocaded casaque which made [Mr Offord] look ... like the dying Voltaire" in "Brooksmith" (1892, *CS* 3: 767); the "extraordinary quantity of stiff and lustrous black brocade, with

enhancements, of every description, that twinkled and tinkled, that rustled and rumbled” about the person of Mrs David E. Brack in “Julia Bride” (1909, *CS* 5: 678). The portrait of Clement Searle – “a young man in a powdered wig and a brocaded waistcoat” (*CS* 1: 568) – and the “stiff brocade [that] may have rustled autumnal leaves” (*CS* 1: 573) of Lockley Park in “A Passionate Pilgrim” (1871). The “morsels of old brocade flung over angular sofas” (*CS* 3: 198) in the lodgings of the Pallants in “Louisa Pallant” (1888) and the “cracked teacups and scraps of old brocade” for which Sanguinetti has a “passion”, in “Rose-Agathe” (1878, *CS* 2: 224); the table covered with an “ancient, damaged piece of brocade in front” (*CP*: 372) that occupies centre stage at the opening of the second act of *The Album* (1891); and the “spread of brocade” onto which Rosanna throws the letter in *The Ivory Tower* (1917, *IT*: 145). Looked at collectively, brocade clutters James’s texts in a manner almost Balzacian.

Brown’s argument, like Savoy’s, that “the physicality of the possessions have been supplanted by their (aesthetic) value; the objects have been supplanted by ‘things’ just as things have been replaced by ‘Things’”, is well-supported by the “lack of specifying, individuating attention” (Brown 2002: 226) given to particularised objects in *The Spoils of Poynton*. But it would be incautious to regard the example of the spoils as indexical of James’s treatment of the material in general. As the swatch-book catalogued above demonstrates, brocade is as striking and significant in James’s text for its physical as for its metaphysical complexity, and figures richly as an instance of what Victoria Coulson, rejecting the idealist philosophy of Brown et al, describes as James’s “textual practice of bodily evocation and invocation, an aesthetic mode originating in, calling forth and responding to the simplest as well as the most sophisticated of psychosomatic experiences” (Coulson 2010: 329); that “a reading practice attentive to the physicality of aesthetic forms can honour in James’s work the challenges not of absence, vacancy and lack, but of presence, plenitude and abundance” (p. 330). What to make, then, of this apparent contradiction? Can one have one’s metaphorical brocade and wear it? I would argue that one can: when James’s brocades are viewed *collectively*, the residue of their material presence – the materiality of material, if you will – abides as forcefully as its range of connotations, leaving us with the richly luxurious apprehension of the physicality of brocade that sits alongside, sometimes aporetically but not necessarily impossibly, its metaphorical compass.

The possibility that brocade presents of a creative co-existence between the physical and the metaphysical, is also crafted on the loom of James’s style. In his *Portrait of a Novel*, Michael Gorra, riffing on the image of Isabel’s mourning dress, refers to “the black brocade of [James’s] later manner”

(Gorra 2012: 310).¹⁰ Gorra need not expand; many of James's readers will know instinctively exactly what he means by this analogy. However, given the preoccupation of this essay, it might be worth parsing the image a little more carefully.

In his preface to *Decorative Textiles*, George Hunter makes no attempt to conceal his conviction that brocade's aesthetic superiority – of which he has no doubt – is a function of texture. He writes:

The main text of my book is of course Texture. The word is Latin for *weave*, and as might be expected, it is produced most richly on the loom. It is of Textiles the most distinctive quality, and when applied to other materials such as wood, marble and brick, iron, bronze and gold, paint, paper and cement, is merely and borrowed and imitative term ... texture is not only the quality which distinguishes Textiles from one another. It is the quality which distinguishes a damask from a brocade, a plain weave from a twill, a satin from a madras, a velvet from a burlap, a domestic carpet from an Oriental rug'.

(Preface, n.p.)

By comparing James's style with brocade, Gorra and those who share his view are possibly guilty of Hunter's and James's own thinly disguised brocade-associated cultural conservatism; an elitism that William James unapologetically identified when, after reading *The Tragic Muse*, he conveyed to Henry his opinion that the "work is too refined, too elaborate and minute, and requires to be read with too much leisure to appeal to any but the select few. But you mustn't mind that. It will *always* have its audience" (Gard 1968: 193). In the same vein, to describe James's prose as a "black brocade" is to distinguish it – if only by implication – from a "plain" Wharton, say, or a "burlap" Wells.

However, its aesthetic and cultural elitism aside, what Hunter's description of brocade alerts us to, is the structural composition of brocade, and it is here that the similarity between fabric and style in James's work becomes most intriguing. Brocade is a textile into which both pattern and its third dimension are introduced in addition to the basic warp and weft of the fabric: "short lengths of colour ... are put in by small additional shuttles, and allowed to float under the surface when not required" (Glazier 1923: 5), forming what Hunter calls "floating wefts" (p. 5) (unlike embroidery, for example, which is superimposed subsequent to the construction of the base fabric). Nonetheless, having being woven into the fabric at the time of its construction, brocade threads serve no structural purpose, and should they

10. James Woods makes a similar point about the textile-like texture of James's writing when he argues that "for all that James's late style is thought of as a braided nest of interminable additions and qualifications [it] is in fact an art of great purification" (Woods 2003: online).

be removed, the base fabric’s integrity remains intact, while its value *qua* brocade itself is entirely effaced. The method of its making is at once intrinsic and non-essential. It is not difficult to imagine that this process of elaboration is a fitting metaphor for James’s style, in which clauses and sub clauses contrapuntally emerge and submerge within, above and under the base fabric of a sentence. Anyone who has experienced the frustration of paraphrasing a Jamesian sentence while seeking to maintain its evocations, will be familiar with the paradoxical sense that his brocading phrases, qualifications, elaborations and contradictions are both superfluous to sense – black on black, if you will – and essential to it. James’s brocades, and the metaphor for a brocaded style they call into being, invite an imaginative and almost visceral contact with text(ile), a tactile reading that is as a brushing of the fingers over their “wondrous texture”, and that makes all the difference.

Abbreviations of works by Henry James

AA	<i>The Awkward Age.</i>
Amb	<i>The Ambassadors.</i>
AS	<i>The American Scene.</i>
CP	<i>The Complete Plays of Henry James.</i>
CS	<i>Henry James: Complete Stories.</i>
E	<i>The Europeans.</i>
FPN	<i>French Poets and Novelists.</i>
H	<i>Hawthorne.</i>
IH	<i>Italian Hours.</i>
IT	<i>The Ivory Tower.</i>
LHJ	<i>Henry James Letters.</i>
PC	<i>The Princess Casamassima.</i>
PoL	<i>The Portrait of a Lady.</i>
PP	<i>Portraits of Places.</i>
PS	<i>Parisian Sketches: Letters to the New York Tribune 1875 – 1876.</i>
RH	<i>Roderick Hudson.</i>
RH NYE	<i>Roderick Hudson. New York Edition.</i>
SB	<i>A Small Boy and Others.</i>
SP	<i>The Spoils of Poynton.</i>
TA	<i>The American.</i>
TM	<i>The Tragic Muse.</i>
TS	<i>Transatlantic Sketches.</i>
“Walter Scott”	“Fiction and Sir Walter Scott”.
WD	<i>The Wings of the Dove.</i>
WMK	<i>What Maisie Knew.</i>

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