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# The Reader in It: Henry James's "Desperate Plagiarism"

Hivren Demir-Atay

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<sup>1</sup> Although numerous scholars have considered Henry James a master of realism, some of his fictions have been interpreted as "writable" or "impossible" texts, in Roland Barthes's terms, for exposing the reader to a distressing practice of reading. A "writable text" entails not only the reader's uneasy experience of reading, but also the writer's loss of mastery in "desperate plagiarism" (Barthes, *The Pleasure* 22). "The Story in It" (1902)—one of his shortest texts—stages both James's mastery and its loss through characters' conversations about novels and romances. On the one hand, these dialogues reflect some of James's discussions regarding the possible representations of love, passion, sexuality and female characters, while on the other hand they create a *mise en abyme* by dramatizing the characters' own contamination by the act of storytelling. Problematizing the border between the story and its teller as well as the story and its reader, "The Story in It" locates its characters in a position that they themselves question and judge. While this dramatization amounts to the story's own loss of origin, James's conceptualization of realism in this bottomless *abyme*, together with his writing style, turn the incongruities to a performance actualized by an ironic spiral. I aim to discuss the contagious nature of this performance which affects not only the characters but also the writer and the reader.

## 1. Reading French versus British Novels

<sup>2</sup> "The Story in It" opens with a scene of writing and reading. With the rainy and stormy weather in the background, Mrs. Dyott writes letters, while her visitor Maud Blessingbourne reads an "obviously good" novel. As the third-person narrator informs us, the reader is happy with her book and her happiness illustrates that she probably reads a French author. After a silence of half an hour, the two ladies begin to converse about reading and living. Maud Blessingbourne draws a sharp border between the two when she tells Mrs. Dyott, "I know you don't read, ... but why should you? *You live*" (309). This

distinction is reiterated by Mrs. Dyott's second visitor, Colonel Voyt, who says, "Well, I *am* a small child compared to you—but I'm not dead yet. I cling to life" (311). Though Voyt's statement lacks direct reference to reading, the subject of his ongoing dialogue with Mrs. Dyott implies that his choice of clinging to life alludes also to his clinging to Mrs. Dyott, who *lives*, rather than to Mrs. Blessingbourne, who *reads*. In fact, the text's discussions pertaining living and reading are colored by the discussions about love, as Mrs. Dyott tells Voyt that Mrs. Blessingbourne is in love with him, like herself. Mrs. Blessingbourne denies that she is fond of romances and calls them "vulgar." The characters' discussions regarding novels, romances, love, and vulgarity illustrate how they lose their innocence "in" the stories that they read and criticize for moral reasons.

<sup>3</sup>In "The Story in It" the dialogue on French and British novels reflects a tension between the two women. Mrs. Dyott's mishearing of Maud's statement that the book is "a little mild" because of the sound of the storm is a sign of this tensed atmosphere. Mrs. Dyott's misunderstanding—"A little wild?" (208)—is significant since Maud reads a French novel. Indeed, the sequence continues with Mrs. Dyott's question, "Do you carry [French novels] by the dozen," to which Maud replies with another question: "Into innocent British homes?" (309). The innocence of British homes implies the "mild" British novels. They are "mild" according to both Maud and Colonel Voyt. In the second part of the story, Voyt agrees with Maud that he cannot read British or American novels as they seem to "show [their] sense of life as the sense of puppies and kittens" (315), referring to the human beings who have passion and desire to seek relations. Hence, adopting life from the street results in the writings of "poor twangers and twaddlers" (315). Representing at this point James's concerns of representation and morality, Voyt means that the artist should *relate the relations* as an aesthetic adventure.

<sup>4</sup>James's approbation that Balzac replicated "every sentiment, every idea, every person, every place, every object" shows his expectation of the inclusiveness of the art work ("Balzac 1875-78" 66). Even if this inclusiveness should be selective, the artist should approach the window with "an air of selection" to see the "wild" weather out. The human scene is like wild weather with its adventurous nature or, as Voyt explains, "intimate, curious, suggestive" relations (315). The "adventures of innocence" are, indeed, "what the bored reader complains of" (320). However, in contrast to Voyt's assertion, Maud seems to be bored with the "wild" relations. According to Voyt, Maud's protests of "the same couple" portrayed in French novels spring from her interest "in something different from life." While Voyt believes that passionate adventures are natural parts of life, Maud is concerned with "vulgarity": "I love life—in art, though I hate it anywhere else. It's the poverty of the life those people show, and the awful bounders of both sexes, that they represent" (317).

<sup>5</sup>"The poverty of the life" in relations becomes more important for comprehending James's realism, considering that Maud reads not only French authors but also the Italian writer D'Annunzio (309). Gabriele D'Annunzio, who, according to James, "has really sailed the sea and brought back the booty," is the only writer named in "The Story in It" ("Gabriele D'Annunzio" 296). James's essay "Gabriele D'Annunzio" (1904) describes the aesthetics of adventure and misadventure. According to James, D'Annunzio has a high degree of aesthetic consciousness through which he makes beauty, art, and form the aims of his life. In the case of D'Annunzio, "ugliness is an accident, a treachery of fate, the intrusion of a foreign substance—having for the most part in the scheme itself no admitted inevitability" (280). Writing "great" erotic relations freely, D'Annunzio does

what the English novelists are unable to do. Yet James seems to be as reserved as Maud about this freedom as it may result in the danger of falling prey to "vulgarity" and depicting "the poverty of life" in an attempt to represent "every person, every object, every detail," including sexual passion. In this article, James echoes Maud's words that "[she] love[s] life in art though [she] hate[s] it anywhere else." D'Annunzio, who derives sexual passion from some "detached pictures" and finds its "extension and consummation" in the rest of life, stands in a risky position: "shut out from the rest of life, shut out from all fruition and assimilation, it has no more dignity than—to use a homely image—the boots and shoes that we see, in the corridors of promiscuous hotels, standing, often in double pairs, at the doors of rooms" (295). It is the integration of life and art that deems erotic relations an aesthetic adventure rather than a representation of "boots" and "shoes" in "promiscuous hotels." Similar to James, Maud considers life and love in art as aesthetic adventures. Her "keeping up" with authors instead of with "somebody" illustrates her wish to position herself "up" without falling "down." Her escape from vulgarity, however, would result in her own destruction. According to Voyt, Maud's wish to read about "decent women" in fiction creates a ruining illusion: "life you embellish and elevate; but art would find itself able to do nothing with you, and, on such impossible terms, would ruin you" (318). Ironically, however, although her presumed love for Voyt is the victim of her diffidence, this "shy romance" (326) does not locate her "out" of the story.

<sup>6</sup>On the one hand, James argues that the mimetic task of the novelist should not succumb to vulgarity, while on the other he believes this kind of caution may result in the poverty of life. Love and passion are included in the picture of life, which is "comprehensive" and "elastic" ("The Future of the Novel" 244), while the English novel omitted the color of passion and sexuality in its paintings—"I cannot so much as imagine Dickens and Scott *without* the 'love-making' left, as the phrase is, out," James says (249). Nonetheless, he goes on, there occurred a big change in the outlook of women, so "we may very well yet see the female elbow itself, kept in increasing activity by the play of the pen, smash with final resonance the window all this time most superstitiously closed" (250). Therefore, when women begin to look out, "great relations" enter in, showing the richness of life, the "wild" weather out.

<sup>7</sup>James's style of storytelling based on "showing" rather than "telling" is collateral to his reservation about writing passion and sexuality. As showing implies an erotic staging versus a pornographic exposition, "The Story in It" employs a seductive contract that erases the border between "in" and "out." When Mrs. Dyott tells Voyt that Maud is in love with him, Voyt asks why she has told him this story. Mrs. Dyott's reply implies the tacit contract: "I mean for her to know you know it" (325). This calculation is reminiscent of Barthes's reading of "Sarrasine," in which he places desire at the origin of narrative and underlines its reciprocal nature. The narrator attains "a night of love for a good story" by means of a metonymic chain of desire: "the young woman desires the Adonis and its story: a first desire is posited that determines a second, through metonymy: the narrator, jealous of the Adonis by cultural constraint, is forced to desire the young woman; and since he knows the story of the Adonis, the conditions for a contract are met" (S/Z 88-89). Likewise, in "The Story in It," Mrs. Dyott's story functions as a seductive contract. She demands that the story seduce Voyt and leave Maud out of the romance, although this does not change the fact that Maud is in it. The dramatization of narrative desire's metonymic nature—a process in which the listener partakes alongside the storyteller—is

also a dramatization of reading literature. It is, indeed, Voyt's question that connects love and passion to storytelling: "if a relation stops, where is the story? If it doesn't stop, where's the innocence?" (319)

## 2. Reading Relations as Adventure and Relations as *Récit*

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin describes the storyteller as "the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story" ("The Storyteller" 108-09). According to him, storytelling cannot be an innocent act as the storyteller has life stories and counsels to share like teachers and sages. Because the messages are inherent in the stories, there is a contract, as it were, between the teller and the listener pertaining to the shared experience. In other words, the transmission of a message requires the consent of the audience, who is expected to perform the difficult task of listening; however, once the message is transmitted from the former to the latter, the listener, entering into the "aura" of the teller, begins to be seduced by him/her.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin speculates that the art of storytelling is expiring since individuals lost the ability to share their experiences during the age of information, a result of which was the replacement of giving counsel by reporting. This transformation was "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87). The novel and the short story, rising in the age of literacy, were also the products of the process Benjamin describes. Nonetheless, there also exist short stories and novels that dramatize oral storytelling, most commonly through frame tales. Henry James's "The Story in It" provides an example of such dramatizations, notwithstanding that it dramatizes the frame structure itself together with storytelling.

<sup>10</sup>

James's explanations of the story in his preface to *Daisy Miller* reflects his strong preference for textual dramatization. He states that the brevity of "The Story in It"—one of the shortest literary texts he wrote—was acquired by a special effort. Despite this, he adds, "it... haunted, a graceless beggar, for a couple of years, the cold avenues of publicity" (xxii). In the end, it was published by an old friend in a magazine, but for James, the story was more than a magazine could carry, as he dives "into the deep sea of a certain general truth" in it (xxii). This general truth, as James tells us, was inspired by a novelist's answer to a question about the female characters of his novels. The question was why the adventurous women in his fiction were not those who respected themselves, to which the novelist replied that "ladies who respected themselves took particular care never to *have* adventures" (xxii). Such demureness, James believes, might preserve their respectfulness, yet it has a pernicious effect on literature, for a literary work needs to be vitalized by an exciting picture of life. According to James, this vivid picture of life is produced not only by the dramatization of human relations but also by that of literary discussions: relations as adventure and relations as *récit* often touch each other in James's fiction.

11

In "The Story in It" the intimate relationship between love affairs and narration finds expression in Voyt's reaction to Maud's will to read decent women in fiction: "the relation is innocent that the heroine gets out of. The book is innocent that's the story of her getting out. But what the devil—in the name of innocence—was she doing *in*?" (320). Voyt voices the idea that being both "out of" and "in" in an adventurous relation would mean to be "in," with which Mrs. Dyott agrees, hence her assertion that "you have to be in, you know, to *get out*" (321).

12

For Voyt, both in relations as adventure and relations as *récit* everything occurs "in" once one is involved. Voyt believes that Mrs. Dyott's story cannot be innocent as she tells it to Voyt both for giving messages to him and for the sake of Maud "know[ing] [he] know [s] it." The blurry border between "in" and "out" in relations and storytelling resonates, as well, with the story's title, which itself crystallizes the uncanny question, "the story in what"? Even though the narrator's final question, "Who but a duffer... would see the shadow of a 'story' in it?" (326), seems to expect the reader to "read" the story in the story, the reader's stupidity insists with the story's creation of endless stories within stories. The reader becomes blind when he/she forgets the original story. Neither "the story in what?" nor "what is the story in it?" is known by the reader who then becomes the "duffer" described by the narrator.

13

As a story of *mise en abyme*, "The Story in It" stages its truth, leading us to involve James in the story as well. The reader in it, then, implies the reader in James's oeuvre, especially considering James's placement of truth in a Lacanian signifying chain during revision of his fiction. In contrast to Barthes's suggestion that the text never denies, so "never apologize, never explain" (*The Pleasure* 3), James persistently explained. He wrote *Prefaces* to his works, theoretical and critical essays on the works of other writers and argued against other critics' affirmations. This effort seems to aim at writing the story of his literary story.

14

James's biographer and editor Leon Edel presents the historical background of James's prefaces. He informs us that in a period during which everyone finds James's works "enigmatic, over-subtle, analytic," he is disappointed by being recognized as an unsuccessful artist. Edel tells us how James worked for the publication of a definitive edition of his works when he returned to New York in 1904 after more than twenty years: "it required days of laborious effort, of re-writing and re-arrangement: his 'uncanny brood,' he felt, needed tidying; there were imperfections to be ironed out, emendations to be made, early works to be raised to the level of his mature, critical, exigent taste" (24). However, his attempts to tidy his "uncanny brood" seem to have bred his uncanny revisions. James's act of revision may well be called a process of re-seeing, going in and out of his works, and claiming mastery while simultaneously realizing its impossibility. "James may have intended writing many reminiscences, but he soon wandered from his autobiographical intentions and 'the story of one's story' proved to be detailed, haphazard, quite loose and yet quite complete exposition of Henry James's art in fiction" remarks Edel (26). In fact, James's attempts to write "the stories of the stories" resulted in "the stories in the stories," each attempt drawing a new frame of reference for readers. The fact that James's aesthetic theory has not produced its confluent readings is evidence

of the lack of "a" frame. Adding to the readerly challenge posed by his oblique writing style, complex thought, and changing time are James's re-visions which render arduous the task of the reader.

15

As Gayatri Spivak suggests in her introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, the preface "involves a norm of truth" since its purpose is to signify a text (x). The text as a signified has a title, an identity, or a meaning. She suggests that "humankind's common desire is for a stable center, and for the assurance of mastery—through knowing or possessing," adding that a book as a concrete entity satisfies this desire. Yet she asks, "But what sovereign subject is the origin of the book?" (xi). While the question of origin underlies the question of reading, the instability of this center renders the act of reading a preface to subsequent readings or close encounters with text. Similarly, James's prefaces—which represent him as reader—refer to a deferral in his failed attempt to "explain" his works thus emphasizing the undecidability of both author and reader as sovereign subjects. If James the writer's failure in explaining his works implies his loss of authority as the origin of the book, the same failure also illustrates that neither can the reader be sovereign subject. In the unstable centers of literature, one always finds oneself in a process of transformation that blinds the interpreter. The transformative effect of storytelling as well as the accompanying loss of innocence induces in readers the experience of *jouissance* and the contamination of "desperate plagiarism," (Barthes *The Pleasure* 22) reminding us of Voyt's question, "What the devil—in the name of innocence—was she doing in?" (320).

### 3. Shy Romances, Fore-pleasure, *Jouissance*

16

James cannot conceive of reading as independent from writing. According to him, "the analytical appreciation" of a story designates the awareness of the act of writing. It is the critic or the critical reader who will look for secrets in a literary work. In another of James's short stories, "The Figure in the Carpet," Vereker, an author, says that "[t]he critic just *isn't* a plain man... if he were, pray, what would he be doing in his neighbor's garden" (311). "The subtlety," as Vereker calls it, as a trait of the critic both implies the necessity of vigilance to overcome complexities and arouses the question of innocence. If storytelling is not an innocent act, then what is the role of the listener/reader in this contamination? How does the seductive power of literature oscillate between writing and reading? "It isn't for the vulgar": this is what Vereker means by "subtlety" according to the narrator's friend Corvick (315). The reader as someone who should be more than simply reading "the story" transcends the plain man. Considering that this is not only Vereker's but also James's expectation from the reader, Maud's position as a reader in "The Story in It" leads us to ask if she is also a plain woman. An inquiry of this question will return us to the erotic zones of the text which may help us see how, in the fetishistic unfolding of the text, the possibility of *jouissance* emerges.

17

Maud reads too many writers, including the French ones and D'Annunzio. Furthermore, "it sticks out of [her]" that she herself also writes (316). Being both a reader and a writer, then, Maud should exemplify a good reader with aesthetic sense. Yet, Maud as a female reader reminds us of James's remarks in "The Future of the Novel" which

complicate this assumption. In accordance with his interest in the notion of "the book" as a possession and his interest in literature as an object of aesthetic value, James relates the vulgarization of literature to the population increase of women and child readers owing to the diffusion of educational opportunities. Then, the books began to be consumed as a means of diversion by "the reader irreflective and uncritical" (245). Associating women with children, James addresses these readers as "boys and girls": "the larger part of the great multitude that sustains the teller and the publisher of tales is constituted by boys and girls; by girls in especial, if we apply the term to the later stages of the life of the innumerable women who, under modern arrangements, increasingly fail to marry—fail, apparently, even, largely, to desire to" (243). It can be inferred from this statement that women remain childish if they are un-married. This situation bears upon the leisure possessed by boys and "girls." Even though Maud is not a "girl," as she was once married, she does not remarry because, according to Mrs. Dyott, "she likes too many men," perhaps "not to like any of them too much" (312). In Mrs. Dyott's view, Maud "fails" to desire to remarry but also reads and experiences a "shy romance."

18

A "shy romance," for Mrs. Dyott and Voyt, is nevertheless a "romance." Maud's will to "get more life for [her] money" (314) places her among those consumer women who, according to James, regard the novel as a commodity. Yet Mrs. Dyott's insinuating remark to Maud that "she wants her romance cheap!" is met by Maud with protest: "Oh, no—I should be willing to pay for it. I don't see why the romance—since you give it that name—should be all, as the French inveterately make it, for the women who are bad" (318). According to Mrs. Dyott, "they" pay for it; hence, Maud, who buys these novels, is included in the "badness." Although Maud situates herself on the innocent side by criticizing these novels, she plays a role in her contamination by paying for them. Voyt apologetically suggests to her that "their romance is their badness. There isn't any other. It's a hard law, if you will, and a strange, but goodness has to go without that luxury. Isn't to *be* good just exactly, all round, to go without?" (318) As a reader, Maud is positioned by Mrs. Dyott and Voyt among the "girls" in James's category. But considering that good and bad are always neighbors for James, cannot we claim that she is merely in the neighbor's garden?

19

It is obvious from his Preface to *The American* that James regards vulgarity as a trait of romance. He questions how the "air of romance" replaces the principle of reality. This "air" surrounds the entire text (themes, figures, images) with its effect. Although James calls it a "deflexion," he adds that "the cause of the deflexion... must lie deep, however; so that for the most part we recognize the character of our interest only after particular magic, as I say, has thoroughly operated—and then in truth but if we be a bit critically minded, if we find our pleasure, that is, in these intimate appreciations" (278).

20

James's in-depth search for the effect of the romance evokes a Freudian model of reading. James's definition of romance suggests that the pleasure offered to the reader stems from a deep source, while the themes, figures, and images present the reader a "fore-pleasure," liberating the tensions in their minds. The experience in a romance is, as James describes it, "liberated, disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered" (280). Therefore, the reader of the romance expects unconsciously to liberate his/her tensions. In that sense, James's category of "girls" is constituted by those who repress their desire,

considering that, for him, marriage is the only way of satisfying sexual desire. Hence, the women who "fail to desire to marry" need to read the romances as an "incentive bonus," in Freud's terminology, to fulfill their fantasies (Freud, "Creative Writers" 443). When Mrs. Dyott asks Maud why she keeps reading what she calls romances, Maud replies penitently: "I don't! .... At all events, I sha'nt any more. I give it up" (316). Neither Maud's regretful attitude nor her wish to read decent heroines changes the fact that she keeps reading romances; in fact, she apparently is interested *in* them. Nevertheless, this interest does not situate her among James's "plain" women as she remains in the realm of critical readers.

21

In his definition of the romantic, James joins the critical mind with pleasure since he considers the romantic as a field which can be reached "only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire" (279). He finds it inadequate to define romance as based on danger, risk, love, or uncertainty, or as a matter of the villains, ghosts, forgers, or degenerate women. Instead, he believes the following:

22

The panting pursuit of danger is the pursuit of life itself, in which danger awaits us possibly at every step and faces us at every turn; so that the dream of an intenser experience easily becomes rather some vision of a sublime security like that enjoyed on the flowery plains of heaven, where we may conceive ourselves proceeding in ecstasy from one prodigious phase and form of it to another. (280)

23

In romance, the secret force of evil derives meaning from its encounter with the good. This encounter constitutes life which is uncanny enough to give birth to dreams that might be more secure than life itself. For this reason, one needs theater stages or dramatization in order for one's phantasies to be liberated. Reading romance, in other words, induces ecstasy. In this model of reading, desire—which indispensably relates to the unconscious—plays a significant role. Peter Brooks defines melodramatic imagination as a "mode of excess." Exemplifying this mode with Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, he argues that "the world is subsumed by an underlying manichaeism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 4). Thus, hidden relationships, dark characters and mystical powers assume a "true subject" wrapped up in these images and figures. Moreover, Brooks explains that the drama as the "moral occult" shows us the novelist's "spiritual values" in disguise. He maintains that "it bears comparison to unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm which in quotidian existence may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value" (5). Brooks's observation explains why reading melodramas, the genre of many romances, appears as a repressed ecstatic experience in "The Story in It."

24

Even if, as James describes it, Maud goes into ecstasy while reading romances, she represses her desire under the guise of morality. Whereas the superego, or the laws of morality, might influence Maud to conceal her desire to read romances, her inescapable involvement in a romance dramatizes her unconscious desire to be a "woman" rather than a "girl." If this dramatization represents the realm of "as-if," the transference that is at stake here "lend[s] itself to its eventual revision through the listener's 'interventions'"

(Brooks, *Psychoanalysis* 53). Likewise, Maud's unconscious desire that is transferred from the pages of romances to the novel's present time lends itself to reader intervention, which manifests itself in readerly desire for the text. While Maud's repressed desire for romances is reiterated in her repressed desire for Voyt, the metonymic chain of desire not only is transferred to the text itself but also extends to the reader. In other words, stories are opened to new stories, calling for new actors/actresses to perform in their dramas. Firstly, Maud as a reader of romances finds herself in a romance. Secondly, Voyt and Mrs. Dyott are both players in the romance that constitutes the story's theme as well as performers who voice James's hesitant views on realism and the representation of sexuality and passion. Thirdly, the reader of "The Story in It" finds him-/herself in the story with its dramatization of the impossibility of innocence. This impossibility is performed through the story's *mise en abyme*, which places characters in the positions they criticize, and through a narrative desire that is transformed into a readerly drive.

25

The story in it becomes the reader's story in "The Story in It," as long as it is read by the text, reminding us of Barthes's suggestion that "the text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*" (*The Pleasure* 27). In fact, the reciprocal fetishistic desire of the reader and the writable text illustrates the point at which James's realism intersects with the experience of *jouissance*. Lacan, influenced by Jakobson, associates realist literature with metonymy and symbolic literature with metaphor. Jakobson makes an analogy between the metaphoric process and the literary movements of Romanticism and Symbolism which, according to him, has already been acknowledged by many others. Meanwhile, the analogy between the metonymic process and Realism remained unrecognized:

26

Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details. In the scene of Anna Karenina's suicide Tolstoj's artistic attention is focused on the heroine's handbag; and in *War and Peace* the synecdoches 'hair on the upper lips' and 'bare shoulders' are used by the same writer to stand for the female characters to whom these features belong. ("Two Aspects of Language" 130)

27

In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan considers the realistic representation of people, objects, and details in "the rails of metonymy" (429). In contrast to metaphor, which is associated with knowledge in the vertical axis of the signified, metonymy is associated with desire in the horizontal signifying chain. Accordingly, one signifier is displaced by another signifier in metonymy, as exemplified by the connection between ship and sail. This connection is "nowhere other than in the signifier," Lacan suggests, basing metonymy on the *word-to-word* nature of this relationship (421). According to him, metonymic structure installs a "lack of being [*le manque de l'être*]" in the object relation," which defines desire as always yearning for something displaced (428). This metonymic structure shows also the barred human subject together with the resistance of signification in the relationship between the signifier and the signified (428). The subject's desire resists expression through speech. On the other hand, metaphor, which is formulated as "one word for another," implies one signifier's substitution for another signifier. It is this substitution which creates the poetic signification effect. The bar is crossed to give rise to the signifier's passage to the signified (429). In other words,

by virtue of maintaining the bar between signifier and signified, metonymy represents insistent lack in the human subject as well as the structure of desire and fetishistic perversity: "its 'perverse' fixation at the very point of suspension of the signifying chain at which the screen-memory is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish becomes frozen" (158). Narrative fetishism similarly suspends the reader in the metonymic chain, keeping him/her in the realm of fore-pleasure.

28

One can suggest that "The Story in It" exposes a reciprocal fetishism. There occurs a break-up in the metonymic chain of fore-pleasure when the text as a fetish object begins to desire the reader as well. Along with Maud, who hysterically plagiarizes what she reads, the reader—being the part of this contamination—is also fetishistically suspended in the story. In other words, the reader becomes a "duffer" who cannot "understand" the story in it, as "the story" alludes to an origin. Felman's interpretation of "The Turn of the Screw" is useful for understanding "The Story in It": "the story's *origin*, actually situates its *loss*, constitutes its infinite deferral. The story's origin is therefore situated, it would seem, in a *forgetting* of its origin" (122). "The Story in It" presents another example of such deferral as that to which Brooks draws attention in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*: "'The Story in It,' Henry James entitled one of his short stories, and narratives repeatedly speak of the problem of what there is to know and to tell, of the problematic boundaries of telling and listening, and of the process of transmission" (221). The problematic boundaries of the story enhance the fetishistic perversion of text and reader, ultimately inducing reader satisfaction in the traces of the text. The reader's encounter with the impossibility of mastering the text together with the text's dramatization of his/her impotence leads the reader to fall into an abyss, "laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself" (de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" 214).

29

Thus, the text stages its own truth, if we borrow from Derrida's observation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter." The "truth" here is the one that "inhabits fiction as the master of house, as the law of the house, as the economy of fiction" ("Le Facteur de la Vérité" 426). Pursuing Derrida's track, we can suggest that James's house of fiction is a "silent house of death," as economy derives from the same origin as *oikēsis* ("Différance" 4). Tracing *différance*, Derrida refers to the silent difference between the vowels "a" and "e," a distinction seen but not heard, and suggests that the vowel "a" remains "silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikēsis*" (4). Stemming from the same origin as "economy," *oikēsis* denotes the silent house of death. Therefore, *différance* becomes the tomb that has an inscription on stone. This connotation clarifies how, in James's uncanny house of fiction, *relations*—e.g. love and *récit*—are enigmatic enough to place readers before the laws of literature. Even if "truth" forecloses James's house of fiction via his theories, prefaces, and explanations, it is the silent house of writing that "shows" rather than "tells" the truth.

## 4. Conclusion

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James not only is renowned for his mastery of realist representation but also theorizes realism in miscellaneous writings, from his critical essays to prefaces. Although he considers the representation of historical truth as an indispensable function of

literature, he argues that the artist's subjective experience is not independent from this representation. James's metaphor of the "house of fiction" envisions "dead walls" that should be revived by the artist's subjective experience ("Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*" 290-91). However, his stance on realism is ambivalent—that is, while he expresses his reservation about the representation of sexuality as an individual experience, he also argues that art should not deal solely with "agreeable" issues. "The Story in It" reflects this ambivalence by hinting at James's realist vision on the one hand and by creating a *mise en abyme* through the dramatization of the characters' own situations on the other hand. The characters' divergent views on romance and vulgarity mirror James's questions about literary representation of life, sexuality and passion. Although it seems impossible to argue that a particular character voices James's thoughts, his writings nevertheless dramatize—in various forms—his questions and concerns. Still, the literary force of "The Story in It" lies not in characters' discussion of themes reflecting James's personal inquiries but in characters' contamination in the stories they read and tell. While these characters, who read romances and French, Italian, and British novels, lose their innocence in the acts of reading and storytelling, actual readers of James's work are also confronted with the question of "what the devil—in the name of innocence" are they doing "in."

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## ABSTRACTS

Henry James, who is often cited as the master of realism, nevertheless expresses his reservation about realist representation of love, passion, sexuality and female characters in his critical writings. This article suggests that James's short story entitled "The Story in It" stages this situation through characters' conversations about American and European literature. Focusing on the dynamics of storytelling, which the conversations revolve around, and particularly engaging in Barthes's concept of "desperate plagiarism," the article discusses the possible implications of "it" in the title of the short story. It concludes that "The Story in It" illustrates how storytelling cannot be an innocent act with its contagious nature which results in listeners/readers' partaking in the stories told.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** desperate plagiarism, fore-pleasure, Henry James, mise en abyme, reader, romance, storytelling

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