

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

The Sacred Fount of Social Art

James Revisited

The Sacred Fount (1901) is James's last novel before the novels of his so-called major phase and bears traces of the novels to follow.¹ James's late novels have been labelled evasive in style, stylistically elaborate, reflecting a technical interest, providing a hermeneutic model of understanding, lately shown to be embedded in the social practices of the turn of the century.² It seems that *The Sacred Fount* can be taken as a minimal model, not to say prototype, of the problems occurring in the late novels: the issues of detection, theories, artistic creation all appear in it. The reason why I selected *The Sacred Fount* to write about here is its apparent focus on one element of the issues above, the failure of comprehension, i.e. the narrator's apparent failure to actually find out anything. Following the focus reveals a complementary relation between detection and artistic creation in *The Sacred Fount*, which I think in turn paves the way for an approach to the late novels.

In *The Sacred Fount* the narrator's exploration of the illicit relations between members of the company remains fruitless. The novel has been read as an ambiguous text, as an experiment with form, a model of understanding, and

¹ On the duality of the major phase and James's literary output in general see Jonathan Freedman. "Introduction: The Moment of Henry James." *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*. Cambridge: CUP, 1998, pp. 16–7.

² On the connection between James's supreme aesthetic detachment and his social engagement see Nancy Bentley. "The Equivocation of culture." *The Ethnography of Manners*. Cambridge: CUP, 1995, p. 9 (especially note 11).

even as a love story and a piece of ethnography.³ If the relation between detection and artistic creation is mentioned, it is not considered any further and is not connected to the problem of manners. Thus, as far as I can see, it remains to be noted that pre-set notions of decency determine detection in *The Sacred Fount* and that they are responsible for the endless mystery. There is a clear correspondence between sociability and detection in the text.

The essay maps out how standards of sociability frustrate the work of detection in *The Sacred Fount* and tries to discuss the emergence of the so-called ambiguity⁴ in it from the perspective of social expectations. The hypothesis is that the work of detection is creating symmetry and pattern rather than an account of things past in the novel. In this way detection appears to resist the tangled real to forge a pattern according to expectation instead. Considering the apparent similarity between detective work and artistic creation, it seems that when detection is flawed it is artistic imagination that has to be suppressed. I argue that this implies a model of art where representation is impossible and a biased presentation is inevitable. The question still open is that of application, whether this pattern fits other so-called ambiguous texts of James's late phase, too.

I would like to explicate the process of detection and its implied parallel to artistic creation in three stages, the context stage, the text stage, and the re-context stage. In the context stage I am going to present how the problem of detection and the problem of art have been discussed before. The two trends distinguished are based on their preference for either detection or art, respectively. Then, in the text stage, I am going to present the case, the process of detection, and those standards of decency that prevent the solution of the case. After this I am going to point out the similarity between artistic creation and detection in the novel and eventually show what model of art this similarity implies. In sum, in the re-

³ The models of Shlomith Rimmon (ambiguity: *The Concept of Ambiguity – the Example of James*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), Sergio Perosa (art: "Rival Creation and the Antinovel." *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1978) and Paul B. Armstrong (understanding: *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford*. Ithaca, London: Cornell UP, 1987. Cf. also his "The Hermeneutics of Literary Impressionism: Interpretation and Reality in James, Conrad, and Ford." *Centennial Review* 27 [Fall 1983], 4.244–269) are the subject of the first section. Blackall devotes a book to the love story solution (Jean Frantz Blackall. *Jamesian Ambiguity and The Sacred Fount*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1965, p. 122) and Bentley uses the example of *The Sacred Fount* to introduce her project, fiction as ethnography (Bentley, pp. 11–12).

⁴ The problem of Jamesian ambiguity as a formal concern of the New Critical interest and its rewriting into new critical notions could be the subject of another paper. See Freedman, pp. 18–19.

context stage I am trying to place this reading of *The Sacred Fount* among other ones and describe how a consideration of the role of decency in the plot points out a social model of art in *The Sacred Fount*.

1 "CONTEXT"

My insistence on the social nature of detection in *The Sacred Fount* does not imply any disregard for other accounts of the phenomenon but indicates my interest. My focus is on descriptions of detection and art in different readings of *The Sacred Fount*, as I would like to show their relations to my hypothesis. Indeed, it seems that representative readings on ambiguity, failure of artistic creation, and even a hermeneutics of bewilderment describe the familiar symptoms of the fruitless detection I am interested in but arrive at different diagnoses of it. The explication of the above accounts aims at locating the reasons of such a negligence of social expectations in individual readings of the text, and tries to position my idea of cultural detection as one between accounts of investigation and style. The reason for the medial position, it appears, is a different set of presuppositions about the term "real" in individual readings.

You can find a meticulous catalogue of detection in *The Sacred Fount* in Shlomith Rimmon's book on ambiguity and James. Rimmon reads *The Sacred Fount* as a tale of ambiguity. For her ambiguity is the principle of composition in the novel. For her ambiguity is basically a logical concept constituted by gaps of knowledge in a text that can be filled in by two mutually exclusive sets of clues from the same text. In this model the text is a collection of clues and gaps to be combined, is treated as a self-enclosed puzzle where all clues are to be taken at face value, and where segments can be moved and freely substituted. The ambiguous text presents a subsection where there are two equally valid combinations of gaps and clues.⁵ The two valid combinations may either be opposites of each other or they may simply be different, but they exclude each other in both cases. In *The Sacred Fount*, Rimmon claims, ambiguity is open in most cases: the two sets of clues are not opposites of each other but are simply different. Still, there is a tendency for the opposite clues, too, and this makes us think of the novel as a step toward the so-called antinovel that uses this type of ambiguity.⁶ In this reading

⁵ Rimmon, p. 167.

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social expectations and evasive formulations belong to ambiguity on the thematic level: one cannot know if detection is a pastime or a taboo in the text.⁷ It is fascinating that all the examples I selected of the appearance of expectations are listed in the article, but the problem of detection blocked by expectation is taken as the problem of classification: if detection is a pastime or a taboo in the novel. In this way ambiguity is described but is not accounted for. The novel's ambiguity is simply considered to be "amazing ... and frightening," a duality characteristic of artistic discourse, as Rimmon puts it.⁸

The description of detection in the text becomes part of a description of art in general in Sergio Perosa's study of the experimental novels of James. Perosa focuses on the figure of the artist in the novel because he views *The Sacred Fount* as the last writing of James's experimental phase that tests both the capacities of the traditional and those of the experimental novel. He claims that the theme of the artist present in *The Sacred Fount* "allows us to relate it to the fictional method and artistic ideals of the French *nouveau roman*."⁹ He goes on to present the narrator as the artist in the text. The narrator has to face the fact that art and life are opposed to each other in that art composes order while life is essentially irregularity. Furthermore, the narrator becomes aware of the fact that the real resists the ordering impulse of art, and all his attempts at imposing order at Newmarch are baffled. Thus he has to meditate on problems of fiction writing, and the novel becomes a "parable on the pathetic failure of ordering and expressive skills."¹⁰ In sum, life wins the battle against art, in other words art fails when no solution of the mystery of the sacred fount is provided by the end.¹¹ In this reading, interestingly enough, detection does not appear as a focal problem of the novel but as a theme within the theme of artistic creation. Although the similarity of the two procedures, detection and artistic creation/reception is pointed out, no further importance is attributed to the relation, it is listed as one example of the artistic failure depicted in the novel. In Perosa's model the real is the binary opposite of art, and expectations and conspiracies on the part of all the characters belong to the realm of the real: are aspects of its irregularity. So,

⁷ Rimmon, p. 220.

⁸ Rimmon, p. 228.

⁹ Perosa, p. 78.

¹⁰ Perosa, p. 84.

¹¹ Perosa, p. 84.

similarly to Rimmon's reasoning, the duality of detection and expectations is present only implicitly in the analysis.

Yet another way to envisage the real/art problem in James is Paul B. Armstrong's theory on the challenge of Jamesian bewilderment based on the example of *The Sacred Fount* and *The Ambassadors*. The value of this approach for cultural detection is that Armstrong aims at describing the *process* of what he calls "understanding" in the novels, and he shows the correlation of detection and art determined by the process of understanding. Another term for understanding is Jamesian bewilderment, that "throws into question the interpretive constructs that we ordinarily take for granted."¹² Armstrong argues that it is the powers of consciousness that have to face uncomposed experience in James. It is not art or artistic reception but interpretation, meaning-creation that faces the real. In general, Jamesian writing is paradoxical for Armstrong because it presents interpretive adventures where one does have facts but their readings are multiple. In this way reality is both one and many: James has a faith in the real and questions its stability at the same time, thus is the last realist and the first modernist writer.¹³ More specifically, the ambiguity of *The Sacred Fount* indicates that the force of "reality" may not be strong enough to pull interpretation to a definitive result. The issues at hand are twofold in this account: firstly, the main concern is the paradox presentation of the composing powers of consciousness, secondly the supplementary concern is to find out how the reader can take this. So the challenge of bewilderment indicated in the title is both stylistic and receptional: Modernism challenges conventions of Realism and the reader is challenged to develop a greater self-consciousness about the workings of interpretative consciousness. As for detection, it does not appear in itself but as part of interpretive strategies. Detection, amongst other phenomena of interpretive consciousness, is – again in this reading – against the real. However, in this version, the absence of a definitive result is not a telltale sign of the failure of interpretation but a challenge of the epistemological assumptions of mimesis, questioning the independence of reality.¹⁴

So far it seems that formal and stylistic matters create the difficulty of comprehension in *The Sacred Fount*: ambiguity, failure of representation, and a paradoxical practice of representation. The similarity of detection and art is

¹² Armstrong, p. 2.

¹³ Armstrong, p. 8.

¹⁴ Armstrong, p. 8.

mentioned but is not deemed significant. In contrast to this, I suggest that a re-evaluation of their relation is possible. If formal matters become connected to social and cultural ones within the economy of the text, we are no longer facing an opposition of real – art or real – interpretation but a correlation of them. Analysing Jamesian tales of representation, Julie Rivkin explicates this economy in a convincing way. She claims that the use of inconsistencies, discrepancies is a compositional method of James, the effect of a specific representational logic. This representational logic is that of supplementarity, whereby new issues are substituted instead of previous ones creating a sense of incompleteness in the reader.¹⁵ The issues connected by substitution are artistic and cultural.

Initially investigating technical issues of representation in James's fiction, I found myself drawn into the investigation of cultural categories such systems invariably mediated. engages issues of cultural construction: when artists seem to live out the compositional imperatives of their artistic activity, they enact the construction of social form.¹⁶

It appears that beside the poles of art and real, one should take notice of a third one: that of the social, that connects the two. My focus on the cultural facilitation of detection in *The Sacred Fount* is an attempt to read the text from the point of view of cultural construction in the above sense.

2 "TEXT"

My hypothesis is that *The Sacred Fount* is a piece of fictional cultural criticism, but no evidence for this claim has been provided as yet. The text stage below elaborates on the phenomenon of cultural detection in the novel, and thus presents the evidence needed. This presentation, essentially, is not so much a novel model of *The Sacred Fount*, but rather a rearrangement of existing critical observations from the perspective of detection flawed. The aim of the rearrangement is to explicate the intricate relationship between detection and social expectations in the text. The mystery itself is presented first in order to prepare the report on the process of detection aiming to solve the mystery. It turns out that detection is both fuelled and confronted by standards of decency

¹⁵ Julie Rivkin. *False Positions: The Representational Logic of Henry James's Fiction*. Stanford, Stanford UP, 1996, pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ Rivkin, *False Positions*, pp. 8–9.

that in this way both require and prevent the solution of the case. As the second step, a comparison of detection and artistic creation reveals the similarity of the two processes. Eventually, the conclusion is a model of art implied by this similarity where the binary opposition of art and real is distorted by social conventions.

2.1 The Case

The mystery of the sacred fount is the mystery of a flow of intelligence and youth the Narrator thinks is happening at Newmarch, the scene of an aristocratic weekend house-party in the country. The Narrator witnesses his old acquaintance, Gilbert Long, whom he has thought dim-witted, growing clever. The only possible explanation he can find for the spectacular alteration is that a clever lady must have influenced Long, so he sets out to identify who the lady in question might be: he is checking all possible variations. At the same time he realises that one Lady of the company, Mrs. Briss, has recently grown really pretty, another significant change of appeal. In this case the Narrator supposes somebody's influence again, his theory is that the lady has been influenced by her husband who, in turn, has grown old. Having struck up his theories and started his investigation, an apparent symmetry between the two couples dawns on him: there is a flow of a quality from one side towards the other in both relationships. Considering the supposed reciprocal relations that both mysterious affairs are symptoms of, the Narrator comes to the conclusion that the unknown lady who is influencing the now clever Gilbert Long must have *lost* the power of her intelligence in the process. The Lady is to be found on the basis of her shattered intellectual power and social art. The Narrator only needs to go around, chat with the ladies and consider their mental capacities. Socialising bursts out, and this is also the point where all hell breaks loose: the supposed symmetry of the supposed exchanges begins to be extended to other members of the company – detection not only speeds up but is protracted and stretched as well.

While the narrator diagnoses the case, values of social behaviour are being expressed by him and by other members of the company. Both Gilbert Long and Mrs. Briss are considered to have changed to their *advantage*: their change shows positive values of the society they belong to. As for Gilbert Long, we have seen

that he has improved first of all because he has more *intellect* (322).¹⁷ However, there are other aspects of his improvement, too. He is less handsome, but his *manners* gained in ease (318), he is actually able to get on with anyone in the company. Also, he can *communicate* much more effectively than before, his accounts are *accurate* (320), and the narrator is fascinated by the way he makes his *points* (321). Added to this, the Narrator can locate a definite change in Long's attitude towards others. Long possesses a reliable *sociability* now: he is friendly and is no longer rude (321, 330). Apart from Long's metamorphosis, the other improvement is that of Mrs. Briss's. This alteration is less complex than that of Long, as she has become *pretty* and seems much younger than she actually is but nothing else happened to her. So perhaps it is no wonder that when the narrator sums up his impression of the improvement in Long he values the alteration as the "high sport of subtle intelligence – between two gentlemen" (407). The other halves of the respective couples change to their *disadvantage*: Briss grows *old*, the Lady loses her *wit*. In this way the identification of the mystery presupposes a clear-cut opposition of socially valuable and non-valuable characteristics.

Detection starts out to investigate the secret plan determining the flow of intelligence and manners (468). To be more precise, detection starts out to investigate the mysterious emergence of the positive characteristics listed above. The narrator studies the mystery with a rather mechanistic model of the transformation in mind: once there is a pattern in one couple, this pattern should be reflected in the other case. Basically all relations among the members of the company begin to be interpreted in terms of the secret flow of information they might be reflections of. Also, it is not only the Narrator who watches the others in order to set up his patterns, but others play the same game as well. For one, Mrs. Briss discusses the latest developments of the Narrator's investigation with him and feeds him her own theory in turn. Then, Obert draws an analogy to the mystery projected by the Narrator, saying "You have your mystery and I'll be hanged if I don't have mine" (351). In this way analogy becomes a powerful tool: the torch of analogy shows the way to follow for the Narrator and Obert, analogy becomes the principle of investigation. The first problem occurs when analogy breaks down.

When analogy fails, the obsession of observation produces scenes of self-reflection in the Narrator. First he takes notice of his sharpened perception and

¹⁷ All parenthesised references are to the Harper edition (Henry James. *Three Novels: The Europeans, The Spoils of Poyntos, The Sacred Fount*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1968, 317–493).

special sensibility (386). He also expresses his need for a material clue, but restrains himself by saying the detective and his interest in the keyhole are ignoble, it is only psychological signs that are honourable for the investigator (352). Still, he notes that he is “reading into mere human things an interest so much deeper than mere human things were prepared to supply” (402). In other words, he is aware of his abuse of psychological signs. He is disgusted by the investigation itself when it begins to concern Mrs. Server, “curiosity began to strike me as wanting in taste” (342), and realises that success may be more embarrassing than failure.

I succeeded, by vigilance, in preventing my late companion from carrying Mrs. Server off: I had no wish to see her studied – by anyone but myself at least – in the light of my theory. I felt by this time that I understood my theory, but I was not obliged to believe that Mrs. Brissenden did. I am afraid I must frankly confess that I called deception to my aid; to separate the two ladies I gave the more initiated a look in which I invited her to read volumes. This look, or rather the look she returned, comes back to me as the first note of a tolerably tight, tense little drama, a little drama of which our remaining hours at Newmarch were the all too ample stage. (342-3)

This is the point where he decides to redirect his forces and instead of a detection to reveal the case he becomes involved in detection that hides: detection serves to deceive.

2.2 Correspondence between detection and artistic processes

Detection serves to deceive: this is also the point where I have to stop listing traces of the detective process and ask *why* detection went astray and was left incomplete. My hypothesis consists of two components. The first is that it was *necessary* to give up detection because common standards of decency required appearances instead of facts. The second component is that the principles determining detection are *also* the principles determining *artistic creation* in *The Sacred Fount*, and in this way art too can only have the status of appearance.

At Newmarch the company required not an exposure but a covering of the supposed illicit relations among its members. So it is not only the Narrator’s moral scruples that restrain him from pursuing his investigation, but also other members of the company express this need. The narrator contends he has to pretend to be an idiot for a decent appearance (484). At the same time he is aware

that he plays a part in a tight little drama where everyone has a part (409). As a result of the acting out, the weekend becomes a secluded stage of a social performance.

The night was mild and rich, and though the lights within were, in deference to the temperature, not too numerous, I found the breath of the outer air a sudden corrective of our lustre and the thickness of our medium, our general heavy humanity. I felt its taste sweet, and while I leaned for refreshment, on the sill I thought of many things. One of those that passed before me was that Newmarch and its hospitalities were sacrificed, after all, and much more than smaller circles, to material frustrations. We were all so fine and formal, and the ladies in particular at once so little and so much clothed, so beflounced yet so denuded, that the summer stars called to us in vain. We had ignored them in our crystal cage, among our tinkling lamps... (427)

Here life became a simulated lounge marked by a tolerance of talk (366), where the art of telling is of utmost importance. The Narrator enjoys this situation and describes his final conversation with Mrs. Briss as mutually activating and pleasurable: “we both knew we know more than we told. This made our conversation far more interesting than any colloquy I’d ever enjoyed”(467). However, the narrator overdoes his tolerance of talk and his playmates resist after a while. Mrs. Briss complains to the narrator about his habits: with his art of putting things one simply does not know where one is (461). Lady John tells the Narrator to give up confabulating (411). In face of them all, the Narrator is amused by his being a nuisance: “as inhumanly amused as if one had found one could create something” (374). The Narrator overdoes his role and thinks he in fact creates something while the others would like to put an end to his creativity.

There is a distinct similarity between the process of detection and the process of artistic creation as the Narrator describes them: their practice, their relation to the Real, and even their aims are alike. The Narrator talks of artistic glow when he theorises, and compares one of his new theories to *reading* a passage in a favourite author he had not noticed before.

My large reading had meanwhile, for the convenience of the rest of my little talk with Lady John, to make itself as small as possible. I had an odd sense, till we fell apart again, as of keeping my finger stiffly fixed on a passage in a favourite author on which I had not previously lighted. I held the book out of sight and behind me; I spoke of things that were

not at all in it – or not at all on that particular page; but my volume, none the less, was only waiting. (417)

Also, *artistic imagination* is characterised in the story and is similar to the obsessed observation of the Narrator. Imagination is dangerous, when too vivid: this is the problem with May Server, her overactive imagination frightens males of the company. So imagination has to be suppressed, much like detection had to be.

As for their relation to the Real, both detection and art are against it. In a spectacular example the *mystery* itself, the relation of the two couples appears as a scene, in which art and the detective interest seek patterns and symmetries that do not characterise the real.

These opposed couples balanced like bronze groups at the two ends of the chimney-piece, and the most I could say to myself in lucid deprecation of my thought was that I mustn't take them equally for granted merely *because* they balanced. Things in the real had a way of not balancing; it was all an affair, this fine symmetry, of artificial proportion. (417)

The Narrator was busy watching two couples of the company and considered their relation as a relation within works of art, still without success.

The aim of the detection and artistic creation is also similar. *The Sacred Fount* is not only the fount of intellect and beauty but something more and more hazy than that: the scent of something ultimate. The others share this thirst for the infinite, for instance after listening to a piano concert the company is under a spell. As the Narrator puts it: "it was the infinite that for the hour, the distinguished foreigner poured out to us causing it to roll in wonderful waves of sound, almost of color, over to our receptive attitudes and faces." (408). Art and detection appear similar as creation and as means to some generalised infinite.

2.3 The parallel breaks down

Although the process of detection and artistic creation and experience seem to match, including their thirst for the infinite, the results of detection and art, namely theories and artworks, do not fit accordingly. Works of art are balanced and ordered, but the solution is apparently not. The problem the Narrator faces is the unreliability of his theories. He has to notice that piecing facts together is like picking up straws (418) and also that his theories come into pieces at a touch

(489). When, eventually, he leaves the house in panic, a tangle of theories is left behind with loose threads, without a clear solution for the mystery. Is it in any way similar to the patterned symmetry of a work of art? It seems that detection only aims at producing perfect results but eventually fails to do so.

However, if you consider in detail how a prototypical work of art actually *functions* in the story, you'll notice that actual patterns of art are not as reliable as the descriptions above may suggest. Let us have a look at how a characteristic work of art within the novel functions. There is a portrait, "The Mask of Death," in the text, where a young man holding a mask in his hand is depicted. Four characters in the novel understand the picture in four different ways, not being able to decide if the expression "The Mask of Death" really refers to the young man or the mask in his hand, as the features of both are somewhat artificial. The problem, on the one hand, is that Death can be either the man or the mask, and in this way the "solution" of the portrait "The Mask of Death" remains unknown. However, this complication still does not account for the four different solutions provided by the spectators of the picture. The observers come up with four solutions instead of the two logically possible because they substitute faces from the company into the picture: they use contextual information to interpret the mystery of the title. In this way, different identities of the young man and the mask are provided, and this initial plurality is doubled because of the duality of the title. If there were more than four spectators present in the gallery conversing over the title of the picture, possibly even more interpretations could emerge. Remember that the mystery of the fount is a mystery of faces, characters putting on masks of intelligence, mental deprivation, youth, or age, while other characters behave as spectators trying to find out what the principle behind putting on masks may be. The scheme of the picture, then, is multiple, but this multiplicity is only doubled by the title, its basis is the plurality of theories concerning the mystery of the fount. The plurality of the picture in this scene, then, is contextual.

Considering the process of detection beside this scheme of art, we can certainly say that detection produces a pattern impossible to fill, too. One has the theory of symmetrical relation between two couples, where the symmetry lies in a flow of intelligence or vitality from one member of the couple to the other. The only problem is to find who the actual members of the two couples are. Detection goes as far as to state the pattern, but does not fill the functions with names. To be more precise, each character fills the pattern in a different way at different

stages of the novel, and this situation results in the semiotic failure. Thus the so-called failure of detection actually resembles the pattern of the picture.

3 AN IMPLIED MODEL OF ART

As a consequence of the plurality of detection based on the context, I argue that detection is not a failure of the artistic creativity in this story but rather a replica of it. A “work of art” here presents a pattern to be filled in but that is impossible to fill in. Similarly, detection presents a pattern where gaps of knowledge cannot be filled in unanimously because of the context.

Let us pursue this similarity between detection and artistic creation and reception further. Remember that detection was blocked by a common need on the part of the company not to reveal the names of the persons involved in illicit relations. Standards of decency made the Narrator put an end to his investigation. He couldn’t come up with a solution because it was better for members not to expose what was going on, i.e. the real if you like.

If the analogy between detection and artistic creation and reception can be stretched so far, the question to be answered refers to the extent of the analogy. Should one assign a role to expectations within the realm of art, too? This, in turn, implies a model of art that does not simply rely on a direct opposition between a patterned work of art and the tangled real. It seems that a third pole, that of standards or expectations has to be taken into consideration, too. The third pole, according to the analysis, is the one that keeps the gap open between the other two.

It is this model of art that has been shown in connection with the picture. The plurality of opinion among the spectators was based on the plurality of their ideas about the mystery of the sacred fount of life and energy. Everyone was compelled to come up with a hypothetical solution to the mystery, and nobody’s version was verified or falsified, which is why the weekend ended in interpretive plurality. The question at hand is how much the compulsion to guess and the interpretive plurality had been expected to happen. In other words, if it would have been possible for the participants of the company to sit down together and listen to a revelation, as would be the case in any conventional detective story. It seems that because of the social expectation not to reveal illicit relations among members of the company, the spectators of “The Mask of Death” were expected to have diverse opinion as to the identity of the mysterious figure. The characters

practically re-enacted the game of “detection flawed” when they interpreted the picture. This means that when they provided a plural interpretation based on the context, the reason of the plurality was in fact the expectation to remain decent, not to expose anyone. The aspect of social expectations prevents a unitary order of the real here.

It is high time to acknowledge that the term “Real” is used with all its ambiguity here. Throughout the text itself it appears with a capital r and the definition of that Real is the one that serves as the basis of the opposition between Real and art. The term “Real” is used in this sense in all the quotes and descriptions above. However, if we come to think of it, in the analysis the essay itself uses the term “real” with another definition applied. In this essay the real with a small r is a cultural product and in that sense cannot be opposed to Art in the Jamesian sense. Basically, throughout the essay I am trying to prove that the definition of the Real in the text should not be taken at face value, and a Lacanian Real be exchanged for an Iserian real.¹⁸

4 RE-CONTEXT

Such a reading of *The Sacred Fount* does not propose any new element to be inserted into the story of the story. Rather, it represents a change of focus. Shlomith Rimmon in her study of ambiguity in the novel saw it as an exercise in gap filling where two sets of exclusive clues were present to fill the gaps and these resulted in ambiguity. She listed the social values of the group and the opposition of detection and decency as sets of exclusive clues to back up her theory of ambiguity based on symbolic logic. Consequently, for her the model of art in the story is a function that creates ambiguity. In other words, she only has the two poles Art and Real in her model, she focuses on Art within this and every other aspect of the story is labelled according to the duality of Art as she knows it. Sergio Perosa, in turn, emphasises life and states the story is a parable of the pathetic failure of the ordering and the expressive skills on which the artist’s greatness depends, so life overcomes art. The power of expectations is labelled under Life, i.e. the real. Let my version represent the third focus, the one on expectations.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser. *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1993 (1991), p. 4.

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Standards of decent behaviour prevented the solution of the mystery at Newmarch in *The Sacred Fount*. The apparent similarity of artistic processes to those of detection made me consider a theory of art implied in the text that involves not only the poles Art/Real but also a third, that of social expectations. This model seems to present an adjustment of focus, as other readers of *The Fount* have concentrated on either the Art or the Real poles instead. The question I still have not answered though is the scope of my approach. *The Sacred Fount* anticipates the major phase and the question that is projected for me is if this frame can be applied to the novels of the major phase, too.