Henry James and his adaptors

The Golden Bowl, directed by James Ivory

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The Golden Bowl *, directed by James Ivory, screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, based on the novel by Henry James*

The Golden Bowl is the third adaptation of a Henry James novel (*The Europeans* and *The Bostonians* being the other two) that the team of director James Ivory, screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and producer Ismail Merchant has undertaken. Why does it feel, a little uncomfortably, as though they had done more? Of course they have brought several novels by E.M. Forster to the screen (*A Room with a View*, *Maurice*, *Howards End*) and made a number of other period pieces along the way (*Quartet*, *Heat and Dust*, *Remains of the Day*, *Jefferson in Paris*, etc.), but the fact that one senses an artist has been to a particular well far too often and it turns out only to have been three times, may point to something of a problem. To put it somewhat unkindly, it feels as though Ivory-Jhabvala-Merchant are always working on a lesser Henry James novel of their own.

In any case, this is the weakest of the three James adaptations, the flattest, the most disappointing.

The film, like the novel, has four central characters, who turn into two couples. Adam Verver, an American billionaire (and widower), and his daughter Maggie are enjoying an extended stay in Europe. He is building up a massive art collection, which will become the basis of a fine arts museum in his native "American City." Maggie takes up with and marries Prince Amerigo, an impecunious Italian nobleman with a wreck of a castle in his homeland. Maggie invites an old school friend, Charlotte Stant, also without means, to her wedding. We learn, but Maggie does not at first, that Charlotte and Amerigo were once lovers.

Charlotte enters Maggie's household and comes to the attention of the wifeless Adam Verver, who proposes to her. However, married life threatens to make no dent on the closeness of Adam and Maggie. Father and daughter, even after the arrival of Maggie's child, remain inseparable. Amerigo and Charlotte, to a certain extent thrown back upon themselves, succumb to their old feelings and renew their affair. When Maggie discovers the truth about their previous relations, she allows her father to make the ultimate sacrifice—he returns to America with the brokenhearted Charlotte, leaving the field to Maggie.

The, or a, golden bowl enters into the story somewhat arbitrarily. Charlotte, in the company of Amerigo, first considers it as a wedding present for Maggie. Maggie later buys it as a gift for her father. When the shopkeeper, stricken with a bad conscience, pays a call to inform her that the bowl is flawed, he espies photographs of Charlotte and the Prince and unwittingly sets in motion the story's denouement.

Gore Vidal has written of the novel: "But James has now made the golden bowl emblematic ... of the relations between the lovers and their legal mates. To all appearances, the world of the two couples is a flawless rare crystal, all of a piece, beautifully gilded with American money. Of the four, the Prince is the first to detect the flaw; and though he wanted no part of the actual bowl, he himself slips easily into that adulterine situation which is the flaw in their lives. Charlotte refused to buy the bowl because she could not, simply, pay the price; yet she accepts the adultery—and pays the ultimate price."

James wrote *The Golden Bowl* (1904) during his "third period," 1897 to 1904, when he produced as well *The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove*.

One of the densely-written novel's most striking features is its extraordinary ambiguity. The relations between the deeply intertwined leading figures are conducted in the most oblique manner, through hints, insinuations, elliptical utterances, in general, through what goes unstated, in the fashion one imagines to have held sway in the court of the Chinese emperors. No one speaks directly of his or her feelings and desires. It is difficult to determine, at any given moment, who is betraying or sacrificing or manipulating whom. At times the relations seem complex and thick for their own sake, apart from anything they might convey about social or human problems. At other moments, something real is present or hovering in the wings.

Father and daughter in particular communicate almost telepathically. The scene in which Maggie maneuvers Adam Verver into offering to return to America with Charlotte is remarkable in this regard.

This will perhaps give some flavor of it:

"This was the moment in the whole process of their mutual vigilance in which it decidedly *most* hung by a hair that their thin wall might be pierced by the lightest wrong touch. It shook between them, this transparency, with their very breath; it was an exquisite tissue, but stretched on a frame, and would give way the next instant if either so much as breathed too hard. She held her breath, for she knew by his eyes, the light at the heart of which he couldn't blind, that he was, by his intention, making sure—sure whether or no her certainty [about Charlotte and the Prince] was like his. The intensity of his dependence on it at that moment—this itself was what convinced her so that, as if perched up before him on her vertiginous point and in the very glare of his observation, she balanced for thirty seconds, she almost rocked: she might have been for the time, in all her conscious person, the very form of the equilibrium they were, in their different ways, equally trying to save. And they were saving it—yes, they were, or at least she was: that was still the workable issue, she could say, as she felt her dizziness drop. She held herself hard; the thing was to be done, once for all, by her acting now where she stood.... He was doing what he had been steadily been coming to; he was practically offering himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice—he had read his way so into her best possibility; and where had she already for days and weeks

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past planted her feet if not on her acceptance of the offer?"

This kind of exquisite writing is perhaps both too easily accepted and rejected. Academic critics and others rhapsodize about James's style, forgetting that cruder prose (Balzac, Hardy, Dreiser) sometimes gets at more of the truth. Vidal, a novelist himself, suggests that after 1880 James decided "he would try to create something that no writer in English had ever thought it possible to do with a form as inherently loose and malleable as the novel: he would aim at perfection." It's not clear why this is a legitimate or desirable ambition in art, or even what it means.

The radical or populist dismisses James a bit too readily. Cultural historian V.L. Parrington, for example, contended that the novelist "remained shut up within his own skull-pan. His characters are only projections of his brooding fancy, externalizations of hypothetical subtleties. He was concerned only with nuances. He lived in a world of fine gradations and imperceptible shades. Like modern scholarship he came to deal more and more with less and less."

In 1918 T.S. Eliot, intending to flatter, suggested that James (1843-1916) "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Ezra Pound, in the same year, wrote: "To lay all his faults on the table, we may begin with his self-confessed limitations, that 'he never went down town [i.e., where ordinary people resided].'" Pound noted that Balzac "gains what force his crude writing permits him" by portraying people at the mercy of cash necessity. He continues: "James, by leaving cash necessity nearly always out of the story, sacrifices, or rather fails to attain, certain intensities." Another critical work makes the same essential point, adding: "His novels have no ordinary people, except as barriers to the extraordinary; his people feel either the passion of the passion or they feel nothing."

This, I think, is critical. James had his themes—as the same work explains, "the international theme [relations between America and Europe], the theme of the artist in conflict with society, and the theme of the pilgrim in search of society"—and an enormous sensitivity to emotional vibration ("Where emotion is, there am I!" he is supposed to have said.) Unfortunately, however, James perhaps remained all his life too much the outsider, from a "philistine" continent, straining to belong to European society to notice that the greatest of modern artists were discovering the "extraordinary" in the "ordinary." Like Proust, he dealt in the most intricate fashion and exhaustive detail with the emotional relations of generally well-to-do people. There is much to be cherished in his work, but its limitations are real.

Ivory's film fails to convey the hothouse intensity of the novel, nor does it offer a contemporary critique. It simply sits there, a rather straightforward and uninspired adaptation, a story about a spoiled young American woman who learns the ways of the ("old") world and strikes back. The lead actors (Nick Nolte, Kate Beckinsale, Uma Thurman, Jeremy Northam) look and feel uncomfortable throughout. They have obviously been told that *The Golden Bowl* is a great and complex work of art to which they must do justice. They act terribly hard, to no great effect; in particular, Nolte as Adam Verver, generally a strong and calm presence, acts up a storm.

It is remarkable that the film's creators have created such a sympathetic portrait of Verver, who is, after all, a Frick or a Morgan or a Carnegie. It is certainly true that men who robbed and exploited and murdered (or had murders committed for them) all their lives felt the need toward the end to "give something back," but Nolte's benevolence and general good will is a bit much. And the notion that the backward mass in "American City" is unworthy of his museum, that they would rather have streetcars than art, this also is a bit much. The filmmakers' adaptation, which is relatively loose, goes out of its way to make the "robber baron" as sympathetic as possible. Is that not symptomatic of our day?

Why, in general, is there such a complacent and uncritical attitude toward the social circles portrayed? The film is less critical than James himself, in my view. The film's creators seem, all in all, rather in awe of the wealth and ease they recreate. Corruption, insofar as it exists or is hinted at, is purely an individual matter, something extraneous. This is intellectually weak, and artistically weakening.

And as for certain themes supposedly advanced in the film—that people should think of others and not act selfishly, that marriages founded on money are bound to fail—these seem relatively weak and thin-blooded when played out amongst such immensely comfortable people (this is also a problem with James himself). A critique of society can certainly takes as its subject the wealthy (Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*), but a good deal depends on the approach. A remorseless working through of social relationships and the air of protest that almost inevitably accompanies such a working through are lacking here, in the film and the novel. It is difficult not to conclude that in James's density there was also an element of obfuscation. There were aspects of social life he chose not to see, and the filmmakers are more than happy to follow him in this.

Ivory-Merchant-Jhabvala have carved out a niche for themselves, making tasteful films for literate sections of the middle class. Some of the works are intelligent and affecting, some are not. But there is something museum-like in all their work, and that is not the inevitable product of adapting older literary works. The work seems to have no life or strong purpose of its own. I don't see how anyone could feel deeply about it, one way or the other. What precisely would one be feeling strongly *about*? Good taste? Literacy?

One is reminded of Trotsky's comments about the Moscow Art Theater following the October Revolution: "They do not know what to do with their high technique, nor with themselves. They consider all that is happening around them as hostile, or, at any rate, strange." Except the social transformation has not yet taken place and the technique in this case is not so terribly high.

Presumably the choice of James or Forster is itself a critique of contemporary culture. But to whom are Ivory and company oriented, and do they offer a genuinely satisfying alternative to the vulgar, degraded products of the large studios?

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