From Restricted to Unrestricted Expenditure: 
Body Economy in James’s *The Sacred Fount* 

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Abstract

The theory of the sacred fount constructed by the unnamed first-person narrator in *The Sacred Fount* has baffled its readers since its publication in 1902. For most Jamesian critics, this theory is merely a whimsical and prurient fantasy of the narrator. However, this article argues that, more than a private fantasy of the narrator, the theory of the fount is inscribed within the sexual ideology of the late-Victorian age. This approach allows us to see the theory not simply as the outcome of the narrator’s solipsistic idealism as many illustrious scholars hold it to be: it is a logical consequence of his belief in the late-Victorian sexual ideology. This article examines the complex interchanges whereby the ideological structure of beliefs is translated into a narrative structure that encodes and perpetuates those beliefs. However, as this article also attempts to show, the very act of deciphering the plot and characterization uncovers a simultaneous counter-narrative: the persistent undermining of the dominant sexual ideology by the contradictions concealed within the specific form that its representation has assumed. Therefore, the aggressivity of the novel is not, as some critics have asserted, aimed at its reader, so much as it is targeted at the sexual ideology itself: embedded and inscribed within the repressive sexual ideology, *The Sacred Fount* simultaneously represents and undermines that ideology by locating its inherent fissures and gaps and thus maps out, for the individual’s desires, a(n) (im-)possible route of escape from the surveillance of that ideology.

Key Words: *The Sacred Fount*  libidinal exchange  sublime economy
vision of horrors  spermatic economy  expenditure
pornographic imagination

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“My poor dear, you *are* crazy, and I bid you good-night!”

Bafflement has always been characteristic of the critical response to Henry James’s *The Sacred Fount* since its publication in 1902. Most critical discussions of the novel begin by acknowledging, in one form or another, its reputation for opacity. Clarence A. Brown summarizes such critical bafflement: “no other novel of James . . . has generated such disagreement, bewilderment, and down-right despair” among illustrious critics (67). Peter Brooks says the novel is impervious to explication, “something of a do-it-yourself narrative construction kit, but one which never yields clear interpretive results” (*Body* 115). These views echo that of Leon Edel, who writes, in his admirable introduction to the Grove edition of the novel, that “criticism, on the whole, still tends to regard it in a mood of weary bafflement” (v). However defeatingly baffling and opaque, the novel, which James called “*jeu d’esprit,*” a “consistent joke” (*Letters* 4: 185-86), never fails to attract, to allure its critics. Brown, for example, may talk about the difficulty of gaining entrance, but does not give up the struggle to penetrate the text; the aim of interpretation, as he sees it, is “to penetrate the shimmering surfaces of this fiction to discover the other story,” the “reality” (69). Brown’s still unravished bride becomes an untamable shrew for Charles Baxter. Treating the novel as a postmodernist text, Baxter argues that it is “an act of language deliberately intended to call forth a disorganized and frustrated response from its reader” (315). Calling *The Sacred Fount* “an aggression in the form of a novel,” Baxter’s interpretation makes the reader “the butt of the consistent joke” that works because the concerns of the novel

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1 *The Sacred Fount* 218. All references to and citations from the novel are based on the New Directions edition.

2 In a recent article, P. N. Furbank argues that *The Sacred Fount,* which he calls an “entrancingly clever” novel, has a “packed and coherent, but insidious, plot line” (384).
are none of the reader’s business (329).

The most popular way to account for the notorious difficulties of *The Sacred Fount* is, following Mrs. Brissenden at the end of the novel, to pronounce the unnamed narrator a madman. Indeed, Jean F. Blackall has devoted a book to an exposé of the narrator’s inconsistencies and his self-indulgent, witless flights into airy theorizing. Patricia Merivale accuses the narrator of turning his friends and acquaintances “into the characters of his own fiction” (994). Such views reiterate that of F. O. Matthiessen, who declares that the novel betrays James’s awareness “of how preoccupation with nothing but personal relations might pass into insanity” (315). However, Edel and Tony Tanner find less madness and more ambiguity in the portrait of the restless, endlessly probing center of consciousness. Edel sees the narrator’s problems as stemming from the inevitable limits to human inquiry encountered by even the most clairvoyant analyst: “*The Sacred Fount*, in its rather madly obsessed way, states the dilemma of the extrasensitive observer who can never be sure that he is fathoming the mystery whole” (“Introduction” to the New Directions edition 11). In a brilliant essay, Tanner explores the manner in which James directs the reader to an ambivalent assessment of the narrator. He concludes, however, by conceding that the artistic mind, as analyzed in the novel, may well be distinguished by a touch of madness: “It is James’s peculiarly modern insight—think of Mann’s *Dr. Faustus*—to allow the suggestion that the activities of the artist might be allied to insanity” (240).3

3 Such critical opinions are largely based on the assumption that the ambiguities of plot and characters in the novel are placed beyond resolution, for the medium through which the entire story is transmitted, the unnamed first-person narrator, is complexly ambiguous. For the critics who hold that the narrator is mad, unreliable and solipsistic, there is no way of telling the difference between what the narrative mind thinks and whatever objective truth there may be. Sharon Cameron finely describes this interpretive impasse: “Criticism is subverted because there is no place outside the thinking mind (here the first-person narrator) where one could assess the status of what is being thought” (160). However, the narrator cannot be simply determined as solipsistic. On many occasions he thinks that he reads too much into the things he has encountered, and throughout the novel he tends to ponder over the validity of his theory of the fount. Nor can he be easily dismissed as an unreliable narrator. For that would mean what Mrs. Brissenden says to him is true to the situation. But why should we trust Mrs. Brissenden? If, as she announces near the end of
For most of the critics cited above, the alleged insanity of the narrator and the ambiguities of plot and characters are primarily due to his overindulgence in solipsistic idealism. However, I will argue in the following pages that the theory of the sacred fount is not simply a purely whimsical and prurient fantasy of the narrator but rather inscribes itself within the sexual ideology of the late-Victorian age. Such a perspective will allow us to see the so-called madness of the narrator not merely as the outcome of his solipsistic idealism but as a logical consequence of his ideological belief. I will then examine the complex interchanges whereby the ideological structure of beliefs is translated into a narrative structure that at once encodes and perpetuates those beliefs. However, as I also hope to show, the very act of deciphering the plot and the characterization uncovers a simultaneous counter-narrative: the persistent undermining of the dominant ideology by the contradictions concealed within the specific form that its representation of sexuality has assumed. The aggressivity of the novel then is not so much, as Brown asserts, aimed at its reader (329), as it is targeted at the sexual ideology itself: embedded and inscribed within the repressive sexual ideology, *The Sacred Fount* at once represents and undermines that ideology by locating its inherent fissures and gaps and thus maps out, for the individual’s (sexual) desires, a(n) (im-)possible route of escape from the surveillance of that ideology. Thus, by examining the novel in relation to its socio-historical ideology of sexuality, I hope to eschew the interpretive quagmire that a discussion of the narrator’s unreliability or his solipsism has certainly led to.

Implicit in these observations are certain crucial assumptions about the nature of ideology, and, consequently, about the process by which ideological beliefs and values concerning social order are transformed into literary practice. Suffice it to say that the relation between ideology and literature is an extremely complex, vexed,

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the novel, the narrator’s theory is “nothing.” Why should she go to such lengths to discuss it with him? Why, long after the midnight, should she seek out so prolonged and intense a conversation with a man who she thinks is “crazy”? I am by no means suggesting, as Heath Moon suggests (137-39), that the narrator is reliable while Mrs. Brissenden is not. My point is that an interpretation of the novel from the perspective of the narrator’s unreliability is partial and tautological.
and often indirect one; it cannot be reduced, as earlier Marxist literary critics attempted, either to a simplistic scheme of hegemonic ideas imposed from above, reproducing in the text the “false consciousness” that screens the individual from “reality,” or to a model in which the work and ideology are coeval mirrors, microstructure reflecting macrostructure or form reflecting content in a clear-cut binary opposition (Eagleton 69-70; 97-98). It is true that all texts are ideologically marked, howsoever multivalent or inconsistent that inscription may be; however, as ideology is never a closed, static, singular, and homogeneous system, a literary appropriation of ideology, as shall be discussed in relation to *The Sacred Fount*, releases its heterogeneous and unstable forces and subjects it to a deconstructive process.

Since the literary representation of sexual ideology in *The Sacred Fount* is one of the major concerns in this paper, it may well be helpful to start with a working definition of ideology. As Louis Althusser understands it, ideology is a system of representations, of significations, that constitutes the sphere of social relations into which each individual is fitted. Ideology can be summarized as a representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence (Ideology 36). In ideology, Althusser writes, “men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them: this presupposes both a real relation and an ‘imaginary,’ ‘lived’ relation. . . . In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation” (*Marx* 233-34). Thus, ideology is in one sense clearly false: it veils from our eyes the way individuals and societies actually work. But it is not false in the sense of being mere arbitrary deception, since it is a wholly indispensable dimension of social existence, quite essential as politics or economics. And it is also not false in so far as the real ways we live our relations to our social conditions are invested in it. As Slavoj Žižek succinctly puts it, “the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence” (28). The fundamental level of ideology then is not that of an illusion.
masking the real state of things but that of an unconscious fantasy structuring our social reality itself; ideology is not a false representation of the real state of things but a real representation of the false state of things.

This definition of ideology may in many aspects help us clear up the ambiguities of *The Sacred Fount* that have tortured its readers and critics. For, if the narrator’s theory of the fount inscribes itself in the dominant ideology of sexuality, then, according to the above definition of ideology, his theory is not necessarily an instance of the “false consciousness,” or a false representation of the real social relations, but rather indicates the way in which ideology structures those relations for him. Therefore, what is at issue in this novel is not whether the narrator is a reliable narrator or not, for, since his representation of the real is already contaminated by the imaginary, there is no way of telling if he is reliable. Rather, what is at issue is in what way and to what degree his narrative becomes the function and effect of the prevailing sexual ideology. Moreover, an approach to *The Sacred Fount* from the perspective of such ideological critique may also add a new dimension of meaning to what has been called solipsistic idealism in the narrator.

Understood within its ideological context, this idealism shows that the narrator does not know that his interpretive activity is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion in which the relation between men and women assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things, that is, the exchange of the sacred founts. What he overlooks, what he misrecognizes, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring his reality. His idealistic illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring his real, effective relationship to reality.

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4 The narrator’s speculative idealism is rooted in the world of commodities; it is this world that behaves “ideally.” In the first chapter of the first edition of *Capital*, Marx writes:

This *inversion* through which what is sensible and concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of what is abstract and universal, contrary to the real state of things where the abstract and the universal count only as a property of the concrete—such as inversion is characteristic of the expression of the value, and it is this inversion which, at the same time, makes the understanding of this expression so difficult. (123; qtd. in Žižek, *Ideology* 32)
And this overlooked, unconscious illusion may be called, to use Žižek’s terms, the “ideological fantasy” (Ideology 32-33), the operation and the undoing of which will be one of the major concerns of this paper.

Like The Turn of the Screw, The Sacred Fount centers upon an observer who may be either indulging in a quite mad, baroque sexual fantasy or witnessing the effects (but not the origins) of an unhealthy, dangerous liaison. The novel opens with the narrator and two other guests, Mrs. Brissenden and Gilbert Long, en route to a country house, Newmarch, for a weekend party. As they make their journey, the narrator and Long agree that the voracious Mrs. Brissenden has become much younger in appearance since her marriage. Soon they also see that her husband appears, by contrast, much the oldest person in the party. The narrator seizes upon the Brissendens as an illustration of his theory of the fount. Later he explains his theory to Ford Obert, a painter who is also present at the party: “Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy himself? She has by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain extracted them; and, he, on his side, to supply her, has had to tap the sacred fount” (34). With this statement the narrator expresses James’s theme of the essentially exploitative nature of relations between men and women, a “vampiric-cannibalistic” theme, as it is often called by the critics (Edel, “Introduction” to the Grove edition, xi).

In a similar imagined parallel transfer of vitality, the narrator also observes that Long, formerly a rather dull and stupid man—a “fine piece of human furniture

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5 A useful term for understanding the process of the transformation and deformation of “ideological fantasy” is “paraxis.” This term signifies “par-axis,” that which lies on either side of the principal axis, that which lies alongside the main body. Paraxis is a telling notion in relation to the place, or space, of ideology, for it implies an inextricable link to the main body of the real which it shades and threatens. It also indicates an area in which light rays seem to unite at a point after refraction. In this area, object and image seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely resides there: nothing does. This paraxial area could be taken to represent the spectral region of ideology, whose imaginary world is neither entirely “real” (object), nor entirely “unreal” (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two. For a discussion of “paraxis” in relation to fantasy, see Rosemary Jackson 19-20.
[which makes] a small party seem more numerous,” as he has it (17-18)—has suddenly become witty, intelligent and lively, and the narrator speculates that he must have formed a liaison with a most intelligent and sophisticated woman who now, if the hypothesis of the fount holds, must have become correspondingly dull, drained of her intellectual life by the vastly improved Long. With a pleasurable perversity, he describes his theory to Mrs. Brissenden and enlists her as collaborator and co-conspirator in his search, among the other guests, for the person who is serving as the fount for Long’s newly acquired cleverness. The two conspirators assume that Long’s benefactress is his lover and that she must be a formerly clever woman, now depleted by the disbursement of her intellectual energy to Long. Long’s role as a greedy consumer is thus complementary to that of Mrs. Brissenden. The married couple, Guy and Grace Brissenden, exchanging youth and hence beauty, are put forward as the initial example of the workings of the sacred fount. But as the novel develops, the narrator turns his attention away from the Brissendens to the case of Long and the mystery of his possible lover. His greater interest now lies with the merely hypothetical second relation, secret and illicit, and with the hypothetical exchange, not of youth and beauty, but of intelligence and wit. As James puts it in his notebooks: “Keep my play on idea: the liaison that betrays itself by the transfer of qualities . . . from one to the other party to it. They exchange. I see 2 couples. One is married—this is the old-young pair. I watch their process, and it gives me my light for the spectacle of the other (covert, obscure, unavowed) pair who are not married” (176). James was aware of the absurdity of his story and also uneasy at its implications. He wrote to Mrs. Humphrey Ward that he

6 In fact, the idea of depletion and repletion involved in the relationship between men and women is not uncommon in the Victorian age. According to Edel, James seems to have held such view. In his own family, his mother appeared as woman of strength compared with his father who expressed his feelings with greater openness than his mother. James seems to have believed all his life that it was his mother’s strength that sustained his father. When she died, as Edel puts it, “the Sacred Fount from which the father had derived life and strength was dried up” (Untried Years 54). This relationship between them seems to have played an important part in James’s fear of involvements of any kind with men and women and in his insistence on his own autonomy and sovereignty (Edel, “Introduction” to the Grove edition, xxvi).
“mortally loathed it!” (Letters 4: 186) and like James, the narrator is also afflicted by the sense that the liaison is none of his business and refers to his obsessive investigation as his private madness. The reader is never sure whether this first-person narrator is a deluded, obsessed voyeur indulging in baseless fantasy or a brilliant, subtle observer piecing together the evidence of a liaison as an urbane “jeu d’esprit” which he shares with two of the other house guests.

Exchange is one of the recurring themes in James’s works. As Adrian Poole aptly describes, James is deeply attracted by spectacular extravagance in a world which is nevertheless one of finite resources, dominated by exchange, and his work finds forms of representation that “actively stress the inevitable reciprocity of power, whereby it is never simply given or taken but constantly passing between donors and beneficiaries, predators and prey”(1). For James there is an exchange, giving and taking, at work at the very heart of things. This theme attains its full complexity and morbidity in The Sacred Fount. In this novel the anonymous narrator’s view of limited sexual energy and his totalization of body and mind relationship may be examined in relation to the 19th-century fixed-energy conception of the human body that received its classic and oft-cited expression in the work of Herbert Spencer. Spencer first developed his theory of the antagonism between individualization and genesis, or individual development and fertility, in an early article on population in

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7 In “De Grey: A Romance,” a short story James wrote at the age of twenty-six, an old family curse destines brides of the De Greys to early death. When the curse is resisted, the destiny is reversed: De Grey himself must die. In this case marriage is proved fatal to man. In “Longstaff’s Marriage” published in 1879, Longstaff is dying for Diana but recovers miraculously when she rejects him; then it is she who fades and dies. The prospect of marriage can prove fatal to a man unless the woman is removed. In The Ambassadors, the theme of exchange receives a more subtle and complex treatment in relationship between Chadwick Newsome and Madame de Vionnet. And more significantly, it is due to the fear of depletion and of the consequent loss of the sovereignty of consciousness that leads Lambert Strether, the hero of the novel, to renounce genital sexuality, which is for him the most exhausting and destructive form of exchange between men and women.

8 For a discussion of the fixed-energy notion of the nineteenth century and its relationship to the theory of the body, especially to the principle of the conservation of energy (also known as the First Law of Thermodynamics), see Cynthia Eagle Russett 104-119. For the history of the discovery of the principle of the conservation of energy, see Thomas S. Kuhn.
the *Westminster Review*, and incorporated it into his synthetic philosophy thereafter. As evidence of this antagonism Spencer pointed to the interconversion between sperm-cells and mental power:

intense mental application, involving great waste of the nervous tissues, and a corresponding consumption of nervous matter for their repair, is accompanied by a cessation in the production of sperm-cells . . . undue production of sperm-cells involves cerebral inactivity. The first result of a morbid excess in this direction is headache, which may be taken to indicate that the brain is out of repair; this is followed by stupidity; should the disorder continue imbecility supervenes, ending occasionally in insanity. (263)

Spencer’s view of the exchange between sperms and mental power echoes Hippocrates’s notion of *stillicidium cerebri*, which considers sperm as a discharge of the spinal marrow and brain (Acton 96). According to Hippocrates, sperm, a foam much like the froth on the sea, was “first refined out of the blood; it passed into the brain; from the brain it made it way back through the spinal marrow, the kidneys, the testicles, and into the penis” (317-18; qtd. in Laqueur 35). For Spencer as well as for Hippocrates, sperm plays a key role both in procreation and in the creation of human intelligence.

Besides being a sociological topic, the sexual in the nineteenth century was also a medical topic, kept within the strict limits of the study of reproduction. Many famous medical doctors, such as William Acton and John Laws Milton, attempted to incorporate sex and the body within medical discourse. For them, the sexual must be understood as medical, contained medically and institutionally within medical representation, as illness, disorder, and disturbance of the individual. According to Acton, those who commit sexual excess are “guilty of great and almost criminal excess.” “Too frequent sexual emission of the life-giving fluid, and too frequent sexual excitement of the nervous system are,” he wrote, “in themselves most destructive. The result is the same within marriage bond as without it” (191). The
unlimited “expenditure of seminal fluid,” which is the “vital force of life,” may cause bodily pains such as indigestion, back pain, enfeebled eyesight, and general debility, and it may even reduce the size of the testes. It damages the body and causes “the languor of mind, confusion of ideas, and inability to control the thoughts”; therefore, Acton suggests, “few hard-working intellectual married men should indulge in connection *oftener* than once in seven or perhaps ten days,” though he adds on second thought that this is a guide only for “strong, healthy men” (194). Acton’s construction of the sexual was typical of the Victorian age, which, according to Stephen Heath, saw a systematic tightening and development of the idea of the body as a kind of precarious economy and as the site and the unit of a delicate balance of forces requiring regulation and steady rhythms of exchange (14).

The same hypochondriacal obsession with “spermatic economy,” to use a phrase coined by G. J. Barker-Benfield (175), is also found in Milton, an indefatigable fighter in what he referred to as “the battle of Spermatorrhoea” (*On Spermatorrhoea* vi). Milton described the illness in a series of articles which, from a preliminary report in *The Lancet* in 1852, had become by 1875 the tenth edition of a treatise of more than one hundred pages, *On Spermatorrhoea: Its Pathology, Results and Complications*, which was published again in 1887 as part of a book called *On the Pathology and Treatment of Gonorrhoea and Spermatorrhoea*. Like Acton, Milton warned his reader that “seminal emissions are real, serious, and sometimes obstinate disease” (14), which can lead to “epilepsy, phthisis, insanity, paralysis, and death” (28). Stringent maxims are in order: “in men who have reached the age of three and four and twenty, everything beyond one emission a month requires attention” (16). Cold water, sleeping on the floor, and even the application of the gadgets like the “urethral ring,” or the “electrical alarum,” are recommended to the patients (90-99).

Continence thus becomes the norm of sexual behavior, and, in practice, it becomes the “gospel of thrift in semen” (Cominos 216). To understand this process historically is to ascertain the function of continence as a comprehensive system of relationships. More specifically, the gospel of sexual continence reveals its
meaning when it is related to the political economy of the nineteenth century. The
capitalist economy, Marx Weber writes, is an “immense cosmos” into which the
individual is born, and which presents itself to him or her, at least as an individual, as
an “unalterable order of things” in which he or she must live. It forces the
individual, in so far as he or she is involved in the system of market relationships, to
conform to the capitalistic rule of action (54). For Weber, as well as for Marx, the
capitalist system has in its structure and functioning an inherent compulsion, a
dynamic quality, to accumulate and reinvest capital. In this system, man is
dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his or
her life (Weber 56-58). Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as
the means for satisfaction of his or her material needs but is assumed an end in itself
(51). The realization of this system produces derivative economic virtues and vices.
The gospel of thrift in money is comprehensible in terms of an expanding economy
requiring the rapid accumulation of capital. Extravagance becomes a vice. As
Marx says:

Political economy, this science of wealth is . . . simultaneously the science of
denial, of want, of thrift, of saving—and it actually reaches the point where it
spares the need of either fresh air or physical exercise. This science of
marvelous industry is simultaneously the science of asceticism, and its true
ideal is the ascetic but extortionate miser and the ascetic but productive slave.
Its moral ideal is the worker who takes part of his wages to the savings-bank,
and it has even found ready-made an abject art in which to clothe this its pet
idea: they have presented it, bathed in sentimentality, on the stage. . . .
Self-denial, the denial of life and all human needs, is its [political economy’s]
cardinal doctrine.  (Manuscripts 118-19)

Marx proceeds to criticize the two sides of the political economy of the nineteenth
century. The one side, represented by Lauderdale and Malthus, recommends luxury
and denounces thrift, while the other side, represented by Say and Ricardo,
recommends thrift and execrates luxury. However, since expenditure and thrift are
mutually implied, Marx concludes, “extravagance and thrift, luxury and privation, wealth and poverty are equal” (120).

The same economy can also be located in the argument for sexual continence advanced by Acton and Milton, an argument that is based on a series of binary oppositions, such as body and mind, restricted and unrestricted expenditure, natural and unnatural sex, etc., with each term being simultaneously constructed and undermined by its opposite term in a chain of endless displacement and deferral. Thus, even as Acton and Milton try to promulgate the gospel of thrift in sexual energy, they also show the impossibility of approaching the sexual as a kind of static balanced economy. According to Milton, there are two forms of emission: one is “natural” and the other is “unnatural.” For the former, emission is a result of heterosexual genital intercourse; the latter includes other emissions, voluntary masturbation, involuntary wet dream, or whatever. Emission via connection is an absolute necessity, fundamental to adult health, for abstinence can only lead to impotence or even worse illnesses, but—the turn of the screw of the impossible—a normal, natural sex life cannot protect a man from the evils of spermatorrhoea: Connection “has no power of curing bad spermatorrhoea” (135). Marriage, a regular sexual life, is finally the worst course of action imaginable, an appalling source of delusion, for in marriage “the frame still continues to be exhausted; the genital organs and nervous system generally are still harassed by the incessant tax, and the patient is all the while laying the foundation of impotence” (135). Milton’s crusade against spermatorrhoea turns out to be a self-defeating enterprise: his effort to regulate and repress sex and the body ends up in the dissemination of the sexual and his apotheosis of spermatic economy becomes in effect an “apocalyptic” vision of spermatorrhoea. His attempt to put the sexual under strict surveillance becomes, as Stephen Marcus says of the same effort by Acton, the “complete sexualization of reality,” a process which also takes place in the pornographic writings of the Victorian Age (15-16). And, as shall be discussed later, towards the end of The Sacred Fount the narrator’s vision of the fount, which is based on spermatic economy, also turns out to be an apocalyptic vision of spermatorrhoea.
In his critical writings, notably in his prefaces to the New York Edition, James often describes artistic creation in terms of economic expansion and speculation. In his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, he develops the concept of the “sublime economy of art.” Life, he writes, “persistently blunders, deviates, and loses herself in the sand,” and produces nothing but “splendid waste”; in polar contrast to life, the sublime economy of art “saves and hoards and ‘banks,’ investing and reinvesting” the waste of life in the useful works of art, and thus “making up for us, desperate spendthrifts . . . the most princely of income” (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1139). Elsewhere, the novelist is compared to a “wary dealer in precious odds and ends” who is capable of making “advance” on rare objects confided to him by the “reduced, mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur” (2: 1076). The capitalist principle of accumulation and expansion is also reflected in the process of the production of *The Sacred Fount*. In the various letters he wrote to W. Morton, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and William Dean Howells, James shows how he turns waste into profit, and “trade-accident” (4: 198) into speculative enterprise. *The Sacred Fount* was originally designed as a short story of eight to ten thousand words. It was one of the several works of his that, as he wrote to Howells, had been conceived only as a “short story” but “grew by rank force of its own into something of which the idea had, modestly, never been to be a book” (*Letters* 4: 251). In the same letter, he wrote, “given the tenuity of the idea, the larger quantity of treatment hadn’t been aimed at”; he would have “chucked” the novel at fifteen thousand words, if in the first place he could have afforded to “waste” fifteen thousand words, and if, in the second, he were not always ridden by a “superstitious terror of not finishing, for finishing’s and precedent’s sake,” what he had begun (4: 251). James also explained to Mrs. Ward the reason why he had to finish the novel: “my hand-to-mouth economy condemned me to put it through in order not to waste the time already spent” (*Letters* 4: 186). Plausibly, the economic was among the most important motives that had compelled him to expand a short story into a short novel: he wanted to pay for Lamb House. Eventually, *The Sacred Fount* did not lead to “bankruptcy,” as he said it would in a letter to Fullerton (4: 197). For, after it was
sold to Methuen in England and to Scribner in America, the money for initial payment on Lamb was earned, and, as Edel finely puts it, “[s]elf-confidence was restored, and James had margin in his bank” (*Treacherous Years* 338).

In *The Sacred Fount*, the Victorian ideological belief in spermatic economy, along with the Jamesian sublime economy of artistic creation, provides the primary perspective for the narrator to reconstruct the intimate relationships between men and women around him. His strong penchant to observe and to speculate on the activities of people around him and his inveterate proclivity to accumulate what he has chosen to see and to incorporate them into his exploitative system of imagination denote that he is an artist or, at least, an artist-manqué practicing the Jamesian sublime economy of fiction writing. However, this sublime economy is counterbalanced and complicated by the narrator’s ideological belief in spermatic economy. It is within the differential space between these two mutually conflicting and yet identical economies that the narrator’s desire floats and perpetuates itself. And since it is within the dream-like atmosphere of Newmarch that the ideological fantasy of the narrator operates, it may not be improper to call his speculative-libidinal investment a “sublime/subliminal” economy.

The world of this novel seems remote and idiosyncratic—and not merely because of the idea of the sacred fount which the narrator discovers within it or imposes upon it. Newmarch is a place lacking stability and lacking, in the basic senses, any physicality or corporal reality on which the reader’s mind and imagination can gain consistent purchase. The people who make up the social gathering lack any solid social identity. We know that Obert is a painter and beyond that detail, little information about the nature of these lives is given us. Insofar as the narrator cares to mention them, the everyday necessities—the preparing of the rooms and the serving of meals, for example—are achieved by “unseen powers.” At Paddington a railway porter and a newspaper boy make brief appearances; at the country house we are informed of the servants only when we learn that Mrs. Brissenden has had the household sit up for her past midnight, and on
one occasion when the narrator toys with the idea of summoning a servant to take a message to Mrs. Brissenden. And the most queer of all is that the host—presumably the owner—of Newmarch goes unremarked and unnamed, except for one occasion, when he gives the sign that the guests should adjourn to the drawing room after dinner (119). The social reality lying outside the weekend party is out of reach, unseen, and speechless, giving reign to anarchic free play of the guests’ erotic desire or, more precisely, to the narrator’s wild dream about other guests’ desires. As the narrator superbly puts it, “the summer stars called to us in vain. We had ignored them in our crystal cage, among our tinkling lamps; no more free really to alight than if we had been dashing in a locked railway-train across a lovely land” (141-42). The locked runaway train is a cogent metaphor for the narrator to express what he apprehends as the reckless and ruthless operation of desire that makes every guest at the party both its agent and its victim. Furthermore, the architectural features of Newmarch also facilitate and intensify the circulation of desires among its guests. It is a very polished and strange country house, where a terraced garden and “great chains” (168) of rooms provide an ample and luxurious setting for the wanderings, waitings, meetings, and separations that are the staple activities of the guests who make up the party. The house’s corridors and the garden’s pathways are so intricate and shady that they make apt places for the dissemination and exchange of desires among its weekend guests.

Like the long, serpentine corridors that connect the great chain of chambers, the “interest” the narrator thinks his fellow guests take in each other implicates them in a complex network of libidinal exchange. As he perceives it, every guest at the party is involved in some kind of libidinal exchange with other guest(s): Lady John takes interest in Brissenden, who manages to interest May Server, who in turn tries to interest nearly every male guest at the party except the narrator, while Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley are interested in each other; most interesting of all, the narrator, in his “speculation,” takes interest in all the love affairs around him, while entirely neglecting his own “affairs” (72). The following snippet of conversation, in which Server answers the narrator’s question as to whether Brissenden manages to
“interest” her, is very typical of the flowing of interest in this novel:

“Oh, yes . . . he had managed to interest me. Isn’t he curiously interesting? But I hadn’t . . . I hadn’t managed to interest him. Of course you know why!” She laughed. “No one interests him but Lady John. . . .” (46-47)

The fact that these remarks are not actually uttered by Server herself but, as the narrator admits, are pieced together and given form by him (47) shows that he tends to incorporate other people’s words and thoughts into his own speculative system.

The narrator’s nearly obsessive use of the term of “interest,” its variants—“interesting,” “interested,” and “interests”—and its correlative terms such as “speculation,” “profit,” “spending,” discloses his desire to contain and regulate sex and the body in terms of economic exchange. “Interest,” a word derived from the Latin interesse, which means “to go between, to make a difference, to concern, and to compensate for a loss or to invest with a right or share,” is one of the most important factors that contribute to the accumulation and expansion of capital. In his analysis of “interest,” Raymond Williams concludes: “It seems probable that this now central word for attention, attraction and concern is saturated with the experience of a society based on money relationships” (173). As its etymology indicates, interest is neither a substance nor an entity with a stable identity occupying a definite space. It is, rather, a free play of pure difference between giving and taking, presence and absence. Its non-identity makes possible the working of the capitalist exchange network. As a key word in The Sacred Fount, it reveals the operation of illicit liaisons that may have happened or are about to happen among the guests at Newmarch. On the other hand, it marks the interchange between self and other in which the narrator’s ideological fantasy operates; as a go-between, or even as a pimp, it tantalizes his desire and yet does not give it immediate gratification. Parallel to the interest every guest takes in other is the screen that each guest assumes to shield his or her affair(s) from being detected. So Lady John and the Comtesse de Dreuil serve as screens for Long’s secret love affair and every male guest except the narrator acts in turn as screen for Server’s affair. This intriguing situation leads
Mrs. Brissenden to say, rather wittily, “They say there’s no smoke without fire, but it appears there may be fire without smoke” (65). At Newmarch, the great chain of interests and screens both reveals and conceals, channels and blocks, the flow of desire for the participants at the party in their mid-summer night’s dream, or, for the narrator, in his dream of other people’s desire which turns out to be a nightmare toward the end of the novel.

The narrator always obtains narcissistic gratification from envisioning the sexual relationship of other people, especially that of the Brissendens. However, the sexual does not merely tantalize his desiring imagination: it arouses his fear and disgust of “spending,” the common Victorian term for a climax of sexual pleasure. The terms he applies to the physiology of Brissenden are often those used by the medical doctors and sexologists of the Victorian age, such as Acton and Milton, to describe sexual excess. Thus, in his observation, due to the “gush” of his sacred fount (141), Brissenden’s face is ugly, melancholy, blighted (115) and white (159), his back confesses to “the burden of time,” and, though thirty at the most, he is “as fine, as swaddled, as royal a mummy” (33). During his short stay at Newmarch, nearly every time he meets Brissenden he feels that he is getting older, for, as he suspects, he must have met his wife again (140, 159). His vision of Brissenden’s fate is not unlike Milton’s apocalyptic vision of spermatorrhoea, for he summarizes that his “inexorable fate [is] an unnameable climax” (123).

The narrator’s obsession with spermatic economy, on which he has built the

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9 The use of the word “spend” to mean “to have an orgasm” is uncommon in James’s work. In The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer is a puritan in her attitude toward “spending”: “There was a terror in beginning to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out” (4: 18). Isabel is explicitly referring to her inheritance here, but, as Carren Kaston persuasively shows, this “old and tired figure” is “revitalized by being made so to echo the overall concerns of the book” (45). The OED traces this use of the word to the seventeenth century in The Diary of Samuel Pepys, from which the following is quoted: “I went up to her and played and talked with her and, God forgive me, did feel her; which I am much ashamed of, but I did no more, though I had so much a mind to it that I spent in my breeches” (3:191). “Spending” is the running theme of the most detailed of sexual memoirs of the Victorian Age, Walter’s My Secret Life, in which the author describes how he spends his sperm and money. In this work, women “spend” too (2109).
theory of the fount, is forcefully disclosed in his interpretation of the mysterious portrait in the Newmarch gallery. This painting\textsuperscript{10}, which features a man with a mask in his hand, is a kind of passkey to the interpretation of the novel as a whole. As the narrator comments, it is “‘the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter’” (50). The figure represented is “a young man in black—a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown” (50). The physiology of the man in the painting shows the symptoms of sexual excess. And this is further evidenced by the narrator’s insinuation that he is like Brissenden.

The discussion conducted among Obert, Server and the narrator is focused on the meaning of the mask in the hand of the man in the painting. It strikes the spectator first as some ambiguous work of art, but on a second view it becomes a “representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human” (50). Its most notable characteristic is that it resembles a human face and yet is not quite human. At this point Server proposes that the painting could be called “‘the Mask of Death’” (56). However, the narrator argues that the mask is “‘the Mask of Life’” and the man’s own face is Death (51). Ignoring Server’s dissension, he holds that the covering, “blooming and beautiful” (51), is preferable to the ghastly face. And here, quite unconsciously, he betrays the self-deception underlying his fantasy about the sacred fount. He subsequently applies the same two adjectives to depicting the rejuvenation of both Long and Mrs. Brissenden, thereby divulging his own preoccupation with the masking of reality. The portrait mirrors the narrator and his dilemma. Given his imagination, he alone is capable of transcending the entrapment in the “crystal cage” of artificiality (142). However, he refuses to doff his mask because of his lack of genuine heterosexual

\textsuperscript{10} Among the numerous circumstances that inspire its composition, the most important is, according to William Bysshe Stein, the popularity of the Pierrot figure among the fin de siècle artists and writers of England (168). For further discussion, see Stein 168-70.
identity (Stein 170). What little inward security he possesses derives from his role as a bemused buffoon, a “pantaloon” (85) in the closed society. As shall be discussed later, though the narrator’s fear of the possible depletion of his own fount has led him to avoid any involvement in love affairs, his prying into and his acquiring of vicarious gratification from other people’s affairs will eventually deplete his own fount.

Throughout the novel, the narrator manages to interpret human relationships in terms of economic-libidinal exchange. Thus, while Mrs. Brissenden suspects that Lady John is the source of the fount for Long, the narrator hesitates and says, “How can she possibly be a woman who gives absolutely nothing whatever; who scrapes and saves and hoards; who keeps every crumb for herself?” (38). Lady John does not spend but only saves. On the contrary, Long, by way of his “extension,” becomes a shrewd speculator who capitalizes on what he has borrowed from his secret lover. The intellectual resources he has acquired from her “multiply in the transfer made of them; as if the borrower practically found himself—or herself—in possession of a greater sum than the known property of the creditor” (49). For the narrator, Long is a practicer par excellence of the principle of the sublime economy, while Lady John, as her name implies, remains a stagnant, odorous pool that gathers and yet fails to recycle human waste.

What interests the narrator most is not the obvious relationship of libidinal exchange between the married couple, the Brissendens, but the unavowed, covert relationship between Long and his unknown lover. However, on many occasions his sense of decency makes him feel qualms about his nosing into the affairs of other people. When Mrs. Brissenden asseverates that Server is the secret lover of Long, the narrator feels “a kind of chill,” “an odd revulsion,” and uses the phrase “wanting in taste” to describe his curiosity (44). Later, he discusses his story with Obert, and together they wonder whether their endeavor to discover the identity of a woman’s

11 Following Obert’s testimony that the sex of the mask is female, Adeline R. Tintner argues that the mask indicates the role of woman Brissenden plays for Long (230).
lover and the nature of her relationship is not unforgivably vulgar. Obert assures him that if the observation is restricted to “psychological signs alone,” then the activity is not only “positively honourable” but “a high application of intelligence” (57). However, if a fact is discovered, if a palpable, unambiguous registration of the object (the sexual liaison) is searched out, then the whole endeavor is vulgar and socially embarrassing. It is worth emphasizing the narrator’s peculiar remarks that “the fact would be deterrent” (57). It means that, if he should actually come up with a material clue, it would throw the moral basis of the quest into doubt: if he should really see a clear sign of what he is looking for, it would inevitably invalidate his whole project. In this respect, the real danger to the quest for sexual knowledge is its success.

However, for the narrator, a sign always indicates the existence of the thing it signifies. As he says, in the second paragraph of the novel, “[we] had always to see something before it made a sign” (17). And, almost throughout the novel, he is excessively addicted to the reading and interpretation of signs and symptoms (37, 44, 45, 108, 112) which he thinks will lead him to discover the liaisons among his fellow-guests. On the one hand, the narrator insists that the reading of the sign should be based on the external thing or fact it refers to; on the other hand, he is so enmeshed in the ideology of respectability that he considers that “the detective and the keyhole” is abominable. This double bind makes the narrator feel compromised by his inquiry, and at points leads him to consider giving up his whole speculative enterprise: “I took a lively resolve to get rid of my ridiculous obsession,” he says (72). At other moments he even questions his own mental state: “What was the matter with me?—so much as that I had ended by asking myself.” Nevertheless he continues to search for the “psychological signs” and to prove the existence of the liaisons.

Since the marriage bed is too indecent an object for literary representation, the narrator’s interest is in presenting the “covert, obscure, unavowed” relationship between the unmarried couple. And by making the narrator conduct his investigation at the level of signs and psychological evidences alone, James can
avoid a direct presentation of the vulgar and embarrassing details related to sexual liaisons and thus detour the moral and social censorship. However, this strategy also creates obscurities and silences that invite his readers to “read volumes” (46). James’s passionate curiosity, like the narrator’s, centers on sexual scene; it is the energy that drives the narrative, but it is unacknowledged as such and the sexual scene, which is the pivotal moment of this narrative, remains as concealed as possible. It is this concealment which enables R. B. Yeazell to write that “the sexual reticence of his late fiction is in direct proportion to the felt presence of sexuality as a force at the very center of life [and] sexual passion becomes the major mystery, the hidden knowledge which the Jamesian innocent must at least confront” (20). Or, as Frank Moore Colby observed in an early review, the “verbal hedge” James created was “his sufficient fig leaf” through which “few would see how shocking he really was” (20). Indeed, the sexual scene in this novel, as well as in many other works of James’s, constitutes a fundamental moment of obscurity and fascination and is characterized by an invaginated enfoldment of silence within articulation and articulation within silence.

While the literary representation of sexual ideology in The Sacred Fount gives that ideology a specific form and structure in the narrative, it in turn enables this narrative to project, by juxtaposition, its own alternative structure. That is, the effort to embody an ideology in literature can expose some of its problematic or controversial aspects, for at some points, the work, becoming incompatible with the ideology it represents, falls silent. Having refused to take ideology’s dictation, the work is left at those points without language at all, and in its silences and ruptures, reveals the limits of the ideology. This silence is what Pierre Macherey has termed a “determinate absence” or an “eloquent silence” of the literary work (79-80). In The Sacred Fount, this mutual sheathing of silence and eloquence reveals simultaneously the attraction and repulsion of genital sexuality in James and also shows an invaginated doubleness of representation, a tracing-back, in the evasiveness and ellipsis or in the blatancy of avoidance, of a reference to that which is so evidently and consciously not said or is un-said. In the very nature of verbal
obscenity there are always signification and evasion, the simultaneous creation and
effacement of meanings.

In *The Sacred Fount*, talk generates more talk and gossip produces more gossip. Indeed, much of the oral activity in this novel represents a socially acceptable transformation of the genital fixations indulged by the main characters and attested to by their double entendres and circumlocution. The reader is overwhelmed by the talk and the language within which it is almost impossible to extract the significant from the insignificant, what is said from what is not said. There is always the positing of an edging, probing understanding between speakers such that the direct speech of their dialogue creates a single ellipsis (often typographically marked by a dash) closed off from the reader. The following is typical of the techniques James employs in presenting dialogues in this work:

“But all you had was immense, my dear man. The Brissendens are immense.”

“Of course the Brissedens are immense! If they hadn’t been immense they wouldn’t have been—*nothing* would have been—anything.” Then after a pause, “Your image is splendid,” I went on—“your being out of the cave. But what is it exactly,” I insidiously threw out, “that you *call* the ‘light of the day’?”

I remained a moment, however, not sure whether I had been too subtle or too simple. He had another of his cautions.

“What do *you*——?”

But I was determined to make him give it me all himself, for it was from my not prompting him that its value would come. “You tell me,” I accordingly rather crudely pleaded, “first.”

It gave us a moment during which he so looked as if I asked too much, that I had a fear of losing all. He even spoke with some impatience. “If you really haven’t found it for yourself, you know, I scarce see what you *can* have found.” (156)
Obviously the narrator and Obert here are engaging themselves in a verbal combat. Their obsessive desire to know is yoked to an equally strong reluctance to give away or to exchange any information. The form of talk is not simply evasion but the ever-renewed ground upon which evasion and desire encounter and give momentum to each other. It is doubly determined, for it is so sophisticated and elliptical that it connotes cultured refinement and politeness removed in the furthermost degree from the object of (sexual) knowledge, and at the same time, though the desire to discover this object haunts the hinterland of the speech, the enigmatic verbal processes produce their own satisfaction. This process is superbly summarized by the narrator as he reflects on his midnight conversation with Mrs. Brissenden: “It could not but be exciting to talk, as we talked, on the basis of those suppressed processes and unavowed references which made the meaning of our meeting so different from its form” (188). The precise term for this process may be what I called earlier the sublime/subliminal economy. The narrator sublimates his sexual desire into desire for sexual knowledge and obtains substitutional gratification from his intellectual inquiry. What he calls the “quite sublime structure” (214) or the “superstructure” (161) of his aesthetic vision is founded on the infrastructure of spermatic economy. On the other hand, the etymological origin of the word “sublime” in chemistry may well be adopted for a description of his theory. As the procedure whereby a body is caused to pass directly from the solid to a gaseous state, sublimation aptly captures the narrator’s movement from “material facts” to a narrative which he constructs, as he admits, from “all of the finest wind-blown intimations, woven of silence and secrecy and air” (189).

By elevating the level of discrimination and intellectual exercise as high as possible, the narrator establishes a hierarchy of vision with himself at the top, and this is not in the service of egoism but to create a value, to mark the “fine quality” of

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12 Freud chooses the word “sublimation” because it evokes the sense of the sublime in artistic or spiritual terms. The Sacred Fount seems to confirm Freud’s suggestion that the activities described as sublimated in a given culture are those accorded with particularly high social esteems (9: 187; 21: 79).
his state. It is a kind of compensatory exchange whereby the act of observation is raised to an extreme pitch only so long as it is a vision not held in common with others’ and only so long as its object is never directly seen. As such it is a wager between an insane intensity of perception and superior moral insight:

It comes back to me that the sense thus established of my superior vision may perfectly have gone a little to my head. If it was a frenzied fallacy I was all to blame, but if it was anything else whatever it was naturally intoxicating. . . . I think there must fairly have been a pitch at which I was not sure that not to partake of that state was, on the part of others, the sign of gregarious vulgarity; as if there were a positive advantage, an undiluted bliss, in the intensity of consciousness that I had reached. (127)

From the moment the fancy strikes and throughout its later flights of rapture, the narrator fattens on the founts of his fellow guests, his imagination eating and drinking the pleasure and the horror that the involved couples experience. The following remarks, which he makes to Mrs. Brissenden, are emblematic of his infantile-oral drive: “‘Well, you may be right,’ I laughed, ‘though you speak as if it [the change worked on Long by a mistress] were cod-liver oil. Does she administer it, as a daily dose by the spoonful? or only, a drop at a time? Does he take it in his food? Is he supposed to know?’”(23). The lack of normal sexual experiences—a fact he admits (79)—induces the narrator to comprehend the sexual in terms of infantile-oral drive. And this perversity is further evidenced by his use of the turkey as an “awkward dinner dish” to describe Brissenden’s fount (34).13 Though the

13 Several cross-references to this analogy confirm that the pattern of slang obscenities provides the base structure for the narrator’s “superstructure.” Later, while talking with Mrs. Brissenden, the narrator is still haunted by the image: “No, she was only eating Briss up inch by inch” (60). And still later when he considers the information he has gleaned from his conversations with Mrs. Brissenden and Obert, he again betrays his infantile-oral inclinations: “I found myself cherishing the fruit of the seed dropped equally by [them]” (75). Furthermore, in his midnight talk with Mrs. Brissenden on the soundness of his cannibalistic idée fixe, he boldly alludes to her stupendous sexual appetite at the outset of the conversation: “You gulp your mouthful down, but hasn’t it been served on gold plate? You’ve had a magnificent day—a brimming cup of triumph, and you’re more beautiful and fresh, after it all, and at an hour when fatigue would be almost positively
narrator is never able to satisfy, by empirical evidence, his voyeuristic curiosity about sexual cannibalism, he nevertheless uses puns and slang obscenities to release his highly charged desire. The intensity of his abnormal and unusual feelings exemplifies the conversion of the sublime economy of aesthetic creation into the prurient hedonism of substitutional gratification. The discrimination and analysis of his fleeting impressions of the flirtation between the guests at Newmarch simultaneously form the base for and de-base his epistemological quest and the exercise of his intelligence.

If the narrator is always interpreting the relationship between man and woman from the perspective of the depletion and repletion of the fount, his speculative interpretation also performs the act of tapping the fount of other people. As he says, in a moment of reflective intensity, “the vision of life is an obsession. The obsession pays, if one will; but to pay it has to borrow” (30). The visionary artist is then a stingy speculator par excellence: he is not personally involved in the affairs of the world but the world performs the spectacle of desire for him. To gratify his own desire in the most “economical” way, the narrator, by way of projection and transference, sees his desire reflected in and enacted by other people’s desire. His theory of the fount thus becomes one based upon specular/speculative economy. However, what he misrecognizes as other people’s desire is in fact what he has projected onto them. The misrecognition in question is a self-misrecognition, which is an effect of the “imaginary” dimension of human existence. “Imaginary” here does not mean “unreal” but “pertaining to an image.” According to Lacan, the small infant, confronted with its own image in a mirror, has a moment of jubilant misrecognition of its own actual physically uncoordinated state, imaging its body to be more unified than it really is. In this imaginary condition, no real distinction graceful, than you were even this morning, when you met me as a daughter of the dawn” (175-76).

The immediate context for this passage is the conversation between the narrator and Obert in which the former visualizes Mrs. Brisseden’s rejuvenation in terms of a comment made to Obert on the condition of her husband—“‘He looks a hundred years old!’” (159)—a comment insinuating that the wife has just met with the husband and replenished her fount. This comment encourages the narrator to hint at her latest feat of gluttony in their conversation.
between subject and object has yet set in; the infant identifies with its own image, feeling itself at once within and in front of the mirror, so that subject and object glide ceaselessly in and out of each other in a sealed circuit (Lacan 1-3).

Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage may help explain why the act of gazing, seeing, and watching recurs in this novel. Even though the narrator is not an infant, his behaviors show a deep structure that is similar to the structure of the mirror stage. For him, other people, or more precisely, their eyes, always hold a mirror up to his own desire. For example, in order to prevent Mrs. Brissenden from discovering the depleted fount of Server, the narrator tries to separate them by giving the former “a look in which [he] invited her to read volumes,” and then he adds, “[t]his 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” (46). This envisioning process helps him to construct his fantasy about the sexual scene. For example, as he is watching Long performing his conversational acrobatics, he wants a “glimpse” of Long being touched by the “sorceress” (25), who he thinks at the outset of his investigation is Lady John. However, he adds, “I am afraid I watched to catch it in the act” and then, in a rather frenzied language, he apostrophizes, “What an intimacy, what an intensity of relation, I said to myself, so successful a process implied!” (26). Subsequently, he uses several metaphors of writing, such as “preface,” the “seal of passion,” and “tell-tale trace,” to construct an erotic fantasy and projects it onto Lady John. However, the whole phantasmagoric scene can be invoked only when he shuts his eyes to reality and his heated imagination soon cools down when reality returns: “Strangely enough,” he says, “there was nothing more than usual in Lady John to assist my view of the height at which the pair so evoked must move” (26). He finally realizes that Lady John is only a “clown” in a circus who cracks “as many jokes and turn[s] as many somersaults as [may] have been expected” (27). Long’s secret mistress must be someone other than Lady John.

As the narrator is gathering evidence to prove that Server is Long’s lover, he is also unwittingly entangled in a network of exchange that is constitutively
transference and substitutive. He becomes narcissistically infatuated with Server. That is, he has converted an object of love into a function of the self, a process which leads to the dehumanization of Server and his own self-alienation and which reduces love to self-reflection and masturbatory fantasy, consummation to titillation. Obviously, the narrator is in love with Server and wishes to establish some kind of intimacy with her. In the garden, he tells her that he “has been in love for a whole day” (109). Server may not know she herself is the object of the narrator’s love, but the latter has certainly been in love with her for almost a whole day, for the time the action of the novel has taken before the garden scene is almost twenty hours. Later in the same scene, in a rare moment of tenderness, the narrator even puts his hand over hers and silently bemoans that he, though taken by her “passion and beauty,” does not have “the direct benefit of them as the other party to the prodigy had it” (111). He feels that Server wants to attract his attention but he does not attribute this to any possible flirtation on her part and seems myopic and almost childish in his perception of the woman.

The fear of what lies on the other side of Server’s “abyss” (101, 110) prevents the narrator from expressing his love to her and the only move he is capable of is trying to represent her in his aesthetic imagination that denies or overlooks the more vulgar side of the possible liaison she may be having with Long or another man. In the garden scene, he sees himself as a painter of “a beautiful old picture” (99), and Server’s approach is “like the reminiscence of a picture or refrain of a ballad” (98). Earlier, in the Newmarch gallery, he sees her as an object of art, “an old dead pastel under glass” (42), and here too he notes that her “grimace . . . was as blurred as a bit of brush-work in water-colour spoiled by the upsetting of the artist’s glass” (99). Through her transmutation into an inanimate and idealized piece of art, Server becomes the depersonalized symbol of repressed love and passion. And, as she has been a sacred fount of conversational brightness for Long, she also becomes a kind of fount of pornographic inspiration for the narrator and gives herself as a “controlling image” (121) to his “intenser apprehension” (99), as well as completes his “ideal symmetry” (122, 130). Thus, represented as a spectacle-fetish or
specular image, Server is constituted as the looking-glass held up to the narrator’s desire. This naturally mitigates the threat of the eroticized female body for the narrator and yet allows him to experience the erotic by way of displacement and projection.

The attempt of the narrator to frame Server within his speculative system is more complexly shown in his female version of the fount. As an inversion of his primary theory of the fount, this secondary theory, while being applied to Server, is in fact a fiction invented by the narrator to protect her from the contamination of the sordid side of sexuality and thus to reduce his own fear of sexuality. He euphemizes the relationship between Sever and her lover as one that would result in mental depletion on the female party, but it is in fact also a kind of sexual exchange not unlike that between the Brissendens. The images in the following passage, in which the narrator registers his impression of Server, reveals that what he sees in her is not merely a woman deprived of her mental power but a woman whose life power is spent due to her overindulgence in sexual activity: “I saw as I had never seen before what consuming passion can make of the marked mortal on whom, with fixed beak and claws, it has settled as on a prey. She reminded me of a sponge wrung dry and with fine pores agape. Voided and scraped of everything, her shell was merely crushable” (101). Though some women do gobble the turkey dinner provided by men, other may fall victim to the predatory exploitation of men’s lust. Like men, women “spend,” too. Although in the nineteenth century there was scarcely any evidence indicating that women possessed a fount like men’s, it was said that some women did secrete fluid in orgasm. According to Ree, “That a mucous fluid is sometimes found in coition from the internal organs and vagina is undoubted; but this only happens in lascivious women, or such as live luxuriously” (qtd. in Ellis, 1: 194). What is most significant in this observation is that it is only lascivious women who spend. The spending women pose a threat to men, as William Veeder points out in his study of The Portrait of a Lady, “That Henry James can apply an ejaculatory image to a woman indicates that anyone, everyone, in bourgeois culture is threatened with ‘castration,’ effeminization” (226). The same fear of castration
compels the narrator in *The Sacred Fount* to construct a female version of the theory of the fount, which plays down the significance of women’s sexuality while highlighting their intellectual resourcefulness.

Moreover, the nineteenth-century concept of fixed energy which promulgates spermatic economy for men also formulates a theory regarding the machinery of the female body. To all the normal drafts of bodily energy common to both sexes women add a singular expense of their own—the development and maintenance of a highly complex reproductive system. Adolescent girls, then, need to abate brainwork during the years of reproductive development. According to Edward Clarke, since Nature imposes “so great a physiological task” on a girl, she will not have as much power left for the tasks of the school as the boy will. The girl who transgresses against this principle of female health often suffers “prolonged dyspepsia, neuralgia, and dysmenorrhoea,” for she puts “her will into the education of her brain, and [withdraws] it from elsewhere,” and changes “the strength of the loins” to weakness (qtd. in Russett, 117). In *The Sacred Fount*, this version of fixed-energy notion is revised and “strength of the loins” has nothing to do with the female reproductive function but is related to sexual pleasure. Furthermore, the convertibility of the female reproductive power into brainpower is diametrically reversed into that of brainpower into sexual expenditure. Although we can never be sure if Long is Server’s lover or if she has a secret lover, we can locate many pieces of evidence, recorded by the narrator, that show she is devoured by her own sexual passion and that her fount is exhausted by coition or, at least, by masturbatory fantasy. During her short stay at Newmarch, as Mrs. Brissenden and Obert observe, she is “all over place” (63, 77, 100)—an act which the narrator euphemizes as her “bright ubiquity” (73)—talking and flirting with nearly every male guest at the party. She is “on the rush,” Mrs. Brissenden tells the narrator, “She was on the pounce. She talked to ten in succession, making up to them in the most extraordinary way and leaving them still more crazily. She’s as nervous as a cat” (63). As her hysterical body indicates, Server suffers a great deal from her unfulfilled desire. Therefore, the narrator modifies his original version of the fount in order to protect
her reputation and to diminish his own fear of her sexuality.

As the narrator taps into and capitalizes on other people’s founts in order to create his own vision of sexual life, other people also feed on his fount. In the scene that deals with the midnight encounter between the narrator and Obert, in which the former urges the latter to identify Server’s secret lover, we have the following description:

“Oh,” said Obert, looking, luminous and straight, up at me from his seat, “the man, now, the actual man----!” But he stopped short, with his eyes suddenly quitting me and his words becoming a formless ejaculation. The door of the room, to which my back was turned, had opened, and I quickly looked around. It was Brissenden . . . My whole sense of the situation blazed up at the touch of his presence, and even before I reached him it had rolled over me in a prodigious wave that I had lost nothing whatever . . . his being there at all renewed my source and replenished my current . . . (157)

This passage is emblematic of the metonymic of the narrator’s desire and of desire in general in the text. The temporal and spatial contiguity forming within the formless ejaculation of Obert’s words, the opening of the door, the narrator’s back, and the repletion of his fount, superbly shows the mutual implication of desire and language, the body and physical setting. The narrator fantasizes about his being, like Mrs. Brissenden, the receiver of Brissenden’s fount. And, on many occasions and in a rather queer way, he is obsessed with the vision of Brissenden’s back (33, 140), as he says, “I seemed perpetually, at Newmarch, to be taking his measure from behind” (159). He even proposes, as a (sexually?) “harmless” man, to “back” Brissenden (87). Therefore, his wish to enter Brissenden’s desire (87) implies not merely that he desires what Brissenden desires (that is, Mrs. Brissenden) but that he desires to be the object of Brissenden’s desire, that is, he desires to be Mrs. Brissenden herself. In a word, far from being a detached, intelligent observer and theorizer of the love affairs around him, he is deeply enmeshed in the sacred fount relationship and is subject to the process of depletion and repletion. As Kaja Silverman remarks in her
reading of *The Ambassadors*, “the Jamesian phantasmatic can . . . be said to enclose homosexuality within heterosexuality, and heterosexuality within homosexuality” (165).  However, what the narrator reveals here is neither heterosexual nor homosexual desire, but is what may be called *homo*-sexual desire, that is, a desire for both men and women. For having not yet entered the Oedipal stage, through which one’s sexual identity is obtained, the narrator still sticks to the pre-Oedipal, in which libidinal drive has not yet been differentiated and regulated according to the law of the symbolic. This drive is, to use a cogent analogy of Lacan’s, more like a broken egg flowing over the floor than like an omelette (*hommelette*, a little man) that has assumed an erect posture. That is the way the narrator’s desire flows, without sense of direction, feeding and feeding on whatever founts he happens to encounter.

If Server serves as tributary to the fount of the narrator and if the narrator both depletes and replenishes the fount of Brissenden, then Mrs. Brissenden becomes the ultimate fount into which almost all other founts flow. As the narrator observes, Mrs. Brissenden is “the full-fed river sweeping to the sea, the volume of water, the stately current, the flooded banks into which the source had swelled” (171). As I pointed out earlier, the dialogue between the characters in the novel is one of the major forms in which desire flows and converges. This can be also detected in the various conversations between the narrator and Mrs. Brissenden. In fact, their talk does not merely reveal the symptom of the narrator’s frustrated desire: it enacts sexuality. That is, the symptom both signifies and *is* sex; it is both the representation and the realization of a fantasy with sexual contents. In the novel, the fluid relationship between the erotic subject and its object is materially manifested in the dialogue. The mouth is the orifice through which language flows and erotic desire circulates; it provides an apt analogy for or even *is* the criss-crossings of the exchange of desires in a novel which centers around illicit affairs and whose characters, especially the narrator, seek gratification in verbal

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14 For a discussion of homosexual desire in *The Sacred Fount*, see Stacey Margolis and Adeline R. Tintner.
exchange. On the other hand, in their “intellectual intimacy” (199) or “associated speculation” (200) the role the narrator plays for Mrs. Brissenden is actually the one that he thinks Server has been playing for Long: he himself becomes one of the tributaries to the main stream of Mrs. Brissenden. Spermatorrhoea in the form of “cerebral lesion” (121) is the fate that is waiting for him on the other side of the abyss.

That the narrator’s fount is both literally and metaphorically depleted by Mrs. Brissenden is clearly shown in his midnight encounter with her. In the meeting what can be called the “forepleasure” the narrator vicariously obtains from his construction of the sacred fount theory is transformed into a full pleasure and the foreplay he has with Mrs. Brissenden in the form of verbal flirtation is converted to the full play of sexual orgy. In the following passage the narrator discloses his purpose for the midnight conversation with Mrs. Brissenden:

> I was there to save my priceless pearl of an inquiry and to harden, to that end, my heart. I should need indeed all my hardness, as well as my brightness, moreover, to meet Mrs. Briss on the high level to which I had at last induced her to mount, and, even while I prolonged the movement by which I had momentarily stayed her, the intermission of her speech became itself for me a hint of the peculiar pertinence of caution. (203)

As this passage indicates, talk becomes a metaphor for lovemaking and the exchange of mental power is not quite different from sexual exchange. Toward the end of the conversation, the narrator is overwhelmed by Mrs. Brissenden’s eloquence and he observes, “she gathered herself up into the strength of twenty-five. I didn’t after all—it appeared part of my smash—know the weight of her husband’s years, but I knew the weight of my own” (218). Earlier he said that he would “repay” Mrs. Brissenden for keeping her too long “out of bed” (166) by performing the act of replenishing her fount and now, completely exhausted by her, he feels the overwhelming weight of his own years.
In *The Sacred Fount*, fear of woman’s sexuality and the unlimited expenditure it inevitably incurs compel the narrator to channel his sexual energy into seedless and fruitless creation of pornographic fantasy of illicit wish fulfillment. Even though he thinks he is, by using his “transcendental intelligence” (114), building a “great glittering crystal palace” (145) or a “kingdom of thought” which will resist any “leakage” (176, 177), he ends in constructing “‘houses of cards’” (181) that do not hold water. The sublime economy of his artistic creation, which is based on the infrastructure of spermatic economy, then degenerates into a sterile narcissistic hedonism and finally results in the complete depletion of his fount. What he says of Server and Brissenden’s fate is also true of his own: “I couldn’t save Mrs. Server, and I couldn’t save poor Briss; I could, however, guard, to the last grain of gold, my precious sense of their loss, their disintegration and their doom” (189). In this way James presents his bleakest vision of love, sexual or otherwise. On the one hand, love inevitably incurs depletion of vitality, sense of loss, and unrestricted expenditure without possible return on the one party involved while giving rejuvenation to the other; on the other hand, the resistance to love by way of indulging in sex fantasy, as shown in the narrator, also has its exorbitant costs. That may be the reason why James told Howells that he himself was “depleted” by the writing of *The Sacred Fount* (Letter 4: 159).
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從限制性到無限制性消費：
詹姆士《聖泉》中的身體經濟

王俊三∗

摘 要

詹姆士《聖泉》一書中匿名敘述者所建構的聖泉理論一直困惑著讀者，而評論家通常將它簡化成敘述者個人情色想像的創造物。相對於這種看法，本文將聖泉理論視為後維多利亞時期性意識形態的產物，並藉由探討文本中個體慾望與意識形態間的辯證關係而嘗試提出下列結論：《聖泉》一書再現、同時亦解構後維多利亞時期的性意識形態，並為個體慾望標定出逃離其監控的（不）可能路線。

關鍵詞：聖泉、原慾交換、渾雄經濟、恐怖靈視、情色想像、消費

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