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Fingers of Memory: "The Bench of Desolation"

By Neil Reeve, Swansea University

The turning point of the 1909 story "The Bench of Desolation" occurs when Kate Cookham returns to track down Herbert Dodd, sitting as she knew he would be on his favorite seafront bench, ten years after he broke off their engagement: a decision for which she made him pay dearly. The meeting involves a little textual memory on James's part:

His eyes only, at last, turned from her and resumed a little their gaze at the sea. That, however, didn't relieve him, and he perpetrated in the course of another moment the odd desperate gesture of raising both his hands to his face and letting them, while he pressed it to them, cover and guard it. (CT 393)

At the climax of "The Jolly Corner," written three years earlier, the ghostly alter ego employs the same gesture in that moment of horrified confrontation, the suddenly exposed flash of kinship between sensitive, self-caressing Spencer Brydon and the coarse, dynamic business magnate haunting him and his childhood home. In the later story, one of the visions Herbert seems to be trying to hide from is a growing awareness that some kind of second self is emerging in Kate, a self not only refined but authoritative, even graceful, mysteriously co-existing with the rapacious mercenary whom he feels to have blighted his existence. Does this vision of unsuspected latent

potential in his enemy have implications for him also, difficult for him to confront or articulate?

Herbert Dodd inherited his uncle's bookshop, made a shabby living from it, and regarded himself as a little gentleman-like beacon of culture in the south-coast town of Properley (which sounds rather like the coastal town Morrissey sang about). When he broke with Kate, she threatened to take him to court unless he paid her an immediate £400, part of her threat being that, if he refused, a jury would certainly award her a much larger sum; £600 is the figure she names. Scared and helpless and seeing no alternative, he sets out to raise the money, a process that over ten years of torment costs him everything he owns, the shop, the woman he does marry (who dies, along with their children), and brings him to penury, a clerical job in the gasworks, a nagging wonder (planted there by his late wife) as to whether he might have challenged Kate's claim, and the bench where he regularly repairs and sits alone, as James puts it, "counting again and still recounting [with the] fingers of memory . . . the beads of his rosary of pain" (CT 384). Kate, who clearly never abandoned hope of one day getting the man she wanted, now returns to announce that through her own ten years of self-denial and shrewd investments she has multiplied the money fivefold--he had given up after raising £270, which she has now turned into £1260. She offers it to him freely but for Herbert of course, at the cost of betraying the memory of his wife and children

and the suffering inflicted on them by this perversely unresolved first relationship. At the very end of the story we see him re-enact the blotting-out gesture, so familiar in James's late endings from The Spoils of Poynton (1897) to The Golden Bowl (1904), this time "lean[ing] forward, dropping his elbows to his knees and pressing his head on his hands" (424-25), as he seems to pause on the brink of that betrayal, of giving in to the new life Kate is so forcefully constructing for him.

Could he have challenged her original demand? I've listed the sums of money involved in detail because I think there may be some sort of signal in them. In James's notebook sketch, written only a couple of days before he began work on the story, Kate's claim was to be for £200, but in the actual story this is first doubled and then trebled. I am sure that both James and his contemporary readers would have known that while £200 was a fairly reasonable figure for breach of promise, given that at the time the average in-court settlement, normally based on the man's income, was £229, a claim for £400, not to speak of £600, would have been thought completely unreasonable and stood virtually no chance of being upheld (£600 then would equate to around £65,000 today). And given both the flimsy evidence of actual promise on which she was relying and the frequent lack of sympathy on the part of the all-male juries of the time for women who could be perceived to be scheming, one might infer that Kate was taking

a fairly reckless gamble, since in the event of a challenge the whole case could have been dismissed and she be made liable for costs. On the one hand, of course, Kate is confident that Herbert won't challenge and that she can throw around these extortionate sums simply to frighten him back into marriage. At another level, one might see in the wild blatancy of her demand almost a wish that he should challenge it, a desire to provoke him into a display of energy and resolve of the kind that, in the recesses of her care for him, she senses he would need were he to continue his life without her.

Primarily, though, she knows he won't challenge the claim on two counts: firstly, he's afraid he would lose, and, secondly, he recoils from the humiliating exposure he would suffer in court. He would have had good reason to hesitate before subjecting himself to what he thinks of as "the squalor of the law-court, of claimed damages and brazen lies and published kisses, of love-letters read amid obscene guffaws" (CT 370). This is an excerpt from a report in the Times, a few months before the story was written, of the breach-of-promise case of Carr vs. Watermeyer:

Mr McCardie, cross-examining Miss Carr--In one of his letters I see the defendant says you had been out on the razzle. (Laughter.) What is a razzle? Whatever it is you had been on it? (Laughter.) Cross-examined by Mr. Marshall Hall, Watermeyer said he should describe (his

relations with Miss Carr) as those of the greatest friendship, such as those with a sister. Mr. Hall (reading from one of the defendant's letters),--Mr. Watermeyer, do you represent that you would like to kiss your sister's wet eyes dry? (Laughter.) As a gentleman, do you consider you treated her fairly?--I always treated her honourably. He paid £2.5s for rooms in Bond-street, and stopped at a good hotel at Folkestone, where they charged 10s.6d a day. Mr. Hall--But you stayed at Claridge's. You cannot stay there for 10s.6d a day. It would hardly be enough for the hall porter. (Laughter.). . . . The jury returned a verdict for the defendant, [but] judgment was not given, as the learned Judge had left the building.

(Times, 3 Apr. 1908)

A key element here is that Herbert in the story has no friends, no one to help or advise him that if he could just brave the risk of a little ridicule he could win the case and retain his dignity. This seems to me peculiarly poignant, since James himself had known very recently what it was like to feel that a powerful woman was threatening to assert a legal claim against his property. The actress Ellen Terry had back in 1895 expressed a wish to produce and perform in a play by him, and he had sent her the script of Summersoft. She never did produce it, and by 1908 he had rewritten it twice, firstly as the story "Covering End" and late in 1907 as a

three-act play, The High Bid. When The High Bid was eventually put on in Edinburgh in March 1908, Terry threatened to bring an action on the grounds that she was the work's sole possessor and no one else had the right to perform it. James seems to have been quite flustered by this development, but, as he explained in a letter to his friend Lucy Clifford, he was quickly reassured by his agent James B. Pinker that Terry's case would never stand up in court:

I feel my situation so absolutely strong that I am not allowing myself to worry in the least. The day after I spoke to you I had a most full reassuring conference on the matter with J. B. Pinker, who is most lucid and competent & master of the whole subject--& who much enlightened my darkness. There is no acquisition of property in a play without some sort of act or process of purchase [. . .] & in cases where there has been none, & no specification of what rights or conditions, the claim is without the warrant that has to be produced. (BW 67)

Actually, the rather incoherent detail James goes into in this letter suggests that he felt considerably more anxiety than he maintained, but it is touching to note that when crisis loomed he had recourse in Pinker to precisely the kind of sensible, soothing advice that Herbert Dodd never receives.

Perhaps Dodd's isolation, his bubble of ignorance, is a necessary part of the fairy-tale element in the story, where a hidden force works in secret while he lives alone and unaware.

I offer this tentatively in respect of what I take to be the connection with another Herbert--not H. G. Wells, from whose novel Kipps James took much admiring inspiration, but Herbert Pocket, who features fairly centrally in the most celebrated breach-of-promise story in all Victorian literature. I do feel James's tale to be in a kind of dialogue with Great Expectations about what meanings are attached to coming into a fortune and the question of what goes into the construction of a "gentleman." Herbert Pocket, not Pip, is the one who comes into money at the end, through Pip's secret actions, enough to buy him a partnership in a firm and some investment capital, but not only is he unaware, as Pip was, of the identity of his benefactor, he doesn't even know that any benefaction has occurred: he seems so entirely ignorant of how commercial procedures operate that he imagines his good fortune has come solely from the appeal of his charming personality. Dickens is so keen to make the case for Pip's having done one morally decent thing with the money that Herbert Pocket is protected from the problem of its origins. But Herbert Dodd knows exactly where his fortune has come from, what the costs of acquiring it were and who bore them, and how much more compromised and tainted it is than any Pip or Pocket had to deal with. This is knowledge that he can't undo, however desperately he thrusts it aside, as Kate, with the cynicism enmeshed in her concern for him, tempts him in the way she knows he can't refuse, with the idea of really becoming the



"gentleman" he always wanted to be: no longer having to work for a living, supported instead by a bank account that appears conferred on him as if from the Holy Spirit:

"There are twelve hundred and sixty pounds, to be definite, but I have it all down for you--and you've only to draw." [. . .] "To draw--to draw?" [. . .] the short, rich, rounded word that the breeze had picked up as it dropped and seemed now to blow about between them.

(CT 418)

It's the women in the late stories who more or less instinctively understand what Barbara Hardy, à propos "The Jolly Corner," called the dependence of the liberal man of culture on the alter ego he rejects: the necessary link between fastidious refinement and ruthless acumen that the men of finer grain find too unpalatable to acknowledge (192). Alice Staverton in "The Jolly Corner" is perhaps the most tolerant and far-sighted and Kate Cookham the most ferociously determined of these women, the one most exasperated by the narcissistic egotism of the man she cares for. In their climactic interview, she allows herself just one brief outburst in this direction, when she exclaims about the money she raised: "I did it for you! I did it for you!" (CT 403). Not quite "I did it for you," as Herbert would prefer to hear, but "I did it because you couldn't; I took on the role you should have occupied; I showed you what you could have been if you'd had any courage or drive." The question of what arises

from the frequent and rather fascinating oddness of James's placement of the stress on that preposition "for" is really the subject of another paper, but what Kate says here does seem to bring a little into the open the sense that resonates so deeply in James of a form of surrogate life always potentially going on alongside the first one, an alternative potential invisible to those whose self-image is too complacently inflexible.

Just now I alluded to The Wings of the Dove (1902), that other Jamesian memory at work, a memory of a woman called Kate, who sets aside any number of scruples and endures all manner of emotional humiliation in pursuit of what she desires. In "The Bench of Desolation" there is a kind of tacit conspiracy, in which two people take for themselves blessings that could or should have come to someone else, in this case Herbert's dead wife Nan. Of course it's grounded on the implausible--how could Kate know that Nan would die?--but if we suspend disbelief and allow the fairy-tale element its head, "The Bench of Desolation" can give rise, I think, and with a peculiarly tough abruptness, to exactly what Michael Wood called the "strange suggestions" at the heart of The Wings of the Dove:

That honour may be a form of weakness. That ruthlessness may be a kind of probity, and in its clear-sightedness may even generate more tenderness than honour is likely

to. That success and failure alter the moral dimensions of any worldly action. (29)

Maybe knowing your bliss to be someone else's bale needn't undermine it? Maybe in a universe of imperfections it is better simply to take the bliss than to corrode it with too much reflection? Unlike the novel, the end of the story effectively sees one character persuading, the other persuading himself, that, since they are where they are, they had better go on with it together. But too much is pressed into that ending to be easily untangled: control and surrender, repulsion and relief, Herbert covering his face with his hands, while "knowing that an arm had passed round him and that he was held. She was beside him on the bench of desolation" (CT 425)--where, and to how much greater an extent than in "The Jolly Corner," the sustaining, cradling, loving maternal arm is also a kind of pincer.

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