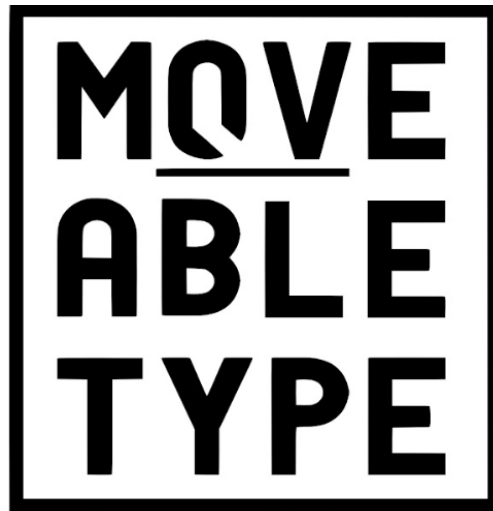




Book Review: 'The Potent Promise: *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction*'.

Author: Freddy Conway-Shaw

Book Title: *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction*. By Stuart Burrows. 2024. 256p. £85. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781009419697

Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 16, 'Promise'(2025-26)

DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.2293

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

© 2026 Freddy Conway-Shaw. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



BOOK REVIEWS

The Potent Promise: *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction*

FREDDY CONWAY-SHAW

Henry James and the Promise of Fiction. By Stuart Burrows. 2024. 256p. £85. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781009419697

That Stuart Burrows's monograph on the promise in Henry James's fiction opens with an analysis of the 'central moment' of the Belgian film *La Promesse* (1997) is reflective of the sprawling range of voices Burrows draws upon for his study (1).¹ Arguing that the promise is the 'governing trope' of James's fiction, Burrows moves effectively through philosophical and literary-theoretical thought as he outlines how the promise holds formal consequences for James's texts, and their subsequent impact on the novel form as a whole (12). Indeed, Burrows's study maintains that 'the relation between morality and literature is better posed in terms of form than in terms of content', an analytical focus that mainly produces readings of the perspectival or temporal consequences of promise-making, -keeping, and -breaking in James's texts (12). Moving from Plato to Sianne Ngai through Immanuel Kant and back again, Burrows populates his text with an eclectic array of thinkers. It is perhaps this eclecticism of Burrows's methodology that in part supports the multivalence of the promise for which he argues.

Burrows establishes the promise in James's texts as 'mak[ing] or break[ing] worlds' (3). While this may be termed the promissory umbrella under which the consequences of promises largely fall, Burrows demonstrates that the ways in which the texts navigate promising and promises are wide-ranging. It means that while the chapters deal with a different James novel or novella as their main focus, some of the most fruitful moments come in the connections drawn between similar but diverging promising across texts. Such gestures are made in Chapter 1, which focuses on James's early novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), establishing the loosely chronological patterning of the monograph which allows for a reading of the promising connections between this and later texts. Entitled 'Promising Others', this chapter looks in detail at the promise Isabel Archer makes to her stepdaughter Pansy: that she will come back for her. While it too looks at the ramifications of other promises—most notably the marriage promise to Gilbert Osmond—the chapter argues convincingly that Isabel's keeping of her promise to Pansy allows her to remake and rebuild her own world. Isabel, Burrows argues, 'repairs the temporal gaps that have structured her experience' (33). The critic's focus on temporality here is characteristic of his overarching argument with regards to the promise: that '[t]he double temporality of the promise binds together the moment of utterance and the moment of fulfilment' (4). Isabel is able to ensure continuity by linking the bound future to the present of the uttered promise, and in so doing, Burrows argues, fully establishes her character as one who is her 'own best friend' and simultaneously located 'outside rather than inside the self' (48). Isabel's keeping of her promise reveals the moral truth that we 'must' see our lives 'from the point of view of those to whom we belong' (45).

¹ Stuart Burrows, *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). Subsequent references will be parenthetically cited in-text.

Chapter 2, which focuses on James's horror novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) but also *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) and *In the Cage* (1898), moves from the centrality of Isabel's consciousness in *The Portrait of a Lady* to characters outside their own fictions: ones who, in the case of Fleda of *The Spoils of Poynton*, are 'at the center of the narrative' but not 'the center of the story' (50). Not as concerned with the promise as such, the chapter focuses at large on the promise of *duty* that the governess feels in *The Turn of the Screw*, and one that positions her and the protagonists of the other two texts 'at a distance—temporal or spatial—from the incidents they record' (51). Burrows makes the admittedly 'perverse' but compelling reading that the governess exists 'only in the third person, and thus [...] outside the time of the promise', even though she narrates the story in the first person (53-4). Her narrative distance simultaneously sees time 'stilled', as 'every moment is actually five separate times in one' in the different ways the story is retold (66). The effect of this, Burrows argues, leaves the governess a 'non-person', whose 'overzealous sense of duty' has frozen a traumatic moment in time as it obscures her own position in it (73).

Just as the governess has a 'sense that time is not chronological but circular' because of the consistently returning 'past [...] in the form of a ghost', Chapter 3 examines the 'strangely circular form' of *The Ambassadors* (1903) (66, 76). It is interested in how Strether's character and 'sense of morality' are 'profoundly changed', as broken promises do not stop what has been promised from occurring regardless (76). Burrows gives the 'clearest example' of the promise Strether makes to ensure Chad returns to America—'by the end of the novel, Chad does indeed appear poised to go home [...] ironically, against the wishes of Strether' (76-7). He moves on from this explicit example, however, to examine how Strether's 'private pledge' to become a changed man fails, but in failing paradoxically allows himself to 'still [be] in a position to do so'—that is, to become the man he wishes to be (77-8). Formal analysis of the consequences of these moments once again tends towards the perspectival, as through James's 'third-person perspective' that is 'no more omniscient than the protagonist', Burrows concludes that James's 'narrative strategy' is one where 'the text [is] a product rather than a depiction of the protagonist's capacious and ever-growing imagination' (88-90). The developing text—and Burrows consistently draws parallels with James's compositional process—is a manifestation of Strether's moral development.

Chapters 4 and 5, on *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) respectively, converge in their interests in relationship dynamics and truth-telling. Chapter 4 looks at the private promise between Kate and Densher to love each other, while Chapter 5 examines Maggie's lies to herself and to others to protect hers and her father's marriages from the affair she knows is happening. Much as in Chapter 3—indeed, Burrows draws the connection between James's three late masterpieces in the harmony between Maggie, Strether, and Densher—these characters are 'both in the novel and the means by which the novel takes shape' (135). For Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*, 'the past can be relived, reimagined, remade', but, tellingly, in a way that also rewrites the future—and I emphasise rewriting here to stress the parallels Burrows draws with the act of narration and textual production (116). Subtle, close analysis of the intertwining of reading, remembrance, and experience for Densher leads to Burrows's compelling conclusion that 'fiction possesses the power to bring into being the world it describes' (120). A parallel can thus be drawn between these descriptions and promises, where to describe promises the creation of the description, as the past and the present create the future. In contrast, it is Maggie's sense of self that is created alongside the novel which is 'narrated from inside itself, by one of James's own characters' (145). Faced with the 'startling knowledge' of broken marriages in *The Golden Bowl* but promising to lie to ensure their integrity, Maggie 'maintain[s] a coherent sense of self' through the promise's ability to 'collapse[...] the difference between past,

present and future' (152). Regardless of what she promises or how she keeps said promises, the act of promising strengthens her selfhood just as her 'developing consciousness' takes 'form' in the novel (136).

The briefer Chapter 6, which looks at James's novella 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903), is looser too on its definition of the promise, looking at how Marcher 'has not kept a promise but been kept by it'—the promise of his future that has kept him 'in a state of perpetual suspense' (155). Burrows concludes with discussion of the 'promise of life' (168): that Marcher lives on in 'The Beast in the Jungle' to discover that the promise of life exists only in the present. The chapter represents perhaps the shortcoming of Burrows's monograph: such is the ambition and scope of the project that a tight definition of promising is left wanting, with Burrows drawing tenuous promissory connections. Regardless, the diversity of definitions with which Burrows treats promising in James's fiction is also a strength of the study, as is its ambition; the conclusions he draws with regards to the shape of the novel form as a whole mark the study as one with potentially significant consequences for literary studies. Undoubtedly, the book's scholarly range, rigour, and strikingly original formal analysis make it an important intervention in Jamesian criticism, and any future writing on the moral landscape of James's fiction will require reference to *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction*.

* * * *

Freddy Conway-Shaw is an AHRC-funded PhD student at King's College London, where he is researching modernist dream-writing under the supervision of Professors Steven Connor and Neil Vickers. He is interested, more broadly, in literary attempts to get inside the mind. He is also a first-class graduate of The Queen's College, University of Oxford (BA, MSt), where he held a Taberdarship. He has been published in, among other places, *The Modernist Review*, and has work forthcoming in the *Iris Murdoch Review*.