

Received 30/07/2016

Published 01/12/2016

Henry James's Imperial Vision in *The Golden Bowl*

Karima SAOUDI¹

¹ Université d'Alger 2, Algérie

Abstract

This article aims at studying Henry James's vision of the American Empire in his novel *The Golden Bowl* (1903). James, an Anglo-American, believes in the continuity of Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the world. In this novel, he establishes the American empire as the successor of the British one. This is allegorically rendered through the expatriation of the wealthy businessman Adam Verver to England. Adam embodies also the practices of American imperialism which are based on the idea of having a responsibility towards the world by transferring democratic principles to other countries like peace and justice. However, the "civilizing mission" Adam wishes to inherit from the British is defected and based on violence in the colonized countries. This is metaphorically translated in Prince Amerigo's and his ancestors' adulterous relationships. To resolve this ideological dilemma, James expresses his imperial vision through the mission he assigns to Maggie Verver, which is to find a solution to the adulterous relation between her husband and her stepmother. Maggie rejects violent reactions and remains silent and calm. This strategy reflects in other words U.S. imperial policy which discards the violent language of European Empires and uses "diplomacy" to establish order and peace in the world.

1. Introduction

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States entered into competition with European nations over world hegemony. For many the structure of the American Empire is just a replica of European Classical Imperialism. Niall Ferguson explains that the American Empire follows the British model by making its values attractive to others, in relying on missionaries "to disseminate" their culture and in making the rest of the world benefit from its own "security and prosperity"*. The resemblance of the British and the American empires received different literary responses. Some writers interpreted the desire of the U.S. to export its democratic principles as just following the European model of finding pretexts for economic and racial aggression. Others felt the opposite by believing in the civilizing mission of their country. Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1903) falls in both categories. The present paper aims at studying James's Imperial perspective. Being Anglo-American, James considers that the American Empire should substitute Britain in world supremacy, but warns the U.S. against repeating the same mistakes and explores an Imperial policy deeply rooted in American democracy.

*-Ferguson, N. *Colossus : The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*. Penguin Books; 2005, pp .22-25

2. The United States and Classical Imperialism

The opening of James's novel establishes a continuity between the Roman, the British and the American Empires through the musings of the Italian prince, Amerigo, who retrieves the lost feelings of imperial superiority and power of the Roman Empire thanks to the Imperial capital London: "If it was a question of an Imperium...and if one wished as a Roman, to recover a little sense of that, the place to do so was on London Bridge" (G.B3). But he soon devotes his thoughts to his forthcoming profitable marriage with the American Billionaire Adam Verver's daughter. The quick movement of his thoughts from history to the advantages brought about by his marriage signal to a new age when the strength he lost as a Roman is rather to be secured by American money, Amerigo seems more to believe in "the strongest lock that could be made" (G.B 4) rather than in what London makes him see. The novel anticipates indeed the decline of the British Empire and establishes the United States as a new force in the world.

America's conquering power is represented through the character of the wealthy businessman Adam Verver and his daughter Maggie. Their actions are all to be translated as reflecting some economic and political truth in their country. Henry James understands that America's power is in its wealth and in its use of "technological and economic means" in its conquest of the world[†], therefore, the novel abounds with images in which Adam Verver is associated to "ships", "machines" and "trains" showing the technological lead the U.S. had over its European rivals. Maggie Verver is said to have images taken from "steamers and trains" bewildering prince Amerigo attesting thus to his unfamiliarity with them and also to the backwardness of his country and England in matters of technological production.

Adam Verver's Imperialism is also translated in a particular language. The traditional Imperial discourse which England used to describe its conquest of its colonies is subverted and applied on England itself. The latter has in fact become a target in the U.S expansionist project which is metaphorically suggested in Adam Verver's lifelong Imperialist ambitions. In his hands, American expansionism has changed direction and became eastbound. Described as a "watcher of the east", Verver begins his conquest of his "Golden Isles" by settling his "tent" in the imperial capital "London" which has become his colony. More importantly, possessing the imperial capital gives the sense of accumulating all the treasure and wealth acquired by the British Empire.

Adam's expatriation to England is indeed motivated by his desire to purchase artistic objects with which James intends to fill out his sense of America's lack of history. This acquisition will serve Adam to work out his project of building a museum in his native place "Americacity" which is "designed as a gift, primarily, to the people of his adoptive city and native state, the urgency of whose release from the bondage of ugliness he was in a position to measure" (G.B.85). John Carlos Rowe claims that "James understood America to be following [Britain's] lead... in borrow[ing], stealing or bring[ing] other cultures aesthetic traditions to

[†]-Rowe, J.C. *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, New York: Oxford University Press; 2000, pp.18-19

bolster its own authority”[‡]. As such, Adam does what the British did before him, his daughter Maggie seems to draw such a picture of her and her father’s life since they are “pirates” and England is an exotic place “where their treasure is buried”. England would, in this case, see its treasure robbed away as much as it used to rob the wealth and treasure of its colonies. Furthermore, Adam seems to be fully inspired by the British model, as it is alluded to in the quoted passage, one of his objectives in pursuing European art is to free his people from “the bondage” of ignorance, hence, he adopts the stance of the “cultural missionary” the very one the British adopted to justify their colonialism of uncivilized countries.

It is also interesting that Adam thinks of creating a museum whose Imperialistic visions makes it very much comparable to the British museum which is full of the treasures of Britain’s conquests. Maggie and Charlotte pay many visits to the museum in the novel. It is there that the Ververs seem to have found their richest object, that is to say, “a whole immense room, or recess, or department...filled with books written about [Amerigo’s] family alone” (G.B.48). In fact, it is this sense that Amerigo’s family has a history which makes him an eligible match to the American billionaire’s daughter or an object of value to take away from England.

Amerigo’s appeal to the Ververs lies in the fact that he allows to establish the historical continuity between the Roman, the British and the American Empires. His name is worn by inheritance to the “push man” who followed Christopher Columbus and who became “name-father to the new continent” (G.B. 47). Thus, he is connected to the Renaissance, which makes of him a rarified “morceau de musée” (G.B. 8) worthy of Adam Verver’s artistic quest. Moreover, this connection with Amerigo Vespucci seems to nurture Adam’s identification with Renaissance Popes and “Patron[s] of Art” like “Julius II and Leo X” whose power and historicity are greatly due to “their treatment of Michaelangelo”. In this sense, in possessing Prince Amerigo, Adam becomes “a Renaissance heir”[§]. The idea of becoming a collector came to him in “Florence, Rome, and Naples” like “a revelation” which makes his experience with the arts an American Renaissance. Furthermore, this purchase and comparison to great historical figures connects his country historically to Europe’s greatest re-awakening and to the beginning of European Imperial territorial conquests symbolized here by Amerigo Vespucci.

The territorial conquests in the novel are symbolically realized through the marriage of Maggie to the Italian Prince. T.G. Peyser writes that in the novel “concerns about western expansion could be displaced upon the events surrounding the marriage of Maggie and the Prince”^{**}. This Imperial mission is set from the beginning of the novel when Maggie reacts romantically to Amerigo’s ancestral relations and “filled out ... every link that might be vague” (G.B. 48). What Maggie might have been filling out has certainly something to do with what his name reminds her of, that is, Amerigo Vespucci’s imperial conquest of America, of her native land, which she and her father romantically subvert and make their own in such a way that her marriage with the Prince with all his family history becomes an

[‡]- Rowe, J. C. ‘Henry James and Globalization’. *The Henry James Review*.2003;Volume 24: 205-214,p.213.

[§]-Kvenstel, A. *Decadence in the Late Novels of Henry James*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007, p.146.

^{**}-Peyser, T.G. ‘James, Race and the Imperial Museum’. *American Literary History*.1994;Volume 6(No.1): 48-70, p.53.

Imperial conquest. This is reinforced in the way the marriage is metaphorically described as opening “wider perspectives and large waiting spaces”(G.B. 78). The terms used allude to territorial expansion. What is more the marriage makes of Maggie a “Princess”, this recalls the European fashion of joining territories by combining royal marriages. Maggie is granted a noble title which is missing in the U.S. and therefore the marriage allows James to give the U.S. the history he believes it lacks and to relate it to the European one. It is perhaps for this reason that Maggie's and the Prince's union is referred to all through the novel as “History” instead of story.

However, the novel also indicates that Adam Verver's Empire adopts new ideologies. Prince Amerigo seems to notice that his union with his American wife makes him move “in so many ways among new things, mysteries, conditions, expectations, assumptions different from any [he] had known”(G.B. 157). His thoughts confirm Adam Verver's own belief that the key to his success is indeed “the creation of ‘interests’ that are the extinction of other interests”(G.B. 84). The new things puzzling Amerigo and which are in Adam's eyes the extinction of old ones rebounds the assumption that American Imperialism is different from the European one.

3. U.S. Imperialism in European “Spheres of Influence”

It is commonly agreed that in contrast to European Empires, the American one is not interested in territorial expansion, but in trade and in the market. Its structure is basically “informal” or “nongovernmental”. Most interestingly, the Americans believe to have a “responsibility” towards the world which is resolving conflicts and bringing “peace” by ensuring “right” and “justice”, and also exporting its culture. Labels like “soft power”, “moral intervention”, “spheres of influence” and “Americanization” are equally used to describe the methods and objectives of American imperialism^{††}.

In the light of all these theories, we might say that the absence of concrete territorial conquest in the novel reflects the Americans' reluctance to expand territorially. Adam's “creation of [new] interests” found expression in his transformation of “trade” and “the market” into a business like aesthetics. At the same time, we may read our initial argument about the marriage of Maggie and Amerigo that the Ververs perhaps localize Europe's financial difficulties by the turn of the twentieth century onward as a probable field of “intervention” or a “sphere of influence”. Hardt and Negri qualify indeed the emergent “American hegemony over Europe” in “financial” and “economic terms”^{††}. In this novel, European aristocracy is threatened by degeneracy and has become a “sphere of influence” where Americans can intervene with their money. Impoverished and reduced to helplessness by his own aristocratic position, the Italian prince Amerigo seems to understand that the survival of his ancestral status depends on American funding as he thinks: “What was this so important step he had just taken but the desire for some new history that should ... contradict and ... dishonor the old?... He perfectly recognized... that the material for the making had to be Mr Verver's millions” (G.B.11). The step Amerigo has made is his marriage with Maggie which is going to rescue him from financial collapse but, which in his opinion, is unconventional and would certainly stir his family's anger since the bride is not of aristocratic

^{††}-*Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, op.cit., p.11, *Colossus*, op.cit., p.12-13, Hardt, M and Negri, A. *Empire*. Harvard University Press; 2000, pp.35-36

^{**} - *Empire*, op.cit., p 162.

blood and thus unworthy of his rank. Our attention is directed however to the prince's recognition of a "newhistory" in which old Europe can no more stand by its own and needs U.Ssupport. His belief that AdamVerver's money as his last resort signals at the United States leading role in providing for the rest of the world. This idea is also reinforced in the novel through the association of the Ververs with "money", "power" and security .This newly acquired status leads the prince to see his relation with Adam Verver not as that between family members , but as that governing the world of business,as between a sponsor and his beneficiary.This is demonstrated whenAmerigoperceives all the glances the wealthy American directs towards him as "cheque[s]" "to be enclosed".

A similar idea is expressed in the novel, but this time "the sphere of influence" is art in England which, due to apparently hard financial times, has become at the mercy of American money.Mr.Crichton,"The custodian of one of therichest Departments of the great national collection of precious things" (G.B.317),expresses his happiness "to see such lost causes invariably wander at last...into the wondrous, the already famous fold beyond the Mississippi" (G.B.317) because England had to sacrifice them for "parliamentary thrift".Mr.Crichton'sjob gives his words an official undertone which bespeaks England's financialdifficulties so much so that it has to give up its cultural leading role to rich capitalists coming from its previous colony the United States.

"Intervention" in Europe's cultural and economic crisis can be understood as part of U.S. responsibility towards the world after that the old Empires started having Imperial difficulties.Adam seems nonetheless to believe that he has some "responsibility" towards the others as the following passage testifies:

This amiable bethought of his personal advantage...only when
 It might appear to him that other advantages, those of other persons
 Had...put in their claims...one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had
 Never been...his portion not to feel committed and surrounded, never
 Quite his refreshment to make out to make out where the many-coloured
 humanappeal,represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric
 zones of intensity... really faded to the blessed impersonal whiteness for
 which his vision ached. " (G.B. 73)

T.G.Peyser claims that the selfishness traditionally associated to men of business is all absent in Adam Verver so that an "ideologicalwork" can be performed^{§§}. "Ideology" of U.S. Imperialism is to be found in the way Adam thinks of it as a "law of nature" and a "duty" to which he is "committed". The language used does not differ from that used by the British in "the white man's burden", especially the "assumption" that it is a "law of nature" which signifies God's natural selection of Americans to help the world. The "duty" and commitment is however contained in the way the Americans see themselves as the successors to the British, and other European powers, as symbolically illustrated in the novel by Adam's rescue of European civilization represented by Italian aristocracy and art in England. The "advantage" which Adam wants to make the others share is not this decadent "civilization",

^{§§}- 'James, Race and the Imperial Museum'.op,cit., p.58

but the “commercial” one in which they take the lead. A new civilization which the Americans want to export not only to European countries, but also to underdeveloped areas of the world represented in the above passage by “gradations of tint”. This said, we can state that Adam Verver embodies both Classical Imperialism in the European fashion based on territorial expansion and the American one based on “softpower”. Yet, the novel is full of warnings that following both policies at the same time is risky.

4. The Lessons of History

The civilization and European history Adam Verver wants to buy is flawed. The account Amerigo gives to Maggie in the beginning of the novel implies that his defects are important and serious. As he explains, his personality has two “parts”, “one is made up of the history, the doings, the marriages, the crimes, the follies, the boundless bêtises of other people—especially of their infamous waste of money that might have come to [him]” (G.B. 6) which are “written in libraries” and are “public”. The other part is “unknown” and is not yet discovered by Maggie and her father. Amerigo’s account about his family history seems to retain only that scandalous relation which makes of him an heir of the corrupted Borgias, exactly with Pope Alexander VI who committed adultery, in such a way as to heed to Maggie that they are to inherit what is worse in history. Adultery, apparently a family trait, is that hidden “part” which the Ververs ignore. In fact, the historical drama is all performed in the two marriages of the Prince with Maggie and that of Adam with Charlotte which, explained in Imperialist terms elsewhere, are here a vehicle to the dangers the Ververs are risking. In other words, where marriage stands for a territorial conquest, adultery in its turn stands as the defects of the imperial system. The choice of Henry James to make Adam want to acquire European civilization is certainly made to point out to the truth behind the civilizing mission of European Empires. In *The Golden Bowl*, the adulterous relation of the Italian Prince serves to remind the Americans about the violence and pillage of European Imperialism all symbolized in the crack in the Golden Bowl itself which is bought by Maggie as a birthday present to her father.

The “crack” in the Ververs plan is indeed expressed on the one hand in their blindness to the warnings made to them by Prince Amerigo, or allegorically, to the teachings of history. The first chapter of the novel is full of indications that they are buying flawed artistic objects and are repeating the same mistakes of European Empires. The best illustration is Amerigo’s remark that “the happiest reigns, we are taught... are the reigns without any history”, and Maggie’s reply that they are not “afraid of history”(G.B. 7). In contrast to the Ververs, Amerigo seems to have learnt the lessons of history, his marriage with Maggie proves his desire to break with aristocratic bounds and not to repeat the mistakes of his ancestors which caused their bankruptcy. Maggie’s remark, however, demonstrates her innocence and the lack of experience which typify James’s characters in his international themes.

On the other hand, the fissure is to be found in Adam’s very personality. As Amerigo notices, the American businessman is “incredibly romantic”, the latter incarnates in fact the Emersonian self-reliance and individualism. His romanticism, however, as signaled to by Amerigo is exaggerated, the conversation he has with Maggie that they “see too much” and want “everything” confirms this idea. The conclusion Amerigo seems to have arrived at is Adam’s ignorance of his own direction. “The great white curtain” which he sees in his father

inlaw's mind reminds him very much of the "thickness of white air" (G.B. 14) the hero in Edgar Allan Poe's story, "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym", has encountered before him in his journey on a boat. The association is interesting not only in the way Poe's stories support U.S. Imperialism, but also it was written during the period when American writers wanted to define what an American is. The unknown direction might in this case indicate the difficulty in defining that character as different from the English one. Adam Verver seems to personify this confusion, his "mysterious" and "anonymous" success we are told "sat somewhere in his inward vagueness", he himself "could not have communicated" (G.B. 74), its secrets. Worse, he cannot indicate "the line of division he had drawn" (G.B. 85) and ignores "where he would end". The "vagueness" he is accused of prevents him from seeing the adulterous relation between his wife and son-in-law, in fact, he is too much absorbed in pursuing his conquests that he fails to see reality.

Adam's ignorance about the adultery is an actual question in the novel asked by his own daughter and Fanny Assingham. He is, as the narrator puts it, "the stage-manager or the author of the play who most occupy the foreground" or simply "the financial backer, watching his interests from the wing, but in rather confessed ignorance of the mysteries of mimicry" (G.B.99). His being the "financial backer" and ignorance of "the mysteries of mimicry" indicates that the United States is taking risks if it follows European Imperialism as a model. James's view about the politics American Imperialism should follow comes with Maggie Verver. In contrast to her father's vagueness, she is apparently more clear-sighted: "through the grey panorama of the London night, she achieved the feat of not losing sight of what she wanted..." (G.B. 265). Furthermore, she is aware of the adulterous relation between her husband and step-mother; she is as the narrator tells us "an actress...on stage".

5. Maggie Verver: The Agent of American Imperial Diplomacy

Book two is titled 'The Princess' and is all devoted to Maggie's discovery of Amerigo's secret relation with Charlotte and her reaction to it. Maggie's is to endorse the practices of American Imperialism and to reject those of the British. Like her father, she is enabled to exercise "sovereignty" within the "sphere of influence" open to her which is re-establishing order in the family, and allegorically, bringing 'right' and 'peace' to the world. Like her father too, she evinces "new interests" in conducting her mission which is the "plan" she devises to react against the adulterous relation striking her family. Her major idea is to reject violent reactions and opt for calmer, peaceful or diplomatic ones. John Carlos Rowe claims indeed that American Imperialism uses a language that is not aggressive^{***}. The narrator informs us that "she ha[s] one rule of art-to keep within bounds and not lose her head" (G.B. 251). Though it is clear that she leads a struggle against "the flame inside her" and is sometimes driven by the "monstrous" and "horribly possible" pulse, she is determined to be "good" and to use "diplomacy". T.G. Peyser identifies Maggie's method to "Roosevelt's appeal to universal humanity". This claim is especially significant if we take into consideration the looming presence in *The Golden Bowl* of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* published three years before James's novel^{†††}. Maggie seems indeed to share the same experience of "the horror" with Kurtz, the place where she finds it "hideously hidden behind, behind so much

^{***} - *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, op.cit., p. 4

^{†††} - *A Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, op.cit., p. 220.

trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness" (G.B. 368), however, attracts our attention. While it reveals her feelings about the adulterous relation hidden behind Amerigo's gentlemanliness and Charlotte's American qualities, it also refers to the violence hidden behind the civilizing mission of European Imperialism. But Maggie is "her father's daughter", "she represents "right" and "peace" so "the horror" which she believes is no more than "a wild eastern caravan" fails her and prevents her from finding relief in "vindictive[ness]... resentment, the rages of jealousy [and] the protests of passion" (G.B.368). Maggie seems indeed to have learnt Kurtz's lessons, her concept of "the horror" as "eastern" wilderness shows her belief in its opposite which is western civilization, and also her conviction that she would succeed where Europeans have failed, that is, where they used force and violence she would use "diplomacy".

Maggie's "diplomacy is translated in her policy of quietude, which she employs with her husband, as she explains "I've made no trouble. I've made no scene. I've taken no stand. I've neither reproached nor accused him" (G.B. 300). Instead the "plan" she designs to counter him is described like "a full blown flower" which she "plucked in [her] garden of thought" (G.B.247). Her strategy of attack, as implied above, is cultivating thought and the concealment of her knowledge about his adulterous relation with Charlotte. Doing otherwise, would be for Maggie to recognize Amerigo as her "adversary" and that they are having a "fight" which goes against her principle. James uses for Maggie's psychological struggle between her inner wrath and her desire to keep up with civilized reactions a narrative technique which is imagining what she would have said to her traitors, had she chosen to "fight". The best example of this technique is when Amerigo comes into the room where Fanny Assingham has just broken the golden bowl and suggests what Maggie would have liked to tell him. The scene is important in the effect Maggie's silence produces on other characters.

In the following chapter, we have the same technique but it is Maggie who imagines this time what Amerigo would have liked to tell but conceals it: "she had imagined him positively proposing to her a temporary accommodation... 'Leave me my reserve...it's all I have...so that, if you'll make me the concession of letting me alone with it for as long a time as I require, I promise you something or other, grown under cover of it..." (G.B. 359). Later on in the novel, we hear that this "something" which Amerigo promises here to his wife is that he has "chosen to do the same" with Charlotte, that is to say "not to speak", not to tell her that Maggie knows about their secret affair. In this way, Maggie has not only succeeded in solving her family problems by using diplomacy, but she has also made Amerigo adopt her strategies, in other words, she has "Americanized" him.

Maggie's diplomacy is even extended to Charlotte, her step-mother and husband's mistress. Similarly, reconciliation comes through the narrative technique of imagining what must have been said. Maggie does not quarrel with Charlotte and embraces her instead. Adam, Amerigo and Fanny Assingham witness the embrace which makes them believe that the "quarrel" is over; so everybody would have said "see, see, the dear things – their quarrel's blissfully over!" "Our quarrel? What quarrel?" the dear things themselves would...have demanded" (G.B.391). The denial of quarrel shows that Maggie includes her step mother in her determination to be "good" which sounds very much like the U.S. assumption that they

have an international responsibility towards the world . She in fact believes that it was put “ upon her to be disposed of...their peril ” (G.B.367) , because she is American , the best way to counter Charlotte is “ to correct her ” instead of “ fight ” . The correction comes in the way by the end of the novel the latter gives up being Amerigo’s mistress and accepts to become the guide to her husband’s museum. This is significant in the way she joins her husband in his civilizing mission to his native land and has been Americanized like Amerigo.

Maggie’s success is completed by the end of the novel by making her husband and stepmother separate without causing neither dispute nor family scandal. Adam and Charlotte leave for the U.S.A, while Amerigo and Maggie stay in England. The act is important in alluding to the necessity of getting American Imperial ideologies separate from those of Europe, especially the British ones. Adam’s return to his native land comes after his discovery of evil in Europe, all translated in the adulterous relationship between his wife and son-in-law, metaphorically suggesting the drawbacks of European Imperialism. Yet, this does not imply that he gives up his conquests, on the contrary, by the end of the novel, we feel him delegate his ambitions to his daughter, as the narrator explains: “The beauty of her condition was keeping him, at any rate, as he might feel, in sight of the sea, where though his personal dips were over, the whole thing could shine at him....”(G.B. 383). Maggie’s beautiful “condition” is probably her ability to stay in England to ensure “right” and “peace” and mainly to Americanize other people. England is specifically presented in the novel as a decadent Empire which, to rescue Anglo Saxon supremacy, needs the financial help of the United States.

Bibliography

- James, H. *The Golden Bowl*. Wordsworth Classics; 2000.
- Ferguson, N. *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*. Penguin Books; 2005
- Freedman, J, editor. *A Cambridge Companion to Henry James*. Cambridge University Press; 2006
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard University Press; 2000.
- Kvenstel, Anna. *Decadence in the Late Novels of Henry James*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007
- Peyser, T. G. ‘James, Race and the Imperial Museum’. *American Literary History*. 1994; Volume 6(No.1):48-70
- Rowe, J.C. *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2000
- Rowe, J. C. ‘Henry James and Globalization’. *The Henry James Review*. 2003; Volume 24: 205-214