

It is those reconstructions where the text is likely to draw criticism from some quarters, as Waters balances the need to accurately tell Stewart's story with the limited archival evidence available to her, and it will be a matter of personal taste whether that balance is achieved. What can be said for certain is that Waters only employs imagination where the archive falls silent, and she very clearly signposts that she will be taking that imaginative approach in order to complete the biography (15).

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Stuart Burrows, *Henry James and the Promise of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, £85.00). Pp. 217. ISBN 978 1 0094 1968 0.

In *The Other House* (1896), based on a scenario originally written by Henry James in 1893 entitled “The Promise,” Tony Bream has promised his dying wife that he will not marry again in the lifetime of his daughter. For James, this witnessed promissory act becomes a tragic prophecy; its unfolding suspends Tony's future: “his life had effectually suppressed any thoroughfare, making this expanse so pathless that, had he been looking for a philosophic rather than a satiric term, he might have compared it to a desert” (170). This metaphoric imprisonment, an abandonment of narrative time and space, is, for James, a philosophic positioning of critical importance. Tony has no way out. Stuart Burrows asserts in his compelling book that “the promise functions as a governing trope of [the author's] work” (12). Temporal expanse, ethical implications for action, and determining responsibility for his protagonists' emplotment, self-realization, and intersubjective understanding render the promise vital to James's complication of narrative form (12). Burrows interrogates and extends the moral and, critically, the temporal aspects of this intentional speech act, and by (re)locating its affect in a wide range of Jamesian criticism, offers powerful (re)readings of James's fiction. In this frame, the promise is a powerful creative instrument which, for James, writes his fiction and characters in mutually self-reflexive realization. Promises are uniquely powerful; they “make or break worlds, ensure the continuity of self, destroy fictions, and create them” (3).

A promise is an essentially human and imaginative speech act – a pledge to future action which assumes or assigns a conceived but uncertain ethical responsibility to our future selves. Self-reflexive and anchoring, it creates the self to come; as an intersubjective force, it commits us to our promisee; it is both public and private in the sense that it is performed by and for us, the intended other party, and for the witnesses of the promise. It is a test of moral courage, self-constitution, and fulfilment: we cannot know what will happen in the duration of the promise which we must fulfil *come what may*. For Burrows, the implications for temporal subject formation are profoundly Jamesian; his protagonists make a promise and the promise makes them. These commitments have ontological power. Burrows argues that promises inscribe James's fiction; his characters come into being and knowledge through the formative experience of their pledges. This underpins the writer's particular narrative temporality – the promise is subjunctive in its modality; it is made for a world that does not yet exist, for a subject that ought to be, and for the self that one hopes to become. Providing continuity across “privatized” fragmented time, the promise is vital to “the person [the protagonist] wanted to be by giving their word” (12, 15).

In *The Golden Bowl*, Burrows describes “an inverted temporal structure” in which Maggie wishes to experience her marriage, created *and* threatened by a promise, as it “*was* to have been” (129, original emphasis).

Promises create moral obligations, demanding an ethical response to moral conflicts. Paul Ricoeur, whose *Oneself as Another* (1990) is a core text for Burrows, sees this dilemma as essential to ethical (self-)construction of identity. Burrows insists that James’s ultimate responsibility resides in the words he writes. His characters and their experience of the world are imagined as inseparable, experiences “drawn from and giv[ing] rise to the texts in which that world appears” (19). These moral dilemmas express and create the protagonists and the plot, and are essential to the form and style of James’s later fiction. In a sense, then, James, in taking responsibility for his writing and fictional creations, makes a promise of experience, in its expressed formation, to us as readers. In giving a promise, the Jamesian hero engages in a creative and imaginative act – she promises herself a future being, for whom keeping her word is a critical component.

Burrows synthesizes and extends the field of moral philosophy, making accessible its discourse on promises, and creating a persuasive dialogue between it, narratology, and Jamesian critics. In a concise survey of nineteenth-century novels and their ubiquitous promises, “deeply felt obligations,” he argues that James’s protagonists are no less serious than these earlier exemplars but are more self-oriented and that “keeping one’s word takes fantastic, ironic forms” (20–22). The subjectively centred sense of the eternal lived present, uneven relative perspective, and participative constitution unbalance any moral certainties. Burrows suggests that James refuses simple moral parables but entangles us “both at the level of the sentence and ... narrative” to pay attention to choices and obligations, to try to discriminate. Drawing again on Ricoeur, Burrows maintains that the connection of actor and promises propels the novel towards a “future in which they will be called to account” (13). The novel creates itself through this innate propulsion, with its centres of consciousness involving us, making us part of their decisions and concerns.

In this recursive, self-reinforcing architecture of moral ethics, narrative, and character, Burrows conceives close readings which rehearse Jamesian givens of consciousness, reflexive constitution, and retrospective and anticipatory temporality, but by introducing the promise and its differential forms as an overarching conceit, he builds a fresh and persuasive perspective. Promises for Jamesian protagonists, in Burrows’s view, are always wrong – temporally, intersubjectively, in ill-conceived terms, without witness, and, crucially, lacking mutual comprehension. Yet, in all their complexity, they elaborate and explain the lives of their protagonists by entangling their experiences with our own as readers. Burrows denies that he is offering a hermeneutic revelation of the kind dramatized in “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896), but he certainly breathes new life into Jamesian predicaments, paying close attention to the small print of the promises made. Isabel returns to Rome and very possibly to Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), and fulfils her promise to return to her stepdaughter Pansy. This is an essential act for recognition of her becoming, which we have grown to understand, her character, as understood by her and us, could not fail to return. “Isabel’s character is a kind of promise, one that exceeds the novel” (23). This sort of promissory paradox is repeated in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), in which Fleda enacts a proxy promise for Owen even though it harms them both. Owen could not be the man she loved if he reneged on his promise to his fiancée Mona; the fact that he keeps his promise in a weak and cowardly fashion is a brilliant example

of Jamesian irony, one both created by, and creative of, Fleda. James's refusal of the marriage plot is here moral, formatively interesting, and richly suggestive of future possibilities. In the formal experiments of this period critically examined by Burrows, the style of the novel is frequently created by the promises by proxy – characters speak and think for each other; they mutually represent themselves. In James's three late novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), he argues, promises have a constitutive power, for both the novel and the characters' lives, the evolution and realized promise of the latter becoming, in effect, the text. He suggests that James blurs the distinction between speech acts and description – actions constitute the world, describing it in effect, and “description is an action, a means of shaping the world rather than merely reporting on it” (23). Merton Densher believes that in not speaking to Milly, he makes no promises, but in seeing him act through Milly's absent eyes, Burrows argues that we should regard this “bad faith as breathtaking” (122–23). The novel is one of denial and not-knowing in which Densher creates his own version of his past, making it impossible for him to fulfil his promise of eternal love to Kate.

The promise of a life well lived is an existential imperative for James; keeping one's word is a critical component in its evaluation. Failure to keep that self-promise dominates in James's late work. John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903) fails to live in the present because he believes he has been promised a momentous future. This promise fails to arrive – until it is “too late” (160–61). Burrows suggests that the empty promise is a “prophecy ... without content”; at the same time, it is too early, and it deprives Marcher of a future by neglecting the present (158–60). Narrative, once again, is constructed by a temporally compromised promise that separates the protagonists, preventing what might have been. “Marcher looking forward to what is to come; May looking back at what has been” (165).

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Chris Molanphy, *Old Town Road: A Song by Lil Nas X with Billy Ray Cyrus* (London: Duke University Press, 2023, £15.99). Pp. 140. ISBN 978 1 4780 2551 1.

1 queer millennial + camp catchy cowboy country hip-hop song by Lil Nas X named “Old Town Road” = a fierce battle for no. 1 artist spot on my 2018 Spotify Wrapped (Janelle Monáe did edge Nas out following their flawless album *Dirty Computer*). “Old Town Road” (hereafter OTR) did and does resonate with me as a “pop artifact” (5), “chart phenomenon” (123), and “cultural watershed” (17). This commercial and cultural success is the focus of Chris Molanphy's book *Old Town Road*, in which he offers a unique interpretation of OTR's success and ingenuity, placing emphasis on “dissecting the chart as much as dissecting the song” (3). He examines its chart success through analysis of the chart's evolution from the 1940s, the relationship between country and hip-hop, and the creative and online savvy of Lil Nas X (hereafter Nas). Molanphy is a pop critic specializing in chart analysis who is a columnist for *Slate*, hosts the *Hit Parade* podcast, and writes for magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork*. Scholarship related to Nas includes *Pop Masculinities* (2021), in which Kai Arne Hansen devotes a chapter to Nas and OTR, investigating how his queer tactics, both musically and visually, challenged accepted boundaries across country and hip-