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To Paradise by Hanya Yanagihara. London: Picador, 2022. 70836 pp., £2013,14
 (Hardcover). Hanya Yanagihara, *To Paradise* (Picador, 2022) ISBN: 978-1-5290-7747-6

By Denis Flannery, University of Leeds

Nov 10, 2023 – Draft 6 30 pm

So emotive has the reaction been, over the years, to Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 *A Little Life* that people often forget what a thoroughly 'well-read' novel it is. Jude St. Francis, its hero, clearly takes his name from the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Malcolm, one of the three friends of ~~Jude~~ Jude on whom *A Little Life* focuses, is an architect who works for a firm called Ratstar. It's assumed that this name is derived from a poem by Edna St. Vincent ~~Mallay~~ Millay but this assumption is corrected, and the poem's real author is revealed as Anne Sexton. So central was this literary misconception to Yanagihara's novel, that it found its way into Ivo van Hove's recent stage adaptation, probably the only one ~~the only one~~ of many literary nuggets in the original novel to have so survived.

A third friend in ~~in~~ *A Little Life*'s gang of four is Willem, ~~an~~ an actor one of whose roles (at least in the novel) has a Jamesian focus. Scott Herring has pointed out that Willem is tipped to play Henry James in a film (to be entitled *Henry and Edith*) about, in Yanagihara's words, "'Henry James at the beginning of his relationship with Edith Wharton'" (cited by Herring, 144646). This is not the only Jamesian allusion in *A Little Life*. Malcom (the architect who works for Ratstar) has a sister whose name – Flora – derives from one of the uncanny children of *The Turn of the Screw*. If the layered secrets that so torment and constitute Yanagihara's Jude may connect with the kind of lugubrious ~~aspiration~~ aspiration that drives and constitutes Hardy's eponymous hero, they are also readable as a Jamesian mass of affect and intrigue, one that provokes stories into existence while never fully resolving them. We might think in this regard of Verena Tarrant's 'monstrous

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little mystery' in *The Bostonians* (1886) ~~or~~ or the enigma that ~~is~~ is so central to the ~~work~~ work of the author Vereker ~~in~~ in "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896). (B 224)

It ~~is~~ is true also that ~~word~~ word "Jamesian" well-describes the narrative structure of *The People in the Trees* (2013), Yanagihara's first novel. That structure echoes, again, *The Turn of the Screw*. Like James's 1898 novella, *The People in the Trees* has at its centre a ~~first-person-narration~~ first-person narration, one that presents itself as a physical document "The Memoirs of a A. Norton Perina Piera, edited by Ronald Kubodera, M.D.""— This parallels the relationship between the governess's written narration in James and the "exact transcript of my own, made much later" of that narration ~~made~~ made by the anonymous first-person narrator of *Turn's* prologue. (TS 6) Like James's *Governess*, magnetized and horrified by Peter Quint, the narrating Norton Piera is magnetized and horrified by Paul Tallent the "beautiful" intensely talented anthropologist whose energies and capacities so drive the action of ~~The People in the Trees~~. (PT 74)

To Paradise, Yanagihara's 2022 novel, is equally well-read, though ~~it~~ it wears its Jamesian affiliations - very proudly - on its sleeve. Part One of this book's three parts is entitled "Washington Square" (this part goes on for about 180 pages) and the novel's 704 pages extend at first into what was once the future -- the early 1990s → and then beyond: "In a 1993 Manhattan besieged by the AIDS epidemic, a young Hawaiian man lives with his much older, wealthier partner, hiding his troubled childhood and the fate of his father," the Picador press release tells us. This sentence summarises Part Two of *To Paradise*, entitled "Lipo-Wao-Nahele" (the title comes from the name given to a small plot of land in Hawaii).— That same press release tries to clinch the novel's third part, "Zone Eight" with the following words: "And in 2093, in a world riven by plagues and governed by totalitarian rule, a powerful scientist's granddaughter tries to navigate life without him - and solve the mystery of her husband's disappearances."— Perhaps inevitably, the press release, with its emphasis on how "To Paradise ... is a work of emotional power," does not ~~highlight~~ highlight the extent to which this novel is utterly, mysteriously, soaked in James. There is the James of *Washington Square* and *The Turn of the Screw*, yes (and I'll

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return to the former shortly) but there is also the James of *What Maisie Knew*, a novel that ends with the three words—“what,” “Maisie,” and “knew”—that form its title. Each of *To Paradise's* three parts ends with the words “to paradise,” differently resonant in each context ([WMK 275](#); [TP 177, 359, 704](#)).

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It's not only the fiction-writing James of the 1890s who turns up in this novel but also the James of the notebooks. After the bruising difficulties of the opening of his play *Guy Domville* in January 1895, James rallied himself round when he wrote “it is now indeed that I may do the work of my life. And I will.” ([CN 109](#)). That final three-word sentence is echoed in Part Three of Yanagihara's novel when one of ~~its~~^{its} narrators, Charles (a proper name that echoes through the text, attaching itself to different individuals across the centuries) writes, in a letter, dated March 14, 2049, to his beloved Peter of his disdain for pandemic-ridden, hyper-security-conscious, New York, baking and melting as a result of climate change: “Suddenly I wanted to be far away from [...] all of it: Rockefeller, my lab, New York, America [...] I wanted to be back on my grandparents' farm [...]. But I can never go home again [...] the farm is flooded, and this is my life now. I have to make the best of it. And I will.” ([TP 429](#)). A sense of what, years ago, Stephen Donadio termed [James's “unequivocal assertion of artistic will”](#) was super-powerful for [him James](#) and, given the sheer mass, the expansive ferocity, of Yanagihara's last two novels, is clearly vital to ~~her~~^{her} sense of herself as a writer. (4) In the passage I've just quoted Charles's will to make the best life possible – for himself, for David, ~~his his son on~~ and –ultimately his granddaughter named, like ~~the~~^{the} heroine of James's *Washington Square*, Catherine.

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Yanagihara's rewriting of James's short 1880¹ novel—has three main areas. The most striking is what, in its counterfactual world, is taken to be the ground of American Life.—The house in Yanagihara's—1893 Washington Square is inhabited not by a father and daughter, Dr. and Catherine Sloper, but by a grandfather and son, Nathaniel and David Bingham. And, no, you do not lose marks for spotting Yanagihara's allusion [here](#) to James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). In this world, same-sex marriage is utterly ordinary. David's grandfather, who recognises that his

grandson is “like us” (this section’s euphemism for being gay) tries to arrange a marriage between him and a certain Charles Griffith, (whose namesake will, in 2049, go on to channel the note-making— Henry James of 1895. (TP 63)). Yanagihara’s Morris Townsend-equivalent is a certain Edward Bishop, a music teacher with whom David develops a carnal and not unambiguous relationship. Part One ends not with David, like Catherine, sitting still and alone in the house on Washington Square “for life, as it were” but setting forth, taking his fortune in gold ingots with his Edward to the West, “to paradise.” (WS 199; TP 177) Both the—sheer length of Yanagihara’s book and its super-ambitious ~~time scheme~~ time scheme allow, of course, for that casual acceptance of same-sex marriage to become undone as the world changes, climates shift, and multiple pandemics take hold after hold. One of the novel’s most impressive feats and its most admirable stretches is its narration of—how, in 2077,—the benefits of marriage are,—with a view to promoting ~~population growth~~ population growth after nearly a generation of children have been wiped out by yet another—pathogen, “made available only to unions ~~between—~~ between biological males and biological—females.” (TP 636).

This shift in sexual and gender politics is matched by the way in which *To Paradise* makes alternative political maps of the United States. Three such maps are an integral part of the book’s visual design and they set out ~~a—the~~ United States divided into five parts, plus an area (it roughly corresponds to Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah) designated “Uncharted Territory.” First, ~~there~~ there is —was the West,—then The American Union (comprising states such as Kansas, Nebraska, ~~and~~ and Illinois), then—The Colonies (comprising southern states such as Tennessee, Alabama, ~~and~~ Florida), and then the Free States (New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, etc). On the East ~~CCoast,~~ Coast, Maine is a republic all to itself; its counterpart, far off the West Coast, is Hawaii. The ~~latter—~~ latter is an intense focus of the novel’s second part,—and a lost paradise in its third. The book’s second map ~~represents is one of~~ the Hawaiian Islands as imagined in 1893, with—Lipo Wao-Nahele prominently indicated. Its third is a map of New York City in 2093 divided into different Zones. Washington Square itself is in Zone Eight, Central Park is called The Farm and, in this hyper-

policed, ~~Orwellian~~ world, movement between each zone is intensely ~~scrutinized~~ scrutinized and policed. ~~Part Three~~ derives much of its dramatic energy and tension from the political shifting, the dodging, ~~the surveillance~~ and the ambient paranoia that you might expect to find in a dystopian novel. ~~James~~ wrote, in 1886, *The Princess Casamassima*, a novel about terrorism and, of the many Henry Jameses that ~~Yanagihara~~ channels in *To Paradise*, this particular James is most evident in Part Three ~~3~~ when David, the son of Charles, ~~joins~~ a resistance movement called The Light and is later killed. ~~Both the three-part structure and Part Three's terrifyingly dystopian aspects~~ highlight highlight the extent to which Yanagihara ~~is~~ is much in dialogue with traditions of science fiction. She herself has spoken written of how the Michael Cunningham of 2005's *Specimen Days* influenced *To Paradise*. Her zoning of 2093 New York owes much to Doris Lessing's zoning ~~of~~ of interstellar worlds in science fiction novels such as *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980) and the Orwell of 1984 is, in *To Paradise*, as quietly, formatively omnipresent as Henry James was in *A Little Life*. ~~Many people will remember the great vogue of Jamesian~~ inspired Jamesian-inspired fiction that happened about 2004, especially through the work of Colin Toibin (in *The Master*) and Alan Hollinghurst in *The Line of Beauty*. James's Catherine Sloper finds herself reinvented in Hollinghurst's novel via a character named Catherine Fedden, the ~~mentally-~~ mentally ill daughter of an affluent, entitled, politically important family. Hollinghurst's Catherine is referred to as "the Cat" and the work of caring for her is jokingly labelled "looking after the Cat." (7). In *To Paradise's* later stages, Catherine is referred to again and again as "little cat." (TP 520, 658).

It is worth asking why it is the James of *Washington Square* who is so dominant in *To Paradise*. ~~What~~ is ~~it~~ it about James's short 18801 novel that so enables Yanagihara's epic exploration of how the aspirations and desires of wounded, conflicted, intensely ~~corporeal~~ corporeal human beings mesh with and produce phenomena such as climate change, epidemics, and brutal shifts in political power?

Most obviously, *Washington Square's* New York setting and the gorgeousness of its sculpted writing about the city might well provide a model for Yanagihara's writing and her image of herself as a writer. *A Little Life* is, on many levels, a love letter to Yanagihara's Manhattan. And Washington Square, the place (and the house thereon) works as a kind of holding structure, almost like a theatrical set, for *To Paradise*. The author's bio on every Yanagihara novel tersely reads "Hanya Yanagihara lives in New York City," as if living there amounts to a ~~life-narrative~~ life narrative. So terse a bio obviously withholds far more than it provides. Here, "background" information such as the former publications, the places of birth, the spouses that more commonly mark authors' bios is withheld.

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A similar withholding is central to James's writing of Catherine Sloper in *Washington Square*. Judith Butler has written of how the novel's ending creates an insistence on the validity of "a conception of ethics [...] one that honours what cannot be fully be known or captured about the other." (208) *To Paradise* can be read as an extended narrative enactment of such an honouring as it allows for the extent to which "what cannot be fully be known" can take on different forms as it mirrors and meshes with issues taken to be "big." There's something bracingly uncooperative about Catherine Sloper and about *Washington Square*. For Yanagihara, I suspect, this resistant ~~energy~~ energy is part of what helps her to create.

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To Paradise is a mighty achievement, though – for me -- it lacked the seductive emotional punch of *A Little Life*. But maybe that's the point, and maybe that's why it is the James of *Washington Square* who broods over Yanagihara's vastly (re)imagined novelistic worlds. Reading *A Little Life* (and even more seeing its stage adaptation) takes you into something close to sentimental fiction. There may be shock and pain but there's a structure that – some of the time -- holds you. *To Paradise* takes you into areas of emotion that, however deeply felt, are less billboarded and much more at odds with narrative expectations around closure. As a reader approaches the novel's end, she wonders if Catherine, the "little cCat," will make it out of an increasingly hellish New York world. Yanagihara's ~~narration~~ narration refuses to confirm or

deny the success of Cat's escape as she sets out ~~for~~ for what may well (but may well not) be her paradise. Among all of the glances, allusions, and reworkings, that make *To Paradise* such a pleasure for people who read Henry James, this refusal may well be its most Jamesian gesture.

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