The first time that I read Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton*, I realized that the love story that it contains seems to have a happy denouement a little after the middle of the novel, when there are still more than seventy pages to go, and although I knew that in the case of James a simple blink can give rise to a whole volume, I could not help wondering what the rest of the work would be about if love had triumphed over all the hurdles and there was apparently nothing more to say. Fortunately, I was utterly wrong in trying to measure James’s insight with my commonsense ideas concerning love (according to which the latter is mainly aimed at the consolidation of a couple) and in not realizing that if the story had come to an end, it was because the love that it stood for had to go on without the burden of the anecdotal that so easily misleads with regard to the everlasting strength of love whose expression is the only task of the writer, as James himself underlines:

> Really, universally, love stops nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which it shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it.¹

Therefore, although there was no longer any room for a shared future in *The Spoils of Poynton*, the lovers had to cope with the life that they had not been up to. Together with this, I realized that the work presented such an original and fascinating approach to the links connecting love, life, and consciousness that it required to be set out within the wider perspective of what love still means for a conception of existence that, like ours (and, in general, like whatever gainsays the romantic, substantial, or eternal identification of lovers), had ravaged the ideals whereby love itself was meaningful from

Antiquity to Romanticism. Taking this into account, this essay will unfold the literary setting of the story in the light of the Western cultural and philosophical conception of love, which, independent of the diversity and contradictory character of its sundry formulations through time, has always included three elements: idealization, desire for company (whether it is really or imaginarily fulfilled), and, above all, consciousness. The preponderance of the last element, whose full sense will be clarified in the second section of this essay, betokens the extraordinary part that reflection plays in whatever manifestation of love beyond the relative length of the relations and the questionable sense of the illusions wherewith each lover projects the identity of the beloved one, which agrees, on the other hand, with the very hub of the Western conception of individual existence, that is, the determination of his own freedom that everyone must carry out by himself. At bottom, love is not reducible to an enduring relationship or to the mere search for company and pleasure, let alone to the happy ending that everyone would wish to find in real life; far from that, it demands everyone to be aware of his own being before the refusal of another will or before the resistance of circumstances, for when reality thwarts both ideals and relationships, the only way to overcome the failure is to concentrate on one’s own existence even at the cost of the deepest hope or of the highest ideal, which confirms that “the self most revealingly exposes itself not abstractly in accordance with predetermined psychological norms but existentially: in terms of aspirations, efforts and damaging miscalculations.” Thus, this essay will show that if the “spoils” whereof the title of the novel speaks are beauty’s and felicity’s, they also are the very substance of a conscious life, at least as it can be led in a time when the only absolute is the relativity of everything.

I. UN COEUR SIMPLE

The narrative in The Spoils of Poynton is deceptively dramatic, for independent of the excitation that it stirs up in the reader, it is ruled throughout by the same feeling: Mrs. Gereth, a middle-aged lady who has recently become a widow and who together with his late husband devoted her life to make of Poynton, the family house, the most beautiful dwelling of the world, rejects violently Mona Brigstock, the girl that Owen, her only son and the new master of Poynton according to her husband’s will, has chosen as his wife-to-be, for she considers that, despite her money and her beauty, the girl wants the exquisiteness required to understand the perfection that Poynton stands for; withal, the lady believes that Mona is incapable of loving her son because she is selfish and blunt. Now, the lady’s refusal becomes harder when she meets