

RAISING THE PILLAR IN THE “HOUSE OF FICTION”:

A STUDY OF THE PROCESSES OF DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN THE

CENTRAL CHARACTERS OF TWO NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES:

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY AND THE AMBASSADORS

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DECLARATION

Unless otherwise stated, the ideas in this thesis are my own.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis focuses on a variation of James's interest in the "international theme", the effect of transatlantic influences on the development of personality, culture and idea. In the context of this theme it seeks to understand the processes in the development of, and portrayal of change in, the identities of two central characters in the fiction of Henry James, Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether. The two novels analysed, The Portrait of a Lady and The Ambassadors, have a strong contextual relevance to the "international theme", and compass the span of James's career, providing some degrees of comparison.

Beginning with a view of the preliminary vision that James had of the main elements of each central character, the thesis seeks to understand how Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether are subsequently shaped, and developed, by way of the incidents and experiences they meet, and what they make of them. Of primary importance amongst these are the relations they form with the other characters in the novel.

INTRODUCTION

Before James embarked on the substance of his novels he usually had a preliminary but clear view of the main elements of the central character. These would then be shaped and developed by way of the incidents and experiences met through the plot of the novel, and chief amongst these are the relations the central character would form with other characters in the novel. The following two quotations from James's prefaces to the two novels selected for this thesis give some indication of what James had in mind for the portrayal of his central characters:

I have always fondly remembered a remark that I heard fall years ago from the lips of Ivan Turgenieff in regard to his own experience of the usual origin of the fictive picture. It began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out. (The Portrait of a Lady, 43)¹

Would there yet perhaps be time for reparation? - reparation, that is, for the injury done his character; for the affront, he is quite ready to say, so stupidly put upon it and in which he has even himself had so clumsy a hand? The answer to which is that he now at all events sees; so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision. (The Ambassadors 34)²

A particular factor to James's portrayal of the central character is, therefore, the temporal dimension, and a strong feature of this is the character's essential fluidity. Unrestricted by the material frame that would define the moment of a painting or sculpture, James's central characters expand and fill out as they pass through a composed structure of relations, incidents and actions. The fine raw grain of their individuality is matured,

carved, and even scarred in a confluence of knowledge and feelings, fed by the rains of experience. In the case of both Portrait and Ambassadors, that grain is from a New England timber, sheltered and relatively unmarked, bright and freshly appreciative of the opportunities their new European experiences afford them.

In the case of Portrait the “Lady” referred to, Isabel Archer, has both the confidence of talent and the innocence of youth, and faces the world with a spirit of self-assuredness, much like the nation she belongs to. And yet, as Lee Clark Mitchell suggests, the title holds within it a certain ambiguity:

The contradictory implications of the painterly title help explain the power of a novel that presents Isabel as constitutionally complete yet in the process of being transformed by others. (92)

The portrait is never fixed, but extends through the plot and beyond, flowing into the imagination of the reader. There is no better evidence of this fluidity than the lack of closure at the end of the novel, when every reader, as Mitchell points out (106), asks the same question: “and what, then, shall she do?” That question effectively completes the circle, for it brings us back to what has always been the novel’s (and Isabel’s cousin Ralph’s) primary inquiry.

In the case of Ambassadors the central character is the more weathered Strether, appointed representative for the mountainous Woollett force of Mrs. Newsome. Whilst he shares with Isabel Archer an eager intelligence and aesthetic sensitivity, he has to deal more with the weight of years that have influenced and chiseled the models of his

thought. It will take more of an effort for him to expand and take on the enlarging views, intricate perceptions and complex feelings a sophisticated and urbane Europe affords his sensibilities. It is his willingness to do so, however, that is so quickly appreciated by the magnificent Maria Gostrey. She it is who provides him the guiding wing to softly lead him on, and to whom he will turn, at least for a while, as he flutters his response to the new views of Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

That Henry James chooses Europe for the yeast to leaven a New England consciousness has perhaps more to do with his own experience than any political sentiments. His life, from an early age, was straddled between the two continents. Born to a well-to-do father in Washington Place, New York City, in 1843, James was almost immediately taken abroad by his parents to Paris and London before spending the majority of his early childhood in Albany and New York. Thereafter James had a particularly transatlantic education. Between the ages of 12 and 15, he attended schools in Geneva, London, Paris and Boulogne-sur-mer, before attending a scientific school in Geneva and studying German in Bonn. His family having settled in Boston and then Cambridge, Massachusetts, James dabbled in art and then briefly attended the Harvard Law School. He started to publish stories and reviews when he was 21 and, after spending a year travelling in France, England, and Italy, published his first novel in 1870. He then briefly lived in New York before spending a year in Paris, and then taking up residence in London, England, and later in Sussex, where he lived for the rest of his life. While he frequently visited Europe, especially Italy, he made only one short visit to Boston, in 1882-3, after he had written The Portrait of a Lady, and before The

Bostonians. It was then twenty years before he left Europe again to visit America, by which time he had written all his major novels, including his last three great ones, The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl, the last published in 1904 (Moore 117-118).

Having spent so much of his life, and so many different periods of it, in both continents James was uniquely placed, in an age when travel was much more restricted than today, to observe the differences in culture, practice, personality and idea. Leon Edel points out in his essay “Henry James: The Americano-European Legend”, that

Henry James, of all the novelists, was the one who became a cosmopolitan without ever having been a provincial ... from the first, the future novelist's world was a world of contrasts, American and European, a legend fostered in his childhood and sustained by the observant eyes of genius. (407)

James's approach to this “international theme”, the transatlantic meeting of the American and European cultures and their respective influences on each other is, as Martin and Ober note (173), even-handed. He avoids any prejudiced condemnation or unbalanced judgements of either. But, as Edel notes, his approach was unusual, contrary to the currents of his time:

In a word, many Americans looked upon Europe unaware, in naïve and child-like wonder, or bewilderment, or with patriotic contempt. They saw picturesque and beautiful things, and sometimes did not guess that these had emerged from the barbarism of history, the nightmare and bloodshed of the ages. On its side, Europe, old, worldly-wise, possessing the shrewdness and the wisdom of the ages, looked upon the American innocents with a knowing and often corrupt eye. (1984, 411)

James could not entertain this generally ignorant and simplistic view. His characters, and especially the central ones, transcended any national caricature. Clearly, while interested in the transatlantic influences of the “international theme”, James used it more as a vehicle within which to study the more intricate and complex theme of character development. Thus, while both Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether have the new ground of Europe to explore, be influenced by, and develop in, they also have their own marked effects on their European friends. This even-handedness is also true of James’s other novels that treat of this “international theme”. The young American girl Daisy Miller, in the short story of the same name, both charms and shocks her new European acquaintance with an unstudied, carefree vivacity and openness. In The Europeans Baroness Munster and her brother Felix cross the Atlantic and test the New England waters with their European-grown sensibilities. They are as much charmed by the admiration, and simplicity, of their newly found American cousins, as Gertrude and Clifford are fascinated by the confident prowess of the Europeans.

James made frequent use of his cosmopolitan background and the “international theme” in his fiction. As Leon Edel notes “The Portrait of a Lady was the third of Henry James’s large studies of the American abroad” (1977; 1: 614). It was not, however, indispensable to him. Hardly any reference is made to transatlantic influences, for instance, in either Washington Square or What Maisie Knew. Though one is set in New York, where Henry James was born, and the other in England, where he eventually chose to settle, both novels consider the development of the young consciousness, and the relationship that development has to the ideas, will, behaviour and influence of the older

generation, without reference to transatlantic differences. James, as Graham Greene notes in his essay The Private Universe,

could have dispensed with the international scene as easily as he dispensed with all the world of Wall Street finance. For the roots were not in Venice, Paris, London; they were in himself. (113)

Henry James was therefore not so much interested in an exposition of the “international theme”, the differences between a provincial America and more urbane and cosmopolitan Europe, as he was in using it for a vehicle to probe the development of the individual consciousness in a new set of circumstances. In the cases of both Portrait and Ambassadors the “international theme” easily afforded him the possibilities of setting accomplished, but relatively sheltered, isolated, and therefore innocent but puritanical American minds into the culturally rich, subtle and established European society. He would examine how the moral code, that would pattern the grain of the New England consciousness, would take to, and turn, the chisels of new relations and circumstances. That he is always interested, and never certain, of any outcome is evident in the frequency he dips his pen in the issues, on both sides of his divided career.

The period of his absence from writing novels, in favour of drama, certainly allowed for a change in his technique and style. Though the earlier novels flowed more easily, they lacked the highly developed sense of intensity and economy found in his later novels, marked by the publication of What Maisie Knew and The Spoils of Poynton in 1897.

Pelham Edgar notes that

from then onward he was almost painfully conscious of the effect he wished to produce and of the means of producing it. If this new discipline had entailed a loss of spontaneity we might well regret the change, but we find rather an increase in compositional ardor, and an inspirational glow that is lacking in the more naive works of his early prime. (95)

The driving force behind James's novels, the harness for his immense intellectual capacity, was, however, much the same in both his early and late period. He had formulated

in a review of Walt Whitman written in 1865, what was to be the principle of his artistic creed for the whole of his career: "To be positive, one must have something to say; to be positive requires reason, labor, and art; and art requires above all things a suppression of one's self to an idea." (Troy 83)

Although Ambassadors has the more refined, complex, and intense style of his later phase, many of the ideas, passions, sentiments, and particulars that structure it indirectly reflect those found in Portrait. There continues between them to be an inseparable linkage between the heart and the mind, between emotional experience and the development of understanding, the growth of a consciousness. Stephen Spender notes that

James's approach is not untrue to life: it is not even less realistic than that of the novel based on a dramatic tradition. For the grand "scene passionelle" is a symptom, but not the root of passion. Passionate activity is intellectual activity. His realisation of this is James's great contribution to the novel. (105)

James's approach is the more realistic for being essentially indirect. The principals are rarely seen in the full light of a narrator's commentary. With perhaps only a brief reference to their background, to give some shape to them, their characters evolve in the relations they have to others, in their actions, dialogue and thoughts. Because they are

not given a label, are not forever fixed by adjectives or pronouncements, they are allowed a certain fluidity, and remain open to change and development. The freedom they have is also the reader's freedom. Judgements are made only to require a revision. Although a logic continually develops to give every new turn a plausible explanation, there always remains a degree of uncertainty, some room for a surprise. This uncertain sense adds such dimension to a character that it extends beyond the chronological bounds of the novel. At the end of Portrait there is no certainty that Isabel Archer will remain with Osmond on her return from England. In Ambassadors, there is no predictable future path for either Chad or Strether, just as there is uncertainty on Kate's and Densher's futures in The Wings of the Dove. The only certainty in all cases is that there has been unalterable change, just as Kate tells Densher in the final sentence of The Wings of the Dove: "We shall never be again as we were!" (The Wings of the Dove 509)

In their case it has been the presence of Milly Theale that has softly touched the course of their lives. Her portrait is so obliquely painted by James, her entry into the novel so late, that she might have missed the centre completely if she weren't reflected in everyone else's eyes. While Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether sit more directly in the centre of their portraits, it is their changing views that are of so much interest.

CHAPTER 1: THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

1.1 Isabel Archer: The Slim Conception

In his preface to the New York edition of Portrait, Henry James reveals that he first conceived his subject, Isabel Archer, to be "the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl" who sets out to affront her destiny. We know that, as a girl, she shows an eagerness to learn - she loves to listen to her elders - and that she has romantic leanings - she thought her grandmother's bustling home "romantic" (Portrait 77). There is, indeed, some significant resemblance between James own childhood and Isabel's, for James, according to Edel,

endows her with the background of his own Albany childhood and, as in Washington Square, he interpolates a section wholly autobiographical, depicting his grandmother's house, the Dutch school from which he himself had fled in rebellion (as Isabel does), the "capital peach trees", which he had always sampled and always remembered (...) The most Jamesian of Henry's heroines is closely linked by her background and her early life to her creator. (1977; 1: 615)

Isabel is thought of by her family as being highly intelligent, and has an active imagination that encourages an appetite for reading books, and from them a desire to experience the world beyond the small comforts of her lifestyle. An abiding interest in Europe had already been planted by her father who, like James's own father, had wished his children to travel

to see as much of the world as possible; and it was for this purpose that, before Isabel was fourteen, he had transported them three times across the Atlantic, giving them on each occasion, however, but a few months view of the subject

proposed: a course which had whetted our heroine's curiosity without enabling her to satisfy it. (Portrait 88)

The initial vision James has had of Isabel Archer appears to have been a mixture of his own experience and a certain amount of experimental ideal. Both Edel (1977; 614, 623) and Martin and Ober (172, 173) make the point that there are some general and vague "borrowings" from other literature that help define Isabel's character. Edel notes that "James began the thought that his Isabel Archer would be a female Christopher Newman (the hero of The American)" (614). Martin and Ober also consider that Portrait has essentially evolved from "all James's successes in the tales and novels he wrote in the fifteen years between 1864 and 1879" (172). Edel also suggests, by referring to George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, that The Portrait of a Lady was James's "way of making Isabel Archer the personality he felt George Eliot should have made of Gwendolen Harleth" (623). Martin and Ober also note that

in the later, more general borrowing the source has been internalized to a greater extent and the situation of, say, Dorothea in Middlemarch, or Gwendoline in Daniel Deronda is fundamentally reassessed and stated in new terms. (173)

While there is little hard evidence to substantiate these above speculations on James's sources for The Portrait of a Lady and the character of Isabel, there may be some grain of truth in them, as there indeed may be in another point made by Edel. Referring to James's allusion to Isabel's "flame-like spirit", Edel suggests that Isabel may be, just as Milly Theale would later be in The Wings of a Dove,

an image of James's long-dead cousin Minny Temple, for he would describe her in the same way. He confessed that he had thought of Minny, in creating the eager imagination and the intellectual shortcomings of his heroine. But Minny, as he

pointed out to Grace Norton, had been “incomplete.” Death had deprived her of the trials - and the joys- of maturity. James, as artist, could imagine and “complete” that which had been left undone. (1977; 1: 615)

Whatever the mix of sources and inspiration that gives James his first vision of Isabel Archer, she turns out to be a particularly attractive character, quickly capturing the attention of society wherever she goes in her travels to Europe. She becomes, to some extent, what Sangari describes as “the expansive Emersonian individual with transcendental notions of freedom and of American ‘promise’ in a restrictive Europe” (719). As Laura Hinton has pointed out,

the Emersonian resonances in Isabel's character in The Portrait of a Lady have been noted by many James critics, including Poirier, who writes that Isabel's “action is absolutely within the logic of her Emersonian idealism” (35); and Sabiston, who argues that Isabel is an Emersonian heroine because she plays the role of “the Transcendental innocent”. (325)

Emerson had been a friend of James’s father (Moore 7), and James became well acquainted with him, a meeting in the autumn of 1870 having had special significance:

James always remembered Emerson’s voice: it was “irresistible” and he had “a beautiful mild modest authority”. He also had (and James was to remark on this again and again) “that ripe unconsciousness of evil which is one of the most beautiful signs by which we know him”. The Emersonian innocence, the exquisite provinciality of it, touched him deeply. (Edel, 1977, 294)

Emerson, however, was regarded by James as being particularly provincial and American, rather like Waymarsh in Ambassadors, but quite unlike either Isabel or himself, who became cosmopolitan in their experience and outlook. What Isabel does share with Emerson is a tendency to have little consciousness of any evil. Nevertheless, it is clear that much was behind James’s own “slim conception” of Isabel Archer, that he

employed a rich mix of sources for his vision, enabling her to become a celebrated portrait, hung in the “house of fiction”.

1.2 Lord Warburton: The English Nobleman

Almost as soon as Isabel sets foot in the green flowing lawns of Gardencourt Isabel wins both the heart of Ralph, her cousin, and proposals from both sides of the Atlantic. She has become what is described as the “object of collection”, the “spoils” that would form the novel’s central consciousness (Donahue 41). The very British Lord Warburton is the first to desire her hand. He is a flawless gentleman, having an elegance and nobility that come from a pedigree of wealth, carefully groomed education, and selected careers. He can give Isabel the sort of security, comfort, and high position in society that would be the envy of the most ambitious social climber. If material gain were the private ambition of Isabel then this would have been success indeed. But along with such success would come the more restrictive duties and responsibilities that would necessarily burden the wife of a wealthy lord. Furthermore Isabel would no longer be considered on her own terms, the “Emersonian individual”. She would now be redesigned into a secondary role: the wife of a man of power and political weight. This would palsy the freedom of her spirit. She would be: “as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage” (Portrait 162).

Isabel is aware of Lord Warburton's personal qualities. She knows he is intelligent and, though firmly part of the ruling class, interested in social improvement and progress even at his own material cost. He is not proud; he is honest, and would be tenderly solicitous of her well-being and happiness. Yet she has no trouble, in her own mind, in refusing him, and her reasoning is simple:

She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was capable of entertaining. (Portrait 164)

Isabel's problem is not one of decision. She is clear, in her own mind, of her general desire and motive to move independently forward. Her difficulty is how to make her mind known with the least possible offence to either Lord Warburton, whom she clearly likes and respects, or to what he stands in the foreground of, the affluent stability of a British respectability. She doesn't want to offend him because she indeed honours him. Her halting explanation to Lord Warburton is not entirely convincing:

It's that I can't escape my fate ... I should try to escape if I were to marry you ... it's giving up other chances ... I can't escape unhappiness ... In marrying you I shall be trying to. (Portrait 185-6)

But Isabel Archer is not a fatalist. She has strong intentions for herself but no particular vision. She never shows any remarkable foresight or prophetic insight. The terms of her explanation are, rather, an attempt to avoid some of the responsibility for hurting Lord Warburton's feelings. She is trying to imply that she hasn't really any choice in the matter. She doesn't want openly to admit that she has made a choice, and that she has chosen an uncertain future over the certain, that she has preferred the possibilities of further choices over a definite path, albeit one paved with gold.

Isabel is most concerned with her sense of independence, with a freedom where the vitality of her mind may abound. She is not pursuing adventure and experience just for the sake of it - something she describes to her cousin Ralph as a "poisoned drink". She

wishes to observe, to see, and hence to calculate and so understand. It may be the common desire of an author who also has an independent spirit, a vital mind, and who is eager for an intelligence of life that he might embrace, realise, and express. It is a zest for life sprung from a sense of self-confidence, a confidence in being able to deal with anything life may throw up, a confidence founded in the knowledge of one's own mental ability. In addition, as Laura Hinton points out, Isabel's sense of originality is an important factor in her decisions that run contrary to general expectations:

An originating female nature reflects the "original" nature attributed to Isabel in the novel by other characters. For example, Isabel's sister Lilian is "distinctly conscious" of "two things in life": her lawyer-husband's "force in argument" and Isabel's "originality" (37). Isabel's goal in the novel is to be "original." Isabel's "originality" causes her to resist marriage, for example, to Lord Warburton; "the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained" (101). Marriage to him, while enhancing Isabel's financial worth, would subject her to aristocratic tradition and confine her to a landed estate. In the Preface, Isabel's self-image of originality is linked to her freedom, a linkage recreated in a prose that invokes the subject of natural origins-- a prose that itself runs untethered and "free". (310)

That Isabel is not keen to use her sense of originality and freedom as a defense against the interests of Lord Warburton betrays the probability that she has insufficient confidence in Lord Warburton's understanding of her real motives. His world is historically and structurally chauvinistic, where the male is particularly dominant in the socio-political economy, and female aspirations are clearly held to be of secondary import. Unlike Ralph he never guesses her reasons for declining his hand, and hence her resort to what is essentially a lie: an appeal to a fate she cannot avoid, rather than the truth: she chooses the freedom to be what she may.

The episode may also be viewed in symbolic terms, with allusions to James's recurrent interest in the "international theme". Here Isabel is the young America, fondly protective of her independence, sensing her own vast capacities for growth, and yet needing to go beyond her own isolated bounds to visit, observe, and perhaps learn from the experienced histories of a stately mother England. It must be a visit that avoids too much wetting of feet, or dirtying of hands.

1.3 Caspar Goodwood: The American Industrialist

The other proposal that Isabel soon encounters as she makes her bid for freedom is from the other side of the Atlantic. Rather like Waymarsh in The Ambassadors, Caspar Goodwood seems to carry about with him a sense of having been affronted, a sort of “sacred rage”. He seems to consider it his right, and Isabel’s duty, to belong to him. He has an inextinguishable ardor, a deliberate perseverance, and huge resources of energy, though he conducts himself as a gentleman, except at the last.

In comparison to the mild-mannered Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood is a much thicker and knottier problem for Isabel. He displays a dogged persistence in the pursuit of his claims on Isabel. He is also well aware of the attractive sensual force that exists between them, something he makes impulsive use of at the end of the novel. His approaches towards Isabel are always in “masculinely assertive terms” (Galloway 56). The instinctive rejection of Goodwood by Isabel, and her ultimate choice of Osmond, lead many critics to consider Isabel, and her relations, and even Henry James, in an overtly Freudian perspective of sexual deprivation, fear or lack (Porte 20). This would appear to ignore the fact that Isabel has a child by Osmond, a fact necessarily dependent on a sexual element to their affair. Her own recognition of the sexual force behind Caspar Goodwood, especially in the penultimate scene at Gardencourt, suggests that far from being merely sexually perverse, Isabel is able to mentally dominate the sexual drive by exercising her hard-won sense of freedom, her sense of independence, and making a deliberate choice. While clearly feeling his sexual power, his forced kiss that is for her

“like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed” (Portrait 635), Isabel is still able to exert her mental power and break free of him. Her rebuttal of Caspar Goodwood, in the face of her own sexual feelings, is almost as much a supreme declaration of her independent mind and spirit, as is her defiance of her own husband's insidious will. Kurt Hochenauer considers Isabel's own struggle for her sexual freedom to be particularly significant in view of the imminent changes in perceptions of women, their status and roles in society:

Isabel Archer's divided sexuality represents a literary paradigm of the struggle for sexual independence among late nineteenth-century women. Throughout The Portrait of a Lady, she remains caught between a stale ideology insisting women de-emphasize their sexuality to gain equal footing with men and a growing, nineteenth-century movement among feminists working to legitimize a woman's sex drive (...) As an ambiguous, subtle character with an apparent but unresolved sexuality, Isabel remains a vanguard of the new realism Henry James sought in his fiction. (19)

Again some allusions to the “international theme” can be drawn out of Caspar Goodwood's strongly assertive approaches to Isabel. American industry and business is particularly well known for its aggressive approach to marketing itself, and for its immense confidence in its own success. The authority of financial success, and the sense of power that can go with it, can, when demonstrated in the different fields of international relations, be perceived by junior, often European, industrial partners as either arrogant, or at least an unwarranted intrusion. Caspar Goodwood's advances on Isabel have that same rather presumptuous sense of authority to them, with the inevitable consequence of Isabel's somewhat indignant rebuttals.

Whether the symbolism is sexual or national, or both, the whole affair is concluded with Isabel's decision to visit Florence with her Aunt:

The serenity of this announcement struck a chill to the young man's heart; he seemed to see her whirled away into circles from which he was inexorably excluded. (Portrait 213)

While Caspar Goodwood is able to travel to Britain in pursuit of Isabel, he feels, rather as Waymarsh does in The Ambassadors, unequal to the task of mixing with the complex social groupings of continental Europe, and especially of Italy, considering them beyond his reach, outside his sphere of influence: "Well, you'll be out of my sight indeed!" (Portrait 213).

Europe is beyond his connections and probably apprehension. When he does come to visit Isabel in Florence, after being informed that she is engaged to be married, it is only for a fleeting twenty-four hours. His business there appears limited to his interest in Isabel, and there is little evidence that he pays much attention to the artistic and cultural treasures of the city, endowments that Isabel would have a particular appreciation for. It is, in fact, Isabel's artistic appreciation that from the first attracts Isabel to both Madame Merle and Osmond. She is immediately charmed by Madame Merle's playing of the piano at Gardencourt, and she quickly perceives Osmond's artistic temperament during her first visit to his villa:

His sensibility had governed him - possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art, and beauty and history. (Portrait 312)

This description of Osmond couldn't have put him further from Caspar Goodwood who, under Isabel's critical gaze on his first arrival in Florence, is described as being

straight, strong and hard, there was nothing in his appearance that spoke positively either of youth or of age; if he had neither innocence or weakness, so he had no practical philosophy. (Portrait 377)

If Caspar Goodwood is so obviously unsuitable to Isabel's taste and turn of mind, there remains the question as to why he is so persistent in his pursuit of Isabel, in the face of her clear decisions against him. Part of the problem is that she is unable completely to refuse him at an early stage. The blind grip of his forceful will needed a strong and irrevocable jolt and this was what Isabel was unable to give him. It was as if, in the face of his determination, she did not trust her own feelings and convictions fully enough to contradict, and therefore pain him. This lack of self-assertiveness, grounded on her good nature, partly opens her up to manipulation, a weakness taken much advantage of by Madame Merle and Osmond.

Caspar Goodwood, however, lacks the required subtle intelligence to manipulate Isabel, and prefers the direct route to her sensibilities. His consistency and persistence serves well, in the course of the novel, as both a test and catalyst of the development of Isabel. His last action, his kiss, forces her to break her delay in deciding her future course, so that by the time he traces her steps to London, she has already embarked on it.

When he does arrive in London it is with another American, Harriet, that he has to deal. Harriet can also be interpreted very much as a symbol of America. She is extremely self-

confident and has an advancing career that carries with it the example of a progressive force for women in society. She is open, direct, and unafraid of breaking any norms and traditions that seem to her to hamstring a creaking, if quaint Europe. But she is also often brash and forceful in her behaviour, and this most especially in respect of what she considers to be the correct course for her friend Isabel's affections. For the greater part of the novel she is as blind as Caspar Goodwood on his incompatibility with Isabel, and equally unaware of Isabel's inner sense of him. Having told Ralph that Isabel had sent Goodwood "back to America", and after admitting that Isabel's "only idea seems to be to get rid of him", Henrietta shows, in her confident stand, a simple ignorance of her friend:

"Well, I shall see him, and I shall tell him not to give up. If I didn't believe Isabel would come round," Miss Stackpole added - "well, I'd give up myself. I mean I'd give her up!" (Portrait 223)

Isabel is unable to give Henrietta much help in understanding her own outlook. She can no more than vaguely respond to Henrietta's questioning of her motives and direction in life ("Do you know where you're going, Isabel Archer"), and resorts to the same reaction she has to Caspar Goodwood. She asks her to leave her alone. As we see above Henrietta has not the least intention to accede to this request, but it is Isabel who finally wins through, and brings Henrietta round. It is a clear measure of the growth in Isabel's understanding of herself, and of her direction, that she is able to turn Henrietta to her view, and leave her to instruct Caspar Goodwood on the implications.

1.4 **Ralph Touchett: The Generous Spirit**

Even though Henrietta and Caspar Goodwood may offer some caricature of their American roots, Ralph, who is also an American, escapes any such categorisation. As Richard Poirier has indicated, he has a fine ironic wit, quite often at the expense of his national contemporaries, with Henrietta at times becoming his unwilling "comic foil":

Much of the broadest comedy in the first half of the novel derives from the conversations between Ralph and Henrietta and the contrast between his supple and extemporizing mind and her attempts to confine him within the limits of her doctrinaire and superficial categories. (Poirier 197)

Ralph is an important figure in the development of Isabel. He has an abundant spirit of generosity towards her that springs from a genuine regard and real affection. He brings to her experience a fine, objective, and critical judgment always smoothed, and softened, by his lively, if sometimes ironic, sense of humour. As noted by Poirier (Poirier 195) the early charm of Gardencourt is built on a sense of lightness, a humorous view, designed in the appeal of quick answers and a ready wit. Henrietta finds this peculiarly English manner difficult to deal with, as she shows in her response to Ralph's playful conversation:

"You're not serious," Miss Stackpole remarked; "that's what's the matter with you." (Portrait 144)

This response is soon echoed by Isabel, though in lighter tone:

"What she says is true," his cousin answered; "you'll never be serious." (Portrait 147)

Of course there is something much more fatal that is the matter with Ralph, and it is typical of Henrietta to be both perceptive, and wide of the mark. Hers is a rather perverse kind of logic that, from the basis of a strong sense of self-confidence, draws conclusions on too limited a base of information, even considering her intelligently deductive processes of thought. It is a fault that is carried through by Isabel in the notably much thicker mists put up by Madame Merle and Osmond.

It is a good example of James' desire to avoid neat closures that the relationship having greatest promise of development, perhaps to a mature reciprocal understanding, satisfaction and happiness, is deprived of the solid circumstances required for it to take lasting root, and flower. It is quite clear that from an early stage Ralph begins to love Isabel. He even briefly intimates his early interest in her, though he does so in his inimitable jocular manner, in terms that are easily brushed aside by Isabel, for want of any serious intention:

"I don't know what you care for; I don't think you care for anything. You don't really care for England when you praise it; you don't care for America even when you pretend to abuse it."

"I care for nothing but you, dear cousin", said Ralph.

"If I could believe even that, I should be very glad."

"Ah well, I should hope so!" the young man exclaimed.

Isabel might have believed it and not have been very far from the truth. He thought a great deal about her; she was constantly present to his mind. (Portrait 114)

Convinced by his untimely fate, and with a genuine interest in contributing to the welfare of his newly found cousin, he decides to channel his growing love for Isabel into a more objective, even apparently fraternal, and selfless attachment to her. He becomes the older

brother, the concerned spectator who has no power to influence, but is always there to turn to in times of need. While it is Ralph's creative generosity that provides the conditions of freedom for Isabel to explore the world, he never makes a demand on her, or looks for any personal advantage. Even when he finds her marriage to Osmond a block on his hopes for her, he keeps high his regard for her, and his sense of duty towards her. He even comes to blame himself for making her the prey of fortune hunters. His feelings for her become the purest the novel offers, and while they are always to be doomed by material events, they yet achieve a momentary sublimity. The timing of this moment, realised towards the end of the novel, contributes a sense of the triumphant, a victory hard worked for and won, a sense made more poignant and remarkable in the face of finality. The sublime moment is in the last few sentences that Ralph utters to Isabel:

"I don't believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little."

"Oh Ralph, I'm very happy now," she cried through her tears.

"And remember this," he continued, that if you've been hated you've also been loved. Ah but, Isabel - adored!" he just audibly and lingeringly breathed. (Portrait 623)

These few words are filled with a simple understanding and unconditional love of Isabel. Her reaction is to bring Ralph as near as she can, without crossing sexual boundaries, to a position nearer than friendship, to being her brother. Defined and limited by the clear circumstances of his fate he has behaved towards her as well as any brother might ever have been expected to. He has earned her recognition of his nearness to her heart.

By the end of the novel a sincere devotion and understanding has developed between Isabel and her cousin Ralph, qualities that would have made success of a marriage. But,

by damning Ralph to an inevitably early end, James ruled out, from the first, any likelihood of matrimony between them. Even if there were, however, a possibility on Ralph's part for the short term, Isabel was not ready enough, at the early stage, to consider Ralph as anything but a friend and relation who had a deep interest in her. While he did not have the commanding attractions of a Warburton, or physical presence of Caspar Goodwood, his dry humour and fine intellect were not primed to bring her free thoughts round to a sufficient interest in him.

1.5 Madame Merle: The Lady of Charm

If Goodwood lacks the wit, Warburton the subtlety, and Ralph the desire to manipulate Isabel around to an interest in them, Madame Merle conversely has all the necessary charm and talent for it. Isabel meets her under the recommendation of being her Aunt's friend from Florence. Isabel is attracted to her first view of Madame Merle by her beautiful piano playing. The scene is suggestive of a tale in Homer's *Odyssey*, when the Sirens lure sailors and their ships, by their sweet singing, to a precipitous destruction on the rocks. Odysseus manages to avoid this doom stopping his sailor's ears, and tying himself to the mast of the ship, but Isabel has no such foreknowledge of the dangerous charms of the European. Madame Merle has, for Isabel "as charming a manner as any she had ever encountered" (*Portrait* 226).

It is clear that Madame Merle has a profound affect on Isabel and her life, and if *Portrait* were to be a dramatic tragedy, then Madame Merle would be the deceiving "vice" figure. Laura Hinton rather excessively labels Madame Merle as a "sadistic matrimonial agent par excellence"(325). Melissa Solomon argues that Madame Merle's "friendship" with Isabel is "necessarily queer", and is the central destructive element whereby Isabel blindly submits, loses her sense of independence, and achieves "subjecthood"(395). Krook considers Isabel's ready friendship with Madame Merle as a sign of an inward flaw in Isabel's character, a tendency towards aestheticism,

for aestheticism seeks always to substitute the appearance for the reality, the surface for the substance, the touchstone of taste for the touchstone of truth. (Krook 59)

Even so, though Isabel is ultimately deceived and manipulated by Madame Merle, and from the start considers her to be "the most comfortable, profitable, person", Isabel's judgement is not completely clouded by the obvious social virtues of her new friend. She finds her character at first too manicured to be natural, just as a fresh New England garden would have found the tapering lawns of Gardencourt, or crafted walls of Osmond's Florentine villa, obviously well-designed and carefully constructed:

Her nature had been too much overlaid with custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. (Portrait 244)

Isabel's friendship with Madame Merle never reaches the simple openness she has with Henrietta. While she enjoys the various shades to Madame Merle's conversation, and admires her studied manners and graces, she will not so easily wear the underpinning aesthetic philosophy, as explained by Madame Merle:

When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take that shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances...I've a great respect for things! One's self - for other people - is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the book one reads, the company one keeps - these things are all expressive. (Portrait 253)

This is a neat summary of Madame Merle's, and for that matter Osmond's, understanding of social existence, and it is immediately opposed by Isabel in the clearest of terms: "I don't agree with you. I think just the other way...Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me" (Portrait 253).

The encounter can again be considered in terms of the “international theme”. Madame Merle is representing the rich tradition of European structure and form, something that is perhaps best symbolised in the structured, ritualistic, and richly overflowing religious services of the High-Church traditions of Europe, where the symbol becomes indistinguishable from the substance it represents (as in the communion ritual). Isabel, on the other hand, true to the puritanical roots of her national identity, rejects the representative value of the symbol, whereby a material thing is made to be the representation of an inner spiritual value. Hence she professes that her identity is in no way reflected by her appearance, her material ‘circumstantial envelope’: “everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (Portrait 253).

Henry James passes no judgement on either side. Any nationalistic divide has, in any case, been blurred by the fact that all the parties are, in fact, American. Isabel’s point, however, argues against the evidence of her being flawed by an appetite for aestheticism. It is significant that their exchange of views occurs before Isabel inherits her fortune, and before Madame Merle starts making her plans for her. Madame Merle might have otherwise have been a bit more guarded either about her ideas, or what she has to say about Osmond who is, as she tells Isabel,

one of the most delightful men I know... He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished... but... No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything... he's very indolent, so indolent that it amounts to a sort of position. (Portrait 249)

Madame Merle gives, at this early stage in her acquaintance with Isabel, a quite truthful description of her perceptions of Osmond. She was delighted enough in Osmond to have

had an affair with him. In his notebooks Henry James has indicated that “her old interest in Osmond remains in a modified form” (The Complete Notebooks of Henry James 15)³. She even complains to Osmond himself that she considers his indolence his worst fault. Her conversation, however, becomes that more careful and calculating once she learns of Isabel's fortune, and her subsequent plans for Osmond and Isabel take shape. She is a figure that can be both blamed, for her interest in manipulating Isabel's future, and yet also understood, and to some extent excused, for having those interests. Henry James acknowledged in his notes that he wanted her actions to appear "natural". He suggests her motivation is driven by both a desire "to do something for him (Osmond)" and her daughter Pansy:

Isabel has money, and Mme Merle has great confidence in her benevolence, in her generosity; she has no fear that she will be a harsh stepmother, and she believes she will push the fortunes of the child she herself is unable to avow and afraid openly to patronize. (Notebooks 15)

These sentiments and purposes appear almost selfless, something that even Osmond openly acknowledges. But it is her desire to influence and manipulate, and her almost dismissive acknowledgement of her capacity to do so, that makes her character sometimes quite reprehensible. This is revealed in an exchange with Osmond, when she first makes clear to him her ideas about Isabel:

"What do you want to do with her?" he asked at last.

"What you see. Put her in your way."

"Isn't she meant for something better than that?"

"I don't pretend to know what people are meant for," said Madame Merle. "I only know what I can do with them."

"I'm sorry for Miss Archer!" Osmond declared. (Portrait 291)

There is a cleverly ironic ambiguity in this declaration, for Osmond is not aware of the future role he will have in Isabel's future bleak unhappiness. It is not at all certain that Madame Merle has any more than the slimmest idea of it either, although she does accuse Osmond of being "so heartless". She is still very close to Osmond, as Isabel discovers too late, and she gives to Osmond her own high opinion of Isabel:

She's beautiful, accomplished, generous and, for an American, well-born. She's also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune. (Portrait 291)

It is particularly noteworthy that Madame Merle feels quite free to pursue her own purposes, her own designs on Isabel, even though she clearly holds her in high regard. If Madame Merle is the symbol of a type of European that James wishes to portray, then his perception is that the character has a strong capacity for deception, accompanied by very little sense of guilt. As we have seen Madame Merle feels she has good reason for her actions. She betrays no compunction whatever in her deception of both Isabel, and her aunt Mrs. Touchett. Even when her deceit is inevitably to be laid bare for Isabel to see, with all its shocking implications regarding Madame Merle's integrity, James is careful to avoid a full-blooded confrontation and denunciation of her by Isabel. He elaborates on his intentions in his notes:

I am not sure that it would not be best that the exposure of Mme Merle should never be complete, and above all that she should not denounce herself. This would injure very much the impression I have wished to give of her profundity, her self-control, her regard for appearances. (Notebooks 15)

It appears that, in the type of European character symbolised by Madame Merle, James determines the corruption as being close to the centre, the heart. There it is so well over-

laid in the coverings of propriety, that it is never to surface, be bared and recognised. It will just lurk, deep underneath the veils of implications, to be detected, eventually, by an unobtrusive, and incontrovertible, logic of the slipped-out facts. In the event it is Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, who releases these facts, and it is her role that, in effect, diminishes the dramatic potential of a major scene, which James desired, between Madame Merle and Isabel. The scene would still be there, and with it the now softened punch, for Madame Merle would see the depths of her own corruption reflected in the clear views of her opponent, with whom she could yet both sympathise and identify. Her subsequent fall would be with all the tired dignity that James could muster for her:

This discovery was tremendous, and from the moment she made it the most accomplished of women faltered and lost her courage. But only for that moment... The tide of her confidence ebbed, and she was able only just to glide into port, faintly grazing the bottom. (Portrait 598)

In this scene, at the convent where Pansy remains unfurled, James now gives Isabel her finest moment, a moment which would indeed reveal how far she has come. The sudden realisation of the sordid use she had been put to was on her:

She saw, in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience and to which the very frailty of the vessel in which it had been offered her only gave an intrinsic price, the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron. (Portrait 598)

It was a very bleak, dark, vision for Isabel, who so prided herself as having been the independent frame for her own decisions, for better or worse. To have seen the first pinion of her life, her marriage, as the manipulated object of someone else's purpose, was too ugly a vision for her to look at for long. It remains an awful but brief flash of

knowledge, to be remembered and taken up later, in the solitude of her train journey north to Gardencourt. Yet, for all the horror of the deception she has suffered, she manages such self-mastery that the only revenge she has on Madame Merle is to keep silent, leaving all things unsaid, hidden under the surface of form. Though she does not mention this particular example, Nicola Bradbury recognizes the value of silence in James's fiction, finding many instances in Portrait:

The shaping properties of silence, and its part in the exhilarating process of perception, are attributes as important in James's novels as its boundless extent, ambiguity, and its liability to mislead (...) In The Portrait of a Lady, silences of different qualities, and achieved by different technical means, help to 'orchestrate' character, action and theme. (Bradbury 13 - 15)

Isabel's self-control and reticence are certainly above the expectations of Madame Merle:

Madame Merle was very pale; her own eyes covered Isabel's face. She might see what she would, but her danger was over. Isabel would never accuse her, never reproach her; perhaps because she never would give her the opportunity to defend herself. (Portrait 599)

Isabel has now shown Madame Merle that the student has succeeded where the master has failed. The "cleverest woman in the world" has been left guessing and it remains for her to try and bring Isabel down, unbalance her, and exact her own sort of revenge. Her suggestion of Ralph's responsibility for Isabel's fortune does surprise Isabel, but it also reveals the source of Madame Merle's deception, and part of her own excuse for it, a deep envy of Isabel's material good fortune. Her now open acknowledgement of the error of her ways, albeit with a weak attendant self-justification, permits the beginning of her penance, made unquestionable by her decision to go to America. The break with Osmond, and especially Pansy, will be a large sacrifice for her to make. That it is

America she chooses to exile herself to has some ironic value, considering the roots of Isabel's own mental and physical journey.

1.6 Gilbert Osmond: The Aesthetic Egotist

Her experience with Madame Merle would force Isabel to discover that the corruption of intrigue, deception, even manipulation could be hidden far under the coverings of a particularly European gentility. In Osmond, the converted American, Isabel would learn the extent of her own capacity for self-deception. It is on this capacity that the designs of Madame Merle rely. She stirs Isabel's imaginative curiosity to an interest in Osmond with some well-placed words. Leaving aside her previous descriptions of his "indolence", she gives him the fairer terms of being "one of the cleverest and most agreeable men", who would be "brilliant" for Isabel. This, on its own, would be insufficient for Isabel. Madame Merle, however, also perceives that Isabel has a wish to not just satisfy a desire, as would be the case with Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, but to fill a need. Her perception of what would most interest Isabel leads her to slip in the suggestive of opinion of Isabel's possible relation to Osmond: "a quick and cultivated girl like Isabel would give him a stimulus which was too absent from his life" (Portrait 295).

The reader always has an advantage over Isabel in the understanding of Osmond's character. We know that his interest in Isabel was ultimately accomplished by Madame Merle with the details of Isabel's fortune, her confirmation of which earns a rare word of praise from Osmond, and we know that he dislikes Ralph, whom we have learned to trust. He is a carefully groomed character, taking great care in the placement and display of his possessions, and the image they project. There would be nothing in this to warn Isabel of

any danger for her, once she becomes interested in Osmond, except that he extends the same attitude to govern the affairs of his daughter, Pansy. Even Madame Merle considers that Pansy has had enough of life in the convent, but Osmond is enamoured with the product:

"I don't know," said Osmond. "I like what they've made of her. It's very charming."

"That's not the convent. It's the child's nature."

"It's the combination, I think. She's as pure as a pearl." (Portrait 294)

Osmond may have been referring to a pet bibelot, a prized sculpture, or a precious jewel. Unlike Madame Merle he has no consideration of Pansy's own thoughts or feelings. As becomes manifestly clear to Isabel, though perhaps too late for her own guidance, he has brought up Pansy with the overriding object, which she dutifully observes, of pleasing him. His sense of a family is one of ownership, of possession, dominion, absorption, and even occlusion. There is no room for an independent mind and spirit, let alone disagreement and disobedience. His sister, the Countess Gemini, must have had the chances necessary for a good understanding of Osmond, even if he would deny her capacity to do so. In conversation with Madame Merle, she raises by degrees our apprehension for Isabel: "he's very hard to satisfy. That makes me tremble for her happiness!" (Portrait 322).

Madame Merle has been right about the interest that Isabel creates in Osmond. A fortune, without other socially attractive qualities, would have been insufficient for him. She must have the intelligent wit and sensitivity to be able to appreciate him, and altogether be eminently presentable, an attractive asset in society. His private reaction to

Isabel's refusal of Lord Warburton's hand is commensurate with this aesthetic and egotistical view:

he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. (Portrait 354)

For Osmond to be able to marry Isabel she must also, of course, take an interest in him, having a sufficient appreciation and respect for his own sense of life, and thereby adding to the quality of it:

His 'style' was what the girl had discovered, with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. (Portrait 356)

His approval of her is subject to the same sort of caveat that has governed the rule of his daughter. While he recognizes Isabel's capacity for loyalty, a "great devotion", she has "too many ideas" for Osmond, too many ideas that "must be sacrificed" for, as he explains to Madame Merle, "fortunately they're very bad ones" (Portrait 336). This rather strong sense of dominion is a side to Osmond that Isabel will not discover until she is married to him. Without the benefit of insight, as from the reader's privileged encounters with Osmond, but with quite the independent spirit, Isabel has had little to guide her judgement of Osmond, except her own confidently intelligent perceptions. She is given little concrete aid by the deliberately ambiguous misgivings of her cousin Ralph, which in any case hang on his oblique critique of Madame Merle. She is quick, however, to appreciate Osmond's talk and company, and to realise he is peculiarly distinguished, "a specimen apart":

It was not so much what he said and did, but what he withheld, that marked him for her (...) he was an original without being an eccentric. She had never met a person of so fine a grain. (Portrait 312)

Recognising Osmond's propensity to be critical and fastidious, Isabel is, perhaps for the first time, intimidated by the taste and opinions of another. In almost deliberate contrast to her impressions Osmond claims an understated life with little ambition, few wants, and a simple devotion to the most charming upbringing of his virtuous daughter. The image he creates for Isabel is one of latent talents and refined qualities, all tastefully covered in a modest and unassuming simplicity. It is what is not revealed by Osmond, in his rather "dry" account of himself, that provides all the interest for Isabel, for "her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting" (Portrait 316). This key reference to Isabel's imagination is the touchstone of her subsequent belief in Osmond, the ultimate source of her small mistake that Ralph so compassionately dismisses at the end of the novel. It is just a small mistake, easily forgiven, because imagination is a vital facet of the lively mind that is one of Isabel's strongest characteristics, which even Osmond recognizes, if uncomfortably so. Her reference to a winter trip in Japan, as an example of an idea she suspects Osmond would frown on, draws his smiling response: "You have an imagination that quite startles one!" (Portrait 358)

An imagination that is even slightly misled by willful notions can lead to trouble. Hypnotism and mesmerism depend on it. James himself is particularly aware of the power of the imagination, hence his frequent use of the blank spaces of silences, things left unsaid, and open endings. Osmond chooses with great care the bold moment for his

declaration of love for Isabel, and all the implications that go with it. He drops the stone into the well of her consciousness almost immediately after encouraging her future travels and possible long absences from Italy. He has, in marked contrast with the ultimatums of her previous encounters with suitors, made no demands on her, excepting an apparently innocuous request to visit his daughter. He simply trusts to her imagination, using the requested visit to his aesthetically pleasing villa, and charmingly pure daughter, as a catalyst to work in his favour.

Osmond understands that it is Isabel's imagination, yet tightly guarded by her moral ideas, which needs to be won over. The baldness of his declaration leaves her breathless, but still in command, able to give the proper perspective of her relations with him: "I don't know you (...) You're not easy to know; no one could be less so" (Portrait 361). Even if this is true she had been in preparation for something of the sort, as we are told that "what had happened was something that for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet" (Portrait 362).

What was important was that Osmond did not stay to press his claim, or pursue any sort of self-justification in the matter of his love for her. He simply dropped his stone and "took a rapid, respectful leave", leaving Isabel sufficient space to turn and look round at this new and important event that might change at least the obvious course of her life. It would take some time and due consideration before Isabel would allow her imagination to traverse the "last vague space it couldn't cross - a dusky, uncertain tract which looked

ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight”
(Portrait 363).

When Isabel does cross that "last vague space" there will be no turning back for her. The determination to live with the consequences of her own decisions has been one of those moral guards that have served to protect her imagination. Another has been the need to know that her decision has been her own, an independent statement of herself in a world of influence. With these two guards satisfied of their duty no amount of persuasion could alter the view for Isabel, despite the good intentions of her cousin Ralph, who considers Osmond a "sterile dilettante" who will put Isabel "into a cage".

The marriage of Isabel and Osmond was in the end a triumph of Osmond's strategic talent and aesthetic sense, and Isabel's romantic ideal and high moral imagination, over the better critical judgement of both. Osmond was quite as wrong about Isabel as she was about him. Even the lucid Pansy thought Isabel would be a "delightful companion" for her father. Isabel had the idea that her marriage to Osmond would be a generous and creative act, that she would ideally supply his particular needs:

There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving. (Portrait 403)

Most important to her decision was that she had perceived that Osmond "was her lover", that he did indeed love her, a fact that even Ralph was aware of and brought out into the open at the last. While Ralph points out, however, that Osmond would not have married

her had she been poor, Isabel maintains that she would not have decided to marry if she had not realised that Osmond loved her. Her argument consistently directs Ralph to the fact that the decision to marry has been hers to make, and that she alone has made it, irrespective of what anyone else thinks, or decides, for themselves, or for her.

What went wrong with the marriage was that once Osmond's motive to win Isabel over had all but gone, so would his natural effort and ability to conceal the uglier sides of his character. Osmond has achieved his prize through determination, subtlety, and an inflexible will. Once married the original motivation behind that will disappears. The prize must now be put on the mantle-piece for all to see, the only work remaining being a bit of spit and polish applied, to rub away the marks and smooth the edges.

Isabel would have to learn during the first years of her marriage that she had been deceived in her idea of Osmond. Her marriage was not to be the creative act she had envisaged - something that would be tragically symbolised in the loss of the couple's only child. She was not there to generously meet his need, but to be a model of his own collection, the paragon of his taste. She had gained an essentially egotistical husband, and her inevitable failure to live up to his conceptions of her would betray all the hard selfishness that egotism implies. The strongest poison to the relationship was ultimately Osmond's discovery that he had misjudged Isabel. He had never realised either the strength of Isabel's moral fibre or the vigour of her desire for a mental freedom and independence. She was not simply an untrained 'Pansy' who had 'bad' ideas that could be 'sacrificed'. She would always think for herself, make her own critical judgments, adjust

her view to her own principles which would be sacrificed to no one. Osmond discovered that, instead of submerging Isabel into comfortable agreement with his own perspective, he would find her a critic, building up a high level of disapproval. It was something he had not foreseen: “that she should turn the hot light of her disdain upon his own conception of things - this was a danger he had not allowed for” (Portrait 482). In his Notebooks James indicated what he wanted to come through:

one must get a sense of Isabel's exquisitely miserable revulsion. Three years have passed - time enough for it to have taken place. His worldliness, his deep snobbishness, his want of generosity, etc.; his hatred of her when he finds that she judges him, that she morally protests at so much that surrounds her. (15)

Isabel's marriage had become a "dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end". This was the most obvious conclusion for a decision, or 'generous mistake' as Ralph would have it, whose ground had been mined by deceits and self-deceptions. The important thing was what Isabel would do with it. She had the example of her Aunt Touchett in front of her: a figure of authority who made her marriage bearable and respectable by leading an almost independent life whose circles only briefly crossed her husband's. That she wouldn't allow herself to continue to suffer the hurts of a nasty routine of life with Osmond must be clear from the great pleasure she receives from Ralph's dying words. Her meetings with Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton have equally enabled her to turn away from what they may have offered. While at the end she returns to Rome, and probably to her house there, with Osmond in it, she does so having firmly established her sense of independence and dominion over her affairs. Isabel has clearly grown by her experiences, and has developed a strong sense of identity and purpose.

It testifies to James's respect for the power of the imagination that he leaves his heroine's next move undecided, only going so far, in his revisions, as to tell us something of what Isabel will not do. "What she will do?" is a question, as Mitchell notes, deliberately left unanswered:

Isabel seems to escape the particular narrative force by which she is constructed, encouraging us - like James, Mme Merle, like nearly everyone else - to place her in narrative of our own devising. And the novel's ending, therefore, offers no closure to her status as a free agent whose "portrait" begs to be converted into plot ... "What will she do?" - a question that continues to register Isabel's existence for us as a character independent of plot. (106)

CHAPTER 2: THE AMBASSADORS

2.1 Strether: The Man of Imagination

James conceived his hero of Ambassadors to have at least one significant similarity to the early heroine of Portrait: a strongly developed imagination. It is a quality that is both celebrated and qualified in Isabel's youthful nature, for, while it drives the spirit of her zestful charm, it fails to guide her through the webs of an unimagined deceit. Strether, however, has all the considerations of an established history: a greater maturity and reserves of a restrained wisdom and carefulness that the long Woollett years have taught him. His imagination, however, has long since gone to sleep. It needs to be awakened, stimulated, released, and encouraged to try out its long furred wings. And that is precisely what James has intended his visit to Paris to do for him. In his preface to The Ambassadors James writes

I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into - since it's only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little. My poor friend should have accumulated character, certainly. (36)

Isabel Archer crossed the Atlantic with a young mind, eager for knowledge, considered by her family and limited acquaintance to be the "intellectually superior" of her circle. She had few attachments to peg her to the New England shores. Her sisters had little to offer to her broadening mental view, and Caspar had the wrong polarity to his magnetism, repelling her with each of his advances. Hence she arrived in Europe with only her own conceptions to shackle her motive, impulse and direction.

The transatlantic fibres that bind Strether to his roots in Woollett, in “the very heart of New England”, are of a much stronger material. Whether intended or not, even some play on the possible anagrams of his name suggests a mental tie: Sr. Tether. What most strongly binds him is his great benefactor’s tremendous force of character and will. She is austere, but noble and generous, and Strether clearly holds her in very high regard, keeping for as long as possible his strong sense of loyalty to her, of doing the right thing by her. Although the reader never comes into any sort of direct contact with her, Mrs. Newsome is designed by James, as he states in the preface to The Ambassadors, to be a continual, shadowy presence, tugging from across the Atlantic on Strether’s conscience, if not actually directing his thoughts and actions:

Mrs Newsome, away off with her finger on the pulse of Massachusetts, should yet be no less intensely than circuitously present through the whole thing, should be no less felt as to be reckoned with than the most direct exhibition, the finest portrayal at first hand could make her. (Ambassadors 44)

Strether is never, however, simply and completely under his benefactor’s thumb, even in Woollett. Mrs Newsome also has an very high regard for Strether. He has capacities and talent enough, in her eyes, to adequately fill the shoes of being her prospective suitor, and he is trusted enough to be selected first, even before her own daughter Sarah, for her most important mission, the retrieval of Chad from the clutches of his Parisian life.

Mrs. Newsome maintains her presence off-stage, as it were, throughout the novel: firstly, in Strether’s consciousness, being kept uppermost there by way of her regular epistles to him; secondly, by her contact with Waymarsh; and, thirdly, by way of her second

ambassador, her daughter Mrs Pocock. Michael Wutz, in rather overly critical tones, notes the strategic thought that lies behind Mrs Newsome's epistles to Strether:

A citadel of Puritan morality, she subscribes to the stable, literal referentiality of the word. In the self-enclosed cocoon of the Woollett world, things are either black or white, an opposition for which the written letter can serve as a transparent window. At the same time, Mrs. Newsome uses language as a tool of moral coercion, as a "pretext" to govern Strether's European movements. The woman who has "worked out the whole thing in advance" functions as Strether's intratextual author (22: 222); she is pulling the strings of the Parisian plot. (94)

Wutz's rather extreme comment fails, however, to take note of the fact that Strether has found Mrs. Newsome an attractive and pleasant enough character to want to marry her. She values and sympathises with Strether, at least, apparently, until he breaks with her trust as her "ambassador". However so, she sits at the apex of Woollett society, and she serves as the emblematic figurehead of all that Strether has mentally and physically come from, a kind of vaguely threatening reminder of his past, and of what he always stands to lose. Her Woollett thought represents, however, the sort of provincialism and parochialism of an America that the cosmopolitan James had left behind, but which would remain as a factor of American society, as Edel notes:

We have only to remember how widely the term "American isolation" was used in the era before the Second World War to understand the powerful nationalism and sense of self-sufficiency which had developed in the United States. Thus when Henry James spoke of "the real cosmopolitan spirit, the easy imagination of differences and hindrances surmounted," he invoked an idea particularly repugnant to his fellow-American. (1984, 406)

This type of national isolationism can lead to thought becoming narrow and constricting and, with a limited base for ideas and opinions, open to a form of mental monopoly or

autocracy whereby dissenting voices and opinions disappear. As Collin Meissner notes this “closed system” of thought prevents revisionist change, and therefore progress:

James depicts Mrs. Newsome as an advocate of the narrowly realistic tradition he believed limiting to fiction because it is the product of a covert ideology that purports to present a real picture of life while secretly confining that life within a closed system. For James, as for Gadamer, the failure of hermeneutics occurs when the interpreting subject refuses to acknowledge the requirements of revision so as to modify understanding in light of newly-acquired knowledge. An individual-Mrs. Newsome as Realist author-who remains essentially sealed off from life seeks to extend control over the world by confining what James understood to be an ever-evolving and fluid reality within a method of perception based on a strict management of reality. (50)

Strether, like Isabel, arrives in Europe with a certain intellectual credit. Mrs Newsome trusts his conduct and performance. Unlike the case of James’s earlier heroine, however, his credit has some strings attached. He is well aware that his future grace at Woollett may well depend on the success of his mission. This is perhaps the most obvious caveat on his freedom of adventure in Europe. When Isabel journeys to Europe she is stiffly accompanied by her aunt. Isabel has, however, an independent spirit, and is used to a relative freedom of action. Given the new resources from her inheritance she easily takes up her own ideas. Strether, however, has terms for his financial freedom.

In his notebooks, and in the “Project of the Novel” that James sent to his publisher, it is made clear that the main spring for the plot of Ambassadors was a quotation that included a few words of advice from W. D. Howells. It was repeated to James by a mutual friend, Jonathan Sturges. The substance of the quotation was given in a Parisian garden belonging to an American painter (Whistler), and is sketched out by James along these lines:

Oh, you are young, you are young - be glad of it: be glad of it and live. Live all you can: it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do - but live. This place makes it all come over me. I see it now. I haven't done so - and now I'm old. It's too late. It has gone past me - I've lost it. You have time. You are young. Live! (Notebooks 141)

It is a quotation that is given, almost complete, for Strether to use on little Bilham, in a middle chapter of the novel. Even the circumstances are approximately the same as in the original scene. Strether takes aside the young, easy-going friend of Chad's, for his piece of advice, his large lesson of life, in the Parisian garden of the "great" sculptor, Gloriani. James elaborates on the germ of his idea for the novel after he first hears the quote, which is told to him by Jonathan Sturges:

At any rate, it gives me the little idea of the figure of an elderly man who hasn't 'lived', hasn't at all, in the sense of sensations, passions, impulses, pleasures - and to whom, in the presence of some great human spectacle, some great organisation for the Immediate, the Agreeable, for curiosity, and experiment and perception, for Enjoyment, in a word, becomes, *sur la fin*, or toward it, sorrowfully aware. He has never really enjoyed - he has lived only for Duty and conscience - his conception of them; for pure appearances and daily tasks - lived for effort, for surrender, abstention, sacrifice. (Notebooks 141)

Effort, surrender, abstention and sacrifice are all the sort of New England puritanical values that might have guided the life of Strether in Woollett. The life of the "Agreeable", of "Enjoyment", is what Strether discovers in Paris. James also makes clear that his novel "would take its place in the little group I should like to do of *Les Vieux - The Old*" (Notebooks 141). This suggests that James was already looking to write about an older and therefore more mature type of character than those that were central to his earlier novels. His motives for the novel were already sufficiently forged before the above quotation fell for him to take up and use as a sharp focus and channel for his ideas.

One of the more significant ideas that flash out in this same sequence of notes lightens up a core theme for the novel: “the idea of the tale being the revolution that takes place in the poor man, the impression made on him by the experience” (Notebooks 142). The experience is Strether’s journey into Europe and the new relations that meet him there. For Isabel the same journey would be for a construction of her future world and her position in it. Strether, who has already quite solidly entered and occupied a position in Woollett society, would experience a revolution, the overthrow and replacement of his familiar systems of behaviour, his feelings, habits and attitudes.

2.2 Maria Gostrey: La Ficelle

For such a revolution to positively take place, that is to leave the subject's consciousness higher up, or further advanced, than before, Strether must have, from the first, a profound and sufficiently sensitive and perceptive imagination to grasp the opportunities for change. It is a quality that Maria Gostrey quickly becomes aware of when she meets Strether in England, and which she describes as being "rather beautiful and rare" (Ambassadors 65). It comes up for praise even towards the end of the novel, when she tells Strether he has, in contrast to Mrs. Newsome, and ultimately to Chad, some "treasures of imagination" (Ambassadors 449).

James explains in his preface to Ambassadors what he had in mind for the character and purpose of Maria Gostrey. He describes her as "the most unmitigated and abandoned of ficelles" (Ambassadors 47). A "ficelle" is a cunning device, or dodge, and hence the label implies that she is, at least partly, being artfully used by James as a device of sorts. Maria becomes a type of confidante to Strether, quickly and completely replacing any role that Waymarsh might have had. She therefore places the reader's ear to listen to Strether's murmuring thoughts and feelings, and with her careful questions elicits the marks of his progress, enlightening herself and, of course, the reader. Yet, while she is Strether's mental chaperone and guide through his European adventure, she also participates as an important part of that new experience. Strether recognizes that Maria was in advance of him, that "she knew things he didn't" (Ambassadors 61),

she knew even intimate things about him that he hadn't yet told her and perhaps never would. He wasn't unaware that he had told her rather remarkably many for the time, but these were not the real ones. Some of the real ones, however, precisely, were what she knew. (Ambassadors 61)

While Strether's meeting up with Maria comes very early on in the novel, through it a sense of history is achieved, particularly in respect to Strether, stretching back far into the reaches behind the first chapter. His first acquaintance with Maria suggests in him the sense of a quite new turn to his life:

Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something in which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then. (Ambassadors 59)

By sounding this new note in Strether Maria signifies the promise of a future course for him that would prove quite different to his past. To understand just how different, some grasp is necessary of the elements of that past. Clearly the style that James uses does not allow for a simple narrative account, and the reader becomes only gradually aware of the facts of Strether's past as they slip into the process of his new experience. It is also Maria's role to help uncover that past, which she achieves by way of various pertinent questions. In his responses Strether sketches out some of his history, and in this way Maria fulfills what James describes as her purpose: to be both the reader's and Strether's friend.

And she certainly does become a friend to Strether. He is at least "exhilarated" by this woman who is quite beyond what he has at all experienced in the confines of his earlier life in Woollett. He first describes her manner as having a "strange and cynical wit"

(Ambassadors 66), but this quickly turns to an admiration at her high powers of perception and understanding, and then to almost a plea for help from her. She has understood that Strether is not free to realise a full enjoyment of his new circumstances, that he is imprisoned by a general “terror” of his responsibilities to any connections with his life and attachments in Woollett, his old friend Waymarsh included. It is to release him from that fear that Maria Gostrey takes up Strether’s case.

Maria thereafter plays a pivotal role in Strether’s future development. She is, as it were, his spiritual guide, his mentor to whom he can turn for some words of advice, or for just the comfort of understanding. She is ready to give freely of her time and services to Strether, even though she finds she is always busy “due somewhere... (finding that) wherever she happened to be she found a dropped thread to pick up, a ragged edge to repair” (Ambassadors 79).

Usually some few steps ahead of Strether in her reading of the circumstances of his situation, Maria is able to deduce, and mention, some pertinent points whose worth and validity he will only discover some time later. Strether is quite in awe of her depth and breadth of knowledge, for “she knew her theatre, she knew her play, as she had triumphantly known, three days running, everything else” (Ambassadors 89). It is Maria who first questions, while they attend the theatre together in London, Strether’s, and therefore Mrs. Newsome’s and Woollett’s, general assumptions about Mme de Vionnet (who is as yet undiscovered and therefore unnamed): that she is corrupt, effectively living a dishonorable and impure life, and has led the young Chad astray:

You've accepted the mission of separating him from the wicked woman. Are you quite sure she's very bad for him? ... One can only judge on the facts ... I don't know, you see, about his life; you've not told me about his life. She may be charming - his life! (Ambassadors 93)

In view of the quite opposite ideas that Strether holds about the "wicked woman", Maria's use of the word "charming" to describe this "influence" appears quite radical to Strether, at least until he meets Chad and begins to have his own doubts about the supposed wickedness of Madame de Vionnet. But the word is later proved a remarkably accurate adjective for the lady in question, Madame de Vionnet, and one that Strether himself would later have no compunction in using. As she discovers more about Chad, Maria only builds on her preliminary intuition, describing the woman behind his transformation as "excellent...too good to admit!" (Ambassadors 179). She has yet to discover that she in fact knows Madame de Vionnet.

What Maria has pointed out to Strether, and what he will only later realise to his own mortification, is that it is possible that, without any real evidence to work with, Mrs. Newsome, Woollett, and by extension Strether himself, have been holding unfairly prejudiced opinions against Madame de Vionnet. Their prejudices have been formulated by pre-conceptions of what European and, to a greater degree, Parisian life, morals, and values are like, based on the more puritanical, "New England" viewpoint.

Maria Gostrey's suggestion that such prejudiced opinions may be well wide of the mark, that the woman in question may be "charming" rather than, in Strether's own words, "base, venal - out of the streets" (Ambassadors 93), raises the implication that the evil

beheld is “in the eye of the beholder”. It is an implication that Mrs. Newsome, or at least her second ambassador Mrs. Pocock, completely ignores and dismisses, so firm is their belief in the corruption. Collin Meissner notes that

James reveals several pitfalls associated with all hermeneutic projects, the most misleading, perhaps, being the unconscious interpretive projection upon a yet to be encountered reality. The most obvious and well-documented example in The Ambassadors is Mrs. Newsome’s projected and imposed interpretation of Madame de Vionnet. (45)

It is, however, an implication that Strether becomes only too well aware of, as he comes to know Chad and his Parisian acquaintance, and which he does his utmost to shift from his own shoulders. Strether’s awareness of, and sensitivity to, this implication is, in turn, an advantage that Chad, Little Bilham, and even Mme de Vionnet, use to perfection in their efforts to win Strether over.

The conversation between Maria and Strether, in this first London scene, with dinner at Strether’s hotel preceding an evening at the theatre, proves a rich source for information for the reader, under Maria’s easy questioning, on the material of Strether’s connections to Woollett, the conditions of his circumstances and the nature of his benefactor. It is here that we discover the absurd source of power for the Newsome family: the mass production of some vulgar “little nameless object”. It is so unworthy of any meaningful consideration that nobody ever bothers, and it is left unnamed. It is here that Maria first deduces that Mrs. Newsome, though clearly a woman of substance and integrity, is also narrow and closed, powerful but egotistical, “a swell”, and whose interest in Strether has similar sandy foundations. It is therefore much to Strether’s surprise, and to his later

illumination, that she suggests he “close with” Mrs. Newsome “before you lose your chance”(101). He ultimately does lose his chance, as Mrs. Newsome takes the initiative and closes with him - an inevitable consequence of Strether’s strike for his moral freedom. Maria would have preferred the cause of the “closure” to have been the result of Strether’s own realisation of his true worth.

Her quick insight into Mrs. Newsome’s character proves to be only one portion of an almost prophetically inspired evening for Maria Gostrey. In another quick series of thoughts she envisions that it will be Strether, not any other emissary from Woollett, who will “save” Chad (The Ambassadors 107). Her line of thought is, though, in a quite different sort of direction to Strether’s for, by “salvation”, she means quite the opposite of what Strether has in mind. She is thinking of “salvation”, for “poor Chad”, in terms of his being prevented from being recaptured by the forces from Woollett. The depth of her inspiration runs so far, by way of her perception of Strether’s true worth, that she has even understood that it will be Strether who will prevent Chad from leaving Paris. And it is indeed Strether who, at the last, attempts to prevent Chad’s leaving of Madame de Vionnet, and his departure for the singular world of business that Woollett offers him. That Strether might ultimately fail in that quest Maria has not yet foreseen, though she senses even that some way before the event, and betrays her sense of it in her typically simple, but surprising, little questions to Strether.

Further evidence to furnish her own vision of Strether’s future role in “saving” Chad comes almost as soon as her arrival in Paris, and Strether’s subsequent and prompt visit

to her small mezzanine apartment in the Quartier Marboeuf. She asks him if he has found any evidence, in his first contact with Chad's life, as represented by little Bilham, of anything to "protest about":

He let her, with this, however ruefully, have the whole truth.
 'I haven't yet found a single thing.'
 'Isn't there anyone with him then?'
 'Of the sort I came out about?' Strether took a moment. 'How do I know? And what do I care?'
 'Oh oh!' - and her laughter spread. He was struck in fact by the effect on her of his joke. He saw now how he meant it as a joke. She saw, however, still other things, though in an instant she had hidden them. (*Ambassadors* 143)

In Strether's offhand remark, belatedly decided by him, in the ease of their relationship, to be just a joke, Maria discovers a source of not just mirth, but ready food for her keen insight and perspicacity. Perhaps she has already perceived some part of the full irony in the future turns of Strether's mind. He has already given, albeit unintentionally, a hint that he is now the less concerned about the sort of influence "that woman" may have over Chad. As he comes to know Chad, and Madame de Vionnet, better, his "caring" about their relation changes from an attitude of prejudiced, apprehensive concern, to one of appreciation, tempered by a few reservations, and even to a decided encouragement. It is a change that is from the first carefully orchestrated by Chad, with Madame de Vionnet behind him, and Little Bilham in front. Maria Gostrey is quickly aware of their intentions, and of Little Bilham's part in it, and she quickly shares her intuitions with the wondering Strether:

"They've got you" she portentously answered.
 "Do you mean he is -?"

“They’ve got you,” she merely repeated. Though she disclaimed the prophetic vision she was at this instant the nearest approach he had ever met to the priestess at the oracle. The light was in her eyes. “You must face it now.”
 He faced it on the spot. “They had arranged - ?”
 “Every move in the game. And they’ve been arranging ever since. He has had every day his little telegram from Cannes.”
 It made Strether open his eyes. “Do you know that?”
 “I do better. I see it.” (Ambassadors 151)

Maria’s reading and understanding of the “game”, as she puts it, is far enough ahead of Strether’s own struggling thought, at this early stage, as to make her seem quite prophetic to him. She loosely becomes Strether’s mentor, or guide, in this unfamiliar, mental Parisian territory, not only helping him read the signs more clearly, but also pushing him to “see other things” (Ambassadors 180), to think further and deeper. Fast on the heels of his encouraged discovery of the degree of Madame de Vionnet’s excellence, comes a warning of the possibility that either Strether has misjudged and overrated Chad’s character and motives, or that Chad’s transformation is not yet complete:

“He does really want to shake her off.”
 Our friend had by this time so got into the vision that he almost gasped. “After all she has done for him?”
 Miss Gostrey gave him a look that broke the next moment into a wonderful smile.
 “He’s not so good as you think!” (Ambassadors 181)

In her next meeting with Strether, Maria again raises some doubts on the validity of Strether’s conclusions, both in regard to the degree of advancement of Chad’s character, and the degree of the supposed “virtuousness” in Chad’s “attachment” to Madame de Vionnet. By her assertion that “everything’s possible” (Ambassadors 193), even in the face of Little Bilham’s claim that the relation is “virtuous”, Maria is teaching the wisdom

of caution, of a reservation of judgement, at least until more of the truth is discovered, and more of the facts are found out.

The implication that Little Bilham may have lied, and that that is what Strether is going to have to find out, fills him with the sort of dismay that he might have been expected to feel, but doesn't, when he later discovers that Little Bilham had in fact lied. It is the very admittance of such a possibility that marks a change in consciousness in Strether, and it takes place here, under the shepherding of Maria's calm mental incisiveness, rather than in the later shock of a lonely discovery on the banks of quiet river.

The same scene also marks a change in Maria's own relation with Strether. Maria has always been aware of Strether's latent capacities for understanding, what she calls his "imagination". She knows that his dependency on her, for explanations of motive and action, will diminish as his own perceptions expand. The degree of his reliance on her serves as the measure of Strether's own progress and growth and, true to form, Maria is keenly aware of each of his mental forward movements. It is with some expression of surprise, however, that she recognizes Strether's early progress, discovered in his intelligent conclusions regarding the strategy behind Chad's delaying tactics, tactics that keep him from any hard decision to return to America until, at least, the Pococks have arrived and have been afforded a view of his life in Paris:

Then he came out with the point he had wished after all most to make. "It seems to give away now his game. This is what he has been doing - keeping me along for. He has been waiting for them."

Miss Gostrey drew in her lips. "You see a good deal in it!" (Ambassadors 191)

She later confirms her agreement with Strether's deductions: "I dare say you're right, at any rate, about Mr. Newsome's little plan." (Ambassadors 192)

The change in their relation has turned in a wider arc by the time of their first meeting, after Maria's decided absence from Paris and Strether's, or more accurately Mme de Vionnet's, affairs. Strether has now reached the point of so feeling the charms of Paris, and so recognising their improvement on the character of Chad, that he finds his role with Chad reversed. It is Strether who is now, ironically, asking the young man to stay put, to "stand by" him, and so keep giving him further excuse to stay on as well. Maria recognizes his altered consciousness, and it serves her to further justify her own absence:

"My absence has helped you - as I've only to look at you to see. It was my calculation, and I'm justified. You're not where you were. And the thing," she smiled, "was for me not to be there either. You can go of yourself."
 "Oh but I feel to-day," he comfortably declared, "that I shall want you yet."
 She took him all in again. "Well I promise you not again to leave you, but it will only be to follow you. You've got your momentum and can toddle alone."
 (Ambassadors 296)

Strether has, in Maria's eyes, sufficiently struck out on his own, independent of her advice and cautions, to warrant her beginning to put aside the job she first took up for Strether, the training and encouragement of his capacity to enjoy his freedom from the strings of Woolett. She has gained sufficient confidence in Strether's development to perceive that she will no longer be needed to give him his directions, and would but take up more relaxed orders, the post of an interested observer, and merely watch out for where he goes. It is an altered relationship that Strether himself would soon recognise for himself:

He could toddle alone and the difference was extraordinary (...) the time seemed already far off when he had held out his small thirsty cup to the spout of her pail. Her pail was scarce touched now, and other fountains had flowed for him; she fell into her place as but one of his tributaries; and there was a strange sweetness - a melancholy mildness that touched him - in her acceptance of the altered order. (Ambassadors 304)

Like Osmond before her Maria is a “Europeanised” American who has celebrated her cultural transformation with an abundant possession of things, of objects, artifacts, and little treasures that have accumulated to such an extent that her flat is likened to being “as brown as a pirate’s cave”(Ambassadors 141). Her similarity to Osmond, however, stops there, in the quantity and quality of her possessions. Isabel’s first acquaintance with the interior of Osmond’s villa is to discover him, admiringly, to be a connoisseur: it is his “keynote”. His “fastidious and critical” nature has led him to be “impatient of vulgar troubles (...) to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history” (Portrait 312). While Strether also recognizes each item of Maria’s horde to have some special cultural significance, what impresses him most is not the reference to the cultural knowledge attached, but the warm sense of life that pervades her little “nest”. Maria’s possessions are a consequence of her love of a European life full of interest for her: they “represented a supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions” (Ambassadors 141).

Just as Maria has taken up each little opportunity to build the collection of objects for her nest, so she has taken Strether in, under her wing so to speak, with all the care that may be required for one of her most promising of nestlings. It is with this sense of guardianship that she makes the rather astonishing claim to Strether that he is “youth”,

even that his “particular charm” is his youth (Ambassadors 305). It is worth remembering that Strether has told Little Bilham that he should “live” all he could, make the most of his youth while he had it, and that he regretted not having done the same. Maria’s assertion, therefore, seems to throw open, even undermine Strether’s, and perhaps the reader’s, conceptions of the nature of youth. Youth, in this context, may have little to do with any actual age, but be considered more a quality of mind, an attitude. This may have been what James pondered in his reflections on the quotation from W. D. Howells. Even Strether recognizes that his earlier lamentations of having missed out on his youth are being addressed, and have been since he first met Maria:

I began to be young, or at least to have the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that’s what has been taking place ever since. I never had the benefit at the proper time (...) But nevertheless I’m making up late for what I didn’t have early. I cultivate my little benefit in my own little way. It amuses me more than anything that has happened to me in all my life. They may say what they like - it’s my surrender, it’s my tribute, to youth. (Ambassadors, 305)

The linkage of Strether’s awakening sense of youth to his arrival in Europe, and his experiences in Paris, all under the guidance of Maria, suggests that the transatlantic orders have been reversed for Strether. It is Europe that is the “New World” for Strether, a place where he has found for himself a sense of learning new things, a liberating form of progress. And it is America, especially as represented in the restrictive ideals of his familiar Woollett society, which has assumed for him the mantle of the “Old World”.

As Strether advances along the footpaths of his liberated understanding, so Maria’s own perceptions come clearer into view for him, and they draw closer together. In symbolic assent to Strether’s graduation Maria allows their roles to be reversed, affording him the

pleasure of showing her, the Parisian, some of his own particular passions for the city. At the same time he realizes that she has always known the particulars of Madame de Vionnet's relationship with Chad, and has for good reason kept it from him:

It came out for him more than ever yet that she had had from the first a knowledge she believed him not to have had, a knowledge the sharp acquisition of which might be destined to make a difference for him. The difference for him might not inconceivably be an arrest of his independence and a change in his attitude - in other words a revulsion in favour of the principles of Woollett. She had really prefigured the possibility of a shock that would send him swinging back to Woollett. (Ambassadors 490)

Maria's unerring sense of just where Strether's consciousness is, and where it will yet come out, would suggest that an early disclosure might indeed have knocked Strether back over the Atlantic. And yet Maria may have well erred on the side of caution, considering that Strether's unforeseen discovery had none of the feared consequences on him. Such a small erring on her part might have sprung from the growing degree of her personal interest in Strether. She hadn't wanted to lose him before his consciousness had fully ripened, even to the point where the calculations of his thoughts and judgements would do a full justice to his latent capacities to understand, before, in fact, he had "come out".

When he does so, in the last scene of the novel, it is, with all the grace and delicateness of her sense of the new level of Strether's consciousness, that Maria offers him her greatest compliment. She refers to her house, which he has just described as "a haunt of ancient peace" (Ambassadors 507), as a place he could treat "as a haven of rest" (Ambassadors 508).

The full meaning of Maria's offer is only grasped by Strether after an implied comparison with the possibilities of the future for him in Woollett :

He took a moment to say, for, really and truly, what stood about him there in her offer - which was as the offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days - might well have tempted. It built him softly round, it roofed him warmly over, it rested, all so firm, on selection. And what ruled selection was beauty and knowledge. It was awkward, it was almost stupid, not to seem to prize such things; yet, none the less, so far as they made his opportunity they made it only for a moment. She'd moreover understand - she always understood. (Ambassadors 511)

These last reflections of Strether show how far he has, indeed, "come out". Maria would treasure his companionship with same warm sense of approbation she bestows on her own beloved collection of "objets". To be so selected by Maria, a paragon of "knowledge and beauty" for Strether, is quite a pinnacle of praise for him. He is, though, still sure-footed enough in his own motivations to steer past the temptations thus offered. His desire to do right is now equalled by his knowledge of what is right, and his departure for Woollett appears to satisfy that. His decision is the only one that would be consistent with what has guided his deliberations and decisions throughout the affair of his ambassadorship - the principle of acting in the best interests of other parties concerned, and not his own. Should he have stayed with Maria that principle would have been obscured, hidden from the general view, and especially from those who would have had most to learn and gain, his erstwhile friends from Woollett.

Both Maria Gostrey and Strether are well aware that the changes wrought in him would make "a great difference" (Ambassadors 511) to his relations with his acquaintance in the

society of Woollett, to the point of restructuring his whole position in it. He has cut his strings, his tethers, and that means he is now quite an independent and unknown quantity. It must have been much the same for James who, on his returns to America, would have felt himself, under the guiding influence of his experiences in Europe, grown outside the general atmospheres of a New England consciousness.

2.3 The Influence of Paris

The marked changes in Strether go unappreciated, as they had in Chad, through the Woollett consciousnesses, through Waymarsh, the POCOcks (excepting Mamie) and, at least so far as we may guess, through Mrs. Newsome. It was those very changes perceived in Chad, however, that alerted Strether himself to something remarkable in Paris, and which began to deflect, and ultimately undermine his ambassadorial charge. Strether's encounters with Little Bilham, with Chad, and especially with Madame de Vionnet, even with the fabric of Paris itself (and the society that turns within it), together with his recurrent recourses to Maria Gostrey for her illuminating commentary, have all contributed towards a yeast that begins to work changes in Strether's consciousness.

A significant element to this yeast is the atmosphere of a location, a "sense of place", which works its own meaning and identity into the consciousness. For a city this involves a sense of history, cultural ideas, the mix of spatial attributes, the forms, shapes, structure and grain. During his amble around Chester with Maria, for instance, Strether is impressed with some particular features, all the more distinctive for his New England background:

The tortuous wall - girdle, long since snapped, of the little swollen city, half held in place by careful civic hands - wanders in narrow file between parapets smoothed by peaceful generations, pausing here and there for a dismantled gate or a bridged gap, with rises and drops, steps up and steps down, queer twists, queer contacts, peeps into homely streets and under the brows of gables, views of cathedral tower and waterside fields, of huddled English town and ordered English countryside. Too deep almost for words was the delight of these things for Strether. (Ambassadors 64)

The impression is of a preserved but living intricacy, a city organically grown, bending to meet the needs of change, still managing to fit tightly, but neatly, in place. With each twist speaking a new line of history, it is easy to understand the attractiveness of the scene to a curious and attentive American, such as Strether, or James for that matter. American cities are more or less built according to plan, often by way of the Dutch design, the grid, and of course have relatively few turns of history to record. To live in this European form of city is to live in a cultural, spatial and physical environment of far greater variety and complexity than its North American counterpart. It might be expected that these particularly enhanced qualities belonging to the “sense of place” would be reflected in the thoughts and feelings of its inhabitants.

The same form of organic growth, with concomitant high densities of population, a thorough mix of structure and activities, and a fine urban grain, built the inner core of Paris. What marks it out from many other intense European cities are the grand architectural statements carved out, and through, the closely knitted urban fabric. These wide boulevards, circles, parks and palaces are all spatially imprinted in a geometric design that speaks primarily of radiation. The boulevards radiate from circles, such as L’Etoile, which are usually crowned with some monumental feature. Direct lines of sight pass down the boulevards and bisect the monuments, gardens and palaces. Combining with the shining waters of the Seine the net effect is the resplendent “City of Light”, where the brightness of nature combines with a vibrancy of urban activity. It is a city where the illuminations of art and intellect, so evident in the monuments, museums, galleries and schools, encourage a brightness of display, a resplendence of show, both in

character and appearance, and it is to this that Miss Barrace later refers Strether, in the garden of Gloriani:

“I dare say moreover,” she pursued with an interested gravity, “that I do, that we all do here, run too much to mere eye. But how can it be helped? We’re all looking at each other - and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That’s what the light of Paris seems always to know. It’s the fault of the light of Paris - dear old light!”

“Dear old Paris!” Little Bilham echoed.

“Everything, every one shows,” Miss Barrace went on.

“But for what they really are?” Strether asked.

“Oh I like your Boston “reallys”! But sometimes - yes.” (*Ambassadors* 207)

This is the atmosphere that James would have encountered and loved when he visited and lived in Paris, and which Strether soon experiences, on one of his first strolls in the city:

He came down the Rue de la Paix in the sun and, passing across Tuileries and the river, indulged more than once - as if on finding himself determined - in a sudden pause before the book-stalls of the opposite quay. In the garden of the Tuileries he had lingered, on two or three spots, to look; it was if the wonderful Paris spring had stayed him as he roamed. The prompt Paris morning struck its cheerful notes (...) He watched little brisk figures, figures whose movement was as the tick of the great Paris clock, take their smooth diagonal from point to point; the air had a taste as of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef. (*Ambassadors* 111)

The quick play and settlement of this atmosphere into Strether’s consciousness soon raises possibilities, forewarnings, of the possible capture of his imagination, and a subsequent derailment of his ambassadorship:

His greatest uneasiness seemed to peep at him out of the imminent impression that almost any acceptance of Paris might give one’s authority away. It hung before him this morning, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences to be comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next. It was a place of which, unmistakably, Chad was fond; wherefore if he, Strether,

should like it too much, what on earth, with such a bond, would become of either of them? (Ambassadors 119)

That such a bond might well form becomes quite evident soon enough. Strether finds Chad's third-story flat on the Boulevard Malesherbes quite admirable, having fine architectural qualities in design and complexion; his whole impression of it is as "neither more nor less than a case of distinction" (Ambassadors 124). He describes it later to Waymarsh as "a charming place; full of beautiful and valuable things" (Ambassadors 133). He is also pleased by its resident, Little Bilham, who wears the temporary mantle of being Chad's own representative, or ambassador of sorts, and who he first observes as being "light bright and alert- with an air too pleasant to have been arrived at by patching" (Ambassadors 124). When inside the "troisieme", and "with his legs under Chad's mahogany", the atmosphere of the city still reaches him "with the great hum of Paris coming up in softness, vagueness - for Strether himself indeed already positive sweetness - through the sunny windows" (Ambassadors 136).

When Strether finally meets Chad he finds him quite extraordinarily changed from the youth that he remembered. He has become a more discriminating and perceptive young man, his consciousness reflecting the qualities of Paris. It is a change, as Strether later finds out, that is wholly owing to Chad's relationship, in the context of Paris, with the gracious Madame de Vionnet.

2.4 The New Views of Chad

Strether's first acquaintances with little Bilham, as his first "specimen" of the young American resident of Paris, and with the greatly altered Chad, have a significant and perplexing impact on him, quite throwing his Woollett preconceptions of what they might have been. He finds little Bilham has an "amazing serenity" that graces his "beautiful intelligence and confirmed habit of Paris" (Ambassadors 146). His first New England suspicions are that it is all a deception: "the trail of the serpent, the corruption, as he might have said, of Europe" (Ambassadors 146). With the aid, however, of his further acquaintance with little Bilham, his poor rooms in the Latin Quarter, and his "ingenious" companions, Strether is brought round to Maria's quick and perceptive view of him: "unspoilt", the perfect example of "the happy attitude", retaining a "state of faith" and "sense of beauty" (Ambassadors 150).

The appearance of Chad, meanwhile, has even more of an impact on Strether:

The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance. It had faced every contingency but that Chad should not be Chad, and this was what it now had to face with a mere strained smile and an uncomfortable flush. (Ambassadors 154)

Far from being the rough, "wild and bold" youth Strether had known in Woollett, Chad is now a much "older" young man, his hair refined with streaks of grey, his behaviour towards Strether showing from the start impeccable taste and manners. He is described, at each turn, as being patient, modestly benevolent, receptive, gracefully quiet,

handsomer, smooth, even having “a way that was wonderful” (Ambassadors 156).

Strether makes out that Chad has been smoothed, that he has been “made over (...) (which) was perhaps a speciality of Paris” (Ambassadors 165), and the effect is

that it had given him a form and a surface, almost a design, it had toned his voice, established his accent, encouraged his smile to more play and his other motions to less. He had formerly, with a great deal of action, expressed very little; and he now expressed whatever was necessary with almost none at all. It was if in short he had really, copious perhaps but shapeless, been put into a firm mould and turned successfully out. (Ambassadors 167)

Strether hovers between accepting this outward view of Chad, that he has been turned rather wonderfully into a gentleman, and alternative brief illuminations that he may in fact be, after all, “an irreducible young pagan” (Ambassadors 170). The prospect glimpsed in the latter is of a youth having discovered, and making strategic use of, a freedom in not subscribing to a definite moral and spiritual authority, with no particular commitment to consequent guiding principles.

Strether’s clarity on the matter is not helped by Chad’s own rebuke of the “horrors”, the rather ugly pre-conceptions, that Woollett, and by implication Chad’s mother, and even Strether himself, had of him. This particular note resonates for Strether. It subsequently forms a significant element to his self-justification, his excuse for a gathering policy in favour of according Chad, and by implication his as yet only presumed attachment, the assumption of an innocence until, and unless, proved otherwise.

Strether's own experience of Paris, and Chad's acquaintance there, provide him few barbs to attach to the Woollett judgements. On the contrary he finds the evenings in Chad's *troisieme* both civilised and stimulating:

Nothing, Strether had to recognise as he leaned back and smoked, could well less resemble a scene of violence than even the liveliest of these occasions. They were occasions of discussion, none the less, and Strether had never in his life heard so many opinions on so many subjects. There were opinions at Woollett, but only on three or four. The differences were there to match; if they were doubtless deep, though few, they were quiet - they were, as might be said, almost as shy as if people had been ashamed of them. People showed little diffidence about such things, on the other hand, in the Boulevard Malesherbes, and were so far from being ashamed of them - or indeed of anything else, that they often seemed to have invented them to avert those agreements that destroy the taste of talk. (*Ambassadors* 182)

In comparison to the range and vitality of Parisian conversation Woollett's, and by extension New England's, appears quite arid and stilted, limited by a reserve founded on a desire for acceptability, an impulse towards conformity, itself the hallmark of a lack of self-confidence that characterizes provincialism. The implication is that this difference, the altogether finer quality of conversation found in the soirees of European cities, is what James himself found, and made use of, and hence his notoriously unquenchable thirst for the dinners of London society.

The case of Chad's character is further mystified for Strether by Little Bilham's apparently contradictory responses to Strether's pursuit of an understanding of the matter. On the one hand Little Bilham casts some doubt over the firmness of Chad's new, improved character, thus rather vaguely siding with the "pagan" perspective:

“I’m not sure he was really meant by nature to be quite so good. It’s like the new edition of an old book that one has been fond of - revised and amended, brought up to date, but not quite the thing one knew and loved (...) I believe he really wants to go back and take up a career (...) You see he’s not happy (...) He isn’t used, you see,” the young man explained in his lucid way, “to being so good.” (Ambassadors 185)

On the other hand he then confirms, after Strether has eagerly pounced on the adjective, the description of Chad as being “good”, and follows this up with the characterization of Chad’s “attachment”, the ongoing cause of Chad’s detention in Paris, as being virtuous. The problem for Strether is that, while for all intents and purposes Little Bilham’s perspective of Chad’s relationship with Madame de Vionnet is that it is, in fact, virtuous, for Strether, had he known the facts, it would not be. They each attach, in other words, a different meaning to the word “virtuous”. For Little Bilham the attachment is virtuous because it is having an enormously good effect on Chad, making him an altogether recognizably better man. Strether is looking at the more formal understanding of the word - an attachment that could openly be considered proper in the eyes of official moral authority, which in his case would be New England public, and generally puritanical, sentiment.

Strether assumes Little Bilham’s interpretation of “virtuous” to be the same as his own, and is satisfied with that conclusion, at least “for the next few days”. It is, however, Strether’s perception of Madame de Vionnet, the architect of Chad’s apparent transformation, which leads him to further plump for the rosier view of Chad. It is a perception that Chad himself appears completely confident will turn out favourably for

Madame de Vionnet, and therefore for his own relation with her, something that he appears quite ready to reveal to Strether in order to draw him in:

“All I ask of you is to let her talk to you. You’ve asked me about what you call my hitch, and so far as it goes she’ll explain it to you. She’s herself my hitch, hang it - if you really must have it all out (...) I owe her so much.” (Ambassadors 228)

2.5 Madame de Vionnet: La “Femme du Monde”

Strether’s first impressions of Madame de Vionnet have already been favourable. Miss Barrace has described Madame de Vionnet, by the illuminating light of Paris reflected through Gloriani’s garden, in glowing terms: “She’s charming. She’s perfect (...) She’s wonderful” (*Ambassadors* 207). When Strether first meets her he also can find only fair terms for her. He describes her as youthful, simple, gentle, obliging and kind, slim and natural (*Ambassadors* 210). What had first struck him most was how normal she seemed, how she would appear to fit into even Woollett society, how he could feel what he terms her “common humanity” (*Ambassadors* 212). When he visits her flat, described as the first floor of an old house and courtyard, he finds the rooms filled with what he deduces are her heirlooms, all sorts of “ornaments and relics” that lend a kind of ancient dignity to the place. He describes the atmosphere as having an “air of supreme respectability, the consciousness, small, still, reserved, but none the less distinct and diffused, of private honour” (*Ambassadors* 237).

It is soon clear why Chad has such confidence in Madame de Vionnet. She quickly puts out an appeal to Strether, and turns their first interview together into the relation that hooks him, and ultimately draws him in on her side:

She was the poor lady for Strether now because clearly she had some trouble, and her appeal to him could only mean that her trouble was deep. He couldn’t help it; it wasn’t his fault; he had done nothing; but by a turn of the hand she had somehow made their encounter a relation. (*Ambassadors* 239)

By allowing a relation to develop with Madame de Vionnet, albeit with so little calculation or premeditation on his part, Strether effectively lets go of his mission, his ambassadorship, leaving it to sink under the increasing rise of his own opinion of her character, nature, and above all graceful image she presents to the world. She is to be for him "one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met," teaching him, by her "very presence, look, voice (...) (that) the world was wide, each day was more and more a lesson" (Ambassadors 242). His impressions of her take on some quite superlative tones:

He could have compared her to a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist high in the summer surge. Above all she suggested to him the reflexion that the femme du monde - in these finest developments of the type - was, like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold. She had aspects, characters, days, nights - or had them at least, showed them by a mysterious law of her own, when in addition to everything she happened also to be a woman of genius. (Ambassadors 256)

Madame de Vionnet's appeal to Strether is, in his own words, for him to "save her", just as one might "save" the mythical maiden in distress. It is not a request that Strether, at first, fully understands, but appears to be for him, at least, to stand by his perceptions, and give his honest account of her and Chad, and most importantly what it appears she has done for Chad, to Mrs. Newsome. She discreetly leads Strether at least twice to that point: that she has "been good for him" (Ambassadors 244), and, in the second instance, Strether himself admits to her: "You've made of him what I see, but what I don't see is how in the world you've done it" (Ambassadors 259).

It is, finally, in conversation with Little Bilham that Strether shows his measure of what Madame de Vionnet has done for Chad, and it is a measure of considerable magnitude. She has, in his opinion, “saved him”, and he explains just what he means by that:

“I’m speaking - in connection with her - of his manners and morals, his character and life. I’m speaking of him as a person to deal with and talk with and live with - speaking of him as a social animal.” (Ambassadors 265)

With such a view it is not, then, surprising that Strether now signals the complete surrender of the original purpose of his ambassadorship, even suggesting that he now believed the opposite course should hold:

Then he threw off as with an extravagance of which he was conscious: “Let them face the future together!”
 Little Bilham looked at him indeed. “You mean that after all he shouldn’t go back?”
 “I mean that if he gives her up -!”
 “Yes?”
 “Well, he ought to be ashamed of himself.” (Ambassadors 268)

Strether soon finds some further justification for his change of thought: “the stand he had privately taken about her connection with Chad” (Ambassadors 276). While quite unaware of her identity Strether observes Madame de Vionnet in the Notre Dame, and imagines that she is

renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly-protected meditation (...) with a discernible faith in herself, a kind of implied conviction of consistency, security, impunity. (Ambassadors 274)

His subsequent discovery of the identity of this “heroine of an old story” leads him to conclude that the connection must be “unassailably innocent” (*Ambassadors* 276), a conclusion that may be a result of religious bigotry:

Edwin Fussell has referred to as the "Protestant prejudice," which leads Strether to misunderstand Marie de Vionnet's "presence in church," along the following lines: since she is a Catholic "she must be innocent because sinners don't go near churches, they take right hold of themselves and amend their lives". (Meissner 61)

Strether’s conclusions in respect of Madame de Vionnet’s character ultimately precipitate what he calls “the smash”, his capitulation to her side:

- he could only give himself up. This was what he had done in privately deciding then and there to propose she should breakfast with him. What did the success of his proposal in fact resemble but the smash in which a regular runaway properly ends? The smash was their walk, their dejeuner, their omelette, the Chablis, the place, the view, their present talk and his present pleasure in it - to say nothing, wonder of wonders, of her own. To this tune and nothing less, accordingly, was his surrender made good. (*Ambassadors* 279)

Of most significance to Strether is the apparent pleasure that Madame de Vionnet has in his own company and conversation. It signifies to him that he has been able to reach over the wide Atlantic cultural floor and entertain the interest of this wonderful paragon of the European “femme du monde”. He has, of course, misread Madame de Vionnet’s presence in the Notre Dame, and his consequent moral interpretations mislead him. He has, to some extent, followed Isabel’s example, in her case in respect of her judgement of Osmond’s character, and has allowed his imagination to find too much in appearances, to make up the facts, and so cloud his judgement.

It will take the most unlikely of coincidental meetings to open his eyes to the real nature of Chad and Madame de Vionnet's relation. Yet, however unlikely, a violent exposure of the truth becomes inevitable, one way or another, just as it has for Isabel. The sudden exposure won't, however, substantially alter either Isabel's, or Strether's, consciousness, nor their respective courses, but it will precipitate and harden the developing trends of each. Isabel is already aware of the abyss between her and her husband: his exposure has served to enlighten her, complete the jigsaw, and has enabled her to act.

Strether has been afforded the space to reflect on his case, and adjust to it, in his hotel, just as Isabel has in the train to England. He perceives that "there had been simply a lie in the charming affair" (Ambassadors 466), while "he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing" (Ambassadors 468). His attitude to this lie, however, is now quite changed from what it would have been at an earlier stage in his development, when he might have been frightened off, back into the Woollett fold. His thoughts, now, are filled with little condemnation. If anything he is admiring, almost appreciative, of how well Madame de Vionnet, and even Little Bilham, carry the lie. He reflects "that their eminent 'lie', Chad's and hers, was simply after all such an inevitable tribute to good taste as he couldn't have wished them not to render" (Ambassadors 477). He tells Maria that he considered Little Bilham to have lied like a gentleman:

"Well", said Strether, "it was but a technical lie - he classed the attachment as virtuous. That was a view for which there was much to be said - and the virtue came out for me hugely". (Ambassadors 493)

Despite Strether's tolerant view, the deception inherent in Chad's relationship with Madame de Vionnet reflects a certain falsity, a critical flaw, in the relation, and Strether's indulgence of it may have been partly derived from his recognition of the pain it must have caused.

Even before he had turned to face up, full square, to the lie he had so accidentally revealed, Strether had already realised the extent his own journey into Europe and Paris had changed him. Alone, searching for Chad and drifting through the balcony and rooms of his flat, he

tried to recover the impression that they had made on him three months before, to catch again the voice in which they had seemed then to speak to him. That voice, he had to note, failed audibly to sound; which he took as the proof of all the change in himself. He had heard, of old, only what he could then hear; what he could do now was to think of three months ago as a point in the far past.
(Ambassadors 426)

Only a mental transformation could so stretch out the span of time. Even Madame de Vionnet hasn't realised how far Strether has come, and where, as he discusses with Maria, he has come out. She recognizes, as she tells him, the impact she has had on him: "I've made a change in your life, I know I have; I've upset everything in your mind as well" (Ambassadors 480).

What Madame de Vionnet hadn't counted on was how much Strether understood, and was prepared to help ameliorate, the root of her grief, the cause of her underlying insecurity, what had most probably rested on her mind and lips as she sat importunately in the Notre Dame. Strether had realised that Chad was, after all, an "irreducible young pagan", and that Madame de Vionnet had known it, and that she would, after all,

inevitably lose him. All Strether's sympathies were now for her, and his efforts would be on her behalf, to the point of telling Chad: "You'll be a brute, you know - you'll be guilty of the last infamy - if you ever forsake her" (Ambassadors 499); and he follows this up in similar vein:

"It's not a question of advising you not to go," Strether said, "but of absolutely preventing you, if possible, from so much as thinking of it. Let me appeal to you by all that is sacred ... You'd not only be, as I say, a brute; you'd be (...) a criminal of the deepest dye." (Ambassadors 501)

Despite Chad's protests to the contrary, Strether's appeal has not been unfair. He is quite aware that Chad appears to be headed, as Little Bilham first suggested, to ignore the demands of principle, take up business and his inheritance, and to abandon Madame de Vionnet. Typical to Jamesian tradition, however, the outcome is not spelt out. The lack of closure keeps the plot alive and, as with Portrait, the narrative open to the individual reader's own imagination and interpretation.

CONCLUSION

What has become clear by the end of Ambassadors is that, in Maria Gostrey's words, Strether has "come out", the process of development of his consciousness having reached a sufficient level to enable him to pause and reflect on just where he (mentally) is. It is with this reflection that the novel concludes: "Then there we are!" (Ambassadors 512). What is important for reader is that the process has been understood. Colin Meissner notes that

reading Strether's developing sense of self and his conception of what has happened and is happening both in Paris and in Woollett as a series of permutations allows us perhaps a more clear picture of the whole process of understanding as it functions in James's hermeneutics. (43)

If that process has been understood then the reader will be where Strether now is. The reader has, therefore, been involved in a process of learning. The question, however, remains, at the end of the novel, as to what Strether, like Isabel Archer before him, will now do. As is the case with the Portrait, where the reader can only be certain, at the end, of Isabel Archer's preliminary intention to return to Rome and Osmond, the only definite probability at the end of Ambassadors is that Strether intends to return to Woollett. His decision is the more readily acceptable when the alternatives are opened up. Should Strether have elected to stay in Paris he would have, at the least, been open to the same sort of accusation he had levelled at Chad, of profiteering at the expense of others. By his return to Woollett he gains nothing, neither security nor companionship. What he has gained, of course, has been the sort of mental development that no amount of wealth can purchase. Elizabeth Dalton makes the point that

Strether has made the familiar Jamesian bargain, acquiring a more developed consciousness - "wonderful impressions" - at the cost of material and sexual advantage. But like all the great decisions in life, this one is not entirely conscious and voluntary. He cannot do otherwise than he does. Strether has wanted to understand, above all to see. (468)

It has been these motivational forces: "to see", "to understand", and above all to "do well", that have driven both Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether to find their own directions, and have ultimately impelled them to escape the restricting expectations of others. As Van Slyck noted(557), Strether particularly struggled with the definition of his identity imposed on him by his past, by the conceptions of Woollett society. Both he, and Isabel Archer, have had to throw off the constructions that others have made for them, designs that were at least convincing, and sometimes powerfully attractive. The struggle to do so has been their adventure, and it has been one that has involved both courage, and the desire to learn.

James had, of course, given them a particularly fertile ground in which to construct their own identities: the transatlantic influence, the celebrated "international theme". It is a ground that he had experienced for himself, had trodden well, and had learned from and benefited thereby. The relations that Isabel and Strether encounter in this new context are, consequently and necessarily, more challenging for them to deal with, but their efforts to do so are the more rewarding.

James does not leave them alone in their encounter. Isabel has the help of Ralph Touchett, and Strether has Maria Gostrey. Yet while they have had help from these different quarters, their decisions have had to be their own, and they have been ready to,

and indeed have, suffered the consequences. Jeanne Dapkus, in her article referring to Jane Campion's film of Portrait, notes how Isabel, within her "Victorian" restraints, self-actualizes through a series of choices (177).

Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether have had to find the courage to make those choices, and recognise when they have appeared to make some mistakes along the way. At the same time they have mentally progressed, matured and strengthened, and have discovered important things about life, and about themselves.

In the end we are therefore left with two characters whose progress has been convincing, and whose identities have turned out to be both realistic and admirable. James has constructed identities whose place will remain secure in the "house of fiction".

NOTES

1. The Portrait of a Lady hereafter abbreviated to Portrait.
2. The Ambassadors hereafter abbreviated to Ambassadors.
3. The Complete Notebooks of Henry James hereafter referred to as Notebooks.

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