

THE AMBASSADORS: A NEW VIEW *

The human mind cannot
comprehend Henry James.

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The second of James's major novels in this period, *The Ambassadors* of 1903, was also, in its own way, an amplification on the theme of the wasted life. The book had a curious publishing history. Rejected by *Harper's* magazine as a serial, then taken by the *North American Review* and by Harper and Brothers, it was so long in coming out as a novel that James completed and published *The Wings of the Dove* a year earlier. Moreover, in both the original American edition of the book and in the definitive Scribner New York edition of James's work, which James himself revised and edited, the 28th and 29th chapters of the novel were in reverse order. The discovery of this error was made by an American scholar, Robert Young, in 1950; the official bibliographers of James, Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, have formulated various theories to explain the Master's nod. « James seems never to have discovered the error », we are told, but perhaps he was so irritated at the delay of the Harper edition that he never looked at the book. In the New York edition, with the famous Prefaces by this master craftsman, James himself stated that his revisions were reduced to nothing « in the presence of the altogether better literary manners of *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* ». These chapters were renumbered as the opening two sections of Book Eleven in the New York edition, which contributed to the confusion. In the author's version they contain an evening scene and a throw-back to the afternoon before;

* A Selection from a forthcoming book, *The Remarkable Case of Henry James*.

and the original Harper editor, perhaps confused by the Jamesian method, returned them to their chronological order.

It is an interesting commentary on this novel, however, that the reversal of these chapters is not really noticeable and hardly affects the story's development. The final « scenario » of *The Ambassadors* also, as James transcribed it in his Notebooks, was wordy, pretentious and rather dull; perhaps *Harper's* turned it down with good reason. The « germ » of the « little nouvelle », which James again transposed into his usual two volumes and 600 pages, lay in Howells' attributed remarks to Jonathan Sturges in Paris. « 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... This place makes it all come over me... I haven't done so — and now I'm old... You have time. You are young. Live! ». This was of course James's own later mood, as well as Howells'; just as it became a central theme — the living of life or « the lost life » — in the work of the American realists during the following decades.

« I amplify and improve a little » — James said about the Howellsian quotation in the Notebooks — just as he always, in his own mind, appeared to amplify and improve a little on Howells' literary mork in general. « At any rate », he added, « 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 organization 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 ». This was a typically later Jamesian statement — but what in the world have « sensations, passions, impulses, pleasures » really got to do with « some great human spectacles, » some great organization for the Immediate and the Agreeable? What then did James really mean by sensations, passions; and pleasure? « He has never really enjoyed », he said about the prospective hero of *The Ambassadors*, « 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 ». Was this also a Jamesian self-portrait, all apparently unknowingly here; just as it may remind us of the later novelist Thomas Mann's description of the stricken hero of *Death in Venice*: the elderly Aschenbach who did indeed surrender himself to « sensations », and was destroyed by them.

But James hastened to qualify his own outline of the hero in the Notebooks. « I don't see him as having battled with his passions — I don't see him as harassed by his temperament or as having, in the past, suspected, very much, what he was losing, what he was not doing ». That was the point, and — « The alternative wasn't present to him. He may be an American ». That was the reason, obviously, still, for an American, there was no possibility even for a *choice* of the sensations and passions, of pleasure or enjoyment; and James went on to show why. « He has married very young, and austere. Happily enough, but charmlessly, and oh, so conscientiously: a wife replete with the New England conscience ». Were there *no* New England wives who suffered, so to speak, a temporary remission of the New England conscience — even with their husbands? Late as early in his work, James could not really vary from his fixed, rigid, aversion to — his infantine and literary fancy of — the New England spirit. At the conclusion of this preliminary profile of *The Ambassadors'* elderly hero there was the familiar Jamesian « solution » to this central human problem. « It is too late, too late now, for *him* to live — but what stirs in him with a dumb passion of desire, of I don't know what, is the sense that he may have a little super-sensual hour in the vicarious freedom of another. His little drama is the administration of the touch that contributes to — that prolongs — that freedom ».

This dumb passion, this desire for « I don't know what », this little super-sensual hour — and how James hovered around such terms! — concludes only with the vicarious freedom of another. Was a man of 55 really too old to live? — or was

it simply impossible for any Jamesian hero, at any age, to live the life of sensations and passions except through some grand organization for the Immediate and Enjoyable — whatever that may mean. If England had disappointed James, and he had changed the scene of his illusion to Paris in *The Ambassadors*, « life » still meant Europe to him, for the constricted American temperament. And « Europe » meant a general sociability rather than any direct, personal, achieved human experience.

And was *The Ambassadors*, as James confidently reported in his later preface, quite « the best, 'all round', of my productions? » We shall come to his own reasons, but meanwhile it is certain that the later Jacobite critics all more or less followed the Master's tip, as well as his nod.

In this group of critics, it was the Harvard professor F.O. Matthiessen who was largely responsible for the revival of « the later James », and whose essay on *The Ambassadors*, in particular, in *Henry James: The Major Phase*, set the tone for the received opinion on the novel. Working in the early 1950s from the yet-unpublished material in James's Notebooks, all of which Matthiessen accepted quite literally in the first glow of a literary « discovery », this critic solemnly praised the scenario-laden « dramatic method » of James which we have already described. He accepted it all without qualms, and without qualifications. He even took over the late euphoric tone of James himself in celebrating these great technical « discoveries ». « After the strained virtuosity of *The Awkward Age* and *The Sacred Fount*, James expanded into a theme that was both opulent and robust ». But these two earlier novels which Matthiessen dismissed here were particularly interesting, as we know, and the « opulent, robust » *Ambassadors* was at least partly a return on James's side to the old-fashioned, sentimental, popular Victorian serial.

The Major Phase paid tribute to the novel's « roundness of structure », its « architectural competence », and its long-delayed, familiar Jamesian strip-tease introduction to the « major

characters » — if they can be really called that. This was narrative-suspense, said Matthiessen solemnly, and he went on to even more peculiar critical judgments. « The portrait of the Pococks... is one of James' triumphs in light-handed satire, in the manner he had mastered in *Daisy Miller* and had developed further in that lesser known but delightful *jeu d'esprit*, *The Reverberator* » The Pococks we shall come to shortly; but the long short story. « The Reverberator », is surely one of the poorest, dullest and most contrived of all James's fictions. How far really can you go in this vein of Jamesian « criticism? » Such a statement, from a critic of Matthiessen's calibre, would be impossible to make except under the influence of some mad enchantment — some bewitchment, some literary love-potion. But more — « The eleventh book rises to the most effective climax of all, Strether's glimpse of Chad and Madame de Vionnet together on the river, and his long-delayed perception of their real relationship ». How can a climax reside in a « glimpse? » And wouldn't even a Boston literary man (such as Howells was presumed to be) have surmised that « longdelayed perception » of Chad and his mistress?

In the novel Strether has been sent to Paris precisely to find out *what* this relationship is. If he doesn't already guess the truth, he is deliberately self-deceived. (The point is that here, as in *The Wings of the Dove*, James *makes* him obtuse for the sake of his plot, for that elaborate, artificial, portentous « narrative suspense »). And while we are at it, why does Matthiessen stress Madame *de* Vionnet; why not Vionnet? But this critic is again overcome — that is really the word — by the Jamesian technique; by the use of Strether as « a center of consciousness ». « What Strether *sees* is the entire content, and James thus perfected a device both for framing and for interpreting experience ». Thus *The Ambassadors*, said Matthiessen, was noted for its large unity, for « a heightened singleness of vision », and it was indeed « the most skillfully planned novel ever written ». Now after such extravagant praise, one can hardly bring oneself to inquire just what is it,

after all, that Strether *does* see, (except two lovers sitting in a row-boat), or what *kind* of experience is it that James is framing and interpreting in his celebrated centers of consciousness?

Is the « most skillfully planned novel ever written » of the same order as that plot-melodrama which regulated and controlled, which manipulated and handled every character in *The Wings of the Dove*? Well, Matthiessen went on to state that « there is a vast difference between James' method and that of the novels of 'the stream of consciousness'. That phrase was used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*, but in his brother's novels there is none of the welling up of the darkly subconscious life that has characterised the novel since Freud. James' novels are strictly novels of intelligence rather than of full consciousness; and in commenting on the focus of attention that he had achieved through Strether, he warned against 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation' » A remarkable and illuminating critical passage! Is *that* the real virtue of Henry James? which might otherwise be considered the barrier which separates James off from the moderns, and marks him so clearly as among the last of the Victorian artists. We have already noticed too, particularly in the novels which Matthiessen scorned, just how much of that « darkly subconscious life » did in fact well up even in the work of James — as it must in any major talent — even when the writer himself was unconscious, or at best half-conscious, of its true meaning. This strain of James's work, indeed, is just what gives it the interest that it does have — that « terrible fluidity of self-revelation » which is so fascinating and revealing in the work of this writer when it does not simply mean that James is talking endlessly about James.

With this singular critical statement, Matthiessen established himself as the first of the non- or rather anti-psychological critics who embraced James deliberately as a rational and conscious artist, and who were then forced to ignore the « pre-logical », or the *true* psychological bases of his work. Thus *The Major Phase* stressed the « trained eye » of James in *The Ambassadors*, while it completely ignored the deep, compulsive

voyeuristic patterns in James's temperament which created such a large part — that « seeing » and « knowing » about life, rather than living and sharing! — of his esoteric « technique ». As to the rest of the Jamesian critics who followed both James's and Matthiessen's statement that *The Ambassadors* was quite frankly the best, « all round », of the later novels, haven't they found it equally difficult to justify their praise in critical terms? And wasn't this because the novel was at best a rather charming light social comedy on the familiar international theme; and at worst a rather silly or improbable romance based on the idea that a « French » love affair can educate and improve a man beyond all the possibilities of provincial American culture?

But to what lengths now did James go in his « method » of « redoing » the old-fashioned popular travel romances of his youth. This perhaps, rather than the somewhat implausible theme, or the generally weaker cast of characters in *The Ambassadors*, and the long-delayed and inadequate action, is the novel's real interest.

The « aging » Strether, (who is merely middle-aged) is a rather weak and unconvincing hero (who could hardly have been flattering to the « provincial » and « innocent » Howells), if at times he is a sympathetic one. James was also trying to prove, rather absurdly, that the French love affair of Chad's was not a carnal but a spiritual one — a liason of « virtue » rather than desire. But how the international fantasy still persisted in James's imagination; how this illusion only needed a change of place, rather than of values, or understanding, to flourish again! « Mr. Waymarsh of Milrose Connecticut » — and now James also dispensed with the conventional comma between place names; while his later style fluctuated rather wildly between the « disappearing comma », so to speak, and the omnipresent comma — was again the taciturn « Yankee lawyer » who is Strether's foil; just as Maria Gostrey is his confidant or a Jamesian « ficelle ». Like the Longdon of *the Awkward Age*, Strether carries his « eternal nippers » through the narrative (as a stage prop of vision); and the « sacred rage »

of the obtuse Waymarsh is scattered through the novel. The later James was becoming a little careless (perhaps through the habit of dictation) about the use of his favorite literary tags and tricks.

The names are still revealing, however. « Way-marsh » is obviously stuck in the morass of provincial American society. Maria « Gostrey » is primarily a gossip, very much so. Strether is « stretching » for new horizons, or a new « breath » of life; perhaps he is also at the end of his own native tether. The humorous view of New England culture, rather charmingly done, to be sure, is also a reversion to the tone, say, of *The American*. The portrait of Mrs. Newsome, whose chief merit technically is that she never appears at all, directly, in the novel — an esthetic extension of the very late appearance of Chad and Madame Vionnet; or of the literary veil cast over the dying Milly Theale is that, again, of the neurotic, semi-invalided, dominating and puritanical American « mother ». This concept also dated back to the 1860's or '70's, when Howells too was describing these idle upper-class American women. But by the 1900's, Howells was well in the midst of his radical American critique of the new fortunes, and of the titans of finance who had supplanted the Boston bluestockings, and who often took quite a different view of womankind.

But not so in *The Ambassadors*. « Is there a business? » Maria asks Strether all innocently about Chad Newsome's family background. « Lord, yes — a big brave bouncing business. A roaring trade », says the New England editor. « A great shop? » Maria asks again. « Yes, — a workshop; a great production, a great industry. The concern's a manufacture — and a manufacture that, if it's only properly looked after, may well be on the way to becoming a monopoly », Strether answers quite approvingly. This was Henry James on American finance capitalism at the turn of the century. And these two « omniscient interlocutors », as we must call them in the opening sections of *The Ambassadors* (for James also admitted that he had « invented » Maria Gostrey simply for the sake of discussing

the novel's background; and her usefulness is limited to her gossip) continue their illuminating dialogue; which, again, however, is designed to conceal quite as much of the plot as it reveals. Would the chief product upon which the fortune at Woolett is based appear to be fairly obvious? It is rather ridiculous, says Strether shame-facedly; a small, trivial object of the commonest domestic use, it is wanting in dignity or distinction; it is a false note, it's vulgar. « Rather ridiculous? » echoes Maria — « Clothes-pins? Saleratus? Shoe polish? » But she never learns this American « mystery of production », nor do we. James was still reflecting the genteel Anglo-American tradition of the mid-19th century about such matters as « trade » and tradesmen.

Through these rather long-winded « conversations », Strether and Maria do form a kind of romantic attachment which simply disappears in the novel when Maria's technical function is at length concluded. There follows Strether's equally tedious « analysis » of his new « experiences » in the narrative of *The Ambassadors* — a narrative, in turn, in much of the first volume, which might be described as an « anti-narrative », or « non-narrative ». Was this due in part to the Jamesian reversion to those bloated Victorian prose « fillers » which were necessary to accomplish the serialization of the book? Nevertheless the whole opening to the novel is slow, cumbersome and tedious — there is so much analysis of so little material; and this is the stream of *consciousness* indeed, since Strether has apparently no unconscious at all. In this later Jamesian style, too, there is a curious use of the double negative as an apex to some kind of ultra-refinement. « Strether told Waymarsh all about that evening, on their dining together at the hotel; which needn't have happened, he was all the while aware, hadn't he chosen to sacrifice to this occasion a rarer opportunity ». What he has chosen to sacrifice is of course the chance to see Chad — who is not, as it turns out, in Paris at all. Like Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, like the Jamesian « royal figures » in general, both Chad and Vionnet must be glimpsed from afar, at some length, before they descend to the common scene.

Meanwhile there is the sparkling « Paris life » of the chronicle, free, bohemian, artistic, cultivated, altogether charming in the resorts of the « aesthetic fraternity ». There is Miss Barrace who should — but doesn't — embarrass the good Strether by smoking; and « Little Bilham », the rather Dickensian young American painter who has simply stopped painting because he enjoys living in Paris so much. « He hadn't saved from the shipwreck a scrap of anything but his beautiful intelligence and his confirmed habit of Paris ». But he still is, according to Maria Gostrey, « far and away the best of them... of all the long procession — the boys, the girls, or the old men and old women as they sometimes really are; the hope, as one may say, of our country. They've all passed, year after year; but there has been no one in particular I've ever wanted to stop. I feel — don't *you*? — that I want to stop little Bilham ».

Well, it is all right, because little Bilham obviously *is* stopped, as to the hope of anything. And Strether adores it all. « It was the way the irregular life sat upon Bilham and Miss Barrace that was the insidious, the delicate marvel ». Strether almost worships these « ingenuous compatriots » — the « delicate daubs and the free discriminations » — the « enthusiasms and execrations » he has met apparently for the first time in the true life of art; the « legend of good-humoured poverty », above all, in these rather spacious and luxurious surroundings which exist, incidentally, upon the generosity, the munificence of Chad himself. For these Parisian esthetes and bohemians show a candor surpassing even the candor of Woollett. « They were red-haired and long-legged, they were quaint and queer and dead and droll; they made the place resound with the vernacular... They twanged with a vengeance the aesthetic lyre — they drew from it wonderful airs »¹.

Now surely these were the « banquet years » of Parisian, French, and European culture, as Roger Shattuck has reminded

¹ These sections of the novel also resound with such phrases as « license », « freedom », the « irregular life, or « the fundamental impropriety », etc. but Miss Barrace's smoking, or perhaps Madame Vionnet's elbows on the table while she dines, are almost the only examples we get of the bohemian life.

us again in his entertaining and acute survey of the period which James was ostensibly describing in *The Ambassadors*. They were the years of the great European renaissance in the arts, painting, writing, the stage; that high peak of western capitalistic culture just before the beginning of the end in the First World War. But where in James's whole work, not to mention his specific novel of Parisian « culture », is there any real familiarity or concern with the modern French movements in art, music, or even the literature, which he read, to be sure, with a certain alarmed apprehension. Or with the great French Impressionists, say, whom James touched on very briefly near the end of his career, not to mention such really bohemian figures as Alfred Jarry, Erik Satie, Rousseau or Apollinaire? No, James's taste was still classical, academic; very close to the formal or antiquarian taste of the great American fortunes themselves. He viewed even the paler, milder British equivalent of *fin-de-siècle* « decadence » and bohemianism with the same distaste (fear?) that he expressed about Zola. He was actually as remote from the contemporary French culture of his own period as he was, surely, from the contemporary American scene; or even, with a certain difference, from England itself.

He was a writer with a built-in time lag, so to speak, of almost half a century. The cutting of his American roots appeared to have cut off his time-sense everywhere. He dwelt still — and forever! — in the imaginary fairy-tale world of his youth and adolescence at best; but then, as we shall see, perhaps the real roots of Henry James had been cut off, in a unique and extraordinary bio-psychic phenomenon, almost at his birth. Meanwhile what he described as « great French culture » in *The Ambassadors* — that great human spectacle, that great Organization for the Immediate, the Agreeable, etc. — was merely a little ingrown group of more or less ineffectual Franco-American expatriates: the same familiar circle of the leisure-class novel, but here even, apparently, more « charming », ineffectual, and ridiculous.

What we actually get of « art » in *The Ambassadors* is simply again those walks through the Louvre, those marvellous lunches and dinners, those scenes at the Comédie Française where finally, in the great « confrontation scene », Strether « secs » Chad sitting alone at the back of his box. « They were in the presence of Chad himself ». James repeated this portentously — though it was hardly so remarkable considering that, after all, Strether had come to Paris to meet Chad — and the novel embarked into another of its purple prose passages when Strether reflects that:

these were the accidents of a high civilization; the imposed tribute to propriety, the frequent exposure to conditions, usually brilliant, in which relief has to await its time. Relief was never quite near at hand for kings, queens, comedians and other such people, and though you might be yourself not exactly one of these, you could yet, in leading the life of high pressure, guess a little how they sometimes felt. It was truly the life of high pressure that Strether had seemed to feel himself lead while he sat there, close to Chad, during the long tension of the act.

This confrontation is actually a silence, another unique development in the bizarre extremes of the drama of consciousness. This life of « high pressure » consists, apparently, of just sitting next to the fabulous (if also to this point quite nebulous) hero of *The Ambassadors* during the course of an anonymous French play. But what were the « comedians and other such people » doing in the presence of what James certainly believed to be his own fabulous leisure-class royalty of these new literary « kings and queens? ».

Maybe the uneasy tone of this absurd and hortatory prose reflected the writer's own consciousness that he had not really established the literary illusion he was trying for — that he really could not. So that James tried again, in still more extreme terms, to express Strether's enchantment and awe at finally meeting the legendary, royal, munificent Chad — this « new vision » of true life for the naive, elderly, New En-

glander; this « remarkable truth » personified somehow by the solitary, silent hero sitting in his opera box:

But oh it was too remarkable, the truth; for what could be more remarkable than this sharp rupture of an identity? You could deal with a man as himself — you couldn't deal with him as somebody else. It was a small source of peace moreover to be reduced to wondering how little he might know in such an event what a sum he was setting you. He couldn't absolutely not know, for you couldn't absolutely not let him. It was a *case, then* simply, a strong case, as people nowadays called such things, a case of transformation unsurpassed, and the hope was but in the general law that strong cases were liable to control from without. Perhaps he, Strether himself, was the only person after all aware of it. Even Miss Gostrey, with all her science, wouldn't be, would she? — and he had never seen any one less aware of anything than Waymarsh as he glowered at Chad. The social sightlessness of his old friend's survey marked for him afresh, and almost in an humiliating way, the inevitable limits of direct aid from this source. He was not certain, however, of not drawing a shade of compensation from the privilege, as yet untasted, of knowing more about something in particular than Miss Gostrey did. His situation too was a case, for that matter, and he was now so interested, quite so privately agog, that he had already an eye to the fun it would be to open up to her afterwards..

Now here again, in the face of his spiritual impotence, as it were, the Jamesian « observer » takes his only comfort from « the privilege, as yet untasted » of « knowing » more about the apparently unknowable than do his less-privileged friends. But what is the « too remarkable truth » that Strether, before he has spoken to Chad, suddenly perceives in this fabulous moment of enlightenment in that dark theatre-box: this sharp rupture that he feels about Chad's identity, this « case of transformation unsurpassed » that also throws light on Strether's own « case », that leaves him so privately agog with the fun of opening up the « secret » afterwards to his little French confidante?

« He had never in his life », so James added about Strether's ecstasy, « seen a young man come into a box at ten o'clock at night ». Is *that* the secret of all this Jamesian excitement, of this overdone, extreme, rather faggy euphoric hyper-

bole — where Strether, again, is also seized by a « wild unrest urging him to seize his chance » to say, finally, *hello* to Chad? What is this marvellous change of character, manners, personality, values, taste in the princely young hero? There is Chad's « wide-brimmed crush hat », his « strong young grizzled crop », his « inscrutable new face », his new « ripe physiognomy », his « identity so rounded off, his palpable presence and his massive young manhood ». There is the hint of some new self-respect, we are told again (and again), « some sense of power... something latent and beyond access, ominous and perhaps enviable ». Chad is also « an irreducible young Pagan ». But then, Strether reflects in his first conversation with this hero, he is something more. « He had been wondering a minute ago if the boy weren't a Pagan, and he found himself wondering now if he weren't by chance a gentleman ».

Dramatize, dramatize, dramatize! Render, render, render! No wonder James admonished himself so continually on this side of his art, since certainly his first « picture » of Chad, as seen through Strether's awe-stricken mind, was hardly very convincing. Chad was certainly *meant* to be a sort of idealized international hero; the young American man of affairs (since he too is « managing » everything, including these first meetings with Strether, in the novel) who has been smoothed, polished, rounded-off, educated and cultivated by his contact with those mysterious European women. « He saw him in a flash », Strether observes, « as the young man marked out by women; and for a concentrated minute the dignity, the comparative austerity, as he funnily fancied it, of this character affected him almost with awe... ». And again: « That was then the way men marked out by women were — and also the men by whom the women were doubtless in turn sufficiently distinguished ». This was certainly a reverse twist on the conventional American success-story of the period in that « downtown world » of business about which James had admitted his complete ignorance. This was the success-story of inherited American wealth which is transformed by European culture.

There was also a certain truth, or half-truth, in this picture of American manhood, which James destroyed by his romantic hyperbole — and by the obvious sublimation of women and sexuality into the cultural instruments of the International Ideal. Strether, to be sure, is another calculated « reflector », or reverberator, of a deliberate, an artificial, a contrived and perhaps altogether improbable « innocence ». (The point is that neither Strether nor Chad is really convincing in this overwrought Jamesian rendering). He still believes, Strether, that Chad's relation with Vionnet is « pure ». Maria Gostrey, whose silences « were never barren, nor even dull », has something of a silence at this juncture. « The fathomless medium held them — Chad's manner was the fathomless medium; and our friend felt as if they passed each other, in their deep immersion, with the round impersonal eye of silent fish », Strether also reflects about Waymarsh's withdrawal. And here James had thrown off an accurate, a homely, a revealing line of imagery.

Yes, but what *is* that « fathomless medium » of Chad's? Just as in *The Wings of the Dove* James was at his old game of « appearance and reality », even though both poles of his « illusion » were so extreme, so manipulated, so theoretical, as to leave little room for any reality. Strether's « innocence » and Chad's « sophistication » are equally implausible; they are merely the extremes of James's own illusionary yearnings. There is another « fabulous » Parisian party scene in the French garden on the Faubourg Saint-Germain where Madame Vionnet — who has not yet appeared directly in the novel — makes her long-delayed entrance. Well, yes, I had almost forgot; there *is* an artist in these pages, the sculptor Gloriani, the same dubious master as in the pages of *Roderick Hudson* some twenty-six years earlier, but who now has a fine worn handsome face.

With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honours and rewards all round, the great artist, in the course of a single sustained look and a few words of delight at receiving him, affected our friend as a dazzling prodigy of type.

Strether had seen in museums — in the Luxembourg as well as, more reverently later on, in the New York of the billionaires — the work of his hand.

And:

He was to remember again repeatedly the medal-like Italian face, in which every line was an artist's own, in which time told only as tone and consecration; and he was to recall in especial, as the penetrating radiance, as the communication of the illustrious spirit itself, the manner in which, while they stood briefly, in welcome and response, face to face, he was held by the sculptor's eyes. The deep human expertness in Gloriani's charming smile — on the terrible life behind it: — was flashed upon him as a test of his stuff.

And that, one supposes, is an artist to beat all artists.

There are also « ambassadors, cabinet ministers, bankers, generals, what do I know? even Jews », as Little Bilham reports eagerly to Strether; and — « Above all always some awfully nice women — and not too many; sometimes an actress, an artist, a great performer — but only when they're not monsters; and in particular the right *femmes du monde*. You can fancy his history on that side — I believe it's fabulous: they *never* give him up. Yet he keeps them down: no one knows how he manages: it's too beautiful and bland. Never too many — and a mighty good thing too; just a perfect choice ». And how James, or his Strether here, circles around these mysterious, fragrant, life-giving *femmes du monde*, whom the novel's hero knows how to use and control so well; and against the background of whom we get our first view of Madame Vionnet herself.

Well, naturally, this view is not entirely direct. Vionnet is accompanied by her young daughter, with whom, Strether immediately assumes, Chad is really in love, in this « virtuous attachment ». James has deliberately thrown another false lead across the reader's path, as in all these later novels of tricks and stratagems and manipulated personality: the so-called « perfectly-planned novel ». And our first vision of Vionnet is accompanied of course by the high chatter of all these European sophisticates in what is really another incredible

scene of « Parisian life ». Amidst all these enchanting Poles, Turks, « Portugees », even Jews; these glittering ambassadors, duchesses, countesses, « brilliant strangers » who all know Vionnet and Chad, cultured continental types with a « bold high look, noble ladies with their gold bracelets and precious bangles beneath their fine black sleeves; these indubitable *femmes du monde* who actually collect men rather than jewels or books, we get such comments as Little Bilham's: « That's half the battle here — that you can never talk politics. We don't talk them » — as another mark of high culture, pure art; or of the highest ranges, at least of the leisure-class novel. Wasn't this actually another part of the genteel society's view, in James's own American youth, of the vulgar democracy's political organization: an upper-class void, a social vacuum, as in Edith Wharton's work too, which the financial titans were happy to fill up?

It is curious how James revealed, almost despite himself, all the traits of the established « upper-class » group of the older American republic confronted by the new power, the vulgarity, the materialism of the Robber Baron period. James even shared certain values and tastes of the new American fortunes themselves; and, in his last major novel of an aging « provincial » and European « culture », he also revealed himself as perhaps the greatest provincial of them all in American literature. « Europe » — this yearned-for, imaginary identity of his youth — persisted for ever and ever in an endless and untouchable dream of art and culture high above the mundane events of ordinary life. The same fantasy of his childhood and adolescence, refurbished for « others » in *The Ambassadors*, persisted in his maturity and age, if now in a heightened and even more artificial form. « He's delightful; he's wonderful », both Miss Barrace and Little Bilham repeat about the dour, unperceptive comic-opera « Yankee », Waymarsh, who is really not too far-removed from the small-town lawyer-politician in *Roderick Hudson*. « Dear old Paris! » all these expatriated American « artists » echo in a communal chorus. — « She's

charming; she's perfect... she's wonderful », they exclaim about Madame Vionnet herself. This is a kind of fairy-tale masque of Parisian marvellous « life » — of this glittering, great, marvellous, beautiful world of ambassadors and duchesses and artists — rather than any kind of realistic appraisal. But just as in *The Wings of the Dove*, as in all the later James novels, there is an added layer of deception. They are all the plot — this whole cast of cultivated European figures — to deceive Strether (who hardly needs their help), to keep him in ignorance about the obvious relationship of Chad and Vionnet.

Maria, who knows the truth about them, accordingly and mysteriously withdraws from the novel. Chad himself begins to hint ominously and mysteriously about « the damnable terms of my sacrifice », and how much he owes to Vionnet. (She is beginning to age, she is almost forty. He has grown tired of her anyhow; he will not risk his American wealth and position for her sake). In the novel there is never any direct view of Chad and Vionnet together; they barely speak to each other — a fabulously « intimate » relationship indeed. But meanwhile Strether has met her and himself has fallen completely in love with her feminine charm, her culture (she subscribes to the « great *Revue des Deux Mondes* »), her plight. It is Strether now, despite the risk of his own career and his intended marriage to Mrs. Newsome, who urges Chad to keep Vionnet and to defy the puritanical, American codes and conventions. « I understand what a relation with such a woman — what such a high fine friendship — may be. It can't be vulgar or coarse, anyway — and that's the point », he declares, and then — « Let them face the future together ». And here, at the close of the first volume, *The Ambassadors*, in its own odd way, despite all the implausible nonsense of its background, and perhaps the even more implausible nature of its « plot », does achieve a certain tension, sympathy and interest.

That was the familiar « secret » of the Jamesian literary magic; of making the unreal, or the half-real, seem real for the moment as we read the novel, at least; or if not quite

« real », at least « convincing », or if not quite convincing, somehow and someway absorbing. This is the great Jamesian « illusion » of literature and life, again, spreading its own wings and its own charm over our infatuated fancies, even though so obviously based on such a transparent web of « magic-yearning » and wishful thinking. Vionnet, worried and anxious about Chad and his American family, persuades Strether to help her case, just when the handsome young pagan is preparing to leave her, and to pay her off. Strether clearly faces the « truth », — « as with dormant pulses at last awake » — and stakes everything on his own belief. He concedes that Bilham, the poor little painter man, is not good enough for Vionnet's cultivated daughter, Jeanne, who has been the previous blind for Chad's « interest » in the French household.

There are curious psychological elements here, of course — in the two central « triangles » of the novel. Earlier Chad is almost viewed as a paternal figure seeking the hand of his mistress's daughter. Now Strether, in his own passion and enthusiasm, takes over the role of the father-surrogate who is convincing an unruly « son » to keep an aging mistress-mother figure — a « pure » father-figure on Strether's part, that is to say, who is also in love with the woman with whom the son is obviously on the most intimate terms. These shadowy and shifting familial and filial relations, centered around an unconscious or repressed incestuous triangle, along with, very often, a similar kind of emotional or sublimated homosexual or lesbian situation, are evident in James's work as far back as *The Bostonians* or *Watch and Ward*. They were even more explicitly developed in the novel which followed *The Ambassadors* — despite all the Jamesian critics who stressed his rational, conscious, or moral and metaphysical grandeur. How much indeed did the later James, increasingly obsessed by « sex », play so delicately with these « abnormal », or historically « primitive », or infantile states of the human psyche —

and perhaps that, too, is almost unconsciously part of our concern with the Chad—Strether — Vionnet triangle in the novel.

One notes, incidentally, that Vionnet's daughter Jeanne — but not Chad's — is cast in the role of the « child-orphan » exploited by the callous adults. For Vionnet forces her into a « suitable marriage »; partly, we are told, because Chad *has* had his eye on her, and partly because Vionnet wishes to free herself entirely of any encumbrances he might object to. So not only is the attachment between Strether and the charming French lady — warm and touching, sentimental and romantic as it is — another « impossible » love affair of James's; but Vionnet's charm itself soon becomes questionable, and her character dubious. Here as in *The Wings of the Dove*, after the brief interlude of Jamesian enchantment, the central figures of the novel are again transfixed by their « pre-arranged destinies ». They are trapped by the relentless coils of the romance-melodrama plot. In one sense indeed these three central figures can be viewed only as an aging, desperate and manipulative woman; a rich, slippery and callous young American bounder; and a perpetually adolescent, rather pruriently old-maidish and inordinately « innocent » middle-aged voyeur. For again Strether spies out, with a kind of childish wonder, and a certain curious loverlike jealousy and envy, all the « intimate » sexual behavior of Chad and Vionnet. In a more realistic chronicle, this after all barely more than middle-aged literary man, completely entranced as he is by the maturing French lady, might well have married her. And this perfect couple might then have left their wealthy, handsome, cultivated and « pagan » young American friend to go his own idle way.

But this is impossible, of course, in the typical Jamesian view of reality, human behaviour, experience. It is much too sensible, possible and practical. If Vionnet is « strange and beautiful » to Strether in « her quiet soft acuteness », we are shortly told that « the golden nail she had driven in pierced a good inch deeper ». If Chad is « strong and sleek and gay, easy and fragrant and fathomless » in « all his pleasant morning

freshness », he becomes all the more ambiguous about his future plans when Strether becomes more importunate. « Are you tired of her? » asks the infatuated intermediary of the triangle. « Chad gave him in reply to this, with a movement of the head, the strangest slow smile he had ever had from him. 'Never' ». « Never? » asks Strether again. « Never », says Chad « obligingly and serenely » in this typical Jamesian exchange. But he is, of course; and he has already decided to leave Vionnet. Then there is the celebrated arrival of the Pococks in the novel, as the real emissaries from the vigilant, powerful, and threatening, puritanical and provincial, if always absent, mother-figure, Mrs. Newsome herself.

Yes, of course, they provide a kind of familiar and accomplished light-comedy touch in *The Ambassadors*. But wasn't Sarah Pocock with « her marked thin-lipped smile, intense without brightness and as prompt to set as the scrape of a safety-match », and « the protrusion of her rather remarkably long chin », and « the penetration of her voice to a distance »: wasn't she also the Jamesian stereotype of the angular, virginal, narrow and harsh New England woman? Beneath the entertainment, the Jamesian animus towards this area of American life was as persistent as his view of New England was fixed. As for Jim Pocock himself:

Small and fat and constantly facetious, straw-coloured and destitute of marks, he would have been practically indistinguishable hadn't his constant preference for light-grey clothes, for white hats, for very big cigars and very little stories, done what it could for his identity.

— he is another caricature of the American business man — a pre-Babbitt or pre-Dodsworth figure; also in Edith Wharton's vein — who comes off less harshly, perhaps, because he is after all the victim and puppet of the dominating New England women. Less harshly, but not too convincingly, because *as* an American business man there is nothing in him of the business world except an incurable, gaping tourist-type misunderstanding of « Europe ».

What is curious, however, in the novel's big confrontation scene of Europe and America — of the Pockocks and Madame Vionnet — where Strether finally declares himself an Europe's friend, is that neither side of this rather forced ideological debate comes out very well. If the Americans are stupid and vulgar, Vionnet is obviously self-pitying and rather tactless. From this point on her character falls apart rapidly — the moves in « her game » become apparent. « Do I seem to you very awful? » she asks Strether; and even with the advantage of her « noble old apartment » which is somehow « full, once more, of dim historic shades, of the faint far-away cannon-roar of the great empire », Vionnet becomes, if not « awful », at least a selfish, scheming, and perhaps even stupid woman. And when this heroine collapses, in effect the novel collapses. We suddenly become aware of the celebrated « method » of the narrative: the indirect presentation through a series of alternating conversations, the different points of view always centered around the meaning of the events which have occurred, the « pre-anterior » analysis of events to come, the anterior analysis, the event itself, and then the series of « post-analyses ». But we become aware of this intricate, elaborate and artificial method simply because the novel's content has ebbed away. In the « circular narrative » which constitutes the form of *The Ambassadors*, too — this « architectural roundness » which James considered to be at its height and perfection here — it is quite possible to omit several rings of the exposition without much harm to the story's meaning. These are really duplicating interpretations, or what one might call also « the skipable reverie ». (Thus the famous « reversed » chapters, which are not really reversed at all).

How far was James deliberate or unconscious, again, in charting Madame Vionnet's disintegration? Was this a measure of Strether's dawning European consciousness, his so-long-delayed social maturity? Was it also a necessary attribute of the plot-line, in order to rationalize Chad's desertion of her, to make him a little less of a cad? There was another, deeper,

typically Jamesian reason, perhaps. In the scene towards the novel's end, when Strether, too, abandons Vionnet — for no reason that one can see, except that perhaps he has finally discovered, with a pang of jealousy and a blush of shame, « the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed », with Chad, that is; and when James again invoked the glorious French past, not of the grand empire but this time of the Revolution itself to serve as the dying chord of his doomed heroine:

Thus and so, on the eve of the great recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper — or perhaps simply the smell of blood... His hostess was dressed as for thunderous times, and it fell in with the kind of imagination we have just attributed to him that she should be in the simplest coolest white, of a character so old-fashioned, if he were not mistaken, that Madame Roland must on the scaffold have worn something like it...

— in this dramatic or even somewhat melodramatic scene of Vionnet's final ruin, we may come across the real reason for her decline.

James again stressed her « cultural » value. Strether sees in her « the view of something old, old, old, the oldest thing he had ever personally touched ». (This wasn't Vionnet herself, one assumes, but her « race » and her tradition). And still again: « She might intend what she would, but this was beyond anything she could intend, with things from far back — tyrannies of history, facts of type, values, as the painters said, of expression — all working for her and giving her the supreme chance, the chance of the happy, the really luxurious few, the chance, on a great occasion, to be natural and simple ». But what does this all mean, really; except that it was another dubious metaphysical smoke-screen of James's, another adolescent-romantic image of French history and culture as embodied in Vionnet — since after all this heroine was *not* natural or simple, as James then grudgingly admitted — and what *had* she intended? Strether could « trust her », we are told: « that is he could trust her to make deception right. As

she presented things the ugliness — goodness knows why — went out of them; none the less too that she could present them, with an art of her own, by not as much as touching them ».

But then what was this « deception », this « ugliness » and this art of omission which is also embodied in Madame Vionnet? For James finally did reach — after all the elaborate « counter-screens », so to speak, of her charm, tact, beauty, culture, art, simplicity — the flaw in Vionnet. « Women were thus endlessly absorbent, and to deal with them was to walk on water », Strether reflects in an illuminating phrase:

What was at bottom the matter with her, embroider as she might and disclaim as she might [or as James might] — what was at bottom the matter with her was simply Chad himself. It was of Chad she was after all renewedly afraid; the strange strength of her passion was the very strength of her fear; she clung to *him*, Lambert Strether, as to a source of safety she had tested, and, generous, graceful, truthful as she might try, to be, exquisite as she was, she dreaded the term of his being within reach. With this sharpest perception yet, it was like a chill in the air to him, it was almost appalling, that a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited.

And Strether finally tells Vionnet: « You're afraid for your life ».

Now there is a certain truth in all this eloquence with which James again propounded his own deepest fear and suspicion of the « passions ». They do indeed exact their toll — the hard vow of the Goddess — upon their often deluded and inflamed victims. They do exploit the finest creatures impaled upon these « mysterious forces »; while fear, anxiety, deception are their psychological concomitants, as the bards, the poets and the novelists of love have always told us. But is this the *only* medium of the passions? Is it love's *only* conclusion; its only premise and only reward — and is this Vionnet's only, true moment of revelation and sincerity in *The Ambassadors*? What was illuminating in this Jamesian passage was the deep

tone of horror with which it regarded love and passion as the destructive agent of all human grace, dignity, and even beauty:

It was actually moreover as if he didn't think of her at all, as if he could think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented and the possibilities she betrayed. She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given to him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man. The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant wouldn't; the weakness of which wisdom, too, the dishonour of which judgment seemed but to sink her lower.

So now the secret was out. The Jamesian half-truth about the passions in the heroine of *The Ambassadors* has become the same, familiar fixed fantasy in the Jamesian mind about not only the destructive impact of passion, but its final cheapness and vulgarity. Vionnet was the highest product of French culture, as James implied, whose whole merit is that she has reclaimed and re-educated the brash, provincial young American millionaire; whose whole mysterious sexuality has been employed, as it were, for a purely cultural and « social » purpose. But Vionnet is punished in the novel because, after all, she *is* sexual! For why now did James describe her passion as « mature, abysmal, pitiful? » And what « possibilities » has Vionnet betrayed? Why is she suddenly so much older, and as « vulgarly troubled » in truth, as that maidservant crying for her young man. (Like the prurient Victorians in general, James identified the « lower passions » with the lower-classes; or sometimes even, as we see in the literature of this period, with « the lower races »). And was James so certain that a maidservant *wouldn't* judge herself (about what?) while Vionnet's self-image now revealed the weakness of her wisdom, the dishonor and depths of her shame.

If the handsome villainess in *The Wings of the Dove* showed that sexuality was at base criminal, the enchanting and all-too-perfect French heroine of *The Ambassadors* showed that sex was disastrous; even when there was a minimum of it,

and when that minimum was used, apparently, for the noblest social purposes. And didn't the whole tragedy of Vionnet's «ruin» simply reflect, in a somewhat less fantastic way, the abiding Jamesian view that sexual love, as in the phobic fantasies of *The Sacred Fount*, was not a source of life, but of an infantile, consuming, and even cannibalistic force. Vionnet is ruined, after all, because she has made Chad what he is (she is a literary cousin of May Server). She has given everything to him; he has taken it all without qualms and without reciprocity; and all that is left of this heroine is abysmal, and vulgar, grief. Strether abandons her in her deepest moment of need; Chad abandons her without even a farewell which is recorded in the novel. And the two men have a final euphoric post-mortem on this suffering heroine. «She must have been wonderful,» says Strether. «She *was*,» says the young American prince.

But was she, really? Doesn't all the Jamesian build-up of Vionnet's charm, grace, beauty, wisdom, tact now appear to be somewhat forced, strained, contrived — and essentially false — in the light of her true purpose in the novel, and the Jamesian moral which she was illustrating? This was surely a technical «counter-screen» in large part, designed to hide her real meaning until the very end; and hence the adolescent and exaggerated view of her charm on the part of Strether — the somewhat euphoric view by James himself. And thus we get those almost always enigmatic «glimpses» of Vionnet, the reflections and refractions of her «charm» — and that one famous scene of her sitting in the rowboat with her lover; the «glimpse» indeed that condemns her — since to approach too closely to her character before the close of *The Ambassadors* would give the whole thing away. But then James never could approach any of his charming heroines too closely. It was his technical virtuosity that could create their «charm» on such an insubstantial base of knowledge, on such a partial, «pure», innocent and fearful view of women in general.

If you remember Vionnet's peers in the American literature of the period — the lovely, graceful and mature Madame Olenska of Edith Wharton's fiction, for example; or even the tender, brooding little Sister Carrie of Dreiser's — the Jamesian heroine is attractive, yes, but inadequate. And she is inadequate precisely because she is attractive — and so unfulfilled as a woman even within her own terms. The final « revelation » of her plight also marks the « wind-up » of Strether's own career, entranced as he has been by this « happy apparition » of ancient French femininity. But what, after all, was his career? The novel ends with a familiar series of rather touching Jamesian « farewells » — to Vionnet, to Chad, to Maria Gostrey, whom Strether might also have married, in a more realistic chronicle, if Vionnet had become out of the question. But this middle-aged « observer, » still living out his life through all these other people, prefers to dwell alone with his new European sensibility. That is the only human gain in the novel, apparently; that is the familiar Jamesian point.

Is it enough, even for a lighter novel or social comedy on the international theme? Well, here as in *The Wings of the Dove*, the real base was that of solid cash. « Shall you give up your friend for the money in it? » Strether finally asks Chad directly, while the handsome young American pagan has become immersed, conveniently, in his new theories of « scientific advertising. » As for Strether's own « ruin, » he is not averse to renouncing the wealthy, dominating American widow, Mrs. Newsome. He still has « a little money » of his own, while Chad assures him fervently that « he mustn't starve ». That is what lingers with us after we have finished reading *The Ambassadors*, interesting and entertaining as it is in parts — if also rather pretentious, overblown and tedious in other sections of its extended « analyses » of such meagre content. Otherwise, after the spell of James's own literary magic has subsided — the magic-magic of illusion, artifice and pretense! — we may wonder just what *is* the novel, beyond the endless chatter of a group of fashionable expatriates, incom-

petents and mediocrities, dwelling in an obviously fabricated and patently artificial « international scene. »

What a fantastic novel, in short, it was; and how James could blow it up to such inordinate proportions! Perhaps his real gift lay in the immense fertility of trivia with which we are constantly beguiled under the pretense of importance. If *The Ambassadors* is at least highly readable, when it is readable at all, how thin and superficial it seems upon any real reflection or serious analysis. (In this respect it anticipates J. P. Marquand's later blend of « romance » and innocuous social satire; perhaps James helped to fashion that attractive but inconsequential genre.) It is probably the most ingenious of all the Jamesian « games of art », and the novel which is most clearly just a game. Maybe that is the reason why the contemporary critics, who followed James's lead and Matthiessen's solemn explication, that this was quite the best, « all round », of James's later novels, have found it so difficult to make any convincing case for their claim.

It is a false claim, and there is no case. Almost all « pre-pre-action » and « post-post-analysis », the human content of *The Ambassadors* is limited; the view of human behavior is dubious; the moral is singularly arbitrary; the literary method is, on the whole, exotic and verbose. All that remains is a rather pleasant sentimental romance, an entertaining fiction, perhaps, which has a certain warmth and sympathy at the expense of credibility.

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