PERCEPTION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE AMBASSADORS

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ABSTRACT

In The Ambassadors Henry James proposes an equation between perception and experience. The novel tells the story of one man, Lambert Strether, as he perceives a world more complex than he had previously known. Strether comes from the New England society of fixed and absolute values to Paris where ethics are based on aesthetics, and relativity and variety are accepted and appreciated. Strether's appreciation of Parisian life changes his "terms of thought" and allows him to reconsider his past life from a new perspective.

Several conditions predetermine Strether's new perceptions. The scenic details of place -- especially his attention to rooms -- act as a framing device, predisposing him to certain attitudes towards the inhabitants and activities within these frames. Strether's expectations based on romantic fiction provide him with preconceived models of life. His consciousness of his dual role, using theatrical terms, as actor and auditor, affects his view both of others and of himself.

Coming from Woollett, Massachusetts, Lambert Strether is bewildered by life in Paris. The strict code of Woollett has not prepared him with viable terms to

describe his perceptions. The bewildering relativity of Paris is most keenly felt in his observations of the intricacy of personal relationships, the ambiguity of language, and the seeming fluctuation in people's ages. Strether is educated to an appreciation of all these examples of relativity and to a recognition of their relevance to his own life.

The apprehension of truth itself appears to be a matter of relativity in Paris. Strether's dilemma is in evaluating contradictory facts: the definite facts of Woollett and the suggestive facts of Paris. However, Strether's evaluation is comprehensive and individual; he can rely neither upon Woollett's absolutism nor upon the easier acceptance of Paris. He finally realizes that an appreciation of beauty and variety is not of itself enough. He must act on his personal knowledge and with a moral judgment based upon that knowledge. His final decision to return to Woollett is the testimony of his responsibility to his own perceptions.

A Note on the Text

All page references in this thesis are made to the Riverside edition of The Ambassadors, edited by Leon Edel (Boston, 1960).

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

This in fact I have ever found rather terribly the point -- that the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connexion with it. But there are degrees of feeling -- the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word -- the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who "get most" out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most.

Henry James, Preface to
The Princess Casamassima

INTRODUCTION

"IMPRESSIONS ARE EXPERIENCE"

The Ambassadors is an adventure story in which the exploits are played out in the human consciousness. Lambert Strether, the novel's middle-aged hero, is sent out from his New England town to Paris to persuade the wayward son of his widowed fiancée to return home to the prosperous family business which awaits him. Back home it is presumed that Mrs. Newsome's son, Chad, is in the clutches of a horrible woman and that he needs rescuing. It is also presumed that Strether's successful rescue of the lad will secure his marriage to Chad's mother. Once in Paris, however, Strether abandons both his mission and the parochial morality which has inspired it. Chad impresses him as being remarkably improved by his life in Paris and, moreover, "the woman" impresses him as being responsible for Chad's improvement. Strether not only approves their relationship -- which he thinks virtuous -- but absolutely insists that Chad remains in Paris. Mrs. Newsome has dispatched a second ambassador, Sarah Pocock, Chad's married sister, to bring the negligent Lambert Strether an ultimatum. Strether, however, will not forsake his approval of Chad, Mme de Vionnet and the Parisian way of life. He thereby effectively ruins

his marital hopes and sacrifices the security of his remaining years.

Strether's great adventure, though, is enacted in his consciousness as he experiences new feelings, thoughts and perceptions. At fifty-five Lambert Strether has led a prosaic and unsatisfying existence. Both his wife and their son died prematurely, and his subsequent remorse has killed the ambitions of his youth. Paris unexpectedly re-kindles the spark of youth in Strether and creates a crisis in his life. As he is on the verge of establishing a stability and possibly a measure of happiness in his life, he is suddenly forced to re-examine and fundamentally question the basis of that life. What naturally is a phase of youth is necessarily uncomfortable for the middle-aged man. "Sensing much more than he is yet psychically able to acknowledge Strether at fifty-five suffers a crisis remarkably like that of adolescence."[1] Strether's acute awareness of his crisis finally acknowledges itself in an intense out-burst to one of Chad's friends, John Little Bilham. The scene is a Sunday garden-party at the home of the sculptor Gloriani. James, in his Preface to the novel, writes:

> The idea of the tale resides indeed in the very fact that an hour of such unprecedented ease should have been felt by him <u>as</u> a crisis, and he is at pains to express it for us as neatly as we could desire.2

Strether's expression of personal crisis forms itself as an exhortation to the young Bilham to live.

> "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had? This place and these impressions -- mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at *his* place -- well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped *that* into my mind. I see it now. I haven't done so enough before -- and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh, I *do* see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express." (137)

Strether's passionate plea to "Live all you can" is the replanting of James's original germ for *The Ambassadors*, an anecdote about William Dean Howells. The Howells anecdote is interpreted by James however in a manner essential to our understanding of *The Ambassadors*. Strether, echoing Howells, says "Live all you can", but James leaves it to Bilham to define what he means by life.

> "Didn't you adjure me, in accents I shall never forget, to see, while I've a chance, everything I can? -- and *really* to see, for it must have been that only you meant." (172-3)

Henry James makes an explicit equation in *The Ambassadors* between life and perception. It is Strether's impressions which have "ther abundant message" for him, for these impressions are his experience of life in Paris.

In "The Art of Fiction", that crucial combination of essay and credo, Henry James defined "experience" for the

aspiring novelist.

> Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative -- much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius -- it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.3

Carrying this definition to its implicit conclusion, James declares: "If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions <u>are</u> experience".[4] Henry James's belief that life was experienced in "the chamber of consciousness" led him to re-define the bounds of fiction. Heroism cannot be restricted to the battlefield, nor tragedy to the lives of kings and princes; every life has its dangers, and mundane lives remain so only for a failure of imagination.

> The panting pursuit of danger is the pursuit of life itself, in which dangers awaits us possibly at every step and faces us at every turn. . . . There are immense and flagrant dangers that are but sordid and squalid ones, as we feel, tainting with their quality the very defiances they provoke; while there are common and covert ones, that "look like nothing" and that can be but inwardly and occultly dealt with, which involve the sharpest hazards to life and honour and the highest instant decisions and intrepidities of action. It is an arbitrary stamp that keeps these latter prosaic and makes the former heroic.5

The dangers and heroisms of life are, therefore, private and individual experiences. Lambert Strether's adventures, being private and individual experiences, are narrated from

his centre of consciousness since that is the only perspective from which they can be known.

Lambert Strether, James admits, is his "opportunity to 'do' a man of imagination".[6] Such a man, who "converts the very pulse of the air into revelations",[7] is of course a rarity. James, himself a man of imagination, was in a position to offer this advice: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!".[8] This commandment, like most, seems easier given than obeyed. However, in his Prefaces James submits his own encouraging testimony.

> One walked of course with one's eyes greatly open, and I hasten to declare that such a practice, carried on for a long time and over considerable space, positively provokes, all round, a mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced.9

Lambert Strether responds to "the urgent appeal" of the life he sees in Paris; in fact his "imagination reacted before one could stop it" (70). However, there are conditions of his perceptions which affect how he interprets what he sees. Perception is not a static exercise; there is an interaction between the perceiver and the perceived, and both are in motion. This relationship we may call proportion, and it is the subject of Strether's one declared philosophic statement in The Ambassadors. "It was the proportions that were changed, and the proportions were at all times, he philosophised, the very conditions of per-

ception, the terms of thought" (205-206).

When proportion is considered solely from the perceiver's position it is called point of view. The familiar, recurrent and sometimes annoying declaration "There we are" reverberates throughout The Ambassadors and is Strether's final punctuation. This choral attention to location emphasises the importance of Strether's point of view to his experience. The question put, and put so often in a mood of anticipation and suspense, is where Strether will "come out". Strether's point of view fluctuates and the course of its movements changes "the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought", and, we might add, his life. The reader's comprehension of Strether's experiences in The Ambassadors will depend on an understanding of the factors which determine his point of view.

CHAPTER ONE

"THE TERMS OF THOUGHT"

The reader of Henry James does well to keep in mind James's injunction to the aspiring novelist: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!".[1] In James's novels the reader must discern levels of meaning not from broad actions but from small descriptive details. A room's furniture or a conversational turn of phrase are of signal importance in the Jamesian novel; to pay them only casual attention is not merely a critical sin of omission, but an act of misreading. As Barbara Hardy writes:

> For the unusual feature of the Jamesian novel -- particularly the last three novels -- is that it makes it almost impossible for us to maintain such a distinction between local effect and central relevance. The local vividness of person or scene or object is nearly always a symbolic contribution to the main action and argument.2

Although The Ambassadors is not perhaps the most elaborate of James's last novels -- it is almost straightforward compared with The Golden Bowl -- one must be especially attentive to details. James's method in the novel is to present Lambert Strether's changing perceptions as Strether himself sees them. The reader, therefore, is in the position of imitating Strether, of seeing both what Strether sees and

how he sees it. (Of course the reader is also at a further, critical remove which is inherent in the appreciation of fiction.) This study of The Ambassadors will concentrate largely on the details of Strether's perceptions; it is virtually impossible to exaggerate their importance.

In the opening pages of The Ambassadors Henry James promptly establishes an alliance between Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey. This alliance is figuratively illustrated by a detail: both Strether and Miss Gostrey wear glasses. Strether is characterized by "a perpetual pair of glasses" (20), "his eternal nippers" (22). These "aids to sight" (21) are included in a catalogue of features which Strether holds in common with Maria Gostrey, features so much in common that "they might have been brother and sister" (21). Strether's sudden friendship with Maria creates an alternative to his old friend Waymarsh and indicates Strether's first change in point of view. The opposition to Waymarsh is underscored by the fact that Waymarsh "wore no glasses" (30). The implication of this descriptive detail is evident; Waymarsh has no imaginative vision, whereas Strether and Maria have. Instead, Waymarsh has a grand tendency to stare, a tendency matched by

> an ambiguous dumbness that might have represented either the growth of a perception or the despair of one; and at times and in places -- where the low-browed galleries were darkest, the opposite gables queerest, the solicitations of every kind densest -- the others caught him fixing hard some object of minor interest, fixing even at moments nothing discernible, as if he were indulging it with a truce. (37)

Waymarsh cannot enjoy the sightseeing in Chester because he does not feel the "mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted".[3] Waymarsh's failure effectively separates him from Strether and Maria Gostrey, making them "the others". Strether's similarities with Maria are the first portents of his movement away from the New England point of view.

Besides symbolizing the alliance between Maria and Strether, the detail of the glasses also introduces a motif concerning the conditions of perception. Glasses literally frame the eyes and direct vision. They are emblematic of the dual nature of Strether's perception; he possesses a limited yet focused awareness of the world around him. This is true, of course, not merely of Lambert Strether but of humankind generally. All our perceptions are necessarily framed -- limited and focused -- and borrowing a theatrical term we shall call the framing the proscenium effect.

We can see how Strether's point of view is determined by examining several examples of the proscenium effect in The Ambassadors. The scenic details of place in the novel,

especially the descriptions of characters' homes, inspire Strether's imagination of them and of their inhabitants. The rooms which enclose the novel's actions almost have the force of character. The romantic novels of fiction give preconceived forms to Strether's imagination. He is encouraged to a romantic point of view by the expectations of fiction. Strether's recurrent theatrical metaphors provide him with a framework with which to understand his alternating active and passive roles. Experience may be a spider web, but the perceptions it catches are each and every one particular and definite. These three examples of the proscenium effect -- scenic detail, fictional models, and theatrical metaphors -- exemplify the way Strether discriminates his experience.

As early as Chester Strether experiences an odd emotional response to rooms. After his meeting of Maria Gostrey and his reunion with Waymarsh, Strether finds the dimensions of his hotel room altered: "A place was too small for him after it that had seemed large enough before" (28). What has changed, of course, is not the room's dimensions but Strether's perceptions. Hotels cannot be confused with homes, though. Homes, however humble, are expressions of personality which sensibly affect their guests. Thus, Bilham's "own poor place" has "an odd and engaging dignity" with "its three or four chairs, its overflow of

taste and conviction and its lack of nearly all else" (86). Bilham's room contains for Strether, "the legend of good-humoured poverty . . . that he soon read into the scene" (87). It is the proscenium effect which isolates an activity or a person within a specific setting that causes Strether to "read into the scene".

Long before Strether actually meets Chad Newsome in Paris, he is introduced to him at Chad's apartments, among the youth's friends who take their leisure there. As Strether reports to Waymarsh,

> "I stayed, I dawdled, I trifled; above all I looked around. I saw, in fine; and -- I don't know what to call it -- I sniffed. It's a detail, but it's as if there were something -- something very good -- to sniff. (73)

At Bilham's invitation, Strether, this time with Waymarsh, returns to the Boulevard Malesherbes. What confuses Strether most about the "irregular life" there is everyone's fine opinion of Mrs. Newsome's wayward son.

> They commended his munificence and approved his taste, and in doing so sat down, as it seemed to Strether, in the very soil out of which these things flowered. Out friend's final predicament was that he himself was sitting down, for the time, with them. (81)

The "sitting down" which Strether engages in puts him, as might be said, inside Chad's frame. Strether's appreciation of Chad's balcony, of Chad's supply of cigarettes, of his fine things and fine friends, predisposes Strether to

approve Chad's life in Paris. Strether's appreciation, though, is not critical; neither his first impressions of Chad's apartments or of Chad himself are marked by an estimate of the youth's real shortcomings. When the sculptor Gloriani visits Chad's apartments, he carefully scrutinizes a painting there whose "frame was large out of proportion to the canvas" (162). Chad's painting symbolizes his general failure; his "frame" of comforts and manners and fine things is out of proportion to his actual worth. Removing this frame, there is very little left to see in Chad Newsome.

Chad's apartments give Strether a sense of a world of impressions unknown in Woollett, but it is in Gloriani's garden where he is "taken for the first time, into the 'great world'" (143).

> The place itself was a great impression -- a small pavilion, clear-faced and sequestered, an effect of polished parquet, of fine white panel and square sallow gilt, of decoration delicate and rare, in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and on the edge of a cluster of gardens attached to old noble houses. Far back from the streets and unsuspected by crowds, reached by a long passage and a quiet court, it was as striking to the unprepared mind, he immediately saw, as a treasure dug up; giving him too, more than anything yet, the note of the range of the immeasurable town and sweeping away, as by a last brave brush, his usual landmarks and terms. (124)

Strether has effectively entered another world, a world of the delicate and the rare and the fine. The attention to aesthetics, the hint of other gardens, the influence of the unsuspected, cause Strether to abandon his "usual landmarks and terms". Gloriani's house is "reached by a long passage" but for Strether it has taken a passage of time -- a life-time -- to reach this place. And though still unprepared, he bravely enters in.

> It was in the garden, a spacious cherished remnant, out to which a dozen persons had already passed, that Chad's host presently met them; while the tall bird-haunted trees, all of a twitter with the spring and the weather, and the high party-walls, on the other side of which grave hôtels stood off for privacy, spoke of survival, transmission, association, a strong indifferent persistent order. The day was so soft that the little party had practically adjourned to the open air, but the open air was in such condition all a chamber of state. (124)

The garden may be a "remnant", but it is a protected one. It appears to be, especially with the traditional suggestion of gardens, a refuge from time. There are birds in the trees and spring in the air, but the enclosed garden promotes the human order. The open air is transformed into "a chamber of state"; it is the court of the beautiful, whose cardinal values are "survival, transmission, association". Strether, however, is not an ambassador here, but only Chad's guest. The guest's impressions can only proliferate.

> Strether had presently the sense of a great convent, a convent of missions, famous for he scarce knew what, a nursery of young priests, of scattered shade, of straight alleys and chapel-bells, that spread its mass in one quarter; he had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression, all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination. (124-125)[4]

The immediate change from diplomatic to religious imagery reveals Strether's keen perceptions. For Gloriani does preside over a religious order, an order whose credo is, again, "survival, transmission, association". Gloriani's garden is a veritable hortus conclusus, immune and happy but also artificial and illusory. It converts Strether -- through the "signs and tokens", "the whole range of expression" enclosed within its walls -- to make an art of life and a religion of art.

Two women are primarily responsible for Strether's Parisian education, Maria Gostrey and Marie de Vionnet. The lengthy descriptions of each woman's home indicate Strether's particular awareness of place. Maria's home in the Quartier Marboeuf changes dramatically in its presentation from Strether's first visit to his last. The change in descriptive tone symbolizes a change in Strether's point of view. Marie de Vionnet's home, however, does not change for Strether; it rather renews and deepens his first impressions with each visit. Both places, though, are immensely important for the way they affect Strether's perceptions.

Strether first sees Maria's home as a clutter of possessions.

> Her compact and crowded little chambers, almost dusky, as they at first struck him, with accumulations, represented a supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions. Wherever he looked he saw an old ivory or an old brocade, and he scarce knew where to sit for fear of a misappliance. The life of the occupant struck him of a sudden as more charged with possession even than Chad's or than Miss Barrace's; wide as his glimpse had lately become of the empire of "things," what was before him still enlarged it; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple. It was the innermost nook of the shrine -- as brown as a pirate's cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects all that caught, through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows. (81-82)

The dual aspects of Maria's home -- shrine and pirate's cave -- reveal something of her character.[5] Her devotion to the beautiful is tainted by "the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" and her general self-conscious acquisitiveness. The gloom of Maria's chambers is more than a little foreboding and her "things" more than a little intimidating to Lambert Strether. Maria Gostrey is a collector and Strether is "a specimen of the rococo" (128) eminently collectable.

The room has another aspect, though, just as Maria has another role. The sinister quality of the place is qualified as soon as Strether turns his attention from the room to its owner.

> But after a full look at his hostess he knew none the less what most concerned him. The circle in which they stood together was warm with life, and every question between them would live there as nowhere else. (82)

This small, crowded, dark, warm place will be a setting of incubation for Strether. Many of his thoughts will be born here, with Maria in faithful attendance. As Strether's ignorance is replaced by knowledge and as their intimacy increases, Maria's home becomes more the place "warm with life" and significantly less a "pirate's cave".

At the novel's end, Strether sees Maria for the last time not among the confusion of his first impression, but in "her little Dutch-looking dining-room".

> This retreat was at the back of the house, with a view of a scrap of old garden that had been saved from modern ravage; and though he had on more than one other occasion had his legs under its small and peculiarly polished table of hospitality, the place had never before struck him as so sacred to pleasant knowledge, to intimate charm, to antique order, to a neatness that was almost august. To sit there was, as he had told his hostess before, to see life reflected for the time in ideally kept pewter; which was somehow becoming, improving to life, so that one's eyes were held and comforted. Strether's were comforted at all events now -- and the more that it was the last time -- with the charming effect, on the board bare of a cloth and proud of its perfect surface, of the small old crockery and old silver, matched by the more substantial pieces happily disposed about the room. The specimens of vivid Delf, in particular, had the dignity of family portraits. (360-361)

Like Gloriani, Maria Gostrey has her remnant of garden, her ideals of knowledge, charm and order. The reflection of life which Strether finds in Maria's kitchen among the familiar and domestic scene offers him care and comfort. The haphazard hoard is completely in the past now; it is as if order has replaced chaos in the Quartier Marboeuf. The roundness of crockery and Delf (not to mention the melon Maria serves him) recalls Strether's earlier perception of "the circle in which they stood" where "every question between them would live . . . as nowhere else" (82). At the conclusion of The Ambassadors there is still one question between Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey and it is only here that it can live.

The proscenium effect of rooms becomes most fully elaborated in James's description of the Countess de Vionnet's home in the Rue de Bellechasse. Unlike Maria, she lives "in the midst of possessions not vulgarly numerous, but hereditary cherished charming" (151). From her surroundings Strether infers

> some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads and faded surfaces of satin striped with alternate silk.6

Mme de Vionnet lives not just in the midst of possessions, but with both the objects and values of her inheritance. She maintains the "indifferent persistent order" of "survival, transmission [and] association" (124) which Strether sensed so keenly in Gloriani's garden.

Strether takes Mme de Vionnet's belongings "all tenderly into account" (152) and inevitably makes a comparison.

> They . . . marked Madame de Vionnet's apartment as something quite different from Miss Gostrey's little museum of bargains and from Chad's lovely home; he recognized it as founded much more on old accumulations that had possibly from time to time shrunken than on any contemporary method of acquisition or form of curiosity. Chad and Miss Gostrey had rummaged and purchased and picked up and exchanged, sifting, selecting, comparing; whereas the mistress of the scene before him, beautifully passive under the spell of transmission . . . had only received, accepted and been quiet. . . . There had been objects she or her predecessors might even conceivably have parted with under need; but Strether couldn't suspect them of having sold old pieces to get "better" ones. They would have felt no difference as to better or worse. (152)7

This is the epitome of the "indifferent persistent order". The frantic energy of Chad and Maria (seven active verbs in a row!) is contrasted by Mme de Vionnet's "beautifully passive" attitude. Strether soon finds himself in an unexpected and unintended relationship with Mme de Vionnet. This relationship is an unavoidable result of Strether's perception of Mme de Vionnet's beauty, passivity, noble heritage and immediate need; "and the relation profited by

a mass of things that were not strictly in it or of it" (154). The elements "not strictly in it or of it" -- such as her room and her relics and the world outside -- are the definition of a frame.

Here, as at Gloriani's garden, time is transcended: "Everything in fine made her immeasurably new, with nothing so new as the old house and the old objects" (153). For Strether's imaginative vision, Mme de Vionnet's home distinctly recedes into historic time. At a visit several months later, the relationship between Strether's historic sensibility and the proscenium effect of Mme de Vionnet's "high and square" chambers is specifically outlined.

> And now at last he took leave of her, as he had been intending for five minutes. But she went part of the way with him, accompanying him out of the room and into the next and the next. Her noble old apartment offered a succession of three, the first two of which indeed, on entering, smaller than the last, but each with its faded and formal air, enlarged the office of the antechamber and enriched the sense of approach. Strether fancied them, liked them, and, passing through them with her more slowly now, met a sharp renewal of his original impression. He stopped, he looked back; the whole thing made a vista, which he found high melancholy and sweet -- full, once more, of dim historic shades, of the faint far-away cannon-roar of the great Empire. It was doubtless half the projection of his mind, but his mind was a thing that, among old waxed parquets, pale shades of pink and green, pseudo-classic candelabra, he had always needfully to reckon with. (248-249)

The vista of Mme de Vionnet's rooms suggests an infinite series of frames-within-frames. Strether makes the imagina-

tive connection between this spatial series and a movement in time. His historic perceptions may be only "half the projection of his mind", but this assumes a corresponding half which justifies that projection. What Strether "had always needfully to reckon with" amply provides this other half.

When James prepared his Project of The Ambassadors for Harpers, he was not yet sure where to set Strether's final meeting with Mme de Vionnet. He refers to the "interview that he has with Mme de Vionnet, who either comes to see him again or addresses him an earnest request, which he complies with, to come to her (I've not yet determined which)".[8] In the novel James deftly puts off the choice as Strether's own.

> She had added a line of postscript, to the effect that she would come to him elsewhere and at his own hour if he preferred; but he took no notice of this, feeling that if he saw her at all half the value of it would be in seeing her where he had already seen her best. . . . He liked the place she lived in, the picture that each time squared itself, large and high and clear, around her: every occasion of seeing it was a pleasure of a different shade. (332-333)

At this final meeting, the framing architectural symbolism of Mme de Vionnet's home is given its meaning. "He felt what he had felt before with her, that there was always more behind what she showed, and more and more again behind

that" (340). Mme de Vionnet "made a relation of mere recognition" (156), and Strether's recognition is of her receding depths, her lineage of history and culture, of her being "beautifully passive under the spell of transmission" (152). Strether discriminates in the alternating Parisian light of surface and depth and recognizes Marie de Vionnet's true self. She tearfully confesses, "It's how you see me, it's how you see me . . . and it's as I am" (341), and accuses herself and Chad of having "thrust on you appearances" (343), but Strether has seen "more and more again behind that".

In the proportional relationship of perceiver and perceived, the scenic details of place almost have the force of characters in themselves. Strether's fictional models, however, seem to be superimposed upon scene and character. Strether's reading apparently has been largely romantic and it has encouraged him to see the world in largely romantic terms. In his Preface to The American, Henry James distinguishes the Real and the Romantic.

> The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way. The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.9

Both the real and the romantic have their mansion in the human mind; the real is distinguished by its direct perception, the romantic by its projection onto the world. In The Ambassadors, Lambert Strether is confronted with a paradox of the real and the romantic. He finds himself suddenly in "a world of types" as at the London theatre where "the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage" (44). Strether's identification of the types from romantic fiction determines the conditions of his perceptions in Paris.

At one point Chad Newsome is described as "finding reassurance in comparisons and contrasts" (353), and this is an activity which Lambert Strether is attracted to in Paris. Back in Woollett Strether had, once, compared Mrs. Newsome (because of her ruff) to Queen Elizabeth. The association he feels was "rather imperfectly romantic" and "vaguely pathetic" since "no gentleman of his age at Woollett could ever, to a lady of Mrs. Newsome's, which was not much less than his, have embarked on such a simile" (43). Strether at Woollett, to Mrs. Newsome, never again uttered such a daring comment; "it was as 'free' a remark as he had ever made to her" (43). Europe, however, inspires Strether's "imperfectly romantic" imagination. As he soon discovers, "wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it" (70).

The problem with Strether's romantic imagination is his literal expectations. One of Strether's many passing occupations in Woollett had been "a course of English Literature re-enforced by exams and tea" (262) given in Mrs. Newsome's parlour. The reader wonders what sort of critical approach Lambert Strether took with the ladies of Woollett, because his appreciation of literature seems embarrassingly superficial. With Maria Gostrey in London, Strether watches a play concerning "a bad woman in a yellow frock who made a pleasant weak good-looking young man in perpetual evening dress do the most dreadful things" (45). This spurs Strether to wonder, "Would Chad also be in perpetual evening dress? He somehow rather hoped it" (45). This naive equation between stage conventions and real life displays Strether's imagination at its absurd worst. However when Chad Newsome does show himself, debonairely at ten o'clock at a theatre in Paris, he is indeed in evening dress. Just as the actor on the London stage impresses Strether by his appearance, so too does Chad assume the appeal of fiction for Lambert Strether.

The appeal of Paris itself for Strether is largely anticipated by the appeal of fiction. Lewis Lambert Strether returned, we are told, from his Paris honeymoon "with lemon-coloured volumes in general on the brain" (64). These "lemon-coloured volumes" have remained in Woollett unbound,

and represent for Strether the unfulfilled dreams of his youth. Certainly one of these volumes may have been Henry Murger's Scènes de la vie Bohème, the foremost romantic account of bohemian bonhomie in the Latin Quarter of Paris. It is the original model of "the legend of good-humoured poverty" (87) which Strether "reads into" Bilham's home. Murger's fiction has formed a sympathetic bond in Strether's mind between himself and the young Chad Newsome. Wandering in his first days in Paris, Strether senses that

> Old imaginations of the Latin Quarter had played their part for him, and he had duly recalled its having been with this scene of rather ominious legend that, like so many young men in fiction as well as in fact, Chad had begun. (66)

News of Chad's plans in Paris had made the older man envious "of the boy's romantic privilege" (67). Strether's thoughts turn to

> Melancholy MÜrger, with Francine and Musette and Rodolphe, at home, in the company of the tattered, one -- if not in his single self two or three -- of the unbound, the paper-covered dozen on the shelf; and when Chad had written, five years ago, after a sojourn then already prolonged to six months, that he had decided to go in for economy and the real thing, Strether's fancy had quite fondly accompanied him in this migration. (67)

Further news of Mrs. Newsome's son however leads Strether to believe that Murger's romanticism had become "vulgarised" (68) because Chad had "been too vulgar for his privilege" (69). If Chad Newsome has abandoned the romantic ideals of Murger,

Strether remains, in "the beautiful circuit and subterfuge"[10] of his thought and desire, faithful.

Strether's first sight of the Countess de Vionnet is greatly disappointing. He no longer envisions a base seductress, but what he sees is an affront to his anticipation. Mme de Vionnet might even pass for an ordinary woman in Woollett!

> There was somehow not quite a wealth in her; and a wealth was all that, in his simplicity, he had definitely prefigured . . . it would possibly have been more thrilling for him that she should have shown as more vividly alien. (134-135)

Mme de Vionnet is the Countess de Vionnet but she does not fit Strether's preconceptions of the nobility. The Duchess who interrupts them at least satisfies Strether's notions, being "very much what he had obscurely supposed duchesses" (135). Furthermore, Marie Vionnet is not only a countess, but she is also a femme du monde, and neither are what Lambert Strether had supposed.

> She was a woman who, between courses, could be graceful with her elbows on the table. It was a posture unknown to Mrs. Newsome, but it was easy for a femme du monde. (186)

Mme de Vionnet is "fifty women" (164), and the effect upon Strether is to take "all his categories by surprise" (168).

Surprised as Strether may be by Mme de Vionnet, he continues to recognize familiar qualities in her. She is

"one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met" (156). Unaware of her identity, Strether observes her quietude in the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

> She reminded our friend -- since it was the way of nine-tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined -- of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written. (180)

In the dim sanctity of this particular church we may be reasonably sure that what Strether would have written would bear a striking resemblance to Victor Hugo. The "great romancer and the great romance" (182) are foremost in Strether's consciousness, especially because of his recent purchase of seventy bound volumes of Hugo's works. The recollection of Hugo conjures up the selfless heroism of Quasimodo and the sad beauty of Esmeralda, promoting Strether's further commitment to Mme de Vionnet. This, too, is a relation made from a mere recognition. Mme de Vionnet becomes for him "the lady of his quest" (212); "she was romantic for him far beyond what she could have guessed" (182).

Of Strether's many literary models inspired by Mme de Vionnet, one transcends naive romanticism. Seeing her at a party of Chad's, Strether invents a series of comparisons -- a Renaissance coin, a goddess, a sea-nymph -- but settles on Cleopatra.

> 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. She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next. (168)

The reference to Cleopatra also implies a reference to Antony. Chad Newsome has long been presumed by Woollett to be a "strumpet's fool"; and in fact this view initiates Strether's diplomatic mission. The "Roman" responsibilities of home have been ignored by the youth for luxurious dalliance in the exotic East. Mme de Vionnet shares with Cleopatra the immensely attractive ability of making "defect perfection". Strether is himself soon attracted to Antony's role, feeling even that

> he could trust her to make deception right. As she presented things the ugliness -- goodness knew why -- went out of them; none the less too that she could present them, with an art of her own, by not so much as touching them. (337)

Like Shakespeare's play, The Ambassadors presents a movement from initial scorn to a full appreciation of a character's tragic grandeur. In Antony and Cleopatra, the immunity ascribed to the Queen by Enobarbus ("Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety", II,ii,235-6) is seriously threatened by Caesar's world and Antony's death. Called "Empress" by Iras, Cleopatra

responds:

> No more but e'en a woman, and commanded
> By such poor passion as the maid that milks
> And does the meanest chares. (IV,xv,73-75)

At their final meeting, Strether sees a Countess who possesses this same tragic awareness.

> She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given 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. (342)

The same qualities which distinguish Cleopatra and Marie de Vionnet make their sorrows not the sorrows of the maid-servant. They have "such variety and yet such harmony" (350). They are women of genius (168) who have the rare gift of presenting their art as artless. They have imagination, like James's "man of genius: who takes "the faintest hints of life" and "converts the very pulses of the air into revelations".[11] From this same creative imagination, though, stems a strong and humbling judgment. At their first encounter, Strether recognized in Mme de Vionnet a "common humanity" (135) and it is at the last recognized again. However, in the very severity of her sorrow and judgment Mme de Vionnet impresses Strether as being immeasurably noble.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Lambert Strether begins to feel his lost youth; his loss is expressed in a theatrical metaphor: "If the playhouse wasn't closed his seat had at least fallen to somebody else" (65). This metaphor slyly hints at Strether's Puritan heritage, but it more importantly reveals his self-definition as a spectator of life. At the London theatre Strether had made an equation between those on stage and those in the stalls, and "he couldn't have said if it were actors or auditors who were most true" (44). Strether's dilemma in The Ambassadors is in reconciling his own duality as an actor and an auditor. His perception of one role as predominant at any one time sets his point of view on one side of the footlights or the other.

Paris for Lambert Strether is populated by types acting out their special roles, sometimes in a pageant, sometimes a tableau, sometimes farce, and once or twice a tragedy. Strether's perceptions of the Parisian scene and its characters reflect his own sense of involvement or observation. Three scenes of Parisian life may be compared to illustrate Strether's change. While seeking a quiet place to read Mrs. Newsome's letters, Strether watches the morning activity in the garden of the Tuileries on his second morning in Paris.

> The prompt Paris morning struck its cheerful notes -- in a soft breeze and a sprinkled smell, in the light flit, over the garden-floor, of bare-headed girls with the buckled strap of oblong boxes, in the type of ancient thrifty persons basking betimes where terrace-walls were warm, in the blue-frocked brass-labelled officialism of humble rakers and scrapers, in the deep references of a straight-pacing priest or the sharp ones of a white-gaitered red-legged soldier. 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 of something mixed with art. (60)

Paris is a spectacle for Strether here; it is all charming clockwork movement and simple occupational insignia. It may be cheerful to watch, but there is really no emotional investment for him. It is, in a manner of speaking, for Strether what the circus is for Waymarsh.

A parallel scene occurs several months later. It is evening now and Strether has again received a communiqué from Woollett.

> The scent of flowers was in the streets, he had the whiff of violets perpetually in his nose; and he had attached himself to sounds and suggestions, vibrations of the air, human and dramatic, he imagined, as they were not in other places, that came out for him more and more as the mild afternoons deepened -- a far-off hum, a sharp near click on the asphalt, a voice calling, replying, somewhere and as full of tone as an actor's in a play. (190-191)

Strether is still a spectator here, but the primacy of the visual has been replaced by a sharper awareness of all the senses. Strether's months in Paris have taught him a deeper appreciation of tone and nuance. His concern is now with

the "human and dramatic".

Finally still another telegram is received, but this time it comes from Mme de Vionnet. Following their auspicious meeting by the river she requests to see him once more and he immediately sends his reply. At the Postes et Télégraphes Strether finds himself in the middle of

> the vibration of the vast strange life of the town, the influence of the types, the performers concocting their messages; the little prompt Paris women, arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed public pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table: implements that symbolised for Strether's too interpretative innocence something more acute in manners, more sinister in morals, more fierce in the national life. After he had put in his paper he had ranged himself, he was really amused to think, on the side of the fierce, the sinister, the acute. He was carrying on a correspondance, across the great city, quite in the key of the Postes et Télégraphes in general; and it was fairly as if the acceptance of that fact had come from something in his state that sorted with the occupation of his neighbours. He was mixed up with the typical tale of Paris, and so were they, poor things -- how could they altogether help being? They were no worse than he, in short, and he no worse than they. (333)

Strether has taken his place with his fellow performers in the Postes et Télégraphes acting out a "typical tale of Paris". "The prompt Paris women" are perhaps the same women he watched in "the prompt Paris morning" (60) so many months ago. Each one, extemporizing her important reply or appeal, has a story human and dramatic. Strether knows this in the only way it can be known -- by having his own story.

He may be a touch patronizing of his fellow actors, but he is more than a touch self-effacing. He humours himself with his surprising place among "the fierce, the sinister, the acute". Yet, his identification is profound; if he is playing a part in a "typical tale of Paris", that tale is as particular as his own case. Types are typical only as they are observed as such; the moment the audience concentrates on the particular, the typical tale becomes a singular case and one in which tragedy is possible.

In the climactic chapters of The Ambassadors, Henry James brings together all the motifs of Strether's perceptions to the point of revelation, revelation both for Strether and for the reader. Among the conditions of Strether's perceptions have been his romantic fictional models, his changing definition as actor or auditor, and his keen awareness of place. At the climax of the novel, Strether's perception is to be tested by his appreciation of one event and all these conditions are called into focus by Strether's consciousness.

Towards the novel's end, his break with Sarah Pocock complete and his days in Paris "numbered", Lambert Strether retreats alone into the countryside for a taste of "that French ruralism, with its cool special green".[12] Strether takes a train for no particular destination and looks out upon the scene. The landscape reminds him of a painting

by Lambinet which he had admired -- and characteristically did not buy -- at a Boston art dealer's shop. The memory of the unbought painting has remained with him and has remained "sweet" (319), sweeter perhaps as unheard melodies are said to be. The passing French countryside is for Strether admittedly "but a land of fancy for him -- the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters" (318). Strether views the scenery through the train window and it is undoubtedly this frame which suggests "the little oblong window of the picture-frame" (318).

Strether disembarks after eighty minutes "just at the right spot" and proceeds "as if to keep an appointment" (319). He takes amusement at the idea of his appointment, but it is qualified amusement. "It will be felt that he could amuse himself, at his age, with very small things if it be again noted that his appointment was only with a superseded Boston fashion" (319). One must understand that Strether, following months of intense life in Paris, is feeling his age. He had previously felt that "there were 'movements' he was too late for" (65), and now he is going back to keep an appointment with his past.

The frame of Strether's remembered Lambinet surrounds his present experience and his movement into the day becomes a movement into the past.

> The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river -- a river of which he didn't know, and didn't want to know, the name -- fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short -- it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover, he was freely walking about in it. (319-320)

Once inside the picture Strether can no longer see the frame; and if time is transcended, so too must be space -- Tremont Street and France are equivalent for Strether. Here the equation of art and life is made manifest in Strether's consciousness. There is a perfection in his day, a "sense of success, of a finer harmony in things; nothing but what had turned out as yet according to his plan" (320). Strether's plan is only to see what he can, clearly as he can, and while he can. He no longer has to contend with Chad Newsome's youth, or Waymarsh's watchful eye, or Sarah Pocock's distaste. His responsibility is only his perceptions. "He really continued in the picture -- that being for himself his situation -- all the rest of this rambling day" (322). Churches and villages, watery bocks and conversations with rural men out of Maupassant -- Strether's day continues and he "had meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame".[13]

Yet at this point the metaphor which informs Strether's day changes, and with it Strether's terms of thought.

> . . . though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in the midstream of his drama. It might have passed for finished, his drama, with its catastrophe all but reached; it had, however, none the less been vivid again for him as he thus gave it its fullest chance. He had only had to be at last well out of it to feel it, oddly enough, still going on. (323)

Strether's odd feeling, of course, prefigures his imminent sighting of Chad and Marie de Vionnet in the midstream of the unnamed river. More significantly, though, it expresses Strether's awareness of the paradox he has had to deal with all along. The necessity of being "out of it" to feel it going on accurately describes the dilemma of point of view. One is either inside or outside the frame in the Lambinet metaphor. Appreciation and judgment are the domain of the viewer, who can stand back and see both the painting and the frame enclosing it. (Thus Mme de Vionnet prefers the outer view of Notre Dame for purely aesthetic appreciation; the interior, chapel view is simply too close.)[14] If one is inside the frame, part of the painting itself, no judgment is possible; as we might say: if you can't see the frame, you can't see the picture.

Strether moves from being inside the frame to being "in the midstream of his drama", and this allows the paradox of point of view to intensify. An actor is by definition a walking duality -- a person assuming to be someone else. Within the theatrical metaphor one can easily perceive

oneself as both actor and audience. The rhythm of dramatic interchange is based on one character acting while another reacts. Drama also inevitably brings other people into the picture.

> For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture -- that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the characters had, without his knowing it till now, peopled all his space for him, and it seemed somehow quite happy that they should offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability. (323)

The scene and the stage of Strether's drama will now be a local auberge, the Cheval Blanc. Here Strether foresees a "comfortable climax" (323) to his day, all according to the "text". Strether recognizes the court of the Cheval Blanc as the real place -- the real right place -- in which to culminate his rural experience. It is

> the thing, as he would have called it, even to a greater degree than Madame de Vionnet's old high salon where the ghost of the Empire walked. "The" thing was the thing that implied the greatest number of other things of the sort he had had to tackle; and it was queer of course, but so it was -- the implication here was complete. Not a single one of his observations but somehow fell into a place in it; not a breath of the cooler evening that wasn't somehow a syllable of the text. The text was simply, when condensed, that in these places such things were, and that if it was in them one elected to move about one had to make one's account with what one lighted on. (323-324)

Strether has finally attained "the common unattainable art of taking things as they came" (62). All Strether's imagination is enlisted to perceive the multitudinous world of sensations and all his perceptions count. Strether's situation is simply to make his account with everything he perceives.

The hostess of the auberge, in whom "the picture and the play" (324) combine, suggests that Strether should pass his time in the garden where "he would have the agrément of the river" (324). It is a garden of pleasure, relieving Strether of the effort and strain of his past months. Strether need only luxuriate in his perceptions; "Such a river set one afloat almost before one could take up the oars" (325). The mere act of vision easily achieves all tasks.

Looking out on the river, "What he saw was exactly the right thing" (325). Strether sees "figures" on the river, figures of a man and a woman in a boat, figures that "had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day" (325). Strether momentarily returns to the Lambinet mode of perception, giving the boaters his unhesitating approval on the pictorial level.

> For two very happy persons he found himself straightaway taking them -- a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent -- that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt -- and it made them but the more idyllic. (325)

The pictorial details -- the pink parasol, the shirt-sleeves -- which are so right for Strether's painting soon become theatrical props. The entrance of personalities inevitably means drama; and as the landscape becomes a setting for human beings, Lambinet bows to Maupassant. The man and woman are Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet.

What follows is a crisis of manners. Mme de Vionnet, having recognized Strether, quickly debates the possibility of rowing off undetected -- while Strether himself has recognized her and has inferred her dilemma. Nothing is lost on Strether in their situation which is "queer as fiction, as farce" (326). As when Chad appeared at the theatre, as he met Mme de Vionnet at Notre Dame, this is another of "the accidents of a high civilization" (92). The crisis passes and the "violence" is averted, in Jamesian fashion, since Strether knows that Mme de Vionnet knows that he knows -- all without a word being spoken.

In fact, the only words spoken in this entire

chapter are Mme de Vionnet's brave "Comme cela se trouve!" (327). The whole scene is reported with a double consciousness, an alternating between a contemporary account and Strether's later, midnight introspections.

> He was to reflect later on and in private that . . . but the present result was. . . . He then knew more or less how he had been affected -- he but half knew at the time. (327-329)

The narrator is more constantly present here than anywhere else in the novel; there are seven direct appeals to the reader in as many pages.[15] Why, we must ask, does Henry James present this crucial scene without dialogue, fractured in time and with the evident intrusion of the narrative voice? Surely there is no question of his being able to present the awkward supper by the river dramatically. James's deliberate technique here compels the reader to draw back in imitation of Strether who is himself drawing back. Strether steps out of the oblong gilt frame, he takes his seat in the theatre. Of course, at the same time he plays his active role in the drama. It is only later, in reflection, that he can re-view the scene. This drawing back, this reviewing, is the process of judgment.

> . . . since we have spoken of what he was, after his return, to recall and interpret, it may as well immediately be said that his real experience of these few hours put on, in that belated vision -- for he scarce went to bed till morning -- the aspect that is most to our purpose. (328-329)

What is most to the reader's purpose is also most to Strether's. It is his belated vision, the recollection and interpretation -- his judgment, in short -- which is the real experience of his perceptions.

What Strether judges is the fact of adultery. He can no longer judge adultery -- or anything else -- by Woollett's absolute terms; the terms of Strether's thought are those of art. On this day most especially his point of view is framed by artistic models: the remembered Lambinet, the sense of drama, the queer coincidence of fiction. Alone, in the darkness of his hotel room, Strether conjures in his memory all the details of his meeting: the laughter, the lies, Mme de Vionnet's missing shawl, Chad's silent signals, the whole performance of their encounter. In the theatre of his mind, Strether again watches the performance, both theirs and his own. The basic paradox of dramatic appreciation becomes Strether's particular dilemma: "there had been simply a lie in the charming affair" (329). What Strether sees within the proscenium arch of his private theatre is a fiction. All art is a fiction, yet one by which the truth is known. Despite his qualms about "the quantity

of make-believe involved" (331), Strether has come to appreciate

> the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed. That was what, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was _like_ that -- and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? (331)

Writing especially about James's last novels, Barbara Hardy states: "The awareness of the characters in James extends beyond an interpretation of the world to a critical awareness of the act of interpretation".[16] Lambert Strether, we may say, has also come to appreciate that art "was _like_ that -- and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like?" (331).

Strether's experience of this extraordinary day has been a synthesis of the romantic and the real. The real, what Strether "cannot possibly _not_ know, sooner or later, in one way or another",[17] is finally known. However, the "one way or another" makes all the difference to the truth. It is a truth that Strether "never _can_ directly know",[18] but only apprehends in imaginative retrospect. Strether recognizes the deep intimacy of Mme de Vionnet and Chad Newsome as James says the romantic is recognized, "through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire".[19] Seen in the "beautiful circuit" of Strether's mind, the relationship of Chad and Marie remains a virtuous attachment, and Strether remains fully committed to the

"innumerable and wonderful" (331). Strether's judgment is the culmination of the aesthetic and the moral; he understands that he has indeed seen "exactly the right thing" (325).

CHAPTER TWO

"FINELY AWARE"

In the Preface to The Ambassadors Henry James discusses his choice of Paris as the setting for Lambert Strether's education.

> There was the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme does break down in Paris; that nothing is more frequently observed; that hundreds of thousands of more or less hypocritical or more or less cynical persons annually visit the place for the sake of the probable catastrophe. . . . Another surrounding scene would have done as well for our show could it have represented a place in which Strether's errand was likely to lie and his crisis to await him.[1]

Paris is, according to James, "a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett".[2] Although a fictional locale, Woollett upholds a "dreadful little old tradition" itself, that of the small-minded, work-a-day New England town. The philosophy dreamt of in Woollett is humourless, utilitarian and definite. As Strether immediately acknowledges to Maria Gostrey, "Woollett isn't sure it ought to enjoy" (25). The Kantian "ought" typifies Woollett's categorical mentality. The Decalogue has been amended there by unwritten laws covering all contingencies. The supreme benefit of Woollett's ordered existence is that

it allows one to get down to business undisturbed by the aggravation of choice.

Once in Paris, Strether, as Mrs. Newsome's ambassador, finds the glamour of the city in direct opposition to his New England absolutism.

> 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 comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next. (66)

At Woollett differences were most comfortably defined. There were only opinions on three or four subjects (113); and human beings were recognized in just two types, male and female: "These made two exactly, even with the individual varieties" (44). In iridescent Paris Strether suddenly finds himself "in the presence of new measures, other standards, a different scale of relations" (78). Strether's education and adventure is his learning to discriminate among the surfaces and depths, an endeavour Woollett has not prepared him for.

Strether's immediate response to the difference of Paris is bewilderment. His confusion on first seeing Chad Newsome is typical of his reaction.

> He was in presence of a fact that occupied his whole mind, that occupied for the half-hour his senses themselves all together; but he couldn't without inconvenience show anything -- which moreover might count really as luck. What he might have shown, had he shown at all, was exactly the kind of emotion -- the emotion of bewilderment -- that he had proposed to himself from the first, whatever should occur, to show least. 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. (92)

Though he sees and feels the "change so complete", Strether literally doesn't know what to think. The workings of Strether's mind beforehand had only been to imagine Chad as Woollett imagined him, and Woollett's mind doesn't leave any margin for surprise. Towards the novel's end, when Strether analyzes Mrs. Newsome for Maria Gostrey, the failure of Woollett is delineated.

> "That's just her difficulty -- that she doesn't admit surprises. It's a fact that, I think, describes and represents her; and it falls in with what I tell you -- that she's all, as I've called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she had done that, you see, there's no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration." (315)

This is as succinct a criticism of Woollett as will be found in the novel. To deny surprise, as Mrs. Newsome does, is really to deny life. In Strether's initial perplexity at Chad's appearance, which he believes "uncanny", Strether tells Maria:

> "All one's energy goes to facing it, to tracking it. One wants, confound it, don't you see?" he confessed with a queer face -- "one wants to enjoy anything so rare . Call it life" -- he puzzled it out -- "call it poor dear old life simply that springs the surprise. Nothing alters the fact that the surprise is paralysing, or at any rate engrossing -- all, practically, hang it, that one sees, that one can see." (109)

A significant part of the enjoyment of life is the perception of life's surprises, and Woollett's marginless cold thought allows neither enjoyment nor perception. The life of the mind is not an enchambered affair with what one knows, but rather an on-going relation with what one perceives.

Bewilderment as a response to life is essential to our understanding of Lambert Strether. "The agents in any drama," James writes in his Preface to The Princess Casamassima, "are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations."[3] Bewilderment is a "displayed mode of reaction, one of the oft-encountered, one of the highly recommended, categories of feeling".[4] Lambert Strether's interest is precisely in the depth to which he feels his situation and his bewilderment is a register of that depth. "It seems probable," James writes in this same preface, "that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us."[5] However, bewilderment may occasion the story, but it isn't the story itself. Lambert Strether's story is how bewilderment is changed to knowledge.

At one point in the novel, Sarah Pocock declares, "We've plenty of reasons . . . for everything we do" (232), and Woollett does have a reason for its marginless approach to life. The absolute code of Woollett provides its citizens with a security from the unknown, for the unknown is truly hazardous. Once Strether commits himself to the vivid life in Paris he is surrounded by the possibility of his "smash". Maria Gostrey often discusses this fate with him: "Ah but the worst -- since you've left such a margin -- may be still to come. You may yet break down" (318). The worst that may come, Strether's "smash", would be his inability to live up to his perceptions. Strether's perceptions are constantly being tested as he must discriminate among the alternating surfaces and depths of Parisian life. We can trace his education from bewilderment to knowledge by studying his response to three aspects of Parisian relativity: the seeming fluctuation in people's ages, the ambiguity of language, and the intricacy of personal relationships.

Perhaps the most cogent example of relativity in The Ambassadors is the vicissitude of people's ages. At Woollett, of course, there is a strict propriety about age. Part of the "pathetic" quality of Strether's Queen Elizabeth

comparison is his and Mrs. Newsome's ages; presumably they should be past such frivolity. When Strether brings his report of the Boulevard Malesherbes to Waymarsh, the patriarchical pilgrim asks Bilham's age. Told "not thirty", he gruffly responds, "Yet you had to take that from him?" (74). What Strether "takes" from Bilham, though, is little compared to what he receives from Chad. After seeing Chad, Strether feels his communiqué to Woollett might be economically reduced to four words: "awfully old -- grey hair" (95). Strether is insensibly upset by Chad's "marked streaks of grey, extraordinary at his age" (94), because "an aged and hoary sinner had been no part of the scheme" (95). If Paris is going to subvert the basic authority of elder over youth Strether fears he can take no authority for granted.

Strether is likewise upset by his first sight of Mme de Vionnet. "Her air of youth, for Strether, was at first almost disconcerting" (133). Strether is even more disconcerted to realize that this "young woman" (133) may be the mother of a marriageable daughter. With Maria's aid, Strether attempts to puzzle out the possible ages of Mme de Vionnet and her daughter.

> "If the girl's of the right age of course the mother can't be. I mean for the virtuous attachment. If the girl's twenty -- and she can't be less -- the mother must be at least forty. So it puts the mother out. She's too old for him."
>
> Strether, arrested again, considered and demurred. "Do you think so? Do you think any one would be too old for him? I'm eighty, and I'm too young. But perhaps the girl," he continued, "isn't twenty. Perhaps she's only ten -- but such a little dear that Chad finds himself counting her in as an attraction of the acquaintance. Perhaps she's only five. Perhaps the mother's but five-and-twenty -- a charming young widow."
>
> Miss Gostrey entertained the suggestion. "She is a widow then?"
>
> "I haven't the least idea!" (121)[6]

As a further irony, once Strether has seen both mother and daughter he is still unsure which is the object of Chad's attachment. In Paris one simply cannot tell.

Mamie Pocock should be a known quantity for Strether. He has watched the child grow up and has, in fact, just recently left her and her family in Woollett. At twenty-two Mamie is the belle of Woollett, "like the happy bride, the bride after the church and just before going away" (220). Yet, when Strether discovers her on the balcony of her hotel room, "she was dressed . . . less as a young lady than as an old one" and has a manner "almost more than matronly" (263). Strether recalls her "as a 'bud'. and then again as a flower of expansion" (261), but Mamie describes herself quite differently. "'Oh I'm not a little girl. I'm a big battered blowsy one. I don't care,' Mamie laughed, 'what happens'" (265).[7]

The variation in Mamie's age which surprises Strether -- in addition to his imagination of her as "something of a bore toward middle age" (263) and "fat, too fat, at thirty" (266) -- helps Strether to understand what is "odd and ambiguous" (261) about the girl. Mamie is "on the side and of the party of Mrs. Newsome's original ambassador" (263), and Strether's side, by this time, is Paris with its relativity.

At Chester, Strether has occasion to take the arm of his new friend, Maria Gostrey, "in the manner of a benign dependent paternal old person who wishes to be 'nice' to a younger one" (27).

> If he drew it out again indeed as they approached the inn this may have been because, after more talk had passed between them, the relation of age, or at least of experience -- which, for that matter, had already played to and fro with some freedom -- affected him as incurring a readjustment. (27)

The relations of age and experience play to and fro in Strether's consciousness throughout the novel. Although older than most of the characters, Strether discovers himself, with some discomfort, to be rather more innocent than his years should imply. Young Chad Newsome from the first exhibits an air of experience, and as Strether reflects, "Of course experience was in a manner defiance" (101). Chad's experienced manner is "a fact carrying with it an implication that, as one might imagine it, he knew, he had learned, how" (94). The further implication is that Lambert Strether

can also learn how.

Strether's exhilaration in seeing Chad's Paris is surpassed by another emotion, an envy of Chad and his "famous knowing how to live" (330). Strether's desire for his own Parisian metamorphosis is expressed to Bilham in Gloriani's garden. Strether has been transfixed by the sculptor, "the glossy male tiger" (139). Gloriani, of course, is even older than Strether and his vitality is worthy of envy. However, just as Strether is about to nominate Gloriani to Bilham as his ideal, "another impression had been superimposed" (139). The second impression is Chadwick Newsome escorting Jeanne de Vionnet. Chad and Jeanne present the very picture of youth and this instantly becomes Strether's desire.

If Strether's rejuvenation is largely a vicarious matter, it is authentic just the same. The principle of inversion active in Paris makes Strether younger and younger in proportion to his new experiences. He was never so old as when his ignorance was intact. Paris is alive with the evidence of "miracles" -- Chad's transformation is one, and his own is another still. The "smash" which Strether hazards is most dangerous because, as he tells Maria, "It will make me old" (206). Maria, his constant friend, disputes the possibility: "Ah nothing can do that! The wonderful and special thing about you is that you <u>are</u>, at

this time of day, youth" (206). Maria's apotheosizing inspires Strether to consider his entire European experience as his youth.

> "Of course I'm youth -- youth for the trip to Europe. I began to be young, or at least to get 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 -- which comes to saying that I never had the thing itself. I'm having the benefit at this moment; I had it the other day when I said to Chad 'Wait'; I shall have it still again when Sarah Pocock arrives. It's a benefit that would make a poor show for many people; and I don't know who else but you and I, frankly, could begin to see in it what I feel. I don't get drunk; I don't pursue the ladies; I don't spend money; I don't even write sonnets. 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." (206-207)

This is a significant progression from Strether's "Live all you can" declaration. In the earlier speech Strether had felt "What one loses one loses" (137), and had even cursed Bilham's luck to be "so happily and hatefully young" (138). Here, however, Strether boldly asserts his latter-day youth. Moreover, he asserts it as being a strictly personal value, his "little benefit".

Strether's benefit of youth is most deeply experienced in his perceptions of Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet.

> "One puts that in where one can -- it has to come in somewhere, if only out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons. Chad gives me the sense of it, for all his grey hairs, which merely make it solid in him and safe and serene; and she does the same, for all her being older than he, for all her marriageable daughter, her separated husband, her agitated history. Though they're young enough, my pair, I don't say they're in the freshest way, their own absolutely prime adolescence; for that has nothing to do with it. The point is that they're mine. Yes, they're my youth; since somehow at the right time nothing else ever was." (207)

Strether has realized the relative and personal nature of the world he perceives. As he ardently tells Maria, "The point is that they're mine". Their actual ages matter no more than his own; the crucial thing is that he feels the youth of their affair. His participation is so crucial that, as he will later reflect, "his intervention had absolutely aided and intensified their intimacy" (337). As they are his youth, he is their "ground"; together these form two halves of a human equation.

At the end of The Ambassadors Strether is no longer "youth" as he declared to Maria Gostrey. Strether's life has been transformed "beyond recognition" (353) and he is left with neither his former New England propriety nor the exuberance of his recent experience. Two parallel scenes will illustrate this change in Strether. On his second day in Paris, Strether, feeling "his campaign had begun" (68), goes to the Boulevard Malesherbes. There he sees Bilham relaxing on Chad's balcony and since Strether's "imagination

reacted before one could stop it" (70), Bilham's attitude symbolizes youth to the man from Woollett.

> He was young too then, the gentleman up there -- he was very young; young enough apparently to be amused at an elderly watcher, to be curious even to see what the elderly watcher would do on finding himself watched. There was youth in that, there was youth in the surrender to the balcony, there was youth for Strether at this moment in everything but his own business. (71)

There is "youth in the surrender to the balcony" by Bilham, and this becomes Strether's surrender as well. The entire movement of the scene carries Strether upward, away from his literally pedestrian standpoint.[8] The scene ends with Strether entering the porte cochère of Chad's house and the next chapter begins with Strether recounting his experience to Waymarsh later that evening. By this narrative jump in time, the reader senses how effortlessly Strether has made the ascent to join the youth on the balcony.

At the novel's end, Strether once more sees a figure on Chad's balcony and joins that figure. It is late evening; this time it is Chad himself and the ascent is not easy.

> Strether paused anew, on the last flight, at this final rather breathless sense of what Chad's life was doing with Chad's mother's emissary. It was dragging him, at strange hours, up the staircases of the rich; it was keeping him out of bed at the end of long hot days; it was transforming beyond recognition the simple, subtle, conveniently uniform thing that had anciently passed with him for a life of his own. . . . It made him feel old, and he would buy his railway ticket -- feeling, no

> doubt, older -- the next day; but he had meanwhile come up four flights, counting the entresol, at midnight and without a lift, for Chad's life. (353)

The lift which does not work at this time of night is symbolically apt; Strether, in the evening of his Parisian experience, no longer feels the "immense moral lift" (176) he sensed in his "pair". Months ago the balcony had been recognized as "the perfect place for easy aftertastes" (79), but Strether now disassociates himself from Chad's "pleasant practice of smoking on balconies, of supping on salads" (353). The passionate sense of "the feelings of other persons" (207) which had nourished Strether's new vitality is now somewhat begrudged. Yet the weariness which Strether feels at the end of the novel is of a different kind than he had at the outset. "I was dog-tired when I sailed" (32), he confessed to Waymarsh back in Chester, but his original fatigue, we can infer, was due to the monotony of Woollett. Strether's final, midnight weariness follows the intensity of several months' experiences and marks the sad knowledge that these experiences are at an end. So finely aware is Strether of his experiences that the entresol counts as a flight.

Although not a logical positivist, Strether has grave misgivings about the ambiguity of language in Paris. New England, to judge by Waymarsh's example, spoke to the point and without room for misunderstanding. After his first visit

to the Boulevard Malesherbes, Strether reported to Waymarsh, "You can't make out over here what people do know" (75); it might be added that, having been told, Strether doesn't seem to know much better. Questioning Chad, Strether finds his straightforward inquiries met with: "One doesn't know quite what you mean by being in women's 'hands'. It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is" (103). Strether suffers the initial discomfort of many travellers: he realizes that he speaks another language.

When words are not definite, when there is not an established and shared meaning -- as there is in Woollett -- then the possibilities of interpretation are allowed to play to and fro with an alarming freedom. Strether's initiation to the freedom of Parisian conversation occurs when Waymarsh accompanies him on a return visit to the Boulevard Malesherbes.

> If Strether had been sure at each juncture of what -- with Bilham in especial -- she [Miss Barrace] talked about, he might have traced others [other freedoms] and winced at them and felt Waymarsh wince; but he was in fact so often at sea that his sense of the range of reference was merely general and that he on several occasions guessed and interpreted only to doubt. He wondered what they meant, but there were things he scarce thought they could be supposed to mean, and "Oh no -- not <u>that</u>!" was at the end of most of his ventures. (80)

The wincing -- for Strether, if not for Waymarsh -- will gradually be educated to an appreciation. And it is his

guessing and interpreting and doubting which accomplishes this appreciation. Waymarsh for his part remains silent, firmly opposed to "the discrimination of types and tones" (39).[9] Paris, Strether discovers, is a place of nuances, a place where tone says as much as and sometimes more than words themselves.

Miss Barrace best demonstrates the ambiguous yet suggestive quality of Parisian speech. Strether's mere mention of Mme de Vionnet elicits her response: "Madame de Vionnet? Oh, oh, oh!" (129). Though her "oh's" might well represent noughts, Strether senses "more in it . . . than met the ear" (129).[10] Miss Barrace literally says nothing with her exclamations, yet implies a great deal to Strether's imagination. Likewise, her liberal dispensing of the adjective "wonderful" seems to have no apparent meaning. However, Strether derives a meaning from her tone and is soon using the word as often as Miss Barrace. Strether's long "backstage" conversation with Miss Barrace at Chad's party for Sarah Pocock indicates how adept Strether has become at the ambiguous speech of Paris. It is a conversation marked by a great many uncompleted sentences and extensive elaborations of one another's figures of speech, and ends with Miss Barrace's "comprehensive 'Ah!' expressive perhaps of some impatience for the time he took to get used to it" (282).

More significant than Miss Barrace's "oh" or

"wonderful", though, are the very terms of moral distinction -- good and bad -- which seem to be confused in Paris. During their first talk, Strether is disturbed to find himself alternately thinking Chad a gentleman and a Pagan. "Gentleman" and "Pagan" are words which in Woollett are mutually exclusive and defined as opposites, one good and the other bad.

> It didn't in the least, on the spot, spring up helpfully for him that a person couldn't at the same time be both. There was nothing at this moment in the air to challenge the combination; there was everything to give it on the contrary something of a flourish. (105)

The flourish of Paris which presents Chad without contradiction as a Pagan-gentleman soon has Strether realizing that Woollett's definitions are not universal.

Although Maria Gostrey tells Strether that Chad is "not so good as you think" (111), Strether believes "he couldn't <u>but</u> be as good from the moment he wasn't as bad" (112). Strether is still suffering from a belief in polarities common to Woollett. One is either a good person or a bad one, Woollett holds, and any compromise would negate the meaning of the words. As Strether tries to maintain Woollett's theory of the bad woman, Maria suggests it may be "a woman" rather than "the woman", and that she is probably a very good one (110). Strether may be unsure what Maria means by "good", but the reader clearly sees that her definition is not his. In Woollett the adjective "good"

applied to the noun "woman" can only mean one thing.

With Chad Newsome, Strether's bewilderment about "good" and "bad" becomes even more acute. Strether is greatly perturbed about Chad's "good relations" with Mme de Vionnet.

> "I mean <u>how</u> good are they?"
> "Oh awfully good."
> Again Strether had faltered, but it was brief. It was all very well, but there was nothing now he wouldn't risk. "Excuse me, but I must really -- as I began by telling you -- know where I am. Is she bad?"
> "'Bad'?" -- Chad echoed it, but without shock. "Is this what's implied -- ?"
> "When relations are good?" Strether felt a little silly, and was even conscious of a foolish laugh, at having it imposed on him to have appeared to speak so. What indeed was he talking about? (150)

What indeed is Strether talking about? He just wants to determine Mme de Vionnet's sexual interest in Chad. Strether's conversational "risk" is to put the question point-blank by asking, "Is she bad?". Since Chad is a son of Woollett, he knows quite well what Strether is asking. However, Chad is also conversant with "new measures, other standards" (78) in Paris. Chad simply cannot subscribe to Woollett's vocabulary -- he cannot call Mme de Vionnet a "bad woman" -- because Woollett's narrowly defined moral terms cannot describe the complexity of human affairs in Paris.

After a few months in Paris, Strether learns a greater flexibility in his use of moral terms. He tells Maria that the newly-arrived Jim Pocock is "frankly speaking, extremely awful", and both share an amusement that Mrs. Newsome doesn't realize "how bad he is" (258). Only from the Parisian point of view does Jim become "awful" or "bad"; back in Woollett Jim isn't awful at all, instead he is a "leading businessman". Strether's understanding of this relativity is an indication of his educated imagination. More significant, though, is his next thought: "Well, he <u>is</u> good too, in his way. It depends on what you want him for" (258). Strether has not only understood that one may simultaneously possess opposite qualities, but further realizes that an appeal may be made to this multiplicity. His ascribing of moral terms on a pragmatic basis divorces him completely from Mrs. Newsome and the Woollett mentality.

In Gloriani's garden Bilham tells Strether, "you're not a person to whom it's easy to tell things you don't want to know" (128). In fact, Bilham does tell Strether the truth about Chad -- just as Maria has -- but Strether doesn't understand what he has been told. Woollett's ambassador has changed portfolios, replacing the theory of the horrible with the theory of the wonderful. When Bilham equivocates about Chad's relationship with Mme de Vionnet, Strether

unhesitantly accepts the equivocation; it's exactly what he wants to know.

Bilham plants an ambiguous phrase in Strether's mind and Strether spend much of his imaginative energy finding definitions for it. The phrase -- virtuous attachment -- is Bilham's answer to a specific question about Chad: "Why isn't he free if he's good?" (116). Bilham's answer is a direct response; in fact it merely restates the question. The components of Strether's question are [not free] and [good]; Bilham simply offers different words for these terms: [attachment] and [virtuous]. The irony of Bilham's ploy is immediately felt by the reader. "This had settled the question so effectually for the time -- that is for the next few days -- that it had given Strether almost a new lease on life" (117). Strether, as a further irony, requisitions Maria's aid, and she "helped him to put into it the logic in which little Bilham had left it slightly deficient" (117). Not only the logic but the very meaning must be "put into it".

On one level, of course, Bilham's phrase merely implies that Chad's relationship with the still-unspecified woman is chaste. Yet it is deliberately more suggestive than "platonic", for instance, would have been. A virtuous attachment intimates a noble devotion, a morally commendable friendship that even Woollett must approve.[11] Since Strether's

tact prevents him from asking the name of Chad's virtuous attachment, the ambiguity of the phrase is left open to his own definition. He immediately infers that Chad's attachment is with one of the youth's "two particular friends, two ladies, mother and daughter" (117), but the question is easily begged: which one? If Jeanne de Vionnet is the object of Chad's affections, as Strether at first thinks, then their virtue is simply the delightful innocence of lad and lass. This is the definition Strether adopts at Gloriani's garden. He sees Jeanne, in her "white dress and a softly plumed white hat", as "bright gentle shy happy wonderful" (139). Without even a comma to separate them, these five adjectives sum up the definition which Strether has been predisposed to give. No wonder he transfers his envy from Gloriani to Chad: "What young man had ever paraded about that way, without a reason, a maiden in her flower?" (140).

The announcement of Jeanne de Vionnet's marriage completely deprives Strether of this definition for Bilham's phrase. As Strether tells Maria Gostrey, "there's now nothing else: nothing else but him and the mother" (256). The virtue of youthful innocence cannot be ascribed to the relationship of a married woman and an unmarried, younger man; another definition must be found. Since it is impossible for Mme de Vionnet to divorce, the virtue must be in sacrifice.

For Lambert Strether, who has read his share of romantic novels, this view has great appeal.

> "They've accepted their situation -- hard as it is. They're not free -- at least, she's not; but they take what's left to them. It's a friendship, of a beautiful sort; and that's what makes them so strong." (175)

What's left them, to Strether's mind, does not include a sexual relationship, and this implicitly is the basis of their sacrifice. Bilham reasonably questions whether a man "may stand that strain" (177).

> Strether's answer was as prompt as if he had already, for himself, worked it out. "Not without a very high ideal of conduct. But that's just what we're attributing to Chad." (177)

Strether is also, unconsciously, attributing "a very high ideal of conduct" to himself. Just as he had earlier nominated Chad (as seen with Jeanne) to replace Gloriani as his exemplar, Strether now makes his equation with the sacrificing Chad.

By the time Strether realizes that Bilham has been intentionally ambiguous about the "virtuous attachment", he also realizes that he would have done the same "gentlemanly" thing himself (349). Bilham's ambiguity was not misleading after all, because Strether has perceived for himself exactly the virtue of Marie de Vionnet's affection for Chad. As Maria Gostrey comments, "you dressed up even the virtue" (349).[12] Strether's "dressing up" is his responsibility to his own perceptions.

> For Strether, and for us as well, the question of what little Bilham "really" meant by his words remains unanswered: we know only what those words can be made to mean.13

What Strether learns is that words possess their full meaning only by personal interpretation. The meaning of "good" or "bad" or "virtuous attachment" is a matter of what one puts into the words more than what one takes out. An early exchange between Strether and Maria outlines this idea of definition.

> "You see more in it," he presently returned, "than I."
> "Of course I see <u>you</u> in it."
> "Well then you see more in 'me.'"
> "Than you see yourself? Very likely. That's always one's right." (54)

Lambert Strether has come to Paris as Mrs. Newsome's ambassador commissioned to bring Chad back to Woollett. However, as James deftly puts it in his Project for <u>The Ambassadors</u>, "everything is altered for him by the fact that nothing, damn it, is as simple as his scheme".[14] What is least simple for him is determining just what pertains to his mission in Paris. Strether's first energies in Paris are inspired by a curious notion.

> What carried him hither and yon was an admirable theory that nothing he could do wouldn't be in some manner related to what he fundamentally had on hand. (58)

What is fundamentally on hand for Strether is Chadwick Newsome. With characteristic beneficence, Mrs. Newsome has provided that "he should be worried with nothing that was not of the essence of his task" (61).[15] Her letters assure him in lengthy detail that his business back in Woollett is being ably attended to in his absence. Forty-eight hours in Paris, however, are enough to threaten his mission with matters not of the essence.

> Was it at all possible for instance to like Paris enough without liking it too much? He luckily however hadn't promised Mrs. Newsome not to like it at all. He was ready to recognise at this stage that such an engagement would have tied his hands. (66)

Strether's "admirable theory" is actually a rationalization sanctioning his dawdling a while in Paris. Once the sanction is given his mission is effectively sabotaged, for Strether comes to see that it is impossible to like Paris too much.

Lambert Strether had barely registered at his Chester hotel when his relationship with Maria Gostrey begins. Their friendship is quickly formed, and formed on the basis of Strether's perception. As Maria expresses it: "you've recognised me -- which is rather beautiful and rare" (25). Strether's rare and beautiful ability to recognize other people thoroughly complicates his ambassadorial mission. To date Strether's life has been marked by "a dreadful cheerful sociable solitude" with only "three or four persons

in it" (62). (Significantly Maria Gostrey is included in Strether's list, though he has just met her.) Having been to Chad's apartments once, Strether reflects on the difference it has made as he returns for a second visit.

> The feeling strongest with him at that moment had borne fruit almost faster than he could taste it, and Strether literally felt at the present moment that there was a precipitation in his fate. He had known nothing and nobody as he stood in the street [the day before]; but hadn't his view now taken a bound in the direction of every one and of every thing? (78)

Strether is now abounding in new friendships: Maria, Bilham, Miss Barrace, everyone is potentially a new friend. Yet, unwittingly, Strether diminishes the central importance of Mrs. Newsome in his life with each new friend. Personal friendships are for Mrs. Newsome certainly "not of the essence of his task".

As Strether's relationships proliferate in Paris, his immediate reaction is to separate his ambassadorial role from his private life. Most particularly Strether is sensitive about his friendship with Maria Gostrey. One of his first concerns with his prospective step-son is to "square" the young man about his relations with Miss Gostrey. Strether felt "he might qualify the alliance as funny if he remained sufficiently grave about it" (106). Strether's fear is that Chad might write a compromising letter to his mother that her ambassador would never properly be able to

explain. Although Strether is safe from Chad's letter-writing, he seems to be a topic of conversation in Paris.

In Gloriani's garden, at their first meeting, Mme de Vionnet mentions Maria's name and Strether is taken aback.

> What had struck him first was the way he was bracketed with that lady; and he wondered what account Chad would have given of their acquaintance. Something not as yet traceable, at all events, had obviously happened. (134)

Miss Barrace, Chad, Mme de Vionnet and even Waymarsh all attest to the bracketing. Strether soon traces their intimations and begins to see himself as others see him. When Mme de Vionnet asks after her old schoolmate, declaring "I'm extremely glad of her happiness" (169), Strether is significantly mute.

> What it conveyed was that he was Maria Gostrey's happiness, and for the least little instant he had the impulse to challenge the thought. He could have done so however only by saying, "What then do you suppose to be between us?" and he was wonderfully glad a moment later not to have spoken. He would rather seem stupid any day than fatuous, and he drew back as well, with a smothered inward shudder, from the consideration of what women -- of highly-developed type in particular -- might think of each other. Whatever he had come out for he hadn't come to go into that. (169)

Strether is still uncomfortably concerned with maintaining his ambassadorial duties. However, his silence has the effect of confirming -- for himself as well as for Mme de Vionnet -- the assertion of her thought.

It is at Sarah Pocock's salon, of course, that Strether's guard about Maria is forced to drop altogether. Before Sarah Pocock, whose report to Mrs. Newsome Strether fears more than one of Chad's flippant letters, Mme de Vionnet brings "dear old Maria" (235) into the conversation. Strether turns "awkwardly, responsibly red" (236), but braves the hazards.

> "Oh it's as true as they please! -- There's no Miss Gostrey for any one but me -- not the least little peep. I keep her to myself." (236)

Strether is forced to speak a shade truer than he knows. He has tried to impose artificial distinctions upon his experiences, but it is necessarily a vain attempt. At his next meeting with Mme de Vionnet, the one publicly arranged with Sarah as the audience, Strether finally accepts his "bracketing": "I've got Maria. And Maria has got me. So it goes" (246). Maria Gostrey is now as much a part of his life as Mrs. Newsome, and the disappointment he causes the lady in Woollett is balanced by the disappointment he might cause his new friend. Lambert Strether feels his situation is paradoxical. When Maria claims that he hasn't "come out" to please her, Strether protests:

> "Oh," he insisted, "that too, you know, has been part of it. I can't separate -- it's all one; and that's why, as I say, I don't understand." (312)

What Strether does understand is that his life has become like Paris "in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked" (66).

Strether's original embassy in Paris is most profoundly confused by his relationship with Mme de Vionnet. During his first days in Paris, Maria Gostrey cautioned him about the then-unknown woman in Chad's life: "Don't consider her, don't judge her at all in herself. Consider her and judge her only in Chad" (111). At this point Strether has seen Chad and has liked what he has seen. Once he has seen Mme de Vionnet, however, Strether's life becomes immeasurably complex. Among the roots of Strether's complexity is his disobedience of Maria's advice; he has considered Mme de Vionnet so completely in herself that he is beginning to fall in love with her. At his first visit to Mme de Vionnet's beautiful home Strether effectively becomes her ambassador to Mrs. Newsome. Mme de Vionnet commissions Strether to write to Mrs. Newsome and "Simply tell her the truth" (157). This has been no part of Mrs. Newsome's plan because she already knows, to her satisfaction, what is true. Even further from Mrs. Newsome's intent is Strether's farewell promise to Mme de Vionnet: "I'll save you if I can" (159).

The uncanny meeting with Mme de Vionnet at Notre Dame, followed by their romantic luncheon by the Seine, signals Strether's unconditional "surrender" (185) to the woman from whom he was to have saved Chad. His promise to save her will be fulfilled by helping to keep Chad in Paris. So absolutely contrary is this to his original purpose that he is rather frightened by his new commitment. With all the grace he can muster, Strether tries to back away from the responsibilities of his deepening relationship with Mme de Vionnet. His mild protest is to remind her -- and himself -- of the rationale for his being in Paris.

> "I've had but one thing to do -- to put our case before him. To put it as it could only be put here on the spot -- by personal pressure. My dear lady," he lucidly pursued, "my work, you see, is really done, and my reasons for staying on even another day are none of the best." (188)

Mme de Vionnet will not accept this simplistic account of Strether's purpose in Paris. She knows that Strether has had a great many things to do in Paris and Mrs. Newsome's errand has not been the greatest of them. Strether once more tries to avoid his involvement, saying, "It's not my affair" (190). By Mme de Vionnet's reply Strether comprehends how deeply she cares for Chad, and by his consideration of her reply Strether realizes how deeply he himself cares for Mme de Vionnet.

> "I beg your pardon. It's just there that, since you've taken it up and are committed to it, it most intensely becomes yours. You're not saving me, I take it, for your interest in myself, but for your interest in our friend. The one's at any rate wholly dependent on the other. You can't in honour not see me through," she wound up, "because you can't in honour not see him."
>
> Strange and beautiful to him was her quiet soft acuteness. The thing that most moved him was really that she was so deeply serious. She had none of the portentous forms of it, but he had never come in contact, it struck him, with a force brought to so fine a head. Mrs. Newsome, goodness knew, was serious; but it was nothing to this. He took it all in, he saw it all together. "No," he mused, "I can't in honour not see him." (190)[16]

James's instinct for conversational idiom is marvellously keen in this passage. The implied phrase "not see him through" is truncated by one word (and echoed in this shortened form by Strether) giving a full resonance to Mme de Vionnet's meaning. It is precisely Strether's vision which intensely commits him to Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet. He has a responsibility to his perceptions; he cannot in honour not see. Strether has made relations of recognitions and he cannot gainsay the truth of those recognitions.

CHAPTER THREE
"RICHLY RESPONSIBLE"

Henry James, in his Preface to The Ambassadors, characterizes Lambert Strether as being "primed with a moral scheme of the most approved pattern which was yet framed to break down on any approach to vivid facts; that is to any at all liberal appreciation of them".[1] Strether's situation in Paris compels him to approach the most vivid facts he has ever seen, and he approaches them with the most liberal appreciation he has ever given anything in his life. The breakdown of his moral scheme, however, is not incapacitating. Strether's appreciation provides, rather, the ground of his growth and strength as an individual. James continues in his Preface: "The actual man's note, from the first of our seeing it struck, is the note of discrimination, just as his drama is to become, under stress, the drama of discrimination".[2] The scene of Strether's drama is not merely Paris, but the consciousness of his own experience. And the basis of Strether's discrimination is neither the "approved pattern" of Woollett nor the "new measures" of Paris, but a personal interpretation of both. In the end, Strether does not only "toddle" (199), as Maria phrases it, but walks free and upright on his own.

When Strether informs Maria Gostrey of his mission to save Chad Newsome, she gives him a good precept: "One can only judge on the facts" (45). Strether's difficulty, however, is in discriminating among different kinds of facts. Lambert Strether brings with him the New England variety with which he briefs Chad. Strether "poured into him all it concerned him to know, put him in full possession of facts and figures" (107). Later, when Chad recounts the benefits a marriage with his mother might provide, Strether acknowledges, "There are those sharp facts" (303). For the Woollett mentality, facts are never very distant from figures, from the computation of money. In Paris Strether is bewildered to discover facts of a different kind. Mme de Vionnet is perceived by Strether as a woman

> whose very presence, look, voice, the mere contemporaneous fact of whom, from the moment it was at all presented, made a relation of mere recognition. (156) (James's emphasis)

Parisian facts are imprecise, suggestive and immeasurable. It is "the oddity" of Strether's "double consciousness" (18) that makes him acutely aware of the dichotomy of facts.

Perhaps the most striking of the new facts Strether encounters in Paris is Chad Newsome. Strether's first sight of Mrs. Newsome's prodigal son is for Strether "one of the sensations that count in life" (92). It is a sensation "both vague and multitudinous" (92) which surprises Strether into realizing that Woollett's informa-

tion has been erroneous. The shock of Strether's recognition impresses upon him "the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett -- communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme" (95). It is not long, however, before Strether comprehends that the distance between Woollett and Paris cannot be bridged, even by telegraphy. As Strether's appreciation of Chad's life in Paris continues to grow, the ambassador becomes increasingly embarrassed by the assumptions of the Home Office. Strether understands, not without his wry humour, that Mrs. Newsome "couldn't at the best become tactful as quickly as he. Her tact had to reckon with the Atlantic Ocean, the General Post-Office and the extravagant curve of the globe" (113). Before he had seen Chad in his improved state, Strether had considered his ambassadorial mission in firm Woollett terms.

> He must approach Chad, must wait for him, deal with him, master him, but he mustn't dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they were. He must bring him to him -- not go himself, as it were, so much of the way. (81)

However, Strether's trans-Atlantic crossing has literally brought him more than half-way towards Chad, and his resolve to see things clearly will necessarily bring him the rest of the way.

Strether's predicament is expressed in his summary to Maria Gostrey: "I came out to find myself in presence of new facts -- facts that have kept striking me as less and less met by our old reasons" (202). Strether's perceptions have replaced Woollett's suppositions in his mind, a situation which leads him to exclaim to Bilham, "Oh I'm not fit for my job!" (115). Marie de Vionnet senses the change in Strether's attitude and offers him a commission as her ambassador to Chad's mother.

> "Simply tell her the truth."
> "And what do you call the truth?"
> "Well, any truth -- about us all -- that you see yourself. I leave it to you." (157)

The truth, in Paris, is the truth "that you see yourself", not the prescribed truth one's been sent to find. Actually, Strether has been reporting to Woollett his truthful impressions all along. When he confesses to Maria his bewilderment at seeing an improved Chad Newsome, she asks, "Is that what you've written home?" (109). It is precisely what Strether has written home, and Maria characteristically predicts: "If you don't look out you'll have them straight over" (109). It is, of course, the report of Strether's impressions -- combined with Waymarsh's "s.o.s." -- which brings the Pococks to Paris.

The truth which Strether sees, the truth which Mme de Vionnet has commissioned him to report, is given

the acid test by the Pococks' embassy. The interval between their dispatch and arrival is a most uncomfortable period for Lambert Strether. Sarah Pocock haunts his sleep, looming "larger than life" and causing him to burn "with the blush of guilt" (211) for his betrayal of Mrs. Newsome's plan. Strether is out of touch with Woollett; though he continues to write frequently and at considerable length to Mrs. Newsome, his fiancée has suspended communication with him. He is on probation until Sarah files her first communiqué. As Strether and Chad await the Pococks' landfall, they discuss the knowledge and attitude Sarah may be equipped with.

> Strether hesitated. "I don't know that I care very much what she thinks there's in it."
>
> "Not if it represents what Mother thinks?"
>
> "Ah what <u>does</u> your mother think?" There was in this some sound of bewilderment. (217)[3]

This conversation reveals the immense change in Strether's point of view. It is now Woollett and Mrs. Newsome which bewilder Strether; and once more he feels himself in the presence of new and unknown facts.

Yet Strether also holds a thin hope that Sarah Pocock will restore Woollett's credibility. As he informs Maria:

> "New reasons -- reasons as new as the facts themselves -- are wanted; and of this our friends at Woollett -- Chad's and mine -- were at the earliest moment definitely notified. If any are producible Mrs. Pocock will produce them; she'll bring over the whole collection." (202)

Strether believes there may be two possible results of the Pococks' visit. They can bring a revised plan based on Strether's good report of Chad and Mme de Vionnet, the "new reasons" in other words; or, they too can see what Strether has seen and abandon any and all plans they may have. In either case Strether is dreadfully aware that his behaviour in Paris will be evaluated by the new ambassadors.

When the Pococks do arrive from America, Strether suffers a terrible moment of doubt. The Pococks give absolutely no indication of recognizing -- let alone appreciating -- Chad's "conspicuous improvement" (222). The Pococks' reserve is a crisis of truth for Strether.

> Was he, on this question of Chad's improvement, fantastic and away from the truth? Did he live in a false world, a world that had grown simply to suit him, and was his present slight irritation -- in the face now of Jim's silence in particular -- but the alarm of the vain thing menaced by the touch of the real? Was this contribution of the real possibly the mission of the Pococks? -- had they come to make the work of observation, as he had practised observation, crack and crumble, and to reduce Chad to the plain terms in which honest minds could deal with him? Had they come in short to be sane where Strether was destined to feel that he himself had only been silly? (223)

Chad's improvement is Strether's prime exhibit of the "new facts" which he has found in Paris. If the Pococks cannot see what he himself instantly recognized, then perhaps there is a profound error in "observation, as he had practised observation". Strether's conception of truth, his very ability to perceive reality accurately, is called into account by the silence of the Pococks. Strether is in the position of reconciling two contradictory views of Chad: Woollett's theory and his own perceptions. Neither has a necessary claim to being the truth about the young man's life. Strether's quandary is not unlike that of a scientist confronted with unexpected data. Writing about scientific truth, Michael Polanyi states:

> there is no rule -- and can be no rule -- on which we can rely for deciding whether the discrepancies between theory and observation should be shrugged aside as observational errors or be recognized, on the contrary, as actual deviations from the theory. The assessment in each case is a personal judgment.[4]

Strether's dilemma inevitably comes back to the matter of point of view. As in James's "house of fiction", Strether and the Pococks are

> watching the same show, but one seeing more
> where the other sees less, one seeing black
> where the other sees white, one seeing big
> where the other sees small, one seeing coarse
> where the other sees fine.5

Strether's seeing fine where the Pococks see coarse is due to his point of view, his "outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman)".[6] It is exactly Strether's "disposition to reflect and project" which distinguishes his perceptions from Sarah Pocock's. In his first talk with Chad Newsome, Strether revealed an important aspect of Woollett's notion of truth: "Yes, I daresay we have imagined horrors. But where's the harm if we haven't been wrong?" (102). Truth in Woollett is not a matter of interpretation; it is a statement, unequivocal and blessedly simple. Like sums in a ledger, Woollett wants final results and definite answers. For Sarah Pocock there can be few answers so definite as adultery. Charm, culture, love even, will butter not her parsnips; Mme de Vionnet remains, to Mrs. Pocock, a person who is not "even an apology for a decent woman" (294).

The crucial difference between Sarah Pocock and Lambert Strether is one of comprehensive vision. Faced with two kinds of facts, Sarah knows which one to choose and which one to ignore; she chooses the one she understands and her being "right" justifies her ignorance of the other. Strether is finely aware of both facts and the resulting paradox deprives him of peace. Strether

confides to Mme de Vionnet that he feels "tormented" since Sarah's arrival.

> "But why can you be?" -- his companion was surprised at his use of the word.
> "Because I'm made so -- I think of everything." (241)

Although he has changed his allegiance, Strether still knows very well how Mme de Vionnet will be seen by Woollett. She will be deemed unsuitable for Chad, not least because she cannot divorce. Strether tells her so himself: "The question will come up, of course, of the future that you yourself offer him" (189). Despite Mme de Vionnet's brave reply ("Well, let it come up!" [189]), Woollett's question is neither improper nor irrelevant, but rather partial and deficient. Finally, it is Strether's inclusive point of view which gives his judgments more value than Sarah's prefabricated "facts".

The prime example of Strether's comprehensive judgment is his midnight vigil after his surprising encounter of Chad and Marie in the countryside.

> It was familiar to him of course that they had something to put a face upon; their friendship, their connexion, took any amount of explaining -- that would have been made familiar by his twenty minutes with Mrs. Pocock if it hadn't already been so. Yet his theory, as we know, had bountifully been that the facts were specifically none of his business, and were, over and above, so far as one had to do with them, intrinsically beautiful; and this might have prepared him for anything, as well as rendered him proof against mystification. (328)

In the darkness and solitude of his hotel room, Strether feels himself "in full possession, to make of it all what he could" (329). What Strether will make of the fact of adultery is the climax of the drama of different truths. Now more than ever Chad appears reduced "to the plain terms in which honest minds could deal with him" (223). Now more than ever Woollett appears correct in its suspicions of Mme de Vionnet. And Strether himself seems to have been the victim of deceptions, perhaps none greater than his own. Against all these facts is only the inexplicable intimate relationship of Marie de Vionnet and Chad Newsome. Strether reflects on and wrestles with both halves of the paradox, and only by the early hours of the morning does he make his judgment. He takes his side with intimacy, with the "innumerable and wonderful" (331), but it is (in Polanyi's terms) a personal judgment. Sarah Pocock has her personal judgment, too, even based as it is on an "intensity with ignorance" (317). The essential distinction between their judgments is Strether's perceptive imagination and this is a "given" of personality as inexplicable as the intimacy of Chad and Marie.

"Experience," James wrote in "The Art of Fiction", "is never limited, and it is never complete".[7] The corollary to this definition is implied in his Preface to The Princess Casamassima: We are all limited vessels of

consciousness.[8] Experience is unlimited because of our inherent human limitations. One version of this Jamesian theme occurs in Strether's "Live all you can" speech to Bilham.

> The affair -- I mean the affair of life -- couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured -- so that one 'takes' the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it; one lives in fine as one can. (138)[9]

Strether's metaphor of the tin mould is actually another example of the framing imagery in The Ambassadors. Like other frames, the mould of consciousness has a dual aspect: it limits but it also focuses. One lives one's life, Strether says, with a personality and from a point of view "more or less" predetermined. Yet, only with this limitation -- with a point of view and a personality -- can we experience life at all.

The sight of an improved Chad Newsome originally brought the mould image to Strether's mind. "It was as if in short he had really, copious perhaps but shapeless, been put into a firm mould and turned successfully out" (100). What impresses Strether is how the "raw material" of a rough youth has been transformed into a civilised young man of sophistication. Bilham, who is not sure Chad was "meant by nature to be quite so good" (115), offers an

alternate simile for Chad's transformation.

> "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 that one knew and loved." (115)

It turns out, of course, that Chad's revision is primarily a matter of a new cover. His improvement is superficial, a making of impressive entrances and introductions, an ability for being "unhurried unflurried unworried"(214).[10] Chad has not, though, been re-moulded morally. After being completely captivated by Chad's new manner, Strether stops to wonder, "What sort of a brute had he expected Chad to be, anyway?" (113). His question is ironically answered by the novel's end; Chad is the sort of brute who would leave Mme de Vionnet (354, 356).

Mme de Vionnet may be wonderful, she may be Cleopatra or fifty women, but she too is a limited vessel. Strether realizes this at his last meeting with her when he sees how deeply she suffers from Chad's easy disregard.

> 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. For at the end of all things they <u>were</u> mysterious: she had but made Chad what he was -- so why could she think she had made him infinite? She had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would; but it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was none the less only Chad. Strether had the sense that <u>he</u>, a little, had made him too; his high appreciation had, as it were, consecrated her work. The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order. (341)

Chad's transformation has not been miraculous, after all, but only marvellous. Mme de Vionnet has done all she could, and Strether happily acknowledges how very much that was and still is. Yet, since Chad is human -- unlike the ivory in the Pygmalion story -- there is always the "mysterious", the "supreme queerness" of the human consciousness.

Strether's metaphor of the tin mould is immediately and most importantly qualified by Strether's further advice to Bilham. "Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion" (138). At first glance, one might suspect that Strether -- or James! -- is being ambiguous here. How can one be moulded and have freedom without a contradiction in logic? What value has freedom if it is illusory? Actually Strether is simply stating a common matter of the human condition. Our consciousness may be but a helpless jelly, the ornamental excrescences of our moulds may not be to our liking, but the drama of our lives is to transcend these limitations. The exercise of our freedom (illusory or not) is the acting of our dramas <u>within</u> the frame of our conditions. For Henry James, "those . . . who 'get most' out of all that happens to them" are those who possess "the power to be finely aware and richly responsible".[11] No responsibility is greater than the

necessity to be aware of one's limited conditions. Destiny and chance create our limitations, our will and understanding make our freedom. The critic Yvor Winters is worth reading on this point.

> Elements of this sort are what we call the given facts of the plot: they are the ineliminable facts of character and of initial situation. We have a certain group of particularized individuals in juxtaposition; the particularity is destiny, the juxtaposition chance. But the understanding and the will may rise in some measure superior to destiny and to chance, and when they do so, we have human victory; or they may make the effort and fail, in which case we have tragedy; or the failure and a willed adjustment to it, in which case we have the combination of tragedy and victory. It is this combination, the representation of which Henry James especially strives to achieve.12

The strength of James's novels, and The Ambassadors in particular, is their portrayal of a tragi-comic sensibility; life, for all but a precious few, is a paradox of freedom and limitation, with our successes and failures both qualified on that account.

Alone one night in Chad's apartments, Strether reviews his experiences of the past three months. His musings bring him to an apprehension of an important truth: "He had heard, of old, only what he could then hear" (298). To fully understand this truth, we should first recall Strether's earlier philosophic statement:

> It was the proportions that were changed, and the proportions were at all times, he philosophised, the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought. (205-206)

Proportion -- one's relative interaction with what one sees -- determines perception, and perception presents one with the terms of thought. Moreover, proportions change; therefore, there is not one possible point of view but a multitude. Yet, at any particular moment one can only have a single point of view.[13] Thus, Strether's perceptions "of old" reflect his previous and particular point of view. What changes Strether's proportions is experience, experience in its deepest meaning as consciousness. In his three months in Paris Strether has known a world of experience and this knowledge not only establishes his present point of view, but also alters his past.

The change of proportions in Strether's relation to Paris is accompanied by an almost Newtonian "opposite and equal" change in his relations to Woollett. The novel's opening page declares Strether's "consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years" (17). In the light of this freedom Strether's criticism of Woollett becomes increasingly specific as the alternative of Paris becomes better known to him. Most especially, it is Strether's relationship with Mrs. Newsome which alters because of Strether's changed proportions. It is Sarah Pocock's

"intensity with ignorance" (317) which fully opens Strether's eyes to his former relations with Mrs. Newsome. Sarah represents her mother's "moral pressure" (292), a pressure which is brought to bear not only upon Chad's Parisian misadventures but also upon Strether's assumed infidelity. Sarah's mission is to present Strether with an ultimatum; he must choose either Mrs. Newsome and the life he's known in Woollett or the life of his new experiences in Paris and the loss of Mrs. Newsome. After Strether meets this ultimatum -- by remaining faithful to Marie and Chad and to his impressions of them -- he is at last able to discuss his loss with Maria Gostrey.

> "It was at any rate," he wound up, "the woman herself, as you call her, the whole moral and intellectual being or block, that Sarah brought me over to take or to leave."
>
> It turned Miss Gostrey to deeper thought. "Fancy having to take at the point of the bayonet a whole moral and intellectual being or block!"
>
> "It was in fact," said Strether, "what, at home, I had done. But somehow over there I didn't quite know it." (315)

Like what he had heard "of old", Strether could not have known "over there" the implications of his life with Mrs. Newsome. It is not until Strether is away from Woollett that he has the vantage to see his life there clearly.

Strether's new knowledge makes him generous, even apologetic, about Woollett's misunderstandings. Mrs. Newsome has been terribly mistaken about Chad, about Strether himself, and perhaps most of all about Marie de Vionnet. Maria Gostrey is appalled by Mrs. Newsome's mistaken judgments. She asks him point-blank, "Do you want Mrs. Newsome -- after such a way of treating you?" (311). Strether's answer is calm and understanding: "I dare say it has been, after all, the only way she could have imagined" (311). His reply comes out of his own experience; he knows how mistaken, how necessarily mistaken he had been. About his mistreatment he maintains a wise acceptance. As he is soon to reflect:

> He wished not to do anything because he had missed something else, because he was sore or sorry or impoverished, because he was maltreated or desperate; he wished to do everything because he was lucid and quiet, just the same for himself on all essential points as he had ever been. (346)

These are the values Strether has learned in Paris, learned largely from the example of Mme de Vionnet. Even about the violence of Sarah Pocock's "twenty minutes" Strether keeps a lucid and quiet countenance. "She was what she had to be. I mean that from the moment they're not delighted they can only be -- well what I admit she was" (302). Strether had hoped that "the indescribable -- what one gets only on the spot" (249) would have brought Sarah to an apprecia-

tion of her brother and his adopted milieu. He is forced sadly to realize that the distance between Woollett and Paris is symbolic as well as actual. That he himself has travelled the distance is no assurance that others will or can.

By letter and telegram Strether has striven to change Woollett's point of view. After his catastrophe with Sarah Pocock, Strether is able to recognize his failure. He confides to Maria the intention of his communications with Mrs. Newsome.

> "I've been, from the first moment, preoccupied with the impression everything might be making on her -- quite oppressed, haunted, tormented by it. I've been interested only in her seeing what I've seen. And I've been as disappointed in her refusal to see it as she has been in what has appeared to her the perversity of my insistence." (314)

Unfortunately for Strether's ambition, point of view is not transferable because it is "created by conditions that are never the same"[14] for each person. Strether finds himself once more under "the clouds of explanation" (95).

> His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact -- for any one else -- explained. (95)

This thought occurred to Strether at first seeing Chad Newsome and recognizing the need for "the happy forestalment of error" (95) by the swift agency of telegraphy. Strether's high ingenuity has been incapable of making

Mrs. Newsome share his vision. The fault lies not with Strether's genius, but rather with the very nature of the human condition.

The change in Strether's point of view is all the more striking because Mrs. Newsome's remains static. There is a danger for the reader, therefore, of considering Strether's re-orientation as radical and complete. The Ambassadors, however, is a novel of process; it is the process of Strether's vision, of his education, of his choice, which Henry James portrays. It is convenient to speak of Strether's reversals or Chad's transformation, but these are not instantaneous and magical occurrences. Strether's New England viewpoint is at no time completely replaced by his new Parisian perspective. It is rather the tension between his new and old positions which makes Strether's drama. His is the drama of discrimination, but it is also the drama of synthesis.

If The Ambassadors were merely the tale of a New Englander who comes to Paris and abandons his parochial viewpoint it would not be a very interesting novel. Indeed, as James suggests in his Preface, when The Ambassadors was composed this plot was so hackneyed as to be conscientiously avoided by the serious novelist.[15] The hour-glass structure of the novel noted by E. M. Forster is not nearly so symmetrical as his description implies.[16]

Certainly there is the basic reversal of Strether and Chad Newsome: as Strether decides that Chad should remain in Paris with Mme de Vionnet, Chad's desire to return to Woollett becomes ironically evident. However this is only one movement of Strether's varied career.

The seeming symmetry of the novel is due to a fundamental imbalance in James's treatment of the two capitols of thought, Paris and Woollett. Woollett is the subject of a broad satiric portrait, reminiscent in some ways of Sinclair Lewis or H. L. Mencken. Satire is always memorable criticism, and memorable not least of all because of the vulnerability of its target. The description of Mr. Jim Pocock is representative of James's satire.

> 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. (224)

Paris has its comic characters to be sure, Miss Barrace for example, but not even Miss Barrace is described so scathingly.

The criticism of Woollett is central to The Ambassadors, but more profound and far subtler is the criticism of Paris. After Strether's initial attraction towards Paris, there is a subsequent motion away from Paris -- if not necessarily towards Woollett. It is this

second movement which gives the novel its meaning and Strether his value. The scenes set in Gloriani's garden mark the culmination of Strether's enchantment with the glamour of Paris. Here James re-plants the germ of his novel, "Live all you can"; here Strether meets Mme de Vionnet and Jeanne; here Strether expresses his envy of Chad's "knowing how to live". And here too, significantly, the reader finds the first note of Strether's uneasiness with the values of Paris. It is sounded amid witty conversation with Bilham and Miss Barrace. They have gaily been inventing descriptions for Strether's friend, Waymarsh. This Sunday afternoon entertainment gives Strether pause.

> "You've all of you here so much visual sense that you've somehow all 'run' to it. There are moments when it strikes one that you haven't any other."
>
> "Any moral," little Bilham explained, watching serenely, across the garden, the several femmes du monde. "But Miss Barrace has a moral distinction," he kindly continued; speaking as if for Strether's benefit not less than for her own.
>
> "Have you?" Strether, scarce knowing what he was about, asked of her almost eagerly.
>
> "Oh not a distinction" -- she was mightily amused at his tone -- "Mr. Bilham's too good. But I think I may say a sufficiency. Yes, a sufficiency." (131)

Strether had initially been attracted to Paris in its iridescent jewel image of alternating surfaces and depths. Similarly, Miss Barrace excuses their fascination with the visual, blaming it on the "dear old light" of Paris

in which "one sees what things resemble" (132).

> "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." (132)

Miss Barrace's worldly wisdom can be amused at Strether's Bostonisms, yet it is an index of her superficiality that she cannot appreciate his desire for moral values. Strether will soon enough learn that there is no such thing as a "really", Bostonian or Parisian, but that by no means denies the need for discrimination.

Miss Barrace is keen, voyeuristic even; she uses her "optical machinery" (277) as an ornament, but she has no real vision. Strether's first meeting with her is suggestively tinged with a sense of the ominous. Strether wonders if this Parisian socializing -- in Chad's apartments and in his absence -- isn't "the most gilded of traps" (78). He goes on to wonder

> why Miss Barrace should have been in particular the note of a "trap" . . . he blinked in the light of a conviction that he should know later on, and know well -- as it came over him, for that matter, with force, that he should need to. (78)

Strether's instinct is accurate; Miss Barrace <u>is</u> the note of a trap. The trap, the trap of Paris, is an easy acceptance of a vague moral sufficiency instead of a genuine moral value. Running to the eye, worshipping the

beautiful, is not enough for Lambert Strether. His real concern is with the depths, and with the surfaces only insofar as they provide a clue to what is beneath.

As Strether is about to enter into Gloriani's garden, he has first to shake off some misgivings.

> Our friend continued to feel rather smothered in flowers, though he made in his other moments the almost angry inference that this was only because of his odious ascetic suspicion of any form of beauty. He periodically assured himself -- for his reactions were sharp -- that he shouldn't reach the truth of anything till he had at least got rid of that. (123)

Surely Strether's reactions are right; he cannot appreciate the beauty of Parisian life while maintaining his Puritan suspicions. Yet, as he tells Bilham later, "the voice of reaction should, no doubt, always be taken with an allowance" (138). The sensation of being "smothered in flowers" remains as a warning to him. A passage from The Golden Bowl is rather appropriate in this context.

> Paris had, in its way, deeper voices and warnings, so that if you went at all 'far' there it laid bristling traps, as they might have been viewed, all smothered in flowers, for your going further still. There were strange appearances in the air, and before you knew it you might be unmistakably matching them.17

Strether does go further still and his progress is accompanied by flowers; Paris becomes "more than ever penetrating. The scent of flowers was in the streets, he had the whiff of violets perpetually in his nose" (190).[18]

As Strether progresses into the aesthetic life of Paris, Waymarsh illustrates for him the danger of floral suffocation. Waymarsh, who is in many respects Strether's alter-ego, represents the "real tradition" (31) of New England from which Strether seems to be straying.[19] Waymarsh's demeanor is Biblical; he is described as a pilgrim, a Hebrew prophet (79), and as being, in Bilham's phrase, "Michelangelesque! . . . Moses, on the ceiling, brought down to the floor; overwhelming, colossal, but somehow portable" (130). Waymarsh's grandeur makes Strether somewhat uneasy with its implication of moral judgment. During the perfection of his Lambinet outing, Strether is "most of all" afraid of encountering Waymarsh,

> in whose presence . . . he had never without somehow paying for it aired either his vocabulary or his accent. He usually paid for it by meeting immediately afterwards Waymarsh's eye. (320)

The intimidation which Strether feels is really his anxiety that he may have sacrificed his moral sense to his aesthetic appreciation, that he may have "run" to the eye.

Somewhat like Sancho Panza, Waymarsh parodies the chivalric actions of Lambert Strether, who is himself somewhat like Don Quixote. Strether's friendship with Maria Gostrey is mirrored in Waymarsh's awkward flirtations with Miss Barrace. Waymarsh makes Miss Barrace the recipient

of his "sacred rage", but she will accept only floral tributes.

> "Innocent flowers," she pursued, "as much as he likes. And he sends me splendours; he knows all the best places -- he has found them for himself; he's wonderful." (166-167)

As Maria is surpassed by Mme de Vionnet in Strether's life, Waymarsh passes on from Miss Barrace to Sarah Pocock. In typical Woollett, matriarchal fashion, it is Sarah who endows him with flowers, "a magnificant rose" (283) chosen in the early hours at the Marché aux Fleurs. The "blooming" (284) of Waymarsh brings drastic changes to Strether's friend. Waymarsh is now "slightly ambiguous" (285), is now in false positions requiring fibs, is now "squeezing through a passage in which three months before he would certainly have stuck fast" (288). Most of all, Waymarsh has now lost the moral authority of his grand manner.

> The sombre glow just darkened in his comrade's eyes; but he was struck with the way it died out again. It was too mixed with another consciousness -- it was too smothered, as might be said, in flowers. He really for the time regretted it -- poor dear old sombre glow! Something straight and simple, something heavy and empty, had been eclipsed in its company; something by which he had best known his friend. Waymarsh wouldn't be his friend, somehow, without the occasional ornament of the sacred rage, and the right to the sacred rage -- inestimably precious for Strether's charity -- he also seemed in a manner, and at Mrs. Pocock's elbow, to have forfeited. (286-287)

Waymarsh's sacred rage has been smothered in flowers, and Strether is not ironic when he mourns its passing. Waymarsh

may have appeared impossibly intimidating, but his translation is genuinely sad. For not only has Strether effectively lost an old friend, but psychically he has lost his alter-ego.

Strether has not, however, completely foregone his New England sensibility. His moral righteousness -- of which Waymarsh is the walking emblem -- expresses itself in Strether's relationship with Bilham. There is a genuine rapport between the ambassador from Woollett and this young expatriate. In fact, there is a hint of identity; had Strether followed his youthful instincts so many years ago he might have resembled Bilham. Likewise, Bilham feels an affinity to the older Lambert Strether: "Oh but I don't know that I want to be, at your age, too different from you!" (138).

Bilham remains in Europe with only "his beautiful intelligence and his confirmed habit of Paris" (86). He has done no more creatively by staying than Strether had done after returning to America. The original enthusiasm to paint, which brought Bilham to Paris, died with the first rigours of study. One assumes that Bilham made the quick discovery that he wasn't really an artist at all. One result of his "confirmed habit of Paris" is his belief in appearance: "What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know? I commend you . . . the vain

appearance" (129). Bilham stays on for the enjoyment of appearances in Paris with a serene laziness. This attitude is, of course, inexplicable to Waymarsh. First told of Bilham's existence, "Waymarsh impatiently growled. 'Why don't he go home?'" (75). That Bilham doesn't go home is proof enough for Waymarsh that he "can't be a good American" (89). Young men of Bilham's disposition, who do not work and who do not stay home, are plainly immoral. It is characteristic of Bilham's serenity that he freely admits the charge.

> "But of course I'm beastly immoral. I'm afraid it would be a funny world altogether -- a world with things the way I like them. I ought, I dare say, to go home and go into business myself. Only I'd simply rather die -- simply. And I've not the least difficulty in making up my mind not to, and in knowing exactly why, and in defending my ground against all comers." (115)

At heart, however, Bilham is really "more American than anybody" (86). For this reason he is easily coaxed back to the path of righteousness and the land of his fathers.

Lambert Strether takes it upon himself to encourage Bilham's repatriation. Why he does so is largely a reaction to his New England conscience. His method is to promote a marriage between Bilham and Mamie Pocock. His previous scheme for a union between Bilham and Jeanne de Vionnet he now recognizes as "a vain image" (272). Strether wants no more of vain images. He is operating now on the level of "practical politics" (272), and his rationale has some-

thing of Waymarsh's rage to it.

> "I've been sacrificing so to strange gods that I feel -- I want to put on record somehow, my fidelity -- fundamentally unchanged after all -- to our own. I feel as if my hands were embrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars -- of another faith altogether. There it is -- it's done." (273)

This is awfully strong language for Lambert Strether, and one wonders if its tone isn't intended to be of humourous exaggeration. Still, even if it is exaggeration, the original sentiment is deeply felt. The way Strether plans to record his fidelity is remarkably similar to Woollett's strategy for Chad Newsome. When Strether told Maria Gostrey the advantages for Chad's return, she quickly inferred their meaning.

> "Consideration and comfort and security -- the general safety of being anchored by a strong chain. He wants, as I see him, to be protected. Protected I mean from life."
> "Ah voilà!" -- her thought fitted with a click. "From life. What you <u>really</u> want to get him home for is to marry him." (55)

Strether is intent on Bilham's marriage to Mamie; he speaks "with a yearning that was really earnest" of his desire "at least to have done <u>that</u>" (273). He wants to save Bilham, as he was to have saved Chad, and as Waymarsh wants to save <u>him</u>.

Waymarsh is not wrong to believe Strether in peril. However, it will be neither Waymarsh nor the Pococks who will "save" Strether; the responsibility is Strether's

alone. The opposition of Woollett, represented by the Pocock's mission, inspires Strether to a dangerous Parisian easiness. The danger is again expressed in floral terms.

> Strether relapsed into the sense -- which had for him in these days most of comfort -- that he was free to believe in anything that from hour to hour kept him going. He had positively motions and flutters of this conscious hour-to-hour kind, temporary surrenders to irony, to fancy, frequent instinctive snatches at the growing rose of observation, constantly stronger for him, as he felt, in scent and colour, and in which he could bury his nose even to wantonness. (276-277)

Strether's active imagination, of course, makes him especially susceptible to the vain appearance. However, perception has responsibilities. Strether is <u>not</u> free to believe anything; that is a travesty of freedom. It is indeed wantonness to live from hour to hour. As Mme de Vionnet will tell him at their last meeting:

> "One does it to cheat one's self and to stop one's mouth -- but that's only at the best for a little. The wretched self is always there, always making one somehow a fresh anxiety." (340)

The alternative to the frantic life of "motions and flutters" is the life of considered judgments. To be a person on whom nothing is lost is not, of itself, enough. James's dictum was to the aspiring novelist, and the novelist was expected to create something from his perceptions. In Strether's case, the man of perception must make moral

judgments based on his experience. Since Strether cannot rely on the absolute code of Woollett, nor on the meagre sufficiency of Paris, he must establish his own ethic from his own point of view. His responsibilities are thereby all the more intense.

In the Preface to The Ambassadors, Henry James declares "the precious moral of everything" to be his representation of Strether's "process of vision".[20] However, what James says elsewhere about the artist is equally true of Lambert Strether.

> But the affair of the painter is not the immediate, it is the reflected field of life, the realm not of application, but of appreciation -- a truth that makes our measure of effect altogether different.[21]

The perceptions which form Strether's immediate experience are followed by a re-viewing, and it is in this "reflected field of life" that James demonstrates Strether's process of choice. The "realm of appreciation" for him is not merely of the visual but of moral judgment. Knowledge, which is necessary for judgment, is not a sudden acquirement of experience, but is possessed only through reflection. The most obvious example of this process is Strether's revised knowledge of Woollett. His conversation with Jim Pocock indicates a familiarity of dissatisfaction with the matriarchal society of Woollett. However, Strether's discontent would never have been voiced, and certainly not

specified, three months before. We may sense things without having any articulate expression of our knowledge. The articulation -- even if not vocal -- can only come after a consideration in time.

At his first visit to Mme de Vionnet, Strether makes the "exorbitant" promise: "I'll save you if I can" (159). At their next meeting, when reminded of his vow, Strether cautiously claims time. He does not withdraw his promise, but says, "I've been thinking what I meant" (170). When Strether sees her again, unexpectedly, at Notre Dame and at their romantic luncheon which follows, he has gained the knowledge he needed. "I know by this time, at any rate, what I meant by my speech; and I really knew it the night of Chad's dinner" (186). However, Strether did not "really" know what he meant the night of Chad's dinner. Between Strether's promise and his acknowledgment of that promise is his articulation to Bilham of Chad's responsibility to stay in Paris. It is only in retrospect of his conversation with Bilham -- and of the days which James leaves unrecorded -- that Strether possesses his knowledge. At best we might say that Strether "half-knew" before. Half-knowing is exactly the term used to describe the most dramatic example of reflected knowledge in The Ambassadors, Strether's appreciation of adultery.

Once Strether adopts his theory of the virtuous attachment of Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet, his faith is virtually unshakable. Despite warnings of Chad's imperfections, not to mention the hovering presence of Mrs. Newsome which he senses, Strether stands firm in his belief. Yet all the while he is uncritically receiving hints about the actual relationship which he champions. As Strether and Chad await the arrival of the Pococks, the outgoing ambassador is given an unmistakable clue. Chad reports that Mme de Vionnet is prepared for the risk of meeting Sarah Pocock. Strether declares, using Miss Barrace's term, "She's wonderful" (215). For the reader, Chad's response is embarrassingly transparent.

> "You don't begin to know how wonderful!" there was a depth in it, to Strether's ear, of confirmed luxury -- almost a kind of unconscious insolence of proprietorship; but the effect of this glimpse was not at this moment to foster speculation: there was something so conclusive in so much graceful and generous assurance. (215)

Strether is given a glimpse both of Chad's character and of the nature of his relationship with Mme de Vionnet. However he defers any speculation about his perceptions. Strether has gained no knowledge from Chad's remark, but his impressions will be the basis of the knowledge that will come later.

The climactic scene of the novel is split in time between Strether's immediate impressions and his later reflections. Strether's "real experience" (328), though, is his "belated vision" (329) in the solitary counsels of the night: "He then knew more or less how he had been affected -- he but half knew at the time" (329). Only in retrospect do the possibilities which Strether had dressed in vagueness become vivid for him. When Strether sees "exactly the right thing" he only half-knows the meaning of his perceptions.

> For two very happy persons he found himself straightaway taking them -- a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent -- that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt -- and it made them but the more idyllic. (325)

However terribly charged with irony this is for the reader, Strether's intimations do not constitute any knowledge. He incorporates the boaters into the pictorial vision of his "Lambinet-day", but they have no deeper meaning for him. It is only as their identities become known that Strether's intimations begin to take form. And it is only later still, in the early morning hours, that his experience becomes coherent, and that he can make a judgment.

The real foil to Strether's considered judgment is not Sarah Pocock, but rather her brother. Chad Newsome's life is abysmally unconsidered. The "wretched self" (340) which Marie de Vionnet senses as spectrally creating anxieties for the individual is unknown to Chad; he has no conscience because he lacks a "consciousness of that organ" (331). In his essay on Guy de Maupassant, Henry James refers to that author's conspicuous absence of fictional men and women with "that reflective part which governs conduct and produces character".[22] By this criterion Chad Newsome is a character out of Maupassant. As Maria says, "He's formed to please" (364). Chad, furthermore, does not think too hard about pleasure or anything else. The adjective most often applied to him is "easy": "He was easy, always, when he understood; he was easier still, if possible, when he didn't" (160). Chad is easy because he lacks the imagination to feel the complexity of life. Ease is a rather limited virtue, and Chad's ease, for lack of any other virtue, is harmful. Strether first comes to Paris announcing the distress Chad has caused his mother; although the course of the novel denies any real sympathy to Mrs. Newsome, one cannot ignore Chad's thoughtlessness. When Strether sees Mme de Vionnet's suffering, suffering caused by Chad's "famous knowing how to live" (330), he realizes how dangerous a lack of imagination can be.

In his Project for the novel, Henry James describes Strether's final attitude towards Chad Newsome.

> He has not, frankly, from a feeling quite absolute, though difficult to justify or . . . explain, wanted any further vision of Chad or contact with him, and he seeks none, and practically makes any, for the young man himself, impossible.23

In The Ambassadors itself, though, Strether does see Chad once more. As he leaves the anguished Marie de Vionnet, Strether, ever her "benefactor" (343), declares: "There's something I believe I can still do" (343). What Strether can do for Mme de Vionnet is remarkably parallel to his original mission for Mrs. Newsome. He believes he can prevent Chad from leaving Mme de Vionnet by impressing upon the youth the seriousness of his obligations, by putting the "case" before him "on the spot -- by personal pressure" (188). Strether's plan is delayed, however, because Chad, unannounced, has left Paris on a jaunt. When Chad returns, Strether climbs the four flights to Chad's apartments and does not hesitate to apply all his personal and moral pressure to the negligent young man.

> "You'll be a brute, you know -- you'll be guilty of the last infamy -- if you ever forsake her."
>
> That, uttered there at the solemn hour, uttered in the place that was full of her influence, was the rest of his business; and when once he had heard himself say it he felt that his message had never before been spoken. (354)

Strether's midnight appeal to Chad is considerably more forceful than his original delivery of Mrs. Newsome's case. Not only has Strether invoked the commanding righteous tone of New England, but he truly has the strength of his own convictions. His earlier breathless presentation to Chad was significantly qualified by his role as an ambassador. He informed Chad of Mrs. Newsome's "excellent arguments and reasons":

> "I didn't invent them, I didn't originally work them out; but I understand them, I think I can explain them -- by which I mean make you actively do them justice; and that's why you see me here." (97-98)

Strether could not make Chad "do them justice" partly because they were not his own reasons. By the end of the novel, Strether no longer needs to borrow his motive; he acts on the basis of his own knowledge and judgment.

While waiting for Chad's return, Strether spent his days mainly in Maria's company, but always with the anticipation of the thing he had still to do.

> There was a question that came and went for him . . . and it was a little to get rid of the obsession that he prolonged his hours with Miss Gostrey. It was a question about himself, but it could only be settled by seing Chad again; it was indeed his principal reason for wanting to see Chad. After that it wouldn't signify -- it was a ghost that certain words would easily lay to rest. Only the young man must be there to take the words. Once they were taken he wouldn't have a question left; none, that is, in connexion with this particular affair. (346)

Strether's "question about himself" is really the fulfillment of his responsibility to his perceptions of Mme de Vionnet. The final testimony of Strether's devotion to her is given by Strether's command to Chad.

> "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 accordingly appeal to you by all you hold sacred." (356)

The reader appreciates Strether's responsibility all the more because Strether realizes that his appeals will be ineffectual, yet he does not relent. Chad is already eager for "the art of advertisement", "the great new force" (359). The force of advertisement is one concerned with results, most especially results which are monetarily calculable. Strether's moral force does not depend on finalities or calculations; it is enough that Strether judges and acts upon his judgments.

Having made Chad take his certain words, however, Strether is still left with another "question about himself". This additional question is not asked by Strether, though, but by Maria Gostrey. Maria indirectly, but not less definitely, proposes marriage to Strether.

> Miss Gostrey, poor dear, but vivid and all herself to the last, is informed with the principle of standing by her friend, so to speak, to the end, and the meaning and moral of what she had done for him, the play of circumstance that, all the while, she had just purely and simply fallen in love with him -- these things gild with their declining rays this last of his complications.24

Maria stands by Strether with her unspoken "offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days" (365). Although fond of Maria and appreciative of her offer, Strether declines a future with her.

In his Preface to The Ambassadors, James writes of

> the last "scene of the book, where its function it to give or to add nothing whatever, but only to express as vividly as possible certain things quite other than itself and that are of the already fixed and appointed measure . . . a relation that has nothing to do with the matter (the matter of my subject) but has everything to do with the manner (the manner of my presentation of the same) and yet to treat it, at close quarters and for fully economic expression's possible sake, as if it were important and essential.25

These comments, especially James's "as if", indicate that the author did not place so strong an emphasis upon Maria's proposal as later generations of critics have invariably done. The ending of the novel is undoubtedly crucial, but crucial, as James suggests, as an illustration of what is "already fixed and appointed".

As the second half of the novel begins (in Book Seven), Strether perceives his relations with Maria Gostrey as "no longer quite the same" (205).

> 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. (205)[26]

The alteration in their relationship has been the unavoidable result of the change in Strether's proportions; compared to Mme de Vionnet, Maria has "shrunk to a secondary element" (206) in Strether's life. Even after Strether has seen the Countess for the last time, Maria cannot reassume the primacy she briefly held. The pleasant days Strether spends with her while awaiting Chad's return are merely "a happy interlude" (344), and he characterizes their uncomplicated fellowship by "the image of the Babes in the Wood" (345). There is no possibility of a lasting, marital relationship between them. Waymarch had testified that "Above all there's no doubt she [Maria] does love Strether (235), and Waymarsh no doubt is right. However, Strether does not love Maria -- not enough, in any case, to marry her.

In the quiet domesticity of the last scene, Strether looks around Maria's "haunt of ancient peace", but admits "I'm not . . . in real harmony with what surrounds me" (361).

> He took a minute 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 would moreover understand -- she always understood. (365)

Once more Strether feels that "The circle in which they stood together was warm with life, and every question between them would live there as nowhere else" (82). However, Strether has grown considerably since his first visit to the Quartier Marboeuf. Maria's home has never been portrayed so attractively, nor she herself so sympathetically, but even this is not enough for Lambert Strether. His discrimination is so heightened that even Maria's fine things, things described as "improving to life" (361), fall short of his definition of the ideal. Strether's perceptions of Mme de Vionnet have convinced him that the ideal is possible and he cannot choose less. Strether's awkwardness is that he does not "seem" to select on the basis of beauty and knowledge. Actually it is precisely a synthesis of these two values which rules Strether's selection. For his knowledge has come to him with his appreciation of the beautiful. Furthermore, this knowledge, in the proportional relations of perceiver and perceived, is not only knowledge about the world, but also about himself. Knowing what he does about the world and about himself, Strether must leave Paris, leave Maria, and continue his life in New England.

Maria Gostrey had feared the effect that knowledge of Mme de Vionnet's adultery might have upon Strether.

> 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 Mrs. Newsome. (347)

Strether is proof against the shock. Yet although he does not revert to Woollett's principles nor to Mrs. Newsome and his independence remains more assured than ever, Strether ends by going back to Woollett nevertheless. His last, lingering days in Paris are spent thinking about his "final reckoning" yet to come.

> It was really behind everything; it hadn't merged in what he had done; his final appreciation of what he had done -- his appreciation on the spot -- would provide it with its main sharpness. The spot so focused was of course Woollett, and he was to see, at the best, what Woollett would be with everything there changed for him. Wouldn't <u>that</u> revelation practically amount to the wind-up of his career? (346)

As during his Lambinet outing, Strether is still "in the midstream of his drama" (323); only Woollett can provide the final scene of his drama of discrimination.

Prior to the time of the novel, Lambert Strether's life in Woollett had been marked by a lack of purpose. He sees himself as having been a failure "in each relation and in half a dozen trades" (62). He is only kept from complete failure by his present occupation, editing a Review for Mrs. Newsome. Lambert Strether is thus allowed a certain notoriety in Woollett by his connection with the Review, and,

implicitly, by his connection with Mrs. Newsome herself.

> His name on the green cover, where he had put it for Mrs. Newsome, expressed him doubtless just enough to make the world -- the world as distinguished, both for more and for less, from Woollett -- ask who he was. He had incurred the ridicule of having to have his explanation explained. He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether. He would have done anything for Mrs. Newsome, have been still more ridiculous -- as he might, for that matter, have occasion to be yet; which came to saying that this acceptance of fate was all he had to show at fifty-give. (63)

Strether's gratitude to Mrs. Newsome is so complete that it has replaced any responsibility to himself. Only after some vivid experience of the world distinguished from Woollett can Strether articulate his situation: "I seem to have a life only for other people" (167).

Two descriptive passages illuminate Strether's application of his Parisian experiences to his reflections on his life in Woollett. Both deal with specific events in Paris but suggest a growing awareness in Strether's consciousness about Woollett, and both share a tone of characteristic self-effacement. As he and Chad discuss the imminent arrival of the Pococks, they wonder if Sarah is "really bribeable".

> The idea of his own bribeability set him apart for himself; with the further mark in fact that his case was absolutely proved. He liked always, where Lambert Strether was concerned, to know the worst, and what he now seemed to know was not only that he was bribeable, but that he had been effectually bribed. The only difficulty was that he couldn't quite have said with that. It was as if he had sold himself, but hadn't somehow got the cash. That, however, was what, characteristically, would happen to him. It would naturally be his kind of traffic. (216)

In context, Strether feels he has been "bribed" somehow by Chad and Mme de Vionnet, or perhaps by Paris itself. Yet the entire idea of Strether's bribeability for the reader reflects backwards onto his relationship with Mrs. Newsome. For Strether has most effectually been bribed by his name on the green cover and the dangling promise of marriage. Strether has indeed "sold himself" by living his life "only for other people", and particularly only for Mrs. Newsome. Later, at Sarah Pocock's salon, Strether is embarrassed to hear Mme de Vionnet publicly imply that their friendship is deeper than he himself has acknowledged.

> He recognised once more the perverse law that so inveterately governed his poor personal aspects: it would be exactly like the way things always turned out for him that he should affect Mrs. Pocock and Waymarsh as launched in a relation in which he had never been launched at all. (231)

There is no clearer indication in the novel about the origin of Strether's relationship with Mrs. Abel Newsome.[27]

With the experiences he has had in Paris and the knowledge and appreciation he has gained, Strether is living

for himself at the novel's end. This does not mean he is living selfishly, however, but that he is living responsibly. A large measure of Strether's responsibility is a recognition of his limitations. He knows that he cannot stay with Mme de Vionnet; that he cannot stay with Maria Gostrey; that he cannot even persuade Chad Newsome to act morally. Strether had feared before that his "acceptance of fate was all he had to show at fifty-five" (63). He now has immeasurably more to show for his life, but he also has a more profound acceptance. Because he has established his own values, based upon his own perceptions, Lambert Strether now knows who he is. The very last note in The Ambassadors is the agreement between Maria and Strether that this is undoubtedly so.

> "I know. I know. But all the same I must go." He had got it at last. "To be right."
>
> "To be right?"
>
> She had echoed it in vague deprecation, but he felt it already clear for her. "That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself."
>
> She thought. "But with your wonderful impressions you'll have got a great deal."
>
> "A great deal" -- he agreed. "But nothing like you. It's you who would make me wrong!"
>
> Honest and fine, she couldn't greatly pretend she didn't see it. Still, she could pretend just a little. "But why should you be so dreadfully right?"
>
> "That's the way that -- if I must go -- you yourself would be the first to want me. And I can't do anything else."
>
> So then she had to take it, though still

> with her defeated protest. "It isn't so much your being 'right' -- it's your horrible sharp eye for what makes you so."
>
> "Oh but you're just as bad yourself. You can't resist me when I point that out."
>
> She sighed it at last all comically, all tragically, away. "I can't indeed resist you."
>
> "Then there we are!" said Strether. (365)

Strether must live according to his values, his "only logic", and Maria is splendidly accurate when she says that his "horrible sharp eye" is behind it all. Strether's imaginative and moral perceptions have made him who he is by the novel's end.

Finally, Strether's decision to return to Woollett is a personal one. The "conditions that are never the same from man to man"[28] create reasons that likewise are individual. Although Strether expresses his "only logic" to Maria, he never engages in a detailed justification for his choice; it really would be unnecessary. Both Maria and Strether recognize that he is acting freely and in harmony with himself, and that should be sufficient for the reader as well. A passage from James's Preface to The Spoils of Poynton describes the nature of Strether's choice. Once again, what James says of the artist is wonderfully relevant to Lambert Strether. James writes that the author

> lays together the blocks quarried in the deeps of his imagination and on his personal premises. He thus remains all the while in intimate commerce with his motive, and can say to himself -- what really more than anything else inflames and sustains him -- that he alone has the secret of the particular case, he alone can measure the truth of the direction to be taken by his developed data. There can be for him, evidently, only one logic for these things; there can be for him only one truth and one direction -- the quarter in which his subject most completely expresses itself.29

Lambert Strether alone has the secret of his particular case. He has his logic and his direction, and the quarter in which he will now find most complete expression is Woollett, Massachusetts.

NOTES

Introduction

The following abbreviations will be used to designate primary sources:

AN: The Art of the Novel (New York, 1934).
FN: The Future of the Novel (New York, 1956).
Notebooks: The Notebooks of Henry James (New York, 1961).

[1]Yeazell, p. 34.

[2]AN, p. 307.

[3]FN, p. 12.

[4]FN, p. 12.

[5]Preface to The American, AN, pp. 32-33.

[6]AN, p. 310.

[7]FN, p. 12.

[8]FN, p. 13.

[9]Preface to The Princess Casamassima, AN, p. 59.

Chapter One

[1]FN, p. 13.

[2]Hardy, p. 14.

[3]AN, p. 59.

[4]Strether's "sense of a great convent" was a detail which James added to Whistler's garden -- the original scene of the Howells anecdote -- based on another garden of his acquaintance. (Cf. Notebooks, p. 373.) The architectural formality of the convent image gives, we may say, Gloriani's

garden the right angles of its frame.

[5]This duality is presented again when Strether senses "the pure flame of the disinterested" burning in Maria's "cave of treasures as a lamp in a Byzantine vault" (253).

[6]The detail of the sphinxes' heads is wonderfully suggestive of more than Napoleonic imperialism. Mme de Vionnet is a creature of diverse composition: part woman, part animal. The riddle of the sphinx -- the Greek sphinx if not the Egyptian -- asks, when unravelled, what is a man at different stages in his life. This is indeed the riddle which Lambert Strether must answer.

[7]This passage hints at another reason why Mme de Vionnet does not divorce: she may be in need, but old pieces will not be traded for "better" ones.

[8]Notebooks, p. 412.

[9]AN, pp. 31-32.

[10]AN, p. 32.

[11]FN, p. 12.

[12]This, and James's use of "murmurous" a few pages later (p. 320), has a distinctly Keatsian flavour for this reader. The only listing for "murmurous" in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations refers to "Ode to a Nightingale".

[13]The remembered Lambinet is not the only fiction which informs Strether's perceptions this day. He spends "an afternoon richly suffused too with the sense of a book in his pocket" (320). Strether anticipates a ride back to the station with a driver who would "tell him what the French people were thinking, and remind him, as indeed the whole episode would incidentally do, of Maupassant" (320).

[14]"They talked in low easy tones and with lifted lingering looks, about the great monument and its history and its beauty -- all of which, Madame de Vionnet professed, came to her most in the other, the outer view" (182).

[15]The direct appeals to the reader are as follows: "as if our friend" (325); "our friend went down to" (326); "so far as we are concerned" (372); "Yet his theory, as we know", "since we have spoken" (328); "the aspect that is most to our purpose" (329); "it in fact came over our friend" (330). As well, the narrator takes the reader aside in less direct fashion: "He was to reflect" (327); "Strether was to remember afterwards" (328).

[16]Hardy, p. 21.

[17]AN, p. 31.

[18]AN, p. 32.

[19]AN, p. 32.

Chapter Two

[1]AN, p. 316.

[2]AN, p. 316.

[3]AN, p. 62.

[4]AN, p. 66.

[5]AN, p. 63.

[6]This passage occurs before Strether has seen either Jeanne or her mother, and before Maria Gostrey knows it is Marie de Vionnet whose age is being debated. Maria was coincidentally a school-mate of Mme de Vionnet and knows precisely how old she is (p. 143).

[7]This echoes Maria's declaration in London: "I've mere battered indifference" (47), suggesting a sympathetic parallel between Mamie Pocock and Maria Gostrey.

[8]Strether feels Bilham's presence gives an "extraordinary quick lift to the issue", and that something "was up and up" (71).

[9]When Waymarsh righteously commanded Strether to "Quit this", Strether replied "with a doubt of his own. 'Do you mean my tone?'" Waymarsh's immediate response to his friend's doubt was "No -- damn your tone" (76).

[10]Miss Barrace's "oh" is the sophisticated cousin of Jim Pocock's "play of innuendo as vague as a nursery rhyme, yet as aggressive as an elbow in his side" (227). The elbowing, of course, is most un-Parisian and Miss Barrace's exclamations are less crudely definite, but there are affinities between the two forms of communication.

[11]Cf. The Westminster Review of 1850: "Are we not all aware that a young man can have no safeguard against sensuality and low intrigue, like an eary, virtuous and passionate attachment?" (quoted in Houghton, p. 381).

[12]This is a direct echo of Strether's own thought: "he had dressed the possibility [of a sexual relationship] in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll" (331). That Maria shares his private phrasing is another indication of their similarities.

[13]Yeazell, p. 76.

[14]Notebooks, p. 397.

[15]Although James does not expressly say so, one presumes that Mrs. Newsome is dispatching her ambassador "all expenses paid".

[16]The Countess is being somewhat disingenuous here. Strether certainly is acting for his interest in her as much as -- and very possibly more than -- his interest in Chad. Strether's immediate comparison to Mrs. Newsome underscores his personal concern for Mme de Vionnet.

Chapter Three

[1] AN, p. 315.

[2] AN, p. 316.

[3] The specific question under discussion is whether Strether will introduce Maria Gostrey to Sarah Pocock.

[4] Polanyi, p. 30.

[5] Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, AN, p. 46.

[6] AN, p. 46. One is tempted to echo Maria Gostrey here: I delight in your classifications!

[7] FN, p. 12.

[8] AN, p. 63.

[9] If there is any doubt about the identity of "the great cook", one need only recall Strether's initial impressions of Paris: "the air had a taste of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef" (60).

[10] James surely intends the cadence of an advertising jingle in this description. At the novel's end Chad will undoubtedly return to boss the advertising in Woollett. Advertising might well be defined as Strether defines showy journalism: "the great new science of beating the sense out of words" (204).

[11] Preface to The Princess Casamassima, AN, p. 62.

[12] Winters, p. 177.

[13] For instance, Miss Barrace claims that Mme de Vionnet is fifty women: "'Ah but only one' -- Strether kept it clear -- 'at a time.' 'Perhaps. But in fifty times -- !'" (164).

[14]AN, p. 46.

[15]AN, p. 316.

[16]Cf. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, p. 137 ff.

[17]James, The Golden Bowl, p. 182.

[18]Strether is no longer intimidated by fine things as he originally was at Maria's home, where "they brushed his ignorance with their contempt as a flower . . . might have been whisked under his nose" (82).

[19]Waymarsh's concern is always with Strether's soul; he fears his friend is "in peril of perdition" (199). He cares not if Strether wins the world -- Mrs. Newsome's hand -- but loses his soul: "What do I care where you are if you're spoiled?" (77). Waymarsh's sympathies have been with Strether as an individual and not with him as Mrs. Newsome's agent.

[20]AN, p. 308.

[21]Preface to The Princess Casamassima, AN, p. 65.

[22]FN, p. 223.

[23]Notebooks, pp. 412-413.

[24]Notebooks, p. 414.

[25]AN, p. 324.

[26]Among the "other fountains" which flowed for Strether, none is greater than Mme de Vionnet. At her home in the Rue de Bellechasse Strether is always aware of "the small plash of the fountain" (335) in her courtyard. This "plash" is one of the elements "not strictly in it or of it" which makes "their encounter a relation" (154).

[27]This also provides the reader with a further reason why Strether cannot marry Maria Gostrey. By the

novel's end Strether will no longer be governed by "the perverse law"; he will not "fall into" a marriage with Maria.

[28]Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, AN, p. 46.

[29]AN, pp. 122-123.

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