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THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

HENRY JAMES (1843-1916) : AN INTRODUCTION

“*It is a complex fate, being an American*” (H. James)

“*Life is learning to know oneself*” (H. James)

« *En ce qui nous concerne, nous n'avons pour connaître l'homme que la lecture, la merveilleuse lecture qui juge l'homme d'après ce qu'il écrit. De l'homme, ce que nous aimons par-dessus tout, c'est ce qu'on peut en écrire. Ce qui ne peut-être écrit mérite-t-il d'être vécu ?* » (G. Bachelard)

With 22 novels (2 unfinished), 112 tales, 7 plays, to say nothing of his critical and descriptive work – (the New York edition of his novels and tales published between 1907 and 1909 comprises 24 volumes) –, Henry James, an American novelist of Irish antecedents, who became a naturalized British citizen a year before his death, is a formidable literary monument ; as W. Morris put it, “the central defect in the mind and art of James is a defect of riches—he is simply too much for us”. Needless to say, one can hardly hope to get a comprehensive view of – or achieve in-depth acquaintance with – such a body of fiction, unless one is willing to devote – not to say sacrifice – one’s whole life to it, and I daresay there are countless other objects worthier of study in a (wo)-man’s lifetime. In other words, the following notes are but a tentative approach to the author and his work, a series of guidelines based on a long but desultory familiarity with James’s fiction and criticism, a miscellany of observations, interpretations and hypotheses – some personal, others borrowed from various sources – to be taken not as Gospel truth but as a point of departure for your own exploration and appreciation of *The Portrait of the Lady* (by the way, all subsequent page references being to the Penguin Modern Classics Edition of the novel instead of the recommended Norton Critical Edition, I must apologize to you, dear reader, for a most inconvenient discrepancy in page numbers. I’ll leave it to you to figure out some sort of conversion table).

James’s fiction is a source of irresistible fascination for some readers and of almost unbearable irritation for others as witness H. G. Wells’s description of “the old master” as a “hippopotamus picking up a pea”, and Mark Twain’s declaration that he would rather “have been damned to John Bunyan’s heaven than read *The Bostonians*” (1885). H. James is not only a monument, he is also in

the words of T. S. Eliot, “an author who is difficult for English readers, because he is an American ; and who is difficult for Americans, because he is a European ; **and I do not know whether he is possible to other readers at all**” (quoted by L. Edel, emphasis mine). Well, forewarned is forearmed as the saying goes : we’ll have to take up the challenge and prove that James is not only “possible to other readers” but also, hopefully, quite profitable and palatable.

Whatever his merits or demerits, attractiveness or repulsiveness – there’s no disputing about tastes –, H. James is beyond dispute a master of the craft of the novel, and his importance lies in the fact that he was “the first great novelist—and perhaps still the only one—to have fused the European’s sense of the objective limits of life, which habitually expresses itself in the novel of manners, and the American’s sense of its limitless conceivable possibilities, which habitually expresses itself in the so-called metaphysical romance...” (S. Gorley Putt). As for *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), it has always been recognized as the best novel of James’s middle period. It was a book of great importance in the history of the novel ; in this novel, James proved to be “years in advance of his time in his psychological interest in his characters. In *The Portrait* he wrote on two planes ; he told a story full of significant action almost entirely in terms of the inner life of his protagonists” (Swan). Both quotations highlight one of the dominant features of the man and his work, what one is tempted to call, for want of a better term and at the risk of being guilty of crude oversimplification, their in-betweenness if not double-sidedness *i.e.* everything that bears upon James, whether it be the period, background, education, themes, language, etc., partakes of duality, of the dialectics of sameness and otherness, as witness :

— **Family background.** Among the facts to bear in mind → overwhelming influence of the father, Henry James Senior whom the novelist was named after, and rivalry with the elder brother, William James :

« H. James, né en 1843, s’avère un ‘génie’ précoce, puisqu’il est présenté par son père dans une lettre de 1857 comme “un grand dévoreur de bibliothèques et un gigantesque scripteur de romans et de pièces de théâtre”. Cet enfant est le fils de Henry James Senior dont il porte le prénom, un ‘intellectuel’ dilettante, féru des théories de Swedenborg, de Fourier, de Sandeman et d’Emerson, lui-même fils d’un négociant millionnaire d’Albany, ‘l’ancêtre’ William. C’est donc dans un prestigieux quatuor que la naissance engage le petit Henry : par le jeu forcené de la répétition et de la nomination (de ce qu’il appelle ‘l’étiquette’), l’enfant s’y trouve placé dans la position d’un rival direct de William ; son aîné d’un an, le futur philosophe pragmatiste, l’image même de la réussite sociale. En 1880 encore, le romancier mentionnera le poids écrasant de cette ‘**géméllité**’ **familiale** qui l’a obligé à fuir le domicile paternel... » (J. Perrot in *L’Arc*, emphasis mine).

More about the head of the family : Henry James Senior was born into a Calvinist family against which he soon rebelled and he remained a critic of all institutions, including “the New England conscience, with its fussy self-consciousness and self-culture”. Wishing to preserve his sons’ minds from any contamination through formal schooling, and to leave them open to experience he sent them to schools in America, France, Germany and Switzerland, and H. James, the novelist-

to-be, left for Europe in 1869 after a short period at Harvard Law School. As stated above, Henry James Senior soon came under the influence of Swedenborg, the mystic, and Fourier, the social reformer, to both of whom he remained an ardent, if somewhat eccentric, disciple (by the way, Charles Fourier coined the phrase “feminism” and stated that « Le mariage est le tombeau de la femme, le principe de toute servitude humaine », a radical opinion *The Portrait of the Lady* somewhat substantiates). He even published a major work, *Society : The Redeemed Form of Man*, in which he attempted to show how Fourier’s ‘Divine Society’ and Swedenborg’s ‘Grand Man’ can be brought into existence. H. James Senior believed – the point is highly relevant to one of the main themes of *The Portrait of a Lady* – that “growing up required the individuating crisis which in Genesis is dramatized as the Fall of man : the fatal necessary quickening within the unconscious chunk of innocence of the awareness of self. This egotism and selfhood is essentially sinful and can only be overcome by a second crisis leading to the individual’s re-birth as a social being”. We’ll find an echo of this doctrine in the Jamesian myth of the Fortunate Fall (see below reference to Hawthorne), and in the ‘spiritual adventures’ undertaken by several of the characters in his novels.

— **Nationality** → cf. following quotation from author himself : “it would be impossible for an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America.” (H. James)

— **Ambivalent attitude to US culture** → James experienced a love-hate feeling for 19th century American society. He was very critical of the shortcomings his native country – “the soil of American perception is a poor little barren artificial deposit,” he said –, yet he was also perfectly aware of the advantages or promises it held out :

“We are Americans born—*il faut en prendre son parti*. I look upon it as a great blessing ; I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilisation not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically, etc.) claim our property wherever we find it... We must of course have something of our own—something distinctive and homogeneous—and I take it that we shall find it in the moral consciousness, our unprecedented spiritual lightness and vigour.”

— **Theme** → See below “The international situation” or the confrontation of New World innocence with the cultural richness of the Old World.

— **Vision** → cf. what has been called “the double vision” : “for James, the poetic imagination was to be very largely a matter of seeing things from both sides : from the early tales to the final *Prefaces* his writing is full of images invoking the obverse and reverse, the back and the front, the passive and the active, the efficient and the visionary, the romance and the disillusion.” (G. Putt)

— **Characterization** → very often dominated by “fascination with the notion of two twin-like personalities inhabiting one consciousness”, hence also the characteristic tendency to “distri-

bute over two or more contrasting characters, often cousins, the split personality of the geminian author” (G. Putt). The cousinly relationship serves to underline the contradictions in the characters’ natures → Isabel Archer and Ralph Touchett are a case in point.

— **Art** → according to critic R. Chase, James’s art can be defined in terms of “an assimilation of romance into the substance of the novel”. James’s fiction is situated at the interface of the romance and the novel (cf. ; in the same way as James himself belongs to a hybrid literary category *i. e.* “he is a poet-novelist combining J. Austen’s skill of observing and dramatizing manners with Hawthorne’s ‘profoundly moral and psychological [...] poetic art of fiction’.” (*Critics on H. James*). In *The Portrait*, James “explores the limits of romance [...] but though he rejects romance as a moral view of the world, he assimilates into the very substance of the novel, by means of metaphor and the charm of the heroine herself, the appeal of romance” (*Ibid.*). Cf. James’s definition of “romance” as opposed to the actual :

Le réel représente à mes yeux les choses que nous ne pouvons pas vraiment ne pas connaître, tôt ou tard, d'une façon ou d'une autre [...]. Le romanesque, d'autre part, représente les choses qu'avec toutes les facilités du monde [...] nous ne pouvons jamais connaître directement, les choses qui peuvent nous atteindre seulement à travers les beaux circuits et subterfuges de notre pensée et de notre désir.

— **Language and Style** → James’s language is a very idiosyncratic variety of English, known as “the mid-Atlantic variety”, a strange combination of English, American and European influences subserving “his ambition of appearing to write from a sort of detached equipoise in Mid-Atlantic” (M. Swan). Note also that James is partial to “the warring words of an oxymoron”, a figure of speech by which a locution produces an effect by seeming self-contradiction, as in “cruel kindness” or “to make haste slowly.”

— **Sex** → James was banned from active service in the American Civil War by reason of an injury sustained when, helping to put out a small farmyard fire, he strained himself with the pump-handle. This ‘**obscure hurt**’ (a back injury, slipped disc, muscular strain or psychosomatic backache ?) was, in James’s own words, “the most odious, horrid, intimate thing that can happen to a man...”. A hurt which amounted to castration ? There has been much speculation on its nature and consequences, and Henry James critics tend to see a relationship between the accident and his celibacy/homosexuality, his apparent avoidance of involvements with women and the absence of overt sexuality in his work.

Biographic information (from *American Fiction*, Longman) :

The peculiarities of James’ life, which spans three quarters of a century – from the age of the common man and of Jacksonian democracy to the first World War – are crucial for an understanding of his work. “He is a member of the James family and has no other country,” his brother William, the famous philosopher of pragmatism, once wrote, pointing to a central idiosyncrasy of

the James clan. Their father wished his five children to be citizens of the world and therefore gave them a remarkably cosmopolitan, eclectic and liberal education. Henry James Jr. thus received a highly informal training which encouraged in him the habit of observation and a certain withdrawal from participation. Privately tutored until 1855, he spent the next three years touring Europe with his family, a crucial experience which brought him in touch with high culture which he was to make his world. From then on, his youth was divided between restricted settings of the American scene – the artistic and intellectual centers of Newport, Cambridge and New York –, and further educational experiences in Europe. Kept out of the Civil War, the great ordeal of his time, by a mysterious injury, James left the Harvard Law School after one year in 1862 and turned to literature. In 1869, he became a transatlantic pilgrim again and from 1875 established his residence in England, while making frequent sojourns in France and Italy.

What he found in Europe was precisely what he missed most in the States, all the attributes of civilization without which the novelist was left empty. James' mock-epic list of items missing in America was more than a humorous reassessment of the poverty and crudity of the American landscape, which Hawthorne deplored in his days – it pointed to the fundamental blankness of American culture which James himself cruelly encountered and which made him an expatriate. He felt unfitted for life in postwar United States and experienced dismay at the greed and vulgarity of the Gilded Age (cf. below). To him the period between the Civil War and the First world war came to be seen as “the Age of the Mistake” and he grew increasingly pessimistic about the possibilities of culture in America. “My choice was the Old World,” he wrote, where his interest in highly refined manners and his devotion to art could be fully satisfied. Hence his lifelong quarrel with his native land, which he officially renounced in 1915, shortly before his death, by becoming a British citizen. Yet if the United States remained an impossible place for him to feel at home in, it did provide him with an essential component of his international theme and thus remained a constant referent in his vision.

In Paris he met Flaubert and Turgenev who were to exert a considerable influence on his conception of art. From them he learned that writing was more than a profession, it was a vocation, and that the novel was the mastery of a form, and as such belonged to art. James thus set about writing novels worthy of this lofty conception, which would lift American fiction to the heights of European and Russian fiction and make it rank alongside the works of Balzac, whom he greatly admired, George Eliot, and his Parisian mentors, Flaubert and Turgenev. Having written *Roderick Hudson* (1876), *The American* (1877), and *The Europeans* (1878), which were all variations on his international theme, it was *Daisy Miller* (1878), another incursion into the same theme, which brought him fame. In *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881), James brought the first of his three periods to a close, with a triumphant sample of his method of psychological realism. This climax in his career

was followed by a period of experimentation, in which James refined his medium into an extremely sophisticated vehicle of perception which earned him a reputation for unnecessary difficulty and undue elaborateness. *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), *The Aspern Papers* (1888), *The Tragic Muse* (1890), *The Lesson of the Master* (1892) and *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) constitute some of the landmarks of this controversial period in which James had to face increasing public neglect and incomprehension, which left him disheartened but which was perhaps the necessary transition, in F.R. Leavis' terms, "to pass from talent to genius."

After an unsuccessful attempt at play-writing which turned into a humiliating failure, James produced the three novels considered to be the masterpieces of his maturity : *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). These late novels, which offer a more and more searching insight into the complexities of human relationships and the depths of human consciousness, testify to James' mastery, though they also point to an increasing loss of touch with the real world, as well as to an often frustrating incapacity for directness, and an exhausting array of subtleties. His prose became accordingly endlessly convoluted, ruminative and elusive, forever accreting, ramifying and qualifying – all Jamesian mannerisms of overtreatment which have divided his readers, among them his brother William urging him "to say it out, for God's sake, and have done with it."

His artistry had become overly self-conscious and led him into realms of his own, with characters altogether cut off from the material world. James' friend, the novelist Edith Wharton, thus criticized *The Golden Bowl* : "What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in *The Golden Bowl* in the void ? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other and fending with each other ?" – a comment which left James baffled. This relinquishing of social surface accentuated tendencies already present in his earlier work, and placed his protagonists in rarefied spheres where perception proceeded against ethereal backgrounds of affluence and sophistication. Even though he greatly admired Balzac's *Human Comedy*, he himself obviously did not care to paint characters from all strata of society, in particular ordinary, commonplace characters that were the stuff of traditional realistic fiction, and devoted himself solely to portraying contrasting types of European aristocrats or artists and American pilgrims. Just as his vision excluded a vast painting of the social canvas, it also discarded apprehension of the physical realities of the flesh : if sexuality appears in his fiction, it surfaces in the blanks of the page, the ellipses of the story, the repressed perceptions of an otherwise hyperactive consciousness. James' own celibate and rather dusky private life may help account for this shadowy treatment of sex. His characters share in their author's essential isolation and withdrawal from life, Strether in *The Ambassadors* being perhaps one of James' closest *personae* in this respect. The scene in which Strether exhorts his young expatriate American friend 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 ?” – speaks eloquently of James' sense of a wasted life. In a life sacrificed to art and gnawed by the awareness of the un-lived life, excesses of refinement thus made up for a fundamental loss : art became for him a means to redeem life.

This is perhaps the ultimate portent of James' fiction. Not only did he greatly stretch the scope and mastery of the novel by introducing psychological realism and emphasizing form, but he also prefigured the modernist vision of art, art being the quintessential form of culture and culture being the sole barrier against barbarism. James' exile is a living testimony to this belief and his fiction a magnificent tribute to the redeeming power of art : “It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.”

Before going any further, it is necessary to situate the novel back in its context and to assess the rôle and importance of James in the evolution of US literature.

Place in the context of American history

Although *The Portrait of a Lady* is a work of fiction and no sociological document, the novel was not composed in a vacuum ; it is firmly grounded in history and incorporates a solid fabric of factual detail. The novel takes place in the latter half of the XIXth century, in post-Civil-War America (the Civil War is mentioned p. 35), and particularly in the decades known as “The Gilded Age” (after the title of a satirical novel, *The Gilded Age : A Tale of Today*, that Charles Warner and Mark Twain wrote in 1873). It was the period between the Civil War and the “Progressive Era” which started around the end of the 19th century (the Progressive Movement which gave its name to the following period was a powerful new idealist movement which aimed at reforming the paltry, disappointing reality of the money-grubbing society the USA had become). The Gilded Age refers to the period when the nation was undergoing a dramatic alteration, passing from an agrarian-commercial economy to an industrial-capitalist one. It was a period of intense economic development which saw the birth of the industrial revolution, the extension of the railway network, the rise of social Darwinism and of the Labor Movement. According to numerous historians, the intellectual and ethical atmosphere of the country was never so poor as during that “age” ; thus the tag is quite appropriate since it emphasizes both the primary rôle played by capital and the spurious values of the age, gilded and not golden (the period was also labelled the “Age of Sham” *i.e.* pretence, fraud, spurious imitation).

The Press was one of those spurious values or institutions ; the crudest expression of the prevalent vulgarity. Throughout his life, James never missed an opportunity to satirize American newspapers and newspaper(wo)men. It can partly be explained by his own unsatisfactory relationship with certain American periodicals and his contempt for their low standards. The delineation of

Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of Lady* bears witness to James's dissatisfaction with and distrust of the Press :

“there's something of the 'people' in her [...] she is a kind of emanation of the great democracy – of the continent, the country, the nation. I don't say that she sums it all up, that would be too much to ask of her. But she suggests it ; she vividly figures it” (p. 93) ; “I don't like Miss Stackpole – everything about her displeases me ; she talks so much too loud and looks at one as if one wanted to look at *her* – which one doesn't. I'm sure she has lived all her life in a boarding-house and [...] I detest a boarding-house civilization” (95).

Place in the context of American literary history

The time of publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* is still very close to the origins of American literature. One must bear in mind that at first, i.e. in colonial times, there was no American literature to speak of : in its early days, American literature was little more than English literature transplanted on new ground ; the New Continent was too immature for the production of original works. As Henry James was to put it much later : “it takes a great deal of history to make a little tradition, a great deal of tradition to make a little taste, and a great deal of taste to make a little art”. In Europe, literature was the product of a sophisticated civilization ; in the early days of the settlement, conditions were not favorable to the flowering of belles-lettres and there was little encouragement to the writing of literature ; pioneering engaged all the colonists' faculties and efforts. What little literature eventually emerged in the formative years of colonial growth had no distinctive American quality and was represented by minor genres such as diaries, chronicles and local histories. So, although America was discovered in the 15th century, the American novel is a recent invention.

After a first slow phase of germination, came the flowering of American literature ; by the middle of the XIXth century, a group of New England authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman) took the lead in American letters and produced in the space of twenty years (1840-1860) some of the finest and greatest works ever written in the land and in the world. Hence, the name of *American Renaissance* that the famous critic F.O. Matthiessen gave to those two brilliant decades.

Henry James (April 15th 1843 – February 28th 1916) does not exactly belong to the American Renaissance, but he is “a continuator of the New England genius” as characterized by the above-mentioned authors, and he showed great interest in **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804-1864), the third major figure of the American Renaissance, who influenced him to a great extent. James wrote that “the fine thing in Hawthorne is that he cared for the deeper psychology, and that, in his way, he tried to become familiar with it”.

In Hawthorne's time, the literary and philosophic scene was dominated by **Transcendentalism**, a philosophic movement launched by R. W. Emerson. The concept of Trans-

cedentalism (i.e. going beyond experience) is borrowed from Kant whose philosophy was known indirectly through the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle. Besides German influences, Transcendentalism also included some elements of Oriental mysticism and French Fourierism. The movement was an outgrowth of the reaction against Puritanism, materialism, rationalism and bourgeois commercialism. Its advocates laid emphasis on the intuitive and mystical above the empirical ; they also claimed that each human being has divine attributes that can be discovered by intuition and they were convinced that the way to attain spiritual growth was through nature. They rejected formalism in religion for spontaneous individual worship and rejected the tyranny of social conformity for a free personal ethical code. Transcendentalism was in fact as much a mode of life as a philosophy.

Hawthorne never was a convert to Transcendentalism though he was once enough of a sympathizer to take part in the Brook Farm experiment (a farm in West Roxbury, Mass. where a communistic community was established from 1841 to 1847). He did not share Emerson's optimism and rejection of the past ; on the contrary, he was closely associated with the New England past through the traditions of his own family which included a judge in the notorious Salem witchcraft trials of the XVIIth century and was obsessed by the traditional view of Sin as rooted in New England conscience. Much of his work is devoted to the probing of the darker regions of the human mind ; his romanticism was not primarily that of an advocate of the new faith in Man's divine essence but rather, that of an artist for whom evil did exist, and who found in Man's sense of sin a rich field for psychological studies. He published short stories : *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), and novels :

— *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) : the story of a woman found guilty of adultery and condemned to wear in public the scarlet letter “A” as a sign of her sin.

— *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) : the working out of an old curse visiting the sins of fathers upon the children of several generations.

— *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) : whose setting is a Transcendental community like Brook Farm.

— *The Marble Faun* (1860) : this novel set in Italy is a predecessor to *The Portrait of a Lady*. It is a modern version of the Garden of Eden with the Miltonic thesis of the “**fortunate fall**” or **felix culpa** through which humankind can be elevated to a new and greater estate than that of innocence.

A key distinction → We owe N. Hawthorne the categorization of American fiction into **romances** and **novels**. The main difference between **the novel** and **the romance** is in the way in which they view reality. The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail ; it attaches great importance to character, psychology and strives after verisimilitude. Romance is free from the

ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude ; it shows a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness and often expresses dark and complex truths unavailable to realism. The word romance also refers to a medieval narrative treating of heroic, fantastic or supernatural events, often in the form of an allegory. A third meaning is appropriate : romance means a love affair with the usual connotations of idealism and sentimentalism, and as such it is not far removed from ‘romanticism’ which according to Th. Mann “bears in its heart the germ of morbidity, as the rose bears the worm ; its innermost character is seduction, seduction to death”. In the “Introduction” to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne defined the field of action of romance as being “the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle”. The distinction is still valid and may account, as some critics have argued, notably R. Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition*, for the original and characteristic form of the American novel which Chase actually calls “**romance-novel**” to highlight its hybrid nature.

This being said, and to return to H. James, who belongs to the XXth century and the beginnings of the modern era → At the turn of the century, a group of *litterati* dissatisfied with social and cultural conditions in the States, turned to Europe to find what was still lacking in their own country : a cultural tradition, a sophisticated civilization, a social climate favorable to literary creation, cf. Hawthorne’s opinion : “No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land” (N. Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*). They consequently often settled in Europe, whether in France, Great Britain or Italy and were given the name of “**expatriates**”.

Henry James was the first to make the pilgrimage back to Europe. There are 4 periods in J’s writing-life :

1.– 1871-1883 : James explored the effects of the Old World on the New (and occasionally of the New World on the Old, cf. *Roderick Hudson*, 1876, *The American*, 1877). This period culminated in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) ;

2. – 1884-1890 : James’s production consisted mainly of studies of current social themes in his native and adopted countries. *The Bostonians* (a novel of *intersectional* – and not international – contrast dealing with social conditions in America, the opposition between North and South i.e. progressive females and conservative males) and *The Princess Casamassima* obviously belong to that period ;

3. – 1890-1895 : While keeping a steady output of fiction, James tried to win a place in the theatre. He dramatized *The American* but the play did not run for long. He then wrote four comedies but he was hissed at first night of his play *Guy Domville* and abandoned the theatre for ever ;

4. – 1895-1904 : James gave his mind to the theory of fiction and the question of point of view. The novels of this time (*What Maisie Knew*, 1897 ; *The Spoils of Poynton*, 1896) marked the beginning of the celebrated “later manner” (by which is often meant a hypertrophy of technique) and they culminated in the publication of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

The international situation

The Portrait of a Lady begun in Florence in the spring of 1879 and published serially in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1880 belongs to the series of early novels having in common the theme of the international situation. The phrase refers to what one might call “the mutual interrogation of America and Europe” (T. Tanner) or “the interplay of contrasted cultural traditions” (Leavis). Thus, the confrontation of the distinctively American outlook and the distinctively European outlook which lies at the heart of nearly all of James’s fiction, was his great discovery for and contribution to the American novel.

H. James considered America a Continent too immature for the production of great literature – “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep”, he said –, while Europe was ancient and ripe with traditions ; it also represented for him that romantic “otherness” which seemed to be necessary to him as an artist. In a way, one might say that H. James exemplified a unique case of ‘divided loyalty’ ; hence the contradiction that is the motive power of his fiction-writing. R. Chase stated in *The American Novel and its Tradition*¹ that the natural bent of the American novel is to exploit and expose the contradictions and discrepancies of the culture it originates in : “[...] many of the best American novels achieve their very being, their energy, their form, from the perception and acceptance not of unities but of radical disunities” ; James compounded the situation, made it more complex, by enriching domestic contradictions with those resulting from the confrontation of the New world with the Old. James’s task as an artist was precisely to dramatize the psychological and cultural complexities that grew out of such conflicts. So James was drawn to the international setting by temperament and training, as well as by what he judged to be the particular aesthetic requirements of the novel, but that pilgrimage to Europe was also the spiritual journey of an author in quest of selfhood :

C’est cette quête de soi que la critique a pris pour la fascination de l’Europe, qui n’en est qu’une des formes, un objectif-corrélatif intermittent et superficiel. Le voyage n’est pas le déplacement dans l’espace du personnage qui en découvre, en inventorie ou en reconnaît les spécificités concrètes ; ce n’est que l’espace absorbé par la conscience individuelle et transmuté en dimension intérieure dynamisée qui permet au personnage de faire le tour de lui-même – de se chercher et, peut-être de se découvrir (M.-H. Bergeret in *L’Art de la fiction*)

1. R Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Baltimore ; The Johns Hopkins UP, 1957, 7.

Thus, there is more to the international situation than meets the eye ; a French critic, H. Cixous, puts readers on their guard against too simplistic an interpretation of James's voluntary exile :

la situation internationale, expression inexacte, comme l'est l'idée du cosmopolitisme, qu'il faut réduire à l'opposition Europe (corps, objet, matière, mère, origine désirée, traversée de part en part, méprisée parce qu'elle est réduite à ses monuments, ses ruines, ses collections, ses os, parce qu'elle est cynique et desséchée, qu'elle a besoin du sang de ses enfants) et l'Amérique (âme, sujet, spiritualité, noblement dépouillée en ses puritains, avide, trompée). Et James, qui n'est ni Européen, ni Américain, se vit comme fils amoureux et trop lucide, désireux de régresser vers une enfance où la lucidité n'entraîne pas encore l'obligation du choix.

I grant you all that may be a little bit complex (however James is no run-of-the-mill novelist), it nonetheless highlights the originality of the author of *The Portrait*.

As far as *The Portrait of a Lady* is concerned, the theme of the international situation is embodied in the confrontation between Isabel Archer (and Henrietta Stackpole) and Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond who represent the two countries of James's imagination : America, the boring paradise, and Europe, seductive, sensual, an enchanting hell. Isabel's fate illustrates “the disabling effects upon the American mind of the simplicities and freedoms of the American life, and their effect in particular of placing Americans at a severe disadvantage in their intercourse with the English and the Europeans” (*The Wings of the Dove*).

After those necessary preliminaries bearing on the general framework of the “international theme”, it is necessary to revert to places in particular, for *The Portrait of a Lady* (which is also a portrait of places²) sends its heroine (and its readers) on an instructive journey through both a “geographic” and “social” map, in other words Isabel's journey in space is also an initiation into the intricacies of “the social atlas” and the complexities of the self. Consequently, the symbolic and social values of the places Isabel traverses differ widely and one could almost trace Isabel's education by reference to the houses and rooms she occupies : from the cluttered office in Albany to the comforting spaciousness of Gardencourt ; through the “stout grey pile” of Lockleigh (Lord Warburton's estate which, to Isabel, looks like ‘a noble picture’ and ‘a castle in a legend’) ; Mrs Touchett's Florentine palace ; Osmond's ancient villa with its imposing front and perpetually chilled ante-chamber ; the garish hotel room in which Osmond proposes marriage ; Osmond's Palazzo Rocca-nera, that ‘dark and massive structure’ like ‘a dungeon’ ; and finally the bare cold apartments of the convent to which Pansy is banished by her father. Each of these references to places, houses, palaces, etc. in a word, architecture, is a clue to Isabel's development. Cf. following opinion from *Critics on Henry James* : “Figuratively speaking the story told in the novel is of Isabel's leaving an American house—a way of life, that is—for a European house. Ostensibly she conceives of this as

2. James published in 1883 a collection of essays entitled *Portraits of Places*.

an escape from frustrating and cramping confinement to a fuller, freer, more resonant and significant life.”

First of all there is “the large, square, double house” in Albany (the capital of New York) ; it has “the appearance of a bustling provincial inn kept by a gentle old landlady” (Isabel’s grandmother) and affords the heroine “uncontrolled use of a library full of books”. This is where the first association of Isabel with gardens manifests itself (note by the way that Isabel’s visits to her grandmother’s are said to have “a flavour of peaches,” 24). In her innocence she is repeatedly associated with gardens — the garden behind her grandmother’s house, then the wide, fresh expanse of Gardencourt and eventually with gardens that harbour corruption and profound egotistical temptation. Note also that on her arrival in England she is described as “*having a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one’s spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many places which were not gardens at all – only dusky pestiferous tracts, planted with ugliness and misery.” (p. 53, emphasis mine)*

The second feature of the house in Albany is Isabel’s “office” whose meaningless clutter of furnishings is a direct antithesis to the studiously contrived aesthetic harmony of Osmond’s villa. It is here that Isabel, “the intellectual superior” (p. 30) seals herself off from the world, never opening the bolted door that leads to the street. She imagines herself in this way protected from what she thinks of as “the vulgar street”, “a region of delight or of terror” (p. 25) and it is this failure of experience, the chronic inability to assess the world as distinct from her romantic vision of the world which will spell her doom ; only in the cloistered office of the walled-in garden behind the house does Isabel feel safe ; she lacks the energy and the conviction to meet the demands of her imagination or to test them against life ; Isabel ventures out into the world only when led forth by her practical aunt, Mrs Touchett.

Then Gardencourt, the country-seat whose name suggests the garden of Eden. In Gardencourt, the symbol of country-house civilization with its rich perfection, Isabel – through her romanticism – sees life as a novel (cf. her reaction on being introduced to Lord Warburton : “*Oh, I hoped there would be a lord ; it’s just like a novel*” [17]) or a picture/painting (cf. “Her uncle’s house seemed a picture made real...the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world and gratified a need” [p. 54]), and becomes herself subject to an artistic analogy (“*A character like that [i.e. Isabel] is finer than the finest work of art. Suddenly I receive a Titian by the post to hang on my wall — a Greek bas-relief to stick over my chimney-place,*” p. 63 / p. 45 : “*She asked Ralph to show her the pictures [...] she was better worth looking at than most works of art*” p. 46), an analogy that is

carried to its extreme in Italy. Gardencourt is also said to be haunted by a ghost whose function is highly symbolic since it is associated with the knowledge of deceit, evil and death, and is only visible to people who have suffered, cf. p. 48 :

Ralph shook his head sadly. 'I might show it to you, but you'd never see it. The privilege isn't given to everyone ; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first... I saw it long ago,' said Ralph.

Italy with its three main cities Florence, Venice and Rome, each endowed in James's fiction with a highly symbolic value :

– Florence, where Isabel lives in Palazzo Crescentini with Mrs Touchett, is the locale of her education to aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment : “*she felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim*” (246)

– Venice : Isabel just passes through Venice [322] (which doesn't play the same rôle in as *The Wings of the Dove*). However, its importance in James's fiction lies in the fact that it is the city in which eastern and western cultures meet and mingle, the vast cemetery of past culture and the city of death.

– Rome is the *terminus ad quem* of Isabel's international pilgrimage from Albany to Italy, the locale of the confrontation with and temptation of "abysses". Rome is a city of decay, offering a kind of openness and freedom impossible in New York or London ; it is a milieu which allows the heroine a certain free-play, an exhilarating imaginative range : cf. beginning chapter 27, and p. 288 : “*from the Roman past to Isabel Archer's future was a long stride, but her imagination had taken it in a single flight and now hovered in slow circles over the nearer and richer field.*”

To know more about the international situation and the confrontation between America and the Mediterranean world at large (bear in mind that Isabel, feeling that “the world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose” [p. 322] makes “a little pilgrimage to the East” [323] and spends three months in Greece, in Turkey, in Egypt [p. 323] before leaving for Italy), see the following extract from a paper read in French by yours truly at the International Conference on “*Saveurs, senteurs : le goût de la Méditerranée*” :

Le rapport Amérique/Méditerranée à l'arrière-plan du roman de James est une question fort complexe : essentiellement vécues sur le mode imaginaire, ces relations sont marquées par une fondamentale ambivalence où l'attirance et l'attraction le disputent à l'aversion et à la répulsion. Cependant, il n'en demeure pas moins qu'historiquement les liens qui se sont établis entre l'Amérique et la Méditerranée remontent à la naissance même de cette nation et sont, à ce titre, d'une importance primordiale : le processus de la découverte et de la colonisation de l'Amérique est essentiellement lié au monde méditerranéen, mais on le sait, les États-Unis se sont voulus et affirmés

WASP, c'est-à-dire anglo-saxons et protestants, ce qui a impliqué le rejet de tout ce qui rappelait la Méditerranée, très tôt perçue comme un tiers-monde avant la lettre. Mais le monde méditerranéen n'est pas totalement exclu et évacué de l'univers anglo-américain ; il refait surface, resurgit avec une fréquence et une obstination insoupçonnées dans les domaines les plus divers et en particulier l'art et la littérature qui apparaissent souvent baignés par « une luminosité qui ne semble pas venir du jour même, mais des temps classiques anciens³ ». Je n'hésiterai pas à avancer l'hypothèse que la Méditerranée, et tout ce qui s'y rattache (Catholicisme, éthique, mœurs, sexualité, etc.), a fait l'objet dans la culture américaine d'un refoulement primaire qui est à l'origine de l'inconscient américain ; reste à en découvrir les raisons et à en apprécier les effets.

Les relations entre l'Amérique et le monde méditerranéen s'inscrivent dès le départ dans la dialectique fondamentale du désir et de l'interdit, de la Loi et de sa transgression. Par exemple, la Méditerranée incarne une relation au corps, à la sensualité et à la sexualité, personnifiée par l'archétype littéraire de la *Dark Lady*, la brune ardente, la séductrice, l'anti-vierge – catholique, juive, latine ou noire – qui symbolise pour la psyché américaine, je cite le critique L. Fiedler, « *our relationship with the enslaved Africa in our midst or with the Mediterranean Europe from which our culture began ; she is surrogate for all the Otherness against which an Anglo-Saxon world attempts to define itself and a Protestant one to justify its existence*⁴ ». Dans le même ordre d'idées, la Méditerranée représente aussi une certaine forme d'hédonisme sinon parfois de licence et d'exubérance foncièrement étrangères à la mentalité puritaine plutôt répressive à l'égard des plaisirs des sens et qui n'en a privilégié que deux, les plus intellectualisés et socialisés, ceux qui maintiennent la distance entre soi et l'autre – et même tiennent l'autre à distance – la vue, organe de la contemplation, qui permet de lire le Verbe, et l'ouïe, qui possède l'autre vertu théologique de l'entendre.

[D]ans un tel contexte, rêver à la Méditerranée, l'évoquer, y situer le cadre d'un roman ou naturellement s'y rendre, sera toujours aller à rebours de certains tropismes fondamentaux de la culture américaine ; prendre le contre-pied de principes fondateurs et de tendances caractéristiques. L'accès à la Méditerranée permet à l'Américain de se dépayser de lui-même, car la (re)découverte du *Mare Nostrum* est placée sous le signe du retour et de la régression sinon de la transgression. Retour vers quoi ? Réponse diverse : tout d'abord, bien évidemment, retour aux sources, à l'origine c'est-à-dire finalement et fatalement au corps : corps de la femme, de l'amant(e) et de la mère (on pourrait évoquer ici le rapport *mare-madre* présent dans les enfonçures de l'inconscient méditerranéen), c'est-à-dire au langage du corps (gestualité, contacts, caresses) et à l'intimité. « Trop de dehors pas assez de dedans » a-t-on dit de l'Amérique ; à l'inverse, les pays méditerranéens offriront

3. M. Gresset, "La Tyrannie du regard ou la relation absolue", Thèse de doctorat (Paris III), 1976, 610.

4. *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, 301.

toutes les séductions et répulsions de la proximité, de l'intériorité, voire de la promiscuité. C'est le lieu et le moment d'évoquer, par exemple, le protagoniste de *Despair* (roman de V. Nabokov publié en français sous le titre de *La Méprise*) qui déambule dans les rues de Perpignan « écrasé par la foule méridionale » et accablé par de « riches odeurs nauséabondes » (216). Intimité sociale et corporelle (liée au contact, au toucher, à l'odorat), mais aussi culturelle : elle se traduit alors par la présence palpable de l'art et du passé, point sur lequel je reviendrai.

La Méditerranée incarne aussi, pour la psyché américaine, la possibilité de quitter la tyrannie rassurante, parce que depuis longtemps familière, du mode géométrique, linéaire et mécanique pour s'exposer au risque du chaotique, de l'amorphe, du tortueux et, ultime étape, de l'instinctuel. S'offre alors la possibilité de régresser vers le premier *cogito*, composé de perceptions sensorielles, le *cogito* radical et perdu⁵, d'avant le sujet pensant – l'anté-sujet – qui fait de l'environnement le complément d'objet direct des verbes humer, goûter, palper, ouïr, et substitue à la formule le monde est ma représentation « le monde est mon appétit » (G. Bachelard). La Méditerranée devient ainsi le terrain de la sensualité permise, ou plutôt reconquise, et d'un certain hédonisme : s'y inaugure ou s'y parfait l'éducation des sens et notamment du goût et de l'odorat à travers l'initiation aux saveurs et aux senteurs les plus diverses, les plus ordinaires comme les plus subtiles et les plus profondes « qui touche[nt] aux morts et à leur pourriture » (Serres). [...] Donc réveil des sens et des sensations qui passeront des nourritures terrestres aux nourritures spirituelles, des nourritures de l'art à la cuisine du sens : l'Américain s'ouvre alors à un monde complexe et déroutant de codes, de rituels et de significations d'ordre social ou culturel, à la nécessité d'opérer des distinctions ou des discriminations subtiles et ténues, condition première de cette – *aisthêsis* – faculté de juger, qui est, ne l'oublions pas, indissolublement liée à la Méditerranée. Le philosophe Luc Ferry rappelle qu'historiquement « c'est d'abord en Italie et en Espagne que le terme goût acquiert une pertinence dans la désignation d'une faculté nouvelle, habilitée à distinguer le beau du laid et à appréhender par *le sentiment (aisthêsis)* immédiat les règles d'une telle séparation – de cette *Krisis*⁶ ».

Ainsi, pour la mentalité puritaine et l'imaginaire américain, la Méditerranée représentera tantôt un lieu de perdition et de damnation tantôt, au contraire, « un ailleurs comme sauvé de la chute et allégé de la culpabilité [...] où l'instinctuel peut se donner libre cours sans entrer en conflit avec le culturel⁷ ». Dans ce dernier cas, la Méditerranée se retrouve placée sous le signe de Pan (sainteté de la sauvagerie originelle) et de Dionysos (abolition orgiastique de l'ordre légal) et symbolise soit la levée des interdits, soit l'irruption d'un Ça, du refoulé de la culture américaine qui

5. G. Bachelard, *La Poétique de la rêverie*, Paris, PUF, 1960, 125.

6. *Homo aestheticus*, Paris, Grasset, 1990, 27.

7. M. Gresset, 610-612.

continue à faire sentir son dynamisme et parvient souvent à rompre les défenses qu'un Surmoi puritain oppose à l'âme américaine divisée, selon D. H. Lawrence, entre l'innocence et le désir, le spirituel et le sensuel.

Ce cadre général ayant été établi, il convient à présent de restreindre notre domaine d'investigation aux frontières de l'Italie [...] Qu'incarnent l'Italie et ses deux villes phares, Rome et Venise, pour l'imaginaire américain ? Nouvelle question complexe à laquelle on apportera diverses réponses selon les auteurs consultés, cependant que l'on évoque N. Hawthorne, dont *Le Faune de marbre* (*The Marble Faun*) a inauguré en 1860 le motif de la rencontre, si ce n'est de la confrontation, entre un artiste américain et la vieille Europe, symbolisée par l'Italie, H. James, son continuateur, qui dans *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *Un Portrait de femme* (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881) ou *Les Ailes de la colombe* (*The Wings of the Dove*, 1909) a élargi et porté à son plus haut degré de perfection le "thème international", ou leurs lointains continuateurs, Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, William Styron, John Cheever et Elizabeth Spencer, nos contemporains, trois constantes fondamentales apparaîtront : un schème – celui du voyage d'Ouest en Est –, une tonalité dominante – l'ambivalence –, et une métaphore, née sous la plume de H. James : celle du « banquet d'initiation / "banquet of initiation" », qui nous met en prise directe sur le thème de notre colloque. Dans les œuvres des auteurs précités, l'Italie représente, par rapport au tropisme fondateur d'Est en Ouest du Nouveau Monde, le terme d'un pèlerinage à rebours du temps et de l'espace où l'Américain, ce nouvel Adam, va, pour parfaire son éducation, prendre part à un rituel initiatique (qui implique toujours la séquence symbolique naissance-mort-rennaissance/résurrection) aux multiples enjeux. Il aura ainsi l'occasion de confronter l'innocence et la naïveté, qui sont en quelque sorte l'apanage naturel de l'*homo americanus*, aux subtiles conventions et aux mœurs parfois corrompues d'une société européenne perçue comme l'antithèse de la société américaine : troc symbolique de l'innocence contre l'expérience faisant défaut au personnage (ou variante tragi-comique : marché de dupes où l'Américain peut perdre sa précieuse innocence sans pour autant acquérir l'expérience). Il peut aussi – comme dans *Le Faune de marbre* (*The Marble Faun*) – boire à la coupe d'argent (« the silver cup of initiation » *RH*, XIX) contenant « le vin de l'Âge d'Or » (« the wine of the Golden Age », *MF*, 164), époque bénie des Dieux, « avant que l'humanité ne soit accablée du fardeau du péché et de l'affliction » (« before mankind was burdened with sin and sorrow », *MF*, 67), et faire, dans les cas les plus déconcertants pour un esprit teinté de rigorisme sinon de puritanisme, l'apprentissage de la vertu libératrice du péché. James évoque en une image marquante – celle du "fouet céleste" (« whip in the sky » *RH*, XVII) – la crainte persistante qui assombrit l'humeur et la conscience du Puritain en Nouvelle-Angleterre (« the suspended fear in the old, the abiding Puritan conscience » *RH*, XVIII), or cette menace paraît absente des cieux d'Italie aussi éprouve-t-il en découvrant la Ville éternelle le sentiment de vivre : « At last – for the first time – I live ! »

s'exclame-t-il. Cette initiation aux joies de l'existence se double souvent d'une révélation des plaisirs ineffables de la culture, de l'art et de l'esthétique. Par opposition aux États-Unis où Hawthorne se plaignait qu'il n'y ait ni ombre, ni antiquité ni mystère, et que les conditions ne fussent guère favorables à la création artistique – « la poésie, le romanesque, le lierre, les lichens et les giroflées ont besoin de ruines pour croître », écrivait-il – l'Italie incarne naturellement la patrie des arts. Même attitude chez H. James, dont certains héros, tel Theobald dans la nouvelle "The Madonna of the Future" (1879), se percevant comme des « déshérités de l'Art » (« We are the disinherited of Art »), dans leur pays d'origine, au passé silencieux et au présent assourdissant (« our silent past, our deafening present »), se rendent en Italie (« an immemorial, a complex and accumulated civilisation » *RH*, 247) pour goûter aux plaisirs de l'acculturation et de l'accumulation de monuments, d'œuvres d'art, de vestiges historiques (« superpositions of history » *RH*, 69), et se faire admettre dans « le cercle magique » ("magic circle") de l'art et de la culture. Rituel qui n'est pas sans danger pour le novice, qui paie parfois cette initiation d'une sorte d'étiollement de ses facultés créatrices, d'une forme d'impuissance devant le talent écrasant et l'exemple insurpassable de ses prédécesseurs. Il arrive parfois que le banquet d'initiation auquel l'Italie convie l'Américain le fasse accéder à des réalités moins souriantes que le pittoresque ou ce que les Américains appellent *romance* (disons le romanesque et le romantique) : ainsi la révélation de l'art ne va-t-elle pas sans la prise de conscience douloureuse de ce qu'il est censé transcender, le temps et la mort, et l'initiation à l'amour comporte toujours sa contrepartie de déceptions, de trahisons et de souffrances. En Italie, terre de contrastes, de paradoxes et de contradictions tout s'interpénètre : innocence et corruption, amour et mort, nature et culture, ordre et chaos, civilisation et barbarie, grandeur et décadence sont intimement mêlés. On y sent le poids écrasant du passé (« sense of ponderous remembrances », *MF*), la présence obsédante de la mort (« some subtle allusion to death carefully veiled but forever peeping forth amid emblems of mirth and riot », *MF*), et l'on y est confronté à de redoutables contradictions dont N. Hawthorne se fait l'écho : "Catholicism is convenient but corrupt, aestheticism is enriching but pagan and tradition is profound but carries along its burden of sin" (*MF*, 342). Si Rome est le lieu où R. Hudson vient bénéficier d'une « education to the senses and the imagination », (147) et, subjugué par tant de beauté, éprouve, tout comme H. James, le sentiment de naître ou de s'ouvrir à la vie, Venise, au contraire, offre à Milly Theale, l'héroïne des *Ailes de la colombe*, l'occasion de goûter la poésie aigre-douce de la mélancolie et de l'infortune (« the poetry of misfortune », 441) et de s'exposer à la beauté mais aussi à la duplicité et au mal. Dans la cité des Doges, on sent, dit-elle, l'ancienneté de la race, et l'interpénétration de l'art de la vie en fait « la plus belle des tombes » (« the most beautiful of tombs », 461) où Milly conformément à son vœu (« I should like to die here », 269) passera de vie à trépas. Finalement, pour l'Américain qui y séjourne assez longtemps, l'Italie comme l'Europe a pour effet d'enrichir et de com-

plexifier la conscience ; c'est par excellence le lieu où les représentants du Nouveau Monde peuvent faire l'expérience de ce que le critique T. Tanner nomme excellemment, par opposition au Transcendantalisme, *descendentalism*, c'est-à-dire une plongée dans l'épaisseur du temps et de l'histoire, dans les profondeurs glauques de l'expérience et les recoins obscurs de l'inconscient, dans le tourbillon vertigineux du péché, de la corruption et de la dissolution (Hawthorne évoque dans un de ses textes "those dark caverns, into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence"). L'Américain, dont J. de Crèvecoeur faisait un « Européen dépouillé », y retrouve ses dépouilles, ses défroques et y éprouve « le sens du gouffre⁸ ».

[...] Ainsi, les romans où l'Italie sert de cadre sont autant d'illustrations diverses d'un schéma que le roman américain a souvent mis en œuvre au cours de son histoire, à savoir que « se rapatrier implique bien un détour, et par une préhistoire et par un ailleurs⁹ ». L'Italie permet au protagoniste de « se rendre maître du chaos que l'on est soi-même, [de] forcer son propre chaos à devenir forme¹⁰ » (voir plus bas la citation faisant référence à l'incohérence d'Isabel). Telle serait au fond une des possibles leçons de la Méditerranée pour l'Américain qui accepte de s'y risquer et de s'y perdre pour éventuellement mieux se retrouver. »

Such observations, however theoretical or far-fetched they may seem to the layman, are not so remote from the novel under study as one may imagine ; they parallel and throw light on some aspects of *The Portrait* which are easier to understand against such a background, for instance :

– Symbolic function of Italy → “The charm of the Mediterranean coast only deepened for our heroine on acquaintance, for it was the threshold of Italy, the gate of admirations. Italy, as yet imperfectly seen and felt stretched before her as **a land of promise, a land in which a love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge**” (223)

– Sense of ponderous past → In Florence Isabel inhabits “an historic building” with Mrs Touchett : “To live in such a place was, for Isabel, to hold to her ear all day **a shell of the sea of the past. This vague eternal rumour kept her imagination awake**” 247

– Education to the senses (“to breakfast on the Florentine sunshine”, 348) and the imagination : cf. visit to Osmond's apartments → “**Isabel was oppressed with the accumulation of beauty and knowledge to which she found herself introduced**” (263) and sojourn in Rome : “I may not attempt to report in its fulness our young woman's response to the deep appeal of Rome... She had an imagination that kindled at the mention of great deeds... These things strongly moved her, but moved her all inwardly. [...] **The sense of the terrible human past was heavy to her...**” (287)

8. G. Bachelard, *La Poétique de la rêverie*, Paris, PUF, 1960, 128.

9. P.-Y Pétillon, *L'Europe aux anciens parapets*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1986, 193.

10. L. Ferry, *Homo aestheticus*, Paris, Grasset, 1990, 259.

– On the deleterious influence of Italy cf. p. 258 : “Italy all the same had **spoiled** a great many people.”

– Motif of “the banquet” & “the silver cup of initiation” (*Roderick Hudson*) : According to Ralph → “You [Isabel] want to drain **the cup of experience**” (*Portrait*, 150, emphasis mine). cf. also : “Madame Merle continued to remark that even among the most classic sites, the scenes most calculated to suggest repose and reflection, a certain **incoherence** prevailed in her [Isabel]. Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly ; she was like **a thirsty person draining cup after cup**”. (323) ; “the dregs of the banquet” (571)

– Romance → “drinking deep, in secret, of **romance**, she [Isabel] was, etc.” p. 321

– Initiation (*i.e.* Europe complicates consciousness) & ensuing disappointment : “**she had had no personal acquaintance with wickedness**” (519). In Italy, Madame Merle fills that gap, and Isabel gets a taste of “wickedness”. After that shattering initiation, Rome feels a congenial place : “She had grown to think of it [Rome] chiefly as the place where people had suffered. [...] the marble columns, transferred from pagan ruins, **seemed to offer her a companionship in endurance**” (518).

Cf. p. 517 : “She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for **in a world of ruins the ruin of one’s happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe**”

– Italy as the scene/site of “descendentalism” → *The Portrait of a Lady* is a modern re-enactment of “the happy fall” : cf. Hawthorne again for whom sin and the fall, the lapse from edenic innocence, were “an element of human education through which we struggled to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained. Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than his¹¹ ?”. Isabel, through her confrontation with evil, hypocrisy and dishonesty, loses her naiveté, her New World innocence, to achieve the higher innocence of those who are aware of the moral intricacy of the world, and having recognized their own limitations, triumph over them by rejoining the world rather than succumbing to self-pity and despair.

– Motif of the abyss :

“...she [Isabel] had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one...it led rather **downward and earthward**, into realms of restriction and **depression** where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard **as from above**, and where it served to **deepen the feeling of failure**” p. 425

Madame Merle → “I am afraid of the **abyss** into which I shall have cast her [Isabel]” p. 286

11. *The Marble Faun*, New York, The New American Library, 1961.

And to round off this short disquisition on the international situation, cf. H. Stackpole's statement to the effect that : "It's nothing to come to Europe [...] It is something to stay at home ; this is much more important" (487). That gives one food for thought, doesn't it ?

MAIN CHARACTERS, SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

Men and women

Before dealing with the question, a word of warning is in order : the following observations do not purport to be a thorough-going psychological study of each character but a sketch aiming at bringing together some essential clues or semes scattered throughout the text in order to emphasize the traits accounting for the fate of the protagonists i.e. Isabel Archer, Madame Merle, Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond. I'll leave it to you to complete the "conversation piece" or *portrait de groupe* and fill in the gaps.

Men and women, or more appropriately, men vs. women, embody a fundamental question not only in *The Portrait of a Lady* but also in the whole of James's fiction as witness the following quotation from critic N. Blake :

La différence des sexes surtout en Amérique est telle que James se persuade que la scène américaine, c'est surtout la scène de la femme. L'homme n'intervient que de façon 'occulte', 'secrète', 'pratiquement désavouée'. L'Amérique, dès *Un Épisode international*, est une société de femmes située dans un monde d'hommes. Et James trouve une image significative : 'les hommes fournissent, pour ainsi dire, toute la toile, les femmes toute la broderie'.

H. James being "l'écrivain de la femme", I'll deal first with women who fall into two categories since in the *Preface* to the novel James makes a distinction between main characters and what he calls "smaller female fry" or "wheels to the coach" (e.g. H. Stackpole) i.e. a character who "neither belongs to the body of that vehicle, or is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside" (XV). There are six women in *The Portrait of a Lady* (Mrs Touchett, Isabel Archer, Madame Merle, Henrietta Stackpole, Countess Gemini and Pansy) forming various couples pairing an elderly or middle-aged woman with a young one (Mrs Touchett/Isabel ; Madame Merle/Isabel ; Countess Gemini/Isabel ; Isabel/Pansy ; only exception Henrietta/Isabel) or, of course, a man and a woman (Mrs Touchett/Mr. Touchett, Ralph/Isabel ; Lord Warburton/Isabel ; Caspar Goodwood/Isabel ; Osmond/Isabel ; Madame Merle/Osmond).

Isabel Archer

In the creation of the main protagonist, Isabel Archer, James was directly inspired by the memory of his beloved cousin from Albany, Minny Temple, who died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four ; the cousins were to have made together the grand tour (i.e. tour of the chief towns of Europe) but Minny's illness prevented it. In both *The Portrait* and in *The Wings of the Dove* (a

companion novel to the former that you are strongly advised to read), Minny served as a prototype of the charmingly ingenuous American girl James was to send on a symbolic voyage to the Old World that would test, temper, and eventually threaten to destroy the very essence of American innocence. However, if we are to believe the author himself, this biographic parallel requires qualifications :

“You are both right and wrong about Minny temple. I had her in mind and there is in the heroine a considerable infusion of my impression of her remarkable nature. But the thing is not a portrait. Poor Minny was essentially *incomplete* and I have attempted to make my young woman more rounded, more finished.”

While we are on the subject of “biographic fallacy” (i.e. an evaluation of literary works in terms of the personality and life of their author, or a literal one-for-one equation of fiction with the details of the life from which it grows), let me add that Ralph Touchett is frequently judged to be a thinly disguised and self-indulgent portrait of the novelist himself. There exist numerous parallels between James and Ralph e.g. their detachment, their desire to test the resources of imagination, their unfulfilled love for a cousin from Albany, etc.

Now to return to Isabel Archer, she clearly represents :

« la jeune fille américaine [qui] possède le double attribut de l'audace et de l'innocence, de la spontanéité et de la naïveté. Importée en Europe, au cœur de la fameuse situation internationale, elle contraste sérieusement avec ses sœurs anglaises, moins idéalistes, plus conventionnelles. Elle débarque en Europe toute neuve, page blanche qui ne demande qu'à s'écrire, identité provisoire qui attend de se constituer en essence. Là, elle devient le point de mire de tous les regards, l'objet de tous les désirs. Le sujet de toutes les conversations également, car ce qui séduit d'abord en elle c'est la contradiction qui la fonde... » (*L'Arc*).

Like many Jamesian heroines, Isabel is “an interesting mixture” ; there's in the description of the alloy composing her nature a suggestion of some flaw : a chronic inability to assess the world as distinct from her romantic vision of it (cf. “*She spent half her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity ; she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action*”, 51). Isabel's aim is “the free exploration of life” (110) ; she wishes to “drain the cup of experience” (150), to roam about the world, to see places and people, and there's nothing wrong with it for “an independent young lady”, except that she is unable to see through them : cf. “*she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging*” (p. 33 ; emphasis mine) and her tell-tale exclamation : “Good heavens, how you see through one !” (48). In other words, “sight” is a poor substitute for “insight”, and the failure of any such discriminating vision is one of the most serious of Isabel's faults (cf. in aesthetic matters, “her fear of exposing her possible grossness of perception” 263). This “tragic flaw” (or **hamartia** i.e. error of judgment resulting from a defect in the character of a tragic hero and bringing about disaster, is an essential ingredient of tragedy, and so is “inescapability” : cf. “I can't escape

my fate” p. 131 and “I can’t escape unhappiness” p. 132) clearly manifests itself in her taste for “ideas” and “theories” (etymologically both refer to the notion of vision : “idea” comes from Indo-European *weid→ *idea/eidos* (idole) in Greek → *videre* in Latin → *voir/vision* in French → *wit, wisdom* in English ; “theory” comes from the Greek *theoria*, meaning “contemplation”, “speculation”, “sight”) two essential signifiers (which shouldn’t come as a surprise in a novel entitled *The Portrait of a Lady* since painting is a visual art ; however, the eye is not only an organ of aesthetic experience but also of moral discrimination → much of James’s work is an exploration of the profound identity of the aesthetic and the moral ; moral and aesthetic experience have in common their foundation in feeling and their distinction from the useful.) as witness the number of occurrences :

“Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories” 49 ; “theories” (53 ; 127 ; 128) ; “a system, a theory, that she had lately embraced”, 160 ; “That love of liberty...was as yet almost exclusively theoretic”, 164 ; “according to her own theory” (180) ; “having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed but for his poverties dressed out as honors” 348 ; “What had become of all her ardours, her aspirations, her theories ?” 352 ; “by theory” 414 ; “if she had really married on a fictitious theory” 427 ; “she had too many ideas” 428 ; “theory”, 583, etc.

and the number of metaphors using visual images as their vehicle → the question of seeing is central to all of James’s major works and it is even more so in the case of *The Portrait* :

The title, *The Portrait*, asks the eye to see. And the handling of the book is in terms of seeing. The informing and strengthening of **the eye of the mind** is the theme—the ultimate knowledge, the thing finally “seen,” having only the contingent importance of stimulating a more subtle and various activity of perception. The dramatization is deliberately “scenic”, moving in a series of recognition scenes that are slight and low-keyed at first, or blurred and erroneous, in proportion both to the innocence of the heroine and others’ skill in refined disguises and obliquities ; then, toward the end, proceeding in swift and livid flashes. For in adopting as his compositional center the growth of a consciousness, James was able to use the bafflements and illusions of ignorance for his “complications,” as he was able to use, more consistently than any other novelist, “recognitions” for his crises. Further, this action, moving through errors and illuminations of the inward eye, is set in a symbolic construct of things to be seen by the physical eye—paintings and sculptures, old coins and porcelain and lace and tapestries, most of all buildings : the aesthetic riches of Europe, pregnant with memory, with “histories within histories” of skills and motivations, temptations and suffering. (D. Van Ghent, emphasis mine)

Isabel’s lack of discrimination is also the logical concomitant of her New World innocence (“her **innocent ignorance**” p. 543), an innocence which is the reverse side of her “sublime soul”, and is paradoxically and ironically enough, strengthened by her intellectualism and devotion to literature (“*Her reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic*” 35) ; even if “her love of knowledge had a fertilizing quality and her imagination was strong” (23), they can’t make up for actual experience as Henrietta Stackpole bluntly states :

“The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You’re not enough in contact with reality — with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that sur-

rounds you. You're too fastidious ; you've too many graceful illusions...You think you can lead a romantic life, that you can live by pleasing yourself and pleasing others" (216-217)

a fault that Isabel herself had come to acknowledge, earlier in the novel, without acting accordingly : *"It appeared to Isabel that **the unpleasant** had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and **even of instruction**"* (33). That it is, indeed, as the rest of the story will show ! Moreover, to highlight another paradox in her psychological make-up : *"**The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance.** With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners."* (199). Her reluctance to face "the unpleasant" stems from her almost exclusive preoccupation with aesthetics ; she tends to place too exclusive a trust in social and aesthetic forms themselves, without considering the ethical distinctions which should inform these. To that shortcoming may be ascribed several other inadequacies : a fear of life, if not a withdrawal from life, and particularly sexuality, associated with three clusters of images bearing on :

shadows → they become increasingly symbolic of the cultural ambiguities and moral obscurity into which Isabel is moving and of her fear of the world, of human commitments and physical contact ;

light→ "if a certain **light** should dawn she could give herself completely" (53) ; "His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed ; and it was extraordinarily as if , while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her... justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession" (591)

water → her persistent fear of her suitor's sexuality is conveyed by the use of water imagery ; water becomes concomitant with the surrender to passion which would destroy her own image → p. 590 : "The world [...] seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters. She had wanted help, and here was help ; it had come in a rushing torrent," etc.

Note also that Isabel turns down Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood as being – in her opinion – too safe, too conservative, too predictable, but one may wonder if she does not reject those suitors because they are hardy and robust men, and turns instead to the sexless love of a dying cousin and to a husband who is slight, effete and cold. Be that as it may, all these implications of frigidity suggest a fear of life itself, of passion and instinct, and it is the most fatal of Isabel's presumptions that she can see life from a detached, almost theoretical point of view, without actually experiencing it ; hence Ralph's pointed reproof : "**You want to see but not to feel**" (p. 150).

Two other characteristics are also to be taken into account in any discussion of Isabel's personality :

– self-complacency → “Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem ; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature [note the variant of the garden-metaphor] ; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right” (50) ;

– and “perversity” → Isabel, whom James describes in the *Preface* as “an intelligent but presumptuous girl” (XI), is a perverse heroine, perverse, that is, in both the English sense of the word and the etymological one, i.e. someone who “turns from the right way, turns aside from a right course or opinion, or who wilfully determines not to do what is expected or desired ; contrary, persistent or obstinate in what is wrong” → Isabel determines, against the advice of her family, to make an unconventional marriage to an effete older man and must learn to accept the limitations of that choice, and to retrieve from it what dignity she can. Having everything (beauty, intelligence, wealth, etc.), Isabel is thus in an ideal position not only to give everything but also to lose everything, to end up with nothing, the common fate of most Jamesian heroes and heroines, and yet to be eventually the richer for the loss of everything because one is radically changed in the process ; it's like a game in which the loser takes all (a sort of “qui perd gagne”).

In her evolution from naivety to maturity, Isabel will have to learn to see people and things plainly, as they actually are and not as they appear to be : this moment of realization (or **anagnorisis** in Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Anagnorisis “refers to the point in the plot at which the protagonist recognizes his or her or some other character's true identity or discovers the true nature of his or her own situation”. If tragedy is, as some critics maintain, the realization of the unthinkable – in the present instance that Madame Merle “had made a convenience of [her]” (573) and that Osmond “had married [her] for [her] money” (576) –, then *The Portrait* clearly belongs to the genre.) is the climax of Isabel's apprenticeship. It goes through various stages :

– first inkling of the truth : p. 408 → “What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood ; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. [...] But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light”

– revelation/“apocalypse” (in the original sense : “lifting of the veil of appearances”) : p. 517 → “What have you to do with me ?” Isabel went on. – “Everything !” she [Madame Merle] answered”

– admission : “I'm wretched” (488)

Isabel's conscious decision to return to her ‘satanic’ tormentor at the conclusion of the novel may seem disturbing ; however, that this decision is not only inevitable, but also the thematic climax of the work is fully appreciated when we grasp one of the novel's most crucial ambiguities : if Isabel is wronged, she is not herself blameless (cf. “the sole source of her mistake had been within herself” p. 405) ; if Osmond is the victimizer, he is also, in important measure, a victim : Isabel

feels herself responsible for having deceived Osmond into believing she was more pliable, less opinionated than she was : “She had made herself small, pretending that there was less of her than there really was... Yes she *had* been hypocritical ; she had liked him so much.” (page reference ?). It is an ironic blend of strength and weakness which determines her return to Osmond ; she actually obeys one of the most endearing aspects of her personality : “the temptation to give”. Thus, Isabel accepts the consequences of her error of judgment and her decision is more or less anticipated by the fact that “suffering with Isabel, was an active condition ; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure” (p. 425). In the work of Henry James, suffering is a supreme discipline—it is the price one pays for being able to feel → “For James, man’s most terrifying fate is to exist without feeling, and he never more clearly argues his point than he does in his short story “The Beast in the Jungle” for here the special fate, the beast waiting to spring is simply the realization that one has lived without ever having felt or committed oneself at all”. As for Isabel’s splendid imagination, it is worth noting that it is not destroyed : it is transmuted into the finer stuff of conscience. This is quite in keeping with one of the most fundamental tenets of James’s literary credo, i.e. that “his characters can only reach **the ultimate stage of consciousness when they have coupled aesthetic perception with ethical perception**”.

Serena Merle

A manifestation of the forces of evil, which in *The Portrait* are embodied by expatriated or hybrid Americans, Madame Merle is the arch betrayer, a born plotter, who loves handling everyone. The pair composed by Isabel/Madame Merle (heroine/anti-heroine) is underlain by the well-known opposition in American fiction between an innocent heroine, the Fair Maiden, and a worldly woman, the Dark Lady : the former stands for American innocence and the latter for European experience. This conventional moral color-scheme is an integral part of James's deepest symbolism and it crops up repeatedly in his characterization : like the **blackbird** from which she takes the name (by the way, note the irony of Ralph’s words on p. 251 : “On the character of everyone else you may find some little **black speck**... For my own, I’m spotted like a leopard. But on Madame Merle’s nothing, nothing, nothing !”), she is crafty and capable of viciousness. Even if Isabel sometimes entertains doubts as to the true nature of her lady-friend – “She liked her as much as ever, but there was a corner of the **curtain** that never was lifted” (324) – and even realizes that “she [Serena Merle] belonged to the ‘**old, old**’ world, and never lost the impression that she was the product of a **different moral or social clime from her own, that she had grown under other stars. She believed then that at bottom she had a different morality,**” 324 (this is the heart of the matter, i.e. of the international motif) she won’t see beyond appearances and will continue to confide in

Mme Merle (“it was as if she had given to a comparative stranger the key to her cabinet of jewels” 187) until she is betrayed.

In “the social battle” (401) that the novel depicts – « le choc du pot de fer contre le pot de terre », to use a French phrase (cf. 192 : “there are many more iron pots certainly than porcelain”) – Isabel Archer, the weaker vessel, who is in a way incomplete (she has much to learn) is no match for Serena Merle who is “too complete” (251), and a formidable opponent : “*That personage was armed at all points ; it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle. She carried her flag discreetly, but her weapons were polished steel and she used them a skill which etc.*” (401). Unlike Isabel, Serena Merle can judge people (see the irony in her warning to Isabel : “One can’t judge till one’s forty” 188) ; this capacity is the result of experience. If Isabel is totally inexperienced in the field of social relations, Serena Merle has learnt her craft the hard way, “on the job” ; there’s nothing theoretical about it (“That isn’t – the knowledge I impute to you – a common sort of wisdom. You’ve gained it in the right way – **experimentally**” 239), hence her cold pragmatism : “I don’t pretend to know what people are meant for, I only know **what I can do with them**” (240). She uses people like pawns on a chess-board and even if she evinces a certain fondness for Isabel, she considers her basically as an asset, “an investment” that is to bear interest in the form of Pansy’s marriage to someone above her station i.e. Lord Warburton.

Madame Merle has been used and abused by the world as witness the image of the “chipped cup” she applies to herself with a wry sort of humour : “I’ve been shockingly chipped and cracked...cleverly mended...remain in the cupboard” (192 ; there are of course moral undertones to this comparison). Madame Merle is “in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be [...] she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals” (192). Hence the connotations of mystery (“She’s too fond of mystery” 174), duplicity (403), cynicism (245) and calculation (268) attaching to her delineation. Setting great store by appearances (“she’s always had a worship of appearances”, 545), Madame Merle “lived entirely by reason and by wisdom” (401) (wisdom i.e. sight + insight). If, like all the other characters in the novel, Madame Merle “wants to see what life makes of you [Isabel]” (188), she, unlike the others, who are often mere spectators, will take an active part in engineering the show. Her two main motives being of course, money (like Kate Croy, her counterpart in *The Wings of the Dove*, she is “a loyal apostle to money” : “the idea of a distribution of property...irritated her with a sense of exclusion”, 207 ; cf. her admission to Isabel : “I wish you had a little money” 203) and social ambition : “She was always plain Madame Merle” (252). However, beware of blackening S. Merle more than she deserves ; the character is a villainess but she also has extenuating circum-

stances ; she is also, in a way, a victim of Osmond's : "You've not only dried up my tears ; you've dried up my soul" (p. 522)

Ralph Touchett

With Osmond and Serena Merle, Ralph is a major force shaping and coloring Isabel's life and lending the final tones to her portrait. An expatriated American, who like his father can be said to "be living in England assimilated yet unconverted" (39), Ralph is defined by Lord Warburton – half in jest, half in earnest – as a "a regular cynic. He doesn't seem to believe in anything" (10). There is a modicum of truth in this judgment as witness Ralph's partiality for/indulgence in paradoxes : "The increasing seriousness of things, then – that's the great opportunity of jokes" (12). Several features stand out in his delineation :

Cleverness : "clever" 243 ; "a clever man" 394 ; hence his tendency to manipulate people e.g. his father (see Ralph's own admission on p. 186 : "But it's scandalous, the way I've taken advantage of you !") and his cousin. Even though altruism is not totally absent from his motivations (as an "apostle of freedom" [462] he urges Isabel to "Spread your wings" [222]), they reveal a good deal of selfishness. Ralph is consciously taking chances, cf. recurrence of the word "calculations" as on p. 338 : "his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost". The source of his cynicism and dilettantism is, of course, his state of health :

Health → "the state of his health had seemed not a limitation, but a kind of intellectual advantage ; it absolved him from all professional and official emotions and left him the luxury of being exclusively personal" (337). His illness leads him to live by proxy and to see life and the world as a stage from which he is excluded : he is restricted to mere spectatorship → "what's the use of being ill and disabled and restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life if I can't really see the show when I have paid so much for my ticket ?" [148]. This theatrical metaphor is a leitmotif with Ralph cf. : "There will be plenty of spectators" (149) ; "he wanted to see what she would make of her husband – or what her husband would make of her. This was only the first act of the drama, and he was determined to sit out the performance" (395). The motif of vision is closely bound up with theatricality : Ralph, like his cousin and most of the other characters in the novel, wants to "see" : "I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton" (149)

Wealth : His wealth will enable him to fulfil the requirements of his imagination (cf. his own definition : "I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination", 183) and "to put a little wind in his cousin's sails" (182) i.e. endow Isabel with the wherewithal to carry out her plans.

It follows from the above features that Ralph is in certain respects a flawed character, and indeed he and Isabel share some of the same shortcomings (e.g. presumptuousness), just as he shares with Osmond the fond delusion that “life was a matter of connoisseurship... She [Isabel] trusted she should learn in time” (262). Although he loves Isabel more intensely than any other character, he plays a major rôle in her downfall. He urges his father to “put money in her purse” because he should like to see her “going before the breeze”, without realizing that she may be driven out to sea, as Henrietta fears. When Mr. Touchett remarks that “You speak as if it were for your mere amusement”, Ralph answers bluntly, “So it is, a good deal”. Such an idea strikes the old man as immoral, and he predicts that Isabel “may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters” (186). “That’s a risk,” Ralph replies, “and it has entered into my calculations. I think it appreciable, but I think it’s small, and I’m prepared to take it” (*Ibid.*). The gross presumptuousness with which Ralph imagines he can steer Isabel’s course is made keenly apparent when he concludes the interview with the statement that “I shall get the good of having met the requirements of my imagination” (186). Even if it is love for his cousin which plants in him the desire to play Pygmalion to Isabel’s Galatea, the motive of selfishness (his desire to meet the requirements of his imagination whatever the cost) cannot be overlooked. It is this hint of egotism which links Ralph with Mme Merle and Osmond. However, there is a redeeming feature in the portrait of Ralph Touchett : his faithful love is to prove the key to Isabel’s salvation. In returning to Gardencourt, Isabel is eventually returning to life, for she has achieved through suffering knowledge of life (remember the “ghost”), and more important still, of truth : “the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together” (576)

Gilbert Osmond

Another “clever” character, only this time to the power of three (“clever” (243) ; “one of the cleverest men”, 244/272 ; “awfully clever”, 297) and a key element in the confrontation between New World innocence and Old World corruption : “You [Isabel] are remarkably fresh and I’m remarkably well-seasoned” 352. Osmond is a compendium of the worst traits all the expatriate characters share among themselves :

- he is “small, narrow, selfish” (345) ; “his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers,” 430.

- “very perverse” (236) ; “a streak of perversity” (507) ; “his faculty of making everything wither that he touched, spoiling everything that he looked at” (424) ; cf. Madame Merle → “You’re very bad” (523). The description of his surroundings leave no doubt as to his evil nature → “It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (429)

- “an original without being an eccentric” 261 ;

– “a sterile dilettante” (345) → “he was the elegant complicated medal struck off for a special occasion” (228) ; “Osmond was a specimen apart” (261).

Osmond, as a villain (“to prove him a villain” 343), is an embodiment of the worst combination in James’s fictitious world : “If he had English blood in his veins it had probably received some French or Italian commixture” (228) ; “He’s a vague, unexplained American who has been living these thirty years, or less, in Italy” (249). As for his favourite subjects – Machiavelli, Vittorio Colonna, Metastasio (259) – they leave no doubt as to Osmond’s true nature. Imbued with a sense of his own importance (“It implied a sovereign contempt for everyone but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied, and for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own” 430) and superiority (“as if he were made of some superior clay” 272), Osmond is a slave to decorum (“what a worship I have for propriety” 312) and propriety : “under the guise of caring only for intrinsic values Omond lived exclusively for the world....Everything he did was *pose*” (394) ; cf. also : “His ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety” 431 ; “he was fond of the old, the consecrated, the transmitted” (431). Isabel is impressed by “Osmond’s artistic, plastic view of Pansy’s innocence” (353), yet all this emphasis on form and propriety is but a façade : “He always had an eye to effect, and his effects were deeply calculated. They were produced by no vulgar means, the motive was as vulgar as the art was great” (393).

Note an anticipation of Isabel’s fate in his tenet : “It’s one’s own fault if one isn’t happy” (266) and the irony ; Isabel is to him a collector’s piece if not a commodity, “a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection” (304) → “he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearances” 428 ; “He wished her to have no freedom of mind”, 462.

Caspar Goodwood → main semes in the delineation of the character : “he expressed for her an **energy** that was of his very nature” 114 ; “nothing cottony about him” 116 ; “**a mover of men**” ; “honesty”, 494 ; “the most modern man in the world”, 505 ; “something really formidable in his resolution”, 587 ; “**firm as a rock**”, 590 ;

Main failing → “a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life” 116 → “he was naturally plated and steeled, armed essentially for aggression”, 155.

What such a cursory presentation of the main characters tends to obliterate is that much of their significance stems not so much from their individual personalities as from their mutual relationship and the influence they exert upon each other ; actually each character is what he becomes through his contacts with the others : *The Portrait* is a drama of mutual initiation. For Isabel, it takes the form of an education of her conscience since she's faced with moral choices ; her trip to Europe is also an initiation, Columbus's journey in reverse, “the exposure of American innocence to a knowing Europe”. Isabel is introduced to the intricacies of European social life and organiza-

tion but to a certain extent her initiation also takes the form of an “education of the eye” (R. W. Emerson), an artistic, sentimental and above all moral education. Like Milly Theale, her opposite number in *The Wings of the Dove*, Isabel learns “the art of seeing things as they were” (*The Wings*). *The Portrait of a Lady* is of course a portrait, a novel of characters, but it also a novel in which relations are the centre ; it is a “**novel of relations**” i.e. a novel whose characters act upon and react to one another (this is to be linked with James’s compositional credo : “to treat a subject is to exhibit relations”).

SYMBOLS & METAPHORS

Two essential devices in James’s poetics and the most obvious by-products of the writer’s traffic with language. Metaphors and symbols highlight the verbal nature of the text → a text is a discursive construct, an artefact made of words. However, if a writer starts from scratch, words don’t ; they have a life of their own, a memory, a history and their integration within a sentence may bring to life long-forgotten or unsuspected meanings. In other words, the writer’s medium is never virgin, yet the aim of a writer is to turn to personal use this collective material called language (“*Avoir du style, c’est parler la langue de tout le monde comme personne*”, or to put it differently, style is “*an individual linguistic deviation from the general norm*”), hence the creation of various figures of speech (among which metaphor and metonymy, two processes standing at the heart of verbal activity), images, similes, symbols, etc. resulting in the emergence of a personal style (*i.e.* « Une sélection opérée dans un répertoire linguistique, déclenchée mais non déterminée par le sujet de l’œuvre et constitutive de cette œuvre » → the imaginative writer creates what it describes ; “style is not a decorative embellishment upon subject matter, but the very medium in which the subject is turned into art.” (D. Lodge in *Language of Fiction*). Hence, R. Barthes’s challenging definition of a writer : « *Est dit écrivain, non pas celui qui exprime sa pensée, sa passion ou son imagination par des phrases mais celui qui pense des phrases* ». However thought-provoking it may be, Barthes’s statement deserves qualification : style is not just a question of technique (*i.e.* it is not reducible to an inventory of various devices and features), but a question of metaphysics, as J. P. Sartre stated. Without going that far, one might say that style is a quality of vision (*cf. infra*) and the “way a writer is able to communicate to the reader the quality of his mind” (S. Foote).

A few quotations as food for thought :

— **Metaphors**

« Le plus grand mérite est d’être un maître de la métaphore... Car une vraie métaphore suppose la perception intuitive de la similitude dans les choses dissemblables » (R. Caillois)

« Il y a dans toute métaphore à la fois la mise en œuvre d'une ressemblance et celle d'une différence, une tentative d'assimilation et une résistance à cette assimilation, faute de quoi il n'y aurait qu'une stérile tautologie » (G. Genette).

M. Proust (un contemporain de James) :

« Il n'est pas de beau style sans métaphore : 'seule la métaphore peut donner au style une sorte d'éternité'. Il ne s'agit pas là, pour lui, d'une simple exigence formelle, d'un point d'honneur esthétique comme en cultivaient les tenants du 'style artiste' et plus généralement les amateurs naïfs pour qui la 'beauté des images' fait la valeur suprême de l'écriture littéraire. Selon Proust, le style est 'une question non de technique mais de vision', et la métaphore est l'expression privilégiée d'une vision profonde : celle qui dépasse les apparences pour accéder à l' 'essence' des choses. » (G. Genette).

Cf. aussi S. Foote : « La métaphore n'est pas un ornement, mais l'instrument nécessaire à une restitution, par le style, de la vision des essences » (*Metaphor is not a fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts*)

— Symbols

One of the five codes out of which – according to R. Barthes – a literary text (which is etymologically akin to “tissue, fabric, weft”, etc.) is woven, viz. :

1. The proairetic code (“voix de l'empirie”) : code of actions → referring to all that happens/takes place in a text ;

2. The semic code (“voix de la personne”) : its objective is characterization achieved through the distribution of “semes” throughout the text. **Semes** = traits, features, attributes whose sum subsumed under a proper name – composes an image of a particular character. Bear in mind that “character is merely the term by which the reader alludes to the pseudo-objective image he composes of his responses to an author's verbal arrangements” (C.H. Rickword in D. Lodge, *op. cit.*);

3. The hermeneutic code (“voix de la vérité”) : devices for stimulating interest, curiosity or suspense such as delays and gaps which turn the reading process into a guessing game, an attempt to solve a riddle or a puzzle. The text suggests the existence of an enigma and delays its solution while, at the same time, it keeps promising an answer ;

4. The cultural code (“voix de la science”) : a code of reference, a shared body of knowledge or **Doxa** = opinions, rationalizations, commonplaces, received ideas : “modest women blush”, “boys will be boys”. Refers to concepts, generalizations, principles governing our perception of the world, justifying our actions, attitudes or judgments. Its function is to naturalize what is on the main cultural : fragments of sth that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced.

5. The symbolic code (“champ symbolique”) : the code governing the production of symbolic meaning (a symbol is something that refers to or represents something else). But in R. Barthes's theory the notion has strong psychoanalytic undertones : symbolism arises as the result of

intrapsychic conflict between the repressing tendencies and the repressed...only what is repressed is symbolized. Repression triggers off a series of substitutions resulting from **displacement and condensation**, two key primary processes governing unconscious thinking → according to R. Barthes, the way in which a text will regulate a series of antithetical terms.

Note that in *The Portrait of a Lady* characterization (the semic code) heavily resorts to symbolism : the names of almost all the characters in the novel convey some degree of symbolical innuendo and there seems to be a certain correspondence between a person's name and his/her character. Isabel (variant of Elizabeth = "oath of god") Archer is obviously connected with Artemis, the archer goddess. Artemis, a Greek goddess, was a virgin huntress, associated with uncultivated places and wild animals. The Romans identified her with the Italian goddess Diana, 'chaste and fair', associated with wooded places, women and childbirth, and with the moon. Pansy is flowerlike ; Madame Merle combines the various connotations of a blackbird, a bird of bad omen, and a blackguard ; Henrietta Stackpole's Christian name is appropriately derived from the name of a man, and a critic has remarked—ironically but hardly irrelevantly—that Henrietta's utilitarian-sounding family name contains echoes of 'haystack' and 'flagpole'.

Lord Warburton is associated with manly virtues, and at one point is directly compared to Mars ; Caspar Goodwood (a pretty obvious surname) is a sturdy, unbending, and pre-eminently good character. Gilbert (*pledge + bright*) Osmond (*God + protection*) bears a name that does justice to his high opinion of himself : a domestic god extending his nefarious protection to all the people around him. The Touchett family obviously presents particular difficulties with regard to such nominal symbolism, since their personalities are so strikingly different, however it has been suggested that there might be an implied emblematic significance of something like 'touching' for Mr. Touchett, of 'touchy' for his wife Lydia, and of 'touché' for Ralph who becomes Isabel's 'touchstone' (etymologically the name Ralph associates two semes : "*counsel + wolf*" : he both advises and preys upon Isabel *i.e.* uses her to satisfy the requirements of his own imagination). Obvious conclusion → nothing in a novel can be wholly gratuitous or neutral.

Now to revert to the first device, it is worthy of note that in his Preface to the novel, James consistently resorts to metaphors to tell about his art and the composition of *The Portrait*. For instance, to evoke the process of literary inspiration, he depicts himself as awaiting "the **ship** of some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist of my subject, the next true touch for my canvas" (V) etc., a fundamental metaphor acting as a filter through which reality within the novel is viewed (*e.g.* Isabel is compared to a ship: cf. "I should like to put a little wind in her sails", 182. Note, by the way, that Milly Theale, the heroine of *The Wings of the Dove* is likened to "a great new steamer" p. 81 ; pretty consistent, isn't it ?) as witness its recurrence throughout the text *e.g.* :

Henrietta to Isabel : “Do you know where you’re drifting ? [...] You’re drifting to some great mistake” 165-166

“She [Isabel] had started on an exploring exhibition..she’ll be steaming away again”, 275 ;
“her [Isabel] adventure wore already the changed, the seaward face of some romantic island from which, after feasting on purple grapes, she was putting off” 308

“he [Ralph] drifted..like a rudderless vessel” 338

“You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue – to be sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly someone tosses a faded rosebud...and straight you drop to the ground” 344

The encounter between Caspar/Isabel : “it was like a collision between vessels in broad daylight...she had only wished to steer wide...to complete the metaphor” (emphasis mine) ; 485

“Isabel far afloat on a sea of wonder” ; 550

“The tide of her (Merle’s) confidence ebbed, and she was able only to just glide into port, faintly grazing the bottom” ; 552

Caspar : “he let out sail” ; 587

“The world seemed to open out, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she [Isabel] floated in fathomless waters” ; 590, etc.

A choice obviously determined by the image of life as a sea full of obstacles which has to be crossed (cf. James’s definition of his main theme as “the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny”, X), not to mention the various symbolic meanings attaching to the notion : the sea symbolizing the feminine principle and blind forces of chaos, the sea as source of all life, containing all potentials, etc. (just look up the term in any *Dictionary of Symbols*)

Another fundamental metaphor is the Book/Sheet metaphor which can be seen as a sort of self-reflexive device pointing to the literariness/fictionality of *The Portrait* as a discursive construct, an artefact made of words and sometimes of other texts (intertextuality). Source of the metaphor : life/nature/world as a book → the book of life (cf. “I [Osmond] had been putting out my eyes over the book of life” 351). Osmond, Madame Merle are quite literate ; they can even read between the lines ; Isabel, despite her fondness for reading, is illiterate when it comes to deciphering the social code/text and interpreting the book of life (cf. “she [Isabel] had not read him [Osmond] right” 426 → hence the need for “an education of the eye” as stated earlier in these notes). Another interesting use of the metaphor is that in James’s fiction, women are consistently likened to books, they form – as a character put it in *The Wings* – “a whole library of the unknown, the uncut” :

L’assimilation de [l’héroïne de James] à une page – page que la lecture ne saurait épuiser – présente la situation fondatrice – le rapport homme-femme – comme une page encore mystérieuse qui appelle indéfiniment la glose, qui sollicite l’interprétation, qui provoque la réverbération : la romance est un texte à lire et à relire, toujours inachevé et toujours se faisant (C. Richard, *DELTA*).

It has been pointed that in most novels by James “the centers of perception are both acting in the drama and organizing their involvement in it into coherent artistic patterns ; they live their experience as if they were writing about it” (L. Barsani), hence the omnipresent literary metaphor turning the characters into books, pages or making them feel as if they were sentences, texts, parentheses, images, *e.g.* :

“Isabel’s written in a foreign tongue” (says Mr Ludlow) 31 ;

“living as he (Ralph) now lived was like reading a good book in a poor translation” 40

“[Stackpole] was as crisp and new and comprehensive as a first issue before the folding” ; 84

Pansy = a sheet of blank paper ; 278 → [Isabel] hoped so fair and smooth a page would be covered with an edifying text 279

“she [Countess Gemini] had been written over in a variety of hands, a number of unmistakable blots” 279 ;

“Don’t put us in a parenthesis – give us a chapter to ourselves” (Gilbert Osmond to Isabel) 307 ;

“You express yourself like a sentence in a book” (Osmond→Merle), 525 ;

“You’re more like a copybook than I”, 525 ;

Gardencourt → “No chapter of the past was more perfectly irrecoverable”, 497 ; etc.

The preface also provides another fundamental metaphor i.e. one having to do with James’s poetics, let’s call it the **architectural metaphor** (the novel as construct cf. “The house of fiction” : “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million [...] The spreading field, the human scene, is the ‘choice of subject’ ; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’ ; but they are singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist” IX):

“She (Isabel) lived at the window of her spirit”, 541 ;

“the truth of things...rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness”, 560 ;

“It (Osmond’s house) was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” 429 ; “when she saw this rigid system close about her, draped though it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation of which I have spoken took possession of her”, 431 ;

“He (Rosier) comes and looks at one’s daughter as if she were a suite of apartments, etc.” 490 ; etc.

Art metaphor (Painting, Images, etc) → life as art (one of Isabel’s fond illusions she’ll have to grow out of) :

“the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch” 6 ;

“the weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks”

“a person [Isabel] who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway” → Isabel is framed like a painting 15 cf. 367 : “framed in the gilded doorway, she [Isabel] struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady” ; Isabel = a Cimabue Madonna, 210 ;

pictures shown by Ralph at Gardencourt 45 ;

Lord W seen as a picture by Stackpole, 89 ;

“she [Isabel] formed a graceful and harmonious image”, 99 ;

“Ralph had such a fanciful pictorial way of saying things...” etc. 274 ;

Osmond → “One ought to make one’s life a work of art”, 307 ;

“her thoughts would have evoked a multitude of interesting pictures”, 319 ;

Pansy = an Infanta of Velazquez, 369 ;

Osmond sees Isabel as “a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection”, 304

“Osmond had given her a sort of tableau of her position”, 441 ;

Osmond → “putting a thing into words— almost into pictures”, 532 ;

“he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art”, 532 ;

“She envied the security of valuable pieces which change by no hair’s breadth, only grow in value while their owners inch by inch youth, happiness, beauty”, 569.

Theatre metaphor (a vestige/reminder of James’s long flirtation with the stage ; H. James : a failed playwright turned successful novelist → failure in one field of endeavour used as springboard for success in another (any relevance to Isabel Archer ?). Source of the metaphor → Society as a stage, people as *dramatis personae*, life as tragedy or comedy, truth vs. appearance, showing vs. telling, seeing vs. action, active vs. passive, the unconscious as “*der andere Schauplatz*” (cf. good old Sigmund *et alii*), and the whole caboodle :

“for him [R] she would always wear a **mask**”, 392 ;

“her mask had dropped for an instant”, 466 ;

“Ralph restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life”, 148 ;

“I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won’t marry Lord W”, 149 ;

“There will be plenty of spectators”, 149 ;

“This was only the first act of the drama, and he [Ralph] was determined to sit out the performance”, 395

[about company at Isabel’s home]→“They are part of the comedy. You others are spectators”

“The tragedy then if you like. You’re all looking at me”, 501.

The five metaphors we have just mentioned invite us to discuss life and art, life as art, life vs. art or the relation of art to life which is of paramount importance in James's poetics. H. James stated once that "the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it should attempt to represent life", however such a profession of faith does not automatically turn the author of *The Portrait of a Lady* into a realistic writer for at least two simple reasons : firstly, the function of the novel is not just to "represent life", it aims also at "lending composition to the splendid waste that is life" ; secondly, James consistently sees the real world through the prism of art. Reality is rarely described in itself and for itself ; it is systematically rendered or better still filtered through some key metaphors pertaining to the world of art viz., embroidery and/or tapestry-weaving, painting, literature and the theatre, etc., and through such metaphors James hoped to find new ways to enable his readers "to read with the senses as well as with the reason". As stated above, James declared men represented the canvas and women the embroidery ; now this reference to embroidery recurs throughout his work and its significance is essential to an understanding of James's work and conception of art all the more so as "text" originally means cloth/"tissu" and that, as R. Barthes put it, "*le texte se fait, se travaille dans un entrelacs perpétuel*" (*Le Plaisir du texte*). It's also interesting to note that just like lace-making, James's texts are as often as not formed around a central blank, a void : cf. his statement : "all my reserves are blanks". What James's indirection often skirts round is something much like emptiness ; although he stated in the Preface to *The Portrait* that "the novel is of its very nature an 'ado', an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado" (XI), James's novels evinced over the years a marked tendency to become "an ado about nothing", hence the characteristic dialectics of presence and absence at work in James's style (cf. a characteristic example in *The Wings of the Dove*: "the subject was made present to them [...] only by the intensity with which it mutely expressed its absence" ; in James's fictitious world, reality becomes not what is fully present to us but what is absent) and the peculiar quality of his conversations that are just « *de vastes dispositifs énigmatiques construits à partir du vide, du rien : non-dit ou dit à demi-mot, flottaison des signifiants vagues, toujours sur le point de basculer dans le silence* » (N. Blake) :

Dans l'œuvre de James, nous trouvons constamment un double mouvement : exposer pour refouler, montrer pour cacher, développer et interroger pour, en fin de compte, ignorer. Les métaphores familières de l'auteur, celles de la tapisserie ou de la broderie sont là pour souligner ce trait de son travail.

Embroidery and weaving are thus archetypal symbols for the nature of the literary text and the process of fiction-writing.

The theatrical metaphor also accounts for some of James's idiosyncrasies as a stylist. James, who would have “loved to be popular”, turned to the theatre in the early nineties to achieve this aim. His popularity as a fiction-writer had declined at the time and he felt that a great theatrical success would restore it. He enjoyed the problems of the dramatic form, and his play *The American* had a moderate success ; but the cold reception of *Guy Domville* (another play) made him decide to put an end to his unrequited flirtation with the drama. However, James returned to novel-writing with a new technique which was largely influenced by his work for the theatre as witness his wish to “produce a novel all dramatic, all scenic” (cf. notes on "showing" and "telling" in last lecture on James's style and “écriture”).

As for the painterly metaphor, it also is of paramount importance ; it must be borne in mind that James went so far as to state that “a psychological reason is to my imagination an object adorably pictorial”. The novel under discussion being, among other things, a portrait study of Isabel Archer, it is no wonder that the heroine's progress is punctuated with references and allusions to various pictures.

Lastly, the literary metaphor at work in James's novels is even more important than the pictorial metaphor ; James had one of his characters declare that “*la littérature, la vie : c'est tout un*”, a contention borne out by much of what is depicted in *The Portrait* and above all Isabel's tendency to perceive reality through the prism of fiction or better still romance.

However sketchy such observations may be, what they point to is that in James's world, life and art are both antagonistic and complementary notions. The relationship between the two notions is all the more complex as it seems that the frustration of life is in James's fiction one of the conditions of success in art. However paradoxical it may seem, James always insisted on the moral beauties of failure and the crudity of worldly success ; he had one of his characters, Henry St George, who refused the price of dedication to art, declare : “I've had everything. In other words, I've missed everything”, and Isabel, who likewise has everything, runs the risk of missing everything. In her eagerness to “drain the cup of experience” and to launch out into “the free exploration of life”, Isabel is in danger of forgetting that « *vivre, c'est ainsi [et aussi] se retenir de vivre pour conserver intacte l'imagination illimitée de la vie* » (J.-J. Mayoux), which seems to be the fate of the typically Jamesian heroine. Lastly to come full circle and complete this short disquisition on the relation of art to life, I'd like to stress that the absolutely gratuitous gesture with which Isabel completes her initiation *i.e.* her resolve to return to Osmond, her renunciation, is a kind of “*beau geste*” : it is a transcendent gesture expressive of a lofty moral and aesthetic sensibility. It is necessary to stress the and, for in James's fiction the moral sensibility is never remote from the aesthetic ; in other words, moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together, hence James's definition of “taste as the active sense of life”.

Eden/Garden/flower metaphor

her [Isabel] nature had..a certain garden-like quality, 53 ;

Ed Rosier, 357

Pansy and Isabel → “the effect of one’s carrying a nosegay composed all of the same flower”
406 ; “it’s all pansies ; it must be hers”, 436

“his [Osmond’s] faculty of making everything wither that he touched, spoiling everything
that he looked at” 424

“his [Osmond’s] egotism **lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers** ”, 430 ;

[Merle wanted to be] a kind of full-blown lily – the incarnation of propriety 546

Wings

A leitmotif in *The Wings of the Dove* ; not so recurrent in *The Portrait* but noticeable all the
same. The motif refers to idealism, transcendence (cf. **Archer**, a symbol of ascent. Bears out Jean-
Jacques Mayoux's contention that James is « *un mondain mystique* » fascinated with “the poetic
drama of the inner life of the soul” trying to rise to ideal heights) i.e. passage from one ontological
plane to another, and finds expression in a pattern of rise (flight, floating, etc.) and fall (abyss, gulf,
depths, etc.) :

“[Isabel] a winged creature”, 383 ;

“her [Isabel’s] poor winged spirit”, 405 ;

“He [Caspar] had never supposed she hadn’t wings and the need of beautiful free move-
ments” 161 ;

Ralph → Isabel : “Spread your wings”, 222 ;

“the terrible human past was heavy to her but that of something altogether contemporary
would suddenly give it wings”, 287.

Light/Darkness metaphor (a variant of the rise and fall pattern : revelation, illumination /
obfuscation ; desire/repression) :

“if a certain **light** should dawn she could give herself completely” 53 ;

“His kiss was like **white lightning**, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed ; and it
was extraordinarily as if , while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least
pleased her...justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession” 591.

Military metaphor (→ society seen as a battlefield where only the fittest survive) :

“she [Isabel] had spent much ingenuity in training [her mind] to a military step and teaching
it to advance, to halt, retreat, to perform even more complicated manœuvres”, 25 ;

“That personage [Mme Merle] was armed at all points ; it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle. She carried her flag discreetly, but her weapons were polished steel and she used them with a skill which struck Isabel as more and more that of a veteran.” (401).

Money (“Money is like a sixth sense without which you cannot make a complete use of the other five”, an anonymous wit)

As a starting-point I'd like to quote M. Zérafra's opinion that : « *il est permis de représenter la pensée de James comme motivée et polarisée dans ses effets théoriques, techniques, poétiques et même scripturaux, par l'opposition ou par le dilemme, entre Avoir et Être* ». Hence the importance of money in the universe of *The Portrait* as witness the number of references scattered throughout the text :

Isabel → “few of the men she saw seemed worth a ruinous expenditure”, 53 ;

Madame Merle → “I wish you had a little money”, 203 ;

“She [Isabel] had not given her last shilling, sentimentally speaking”, 224

“the element between them [Osmond/Madame Merle]” 241 → money = Madame Merle's motive, 545 ;

“Isabel wondered a little what was the nature of the tie binding these superior spirits” → the inducement of profit, 245;

Passion → “It was there like **a large sum stored in a bank** – which there was a terror in having to begin to spend”, 310. A key metaphor – feelings/love equated with money – that keeps cropping up in American fiction (Fitzgerald, Faulkner, etc. see for instance in *The Wild Palms* the tell-tale statements : “I am still in the puberty of money” ; “I have repudiated money and hence love” ; “the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it and any time you get it cheap you have cheated yourself”). As French philosopher G. Bataille put it :

« L'érotisme ressortit à la dilapidation [dépense d'énergie, de sentiments, de ressources, don de soi] ; l'union charnelle relève à la fois de la 'consommation' (œuvre de chair) et de la 'consumation' (dépense) ; c'est un excès faisant pièce à l'avarice et au calcul froid de l'ordre réel. [...]. Dans l'érotisme 'JE me perds' ; c'est le déséquilibre dans lequel l'être se met lui-même en question. »

Isabel's fighting shy of/shrinking back from sex, physical surrender, is akin to emotional miserliness (to coin a phrase !).

“for advice read cash”, 365 ;

“At bottom her money had been a burden”, 427 ;

“Lord Warburton's friendship was like having a large balance at the bank”, 440 ;

“an account to settle with Caspar”, 486 ;

“Caspar *would* make it out as over a falsified balance-sheet.. Deep in her breast she believed that he had invested his all in her happiness, while the others had invested only a part”, 487 ;

(Isabel) “missing those enrichments of consciousness”, 571 ;

“Having” and “being” thus form a fundamental antithesis enabling one to categorize Jamesian characters into two classes i.e. those who, like Isabel, have everything but feel they are not complete, and strive to reach a higher state of being (Archer↑), and those whose sense of being is undermined by the painful awareness of not having enough e.g. Madame Merle. So money is the controlling force in the novel, and the acquisitive drive is the motive power, the *primum mobile* in the society depicted by a novel which, among other things, is a reflection on the notion of “value”, for “*le déchirement de la conscience moderne naît pour James de la permanence du Beau dans un monde aliéné par l'argent*” (*L'Arc*), the supreme value endowed with permanence in a fleeting, transitory world.

However, the status of money in James's fiction is ambiguous if not paradoxical because if acquiring money is morally despicable, the possession of it is the requisite for the good life that all Jamesian characters strive for, but money destroys those who are associated with it, for possession not only takes away the charm but is always impure. Be that as it may, in *The Portrait*, « *l'arithmétique d'une économie monétaire contamine les domaines intérieurs* » (*L'Arc*) : feelings are expressed in financial or monetary terms reminiscent of the notions of “emotional currency” or even “emotional bankruptcy” used by W. Faulkner and F. S. Fitzgerald in their own denunciation of the role of money and of business ethics in the society of their time. Likewise in James's fiction, « *l'argent sert à consacrer la possession* » (*Cahiers Cistre*) and above all the possession of woman who is seen as a commodity : woman is an object and, as in ancient Rome, marriage (Latin : *cæemptio*) is tantamount to an act of selling (*emptio*) : love is replaced by “*le commerce amoureux*”, a sort of “emotional bargaining”.

Thus the narrative is punctuated by a series of deals and bargains that the different characters make with each other. An interesting aspect of the question of money is that the two female deuteragonists also embody opposite notions of value : if Madame Merle stands for “market value”, Isabel at the end of her initiation (when she makes the **superior choice of renunciation**) comes to represent “the real thing” i. e. a kind of value based on what one might call in French, “*l'économie du don*” i.e “*du don de soi/oblativité*” (self-sacrifice, self-denial or abnegation). In the final stage of her evolution, Isabel Archer shares with Milly Theale “the imagination of expenditure” (*The Wings of the Dove*) in the figurative sense.

Possession assuming two forms – it is either financial or sexual – this leads us now to the question of sex in *The Portrait*.

Sex

Though there is no direct reference to sex, it is omnipresent in James's fiction (« *James ne couche les femmes que sur le papier* » as some critic, who shall be nameless, humorously put it), but inasmuch as “the names of things, the verbal terms of intercourse, [are], compared with love itself, horribly vulgar” (H. James), « *l'acte sexuel se dit [...] presque exclusivement par détours [...] Dans ces romans si verbeux, tout se dit en fin de compte en silence. Le roman jamesien, c'est le triomphe du non-dit* » (Cistre) i.e. the untold and “obliquity”. Cf. following metaphors in *The Portrait* :

Book metaphor → Pansy = “a sheet of blank paper”, 278.

Pansy = “unspotted nature, a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so”, 315 (“If he were not my papa, I should like to marry him” 316)

“[Isabel] hoped so fair and smooth a page would be covered with an edifying text”, 279 ; “she [Countess Gemini] had been written over in a variety of hands, a number of unmistakable blots”, 279 ; that one is a beauty ! → Is novel-writing a surrogate for...a more strenuous and dangerous activity ?

Cf. ironic sexual overtones of Osmond's description of what Isabel's life would have been like had she married Caspar :

It would have been an excellent thing, like living under some tall belfry which would strike all the hours and make a queer vibration in the upper air. He declared he liked to talk with the Great Goodwood ; it wasn't easy at first, you had to climb up an interminable steep staircase, up to the top of the tower ; but when you got there you had a big view and felt a little fresh breeze (495).

Caspar's words : « I can't understand, I can't penetrate you ! » 511 ;

Osmond → “We're as united as the candlestick and the snuffers” 505 ; etc.

This is the crux of the matter : sex in James's universe is not something stated but rather something understood. But the fact that love is never dealt with directly is more than compensated for by an unmistakable “*érotisation du discours*” : in James's fiction, sex never pertains to “showing” but to “telling” obliquely, and discourse becomes, so to speak, a substitute for sexual intercourse (cf. in *The Wings* : “the verbal terms of intercourse”). Sexual intercourse does take place between Isabel and Osmond, but as usual with James the satisfaction of desire involves an immediate penalty : « *tout succès charnel aboutit en effet à une dissipation de conscience, tandis que tout échec accepté et surmonté, toute absence reconnue et explorée, tous les états de manque cultivés mènent à une intensité prolongée : telle est la formule du monde jamesien* » (J. J. Mayoux : this, by the way, is one of the most penetrating observations ever made about James's fictitious world ; cf. also Freud's opinion that « *la frustration est la seule mesure éducative* »). James's main subject is thus the growth, the emergence of conscience in an individual, and conscience, as we have seen, evolves out of suffering and deprivation.

James's Art revisited

H. James was not only an outstanding practitioner of the novel but also a most perceptive theoretician of fiction-writing ; in his prefaces and studies, particularly *The Art of Fiction*, he's made numerous observations on the art of novel-writing and novelistic technique. It should be borne in mind, however, that most prefaces were composed years after the publication of the corresponding works so that there is as often as not a discrepancy between the texts and the questions the Prefaces intend to throw some light on : to put it bluntly, theory is not always reflected in the author's actual practice and there may even be a wide gap between the novel as planned and the end-product, the final version of the text, as James himself explicitly acknowledges : "Yet one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another," which doesn't detract from the interest and value of the various prefaces but is a clear indication that they have to be taken with a pinch of salt...

In the preface to *The Portrait*, as in *The Art of Fiction*, James resorts to define his art to various metaphors and images drawn from three essential fields : "architecture", "painting" and "the drama" ; to these must be added the notions of "indirection" and "reflection". The architectural metaphor ("the house of fiction") is strengthened by the allusion to the "use of windows and balconies" which is linked to the question of point of view since the novel aims to build, to borrow and adapt a phrase from *The Wings*, "the whole bright house of Isabel's exposure", in other words to evoke Isabel "through the successive windows of other people's interest in her". To achieve such an objective, James will resort to a principle of composition and exposition called "indirection" or "indirect approach" i.e. "all the events and actions are represented as they unfold before, and filter to the reader through, the particular consciousness of one of his characters" (M. H. Abrams). Which means that the author "presents the reader not with a narrator's objective account of the characters but with the characters' subjective and therefore partial, colored and often warped accounts of themselves" (R. C. McLean). James dubbed "reflectors" such characters whose consciousness plays the rôle of a mirror hence, an important stylistic consequence : the frequent use of free indirect speech with a marked effect of bivocality i.e the voice of the narrator intermingles with the character's to express the thoughts of the reflector. Incidentally, it is worthy of note that the function of reflector is not limited to characters only : things, places, elements of the setting are also likely to serve this purpose and connote a situation, a state of mind, etc. : the description of the characters' various interiors (cf. Osmond's palazzo or Gardencourt) is a good example of such "characterization by environmental implication" (cf. "We're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self' ? Where does it begin ? where does it end ? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then flows back again", 201). Another consequence of James's circuitous approach "by narrowing circumvallations from an outer ring" is that it enables the author to study

his object from various angles, to see the obverse and the reverse : Jamesian images “have sides and backs” as S. Gorley Putt convincingly pointed out :

For James, the poetic imagination was to be very largely a matter of seeing things from both sides: from the early tales to the final Prefaces his writing is full of images invoking the obverse and reverse, the back and the front, the passive and the active, the efficient and the visionary, the romance and the disillusion. [...] That complete honesty of the double vision in James's work...helps to explain the tortuosities of the high style where he makes the reader dizzy by his conscientious efforts to be fair all round, to take every possible aspect into consideration.

The desire to do justice to the complex situations and motivations, as well as the dual nature of numerous characters and the diverse relations prevailing between them led James, according to the critic above-mentioned, to strike “the geminian notes of antithesis or parallel, dissonance or assonance, contradiction or compensation”. No sooner is one term laid down than somewhere in the same sentence or paragraph there crops up its opposite (p. 7 : “It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure.”) ; the high rate of dual forms created by the bringing together of the two terms of a polarity makes for uncertainty and indecision, which proves that James aims not so much at realism as at “the intensity of an illusion”. The rôle of James the artist is to make the reader see the multiple, the complex and not to impose unity of vision (Cf. what he wrote in the preface to *What Maisie Knew* : “The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement”). However such “double vision” is sometimes thwarted by an opposite principle which consists in not showing everything, in not telling everything. It has been repeatedly pointed out that James is an illusionist practising « *l'art d'exposer pour refouler, de montrer pour cacher* » or weaving his texts around numerous blanks or things untold : thus his texts very often hinge around « *des pivots obscurs parce que non représentés* » (such as the intimate relationship between Madame Merle and G. Osmond) so that :

laissées à l'imagination du lecteur et parfois des protagonistes, ces ellipses qui trouent le récit de brusques suspensions et de silences se transforment peu à peu en d'invisibles mais inépuisables matrices de significations, analogues, par leur dialectique de la plénitude et du vide, aux abîmes dont les gouffres, les tourbillons et les naufrages de la préface offrent autant de réfractions mélodramatiques. (E. Labbé).

Such ellipses force the reader to implement a virtue James deemed essential : “the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern”.

The other two metaphors “the picture” and “the drama” represent “the two rival techniques of the novel” (L. Edel). “Picture” refers to “narrative from a point of view” and “drama” to “direct representation”. To throw some more light on those two devices, one might say, following P. Lubbock’s cue that “a scene is pictorially depicted when it is the reflection of events in the mirror of

somebody's receptive consciousness". So the novel as picture is based on a central consciousness and a kind of inner soliloquy. "Picture" is in some respects equivalent to "sommaire"/summary i.e. « *un raccourci de plusieurs moments tel qu'il s'effectue dans la conscience d'un personnage* » (C. Verley).

The second device consists in erasing all references to the narrative instance to give the floor to the character (→ « *discours immédiat, émancipé de tout patronage narratif* »), hence James's own watchword in his *Notebooks* : "Dramatize, dramatize." Thus drama, as opposed to picture (a non-scenic rendering of some character's consciousness of a situation), renders scenically the character's speech and behaviour. This opposition parallels the one existing between the two modes of regulation of narrative distance i.e. "showing and telling", two novelistic strategies associated with the name of H. James. Actually the opposition is as old as the hills since Plato made a distinction between "**diegesis**" (i.e. pure narrative innocent of mimetic elements ; the poet speaks in his own words without trying to make the reader believe that someone else is uttering the words) and "**mimesis**" (the author tries to create the illusion that it is not he who speaks). From such a perspective, pure narrative is considered to be more distant from reality than imitation : it says less (condensation) in a more mediate way (indirection). Actually, this opposition neutralized by Aristotle, reappeared in the theory of the novel in the late XIXth century with James and its disciples under the names of "showing" vs. "telling". However G. Genette rightly pointed out that the notion of "showing" is quite illusory inasmuch as no narrative whatsoever can show or imitate what it conveys : language signifies without imitating unless, of course, the narrated pertains to language (« *La mimésis verbale ne peut-être que mimésis du verbe* » Genette). After experimenting with the theatre, H. James tried to dramatize the action as much as possible hence his emphasis on the notion of "showing" of which the two main characteristics are the predominance of scene (detailed narrative) and the transparency of the narrator (which in Genettian parlance results in the formula : showing implies the maximum of information and the minimum of informant). Consequently, the best narrative strategy for James is « *un récit focalisé, raconté par un narrateur qui n'est pas l'un des personnages mais qui en adopte le point de vue* » (Genette). Thus the reader sees the events as they are filtered through the consciousness of one of the characters, but s/he perceives it directly as it impinges upon that consciousness.

By way of introduction to a reading of *The Art of Fiction* cf. following excerpt from *American Fiction* :

The Art of Fiction (1884) figures as the classic text on the realistic novel. In this essay, James pleaded for his own brand of realism, very different from William Dean Howells', and one which contributed to giving American fiction its noblest coat of arms. For James the novel was to be

concerned with impression – “a novel is in its broad definition, a personal, a direct impression of life,” – and with experience, experience understood not as surface incident but as “an immense sensibility” : “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.” With this seminal essay, James struck an altogether new note in the concert of realistic fiction and gave birth to a new type of novel called “the James novel.”

If the novel was to be “the art of representation,” and if the novelist was to transcribe “experience,” the stuff of fiction was not to be confined to mere external objective material, incident or plot in the traditional sense of the term, but was to concentrate on sensibility and perception. To the sensationalism dear to naturalistic fiction, James thus opposed the fascination for the enlarging consciousness and the excitement of penetrating insight. No need for the novelist to resort to violence to entice his readers’ attention, the drama is played out in the mind, in the web of relationships established by consciousness : “It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and to look out at you in a certain way.” Consciousness thus becomes the pivot of fiction for James, and his realism is ultimately that of the inner, subjective life, and not of the outer, objective life. As a consequence, character reigns supreme and prevails over incident, or rather, determines incident – “What is character but the determination of incident ? What is incident but the illustration of character ? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character ?”

In order to present experience through a consciousness, James needed a central intelligence, one that would serve as reflector, or refractor, – also called focus, mirror, reverberator – of the events and scenes represented. Hence he was brought to give form to a major innovation in the history of the novel, that of the mediation of an active consciousness between the story and the reader. In doing so he got rid of the foremost convention of the traditional novel, that of the authorial voice of fiction or omniscient narrator, through which all the events filter to the reader. As a consequence of this chosen center, the author is never allowed to intrude directly, even though his presence may be felt in an implicit counterpoise and through a subtle play on a dual consciousness. In *The Ambassadors*, James refined this narrative mode into an unprecedentedly complex structure of mirrors and ironic patterns. Clearly, the more finely aware the refractor, the more intense the refraction, which led James to select characters of unusual perceptive power and exceptional sensitivity, like Maisie in *What Maisie Knew* or Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Thus the restrictive point of view, far from being a limitation, becomes on the contrary the ground for an ever-widening enlargement of experience and a fascinating medium for the penetration of reality. James’s stories embark the reader on an inner voyage, in which the narrative attention is drawn inward and which prefigures the latter developments of the stream consciousness technique.

His realism is therefore one of analysis rather than of documentation, focused on psychological portrayal and human intercourse rather than sociological reporting and social scope. Through his emphasis on principles of composition and his technical mastery of point of view, James perfected the form of the novel and gave it a consistency and a tightness unequalled in European and Russian fiction. Together with “The Art of Fiction,” the *Notebooks* which he kept all his life and the prefaces which he added to his novels in his last decade form a kind of manifesto of his art. His influence in the history of the novel is thus unquestionable : he served as a bridge between America and Europe, between the past and the present, between the 19th century traditional novel of plot and the 20th century novel of consciousness. No one surpassed him in his time and the title of of his short stories fittingly characterizes his literary legacy—“The Lesson of the Master.”