# SEEING AND BELIEVING

## Henry James and the Spiritual World

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CHAPTER 4

# The Vain Appearance: Vision and *The Ambassadors*

When I was an undergraduate discovering Henry James, my friend Stephen Henderson, who was better-read than I, suggested that as I had enjoyed *The American,* I should try *The Ambassadors* next. "There's this great scene near the end," he enthused, "when Strether—he's the American chap in Paris—sees his two friends in a rowing boat and realizes they've been having an affair all along." Then he added rather wistfully, "I don't think I ought to have told you that." Indeed not.

On first encounter with this novel, therefore, I knew more than I should have. I caught the full force of dramatic irony usually reserved for subsequent readings and lost any sense of surprise at the *denouement.* I suppose that I felt rather like Maria Gostrey. Initially I felt a little robbed by this. James's plots are always finely balanced, and this one in particular is meticulously structured round that one moment of revelation that turns Strether and his novel inside out. But since then I have come to appreciate the fact that *The Ambassadors* is not so much about what happens as about how one sees it unfold. I have read it many times now, and it has become the novel of James's that I admire the most. It always amazes me how slight a plot sustains *The Ambassadors.* Stephen told me all there was to know. But the control with which James paces his material, and the air of solemn mystery that he breathes into this tale of a tailed holiday romance make it, for my money, one of the finest things in literature. "Nothing," as James says, "will ever take the place of the good old fashion of'liking' a work of art" *{Criticism^* 57).

*The Ambassadors'^* all about vision. The process of seeing is central to the reading experience it creates, as well as to its composition and plot. This novel is often cited as the first consistent example of limited

point of view in fiction, although James had already achieved something similar in *What Maisie Knew* (1897). The reader sees through Strether's eyes and knows only what he knows, but this is subtly glossed by narrative interjections, and it does not stop one from reading between the lines. By adopting a third-person narrative voice focused through one observant character, James avoids the claustrophobia generated by the narrator's intrusive analysis of events in *The Sacred Fount.* However, the reader's experience remains closely tied to the central character's development. As Strether's perspective changes with the arrival of the rowing boat in Book Eleven, so the novel opens out into a spreading, colorful landscape.

Seeing is also one of the major activities of the characters in *The Ambassadors.* The Newsome delegation and Chad's Franco-American set spend a great deal of time observing—either informally at social events, or self-consciously at galleries and theaters. Several of the characters, including Strether, wear spectacles, highlighting the importance of sight and the dangers of distortion. And Strether's moral perspective is altered by the visual spectacle of Paris. In this "empire of things" there is a bewildering amount of shopping and dining and cataloguing of personal possessions and everyday urban paraphernalia (XXI, 119). As Fussell points out, the novel is "as full of lists as a Walt Whitman poem."[1] The materiality of this environment is carefully juxtaposed with the abstract terms in which Strether orders his perceptions. He is determined at the end "not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself," except his "wonderful impressions" (XXII, 326). However, the material world plays a vital role in reconfiguring his inner landscape. This process of translating external objects into inner experience is complicated in *The Ambassadors* by its focus on aesthetic objects. Art and architecture, like verbal signs, carry possibilities for communication—but may also be misread. The Lambinet scenes in particular explore the potential of art to reveal and create meaning. They also blur the dividing line between inner and external worlds. These scenes extend for Strether the possibilities of vision, opening up a whole new world of aesthetic experience. They also lay him open to problems of artifice and illusion and force him to reevaluate the relation between appearance and reality.

So much for seeing. It is less obvious what *The Ambassadors* is doing in a book that is also about believing—or more accurately about the difficulty James and his generation felt about doing so. The characters do drop into Notre Dame now and again, but this novel has little evidence of religious doubt or fervor. There are no supernatural phenomena. There are relatively few of the biblical and mystical symbols



in which James's other late works such as *The Sacred Fount* and *The Golden Bowl are* so rich. However, this novel demonstrates very clearly James's ability to take elements of spiritual experience, translate these into a secular setting, and use them to explore the deepest levels of the human consciousness and the inexplicable forces that play around its margins.

Like other Jamesian men and women of imagination, Strether likes to "guess the unseen from the seen" *(Criticism* I, 53)—but he does not always guess it correctly. His empirical experiences are more than separate episodes that initiate him into the sophisticated social code of Europe. They allow him glimpses into the common fond of human life, from which he constructs, and continually reconstructs, his system of values and his sense of self. Merle Williams says that Strether behaves like a phenomenological philosopher by attempting to "identify the universal structures of experience through the detailed and discL plined scrutiny of the individual case" (Williams, 5). Williams describes the phenomenological *epoche* as a moment of essential confrontation with the real. It is a profound shift of center such as that which follows a mystical experience. "Such procedures," he writes "are not unlike the often quoted experience of religious conversion; the world is renounced, only to be reclaimed and rediscovered from a strikingly fresh and illuminating perspective" (1).

Williams bases his analysis of James's work on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenologie de Perception* (1945) was written long after James's novels. However, Williams could have looked closer to home to find models for James's exploration of the transforming power of phenomena. The relationship between environment and consciousness was hotly debated at the opening of the twentieth century, in the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud, anthropologist James George Frazer, and philosopher Edmund Husserl, among many others. William James's exploration of spiritual experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience is* an investigation of this process in religious life. His definition of religion as "the feelings, acts, experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" *(V,* 31) confirms his phenomenological standpoint. The correspondence of inner life with outer sensation was also central to the James family ethos. "Convert, convert, convert," Henry James Senior urged his children over the breakfast table, desiring that all experience should be translated into personality. "Every contact, every impression, every experience we should know," Henry remembers, "were to form our soluble stuff *(AU,* 123).

*The Ambassadors* reflects this fascination with the subtle but significant minutiae of emotional and sensory experience. Strether struggles to relate his feelings, acts, and experiences to the universe around him. This is most vividly articulated through his encounter with art. His epiphanous discovery of the physicality of passion through the Lambinet episode realigns his view of reality in a process very like Merleau-Ponty's *epoche.* Like his mentor Husserl, Merleau-Ponty sees this as a stage of suspended judgment in which values and assumptions can be reassessed and rediscovered. Strether's moment of insight also meets many of William's criteria for religious conversion. Conversion is "the process gradual or sudden by which a self hitherto divided and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy . . . whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about" (V, 189). William positions his argument and his case studies in relation to "religious realities," but he also says that much of what passes for religious experience is explicable in psychological terms. There may be "an accumulation of vestiges of sensible experience" in the subliminal region, vestiges that acquire "such a 'tension' that they may at times enter consciousness with a burst" *(V,* 236). This explanation does not, he insists, belittle the value of conversion or even preclude the possibility of an external force acting upon the individual. Ever pragmatic, William asserts that the worth of any conversion lies not in its source but in its effect on the candidate's life; "the best fruits of religious experience are," he believes, "the best things that history has to show" *(V,* 259). Nevertheless, the spiritual awakening that he maps follows a pattern similar to Strether's response to artistic and cultural forces.

The power of sensory perception to quicken the emotional life is also high on the agenda of the writers and artists of the Aesthetic movement. James feeds heavily off this contemporary debate about the validity of sensation throughout *The Ambassadors.* Although often simplified as a veneration of artistic form over the demands of life, Aestheticism deals with the same problem of how to convert the intensity of physical sensation, particularly visual sensation, into inner substance. Many of the central figures of the Aesthetic movement were deeply conscious of the spiritual possibilities of this process. Others were more skeptical. John Ruskin and William Morris came to view institutionalized religion as a humbug that interrupted the flow of real sensation and experience. Conversely, Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the Rossettis exploited sensation and experience as a means to the mystical and the divine. The usual formula for analyzing *The Ambassadors* involves forcing Strether, and thereby the reader, to choose between moral and Aesthetic values. Implicit in such a reading is the assumption that Aesthetic values exclude moral responsibilities and metaphysical levels of experience, and vice versa. This is not the case—although this assumption does explain the difficulty that those arguing for one reading over the other have in accommodating the ending of the novel. As *The Ambassadors* progresses, categories of "moral" and "Aesthetic" become increasingly difficult to delineate. Artistic and spiritual perceptions fuse in the shock of Strether's newfound awareness of a previously hidden dimension of life, in which each expresses and extends the other. I cannot avoid the conclusion that Strether's experiences in Paris contain a deeply spiritual element. What he lives through is not a religious conversion in the conventional sense. It does not lead him to embrace deity or creed. However, Strether's evolving character clearly demonstrates what William calls "the love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world" ( *V,* 25). *The Ambassadors* is nothing if not a story of profound transformation. Strether is a man who sees, and this irrevocably changes what he believes.



## THE LUST OF THE EYES

"Live all you can," says Strether to Little Bilham, "it's a mistake not to. It doesn't matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had?" (XXI, 217). James's reconstruction of William Dean Howells's conversation with Jonathan Sturges in Whistler's garden in 1895 sits at the center of *The Ambassadors,* both formally and conceptually *(N,* 141). "Nothing can exceed," James writes in the preface, "the closeness with which the whole fits again into its germ" (XXI, vi). Many of the novel's themes intersect in this speech: youth, time, freedom, illusion, and consciousness. Had Strether booked his passage home the morning after Gloriani's tea-party, one could be forgiven for accepting it as the novel's last word. Strether's advice to Little Bilham to seize all experience, sample all emotion is almost a caricature of the Aesthetic ideal. Strether repeats the appeal to experience voiced in Walter Pater's conclusion to *The Renaissance.* One should "burn always with this hard gem-like flame," aim for "the quickened sense of life," and squeeze "as many pulsations as possible into the given time" *(R,* 189). However, Strether has not even finished his scene before James moves to undermine this apparent conversion to the life of the senses. Strether speaks, as James notes in the preface, with "the voice of a false position" (XXI, xi). His tone is that of a man out of his moral context,

struggling to adjust his code of belief to a strange, expanding world. As he speaks he also revises and reassesses his position. In the end Strether concedes that "one lives as one can" rather than *all* one can, that one chases "the illusion of freedom" and can only hope for the "memory of that illusion" (XXI, 218). This speech is a pivotal point in the novel; it marks the apex of Strether's innocence and, despite its air of epiphany, of his blindness. Everything that builds up to it is necessary to allow Strether to break out with such enthusiasm. However, everything that follows deconstructs this fervor and exposes the errors and concealments on which it has briefly thrived.

This "false position" is a recurring situation in *The Ambassadors.* As Julie Rivkin points out, it is almost a prime idea in a book where prime ideas are exposed as deeply suspect. The book's logic follows a pattern of displacement and delegation: the absence of Mrs. Newsome, Strether's ambassadorial relocation from New England, his vicarious experience of life, his constant revision of his mission, and the misrepresentations in speech and appearance that consistently confuse him. These displacements throw the emphasis of the novel onto supplementary relationships, and onto the operation of signs and frames—with interesting consequences for art and language. Tike the supplementary sign, Strether strays from his original purpose, "generating meaning and effects that are in no way proper to the original" (Rivkin, 58). James himself says that Strether's story only came to life in relation to "the question of that *supplement* of situation" surrounding the exchange in Gloriani's garden (XXI, viii). Strether and Little Bilham supplement and extend one another, providing one of the many framing relationships within the novel. What Strether envies in Bilham's youth, Little Bilham aims for in Strether's age. "Oh, but I don't know that I want to be, at your age, too different from you!" he responds—which rather undermines the urgency of Strether's warning (XXI, 219). Later on it will be to Bilham—not to Chad—that Strether will offer his inheritance as to a surrogate son. Bilham, like Strether, is free to observe because of his lack of personal property or success. Bilham, the artist, watches Strether from Chad's balcony at the beginning of his Paris adventure, as Strether will himself watch others through so many windows and frames. Bilham introduces him to the world of art, to the Louvre and the Luxembourg, and the studio world of the Left Bank. It is also Bilham who offers Strether the ideas of the "virtuous attachment" and the "vain appearance" that deceive him but also make possible his spiritual growth (XXI, 180, 203). The artifice of Bilham's lie allows the suspension of judgment in which Strether's *epoche* takes effect. A few pages after Strether's injunction to "live all you can," Bilham converts this into an intention "to see, while I've a chance, everything I can" (XXI, 278). In Bilham's world, and increasingly in Strether's, the experience of the eye is what counts.



Strether's incipient awareness of his "false position" is a critical step in his reappraisal of values. James writes in the preface that Strether feels he has made a "mistake" in ordering his life as he has and feels the need for profound realignment:

> He has accordingly missed too much, though perhaps after all constitutionally qualified for a better part, and he wakes up to it in conditions that press the spring of a terrible question. *Would* there yet perhaps be time for reparation? . . . The answer to which is that he now at all events *sees;* so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision. (XXI, vi)

There is plenty for Strether to see in Paris. At times he seems to do little else. Seldom can a literary protagonist have been so passive and spent so much time simply sitting by windows or on sofas or in restaurants or parks. A little stroll through the city opens vast possibilities for observation and reflection, and a short day trip to the country ends with an almost epiphanous revelation. One is so impressed by Strether's imagination, by the sense of his revisited youth, by the mobility of his mind, that it is easy to overlook his age and his weariness. He is a middle-aged man who likes to watch and discuss. Strether converts his contraction of movement into something expansive. Others hurry off for visits to Cannes or to Switzerland, but his relative lack of action extends the depth of his vision. Paris burns for him with its own gem-like flame. It is a "vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard" which is "all surface one moment" and "all depth the next" (XXI, 189). The process of vision comes late in life to Strether, but it comes intensely. The displacements and distortions he experiences initiate him into the world of perception with its shifting, aesthetic judgments.

Paris is a sharp contrast to the earnest and ethical community of Woollett, Massachusetts, from which Strether has so joyously escaped. However, *The Ambassadors* is not a straightforward contest between American manners and Parisian *joie de vivre.* The apartment of his fellow American Maria Gostrey crystallizes for him the Paris motive of style. This motive challenges his sense of New England propriety and represents "a supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions." Strether recognizes that her surrender to the visual stimulus provided by her accumulated *brocante* involves a different system of

belief that is at odds with Puritan probity. Her old ivory and brocades appear to him as supremely "charged with possession" and he feels that in her collection "the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple" (XXI, 119). Chad, the young American, is several times described as a "pagan" (XXI, 157)—also one of Pater's terms for the Aesthetic spirit. Later Strether feels his own hands "embrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars—of another faith altogether" (XXII, 167). Conversely, in the novel's final analysis, it is the Parisian *femme du monde* Madame de Vionnet who articulates the moral principle of self-sacrifice as a governing value: "What it comes to is that it's not, that it's never, a happiness, any happiness at all to *take.* The only safe thing is to give. It's what plays you least false" (XXII, 283).

Strether's journey is more than a simple rejection of New England ideals. It not a one-way ride from innocence to sophistication, or from the moral to the artistic. As in James's other late novels, American "innocence" and European "experience" have somehow acquired quote marks and require reevaluation. The beauty of Paris is founded on bloodshed and betrayal. But the respectability of Woollett is built on wealth accrued from the unnamable object it manufactures and the unspeakable actions of the "old swindler"—Chad's grandfather (XXI, 62). Jim Pocock, with his coarse tastes and abrasive manners, refutes any claim by Woollett to moral superiority. Waymarsh's secret correspondence with Mrs. Newsome about Strether's progress also implies something distinctly Machiavellian in the precious code of Milrose.

The international theme that James explores in *The Ambassadors* is complicated by the characters' refusal to divide neatly along lines of nationality. Nevertheless, Paris and Woollett do represent two contrasting positions between which Strether is caught. Waymarsh and the Newsomes view life in terms of money and morality—external, absolute systems of value; Chad's cosmopolitan Paris set operate on relative, perceived values. Strether articulates these new shifting values to himself in his description of Maria's *objets* as "the lust of the eye," but this is not his own phrase—nor is it James's. Walter Pater's semi-autobiographical short story "The Child in the House" tells of, "the lust of the eye which might lead him one day, how far! Could he have foreseen the weariness of the way!"[2] Like James's novel, Pater's short story explores ideas of awakening sensuality and the tension between art and morality. The excerpt cited above is, in turn, a fusion of two biblical verses. Ecclesiastes 1:8 insists on the vanity of all human experience: "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." Similarly, 1 John 2:16 opposes visual and spiritual values: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world." James would have known both the biblical and the literary sources for this phrase, which further compounds the difficulty of unraveling the novel's agenda. Either way, the process of vision remains central. "I dare say," offers Miss Barrace, flourishing her tortoise-shell lorgnette, "that I do, that we all do here, run too much to mere eye." However, she does not seem to consider this a shortcoming. "But how can it be helped? We're all looking at each other—and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to know" (XXI, 207). At the time, Strether does not register the implications of Miss Barrace's emphasis on resemblance rather than actuality, but this remark is one of the early warnings in the novel that all is not as it appears. Even "Appearance," which to Strether in the opening scene is little more than the need to tidy himself up for a stroll with Miss Gostrey, turns out to be not what he thought (XXI, 9). Moreover James gives it a capital letter, which makes it looks like a philosophical concept in a text book and alerts the reader to its importance. It is no accident that both Maria and Strether wear the concave lenses of the shortsighted, while the Europeans Miss Barrace and Gloriani wear convex lenses, prescribed to the longsighted. There is even a grammar for spectacles in James's fiction. Once Strether's myopic moral perspective has been corrected by the gold-framed lens of the Lambinet picture, he is able to see Chad's affair as his Parisian friends do.[3]

To the Newsome delegation, morality and art, truth and appearance, stand in opposition to each other. However, Strether's diplomatic negotiations between his groups of friends suggest that what he is attempting throughout the novel is a synthesis between these perspectives. The focal point of his experiment is the issue of adultery, so often used in Victorian novels to explore the tension between social pressure and individual desire. James's original note for *The Ambassadors* speaks in terms of releasing a character, who has until now lived only for duty and conscience, into the world of "sensations, passions, impulses, pleasures." He is to be marked out for "the Immediate, the Agreeable, for curiosity and experiment and perception, for Enjoyment" *(N,* 141). Strether's predominately visual experience of Europe awakens what Pater calls the "life of constant and eager observation." Strether tastes "not the fruit of experience but experience itself *(R,* 188). This heightens his awareness of the tension between the inner self and the world outside, but it does not result for Strether in a rejection of moral responsibility. If anything, it intensifies both his sense of the consequences of personal actions on others and his aspiration to live to an ideal higher than self-interest.

The relationship between Aestheticism and Victorian moralism is complex. The emphasis placed on individual experience by the writers of the Aesthetic movement challenged the social code of Victorian moral values in ways similar to the early relativists' attack on received concepts of absolute scientific value, as explored in the previous chapter. The same attitudes and techniques are evident. The same language is employed. There is the same radical rejection of received, absolute conventions. There is the same emphasis on motion, and on the flux and flow of reality. There is the same recognition of the role of the observer in creating the known world. These elements are evident in John Ruskin's enormously influential analysis of art, *Modern Painters,* in which he explores the free-flowing, nonabsolute quality of light in }. M. W. Turner's work:

> There is not a stone, not a leaf, not a cloud, over which light is not felt to be actually passing and palpitating before our eyes. There is the motion, the actual wave and radiation of the darted beam: not the dull universal daylight, which falls on the landscape without life, or direction, or speculation, equal on all things and dead on all things; but the breathing, animated, exulting light, which feels and receives, and rejoices, and acts, which chooses one thing and rejects another—which seeks and finds and looses again,—leaping from rock to rock, from leaf to leaf, from wave to wave—glowing and flashing, or scintillating, according to what it strikes; or in its holier moods, absorbing and enfolding all things in the holiness of its repose.[4]

It is a strikingly Modernist celebration of flux and specificity, which sounds more like D. H. Lawrence in full flight than a mid-Victorian art critic in high dudgeon. However, Ruskin's voice is by no means isolated in appealing to the fluid, the particular, and the subjective. Like the mathematician W. K. Clifford, the Aesthete Gilbert in Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as Artist* asserts that all experience is subjective. The human mind is capable only of describing itself and cannot apprehend any objective and immutable world beyond it:

> The difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely. It is accidental not essential. All artistic creation is absolutely subjective. The very landscape that Corot looked at was, as he said himself, but a mood of his own mind . . . For out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not. Nay, I would say that the more objective a creation appears to be, the more subjective it really is.[5]



The moral implications of this position are far-reaching. Peter Keating identifies the desire to "shock the social classes out of their supposed complacency by outrageous behavior" as one of the prime forces driving Aesthetic and Decadent literature (Keating, 104). In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde dismisses all moral claims on art out of hand: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well-written or badly-written. That is all." He continues: "The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium."[6] Wilde's manifesto for the independence of art from moral responsibility always gives me the feeling that he has recently been reading "The Art of Fiction," which is not unlikely. Despite their differences, James and Wilde share common ground on this issue. Wilde, understandably, is more explicit about the contingent personal dangers of this standpoint. The plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* dramatizes the tragic consequences as well as the artistic possibilities contained in "the love of art for its own sake," as Pater termed it (JR., 190). The odd result of Wilde's extravagant plot is a profoundly moralist, cautionary tale, as he himself recognized. Pater also sees that the Aesthetic ideal is a volatile form of social dynamite. The 1888 and 1893 editions of *The Renaissance* include an apologetic footnote in which he admits that he excluded the celebrated conclusion from the 1877 edition because "it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall." Pater was a quiet, mild-mannered man, whose life never appeared to crackle with the electric intensity conveyed in these few controversial pages—but he was passionate enough about his ideas to reinstate them, regardless of opposition.

The morally ambiguous world of Aesthetic experience is exactly what Strether is sent to Paris to rescue Chad from. However, as Strether begins to realize, the commitment to sensation is not a hedonistic license. It entails a complex philosophical position constructed around the authority of the individual and fleeting impression. Followed to completion, this tends towards passive observation and internal analysis rather than frantic or chaotic action—which is perhaps why Pater's own life, from an external viewpoint, appears to have been so quiet. For Pater, it is not missing out on action, but failing to observe it, that is a waste of life:

> Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those around us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing

> of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be forever testing new opinions and courting new impressions. *(R,* f 89)

This is very like the phenomcnological process of reflection and speculation to which Strether submits toward the end of the novel, as he attempts to do justice to the "innumerable and wonderful things" that he imagines after the rowing-boat scene (XXII, 266). Charles Anderson writes that James's method is founded on the use of external objects—a person, place, or thing—through which Strether comes to understand the other characters. Thereafter, he has no need for them because "through this process he has come to understand himself—self-knowledge being the whole point of the novel."[7] This process of developing through observation of people and objects repeats the pattern of supplementary relations evident in James's other novels of this period. In the second half of this chapter, I will look more deeply into Strether's transformation through his encounter with the Lambinet picture. However, self-knowledge is not the *whole* point of the novel. Strether knows himself quite thoroughly already. He arrives in Paris aware of his own foibles and limitations. He brings with him the "oddity of a double consciousness" that makes for "detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (XXI, 5). It is the external world and his own place in it that he does not yet grasp. He comes to appreciate these through accepting the validity of things as they appear. In the end this allows Strether to escape from his Divided Self, not simply into the world of artistic objects, but through them into something wider and richer, with responsibilities both horizontally, to his fellow characters, and vertically, in relation to "whatever he may consider the divine," as William has it.

The Aesthetic ideal of "art for art's sake" is more than an expression of self-referential materialism in which the artistic product becomes the goal of experience. Key Aesthetic figures including Ruskin and Morris did reject metaphysical belief and religious systems, but to see Aestheticism as a specialized form of Victorian consumerism is to miss the point. The Aesthetes and the Pre-Raphaelites consciously defied the crass, mass-produced quality of much mid-Victorian culture. In *Modern Painters,* Ruskin traced a close connection between beauty of form and purity of moral sense. Morris established his design firm Morris and Co. in 1861 to supply individual,



handcrafted furnishings and artifacts characterized by purity of design and imbued with the dignity and personality of the artisan. This idealistic project typified the desire of this group of artists and writers to use material objects and forms to nurture profound levels of human experience. This was not always understood by the Victorian reading public. Nevertheless, many of those central to the Aesthetic movement also remained deeply interested in spiritual and religious themes and experiences. Thus, despite his lack of belief, Morris and his partner Edward Burne-Jones continued to specialize in the design of church stained-glass windows for reasons that were not entirely cynical. The spiritual element of Aestheticism is also apparent in the religious fervor of the poems of Christina Rossetti, the biblical subjects chosen for paintings by Holman-Hunt and Millais, the Swedenborgian imagery in Coventry Patmore, and the mystical, mythical quality of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry and painting.

The desire to extend physical sensation into spiritual insight through artistic form is also clearly articulated in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Although his work was not published until 1918, Hopkins was closely connected with members of the Aesthetic circle and assimilated many of their ideas. He was taught by Pater at Oxford and was also a friend of Coventry Patmore and Robert Bridges. He was also an admiring reader of both the Rossettis. Hopkins, who was himself a capable sketcher and watercolorist, adapts the intensity of the artist's vision to his devotional agenda through his terms "inscape" and "instress." Inscape is the name coined by Hopkins for the unique, inner form of each organic thing revealed to the observer through the senses. He articulates this idea in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves-goes itself; *myself it* speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

Instress is the awareness of the connection between one inscape to the inscape of other objects. It also applies to the relationship of the perceiver to the perceived. Instress is therefore the observer's sensation of inscape, the realization of form or pattern, and the recognition of the interwoven character of all being. Hopkins sees instress as the revelation of a divine presence in nature. Through it "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his."[8] However, his system also connects with many of the relativistic ideas

of his age. His view of reality as a web of infinite connections suggests that what he desires to articulate is the idea of a world governed by difference—a divinely sanctioned difference. The paradox of the unique form of each object, which is connected to everything else by the relativity of subjective perception, anticipates early twentieth-century theories—for example, Clive Bell's concept of "significant form" and Saussure's presentation of language as "a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others."[9] This relativistic element within Hopkins's thought explains the delayed success of his work, several decades after his death, and the disproportionate influence of his small *ouevre* on the poetic language of the twentieth century. Hopkins's attempt to hold together Aesthetic vision and orthodox belief is often troubled. His overwhelming personal despair stretches workable syntax to its limits in "Carrion Comfort" and his other late sonnets of doubt. But at other times he provides a sublime account of the revelation possible through close attention to natural forms.

The hallmark of Aestheticism is subjective perception. This technique fosters an awareness of the transcendent possibilities of art, but the "religion of beauty" does not preclude other forms of spiritual experience. Arthur Symons, analyzing the Decadent movement in 1893, argues that Impressionism and Symbolism are merely two halves of the same impulse, each striving for an experience beyond the material: "What both seek is not general truth merely, but *la verite vraie,* the very essence of truth—the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it; and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision."[10] He could not have known it at the time, but this is also a fairly plausible working definition of Hopkins's "inscape." James's use of the term "impression" is also similar. James obviously relishes the word's ambiguity, which implies several things at once: a haziness of outline; a clearness of stamp; an inward consciousness of an external, visible reality; and the implication of a significance beyond itself. Aestheticism deals with the nature of surfaces, but it is never superficial. Strether's shift of values in Paris, therefore, involves much more than exchanging one kind of materialism for another. American commerce is not simply replaced by European art. Strether's conversion to the Aesthetic mode of perception involves a growing awareness of the power of "the vain appearance" to reveal a profundity of experience. "All art," says Wilde, "is at once surface and symbol," and those who go beneath the surface "do so at their peril" *(DG,* 22). This is the dangerous inner journey that Strether undertakes.



## THE CLEVER CANVAS

"He was moving these days," Strether feels towards the end of the novel, "as in a gallery, from clever canvas to clever canvas" (XXII, 273). Strether's vision evolves through many forms. However, it is most intense in his confrontation with visual art, particularly the Lambinet picture, which reveals to him the true nature of Chad's relationship with Madame de Vionnet. The Lambinet scenes provide the climax of the novel and create a space in which Strether can reassess his categories of perception. However, Strether's encounter with the Lambinet is carefully anticipated by a series of introductory paintings and visual scenes. Charles Anderson maps *The Ambassadors* as a progression of clever canvases. Scenes in the novel correspond to Impressionist paintings that James may have seen and appropriated. For example, Pissarro's *Jardin des Tuileries* (1899) matches Strether's view from the hotel on the Rue de Rivoli, where Pissarro had his studio; Degas' *La Lqge* (1877) depicts a brightened stage viewed from a darkened box similar to the scene of Strether's meeting with Chad at the theater; Strether's lunch date with Mme de Vionnet bears a striking resemblance to Manet's *Chez le Pere Lathuille* (1879). Anderson also offers several sources for Gloriani's garden party and the view of Chad and Mme de Vionnet in the boat. This system provides Strether, within the novel, with a means of grouping and composing his impressions. It also emphasizes James's habit of connecting his own fictional work to frames of reference outside the fictional world.

There are difficulties with this approach to the role of art within *The Ambassadors.* The desire to pin James's story down to several definitive paintings undermines the narrative by solidifying Strether's fluid, constantly changing perceptions in a series of oil and canvas snapshots. In reality, his impressions refuse to stand still. However, the idea of Strether as a man who prefers to view life through a frame is a useful one. The logic of delegation that Rivkin traces in the novel highlights Strether's inability to engage directly with life or to represent it. But, Rivkin does not apply this logic to the role of art in the novel—which is a pity, as the paintings in the novel are the objects that are most vividly present and absent. They are both illuminating and distorting. This is true of the suggested paintings that Anderson infers as well as the paintings that James himself articulates: paintings that are only present through language and are therefore not pictures at all, except in the most metaphorical sense. The Lambinet scene also offers the most effective dramatization in the novel of Strether's

displacement. At the height of his powers of perception, he can recognize his situation only through the agency of a long absent picture, which revises and reinvents itself as he engages with it.

As Strether travels into the countryside, the window of his train and the picture-frame become interchangeable as he goes in search of "that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame" (XXII, 245). He looked at it long ago at the art dealer's in Tremont Street, Boston, where a young Henry James once reviewed an art exhibition; he has looked at it more recently at Chad's house. Strether's view of Chad's tasteful little painting, shared with Gloriani, comes immediately before his first about-face in the novel. After looking at this picture, Strether decides that his proper course of action is to encourage Chad to stay.

> The thing was a landscape of no size, but of a French school as our friend was glad to feel he knew, and also of a quality—which he liked to think he should also have guessed; its frame was large out of all proportion to the canvas, and he had never seen a person look at anything, he thought, just as Gloriani, with his nose very near and quick movements of the head from side to side examined this feature of Chad's collection. (XXI, 262)

This little picture seems incidental, but it is carefully placed. It occupies the same position in Volume I of the novel as the Lambinet picture occupies in Volume II. When Strether steps off the train in the country, he finds diat the lines of the tiny frame have expanded to accommodate him.

> The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he didn't know and didn't wish to know the name—fell into a composition, full of felicity within them: the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there in short—it was what he wanted; it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it. (XXII, 247)

Strether's picture is not named, but it sounds similar to *Sur La Seine,* a painting characteristic of Lambinet's style (Figure 4.1). The significance of the picture, however, is not in its source but in its effect. In Strether's mind, his rediscovery of the remembered picture achieves a unity of opposites, fusing New England and Europe, art and reality, imagination and action, past and present. But it does not ever achieve absolute



Figure 4.1 Emile-Charles Lambinet, *Sur La Seine.* Courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collections.

completeness. Like Ruskin's description of Turner's work, it constantly changes and recomposes itself. It also displaces Strether again, as it fragments and reorganizes his carefully constructed system and draws him into a closer relationship with reality.

The Lambinet operates like the painting of the man with the mask in *The Sacred Fount,* in that it reveals what cannot be shown elsewhere. As Paul Beidler argues, the Lambinet scene forms a frame or a preface—a parergon—to the novel as a whole. It makes available what is lacking in the rest of the story, most specifically the true nature of the relationship between Chad and Mme de Vionnet. The painting allows Strether to stand back from his own experience to escape "both into art and out of it" *(FJ,* 74). Strether passes, says Beidler, "into a new realm of being" from which he can observe the world: "Equally detached now from ethic and aesthetic, he is free to reconstruct the world as he chooses" (83). This reading of the scene wisely avoids aligning Strether's new vision with one ideological standpoint. Strether simply steps back and sees more than before—both ethic and aesthetic. Beidler is also in line with Williams's phenomenological reading of the novel, which presents the *epoche* as a moment of inner transformation effected by suspended judgment. This suggests that art, and by extension language, may be able to transcend material experience. Beidler, like Anderson, argues that Strether achieves primacy through his power of vision. He reconciles his opposing worlds and becomes the ultimate ambassador. Although the appearance

of Chad and Mme de Vionnet does fill the gaping lacuna in Strether's conception of the situation, there are problems with seeing this as a moment of complete presence. Strether feels that "these figures, or something like them had been wanted in the picture, had been wanteti more or less all day." Their arrival promises "to fill up the measure" (XXII, 256). However, the figures in the boat are themselves incomplete. They have no coats or hats and Mme de Vionnet has the wrong shoes and parasol for traveling. These little domestic absences reveal to Strether that his friends have not traveled out from Paris for the day, as they claim, but have been staying together at a country hotel. Even this realization manifests itself in silence and avoidance. Strether's lack of knowledge is simply replaced by a lack of confrontation as all three characters keep up the vain appearance of the "lie in the charming affair" (XXII, 262). Earlier, he congratulates himself on his new confidence with the French language, suggesting that he has finally mastered the mystery of representation. But over dinner this apparent triumph evaporates in the face of Mme de Vionnet's evasive fluency. Moreover, the significance of the boat scene is not fully grasped at the time. Strether only comprehends what he sees in retrospect as he mulls over the day's events alone in his hotel room. None of this feels like primacy to Strether. He is "lonely and cold" and finds that the lie he has been fed "disagreed with his spiritual stomach" (XXII, 264, 265). He sums up his experience as an absence and a failure, and he escapes again into speculation: "He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things" (XXII, 266). In this double negative, Strether's inability to "suppose nothing" collapses in on itself, both linguistically and epistemologically. The result of this is not simply a rejection of New England moral standards for European finesse. Strether's new perception involves the reworking of all previous categories of judgment—which is presumably one of the reasons why, at the end of the novel, he refuses Maria Gostrey, the "mistress of a hundred cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which from a full experience, she pigeon-holed her fellow mortals" (XXI, 11). After the Lambinet episode, Strether is in a position to evolve his own categories of judgment from his own experience, as the phenomenologist advocates.

This reading of the Lambinet scene as an encounter with a mutable, indefinable, subjective experience has many implications for *The Ambassadors* as a whole. The phenomenological slant this gives to the novel suggests that Louis Lambert Strether may owe his name not



only to Balzac's *Louis Lambert,* as highlighted in the opening chapter of the novel, but also to the Enlightenment philosopher J. H. Lambert. His interests overlap with those of *The Ambassadors* at various points: vision, perspective, language, the operation of signs, and phenomenology—a term Lambert was the first to use.[11] Lambert subtitles his major work, *Neues Org anon,* "An Investigation of the Distinction between Truth and Appearance," which is exactly the riddle that confronts Strether in Paris.[12] A phenomenological approach to the Lambinet scene also highlights James's portrayal of the difficult relation between art and reality, and it reinforces the idea that at times he prefers the distorted impression to the detailed, apparently accurate representation. Through this, James presents art as a phenomenon of deep transforming power. So central is the Lambinet to James's construction of the novel that it is almost impossible to say anything meaningful about the book without discussing it at some length. In many ways this episode stands in the same relation to Strether's experience in Paris as his whole European visit does to the rest of his life. It is a self-contained period of exile and reappraisal, a point at which exertion is replaced by a surrender to external stimuli, and the lost past is recovered. Like a play-within-the-play in a Shakespeare text, the Lambinet scene offers simultaneously an escape from, and an intensification of, the themes and problems of the wider plot. Thus the inevitable change and transformation, which has been gradually building up for Strether throughout the novel, appears to be distilled into one flash of recognition that recenters his universe. In this way, his experience mirrors William James's description of a conversion that is the product of an accumulation of sensations and observations, which have hitherto seemed peripheral to the candidate, lurking on the "outskirts of the mind" but which suddenly become "the centre of his energies" *(V,* 194). Strether's latent facility for observation is dramatically released and intensified through his immersion in art, and in this process experiences the sensations that William describes as "the state of assurance":

> The central one is the loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the *willingness to be,* even though the outer conditions should remain the same . . . A passion of willingness, of acquiescence, of admiration, is the glowing centre of this state of mind. The second feature is the sense of perceiving truths not known before. The mysteries of life become lucid . . . and often, nay usually, the solution is more or less unutterable in words. A third peculiarity of the assurance state is the objective change which the world often appears to undergo. *(V,* 243)

William goes on to discuss hallucinations and photisms—the appearances of lights, signs, and wonders—that many religious converts experience and Strether does not. However, the sense of Tightness and lucidity that he describes is present in Strether's experience in the hours after the Lambinet episode. His rediscovery of the art of leisure, his intense appreciation of Madame de Vionnet's house, and his facility for reading her mind and mood during their interview, all point in a similar direction. Something profound has happened to Strether, and vision is both the cause and the effect of this transformation.

The visual device of the painting is obviously the catalyst for Strether's jolt into awareness, and the result is a desire to look at things afresh. When Maria suggests to Strether that the reason things are over with Mrs. Newsome is that "she's different for you," he responds: "She's more than ever the same. But I do what I didn't before—I *see* her" (XXII, 510). However, Strether sees much more than the fact that his mature fiancee is a pompous, overbearing matriarch. What the preface promises is not simply that Strether will acquire knowledge or insight, but that the novel will demonstrate the "process of vision" (XXI, vi). In both preface and novel, James focuses on the mechanics and the experience of vision, rather than on the objective truth of the visible. What Strether gains toward the end of the novel is not a solution or a fixed point of reference by which he can order his life; rather, he gains that quickening of the senses and heightened awareness advocated by Hopkins and the Rossettis. The question remains however whether this vision entails anything transcendental or merely a quickened sense of material reality.

Strether's slow realization of the situation around him is similar to the visual experience of looking at an Impressionist painting; the refracted shapes and colors begin to group themselves into plausible forms until a moment of recognition is achieved. Impressionism with its close affinity to photography is rarely concerned with presenting a symbolic or allegorical message through this method. However, by his choice of title for the novel, James aligns Strether's experience with a painting that fuses representational symbolism with this deliberately delayed recognition. Adeline Tintner's suggestion that James borrowed the title of Hans Holbein's masterpiece *The Ambassadors* reinforces the idea that James saw his novel as a picture (Figure 4.2). It also implies an interest in the ability of art to engage in symbolic strategies. Tintner argues that James would have been aware in 1900 of Mary F. S. Hervey's revelation that the subjects of the painting were not the poets Leland and Wyatt, as previously thought, but two French diplomats Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve.[13] Strether's



Figure 4.2 Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors.* Copyright, National Gallery, London.

transformation is also from, minor man of letters to international diplomat. The navigational and astronomical equipment in the painting echoes the novel's journeys, both physical and emotional. The timepiece recalls its accent on time and age. Tintner draws many parallels but she does not explore the importance of Holbein's experimental use of perspective and distortion to the concerns of James's novel. The painting's most significant feature is the anamorphic, central skull, which strikes the spectator at first as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view, a sideways view, becomes a representation of a human face, modeled in some substance not human. It bears an uncanny likeness to the Mask of Death—or is it the Mask of Life?—in the picture in *The Sacred Fount.* Like the lie at the center of *The Ambassadors,* Holbein's skull is

unconcealed and yet is only recognizable by a shift in viewpoint. It represents the presence of death in the midst of life, as well as the problem of perspective at the center of art. The distorted skull becomes a parergon that offers and then fails to explain Holbein's painting, which in turn offers and fails to explain James's novel.

In his meticulous analysis of Holbein's painting John North shows that the position of the globes, the astrological instruments, even the position of the shadows in Holbein's painting are mathematically calculated to locate the picture at the precise time of 4 pm on the Good Friday of 1533. The picture thus offers a complex religious allegory if deciphered correctly.[14] North says that Holbein's painting secretly and silently enters the religious debates of Reformation Europe and articulates not simply the personal fear of death emblematized in the picture's details, but also the redemptive potential of death through Christ's passion at Easter. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, conflicting explanations of die painting abounded. James could not have avoided knowing about the controversy surrounding it, either through Hervey's book, or through his friends Sir Sidney Colvin and Sir Edmund Gosse—both were associated with the National Gallery boards and helped to raise funds to buy the painting in 1890. The significance of Holbein's masterpiece, scientific, allegorical, political, and religious, has been debated for as long as it has been in the public eye. Its most powerful role, therefore, is as a cipher for art's enigmatic quality that refuses to be finally solved but offers merely a succession of riddles and allusions. It is well chosen as a foil for James's elusive novel, which also invites contradictory readings.

By aligning his novel with this complex double portrait, James invites the reader to recognize the ability of art to suggest significance beyond itself. He also concedes the difficulty of ever fathoming such significance. Both Holbein's picture and James's text rely on a process of defamiliarization and recognition. In each case, by obscuring and prolonging the act of vision, the artist draws attention to the process by which the subject is assimilated. Vision is only possible by a change of perspective. Recognizing this allows Strether to understand that life, like art, can be apprehended from a multiplicity of viewpoints. The monologic perspective of Woollett evaporates as Strether submits to a relativistic series of flickering, self-authorizing impressions in the wake of the Lambinet episode. His admission to himself that "intimacy, at such a point, was *like* that—and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like?" is a rejection of absolute moral standards (XXII, 266). However, it is also an affirmation of the "deep,



deep truth of intimacy revealed." Strether therefore does not abandon truth altogether, but through his encounter with the painting he gains a different kind of understanding. His double consciousness, which until now has felt like a handicap, is confirmed as he accepts a pluralistic universe. Moralistic judgment gives way to subjective and particular experience. Pater calls this "the fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness." The fact that this multiplicity is revealed by a relationship that flounders almost before Strether is aware of its existence only serves to underscore the transience of the world that he eventually apprehends. Pater concludes: "Art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" *(R,* 190).

Vision in *The Ambassadors,* therefore, operates on several different levels. In the previous chapter, I explored the symbolic significance that James attaches to images of vision. The metaphor of the window frame as a means to wisdom that operates, albeit ironically, in *The Sacred Fount* also applies to the gilt frame of the Lambinet painting in *The Ambassadors.* By learning to respond to aesthetic stimuli, Strether converts art into a window through which he sees something of more than aesthetic significance. This process is similar to the way in which Henry James Senior sees objects of art and culture as central to the process of redemption. By learning to respond to these material demonstrations of beauty and proportion, the individual develops the sensitivities required to understand more spiritual realities. Henry Senior, picking up on Swedenborg's work, sees the house as an image for the spirit, the focus of art, and the home of the soul. The house of life contains three levels—at base the sensuous and natural, above that the rational and artistic, and on the upper floor the spiritual and conscious—roughly preempting Freud's psychology of id, ego, and superego, and his idea of the dream house.[15] Henry James also uses the phrase himself, describing his childhood visits to the Louvre as "so many explorations of the house of life" *(AU,* 198). Dante Gabriel Rossetti's use of the phrase as the title of his sonnet cycle is no coincidence either. The progression from physical passion to visionary transcendence that his sonnets reflect is also closely tied to this trope.[16] Strether's progression "as in a gallery from clever canvas to clever canvas" should therefore be seen not simply as a picture-show that he observes from a detached distance (XXII, 273). It is a process of deep personal development through which he moves towards a higher level of understanding.

That his process of vision contains a more than material element is confirmed by the effect it has on Strether's behavior at the end of the

novel—which as William reminds us is the only reliable yardstick. Strether's mix of Aestheticism and asceticism at the end of novel suggests that he has not accepted Appearance as a guiding principle, nor has he grasped a final Truth. He has recognized the impossibility of seeing or grasping everything. He has realized that the primacy offered by the systems and categories of the other characters fail to represent life fully. As he says to Maria: "Yes. No. That is I *have* no ideas. I'm afraid of them. I've done with them" (XXII, 273). T. S. Eliot sees this rejection of systems of response as characteristic of James's entire literary project: "Henry James did not provide us with ideas but with another world of thought and feeling" *(CE,* 56). The rejection of ideas in favor of sensation implies a surrender to the subjective, shifting phenomena of experience, both physical and psychological. It also suggests that the most profound thing available to Strether is an uncertainty and an absence, another world that remains more or less unutterable. When Maria asks what Strether is going home to, he replies,

> "I don't know. There will always be something"
> "To a great difference," she said as she kept his hand.
> "A great difference—no doubt. Yet I shall see what I can make of it."
> (XXII, 325)

A great difference: the reader is confronted with the phrase twice to underscore its significance.

## MORE AND MORE AGAIN

Strether goes home with nothing from Paris except seventy volumes of Victor Hugo. Over the course of *The Ambassadors,* the reader becomes fond of its middle-aged, but youthfully naive and perceptive protagonist, and this seems like a mean way for James to dispatch him. Strether's rejection of the advances of two charming women and his return to New England to face the icy fury of Mrs. Newsome make for a bleak ending. The image that the finale projects is of Strether ageing quietly in his modest clapboard home in the cultural wasteland of Woollett, leafing through tales of the French Revolution. It is uncomfortably like the fate of Evelyn Waugh's hero Tony Last at the end of *A Handful of Dust,* interminably reading Dickens novels to Mr. Todd in the Amazon rainforest. One can read many lands of significance into the red and gold-bound volumes that he buys in Book Seven: they signal Strether's retreat into art, into language, the realm of the literary sign, they emblematize the spirit of revolution that Strether takes home to New England, they encapsulate the essence of French history and culture, or alternatively they imply a retreat from the newly glimpsed world of subjective modernity into Victorian realism. None of these is quite convincing. There is something wrong with the presence of these garish volumes in Strether's luggage along with his "wonderful impressions."



James has a mixed opinion of Hugo, as his literary criticism shows. He writes, "With a genius at once powerful and eccentric, like M. Hugo, if one has great disappointments, one also has great compensations" *{Criticism* II, 458). But James finds the overall effect exhausting and dissatisfying:

> M. Hugo's pretension is to say many things in the grand manner—to fling down every proposition like a ringing medal stamped with his own image. Hence for the reader, an intolerable sense of effort and tension; he seems to witness the contortions of ingenuity. (459)

James objects, here as elsewhere, to the intrusion of the artist into his work. This description of Hugo's persona mirrors Strether's impression of the overbearing artist Gloriani as "a medal-like Italian face, in which every line was an artist's own" (XXI, 197). In both cases James undercuts the success and popularity of the established artist by exposing the flare of the "aesthetic torch" and the "terrible life behind it" (XXI, 197) as something egotistical and superficial—Ceasar stamping coins with his own image. When Gloriani drops Strether at the garden party for a more interesting guest, the reader feels that it is the great artist, not Strether, who has somehow failed a test. This subtly undercuts the novel's appeal to art-world values. It suggests that what the artist can offer the individual is secondary to what the individual might see firsthand. Thus, I can only assume that James ships off Strether's expensive Hugo novels with a knowing smile. Strether thought he could buy the Paris experience and remain a detached observer, but ultimately found himself "mixed up with the typical tale of Paris" (XXII, 271). Worse still, he appears to have enjoyed it. What these novels *are* capable of representing is the difficulty of objectifying Strether's experience, or articulating what he has gained. Victor Hugo does not do it justice—but then, what would?

The end of *The Ambassadors* is awkward—not in terms of its execution, which shows James writing at his most elegant, but in terms of the difficulty of fitting it into any systematic reading of the novel. Even by James's standards there are a lot of loose ends. Strether never

properly takes his leave of Little Bilham or Miss Barrace. The New England tourists are stranded somewhere sightseeing as the novel closes. We do not know whether Chad ever goes home to Woollett, as there is the suggestion at the end of the story of another woman in London and the eerie possibility of the tale repeating itself endlessly. Strether simply slips out of the life of Paris, much as Isabel Archer slips away from Gardencourt to Italy. There is a clarity of direction but an ambiguous motive. On one level, Strether appears to reembrace the moral system of New England; he is shocked at the lie he has been sold and his disillusionment with Paris sends him back to clear-cut American values. But this superficial recoil from aesthetic experience does not diminish for him the otherworldly savor of what he has observed. "Of course I moved among miracles," he says. "It was all phantasmagoric. But the great fact was that so much of it was none of my business. It isn't even now" (XXII, 301).

His refusal of Maria Gostrey can be construed as the final ironic triumph of Mrs. Newsome, but Strether's return to New England appears to have more to do with his feelings toward Mme de Vionnet. These feelings are always powerful and yet never properly explored. His final conversation with Mme de Vionnet is potentially the most candid and yet most puzzling conversation of the novel. Everything is confessed and nothing explained. In this leave-taking, Strether and Mme de Vionnet show each other the impossibility of closure. Everything must be left fluid, despite the intensity of emotion between them. She has, like Strether, seen something metaphysical through the whole affair. She has "transcendently prized" Chad, over his obvious value, despite the fact that he is "none the less only Chad" (XXII, 285,284). Mme de Vionnet, like Cleopatra in her infinite variety, also embodies for Strether the recessive impossibility of grasping meaning: "He felt what he had felt before with her, that there was always more behind what she showed, and more and more again behind that" (XXII, 283). Like the Lambinet episode in which she features so centrally, Mme de Vionnet defies categorization or possession. In *Guy Domvilk, The Turn of the Screw* and *The Sacred Fount,* James establishes a pattern of ungrasped possibilities through connection to the past and to the world of supernatural experience. This pattern is repeated in *The Ambassadors* through the novel's exploration of visual sensation and perspective. Nicola Bradbury's idea of the end of the novel as a graphic "vanishing point," which transcends a "rigid two-dimensional structure of meaning," articulates the impossibility of fitting the novel to a "moral" or an "aesthetic" system, indeed to any system at all (Bradbury, 38). Strether is changed by



what he has seen. However, it is the sense of something hidden beyond that vanishing point, around the curve in the river, and "something more and more again behind that" which has the deepest impact. *The Ambassadors* is all about vision, but it is the ability of vision to suggest or reveal something beyond the visible that is its strongest theme.